

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 23: Walkabout

"When all the truth does is make your heart ache, sometimes a lie is easier to take."

The sea rolled back and forth in front of me, slowly breathing its hushed breath on the rocks far below. The cliff rose in an almost sheer face up to the chiseled edge on which I sat. I looked out at the waves slowly marching to their deaths against the bottom of the cliff. Once, there'd been a rail along the clifftop path, but now there was nothing but rusting lengths of pipe and dead grass. I closed my eyes, listening to the softly breathing water. I pressed the cool metal barrel beneath my chin. Was this how Mini felt before she died? I took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

I was over. This was done.

I pulled the trigger.

* * *

I was dropped on the cold, wet grass, coughing and gagging with foam on my lips as my body struggled for breath. Maybe, for once, I would catch a break, and the chlorine I'd inhaled would finish me off for good. My eyes burned and my hide itched terribly as rain pattered down. I felt a potion bottle pressed against my mouth and clenched my jaws, fighting, coughing and snorting until the healing draught had been emptied mostly onto my face.

"Help me!" Glory gasped as I writhed. Each breath felt like it was my last... if only... but my body jerked to take another sharp, shallow inhalation. My hooves scraped against my chest, as if I were trying to tear open my body and toss away my burning lungs. My eyes stared wide, the chemicals burning the glowing surfaces as I squirmed, rear legs kicking up clods as they spasmed and tried to get me away from the pony I didn't deserve.

P-21 sat apart, eyes closed, head bowed as he shook with silent tears. He glanced at me, pain etched in his blue gaze. Pain and anger... good. Be angry at me, P-21. Take it out on me, I mentally begged, but he came over and tried to hold me down.

Rampage's own haunted look was masked by her frustration as I kicked her soundly in the face. With a sickening crunch, her nose shattered. A moment later, it crunched back into place. She grabbed my rear legs and forced them still.

Scotch Tape merely stared in shock as she looked from me to the tunnel entrance in horror. Congratulations, welcome to your first taste of the Wasteland. She pushed back her goggles, her green eyes widening as the young olive mare muttered in shock. "They're... they're dead? Everypony? She killed everypony?!"

"They were infected," Glory sobbed as she pulled out another purple potion, fighting to get it down my throat. "She had no choice."

Lacunae stepped next to me. "Of course she didn't. Necessity is the mother of atrocity," she said as she knelt and used her magic to force my thrashing body to still. "Shhh... hush now," she murred as she touched her glowing horn to mine. There was a flash, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

A memory... just like a memory orb. I supposed it made sense. Unicorn magic extracted memories, and the alicorn could read minds, so I guessed she could swap memories. 'We live in each other's dreams', she'd told me. I wondered if this was Lacunae's memory, or the Goddess's, or somepony else's? From what I'd heard, it could be from any one of hundreds, possibly thousands of ponies.

You're a murderer, Blackjack.

So... first things first. Body? Mare. Unicorn. A little older than me, I suspected. The place? A long, boring-ass hallway. It looked familiar. Really familiar. I caught a glance at a nameplate beside a door. 'Colonel Cupcake'. So this was Miramare, not yet all blown up. It was late at night, but this didn't have the feel of a patrol. No... from the way she moved, it was more of a pensive wandering. Huh... I could relate.

Now if she'd only pass by something shiny so I could get a good look at her.

You're a fucking murderer, Blackjack.

"She lied to me, Vanity," a stallion with a deep voice said softly somewhere nearby. The voice was thick with the sound of tears. Slowly, the mare drifted closer to a closed door, standing in the spill of light underneath it. "She's been lying to me since we first met." From outside, I could hear the dull boom of thunder and the soft hiss of rain on the roof.

I heard Vanity's patient sigh. "I know this is hard for you, but take a deep breath and think about it a little."

"What's there to think about?" he said with a sniff. "It's over. I trusted her, trusted her with my life, with my heart, and she lied to me. It's like... it's as if my sisters lied to me. I just didn't think it could happen."

"How'd you find out?" Vanity asked softly.

"I had some suspicions after running into her at Maripony. It just seemed awfully convenient. Wonderful, but convenient." He gave a deep sigh. "And then there were the things that she knew that nopony should know. I knew something was up. Then, we were mugged and it all came out. After that, she confessed." He sobbed softly. "She was using me..."

"I know it's hard, but you should forgive her," Vanity said calmly, reasonably.

There's no forgiveness for what you did.

Shut up, brain. I'm trying to listen to other ponies' problems.

"Listen to what you just told me. You knew, she confessed. Do you think she still cares about you?"

"You don't understand! She lied to me!"

"So you're too good to lie to?" Vanity said with a chuckle. It wasn't returned. "She had reasons to lie, and, unlike with most ponies, hers were actually valid. Think of her job. She had to lie to you. To everypony. How else could she keep doing what she has to?"

"I understand all that. Still, it hurts."

"If you expected to go through your whole life never getting hurt by somepony you love, then this is long overdue," Vanity replied firmly. "Yes, she hurt you, but she didn't mean to hurt you. You have to ask yourself: is it worth losing all the good times over this one mistake?"

Killing my stable wasn't a mistake. It was an atrocity. I should have done better...

The mare turned away, and the hallway seemed to smear in my vision, and... I found myself in a kneeling stallion in a well-lit office decorated in purple and gold. Ooohkay; apparently I'd switched to a different memory. There were numerous books stacked up in heaps on the tables, the desk, and the floor. A purple scale hung from the side of the desk's terminal on a braided length of purple hair. A figurine of Fluttershy and another of Rainbow Dash sat beside it.

My host was connecting some kind of device to a series of wires, working with great urgency, when I heard a mare calling out from outside the room. "Goldenblood! I'd like a word with you in my office, please." My host suddenly gasped, pushed the panel back against the wall, and levitated the screws back into place. The door opened, and my host dove under the large oak desk, curling up as tight as he could.

I heard the familiar wheezing rasp, the dry coughs. "Yes, Twilight?"

"What is Project Chimera?" My host saw her lift a folder from the bookcase behind the desk, floating it towards the middle of the office. Fortunately, there was a mirror in the corner of the office, and I could see Goldenblood facing Twilight Sparkle. Both looked... tired. Old. Angry. The scars on Goldenblood's hide had healed somewhat, but his metallic eyes had lost none of their conviction. Twilight looked like she'd aged a lot recently. Her eyes had developed wrinkles in the corners, and her mane was growing fainter and grayer in certain streaks.

He didn't answer right away, locking eyes with her before giving a dismissive wave of his hoof. "A defunct and failed branch of research, Twilight. A stab in the dark between the M.o.P. and the M.A.S.," Goldenblood rasped softly, but with resolute conviction.

"Failed? I read the reports. The fusion megaspell worked! It worked!" She waved the folder like she was going to strike him with it. "Why am I only finding out about this now? Why did I have to find out from Dr. Trueblood and not from you? Why did you keep this from me?" There was a hurt tone in her voice.

"Dr. Trueblood is an intellectual opportunist who takes far too much glee in debasing and deforming ponies, and I'll see him transferred to Yellow River for this. He can spend the rest of his career cleaning out bedpans and dealing with zebra hoofrot."

"Goldenblood," Twilight began when he turned away from her.

"It was a mistake, Twilight!" he said sharply, then hunched his shoulders as he started to gasp and wheeze for breath. Still, he struggled to continue. "We fused ponies with cockatrices... ponies with diamond dogs... ponies with manticores and griffins and baby dragons. Baby dragons, Twilight!" he said, turning and pacing, his head still hanging low. "Every fusion was a mistake. It doesn't matter the powers the test subjects gained; every time, something fundamental was lost."

"But that just means the research was a failure, Goldenblood. You just missed out on that missing element. If you'd brought this to me sooner--" she began, but he cut her off with hacking. To my horror, I saw blood on his lips. Had his body still not healed from its injuries after all this time? "Golden!" She started to rush to her terminal, and my host clenched his teeth as he drew as far back under the desk as possible.

"I'm fine... Twilight," he gasped. "Fine... just... let me catch my breath..." He sat as she slowly approached him again, my host relaxing slightly. "Twilight... we're not going to win this war by turning into monsters. I tried to explain that to Trueblood. He couldn't care less. I don't know what he's told you about Chimera, but it was a mistake. It has *nothing* more to offer Equestria."

I have nothing to offer but death.

Not true. I saved one. By one. By one.

A point one percent success rate doesn't excuse a ninety-nine point nine percent fatality rate.

Great, my mind was using math to damn me.

"Nothing. Goldenblood... think about it! If we can alter the megaspell, perfect the mutagenic element, we could do more than just fuse ponies with non-ponies. We could create alicorns!" she said, her eyes lighting to the possibilities. "Imagine dozens, or hundreds of Princesses fighting on our side!"

"No!" he shouted and struck her hard across the face with a hoof. He looked just as shocked as she at what he'd just done. "I... I'm sorry..."

Twilight rubbed where he'd hit her, looking confused and angry, but still concerned as he coughed and retched, his lips spattered pink with bright specks. Twilight looked at him for a long moment before her face hardened and she said gravely, "It's my duty to pursue any and all research to win this war, Golden. This should have been brought to me from the start. I'm going to launch a full review of Project Chimera. If it's a dead end, like you said, then we'll put it to rest for good." Goldenblood crumpled a little before her, gasping for air as he wheezed. "I want access to every file. Every book. Every sample. Every test subject."

He closed his eyes. "It's all at Hippocratic Research, Ministry Mare." His whisper barely reached my host's ear. "But remember, nothing good comes from making monsters, Twilight."

"I won't, Goldenblood," she replied, sounding tired. "I'm trying to find something... some spell, some... something that will put everything right again and help us win this war. I know you're trying to do the same. We just have to work together. Right?"

Goldenblood was coughing too much to answer, but from the haunted look he gave her, I suspected that he hardly agreed. "Come on, let's get you to the nurse's station. And I need some ice on this bruise."

The door had been closed for several minutes before the stallion relaxed. "Chimera, huh? Bet Pinkie would be mighty curious about that," he said to himself as he returned to installing the device on the wires.

Suddenly, the memory bled away... reforming in pain as he was being dragged by a telekinetic glow along a catwalk over immense vats, screaming along with dozens of other ponies. Alarms rang in an anemic attempt to give warning as he weakly scrabbled for something to hold on to.

"No! No! I don't want this! Mommy! Mommy!" he sobbed brokenly. He hooked a limb on a bar, but the force pulling on every inch of his body grew and grew. There was a snap, a grinding noise as pain exploded along his aching, burned hide. Then the telekinesis released him, and he drew a shuddering breath... seconds before the force redoubled and tore him screaming from the catwalk and into the churning, bubbling vat of rainbow and blue below.

The sensation that followed was nothing less than what I imagined it'd be like to be shoved through Stable 99's recycler. What emerged was not what went in.

We live in each other's dreams and memories...

The world smeared and congealed back into a hilltop in a flash of purple; in the distance was a city of black towers wreathed in baleful green light. Now I was in... yes. This was an alicorn. I felt... strong. Healthy. Powerful. I wasn't sure if I was actually hearing it, but a vast whispering host filled my mind, at the moment drowned out by a grand proclamation. "Red Eye has yet to even touch Hoofington, my children. Now is an excellent chance to save more of these poor ponies!"

We slowly advanced, my host, two greens, and three blues, each one alike save for her color; who knew they came in different shades? I felt myself sliding like oil from among the perspectives of the group as we approached the swampy morass of Flank. Then I became aware of a sound... yet not a sound. A noise within my host's head was the only way I could think of to describe it. The noise increased. With it came the pain.

Screams.

The city was screaming inside me. With every second, I felt myself jerked more and more erratically from one alicorn to the next. It was as if the screams were pulling something fundamental from my host, and the more that overpowering voice rose, the louder the cries became. Hundreds of screams crying in agony. Thousands. Millions. The jerking became a blur, and I was certain that at any moment I would be torn to pieces.

A purple flash, and once more I was on that hilltop overlooking the distant city. The whispers were silent, the Goddess silent. Then a mare's voice in my host's mind said, "They're gone."

The Goddess snorted. "That's ridiculous. Impossible!" But I could hear the quaver of uncertainty and fear. "They can't be... gone... not even death truly separates us." The whispers rose and fell.

"They've been torn..." another mare said, and then a different mare finished, "...from Unity."

Now that great chorus began to quail in fear. "Silence," the Goddess commanded. There was a long quiet moment, and then the Goddess asked, "Do *you* know?"

For several minutes there was naught inside the purple alicorn but stillness. Then a strange, oddly familiar voice said solemnly, "This magic... it's cold. Like Rarity's Black Book." Another long and drawn out silence. "It must be some kind of necromantic effect. Something we never imagined. And it's saturated Hoofington."

"If a necromantic spell were that powerful..." one mare began, "...Hoofington would be sterile for miles," another finished.

"Not if we are... as distant a possibility as it is... just particularly vulnerable to it," the calm voice pointed out, setting off a riot of argument and fear. I wondered if the Goddess was in control of that whispering, panicked mass of thought or if she fought against it for control of herself.

"We are vulnerable to nothing! We bathe in taint and glow in radiation! And do not forget, we have experienced necromancy. We scoff at it! It cannot truly harm us."

"It just did." The calm familiar voice said. "We need..."

"I will decide what needs be done!" the Goddess proclaimed as the whispering rose and fell.

Then there was a pause. “But what is *your* idea?”

A long sigh. “We must try and send another mare into Hoofington to learn what is causing this and how we can stop it.”

“Didn’t *you* just see what happened? We all felt it; every one of us. It would be torture. Neigh, suicide!” The Goddess’s voice oozed in disdain.

And, barely ‘heard’ over that whispering chorus, a mare said meekly, “I’ll go.”

Again, silence. “You’ll go? You?” The Goddess seemed incredulous. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“To get what I deserve,” she murmured softly.

“This is a waste of time. Better to send more of our children to try to obtain the Black Book before Red Eye becomes too much of a difficulty,” the Goddess declared imperiously.

“We agree that finding the book...” the first of the paired mares said as the other finished, “...is more likely to be successful.” The whisperings rose and fell, a consensus seeming to settle around leaving Hoofington alone.

Finally, that lone, calm voice said softly, “What’s one, if she’s willing to endure it? We will have to block her connection partially... mute her experiences... but she may find the answers we need. I’ll help her.”

“*You* will do no such thing. I know what *you* are capable of! Do not forget that I am the Goddess!” The Goddess roared across the collective, silencing it. Finally, though, the Goddess asked, “You are certain you want to do this? You will be isolated and alone. I know... we all know... how terrible that is.”

The meek whisper rose above the chorus. “If it’s what you need, I will do it for you.” The murmuring rose and fell again in consideration. “I know Hoofington.”

The Goddess seemed to consider that. “You do, don’t you? Very well. *You*, give her what she needs. Block the rest. I don’t want to feel that sensation again, do *you* understand?”

“Of course.” The muttering whispers seemed to go away, and that mare asked softly, “Are you sure about this?”

“It’s what I deserve.” And with that, everything swirled and smeared away again.

oooOOOooo

It figured. I had to be the only pony in the world who could be trapped in a stable filling with poisonous gas and live. Was my luck really that bad? Couldn’t whatever malicious and depraved being that was in charge of the universe just let me die? Apparently not. I was lying on a soggy mattress that smelled of old water and faint rot. My lungs sounded just a little better than Goldenblood’s and felt a little worse.

I wasn’t sure where this was. Big building, from the hiss of rain and the splashes echoing in the distance. There were peeling and split ministry posters; I barely made out Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy, but whatever encouraging message they offered had returned to pulp ages ago. My eyes traced along the ceiling tiles overhead, as if there was some answer or meaning in the cracks and

crevices.

Murderer.

Midnight's last word echoed in my mind over and over again with perfect clarity. I know that some ponies might say it was Rivets's fault. They'd be wrong. If I'd been stronger... better... I would have forced them to march every corpse outside and purge the recycling systems. But I hadn't, and in doing so I'd allowed Rivets to commit an act that doomed 99. That wasn't what made me a murderer, though. The ponies of 99 were doomed; nothing I could have done would have changed that. But when it was my hoof activating the gas, I'd damned myself. It's tragic for hundreds to die. It's murder when it was my actions that caused their deaths.

Necessity is the mother of atrocity. I remembered the stallion being ripped into a vat of... not thinking about it... and transforming into an alicorn mare. But I also remembered his burns. The heat... the damage all around him. Faced with such a choice of letting him die, or saving him by forcing him to change, what was the more virtuous choice? Or was the Goddess, like me, damned simply by being there? Act, and you transform ponies into monsters. Don't, and you're a murderer for standing by when you could have acted.

But that wasn't what really damned me.

"I'm sorry, Glory," I murmured softly.

There was a shift beside me, and a cool rag dabbed at my brow. "Hey. You made it. I was worried there for a bit." Her fond tone wasn't what I'd been expecting. "If you ever pull a stunt like that again..."

A stunt? I... "What are you talking about, Glory?" I asked warily.

"Lacunae filled us in while you were out. How you... how you had to do what you did in the stable." She sighed softly as she wrapped her hooves around me, resting her head on my chest. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack. For a while there I thought... I thought that you'd tried to... to do something. Something horrible." She pressed her face against my chest.

My mouth was dry as I held her atop me, staring at the water stained tiles overhead. "What... what did she tell you?"

"That you'd worked out her teleporting you out, but that you activated the poisoned talisman early. That Rivets and the others tried to stop you and Lacunae got injured," she said quietly. "I'm so sorry you had to do that. I know you thought we'd argue, but... I wish I could have been there with you when you had to do it." She let out a great sigh as she lay atop me. I felt as if I were falling. "Don't ever do that again. I couldn't take it. Not if you did that."

She'd lied. Lacunae, or the Goddess, had lied to save my tail.

Quiet tears streaked my face as I stroked the soft hair and delicate feathers of a mare I'd never deserved. "Yeah. I had to do it. I had to."

Murderer. Liar. Monster.

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"Why the hell do I need to learn all this stuff again?" I heard a filly grouse grumpily from the next room. "I mean... who cares if a ghoul is a zombie or not? They sound disgusting!"

"Some of them may be, but a few are still ponies inside. We've met some pegasus ghouls who were quite kind and sweet," Glory pointed out.

"Besides, Blackjack, Glory, and I learned all of this the hard way. Trust me; you'll deal with far fewer bullet holes if you read up," P-21 said in his calm, soft voice. "But if you want to learn the hard way, we can have Rampage teach you though the stallion to the head system."

Once I'd pulled myself together enough to get to my hooves under me, I walked like my body was made of thin glass. Every step I took, I felt I was going to break or something. I kept hearing the word, seeing the still bodies of the foals. I could smell the chlorine reek in my nostrils. Sweet Celestia, please let me hold it together. I faked the most sincere smile possible. "Yeah, worked wonders on me..." I said as I walked out slowly into the room with the others.

Rampage was going over the Hoofington edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide with Scotch Tape, giving pointers. "Go for the eyes, Tape. Go for the eyes." The young olive mare looked at me with an expression that mixed gratitude with fear and added touch of hate. She quickly looked back at the book as if her life depended on it. With a little bit of luck, she'd do a thousand times better than P-21 and I did coming out.

Said stallion was lying on some rags in the corner. I walked slowly over, and he looked up with bloodshot eyes. "Hey," I said as I sat beside him. He shied away. I guess I couldn't blame him.

"Hey..." he murmured as he closed his eyes. "So. There was a plan?" he asked softly.

I looked over at the inscrutable features of Lacunae gazing out at the rainy night. "Yeah. Something like that." I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. I couldn't tell if he cared or not. He seemed empty and brittle, like one good shove or wrong word would snap him for good, and I'd lose another friend. I didn't deserve to have him, either; I didn't deserve any of them.

"I saw you... did they..." He drew a shaking breath. "So... was it fast?" His soft voice still varied, and I saw Scotch Tape looking over with her wide green eyes, shifting nervously.

Rampage swatted her head. "Hey. Spikey death dealer giving you pointers. You should listen to them, or I'll give you points instead." Scotch quickly flushed and looked away as she nervously chewed on the end of her dusky blue tail.

"It was over quick," I lied. Sure, minutes were better than spending your last few days eating each other, but minutes of agony... I'd done that to foals... my hooves started to shake. I felt bile rising in my throat. I had to fake it, had to pretend like it didn't affect me. I wanted to sob right there. Instead, I grimaced. "I just had the luck to get just enough to mess me up. My chest still feels like my lungs were scrubbed out with a brush, and my eyes hurt."

I killed my stable... and I was complaining about my eyes?

"Blackjack... how are you doing? Really?" he asked softly as his eyes met mine, and I felt my grin strain even more.

"I'm fine... just fine... I had to do it... I had to..." Keep repeating that. Keep on repeating it till you believe it.

For some reason, that seemed to disappoint him even more. He turned towards me a little and stretched out a hoof... paused... and then drew it back with a shameful look. "Because... Because I just had a stable full of ponies I honestly didn't care that much for die, and I'm barely holding it together.

Just... they're gone. And they were pretty shitty to me, and I still feel bad they're gone."

I couldn't meet his eyes anymore. I pretended to find batting an empty can fascinating to keep from shaking. "It doesn't matter... I had to do it..." Had to. Had to.

"Blackjack." He put his hoof on the can. "They were your friends. Your family. Your mother--"

"Don't!" I yelled, and promptly all eyes were on me... except P-21's. He flinched away, clenching his eyes shut. Glory started towards me, but I gave her a look. I couldn't handle this. I was about to explode... it was all I could do to control my breathing. "Don't... talk about her. Them. Any of it. Please." I could smell it in my mane. Feel it on my skin. I heard that shout echoing endlessly inside me. "It's over. It's done. I can't... do this now... please," I begged.

Scotch Tape looked at me in shock as her own tears began to fall. Rampage took one look at her and declared boldly, "Hey! Scotchy wotch! Don't you think you should give Blackjack her PipBuck back? Not that that the classic version isn't peachy keen, but she really needs the über black one back."

Scotch Tape blinked up at her incredulously as sorrow and shock vied with her request. "Are you serious? Do you know how hard it is to remove one of these?" she asked as she held up her own PipBuck. "If it were held on with nuts and bolts, sure! Let me get my wrench. But short of taking off her leg, these things don't come off without the proper tools."

Which, I gathered, was part of the point of Rampage asking. The striped pony grabbed Scotch's PipBuck and started to tug. "Come on... it's gotta come off somehow..." she said, and the young mare fought for her life, swatting her armor in futility. "I know... I can chew it off!"

"Ack! Get me out of here! Everypony outside is crazy!" she wailed as Rampage started to slobber over the screen.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed. I cried too... but I think the laugh covered it up.

Thank you, Rampage.

* * *

The building we were in had been some kind of publishing house. Copies of 'Hoofington Weekly' newspapers lay in soggy stacks, heaps, and, more frequently, barely-recognizable lumps. I really had no clue what kind of salvage might be available, but we split into pairs to look around the three story building. We badly needed ammo, and, as much as I hated to admit it, needed salvage for caps. We wouldn't get far if we were broke. Glory and P-21 took the second floor, and Rampage and Scotch started off to check the first. I began heading towards the basement with Lacunae, but halfway down the stairs I realized what had just happened. I took the stairs up two at a time, ignoring my body's protests, and half ran, half skidded down a hallway. I spotted Rampage and Scotch through a doorway as I passed and managed to catch myself on it, panting and wheezing. The two looked up in alarm.

"Rampage," I began, "Could I talk...to you alone?"

Scotch gave a questioning look at me, then another at Rampage. The Reaper nudged her towards the door as she headed out. I motioned Rampage into the far corner.

"Rampage," I asked quietly, meeting her pink eyes with my own and then looking back at Scotch, who was now talking with Lacunae. "Is she going to be okay with you?" One sneer. One half-lidded look, and I'd be putting a bullet in her head. Then I'd be swapping her with P-21 while she popped the bullet out of her noggin.

She blinked at me, then smiled slightly sadly. "No... I think she's a little too old for that." Okay... tiny bit reassuring, more than just a little creepy. "I'll keep her safe. I promise. I won't... slip... again." She'd better not. I was already suicidal. I didn't know how I'd take another Thorn. Would I freak out? Try and kill Rampage by putting her through the printers? Cry? Just break? Or would I feel nothing at all? That last possibility scared me more than all the others. I nodded at her, then went back into the hall, tried to smile at the odd look Scotch was giving me, and headed back towards the basement with Lacunae.

Our hooves clopped softly as we moved together, me in front and she behind. My glowing eyes pierced the darkness, but aside from radroaches, this place was dead... ooh, bad thought. I kept waiting, hoping, for something to jump out at me. I needed something to distract me from how similar these tunnels were to Stable 99. Needed something to drown out the word echoing in my mind.

And Lacunae wasn't saying anything about what she'd done. About what I'd done. I was glad she couldn't read my mind at this moment, as I was fairly screaming with questions about what she'd said. About saving me. But the alicorn remained stoic and silent, illuminating her way with a little spark of light.

I got to apply my lockpicking skills, at least; despite everything, I had to admit that I was getting better at the delicate process of tricking open locks. Security Mare: lockbreaker. Somewhere, the Goddesses must be laughing at the irony. I opened one locked metal door and was greeted by a storeroom. "Oh, look! Turpentine and Wonderglue!" I said with infinitely more enthusiasm than was warranted. "Scrap metal. Always useful. Sensor modules. Even a spark battery." And in the back was a yellow medical box. The healing potions inside were the consistency of tar, but I took the Med-X and Mint-als.

"Truly a cornucopia of caps," Lacunae agreed softly with just a hint of sarcasm.

"Hey. It'll tide us over till we find some nice high quality guns to sell," I said as I lifted a metal box lid and swept four measly bottle caps into one of my pockets. Storeroom stripped, I glanced back at her. "The thing you put me in? Was that Unity?"

Lacunae didn't look at me, her thoughts sighing softly. "It is... like Unity. It is as close to Unity as you can know."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I took a lead pipe and casually squashed a hungry radroach that wandered too near.

She sighed again as she plucked a gobbet of radroach meat from the corpse with her horn and deposited it into a plastic jar kept for Rampage's high protein diet. Somehow, I doubted a goddess liked crawling through tunnels for scrap and harvesting bug flesh. "What you experienced was an outsider looking at Unity. You remained you. Your memories, your experiences, your point of view... they were all intact." At my 'I'm an idiot, remember?' look, she elaborated, "At any point, did you not feel like yourself?"

I wish. "No; it was like a memory orb."

"Exactly. There was a wall between you and the memories you viewed. You did not become the original person experiencing the memory. You didn't know what they thought. You can infer, you can sympathize, but you remain apart from them. In Unity, there is no such separation," she said quietly.

We walked past some hulking turbine-engine-things; amazingly, they still had power. Most of the indicator lights were red, though. 'Lockout', one read. "So, you're you and not you at the same time?" She smiled, looking a little surprised.

"In Unity... you are yourself, but you are also countless others. It is like being in a great dark room, and not knowing where you begin and the others end. I am me, but I might also be a pedicurist, or a soldier, or a librarian. And who I was originally is lost. I have some semblance of independence and personality, but I've no idea if this body was originally mine. If this brain held my original memories or housed my soul. And at any moment, the me who is me can be replaced by the Goddess."

"Why is that?" I asked as I remembered that imperious voice. "Who is she? What makes her so special?"

"She is... the Goddess. She is the glue that binds us together. She is... difficult to describe," she said softly with a sigh. "She is attempting to ignore me. I'm separated from the others, though not yet severed."

"But why?"

Lacunae looked right into my eyes and asked me softly, "Would you like to experience somepony gassing a stable? Feel her guilt? Know her horrors and shame?" I felt myself start to shake, my eyes wide as I looked back at her. I broke my gaze to the floor as Lacunae went on. "There is much pain in Unity, but it is dispersed. Separated. Tolerable. In me, it is concentrated. The Goddess hurts enough with what she has become. She does not wish to include the pain I witness in her own burden."

I hadn't thought of that. What would it be like to know, to have experienced, the suffering of hundreds, maybe thousands, of individuals over centuries? To never be able to be apart from it? It would drive a pony crazy. "And then there's the Hoofington problem," I added as I found some dusty ammo containers. Why would there be ammo containers in a publishing house?

"What..." she started. "What do you know about it?"

"The screams. That jerking. How you lost five ponies from Unity." I poured the bullets into my saddlebags and turned to face her. "It was something I saw while I was away. The screams."

"Yes... the screams." She shivered. "I... that is what I am here to discover. What magic... what power... can affect us so. Alone, the screams are... manageable. They rise and fall constantly, but do not overwhelm."

"But put two of you together and you bounce back and forth like radroaches in a shoebox," I said, and she looked impressed once again. "So that's why you're here alone. That's what the Goddess wants. But why?"

"Because in Unity, there is comfort and safety. We have no promise of an everafter, but in Unity we endure. Kill one of us and it matters little. Some of us have been slain and then returned to slay our attacker in a new body, having learned their tricks. Few ponies can maintain the level of creativity and ruthlessness to keep ahead of us." She looked away with a momentary scowl. "That one little mare and her friends, however..." Somehow, I didn't think she meant to mutter that into my mind.

I couldn't help but smile, wondering who she was referring to. Still, stay on topic. "So, when those others were lost... it must have been pretty terrifying."

"When you are as we are... something fearful is intolerable. Therefore, we must either ignore it or hunt it down and destroy it at all costs. I am a rare exception; I was sent to learn about this threat." By 'you'.

"The screams... they hurt you, don't they? Even alone?" She just closed her eyes with a small

smile and shrugged elegantly. As much as I found the Goddess a twit, Lacunae was perfect for our group. "You said you deserved it..." Now there was shock on her face. Apparently, she hadn't known exactly what I'd experienced in that dream state. "Why?"

She walked a little ways past me and then stopped. "I did something terrible. I don't remember what, or why, but I remember the shame. The horror. I know what you went through when you closed that door on your friends. And I know... how much it would hurt your friends if they realized just what you tried to do.

"I had friends once, I think." She closed her eyes, tilting her head back. "Dear friends. But I lost them somehow, one after the next. Eventually, we were all alone. And one by one, we were consumed. Just as you are being consumed."

I sat down. "I don't know how to go on. EC-1101 seems so... so stupid now, Lacunae. I killed my stable. How do I live with that?" I looked up at her, tears streaking my cheeks. "How am I supposed to live with that? How do I tell Glory that... as much as I care for her... I wish I'd died along with my stable?" Lie to her? Go through the motions of being interested in a life I couldn't care less about?

"I don't know, Blackjack. I have no choice but to live and endure. It's my punishment. It's what I deserve. But you... I can't weigh your sins against your virtue." She approached and nudged my shoulder with a motherly sort of smile. "Come. There're no answers found in a smelly basement." With her minigun floating above her, she proceeded down the hallway.

* * *

An hour later, we'd come across a few more storage rooms, and my bags were filled to overflowing with assorted crap I'd gathered in the hopes that it could be put to some sort of use. We were on our way back up towards the first floor, not having any good way to carry more stuff even if we could find it. "So, deep and profound questions of identity aside, what were you doing in Chapel?" I asked as I stepped over the radroach carcass. "How long have you been there?"

"Chapel is a hollow, a refuge; the screams of the city are muted somewhat. I hadn't been there long, though; a few months at the most."

"And nopony commented on the giant unicorn in black?" I asked with a slight tease. "I mean, not to be rude, but you do stand out."

"One advantage to being a giant unicorn is that few bother you with *why* you are a giant unicorn," she replied with a calm smile. "Priest suspected something, I'm sure, but I think he was more interested in preventing me from trying to enter the city. The Crusaders gave me a wide enough berth. That delightful filly Charity made the most delicious daisy sandwiches I'd ever eaten, though. Where she found the flowers I can't imagine, but they were worth every cap."

I couldn't imagine Charity making me a daisy sandwich. In fact, I couldn't imagine a daisy sandwich without getting some disturbing visuals. "Yeah, and she probably charged you a horn and a hoof for 'em," I muttered sourly, then blinked. "Wait. If you don't have to eat...?"

"Why would I buy food from her?" she finished, looking at me in surprise. "Why, because they're quite tasty." Her lips curled with elegant delight.

On a whim, I peeked into an office near the stairs. Wallsafe? Unopened? I felt the most curious nibble at my spine, like that locked door had insulted my mother by being locked! Well, we'd see about *that!* "Hold up a sec," I said as I nipped inside and floated out a bobby pin. "Okay. How are we going to do this? The easy way or the hard way?"

Lacunae stood behind me. "What's the hard way?" she asked in an amused tone of thought.

"I cry and have to get P-21 to open it for me. It's ugly. Trust me," I assured her.

It wasn't the worst lock I'd run across, though I had to press my ear to the side of the door to hear the faint tap of the pins, screwing up my face, and I went through two pins before the third one opened it.

Inside, there were some gold bits, a nine millimeter automatic pistol, two magazines of nine millimeter ammo, and a folder with a note taped to the front that read: 'We can't print this! Image would kill us!' Okay, M.A.S., M.W.T., even M.o.M., I could understand, but what would the Ministry of Image do? Write a bad review?

The Armor of Image
By Ace Buckley

We all know the picture of the ministries as the pillars of modern Equestria. Bold, strong, and working for the betterment of all ponies everywhere! We know that image because of the tireless efforts of the Ministry of Image and its Ministry Mare, Rarity. Its duties are to protect, inspire, and brighten our dull lives with fabulosity.

So why is the Ministry of Image creating magical armor?

Yes, that's exactly what I thought when a confidential source informed me that Rarity was conducting experimental spell and material research on creating armor. This is normally the stuff I expect to come from the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the Ministry of Arcane Science... heck, even Awesome would be up to it. But Image? It's like a Ministry of Peace weapons program!

Image has downplayed inquiries that Rarity was simply exploring the possibility of creating low grade armor for Equestrian citizens. If that's the case, they're certainly pursuing the research with a decidedly low horn. According to documents obtained from the M.o.M. at Hightower Jail and Shattered Hoof Penitentiary, several 'undesirable elements' were transferred to Image custody and unknown destinations courtesy of everypony's favorite spooks at the O.I.A..

But, thanks to an exclusive inside source, I can now tell you that these prisoners were used to explore radical and dangerous new techniques of magic. The victims of the experiments were so traumatized that they simply wasted away. Others were driven mad, and we have confirmation that some were sent to Happyhorn Gardens. Unfortunately, Ministry Mare Fluttershy was not willing to comment on these patients, citing confidentiality. However, she said she would discuss the matter personally with Rarity. Will the details be shared with this reporter? Don't hold your breath!

So, what is the status of Image's armor research project? Will Ministry Mare Rarity come forward to disclose just what she's up to? Will she explain to the families of these prisoners why she subjected them to such dangerous magics? Will she disclose her findings to the M.A.S. and independent review? Or will she simply deflect them with a laugh and a wave of her hoof and find something new to distract us with? Inquiring ponies want to know.

Okay. That was definitely more interesting than I had expected.

Suddenly, there was a loud hum, and the lights overhead flickered to life. A radio tuned to a long dead station poured out a sea of static, and the office terminal flashed, crackled, and then died in a puff of acrid purple smoke. "I didn't do it!" I said to Lacunae. Then a portion of the wall retracted, and a four-wheeled robot rolled into the hallway. "Get down!" I shouted as the sentry robot's visor bar turned a brilliant crimson.

"Unauthorized presence detected. Initiating removal protocols. Surrender immediately and be disintegrated!" the sentry bot declared, and I knew that there was a robotics programmer two centuries ago needing a swift buck to the head. Of course, by the word 'removal', Taurus's rifle was coming out, and I'd slammed home armor piercing rounds by 'be'. Then the robot's missile pod flipped out of its shoulder, Lacunae's glittering shield flashing up just in time to take the blast. The shimmering magic wall dropped, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four rounds through its head.

Of course, it didn't keep its brain there, so the effect was a little bit spoiled. Lacunae's minigun bullets simply dinged and sparked off its armored hide, and after a moment she put the weapon aside, her horn flashing as three glowing arrows manifested next to her and streaked into its chest. With a crackle and pop, the sentry went still.

"I dislike these machines," she declared calmly as she opened a side panel and pulled out the robot's 5mm ammunition belts.

"Oh, why don't you push yourself? Be peeved. Mildly annoyed. Disgruntled?" I said with a chuckle, my brain running on bullet time rather than 'think about what you did and are doing to your friends' time. The missile launcher came off in one big piece, and I held it in my hooves. "Hey! Try using this!"

She looked at the weapon coolly. "Don't be ridiculous. I could never use that." I stared at her in shock. "It's loud, noisy, and smelly."

"Right. How silly of me!" There was no way I'd manage it. My magical strength wasn't nearly enough to fire it accurately, and when using missiles I sure as heck wanted to be accurate. We made our way up the stairs and towards the sounds of continuing gunshots and explosions. Scotch Tape's PipBuck tag flashed in my vision, leading the way.

We entered the room filled with printing machines. Whoever had turned on the power hadn't anticipated turning on the security, because turrets were lighting up and more sentries were activating from their hidden nooks. A missile streaked across the room, exploding in time to send a white and red mass arching overhead, splatting wetly into the wall above us and then falling limply. Rampage opened her eyes as her blown off limbs started to regenerate. Scotch yipped as she scrambled along the edge of the room to join us.

"Did you push something?" I asked sternly.

The olive filly blanched and pointed her hoof at Rampage. "She told me to!"

"It was a shiny red button. How could we not push it?" Rampage groaned as she stood on her restored legs. "Round two, you metal motherfucker!" she cried in glee, charging at the sentry bot that strafed our corner of the room with its minigun.

"Well, I guess I can excuse a shiny red button," I said as I looked at the robots rolling around. "Can you shoot?"

"Shoot? Shoot what?" I rolled my eyes at her response. That answered that question.

"Right." I shoved her down and grabbed her PipBuck. "Okay. Pray I remember how Mom did this," I said as I pulled out a connection lead and plugged it into her PipBuck. "Okay... security operations... deputize. Confirmation, Marmalade."

Her eyes widened. "Whoa. I can see a little target in my vision." Good. That meant it worked.

"Yeah. You should have a target, Eyes Forward Sparkle, and S.A.T.S." I said as I lifted out the automatic and pushed it into her mouth. "The little X is where your gun is pointed. Pull the trigger with your tongue. Push this catch to eject the spent magazine. Put in a fresh one and load a round into the chamber with your hoof. Shoot at the smaller robots and, whatever you do, don't shoot me."

"O--" she said around the gun, pulling the trigger with her tongue as she tried to speak. She dropped it in shock, and I fell back with my armor stinging from the impact. I glared at her as she flushed. "--kay..." she finished lamely.

"Welcome to the group," I muttered as I stood and pulled out the shotgun, loading slugs. More robots were orienting on our position as one of the massive printers started to spark and smoke. I supposed trying to run after two centuries of no maintenance was a little risky. "Lacunae. Go to the second floor and get Glory and P-21 down here and out." There were more sentries and Protectapony robots making their way towards the disturbance in the print room.

Lacunae nodded once and flashed away from view. Then it was fight time. Rampage was the target, drawing most of their attention. I played flanker, running around behind the sentries to fire point blank into the gaps between the different parts of their chassis. I just prayed Scotch Tape lived through this fight.

Then the room exploded. Okay, no, the missile exploded. Apparently, I was more target than I anticipated and found myself on a ballistic journey across the room. I landed in a numb heap, my combat armor smoking as the Workhorse sentry oriented towards me. I couldn't help but smile as its gatling gun started to spin. I could get away, maybe. I might be able to blast it. I just felt so tired. So heavy. So slow.

Then the sentry jerked, and I blinked as the red bar disappeared.

Scotch Tape ducked down from behind it with wrench in her jaws and a spark battery between her hooves. She stared at me, trying to shout something around the wrench to the effect of "Wha re oo doeng? Ooove!"

Okay, when a fresh-out-of-the-stable filly almost half my age is telling me to move, then I know I need to get my ass in gear. I scrambled to my hooves and snatched up my gun. Even though she couldn't die, Rampage could still lose and we could still bite it. I had to get my head in the game, or I'd be burying my friends instead of them burying me.

We were moving again, trying not to let the robots get a decent bead on us as I did my best to take out the sentries engaged with Rampage. Even she was regenerating slower and moving with increasing disorientation. If she gave out, how long could I withstand their fire?

"Scotch. I need you to get me something," I said with a grimace. I was going to need a bigger gun. No, not Folly. That was like... an anti-*building* gun. I told her what to do as I watched Rampage go down again. Two sentries began to turn towards me, and I ran as missiles streaked after me, cooking my tail as Rampage struggled to rise again.

I took cover behind one of the groaning, chattering printing presses and reloaded, my ears ringing

and nose bleeding from the overpressure of the explosions. I panted through my mouth to keep my ears from popping as I backed away from the next sentry rolling around the corner towards me. I really missed those spark rounds.

Then Scotch Tape backed out of the hallway with the missile launcher I'd removed in tow. "Good job!" I yelled as I stuck my shotgun in its sling and raced to her. The heavy weapon shimmered as my magic strained to lift and orient the reinforced tube. "Cross your hooves," I yelled as I jumped into S.A.T.S. and put almost the spell's whole charge into the shot.

The missile streaked towards two of the sentries, striking soundly in the middle. My magic failed and the backblast sent the missile launcher back down the hall behind me. Still, with an explosion of metal, the sentries were blasted into pieces. That just left three more. "Go get it!" I called out, bringing out the shotgun again.

"What am I, your dog?" she yelled at me crossly.

"Yes! Now fetch!" I laughed, feeling... good? Excited? Not like a corpse waiting to die? One of them. Glory and P-21 came out onto the catwalks overhead, and precision green beams joined strafing minigun rounds and grenade blasts. Rampage ripped off the head of one robot and crawled inside as it wheeled about helplessly. Finally, Scotch Tape dragged the missile launcher back and loaded it, and I tried for a shot at the last sentry, which was sending one missile after another at the catwalks.

I entered S.A.T.S., took my target, and breathed out as the hovering weapon fired. This time, I managed to keep the missile launcher from flying back as the explosive projectile blasted the remaining sentry bot. I sunk to my haunches, laughing, hugging the hot metal tube to my chest. Missile launchers. Loud, noisy, smelly, and fun!

But as I sat there, the smoke hazing the air, I felt like I was looking out of the Overmare's window once more. My throbbing ears could hear the distant screams choked silent in gagging, gasping agony. I pressed my face to the warm green metal. *Murderer*. I felt the tears running down my cheeks. *Foal killer*. I grit my teeth, hovering somewhere between tears and laughter. I could smell the chlorine. I could hear the screams.

Scotch Tape sat next to me, staring in shock as I hugged the tube, unable to stand. I sobbed as I did all I could just to curl the ends of my lips up. "I'm sorry, Scotch Tape. I'm so sorry I killed our home."

She looked at me, seeing the real me. Not the laughing idiot or even the fake hero, but the murderer. I hated the pity in her eyes, even if it was what I desperately needed. "Yeah. Me too," she said quietly before she rose. "Hey! Don't mess with that! Let me see if there's something good in there!" she yelled as Rampage proceeded to smash the robotic remains.

We survive in the Wasteland through doing. Action. If we think, we drown. We grasp for meaning in vain. Why was I alive? EC-1101? No. Helping a Wasteland determined to sink and die in poison and hate? Not if I were honest with myself. Glory? Goddesses, let it be for Glory. Please.

* * *

MASEBS Broadcast Tower 14 was only an hour or two east of the Hoofington Weekly building we'd left in our wake. To the northeast, I could barely make out the sliver of gray ocean, while to the south I could see the round building of the Hoofington Arena. Beyond that was the Core. Scotch Tape stared up at the huge white metal spire rising endlessly towards the clouds overhead. Lights glowed dimly on a broadcast dish-festooned ring platform high, high above the ground but not even at the midpoint of the tower. The outside was distracting her from what we'd left behind.

"How high does it go?" the young mare asked Glory, who seemed amused with her fascination.

"Higher than the clouds. No pony knows what they were for originally, but we use them today to grow our food. Thunderhead has the distinction of being one of the most advanced agricultural centers in the Enclave. We're one of the few that managed a surplus harvest every year for the past fifty years." She didn't try to hide the pride swelling her chest. "No other pegasus community has managed that."

"Thunderhead? What's that?" Scotch asked as she craned her neck back.

"Well... it's my... it's where I'm from originally." She deflated almost instantly; there was no covering the hurt. She took a deep breath and fell into a vaguely pedantic tone. "Before the bombs fell, Thunderhead was a support settlement for the forces working out of Shadowbolt Tower. When the war ended, we became one of the primary Enclave bases in the east; at first, this was just due to our possession of the tower, but, as the new order settled in, it quickly became clear that Thunderhead was preserving and building on the innovative, productive spirit that Hoofington was famous for. Today, Thunderhead enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the Enclave, and its people are forward-thinking technologically, scientifically, and socially. It's even the first Enclave settlement to begin sending aid down to the surface."

Scotch Tape looked at the ruins to the south. "So, where exactly are they sending this aid?"

Glory flushed and glanced at me. I arched a brow. Did she really want me to come to her rescue on this? I half-agreed with the filly. The little gray pegasus sighed. "Well, here, but there's a lot of work to do and there's been a lot of resistance. But we're trying to do better."

When they're not developing biological weapons.

"Why didn't you come down sooner?" Scotch asked as she walked beside Glory, her utility harness jingling with the tools she'd had on her when she'd fled. None of them were for removing PipBucks, unfortunately.

Glory sighed again. "We wanted to, but for years the surface was too radioactive. Then there wasn't any pony down here to help. Then for a while, the ponies that *were* down here were savage, mindless monsters. And of course there's always fear of biological contamination."

Biological contamination. I cocked my head, trying to think about this some. "Glory... Lighthooves was trying to infect a pegasus with the raider plague. Why would he do that? Why not just spray it over every pony village down on the surface and wipe us all out?" Glory blinked at me and then shrugged. "We've been thinking about the cannibalism and the mindless loyalty the disease fosters..." I continued, "but what if... what if all he's after is a spectacle? A contagion that would be an excuse for pegasi to never ever come back to the surface again? Who cares how it works if it's something they've never seen before and scares the feathers off them?"

"If there was a real contagion like the ones they talk about on the Science Network..." Glory chewed on the end of her wing as she thought about it for a moment. "Something verified by outside sources as a deadly threat... you're right. I don't think we'd ever come down here again." She shivered. "And the lightning rods would keep any pony down here from making it to the clouds. It'd permanently sever any hope of fixing things between pegasi and the surface."

"Especially if Thunderhead is responsible for finding a cure," P-21 added. "Seems like a perfect way to keep the status quo."

I didn't answer. Thinking of Lighthooves made me feel... nothing. I wanted to stop him, but it was an abstract and distant desire. It was the same as how EC-1101 had gone from a burning curiosity

to a dull interest. Everything inside me had been snuffed out by chlorine gas and strangled screams. I tripped over a rock and nearly sprawled on my face. Damn, I couldn't even walk anymore.

"You should turn on your radio," Rampage said as her tail swished behind Scotch Tape and swatted her rump, making the young mare jump; thankfully, it hadn't hit hard enough to rip her barding. "Now that you're on the outside, you need to hear DJ Pon3. He's a big fan of Blackjack."

"He's a fan of Security," I muttered, not wanting to listen in on what he might say. "No surprise, since he's the one who made her, Goddesses know why."

"Security?" Scotch Tape asked, then flicked the radio on. I was thankful to hear Sweetie Belle's melodious voice rise from her speaker. The olive filly looked shocked. I remembered how I'd felt the first time I'd heard music that wasn't stable sanctioned and glorifying the Overmare.

I gestured to the word on my armor. "DJ Pon3 found out that I was helping ponies out here and started calling me the Security Mare." She looked at me skeptically, and I shrugged. "Don't look at me. It's not like I asked him to."

"That hasn't stopped her from taking advantage of it when she can," P-21 said with a little smirk. But I didn't mirror it. Once, I'd been both annoyed and secretly proud of being Security; it'd somehow made me stand out above the rest of the Wasteland, corny as it was. But it'd been a lie. I wasn't better than the scum out there. I was worse. Maybe this Red Eye might have killed as many ponies as I; anypony nasty enough to take over Paradise sounded like a piece of work.

"Stop it, Blackjack," P-21 muttered beside me. I looked at him in surprise. "You're thinking about it? Aren't you? Kicking yourself isn't going to solve anything."

"No. I'm fine. I had to do it. I know that." I gave him a broad smile.

"It's okay to be sad, Blackjack."

I wasn't sad, though. I felt... hollow. Empty. Brittle. I was going to the tower from inertia; I didn't want to go. It was just the only destination any of us had. It was pretending like everything was okay. "I'm good, P-21. I'm just fine." Maybe I didn't want anything, but I knew what I didn't want. I didn't want my friends hurt. I didn't want them to worry. I didn't want EC-1101 in Sanguine's hooves. I didn't want to keep walking like this. I just had to keep up the lie. Go through the motions. Hope.

Eventually, the music came to an end, and the robust stallion came on. "Well, hello there, children! It's your MC of the Wasteland, DJ Pon3! Time for some news." I relaxed a little as he went on about the troubles around Manehattan and with Red Eye and other difficulties. My ears strained for some word about the Stable Dweller; I needed to believe there was somepony out there who could fix things in the Wasteland without murdering innocent ponies. Unfortunately, it looked like he didn't have anything to say about her at the moment.

After a mention of things happening around Stalliongrad, he then said the words that I'd been dreading. "It's time for some news for our friends out east. Some of you might notice that things are a little quieter than usual out there around the Core. Yeah, I can hear you from here, kiddies: 'But DJ, weren't you telling us to hammer up the windows, barricade the doors, and turn off all the lights 'cause a bajillion raiders were coming to eat us?'"

"Yup. I did. I admit it. But..." He gave a low chuckle of anticipation. "Turns out that somepony out there must have been listening up, because she went right where they were thickest and all of a sudden it's quiet. Dozens of raiders simply gone. No shots. No bodies. Just quiet. Now that's some pretty good work. Now we can just hope the Reapers and Rangers get the clue and knock off their latest

peeing match over the Zenith Bridge before Security heads in that direction.

"In other news around the Core, what do folks make of these 'Volunteer Corps'? Now, we all know that, somewhere up above, the pegasi are making clouds right and left so thick that even I can't see through 'em, but now out of the blue a whole slew of them are around the Hoof offering to help. Well, that's awfully nice, but when you ask 'em to take care of some raiders or maybe something really crazy like let the sun through, they're just hemming and hawing. Look. I'm glad you're back, but if you're going to help, then make like Security and help. Don't just show up with a skywagon full of excuses why you can't do what we really need.

"So let's hear it for Security, for fighting the good fight and taking it right to the heart of the matter. Here is a mare that'll do whatever it takes to make the Wasteland a better place. This is DJ Pon3, bringing you the truth... no matter how bad it hurts."

Speaking of hurt, it really stings when you walk right into a tree! I fell hard on my rump, clutching my horn in my hooves as I hissed 'Ow...' over and over again. I tried not to think about what I'd just heard. I looked back at the others who'd watched me just smack my dumb face into a dumb tree. "Woopsie. Looks like listening and walking at the same time is too much for me. Think we can turn off Pon3?" I asked, grinning as widely as I could, keeping my eyes closed so I wouldn't have to see their faces.

Doing what had to be done. That sounded so simple. It should be easy. Blame Rivets and Stable 99 obstinacy, calmly and coolly accept that their death was inevitable and that I'd prevented more harm than if I had simply sealed them up.

So why couldn't I do it?

I wanted the Dealer here. I wanted some kind of cryptic bullshit to confuse me. I needed something inscrutable to make me not face the simple truth. I had to smile. I had to keep it together. Everypony needed me to hold it together.

Sweet Celestia, why couldn't I stop the screaming?

* * *

I have a special talent with ambushes: I walk into them with surprising regularity. This one, I was simply staying on point, keeping my back to all my friends, when the bullet slammed into my left shoulder. Oh, hello. Red bars. I grinned and laughed as my friends took cover, feeling the dull thump against my barding as the three or so raiders fired at us from the cover of a covered wagon. Out came the rifle and I peered down the scope, not even registering who or what I was shooting at.

Red, it's dead. S.A.T.S., three shots to the head. Engage... Boom... boom... Then I was being knocked do the ground by P-21. I just looked up at him as he shouted down, "Blackjack! What do you think you're doing?"

"Daddy!" I heard a filly wail as Glory took wing and flew to where the poor scavenger ponies curled up, their varmint hunting rifle discarded. Hastily, Glory worked to treat the massive damage I'd done to my target's head.

I just looked up at him, his staring eyes wide with fear and confusion as I murmured softly, "Red, it's dead. Red, it's dead."

* * *

"She's losing it," P-21 said quietly from the campfire. The stallion I'd shot wasn't doing well at all. Healing potions could do a lot, but not much for a brain that had taken a bullet through the middle. I lay apart from the others, staring into the darkness. Just a little family scavenging unit scared to death of being trapped in raider territory, and who'd shot first without the benefit of an E.F.S. to let them know I wasn't hostile.

"She's been under incredible strain. She's coping as well as she can," Glory said. I could feel her eyes on my back.

"No. She isn't, and you know that better than any of us, Glory. You've seen her push herself to the point of physical collapse." I'd tried so hard to be strong. And I was trying to keep it together. I was. I was trying to be happy. I was trying to live for them.

Glory didn't say anything. I knew she didn't have to. "She's going crazy, isn't she?" Scotch Tape summed it up excellently. The gray pegasus gave a soft sob.

"I'm going to check on him. Give him some more Med-X," Glory said thickly as she rose and walked back into the cargo wagon that had become a makeshift hospice.

"What are we going to do?" P-21 said quietly. You're going to do better. Whatever you do, you'll do better than I have. I'm a murderer. A killer. This proves it.

"What would you do if there was no Blackjack?" Rampage asked.

"I don't know," P-21 said quietly. "I just don't know. Goddesses, I need her. Her and her stupid quest... it kept us going. Now that she's falling apart, I don't know. Try to find a life in Megamart or Chapel... or something." I should tell him that he'd be fine without me. That he was too smart to let the Wasteland hold him down. Without me, he'd do something amazing.

"And me?" Scotch Tape asked. I'd saved her life and killed everypony she knew. And now she was travelling with her killers. She was a good pony, for now. I didn't imagine her mother beat her and tormented her.

"Well, fortunately, there's always a job opening slaughtering wannabe Reapers while picking fights with the Steel Rangers across the river. It's a living," Rampage said quietly. Lacunae said nothing. I supposed she would do... something. Return to Chapel? Continue searching on her own?

And Glory... who had lost everything... what would she do? Where could a Dashite go in this world? Would she continue her search to clear her name? Take on Lighthooves by herself? Or try to find a quiet part of the Wasteland to live in?

Till slavers took her. Till poison choked her. Till monsters ate her. Till the Dealer took one more pony. And one more. And one more. Because that was what the Wasteland did. 'It's not getting any better,' Rampage had said. 'It's getting worse. The poison spreads a little more day by day. And one day, if I don't die, I think I'll be the last pony left in the world.' You're right to be afraid, Rampage, because you are. And there wasn't anything I could do. The Wasteland always won.

From the trailer rose an anguished wail. It joined perfectly with the screams in my head, echoing that word over and over again.

And one more.

I couldn't stay here. I couldn't do this. I had to leave... but I couldn't. So I did the next best thing. I floated an orb from my pocket and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Pony... male... earth. I felt big and heavy. Uniform. Gun. Peppermint cologne? That was unexpected. He stepped in front of the mirror. Doof still had all the charm of a cinderblock. He turned this way and smiled. That way and grinned. It somehow managed to resemble a leer. Slowly he collapsed on his rump, pressing his hooves to his head. "This just ain't gonna work, Momma. I know you say I gotta be brave and all... show her how I feel... but it just ain't gonna work."

"Doofus, you idjit!" a crabby mare snapped from the other room. "You like this mare, don'tcha?"

"Yeah, Momma. More than anything."

"And yer saying she's hurtin' bad right now?"

"We all are, Momma," he said as he tried to slick back his black mane. "With Big Mac gone... it just hurts us all."

"Then she needs ya, don't she? Ya need to be there and tell her how you feel and let her know ya like her," his momma said in a vinegary voice. She stepped into view, bony and sour-looking, but she still smiled. "There you go. Look just like your daddy." Somehow, that didn't seem to reassure the gaunt pink mare. "Now, you go and do your best, you got it, Doofus?"

"Yes Momma," he said with a nod of his head. "I promise I won't screw up again, Momma."

She sighed and patted his chest with a hoof. "Just do your best," she said as she stretched up to nuzzle his cheek. "How'd I birth such a great big lump?" He chuckled and nuzzled her back fondly before stepping back. "You have a nice night, Doofus." I had to admit, I'd never heard that particular word said with such fondness before.

He ducked out and trotted to a bus that took him back to Miramare. It seemed particularly subdued. I supposed they must have buried Big Mac recently. He stepped off the bus and started to trot towards the main building, passing by a half dozen mares who struggled to unload their skywagon. They saw Doof and immediately nudged each other.

"Hey! I betcha you can't unload all these crates in five minutes," one said loudly to her friend.

"Aw... nopony could do that," her friend protested, and then added, "Not even Doofus."

His ears stood straight up. "What you ladies talkin' 'bout? I can get them unloaded, lickety split."

I mentally groaned as he immediately climbed into the back, bit the canvas rope at the end of the wooden crate, and pulled it off and onto his broad shoulders. I had to admit, these crates were damned heavy, but Doof was one strong pony. He talked between crates. "See ladies... this is why... mares like you... need stallions like me... around!" The mares just grinned at each other as he sweated profusely, doing their work for them.

One nudged the other. "Hey, Doofus. We heard Twist talking about you."

He dropped the crate, his head snapping to her immediately. Oh no... "Really, Brass? What'd she say?" The crate banged solidly on his hoof, but he completely ignored it.

Brass, the coppery red mare, gave a smirk as she looked at her friend and then at the big, dumb stallion. "Well she was saying how she was looking for one particular stallion. Big. Strong. Brave." I

could feel his idiotic grin.

"Well I'm big, strong, and brave," he said, missing sweaty and smelly as well. Damn but he worked up a sweat!

"But she was saying what she really needs is a big, tough stallion who will just take charge and give it to her between the flanks good and hard." While her friend might have liked this talk, the others were quickly frowning at her blatant manipulation.

"Really? But Momma said I should be nice to her."

"Tch... and what's that got you? I'm telling you, she wants it. You just have to buck up and give it to her."

"Doofus," one of the others began, but the nasty mare's friend cut her off with a glare.

"Well, I got to go, ladies," he said as he trotted towards the building.

"That was nasty, Brass," one admonished as he trotted away.

"What? Not my fault he's a fucking idiot. Twist will kick his ass good and proper. It'll be a great laugh." I didn't know if what she said registered or not, but he didn't take his eyes off the Miramare building.

The Marauders had their own shared quarters. I was astonished to see that Doof had once roomed with Big Macintosh. How had they both fit in there? He walked up to another room. Twist and Jetstream. He knocked with his hoof. A few seconds later, Twist opened the door; I knew that look. Her pink eyes were puffy and bloodshot, her nose wet and red... and her breath reeked of peppermint schnapps. "Doof? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you. I... ah... wanted to help..."

She wrinkled her nose but stepped back and let him in. Her quarters were neat and tidy. "Don't know how you're going to do that. Jetstream's cracking, I think. Vanity's been talking with her all day about Big Macintosh."

"We all knew it could happen, Twist. You could die. Or me," he said sourly as he sat beside her little table where she'd been having some bread and cheese. He took the knife and cut off a huge hunk, munching noisily. "Mmm... tasty!" I wanted to facehoof.

"It wasn't just you or me, Doof. It was Big Macintosh. He was... he was like a big brother or daddy I never had. Like, as long as he was there, we were going to be okay. Even after Stonewing." She sniffed as she rubbed her eyes. "Goddesses, I'm a mess. I feel like my shop's burned up again. I dunno if we're gonna be able to stay together. Not as the Marauders, I mean."

"We could become Doof's Destroyers," he suggested, and I could tell he was serious. Twist, however, broke into sharp, tense laughter.

"Oh that's a good one," she snorted. "Might as well rename us Twist's Terminators or Psalm's Slaughterers." She sighed, shaking her head and rubbing her temples. Then she turned away and flicked her tail as she walked to the fridge. Oh... I knew that smell. And if I was smelling it... oh jeeze. I could already feel the effect it was having on Doof's nethers. This was not a good time for a mare and a stallion to be alone together with one of them stupid and the other drunk and both of them hurting! Not at all!

"Well... I could take care of you," he said dumbly as he raised a hoof to brush the candy canes on her flank.

"Doof, get off!" she said crossly as she scowled back at him, getting out the bottle of peppermint flavored liquor and took a pull off it. Then she pointed a hoof at him. "How many damn times do I have to tell you 'I am not interested'?"

"But..."

"Not. Interested. I don't care what you smell. That's hormones. And even with them, I still don't want anything to do with you. Not unless that's a huge Doof costume and inside you're a crème filly with a red mane who talks in drawl and wants me to be her friend again."

I had to admit, I echoed Doof mentally. "Huh?"

She looked at him with inebriated scorn. "I'm gay. Fillyfooler. Marelicker. Take whatever damn label you like. And the only mare I've ever been interested in stopped being interested in me when I got my cutie mark and she didn't. You ain't her. So just get out." She turned her back on the poor, confused, dumb stallion whose brain told him one thing while his cock told him something else. And maybe, maybe it would have ended there. He'd take a cold shower, she'd sober up and cool off. And that would be that.

Then he grinned slowly. "Oh... I get it." No Doof! Don't do this. She was a lying cunt. She was messing with you. Stop!

But he didn't.

Perhaps Twist might have kicked his ass. She certainly seemed capable. Like she'd usually be capable. But she was drunk and tired. It wasn't good. It wasn't fun. It didn't feel nice. And eventually, she simply stopped crying and fighting and everything but enduring. And when it finished and she just lay there, Doof stood over her, seeming to be waiting for something. For her to tell him that it was what she'd wanted... that he'd hit her spot... something.

"What the fuck did you do?" a male said from the doorway. Applesnack was not a happy pony at the best of times. And now? Now the green stallion looked like one immense raw bundle of nerves. Right now, he was looking for any excuse to take a pony apart.

Right now, Doof was exactly what he needed.

Somewhere in the beating, everything smeared as the memory shifted. Doof found himself sitting in a concrete cell. He'd saved some newspaper clippings. 'Macintosh Marauder convicted of sexual assault,' screamed one headline. 'I knew he was always dangerous' started another clipping beside a picture of Brass and her friend. He'd scribbled 'cunt' beside both their heads. 'Marauders disbanded. Hoofington's legendary squad disgraced.' The last was a little letter. 'Please don't write me any more, Doofus,' was all it said. There was no signature, but the paper was warped and smeared with tears.

Then the guards came, and the nurse with them. They looked at him like he was scum. Perhaps he was. Perhaps he wasn't. They gave him a shot; I felt the Med-X take effect quickly as he was walked down the concrete hall. They stood him over a padded frame and strapped him down. "Whut are yew doin'?" he slurred numbly as they finished scrubbing him with harsh-smelling alcohol.

"We're experimenting on how to make a better, stronger pony," a mare said softly. The black earth pony looked down at him in contempt. "As you might understand, it's better to experiment on a worthless piece of scum like you before we give the Steelpony treatment to real soldiers."

"I ain't scum," he muttered thickly as unicorn mares with scalpels floating over them approached. He jerked his legs against the strong restraints. "Let me go... you can't do this, you cunts!"

"I assure you... we can," she replied softly. The Med-X might be a painkiller, but it did nothing for the sensation of his hide being cut open.

"You cunts!" he shouted as he jerked again.

"We are..."

"Cunts!"

"And you deserve it."

"Cuuuuuunnnnnntttts!"

The memory smeared once more. The pain, that rolling pain though every fiber of his being, was barely held off as the needle was stabbed into this throat. The painkiller went straight to his brain, and he shuddered in relief. The floating needle pulled out, and a ghoul rasped, "Ah, a thing of wonder is a joy forever."

"So, I just got to get to this stable and get the Overcunt to give you this EC-1101 and you'll tell me how to make that drug so I don't hurt no more?" Deus asked thickly as he rose on his hydraulically augmented limbs and looked down at the ghoul.

Sanguine. I don't know what I'd expected. I'd seen a few ghouls in the Wasteland, but never one like this. Wisps of pink gas danced around his lips and leaked out of cracks in his charred hide. His crackled mouth split in a grin. "That's it. You go in there and get me that program, and all your ouchies will be gone for good."

"And why do you want it?"

"Why? My. Do you think you can understand?" he asked, chuckling brightly. His business suit looked like it'd just come off the rack of a store. I had to admit, the sight of that abomination in that freshly pressed suit was more unnerving than if he'd been dressed like a raider. He trotted to a window that looked out at the blasted landscape. "Isn't it beautiful? Poisoned. Sick. Broken. This is the purest expression of Equestria! The culmination of all our sins! But it is also an opportunity."

Deus had an E.F.S., and I watched the target line up perfectly with the back of Sanguine's head. "You talk too much," he muttered.

"Apologies. It's an occupational hazard for visionaries like myself," Sanguine said with a disarming little chuckle. "Let's simply say that, with that program, I will be able to create and explore new evolutionary paths otherwise unrealized. We tasted a sip of it during the heyday of Chimera. Just a sip of the possibilities. Twilight Sparkle succeeded, despite all odds, and the alicorns are just one possible path. I want to use the Wasteland as my canvas and explore the myriad possibilities of pony evolution!"

"It will also," he added, turning back to Deus and trotting to him with a freaky little dance, "Discharge a certain obligation I hold to a very important pony. A pony whose dreams far exceed mine. Now that it's been found and the Overmare is opening the door, all you have to do is get it."

From the next room came a soft chime. "Ugh... now, if you'll excuse me, go ahead and bully some of those raiders into helping you, and let me get to work." And with that, he trotted to the door.

Perhaps he underestimated the huge gray pony, or perhaps the unicorn was simply too mad to care. Deus, however, lingered at the door, his augmented ears picking up every word.

"Hello, good sir! And how are you on this most splendid of days, Director?"

The mechanical voice reminded me of Watcher. "Progress?"

"I've just sent an errand stallion to get the program."

"And the biological sample?"

"Safe and sound. We put it in her hooves, and we get everything we want. I get Project Chimera. You get everything else. She gets to play at being queen of the Wasteland. Everything according to plan."

"No."

"No?" Now Sanguine sounded perplexed. "No? Nix? Null and void?"

"We must stop him."

"Him?" Then a pause. "Him?! Sir, with all due respect, he was stopped two centuries ago. I saw it. He died with the Princesses, Project Horizons died with him, and we are all the better for it."

"He lives. I know it. Find him, Sanguine. He's here. I can feel it. I can feel him!"

"Of course. Of course," Sanguine rasped in mollifying tones. "I'll get right on top of that, Director."

Deus turned from the door, muttering softly, "Project Horizons, huh? Interesting..."

oooOOOooo

I awoke in the rain. No pony talked. No pony smiled. They sat apart from me, together. Occasionally, one would glance in my direction, but I couldn't imagine what they expected. Was I to say something? Do something? Be something? I knew what they wanted; they wanted me to lead. To stand up, grin, point them in a direction and move out. Because we were friends. Because they trusted me, even after all I'd done. All I'd done to them.

I didn't deserve them. I didn't deserve to draw another breath.

I slowly rose to my hooves. "Blackjack?" Glory said in worry as she rushed to my side.

Slowly, I started walking. "Let's go," I rasped softly as I walked towards the tower.

"Blackjack... it..." But then she met my eyes and realized it didn't matter if it had been an accident or not. "He's... okay. He's going to pull through."

I felt nothing at all. No relief. No joy. Nothing. I smiled. "That's good. Really. I'm glad."

"Blackjack?" she asked as she touched my cheek. I pulled away, looked away. I may as well have slapped her.

"Listen. He's hurt really badly," I said. "You should take him to Megamart. Make sure he pulls

through. Take Scotch Tape, too... it'll be safer there." I looked at Lacunae. "You can go with her and teleport both of them back when he's safe and sound." That would take at least several hours. Maybe more. "Then you meet up with the rest of us."

"Blackjack. Are you sure?" Glory asked. "You're really scaring me, Blackjack. Please..."

"I'm sure," I replied quietly, sincerely. "Get him and his family to safety." Keep me from adding one more to my count. Goddesses, how much blood was on my hooves?

She rushed to me and hugged me as tightly as she could, shaking. I tried to return the gesture. To get some feeling... some compassion... in the embrace. "I love you. I'll see you soon."

My words caught in my throat. I swallowed hard and murmured, "I know. I love you too." And I did. I did. Glory turned away, going to the wounded scavenger's family. She gave me one last look, worry etched in her face. I smiled as hard as I could. She returned it with a slight lifting of the corners of her mouth. Then, as they left, I murmured softly, "Goodbye."

* * *

Rampage, P-21, and I didn't say a word as we approached the massive armored base of the tower. I couldn't imagine what it was for; broadcasting, I supposed. The door to MASEBS #14 looked like it could have had a balefire bomb detonate while taped to it and only just have its paint a bit scuffed. The door was locked and sealed, of course, but, after taking care of the lock on a panel beside the door with a pair of bobby pins and spending several minutes glaring at the terminal ensconced within, P-21 found the password. With a groan and a slight hiss and hum, the yard-thick slab began sliding down into the ground. Goddesses, how'd I luck into having a smart pony like him? We slipped through the door, walked down a short corridor that I suspected was just to get us past the armor plating, and found ourselves in a spartan, metal-walled antechamber. The lights were still almost all on and the place was reasonably clean. "See what you can find," I said to P-21. The blue stallion looked at me skeptically, then nodded and started off through one of the doors with his usual diligence.

"Watch out for him," I said to Rampage as I opened another door, found some stairs, and slowly began climbing them, looking for... I didn't really know. A command center. Maneframe. Something I could plug the Delta PipBuck into, I supposed. I made my way up; it seemed a natural direction. I passed by rooms filled with machinery still running even after two centuries. I wondered if it drew power from the city or some other source.

Then I heard a familiar stallion's voice. "...know ghouls might not be the most comfortable ponies to be around, but you can say the same thing about half the ponies in the Wasteland. So if you see a ghoul sitting there all by their lonesome, pop over and just say hello. Give them a smile. It might be the only thing that keeps them from losing what little equinity they have left." I frowned; right now DJ Pon3 was the last pony I wanted to listen to.

I approached the voice and stepped through a door into a room marked 'MASEBS Relay Station: authorized unicorns only'. Within were a dozen dusty monitors and speakers. Two unicorn skeletons lay curled up on a mattress surrounded by empty tin cans and Sparkle-Cola bottles. Most of the monitors showed pictures of the Wasteland. To my shame, I saw Glory making her way towards Megamart with the scavenger's family. I reached out and touched her image on the display.

There was one picture that was off, though. A small gray unicorn mare with a glowing horn was talking into a microphone, which was odd enough. What really confused me was how her mouth movements matched the stallion's voice coming out of the speakers set in the roof. I put my forehooves on the control panel to lean in and watch her lips moving.

"DJ Pon3 is a mare?" I asked, staring in shock.

Suddenly, she stopped talking and looked around. Her eyes looked towards a monitor. "Oh boy! Looks like we've got some technical difficulties, my little ponies. I'd send my assistant for a certain repair pony, but then it'd never get fixed! Enjoy some Sapphire Shores in the meantime!"

She trotted towards the camera and began to work some controls. Then she blinked and smiled up at me. "Heck of a time to break into the radio biz," she said in that stallion's voice. She blinked and made a face, her horn glowing for a moment. Then she said in a softer, feminine voice, "Sorry about that."

"DJ Pon3 is a mare?" I repeated dumbly.

"Yup. Fortunately, you hit the 'transmit studio' button instead of the 'transmit all' button. Otherwise, I'd have some explaining to do," she said with a sheepish grin. "My name is Homage." Then her eyes widened as she stared at me. "You're her? Aren't you? MASEBS #14! Yes, you are her! You're Security!"

I nodded again as I sat in front of the screens, looking up at her with a small frown. "Yeah. I guess..."

"I've got to say, I never actually thought I'd get a chance to meet you. I mean, Hoofington's a long long way from Manehattan. You're clear past Ponyville and Canterlot," she said as she brushed her blue bangs back behind her ear. "I'd like to tell you, you're doing an incredible job out there. The Heroine of the Hoof."

"Stop..." I muttered as I felt myself start to shake.

"What's that?"

"Please... stop all that Hero Security crap. I'm not a hero."

She smiled. "I didn't know you were modest too. I've heard from dozens of ponies how you're cleaning up the Hoof. Sure sounds like a hero to me."

"I'm not a fucking hero!" I yelled as I covered my head with my hooves, my whole body shaking. Her eyes went wide. "Heroes save ponies. That's what Security is supposed to do. Save ponies." I sobbed as I looked up her. "Heroes don't murder whole stables of hundreds of ponies! Heroes don't walk around praying somepony blows their brains out! I'm not a hero, Homage! I'm one of the bad ponies!"

Homage just stared at me in shock and slowly gave me a sad smile. "Tell me about it?"

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. What I was supposed to say. I just found myself talking, starting with how I'd heard about the attacks around my old stable and how I was returning home anyway. I then went on about how I'd discovered my stable had been infected by the raider contagion and how we'd fought like hell to free it from the Overmare. I explained how I'd told them to toss the bodies outside, but had never checked up on them actually doing it. How I'd discovered the entire food supply had been contaminated, how the entire stable was infected.

"And then... then... I activated a poison gas talisman in the ventilation system," I sobbed as I shook, feeling that emptiness ripped apart by pain as I hung my head back. "In a few minutes, I killed four hundred ponies, Homage. Four hundred! I killed everypony I knew in the stable. I... I killed foals. I killed stallions who'd finally gotten their freedom. I killed them all. I know there were probably some uninfected in there too. I killed them. I killed them before they became monsters."

Hanging my head, I bawled before her. "I wish I'd died in there with them. That would at least have been fair. I'm a murderer, Homage. I can still hear their screams. I can hear them calling me a murderer. I can smell it and feel it and all I want is for it to end. For me to get the punishment I deserve." I drew a slow, trembling breath and dared to look up.

She had her hooves folded under her chin, tears streaking her cheeks. "I forgot just how rough it was around Hoofington..." she said quietly. "But I know this, Blackjack. You are a hero. To so many."

She tapped her controls and one of the monitors changed to a caravan crawling past Pony Joe's. Another brought up the Fluttershy Medical Center, where ponies were limping into the emergency entrance for care. Then up came Stockyard, the brahmin eating their meals unmolested by the mutated dragonlings. Brimstone's Fall showed me a lone railcar loaded with boxes of gems and other goods being pulled along the tracks towards the city; nopony had a whip. Another monitor flashed to life, and I saw Blueblood Manor with a wagon being pulled by Harpica outside the front entrance while the Crusaders brought out boxes of salvage from the ruined estate. Flank was back open for business, now more secure. And another of Riverside, where a caravan of merchants was trading with the fishers and the sand dogs at the same time. A blurry, heavily-zoomed-in *Seahorse* cruising along the coast with a barely distinct sea green mare in the bow. The last was of Chapel, where they'd cleared and leveled a plot of ground for some new buildings. I saw the distant black form of Priest talking to some pilgrims... and then watched as they started away... not towards the bridge, but back out into the Wasteland. There was Sekashi, telling her not always so funny stories to the ghoulish foals.

We do not always see the good we do.

"You've touched so many, Blackjack, in the things you've done. I know you don't feel like it, but every time you keep fighting the good fight, you're making Hoofington a little better. And if Hoofington can get better, I really think there's hope for the Wasteland as a whole," Homage said as she scrubbed her eyes.

I didn't know what to say. "I'm glad I helped. I am. But... how am I supposed to go on? Am I supposed to get over it? Am I supposed to forget about it? I can hear them. I feel like I'm still choking on the chlorine, Homage. How am I supposed to live?" I begged her softly.

"I don't know," she replied. "That's something everypony has to decide for herself. It's as vital to us as our virtue, our friendships, and our loved ones. You need to find that special something inside you. You need to know it's there so that you can move forward," Homage said gently. "If you find it, come and talk to me. I'll keep the hero talk toned down till you change your mind. But if you don't mind, I'd like to tell folks about Stable 99. I think it's important that they know just what their safety and security cost you."

"Please. There's nothing good to remember about 99," I lied. I had plenty of good memories. Waking up and working with Mom. Card games with Rivets. Hitting on Midnight. Even if there was plenty of shit mixed in, there were gems, too. "But if you want... please, don't call me a hero. It wasn't heroic. It was murder..."

Homage just gazed at me like she'd heard this before. "I'll just tell the truth folks need to hear and nothing more," she said solemnly.

"Thanks." I started to turn away, then paused. "You like music, don't you?" Her eyes brightened at once; I supposed it was a stupid question. I pulled out the Delta PipBuck. "I've got some music here. I don't know if it's your thing... it's no Sweetie Belle. Just some that I've picked up here and there. Some music by a pony named Octavia..."

"What?" Homage burst in glee. I started from her sudden enthusiasm. "You have something by

Octavia? I thought the M.o.M. and M.o.I. banned her for that charity concert! All her recordings were destroyed!"

"Well, I found some... um... with her." And Homage's smile turned more sympathetic. "She ended up in Flank, but she still had a ton of records with her. I have them in Chapel and downloaded others from her terminal."

"Thank you, Blackjack. I know you don't like being told this, but you're my hero for sending this to me," she said, and I went red once again.

"Well... yeah. And some music from some weird ponies in Flank, in a club called Mixers. And... um... some that I played," I added lamely as the PipBuck broadcaster made a connection with the computers. "It's horrible, though. Just horrible."

"You play?" She grinned at me.

"Horrible!"

"What instrument?"

"...A contrabass. Or so I was told..." I muttered as I tapped my forehooves together awkwardly.

"Just like Octavia?" Could she grin any wider?

"Did I mention I was horrible at it?" I said as I flushed... and... funny. I felt... better. Oddly more alive. Hurt and hollow, but... better. "Anyway... I'll just send it all to you. I know you like music. Maybe some of your listeners will too."

She shook her head. "You're incredible. Someday, when all this is over, the three of us need to get together and share stories. I think it'll be the finest interview in the history of DJ Pon3." Me, her, and... Glory? It didn't really matter at the moment.

"We'll see," I said as I watched the PipBuck upload the music files. I could only hope that Homage would know how to retrieve them.

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said with clear sincerity. "Look, I need to get back on the air. Folks get anxious if I'm away for too long, and there's stuff happening in the west. I hope you find what you need to find, Blackjack. And I hope you think about what I told you. You might not feel like it now, but you are a hero." She gave one last smile of comfort, then left to return to her microphone.

"What kind of hero wants to kill herself?" I muttered softly to myself as I sat back.

"One that really fits Hoofington," the Dealer murmured. I looked at him shuffling his cards.

"I thought you were gone for good. You've missed some real opportunities to fuck with my head," I said sharply as I rose to my hooves.

He looked at me with a thin smile. "Well, there's not much point to kicking a mare who's beating herself down already. Where's the fun in that?" he asked, then looked at his cards. "Don't kill yourself... you know it's wrong."

"Of course I do," I said softly as I looked down at the delta's cool blue screen. The good feelings were going fast. I was already starting to smell chlorine. "I know I'm loved. I know I helped people. I just feel like it doesn't matter. The ponies I saved today are just going to die tomorrow."

"Everypony dies. You've seen what happens when they don't. Don't tell me that's preferable," the Dealer said as he showed me three cards depicting Rampage, Blueblood, and Deus.

"I'm not talking about eventually. I'm talking about dying bad. We're just barely holding on, and every day a little bit more just falls away. Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me there's hope in this poisoned land." He sighed and stopped shuffling the cards, just holding them between his hooves. I sat down beside him. "I need to know what I'm living for. I need to know that... that there's something better possible. That it's not going to keep getting worse and worse." I sighed and leaned back, tapping my head against the metal wall. I was sick of being the universe's chew toy.

"I know, Blackjack. It's a question I ask myself too," he said with a small, old smile.

"Of course you do. 'Cause you're my crazy," I said as I looked down at the sleek black PipBuck. "So how am I supposed to find out where this EC thing is supposed to go next?" Was I supposed to thump it? Shake it?

"You're asking me?" he chuckled, and the PipBuck blinked. 'Equestria Military Command Hub: Hoofington. Ironmare Station.' The display showed the navigation further east and was even kind enough to copy it on to Marmalade's PipBuck.

I held up the black device with my magic. "It can calculate the value of radroach meat, tell me if somepony plans to kill me or not, and can download the data I need and move it around for convenience even if I don't have a clue how to look for the data. Is there anything it doesn't do?"

"Tell you the secret of happiness, apparently," he replied dryly, shaking his head. "So... are you going to kill yourself still?"

"Probably," I muttered as I looked at him. "I can't live with what I've done. I know it wasn't my fault. I know that. But every second I'm not doing something, it's tearing me apart. Homage was right. I need to find something to live for. Something that matters. Or I need to kill myself before I become a complete monster." He just stared at me, and I smiled mirthlessly. "I can feel it happening, Dealer. It happened in the stable. I fought to kill until I almost died killing everypony around me. What if I pulled that in Megamart? Or Chapel? I can't let that happen. I can't let gassing my stable ever be okay. I just can't."

He put his hoof in mine. "You remind me of how things used to be, Blackjack. I hope you find what you need. The Wasteland needs you. Your friends need you. I need you." And with that, my crazy hallucination went away.

I found a pencil and some scrap paper in my packs. 'Went for a walk. Might not be back. Meet you in Megamart if I am. Sorry. BJ.' Then I fished out the StealthBuck, and, after some fiddling, activated its magic. I headed down till I heard P-21 searching. I looked at him with a parting smile. I slipped the note under my Delta PipBuck and set it down in the doorway for P-21 to discover. Then I headed out the door. Feeling better than I had in ages, I started north.

Towards the sea.

* * *

I wasn't really paying attention to how long I wandered. An hour? Two? Three? Night arrived, my eyes transforming everything into amber hues. Due north, the land became rocky, and here and there were thin gray trees with a few sick leaves clinging to them. I could hear the steady, repetitive but

constantly unique sound of the waves growing louder and louder with each passing moment.

And then the land ended.

Before me was a great wedge of stone thrusting out into that great endless plane of churning water. Cold wind snapped at me, the clouds overhead spitting occasional cold blasts of rain that mixed with the salty tang in the air. Step by step, I walked along a narrow trail that wound towards that point, passing by desiccated picnic tables and rusted fire pits. Marmalade's PipBuck chimed softly. 'Star Point' appeared on the navigation tool. Finally, I came to the end. The tip of the great stone triangle. Surrounded by all that openness, I felt that old familiar sensation swallow me. The rusted remains of guardrails ran around the edges of that great wedge of stone. The long grass rattled softly in the wind.

At least I had company.

One lone skeleton lay there in the center of the rock, protected by a slight divot. A few rags and a decayed duffel bag anchored the unicorn's remains. "Hey," I said softly to the bones as I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the familiar panic rolling back and forth within me giving way to a resignation that, bad as it felt, was tolerable.

I opened my eyes again and looked out at that cold, vast emptiness. A hard mountain loomed to the west. The harbor ruins stretched to the east. Behind me was 99 and all my bloody sins. Ahead of me, nothing but stark emptiness. I felt as if I were alone on the moon.

"I hope you don't mind some company," I murmured softly as I drew Vigilance. I was over. This was done. I pressed the gun to the underside of my jaw and clenched my eyes. If there was something, anything to keep me alive, now would be the time for it.

I pulled the trigger.

The weapon clicked softly as the cool metal ring kissed the underside of my jaw. Slowly, I moved the gun back into my field of view and stared down at it. At the safety. I slowly shook as I looked at that little tab above the trigger. Salty tears mixed with the ocean spray as I curled up beside those bones. I looked at those eye sockets and the salt-crusting glasses that lay atop them. They seemed to stare at me, asking me why I was doing this.

Had this mare come out here to die when the bombs fell? Choosing where she would finally meet her end? Had she died weeping? In pain? Or had she wanted to live? To stay with the ponies that loved her? To stay in a world that was dying and falling apart?

What sense was there living in a world that only got worse? In a world without Princesses? Where the only reward for doing good was misery and everything worthwhile became tarnished? I flicked off the safety. Four hundred murders. Forty colts and fillies. Scoodle. If the penalty for murder was death, then I wished I could die four hundred and forty one times to pay the price in full.

Bowing my head, I put the barrel in my mouth. Felt the cool silver plate. Tasted the salt on the barrel.

The skull of the pony broke free and bumped against my leg. I looked down at it and the still-faintly-blue horn touching my knee. "How do I go on living?" I whispered.

Then I saw that the seam on the bag had split. A few ratty clothes. A foal's rattle. A battered recorder. I carefully pulled it out; the machine was trashed, but I connected my PipBuck to it. There were only two fragments recoverable. I played the last.

There was lots of yelling, shouting, shoving, and scared cries. "Mommy, I'm scared. Where are we going?"

"We're going to a stable, sweetie. Remember? Just like I told you," she said softly,

"I don't want to go to a stable! I want to go home. Why can't we go home, Mommy?"

"Shhh. Shhh. We have to go. It's the only safe place left."

"Stable pass?" asked a mare.

"Here. For me and my daughter."

"Whoa whoa whoa! This pass is for Stable 90! Not 99. You can't just swap these things."

"Please, there's no way we can reach Stable 90 in time!"

"That's not my fault. Get back!"

There were sounds of a scuffle, and another mare asked in a more authoritative voice, "What's going on here?"

"Please. Our passes are for 90, not 99, but... please take her!"

"The rules are clear, Trick." The mother gave a sob.

"Hrmph. Fuck the rules. My pass says I get to bring a kid if I want. Well, I don't have one." Her harsh tone softened. "I'll take her."

"You will? Oh thank you. Thank you! Honey, you need to go with this nice pony, okay?"

"No! Mommy! I want to stay with you!" the filly wailed. "I want to go home. Why can't we go home?"

"Listen! Please. Please!" her mother begged frantically, the filly sniffing. "You have to go with her. This is your home now. You need to live. You have to grow up. To be a big girl. You're going to do great things. And you're going to have kids. And they're going to do great things too. But to do that you have to live."

"No, Mommy, no..."

"Always remember how proud I am of you. How glad I am to see you go becoming such a good girl. You kept me going. You kept me strong. And now you have to go and help other ponies, too. Please. Promise me you'll keep going. Promise me you'll live."

A sob, a sniffle, and then the filly said, "I promise, Mommy. I promise."

"That's my big girl. My good girl. You have stars in your eyes. Don't ever forget that."

"We've got to seal the stable, ma'am," the mare said softly. "There's a whole mob coming."

"Thank you." A sniff and a nuzzle. "I love you. I love you."

"I love you, Mommy," the little filly blubbered. "I love you!"

"Come on, honey. Let's get inside. I'll show you a trick. It's my super special talent."

"Goodbye..." the mother whispered. There was a metallic grind of the door rolling into place.

I wept as I looked down at her bones. She'd given her daughter away to save her. How many parents had made that same sacrifice? Who had something they loved so much that it was more important than their own life?

What was I living for? What would I be willing to die for? Glory? I cared for her, maybe even loved her a little. Revenge? No, as much as I might hate Sanguine for what he did, I didn't have some burning vendetta in my heart. Was it virtue? Friendship? Were either of those enough?

Would I be here if they were?

I pressed the gun to the side of my head, leaning back this time. I clenched my eyes shut, my magic increasing on the trigger. Then I opened my eyes for one last look at the poor, sick world before I left it.

Stars.

The hole in the cloud was no bigger than my hoof, and only a dozen or so stars twinkled softly in the night.

Only a fool would demand power of the stars.

"Please..." I said as I stared up at that gap in the heavens, at those tiny winking jewels in the sky as tears ran down my face. "Please... help me. I need something. Anything. Anything that can make me bear this." My gun trembled as I begged the heavens for something to stop this. To give me a reason to go on, a reason that I could live with. Something that could make the murder of hundreds bearable.

My horn brightened.

"Blackjack?" asked a tiny metallic voice behind me. "What are you doing?"

Slowly, ever so slowly, I turned to look at the bobbing spritebot. "Watcher?" I whispered, my voice cracking.

Those robotic eyes just stayed focused on me as I sniffed and said, "I'm afraid I fucked up again."

The tiny machine bobbed closer. "I'd disagree with that. Why don't you put the gun down and tell me about it?" Slowly, I lowered the weapon and told the robot everything that'd happened from the gas station to now. I told him everything, my lies and fears and how much I hated myself for wanting to die when so many others wanted to live but didn't. This poor mare had lost everything to save her daughter. Why couldn't I find a reason to live in this dying, poisoned world?

"Wow. Blackjack. Just... wow," the spritebot said in its tinny voice. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine anything that would make that easier."

"Yeah," I said as I faced the robot. "You told me the way to survive Scoodle's death was to fight every second to make things better. But I haven't made things better. I've just raised my death count by a factor of ten." I closed my eyes. "You told me you knew ponies whose fuck ups killed millions. Do you think those ponies could live with those deaths?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"How do you survive, Watcher?" I asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you watch the Wasteland. You try and get ponies to do good things. You've seen failure time and time again. You've seen the Wasteland decaying. What keeps you going?" I asked softly.

He fluttered before me. "Hope," he replied after a minute. "Hope that someday my mistakes can be forgiven and hope that Equestria can heal."

I looked out at that endless dark water. "I don't see how anypony can have hope anymore."

The spritebot just bobbed there for a second. Then he said quietly, "Would you like me to show you?"

"What?" I asked as I looked at the bot sharply.

"You're literally only a few minutes from me. If you promised not to tell another soul... and I showed you what gives me hope day after day... do you think you could live?"

I just stared at him and then gave a shrug. "Maybe."

"Then stay there and don't move." And with a crackle, the bug robot resumed its normal behavior and flew back into the gray woods.

Don't move? I looked around the flat slab of rock. The rainy woods. The black waters. The gray ruins and the looming dark mountains.

One minute. Two. I sighed, and then saw something glint through the tear in the bag. The frame was corroded and flaked from the salt, but the glass had preserved the drawing within. The unicorn mare with the streaks in her mane looked down at the small filly in her embrace, holding her still for the artist. I looked at the two streaks of color in her shaggy mane, rather like a skunk and not like her mother at all. Even after two centuries, there was a bright light in the filly's eyes. I supposed that that could have been artist's fancy though.

Then I stared hard at the mother. I'd seen her before, but where?

And then I was flying through the air, screaming like crazy as the dark waves flashed beneath me. Razor-sharp talons tightened against me as we flew higher and higher, powerful wings blasting me with a gale. I looked at the massive reptilian head, the scaly purple hide, and the lashing tail as we lifted clear up into the clouds. All the while, I screamed like crazy. This was NOT how I wanted to die.

"Relax, Blackjack," the dragon growled in its deep voice. "I told you I was coming to get you, didn't I?" he said as he flew higher, up through the tops of the clouds, and higher still towards a cave near the top of the suddenly much closer mountain.

"Watcher?"

He grinned down at me.

I took a deep breath and yelled at the top of my lungs, "Couldn't you have mentioned you're a frigging dragon?!"

* * *

Heights like this were no good. No good at all. I was glad the flight was mercifully brief and that I hadn't the opportunity to soil my armor before I was deposited inside the cave. The large purple and green dragon immediately started to check the cave. "Wait here," he growled as I stood next to a massive pile of gems. If that treasure wasn't what he was so worried about, then I didn't worry about idly kicking a few errant diamonds back towards the heap. On one spot of floor was a black charred patch that reeked of burnt flesh. I gave it a wide berth.

He returned with a relieved look on his face, walking to the pile of gems and flopping down on it as he pressed a hand to his chest. "Whew. I don't think I've left my cave in... forever. It looks like the Enclave didn't have time to sneak in and try something." He looked at the burnt patch on the floor. "They're a little bit sore with me, at the moment."

The sheer absurdity of the situation snapped me out of my funk enough for me to smile and approach, extending a hoof. "Hi. I'm Blackjack. And you are?"

"Spike," he replied as he rolled on to his side, reaching down and shaking my hoof with remarkable care. "Though most ponies, and I can count the exceptions on two hands, only know me as the Watcher."

"Well, thanks," I said as I looked at the massive dragon and sat down hard. "You know, I really was not expecting this," I said as I gestured with my forehooves. "I figured you were some ghoul sitting in a shack or bunker somewhere."

"Ponies aren't the only ones concerned with the future of Equestria. Griffins. Zebras. Even dragons have a stake in seeing it put back to normal."

"I'm still a little fuzzy as to why? Your name rings a bell..."

He sighed with a sad little smile. "No surprise. Rarity always kept me on a low profile. With so many dragons helping the zebras, well... it got awkward." He sat up a little. "You're looking at Twilight Sparkle's number one special assistant."

I stared at him and gave my head a hard shake. "Twilight Sparkle... had a dragon... as an assistant?!"

"Well, I was just a baby at the time," he replied with a modest smile. "This was a long time ago. Before the ministries. The war. Everything. Back when it was just the seven of us in Ponyville and my biggest problems were diamond dogs kidnapping Rarity." He looked wistfully away. "Sometimes, I can close my eyes and almost smell Twilight's daffodil and daisy sandwich."

That stabbed at me. "As if that will ever happen again," I muttered, my gaze dropping.

That claw reached down to tilt my face up. "It will. You asked me what it was that gives me hope every day. Hope to try and help ponies in the Wasteland. To help them to do better?"

I swallowed hard and nodded. Please... please let this be what I need.

He slowly stood once more and started towards the back of the cave. "Why don't you come with me? You need to see something."

"What?" I asked as I followed.

"The thing that may someday save Equestria."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Weapon Handling - Either your horn's gotten tough enough to handle the kick or you've broken in that battle saddle. Weapon strength requirements are two less for you.

Quest Perk added: Star touched - The stars are watching out for you: others suffer a 10% penalty to crit chance and a 25% penalty to crit damage against you.

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for making it decent to read, and Sarsaparilla Fizz for helping me get out of a plot hole at the beginning of the chapter. (Even if he doesn't read PH cause it's too depressing.))