

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 24: Hell of a Night

"It's the horrifying story of the messy inconsiderate ghost, who irritated everypony within a hundred miles! OoooooOOOwwwOOOoo..."

I had to admit, I had no idea what to expect. Something here gave Watcher the ability to go on day after day, year after year. The strength to face a future that seemed determined to get bleaker and darker till everything was lost. I needed that strength. Virtues. Friendships. Even love wasn't enough. I needed a reason to live.

Or else I was already dead.

Spike stretched his arms and wings far overhead as we walked. "I don't think I've ever left like that before. You mares must be rubbing off on me," he said with a rueful chuckle.

I couldn't help but smile nervously. He was a huge, scaly, fire breathing carnivore. "You seem like you're in a good mood."

He blinked, then looked at me with the smallest of smiles. "You know... I am. Between you and her and everything, I feel better than I have in decades."

"Her? Oh! That mare you were talking about. How'd that go?"

He snorted, glaring at the burned patch. "Aside from the Enclave making asses of themselves, just fine," he said with a low, worrying growl. "They're up to something, though." Tell me about it.

I looked around the cave. Now that I was a bit less nervous, I could appreciate how... unexpected it was. The huge pile of gems I'd been next to was only one of several, but that wasn't surprising in a dragon's cave. What was surprising were the high shelves packed with books that covered most of the walls. We also passed a dragon-sized circular bed which, aside from its size, shape, and being built into the floor, was a perfectly ordinary bed with pillows and blankets. An ordinary-looking terminal stood on a pedestal next to the bed. I looked up and saw a rough, stalactite-strewn ceiling: exactly what you'd expect in a cave. I thought of asking Watcher if all dragon caves were actually like this, but decided that there were more important things to worry about at the moment. "So... you have something to show me?"

"I do," he replied in a softer voice, stopping in front of a passage leading deeper into the mountain. "But I need something from you first. Something very important: a promise. You have to keep this from your friends. From everypony you can."

"After what I pulled tonight, I'm not sure I still have any friends," I muttered, ears drooping. Then I met his green gaze, sighed, and straightened. "I promise. I'll do everything I can to keep your secrets, Watcher." He looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to gauge the sincerity of my words, then nodded.

We wound our way further into the cave, as Watcher (or should I call him Spike?) talked in his slow, deep, rumbling voice. "When the ministries were formed, Twilight Sparkle devoted herself to helping Princess Luna win the war. None of us thought that it would be easy, but I think there was a conceit that, now that we were involved, it'd all be wrapped up soon. But the bigger the ministries got, the less Twilight saw of her friends.

"Did you know that, for years, Twilight lived almost completely alone in Canterlot?" he asked, looking back at me, and I shook my head dumbly. "She had me, of course, but her entire life was studying and thinking and learning new magic. Then Princess Celestia sent her to Ponyville; she met her friends there and stopped the rise of Nightmare Moon. Together, they could do anything. But once they dove into the ministries, they were slowly pulled apart.

"It wasn't like there was some plot to keep them isolated. The war was just so big that, honestly, there was no way for us to be together like we used to. And Twilight, she regressed to how she lived in Canterlot, except that she was desperate for those moments when she could be with her friends. For times where they could pretend like everything was okay. Most folks thought she was happy being in charge of an entire ministry dedicated to arcane sciences."

He let out a great sigh. "Deep down, I think she hated it more than anypony."

"I don't understand how it happened, though. I mean, why didn't they just quit if they were so unhappy?"

He stopped and looked down at me again. "How it happened is a bit more complicated. But as for why she didn't just quit... why don't you quit being Security?"

I arched a brow and gave a little smile. "Spike, I was going to blow my brains out fifteen minutes ago."

"That was suicide. I mean, why don't you quit?" he asked, pointing at the word 'Security' on my barding with his huge claw. "Take that armor off. Go back to Chapel. Let everypony know you're done with wandering the Wasteland and helping out Hoofington. Why don't you do that? Seems a bit saner than killing yourself."

The thought hadn't entered my mind, and I sat down hard. Why hadn't I thought of that? Just give up the job without giving up life? But the thought of what my friends would say... what DJ Pon3 or Priest or Bottlecap would think...

I swallowed hard at the unpleasant thoughts, and he nodded. "Exactly. It's easy to die. Not so easy to quit. Once they were the Ministry Mares, they couldn't stop. They wanted to. I don't think even Rainbow Dash liked what they'd become. But they couldn't... not without completely humiliating themselves and letting down Princess Luna." He looked away with a wistful gaze. "There was a time, about five years after the M.A.S. formed, that I thought she was going to do it. Step down... hand the ministry over to Mosaic and Gestalt. Just walk away to the life she wanted."

"So what happened?"

"Shattered Hoof Ridge. The assassination attempt on Celestia, I think, broke something in her. After that she became... consumed. Her friends grew further and further apart, especially her and Pinkie Pie. But even I wasn't around like I should have been."

"Then, one day, she showed me this..." he said as we reached the end of the tunnel. The chamber beyond was *huge*, large enough for Spike to rise to his full height. I'd never seen so many maneframes.

The six walls of the chamber formed a hexagon lined with gems and arcane machinery. In the center of the room, though, rose a large, elegant stalagmite of technology that made the walls seem like only a step above bare rock. It seemed to breathe silently, as if it were asleep. My eyes were drawn higher and higher up that spire until I was looking out at a black patch of faint stars.

Then I promptly fell back with a limp thud. Spike blinked in surprise. "Sorry..." I muttered lamely. "I'm not good with heights..." I rose to my hooves and gave myself a good shake. "What is that?"

"This is a Crusader super maneframe," he said quietly, as if it could hear him. "It's one of the single greatest arcane machines ever invented, capable of handling both technological data of staggering complexity and employing precision magical effects." He looked up at it. "She designed it herself, completely secret from the rest of the ministries and even her own people."

I couldn't believe that. There was no way one pony, or even one pony and a dragon, could build something like this or keep it secret. The materials and technology... Then I looked at him again. "The O.I.A. did this, didn't they?"

He looked shocked. Even a little impressed. "You know about them, huh?" He looked at the supercomputer with a grudging glare and sighed. "Yes. She commissioned it from the O.I.A. Goldenblood got the machines, the equipment, from somewhere. Everything completely off the books. A hundred ponies lived in this cave for two years straight constructing it. Then he had their memories erased."

"I don't understand. Why the big secret? What is it?" I asked, looking at the sleeping machine as if expecting it to wake up and talk to me. Was this what EC-1101 was for?

"This machine is designed to cast a spell, the single greatest and most powerful spell of all time. A megaspell specifically crafted to affect, potentially, all of Equestria." I looked at the device in awe. "It has the ability to purge the Wasteland of taint, neutralize radioactive contamination, and restore life to the land. It's called *Gardens of Equestria*."

I fell over again. "Oh, is that all?" My head reeled at the possibilities. I could imagine the Dealer dropping his dusty cards in shock at this!

He nodded as he gazed at the machinery. "It taps into a source of power greater than even Princess Celestia and Luna: the Elements of Harmony." He walked along beside me as he pointed at jeweled necklaces sitting on crystalline pedestals surrounding the central machine. "Honesty. Kindness. Laughter. Generosity. Loyalty." He paused for a moment, his green eyes lingering on the last, which was a strange crown thingy instead of a necklace. "Magic."

"So... let's get this show on the road! How do we fire it up?" I asked as I looked at the machine. Maybe there was a button that needed pushing? A bright red one? I reached towards a likely-looking gem but caught Spike's look. Right, no touchie.

"We can't," he said softly, "It won't work without the Elements of Harmony."

"But... I thought you said that *those* were the Elements of Harmony?" I said, waving a confused hoof at the necklaces and crown thingy. He looked like he was trying to decide whether to smile or not.

"They are, but..." he began after a moment, "I suppose you could say that they are dormant. The physical forms of the Elements of Harmony aren't enough; for their power to be used, they have to be wielded by ponies who embody the Elements. The Ministry Mares were the bearers, once... but that was a long, long time ago."

There was a pause as we both thought. The only sound was the beeping of the active maneframe wall.

"So..." I said, "You're looking for ponies that fit the bill?"

He nodded solemnly. "For two centuries. Every now and then, I might find one... but then they die, or they lose themselves to the Wasteland, or just never meet any others. I try to encourage the Elements and foster them wherever I can..." Like when he saw P-21 and me helping each other outside the stable. "But I haven't been able to find enough yet."

I thought of my friends. Glory... was she still loyal after what I'd pulled? Or was her virtue something else? I doubted Rampage's laughter would fit. P-21? Lacunae? Would this even work with an alicorn? "I'm sorry, Spike. I really wish I could be one of those six ponies, but I don't think I'm your mare." To be honest, I'd be terrified of any megaspell that included me as a component.

He reached down and patted my head; okay, I tried to appreciate the intent, even if it did just remind my body that I was standing next to a *dragon*. "It's alright. The fact is that, even after all this time, I doubt I've come across more than a dozen ponies that were possibilities. Think of how hard it must be to find honesty in a place like this. Or generosity, when ponies kill each other for what was effectively litter two centuries ago?" He looked at the majestic machine with a sigh, reaching out to touch it lovingly with his claws. "But so long as there are ponies, I still have hope that, someday, I might find the six needed and give Equestria a chance to be reborn."

It was a long shot. I knew it. So did he. But as I sat there looking at the machine, I gave a little frown. My eyes were drawn to the necklace with the diamond-shaped jewel, and I had a niggling thought. What about Bottlecap? Maybe... though I feared that her trading in weapons might disqualify her. While she was generous, in her own way, she had caused harm as well. Caprice... yeah, right.

I did know one pony, though... one infuriating... obnoxious... ruthless little pony who had no scruples against trading for every cap she could get her dirty hooves on... but who also went above and beyond in making sure that everypony had what they needed. A pony who somehow found a way to make a daisy sandwich, gave me a box of spark batteries, and sold Glory the barding she'd need so she wouldn't look like a raider. I groaned, pressing my hooves to my temples, hoping I wouldn't regret it.

"Is there an age limit on this thing?" I asked with a rueful smile.

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As we walked back to the main chamber, I felt something settling inside me: a dream of a green Equestria. I knew that Gardens wouldn't magically make everything perfect; there was still the Enclave and the mysterious Projects to deal with... and the raiders, and the slavers, and the bandits, and the Remnant, and Goddesses-knew-what-else, but an Equestria where the land could grow uncontaminated food and the rivers lacked irradiated water... maybe it could even disrupt the Enervation that sickened countless ponies! The idea... the sheer possibility... was intoxicating.

Sure, the odds were slim. But I'd beaten Gorgon and Deus and had a boat dropped on me. I could take those odds! I looked over at a display case, minuscule compared to the bookshelves that surrounded it, smiling fondly at the set of six figurines inside it. Together, they just looked... whole. Happy. Compared to those six figurines, every memory I'd had of the friends was stained with gray.

I told him about Charity, and my hunch that her virtue might be generosity. The dragon rubbed his spines, a little skeptical but willing to consider the possibility. It was the best I could do.

"It's hard to believe that all of this was done secretly," I marveled, but noticed Spike seemed a little put out by the comment.

"You'd have to know Goldenblood. Then you wouldn't be surprised at all," he muttered darkly, plucking up a ruby. His green eyes narrowed as he squeezed it, crushed it into powder, and tossed the

clawful into his mouth.

"Did you know Goldenblood?" I asked, and he nodded with a dour look. I felt curiosity nibbling at my mane. "I see the ministries everywhere I look, but the O.I.A.'s been nearly impossible to nail down."

"It was designed that way. Again. You'd have to know Goldenblood." He licked the rest of the red powder off his fingers, then blinked and looked at my wide grin. He sighed. "Everypony knows about Celestia, Luna, and the Ministry Mares, but nopony knows about Goldenblood because he was always two steps away from everything. He was smart. Not like Twilight Sparkle smart... but he knew things that I couldn't imagine anypony knowing. He could read Zebra and speak Dragon. He probably knew most of the most influential ponies in Equestria. But above all, he knew politics. And he was the one who knew that what he was doing was wrong and did it anyway."

"I don't understand. Why was forming the ministries wrong? Didn't your friends agree? Princess Luna didn't force them into it, did she?" I asked, remembering that beautiful, if faintly flirty figure.

"If you mean 'were spears involved', no," Spike muttered, then sighed. "I was there when Luna met with my friends, and so was he." The purple dragon snorted softly. "She explained how Twilight and the others were ponies she respected, ponies who had saved Equestria in the past and now were needed to help protect Equestria again. How something had to be done to restore confidence after Littlehorn. Then Goldenblood tried to talk us all out of it," he said sourly.

"He what?" I blinked, stupefied.

Spike stretched his arm to the terminal and with shocking deftness accessed a file. "Twilight somehow got her horn on this recording." The terminal crackled for a moment, then Twilight Sparkle's voice came out loud and clear.

"I don't know how we're supposed to help, Your Majesty. This war seems too big for us. For any one pony to be able to affect."

I knew the rasping gasp that came next. "I know it's intimidating to consider, Twilight."

"We're not afraid," snapped a mare, and my eyes were drawn to the figurine of the cyan pegasus.

"You should be, Rainbow Dash," Goldenblood said grimly. "We're not asking you to risk your lives in a fight, or to go on a quest for some treasure. What we are asking you to do is to assume responsibility. You will be given the power not just to act but to direct others to act on your behalf. To work under your direction. To make your vision a reality. This is not the same as working on your own or with your friends. If you fail, the consequences fall not just on your heads, but on thousands... perhaps millions... of lives.

"Can you accept that responsibility, Twilight? Or you, Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Fluttershy? Rarity? What about you Pinkie Pie?" he said in a grave voice. "If not, then make your apologies right now, and go."

"Goldenblood. This was your idea!" Princess Luna protested.

Then there was another wheezing gasp, coughing and wet. It sounded like he was drowning. "Your Majesty. I know you wish to rule, and to see this war to victory. I beg you to reconsider. We have an opportunity to create a new future for Equestria. A new society. No good can come from perpetuating this conflict. Sue for peace. Let the ponies of Equestria find another path. Live a life away from power."

Luna sighed. "I can't. Goldenblood, you know I can't. They took Littlehorn from me. Please.

Help me make this new government a reality.”

A long pause. A soft, resigned sigh. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

The recording ended, and Spike turned back to me. “After that, he worked with Twilight and Luna to get everything organized. He talked extensively with each of my friends, working out what powers and ideas they wanted and codifying those into laws. He worked with Rarity on the image that was needed to shore up the ministries. He worked with generals, aristocrats, and bureaucrats to get them to go along.” He gave a snort. “Finally, he had a heart attack. Nearly died. Fluttershy personally nursed him back to health.” He rolled his eyes and gave a soft sigh. “It was funny at the time.”

A pony so fixated on something that their heart stopped? Where had I heard that before? Oh, yeah, my own stupid butt nearly dying in the ruins of Flankfurt! “He almost died creating them? But... I thought he was against the ministries?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I know. I know. With one breath, he told us not to do it, but then he put every effort into making the ministries a success. That’s the kind of pony he was. For a time there, I really hated him.” His low growl made me glad I didn’t have any yellow on me.

“You did? Why?”

“Because, before he and Luna showed up, I had a good life with my friends. Oh, there was the war, and Celestia’s missions, but they didn’t feel much different from the adventures we’d had before,” he said sourly. “But you know what he told me? He asked me if I hated him. I told him... I was a little cranky at the time, so I won’t repeat the language, but I called him every last name in the book. And he told me that no matter how much I hated him, I was right to, and he’d always hate himself more.” Wow.

“So where did the O.I.A. come in?”

“Right from the start, it was pretty clear that there were going to be conflicts. I mean, my friends might have liked each other, but they still fought. You can’t imagine how Rarity and Applejack could carry on. Pinkie Pie wanting giant balloon fortresses floating off the towers of Canterlot with Rarity saying that they were tacky... things like that. Even Twilight could be awfully stubborn if she put her mind to it. So, Goldenblood stepped in and help work things out. There were still fights and arguments, but the O.I.A. kept things running smoothly.”

Spike sighed again and shook his head. “I remember that day so well. All my friends sharing ideas. Talking about ways they could help, what they wanted to do. I remember Fluttershy crying when she was told that she’d be able to help thousands of hurt ponies all at once. And all the while, Goldenblood was taking notes and watching and making suggestions.”

The massive dragon climbed out of bed and walked over to one of the shelves. “Sometimes, I think that if there hadn’t been an O.I.A. or a Goldenblood, the ministries wouldn’t have worked out. Or my friends would have quit. Something.” He reached up to a shelf too high for me to see the contents of, and brought down an intricately carved wooden box. “Here. Maybe this will help you understand what I mean.” He opened it to reveal dozens of memory orbs in labeled, velvet-lined niches. He picked out one and then carefully set it on the floor next to me.

“I need to check on things anyway. I get... anxious... if I stop paying attention to things going on for too long,” he said as he returned to the bed and started typing at the terminal. I looked at the offered orb and gave a half smile. Well, it’d be rude not to, right?

I tapped the orb against my horn. “Come on... probably nothing gruesome in this... come on... come on...” Finally, I felt the tickling connection as my reluctant horn reached out and made contact.

The world swirled away around me.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Mare... wings... pegasus. The place looked like some kind of mansion... no, if I had to describe this place, I'd say 'palace'. Red and orange mane obscured the right side of my vision. She walked with her head hung, tail dragging, and let out a soft sigh. Still, this body felt good. Healthy. Fit. And for some inexplicable reason, I felt twenty percent cooler just watching this memory.

"So. Ministry of Awesome?" rasped that horrible, wet and rusty voice behind her. Every feather (and wasn't *that* a freaky sensation) ruffled as she froze in place then glanced behind her at the scarred pony with the golden eyes.

"Oh, hey Golden," she said, turning and giving the most insincere grin I'd ever felt... and I was an expert. "I just thought I'd slip out. Stretch my wings. Take some air." Through the doorway behind Goldenblood, I could see a room with a large table. Twilight Sparkle was talking, gesturing to some diagrams on chalkboards.

"Of course. I imagine a member of the Skyguard doesn't have many opportunities for flying about and getting some air," he said in that whispery, rusty voice. He approached, and I felt her take a few more steps back. Goddesses, he'd be so much less freaky if he'd just blink. "What's the matter, Rainbow Dash?"

She looked at the table and all her friends behind him. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's great. Just great! Why would you think anything's wrong?" she stammered.

"I've made an art of furtively skulking out back ways and exiting unnoticed my whole life. It's rarely done because a pony is feeling particularly bubbly about their circumstances." He kept up that staring gaze, his scarred face sympathetic. "So, what's bothering you?"

Rainbow Dash looked at him for a long minute, then sighed. "It's nothing. I just... I'm useless."

"I can see why you think so," he replied, and she blinked and frowned.

"Gee, thanks," she said sarcastically, then faltered. "Or, wait... was that a cut? Ugh... can you smile or twitch your tail or something when you're messing with me?"

He turned and walked towards a pair of double doors. His horn glowed, pulling them open. "So, Ministry of Awesome. Where your job is to be awesome? Make awesome? Sell only awesome of the highest quality?" he asked with a ghost of a smile.

"It was all I could come up with," she replied with a grumble. "It's easy for Twilight. 'Ministry of Magic'... or 'Arcane Sciences'... whatever. Magic's always been her thing. Makes sense for her to coordinate it. Or Fluttershy wanting to run hospitals and stuff. Gee, who saw that one coming?" she said crossly as she rolled her eyes.

"But you're a flier..." Goldenblood rasped softly.

"But I'm a flier..." Then she blinked and narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't do that..." He just smiled a little more broadly as Rainbow Dash walked to the rail and looked out at the night. Canterlot was aglow with lights. Far to the west was the golden glow of Manehattan. She sighed and closed her eyes. "But the only thing I'm really good at is flying. So... what, am I supposed to have a ministry that regulates flying? Holds air shows? That'll really help Equestria."

"You do have other strengths besides flying. Your loyalty goes without saying. You're brave, if reckless. Tenacious. Beautiful." Okay, I felt her blush something fierce, but then he said, "But I know you feel inferior to your friends."

She snorted. "Yeah, right! What do I have to feel inferior about?" He smiled softly at her, and she muttered, "Right. Don't answer that..." She took a deep breath. "Look, I'll be fine. I'll figure something out. Somehow." She huffed as she folded her hooves on the marble rail of the balcony. "It'd just a lot easier if I were... well... more like Twilight."

"Why, because she's smart and you're not?" Rainbow Dash looked at him, her ears drooping. But he simply put a hoof on her shoulder. "You are not stupid. Perhaps you're not like Twilight or the others, but you are cunning and creative. I've seen you fly." Rainbow looked at him more directly now. "What you really need is a challenge."

"Well yeah. That's part of the reason I joined the Skyguard! But this isn't a race I have to win or something. I can't just fly out there and beat up all the zebras with my own hooves..." Then she paused and rubbed her chin, adding, "Maybe."

"We're in a contest now. War is a team sport, with deadly and desperate odds. Win, and you live. Lose, and you might die," he said quietly, then smiled slowly. "But there's more than one way to win this contest. Say... if you cheat?"

"Cheat?" Rainbow Dash blinked. "How the hay do you cheat at war? I didn't know there was a rulebook."

"Most ponies might think that wars are won on the battlefields, and there's no doubt that battles are critical. But what if an army arrives to the battle hungry because their food supplies were blown up? Or lacking weapons because the shipment was delayed? Or late because their base lost power?" he asked with that steady little smile. "Do you think that might change the battle?"

"Well... sure! That makes sense." She cocked her head at him. "So... don't we do that?"

He gave a tiny shrug. "Our military is all about winning the battle. They aren't creative or cunning enough to risk going behind enemy lines and fighting dirty. Sabotage. Infiltration. Spying. These are tools the army just isn't flexible enough to use efficiently." He was good. So good that I couldn't tell if he was playing her up to create that ministry or actually trying to help her.

Rainbow Dash sat hard, running a hoof through her mane. "And you're saying the Ministry of Awesome could do all that?"

"It could do far more, but that would be a start." Rainbow Dash's eyes went wide as she stared at him. Why did he look so... so sad? "Princess Luna will need a mare who can get special projects done. Tricky projects. Secret projects that nopony can know about if we're going to win this war," he rasped. His golden eyes now stared out at the distant city as his breathing became harsher, punctuated with soft coughs. "As you might know, the best kind of cheating is the kind you do when nopony knows you're cheating."

Rainbow Dash stared hard and pointed a hoof at him. "You mean I shouldn't tell anypony what I'm doing with my ministry?"

"Does anypony expect you to do a lot with it? Did any of your friends really act all that surprised when you suggested the 'Ministry of Awesome?' If somepony thinks less of you, they'll underestimate you. They'll make mistakes, and they'll give you the freedom you need to act."

"Whoa." Rainbow Dash blinked, her eyes going wide. "You are scary good, you know that, Goldie?"

"Good at everything except breathing," he said with a self-deprecating smile. Together, they started back towards the conference room. But I thought about what he'd just said. I wondered if all of his deflections weren't just ways to make others underestimate him.

I imagined a chill when I realized I didn't know Goldenblood at all. Was he a bastard manipulating everypony around him for his own ends? Was he truly trying to save Equestria? Was he a good pony or a villain? What had he been thinking when he had ponies turned into monsters with Project Chimera, or made half machine with Project Steelpony? And the other projects: Eternity, Redoubt, Partypooper, Starfall, and Horizons. All created by Goldenblood on some level, all sealed by EC-1101.

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I came out of it alone. I could only figure that Spike was checking on Gardens, or organizing his books, or... whatever it was reclusive dragons did when they weren't helping Wasteland ponies in a never-ending search for six virtues. I carefully levitated the orb to the case and slipped it back into the empty nook, closing the lid. There were probably days' worth of memories here, but, as much as I might have liked to go through all of them, I had to get back to my friends. Then I'd have to hug their hooves and beg them to forgive me. Tears would likely have to be employed.

...

You know, I really am not good with waiting...

I started down a little side tunnel, one a bit too small for a dragon unless he really wanted to squeeze. Plenty of room for me, of course. Gardens of Equestria had been a monumental feat of engineering and secrecy. Virtually a miniature stable had been built during its construction and development, though of course, not a true stable. Double bunk beds lay in dusty rows, and I suspected that the workers had slept in shifts.

The normal priority of scavenging went: weapons, armor, medical, food and drink, and something to sleep in. Since I was about as abnormal a mare as you could get, the first place I hit was the kitchen, where I was rewarded with not one but two boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs and some Fancy Buck Cakes. Cherry! And to complete the miracle of the Wasteland, there was a six-pack of Buckweiser in the fridge. I had to admit, I wasn't precisely the greatest aficionado of fermented hops and barley, but after the last few days I honestly didn't give a shit. I savored one bottle as I poked around further.

Then I took the liberty of checking the toilet facilities and found myself a porcelain basin of heaven. My insides melted. My knees were weak. I might have been marginally aroused. Ah... hot water. Was there any surer sign of civilization than the ability to pour unending amounts of steamy fluid over one's body?

The spritebot found me lying back in the tub with a bottle floating above me as I hummed a song of inebriation to myself. Two empty bottles joined me on a sea voyage as the little robot looked down at me. "Oh, that's where you went. I was worried." Then a pause. "Are you drunk?"

"No. That is incorrect. I am drinking. More accurately, I am approaching the state of being that is drunk." I scowled at the half empty bottle. "A journey that is taking me somewhat longer than I anticipated. It'd only take me a quarter bottle of whiskey to get this buzzed." I raised the bottle to the bot. "I drink to your good health, good sir dragon."

There was no answer for a bit, and then he simply replied, "Blackjack, you are so random."

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After a soak, which did a marvel on my attitude, I stopped and considered myself in a mirror by the sinks.

Ugh... the last three weeks had done a number on me. I was definitely skinnier than I had been. The shiny scar on my chest was my most obvious souvenir of combat, but it was joined by a satellite of injuries all around it. Between the chemical burns and the shower, I was almost a mottled pink instead of white. And my mane needed a grooming badly. I chuckled ruefully. Going from suicidal to wanting a haircut: that was progress, right?

"So, going through for supplies?" Spike asked.

"Yeah. Hope you don't mind," I said as I tugged open the box of cereal. "I know that this is all your stuff..."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not using any of it. Honestly, I forgot that those smaller tunnels were down there." I personally wondered how Spike had managed not to go stark raving mad all alone. I supposed having guests like me and his mysterious marefriend did him a lot of good.

"So, tell me about your friend," I asked around a mouthful of Sugar Apple Bombs, wonderful powdery dust all over my muzzle as I floated the box on my left and the beer on my right. I found an arms locker and did a little happy dance at the sight of the ammo containers. It was almost like my birthday!

"Who? Oh! You mean LittlePip and her friends?"

"Yeah," I said as I looked in one ammo box and gave a little squeal of delight. Despair, my poor shotgun, because somepony had included explosive rounds in this arms locker! I had missed the little orange shells of boom. "What's she like?"

"Well... ah... it's kind of hard to describe her. She's... kinda like you, actually." That made my ears perk. "Minus the drinking..." he added. I snorted. If she couldn't handle a little Wild Pegasus... "She struggles every day to make the Wasteland a better place, no matter what." ...Okay, I could excuse sobriety for that.

"She's like me? Poor dear," I said with a smile, cleaning out his supply of shotgun shells but leaving the other ammo. Maybe someday this LittlePip or some other pony might need some. I also found a second pump action and a sweet muzzle choke that would help reduce the spread of my buckshot. "And her friends?" I asked as I pulled the two guns apart and started pick out the better parts.

"Well, there's Velvet Remedy. She's the closest thing to a real pacifist I've ever seen in the Wasteland. Thank goodness she's got her friends to keep her safe. Then there's Calamity, a Dashite with a real beef against raiders. I like him, but he's definitely got a past he's trying to leave behind. Steelhooves, a Steel Ranger from Manehattan, is their heavy weapons pony. Not really sure about him, but he's much better than the rest of the Rangers," Spike said with an annoyed snort.

I cocked my head and looked up at the little machine. "You have a problem with the Steel Rangers?"

"Anypony who puts more importance on a suit of power armor or a gatling gun than on a pony needing help isn't much of a pony in my book. Plus there's the fact that they feel they've got a mandate to possess any and all technology they deem advanced enough." He noticed my 'I am not getting the problem' look and sighed. "What's the most advanced technology in all of Equestria?"

Oh... shit. "You think... they'd try and take it or something?"

"More like try something and get it damaged when I stop them," he replied, and I could just imagine a toothy draconic grin.

I thought about that; I really didn't know very much about the Steel Rangers. Then again, there was so much that I didn't know very much about.

"So, is that all of her friends?"

"Her close ones, the ones who travel with her, yes."

I inspected the shotgun parts in silence for a few moments, but then a thought struck me.

"Do you know the Stable Dweller too?" I said with a small grin.

There was a pause. "Um... yeah."

"What's she like?" I asked as I carefully added the mod. I didn't want my gun blowing up later because I'd screwed the thing on wrong.

"Well... ah... Blackjack? You mean you don't know who she is?"

"Well, no. It's not like she gets out east a lot," I said with a small huff of annoyance. "I like to imagine her as some big, tough, take-no-shit kind of mare. Sorta like... did you know Big Macintosh? You knew Applejack, so you must have..." I said as I wandered into a small medical bay. Oooh... spare Buck, magical bandages... and dusty but still beautifully lustrous purple healing potions that would really heal! Goddesses, I hated Enervation. "That. That's what I imagine she's like. Big and tough and strong and doesn't let anything cross her. She probably dual wields miniguns with missile launchers strapped to them." I brightened as I grinned. "She's probably got some kind of power armor too. Like magical super heavy plate that blasts lightning from her horn. And flies!" There was a prolonged silence from the little machine. "Spike?" I frowned. From somewhere deep inside the mountain, I thought I heard laughter echoing down the halls.

* * *

Well, Spike must have seen something really funny on his monitors, because for the moment I was left alone. Hopefully he'd share the joke. Then, in the corner of the barracks, I saw a small door I'd nearly missed. Well, couldn't pass up the broom closet, now could I? But this led to a small office and side room rather than more storage.

The room was quite full but very neat. Somehow, it felt like my mom's room, and I felt like a trespasser inside. Books lined the walls in alphabetized neatness, and there were diagrams and designs of the supercomputer I'd seen earlier. Two beds. Two desks. Two terminals. A safe.

The terminals took one look at my feeble hacking skills and virtually spat in my face in contempt. I had better luck with the safe, though. Inside were a lot of papers, a bag of bits, and a recording device. I played back the recording.

"Is that everyone, Goldenblood?" Twilight Sparkle asked softly.

"Almost," he replied. "I've modified their memories. They'll remember working on Stable 93, when a gas leak knocked them all out and the stable had to be evacuated." He gave a horrid raspy little

chuckle. "Close enough to the truth for your ends, I think."

"I'll never know how you arranged this with Stable-Tec... or managed to keep it a secret. It's incredible, Goldenblood." And then there was a soft sound of a kiss.

"Twilight. No." Oh, wasn't that an awkward silence!

"I... I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me," Twilight stammered.

"You're happy because you finally made something that will save Equestria if the worst happens. I hope it does." Hope it works, or hope that the worst happens?

Now it was Twilight's turn to sound skeptical. "You sound like you've already given up on winning the war."

"Well, pessimists are always pleasantly surprised," he replied faintly. "But if you really believed this would end well, you wouldn't have bothered to create Gardens."

"Somehow, the zebras got their hooves on megaspells. I can't imagine it. Our most critical and highly guarded secret, and they've got them now. It's now just a matter of time before they're weaponized." Twilight muttered softly.

"Yes. But that's something for Morale to uncover," he replied, and got a long low hiss of disgust. "Something wrong?"

"Morale... Pinkie. I don't know what's wrong with her. What's gotten into her? The spying? The drugs? The arrests? How did she turn into this?" Twilight muttered softly.

There was a momentary pause and then he said quietly, "You, of all your friends, should understand."

"What?" There was a little shock and anger, but curiosity as well.

"You know what it's like to be in a room filled with hundreds and feel utterly alone. You're brilliant, Twilight, but you know that there are few who really and truly care for you. You're respected, certainly, but feared as well. You know how sensitive and perceptive Pinkie Pie is. Do you really think there's a single pony around her that likes being with her?"

"Well... I mean... the parties... and drugs... and..." There was a long, drawn out sigh.

"You're feared for your accomplishments. Pinkie Pie is feared for her threat. With a single proofless accusation, she could make almost anypony disappear. The M.o.P. is modifying memories with ever-increasing regularity. How could Pinkie Pie ever be happy knowing she's surrounded by ponies who fear her? Who hate her?"

"But... she shouldn't be hated!"

"Of course she shouldn't be. And you shouldn't be feared. Big Macintosh shouldn't have died. Littlehorn shouldn't have happened. This whole war shouldn't have been fought. The mistakes, obvious, one after the next, shouldn't have happened. But they did."

"We can still save Equestria," Twilight Sparkle said with conviction. "If all else fails, my friends and I will use the Elements and save the kingdom."

"I have no doubt." There was a clinking of glasses and then a sound of them being filled. I looked at an empty bottle of wine and two stained glasses, one broken on the floor. "A toast... to our efforts to save Equestria. One way or another, she'll be returned to what she should be."

A sound of drinking, then a sigh. "Well, I guess there's nothing left but to erase your memories now as well, Goldenblood."

"Ah, yes. I'm afraid we're going to hit a snag there," Goldenblood said softly. "I'm sorry Twilight..."

"Golden? What are you talking... about..." And then there was a soft thud.

"You are brilliant, Twilight. But sadly you're not sneaky enough. You won't be able to keep this secret forever. I will," he said softly. "If your method fails, mine will succeed."

A few minutes later, a much younger sounding Spike asked, "Twilight? Golden? Is everything okay?"

"Just fine, Spike. I'm afraid she's exhausted, though. I removed the memories of this place just like she planned. I'll take her back to the M.A.S. hub in Hoofington to recover." Another pause. "You know what you have to do?"

"Yeah. I just don't like it. Keeping secrets, I mean."

"You have to keep it from everypony, Spike. Even Twilight. I'm sure she'll feel upset... like she's wasted two years of her life and accomplished nothing."

"But why do we have to?"

"If Princess Luna finds out what we did here, it would be a sign that we think she'll fail. Planning for disaster means you believe disaster will occur. I'd be exiled, or imprisoned, or imprisoned in exile. Twilight might face even worse. I don't want that to happen, and I know you don't either. Besides, if the zebras found out that Gardens was here, then it would be immediately targeted."

"Right. I'll just tell everyone that I'm ready for a lair of my own. I'm finally flying now... pretty soon, I won't even be able to fit in the Ponyville library anymore." He let out a long sigh. "I just wish that you and Twilight had agreed to wipe your memories instead of hers."

"Yes. But I can keep secrets better than she."

"I don't like keeping them from her," Spike grumbled.

"I know what you mean. Neither do I." A long rusty rattling sigh sounded. "I'm drowning in secrets, Spike. One day, all these secrets are going to kill me."

I sat back, looking at the recording in horror as the playback ended. I took a slow, thoughtful sip of my beer. Twilight had sacrificed two years of her life to make Gardens, and she hadn't even known about it. "How could he?"

"Yeah. That's the kind of bastard he was," the spritebot said behind me, making me jump to my hooves and whirl to face him. "One moment he was talking with her about Pinkie Pie, and the next he was drugging her and wiping her memory of the greatest accomplishment in history."

"What happened to her?" I asked quietly.

"She became obsessed with winning the war. She got her hooves on another O.I.A. dirty secret and renewed its research. Everything became focused around that. All the rest of us just fell away."

"Why did it sound like you were working with Goldenblood if you were Twilight's assistant?" I asked, hoping this wasn't going to be a sore point.

"It's complicated," he said. When wasn't it? "I worked with Goldenblood on and off over the years. Said I wanted to do my part and all that, but really, I was just spying, trying to find something to use against him."

"I take it that it didn't work out like you expected?" I said with a sympathetic smile. I trotted my way back out to the lair as Spike went on.

"Goldenblood wasn't what I expected. You saw the memory and heard that recording. I thought he was a villain who took my friends away. I thought he liked the war." Spike sighed. He did that a lot, but I supposed that he had plenty of reasons to. "Did you know that, throughout the whole war, the O.I.A. kept back channels with the Zebras trying to negotiate peace? Or that he ran constant interference to protect non-ponies too? He'd work for hours, sometimes days on end before he'd collapse. Then he'd crawl back and work some more. He kept saying that he was trying to save Equestria. Not win the war. Not even end the war. It was always to save Equestria."

I thought about that as I joined him in the main chamber again. The spritebot chirped and flew up to a hole near the ceiling. I had to admit, I still didn't know what Goldenblood was either; if anything, I was even more confused now. Sinister manipulator? Misunderstood genius? A pony who saw the writing on the wall because he'd written it himself? How had what he'd wanted been any different than what Twilight had? Or myself?

"The more I hear about Goldenblood, the less I like it," I said; I saw Spike's smirk and added, with my own smile, "Not him, so much. But it feels like he was the one who set up the big things." My magic levitated some square gems and placed them on end. "Luna comes to him for advice and he sets up the ministries. He talks your friends into becoming the Ministry Mares. He works in the O.I.A. behind the scenes. The war gets worse and worse and he starts doing the Projects like Chimera and Steelpony. Then..." I knocked one gem and it fell against the next, which fell against the next, and then whole pile was tumbling over.

"Yeah. Now you know how I feel about Goldenblood."

"So what happened to him in the end? Wasn't he removed from being director?"

"Suspended. Luna found out something she didn't like. I don't know what, but it caused a major shakeup. Still, I don't think even Luna realized just how much power he had at that point. I know that Horse might have been in charge, but the entire O.I.A. still went through Goldenblood and Hoofington. No pony wanted to touch him. He knew too many secrets. Had too much leverage. Then, finally, he was arrested for treason."

"Treason?" I gasped.

He nodded gravely. "No pony knew the details. It didn't matter, though. The next day, the bombs fell. Canterlot was consumed by the Pink Cloud. Goldenblood probably died in his cell." He flicked away a diamond with an expression of 'good riddance'. I frowned up at him. This wasn't quite what I expected. This wasn't anger. There was something else to this.

"Spike, why are you really upset with Goldenblood?" He gave me a sharp look, and I was

reminded that I was on the wrong side of Spike on the food chain to press questions. "Please. Tell me. I think that Goldenblood might have done something in Hoofington. Something that's not over."

Spike looked at me for a long moment, then let out another sigh. "Dragons aren't exactly real big on family. Twilight raised me, and I loved her like a mother. She tried to teach me right from wrong. I grew up surrounded by mares, and don't get me wrong -- they were my dearest friends, too. There was just one little thing missing."

I thought of my own upbringing. Funny. Three weeks ago, I never would have thought of it. "No father?"

"Yeah. Not a lot of guys in Ponyville were real keen on hanging out with a baby dragon. Oh, there were Big Macintosh and Angel Bunny. Snips and Snails. But yeah. Not a lot of guys." He sat up and put his elbows on his knees, cupping his chin in his claws. "You know how I said I originally cozied up with the O.I.A. to find some dirt on Goldenblood?" I nodded, and he sighed. "Well, over time, it sort of changed. I'd never really spent a lot of time around a guy like him. I told you how scary smart he was? Well, that didn't wow me much. Twilight was smarter. But he was also... strong. Determined. Focused. As much as I resented how he created the ministries, he was also the closest thing I ever had to a father."

"He told me once that a stallion had to devote himself to an idea and, whatever that idea was, it would shape him for the rest of his life. Like a virtue, it would define you. Build you into the person you are. It didn't matter if that idea was good or bad, so long as a guy stuck to it at all costs." The dragon looked back towards the depths of the cavern. "Sometimes, when I get lonely, or frustrated, or just tired of this... I think of that. I think of what it means to be a guy. That I have to remain true to this. And even though I hate him a bit... at the same time, I can't hate him completely. I've tried, but I just can't do it."

He sighed and shook his head. "The last thing he ever said to me, the night before he was arrested, was how proud he was that I protected the secret. That I kept the vigil. He was proud of me. I don't know if he was just lying to me or if he meant it, but I still feel it inside."

"Well. You should be proud," I said. "I think that, through it all, you've tried your best to stay true to Twilight and what she tried to do here." I immediately brightened as I pointed a hoof at him. "In fact, why can't you be the Element of Loyalty? I'm sure you'd make a great Rainbow Dash!"

He blinked and waved his hands at me. "Oh, no! There's no way I'm going to try impersonating her again! It didn't end well the first time and it won't end well now," he said firmly, but then chuckled. "But thanks for the thought."

"No problem. So..." I looked at the mouth of the cave. "I guess I should get back to my friends. I'm going to have to kiss Glory's hooves bigtime when I see her. And there'll probably be some groveling involved. Tears." I sighed, looking around the cave. "I don't suppose I could hang out here for a few years, could I? Just as an option?"

"Go find your friends, Blackjack. I know they're worried sick," he said with a sigh. "I'd fly you, but after leaving once, I'm positive the Enclave is on high alert for me to leave again. I won't be able to go out for a good long while."

Oh. Great. That just left me on the top of a really high mountain. Fortunately, the inebriation was making me feel a little less ooggly about the prospect than usual. He must have seen my face, because he chuckled. "Don't worry. There's a path. I've got a few connections with ponies across the Wasteland to bring me food and fresh gems in exchange for info. Just hug the side of the mountain."

"Sure. Right. Sounds like a blast." I trotted up to him. "Thanks, Spike. For everything. For showing me something better."

"You're a good pony, Blackjack," he said as he stroked my mane with a clawtip. "I know you don't feel it, or see it, or believe it, but you are." I hugged his claw tightly, being careful not to cut myself. I'd only had Mom for a family, but now I had an inkling of what it meant to have a big brother, too.

* * *

'A trail down' was something of an exaggeration. At times, the trail was simply a ledge with a cliff rising on one side and a void plunging down the other. Only my inebriation kept my stomach from completely unloading as I picked my way down. I came to a gap in the trail and peeked down. Aw, buck me, was that a river down there? All the way down there?

From this high, I could see forever. Well, no, not forever, but it sure seemed like it. It felt like I was close enough to the cloud ceiling to reach up and touch it... which, actually, was pretty much the case. Grays and sickly green and browns stained the landscape below like the hide of a rotting corpse.

Yet instead of the usual depression creeping in, I remembered that it could be better. Because of Twilight Sparkle. And Spike. LittlePip and the mysterious Stable Dweller.

For the first time in a while, I felt glad to be out here. I just wished I could have had a better look at the stars. Even though the cave was above the Enclave's cloud ceiling, there was a higher layer of thin cloud that not only blocked the moon and the dimmer stars but spread the moonlight out and made even the brighter stars difficult to pick out. Still... the rainbow halo the clouds gave the moon had been one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. If I could've stayed up there forever...

But I still had my friends to meet up with... copious apologies to make... a brain that was slowly breaking down... possibly a really big bounty on my head... old plots that were still doing plot stuff... Enclave plagues... I cast one last look at the path behind me running up into the cloud ceiling, took another long pull off my bottle of Buckweiser, and tried to set my mind firmly ahead.

"First... just got to do this," I muttered as I looked at the gap. I could imagine a little pony singing in my head that all I needed was a hop, skip and jump. "Right... so... a hop..." Really, it was more of a step. "...a skip..." A second step. "And a..." Don't look down! So of course I looked down, my eyes widening as I plunged to my death!

Or not. My forehooves landed on the far side of the gap. I heard an orange pony groan softly in the back of my mind. Okay, more voices in my head, but, on the other hoof, still a head to have voices in. Not plunging to my death. But now what?

Missiles make everything easier.

The rocket streaked from above, and my legs kicked me across the gap as it exploded behind me. The blast knocked me horn over heels and smacked me into the ledge on the far side. I lay there, upside down, as two suits of black Enclave power armor landed on my ledge while a third remained hovering above us. "Damn it, Boomer! Can't question her if she's blown to pieces," yelled the leader through her helmet.

"Right. Saves us all the yappin'," muttered the buck beside her.

"Till command asks why we used up a missile!"

I chuckled as I fell over, then pushed myself upright and sat there against the stone. I looked right at the mare who had more fiddly bits on her armor; I took her as the one in charge. "You're coming

with us. We got questions 'bout that dragon in thair." I slowly rose to my hooves, laughing.

"Uh... why is she laughing?" the buck beside her asked. "Is she... drunk, Twister?"

I levitated out my last bottle of Buckweiser and popped the cap with my magic, tucking it in my pocket as I stared right at the pair. "Yup," I said as I took a swig off the bottle and pulled out my shotgun. "I think I'm just about there." The three stiffened, but then I started to eject the shells one after the next and put them in my saddlebags.

"Right," the lead mare said as she watched me unload the weapon. "You drop your guns and come along peacefully and there won't be no trouble. Just want ta ask ya a few questions."

"Oh... I don't really think so," I said as I stared at them and started loading the orange-banded shells. "You want to know what's really funny, though. If you'd pulled this... mmm... an hour ago... I probably would have gone along without a fuss." A normal, smart pony would probably have shot me right now. But I had my shootiest look going, staring at the trio like I was the one who'd ambushed them.

"Yer twiggged," the mare muttered, and I laughed even more.

"Oooh, just a bit," I said with a grin.

"There's three of us and one of you! And yer not in power armor! And ye've only got a shotgun! Stand down, mare. I won't be askin' a second time."

"Maybe if you've got six more waiting, I'd be worried," I said as I racked a round into the chamber. "But right now, I got my gun, my beer, a fire in my belly and a grin on my face, and there's not a mother fucking pony in the Wasteland who can stop me!"

"Right," she drawled, unimpressed. "Sunset." The hovering mare's gatling energy rifles started to spin.

But it was already too late for them.

I leapt straight at Twister as I slipped into S.A.T.S. for one special attack and one standard, and as time resumed the beer bottle was flung end over end to smash across Sunset's visor and coat it in sudsy froth. She reared back, her shots going high and blasting a crater field into the wall behind me as my second attack sent an explosive shell straight into the leader's face. Her beam rifles flashed over me as smoking rock rained down on all of us. With a final leap, I slid between the pair and fired a third shot; but what I'd intended to be a gut shot on the leader simply blasted her scorpion tail.

Oh. By the way, did I mention this was taking place on a ledge?

My hooves scrabbled on the gravel as my rear end slipped over the edge. Boomer stabbed his tail at me wildly, the sharpened spike sparking off the stone. I stretched out my left hoof, gritting my teeth as the spike smashed hard into the reinforced casing of Marmalade's PipBuck. The powered armor lifted me right into the air and nearly jerked my leg out of its socket. I blasted the end of his articulated tail, bouncing once and rolling to my feet.

"Look out," the leader mare said, blood in her eyes as red beams of magic tried to turn me into barbecued pony as I charged at Boomer. Sunset, her visor cleared, strafed me with rapid-fire disintegration bolts; I'd have to deal with that lickety split.

You know. I was discovering a new fondness for missiles.

I shoved hard against Boomer as I snapped out my dragon claw. There was no doubt the articulated black armor was tough stuff. With the exception of the visors and the extremities, I didn't really have much that would chew through it without a lot of sustained fire. However, there was one particular part of that armor that was just covered with reinforced rubber and waste collection systems. Tough stuff...

My claw was tougher.

I slid in close, using him as cover from the leader, then jabbed the claw hard against his nethers. "You'll be the third male I've gelded if you don't shoot the flier with a missile right now!"

Boomer froze. "Ah... ah..." I wiggled the tip. "Aw, shit... Ah'm sorry, Sunset!"

"What?" the hovering mare asked blankly before he sent a rocket right up into her chest. The missile exploded and sent her arching over the gap to land with a crash on the far side.

"Boomer, you idjit!" the leader shouted in rage, and there was a blast and her red beam struck my dragon claw squarely. In a flash, the weapon was reduced to sizzling chunks of bone. "Take her down or Ah'll shoot your jewels m'self!"

"Ah'm tryin'!" he shouted as he shoved me away, but I'd swapped back to my shotgun and was blasting at his wing guards and weapons now. The leader had taken to the air; her weapons were far more accurate at range than my shotgun.

But not much more than my rifle.

In S.A.T.S. I targeted her head. Two rounds would probably do it. *Be kind...* Except... if I killed her, it would probably make even more trouble for Spike. They already had questions for him. I cancelled the two shots and placed one on each of her beam rifles instead. Luck was with me; the armor piercing rounds I'd loaded in the print shop tore right through the delicate magical weapon components.

Boomer was turning to face me as he loaded another missile, but once more I was running. My barding smoked from the beam impacts, but at least I wasn't smoking as I jumped on top of him and put two rounds straight through one of his wing guards and into the feathered appendage.

That was when the leader swooped in and tackled me. In a second, we were over a very long drop as my legs wrapped around her. "Gotcha!" she laughed. I had to admit, she had very pretty lilac eyes.

Then I pressed the shotgun against her head.

"Y'all can't be that crazy!" she shouted as her eyes went wide. "Y'all die too!"

Yes, and the thought of plummeting hundreds or thousands of feet to a very squishy end sent a very familiar fear screaming in my head. However, at this exact moment, the alcohol and the high I rode took that fear, tied it up, tossed it in the back closet of my mind, and beat it into submission with rubber hoses. "Me? I've had cyberponies blast me with artillery! I've been shot in the back by zebra snipers and taken an armor piercing round through my skull! I've had my face attacked by almost every single pony I call a close and personal friend! I've had boats dropped on me! Don't you tell me what will and won't kill me!" I shouted in her face as I grinned from ear to ear. "You hear me?"

"Yer fucking loco!"

I jammed the gun hard into her temple. "Do you fucking hear me!?" I roared even louder,

wondering if I could use her like a parachute.

She must have seen it in my eyes. "Yes!" she yelled.

"Then fly your ass east, right now!" I said, and then glanced back at all the nothing underneath me. You know, for being beaten with hoses, that fear was still mighty loud. "And get me on your back, damn it!" Please!

* * *

What took Spike all of two minutes took Twister almost an hour. For the longest time, all she'd give me was her name and a string of numbers, followed by a colorful collection of expletives about my sexual habits, breeding, health, and weight. She only once touched on the subject of my mother, which resulted in the connection of my shotgun butt against her skull and a short fall before she regained enough consciousness to fly.

After several dozen assorted questions, I got around to asking, "So messing with the VC isn't bad enough, and now Thunderhead's sending ponies to spy on dragons?"

"I ain't no Dunderhead!" she swore, then cursed herself as we flew low. I might even survive a fall from this low; I'd break every bone in my body, but I might survive.

"You're not from Thunderhead?" I said in surprise.

"Do I look like I'm one o' them fancy prancin' cloudhumpers?" she replied crossly. Honestly, if they weren't ghouls or Glory... "Thunderheaders are half a feather above surface scum in my book."

Really? Wasn't this interesting... "Well, so glad to meet a better class of Enclave. So where are you from?"

"Won't mean nothing to ya," she drawled as she glared back at me.

"No harm in telling me, then," I countered as we approached Star Point.

"Neighvarro," she replied after several seconds. "You mind telling me what you and the dragon were yapping about?"

I thought about it and then shrugged. "He was helping me out with a problem."

"Problem?"

"Yeah. I got a lot of ponies killed. Hit me hard. He was helping me get through it. He's nice like that. You really should leave him alone."

"Nice?" She snorted. "That dragon torched one of us for trying to take a fugitive into custody. Don't you tell me how nice he is."

I laughed. "Wait, you tried to take something from a dragon's lair?" Even I wasn't *that* stupid.

She glanced back at me, her lavender ears reddening. "Well, yeah!"

"Right. Good call. Be glad only one of you got toasted. He probably could have killed all of you," I pointed out, and she clearly didn't like it.

"Ain't nothing you'd understand," she muttered.

"Maybe not. But I was in security in my stable. So I'm sorry. I know how bad it hurts to lose your own." And I could still hear that word and smell that smell as if I were still there. I wondered if I always would. Then I adopted a lighter tone. "Still, I got to admit that I am just burning up with curiosity about your problem with Thunderhead. Because they've really got my hate too, and it seems damned stupid for us to fight each other."

"Yer a surfer. I ain't allowed to talk to ya bout nothing," she muttered stubbornly. "Got to keep our own safe and sound."

"Believe it or not, I understand that better than you know. Security, remember?" I said as she finally touched down on the rock. I slipped off her. "Thunderhead operative Lighthooves created a plague that infected my stable. Turned them all into raiders. I had to put them down myself," I said softly as I found Vigilance amid the rocks and lifted it.

"You... what?" Her eyes widened in shock. "Yer lying!"

I stared right into her eyes. "Tell me I'm lying again." And as I stared into her eyes, I thought of Midnight's scream. I thought of limp foals lying on the atrium floor. I thought of that horrible smell. But, as much as it hurt, I didn't feel that hollowness inside. She looked away quickly and I took a slow breath, opening a Sparkle-Cola and taking a sip. "Anyway, you should probably get going," I said as I unslung Taurus's rifle.

"Why? So you can shoot me in the back?" she asked in alarm, her eyes narrowing.

"No. Because I'm seeing red bars. Lots and lots of red bars," I said with a swallow as I lifted the rifle and looked through the scope. Through the darkness and spitting rain I picked out a leonine form and stinger tail amid the stunted and dead trees. "Manticores."

"Manticores?" she said in alarm as she shielded her eyes from the rain. "Damned Hoofintun sky piss..." She spotted them without the scope, backing away in alarm a little. "What are critters like that doing out here?"

"Following me, I bet," I muttered. No sign of the monsterpony that controlled them. "Well, take care. Have a good one. You held up your end of the bargain." I swept the rifle back and forth, looking for a skull to perforate.

"You're just going to stay here and die alone?" She goggled at me.

"Well, you could stay and I'll have company. Your armor is trashed and those manticores can fly. It's me they want. Not you," I muttered as I glanced back at her.

But she was looking at me funny. Like she wasn't sure if I were crazy, something else, or both. "Can you buy me time?"

"Possibly. For what?"

"Let me get some scrap metal, and my armor will make repairs. I'll need a few minutes, though," she said as she opened up a panel on her forehoof similar to a PipBuck.

Well, any stable in a storm... "Right. I'll try and leave some for you."

She snorted and smirked. "You better."

I ran towards the woods, hovering the rifle to my left and the shotgun to my right. Sure, it looked bad ass, but I doubt anypony would be impressed with my aim. I found a nice picnic bench, rested the hunting rifle on some boxes of junk, and took sight. Two manticores roared and broke free from the group, bounding across the uneven ground as their claws scraped off the stone. S.A.T.S. let me line one of them up perfectly. One, two, three rounds in its skull, and the leonine monster staggered and fell to the side, unmoving.

One down, a lot to go. I swapped targets and guns, my focus lining up a shot from the hip. The explosive slug fired, but lacking a hard surface refused to detonate; just slammed the monster back and stopped it in its tracks. I wasted four more before the beast went down.

And the rest were coming. As quickly as I could, I swapped the explosive rounds for buckshot and loaded a magazine of hollowpoints into the rifle. I started backing up, firing with the rifle till they were close enough for a pounce and then swapping to the shotgun. There was no finesse in this, no elegance. Simply firing and moving as quickly as I could and not letting the giant felines pounce. If I'd had a wide open area I'd have been fine.

My butt hit a rock at the exact moment one pounced. I blasted twice with the shotgun... and the third time I heard the sickening sound of it firing on an empty chamber. Its forelegs sunk two heavy claws into my shoulders and it opened its mouth wide to chomp my head off. My eyes went wide as I stared into its gaping mouth.

Three magical bullets exploded right down its throat. The monster vomited hot blood over me, and then slumped against me. My horn throbbed with the sudden release of magic. Unfortunately, I was still pinned by the heavy body as I struggled to shake the claws out of my barding. Two more were racing at me. How many rounds were in the rifle? Two?

I brought out Vigilance and opened fire. The heavy twelve millimeter rounds bit deep into the massive monsters, enough to hold them at bay for a few precious seconds as I struggled to free myself. The second I ran out...

Even with Vigilance's expanded magazine, it went through ten rounds far too quickly. The less injured of the two pounced.

Shit. I wasn't going to have a chance to grovel before Glory...

Find out what the other Projects were or where EC-1101 was going...

Have a chance to find the other elements...

Have really great make up sex with Glory...

"Fuck that!" I screamed in furious defiance as I smacked the manticore across its face with Vigilance while thrashing my way free of the corpse. It didn't have to kill the monster, just distract it. A few more seconds.

I pushed myself free, shoving the body aside as I tried to summon a few more magic bullets. They weren't nearly as effective as the first volley, but they still blasted holes in the manticore's hide. Finally, the combination of pistol rounds and magic bullets dropped the beast in a heap.

Unfortunately, there was one more and I had three unloaded weapons and a horn that was shot and three seconds between now and the moment the remaining manticore tore my head off. It leapt at me, claws extended and spittle spraying in a glistening arc as the beast prepared to rend my flesh.

Then crimson beams flashed past me, the light striking it and transforming it into a glowing gray statue that exploded in a cloud of ash. Stepping onto the rock above me, Twister shouted in glee, “Yeeehawww! Bring it, you flyin’ pussies!”

With her momentarily drawing their attention, I reloaded Vigilance and my shotgun. She played the crimson beams at range while I moved in for close and messy work. The remaining manticores scattered and disappeared back into the woods. My strength gave out as the adrenaline faded. “Well, thanks for the assist there.”

“T’weren’t nuthin’,” she replied, and my mane crawled at the tone in her voice. “Couldn’t let an intelligence asset get killed.” The hum of two charged beam rifles purred behind me.

I let out a long, low sigh. “Why is nothing ever easy?” I said as I lifted Vigilance, turning it over before me. “I help Flank... turns out they were looking to sell me out. I try and help my stable... then I have to kill my stable. I spare you and your friends, and you want to shoot me in the back.”

“You don’t understand, you idjit. When you made me fly down here you exposed me to sky knows what. My own team might shoot me on sight rather than let me expose ‘em to whatever crawling plagues and diseases are down here. And the Dunderheads would just hang me for a spy. I want to get back, I’ll need something that’ll put me through decon rather than put a bullet through my brain. I got to take you back with me.” I knew that desperate tone. I’d shared it myself on more than one occasion.

“You won’t get contaminated so long as you don’t eat contaminated ponies or food,” I said matter-of-factly as I stood and holstered my weapons. “The Volunteer Corps seems to operate just fine.” When they’re not sending their own ponies on suicide missions to give peace offerings to raiders.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously as I started walking away.

“Going to meet my friends,” I replied.

“You idjit! I’ll blast you!” she blustered, and I turned to face her.

“Mhmmm,” I replied blandly. “And I’m sure they’ll be willing to decon-whatever you when you come back with a bottle of ashes.” That made her mouth work soundlessly before her lilac eyes narrowed.

“Well, if I’m fucked either way...” she began.

“You can be stupid and try to kill me for some petty revenge,” I said, staring into her eyes and making her balk. “Or you can come with me, and I’ll introduce you to some ponies who might be able to help you.”

“I... you...” She licked her lips, looking around as if some other option might magically appear. Finally she stomped her hooves hard. “Tarnation, this ain’t fuckin’ fair!”

I blinked at her and grinned, spreading my forehooves wide as I laughed, “Welcome to Hoofington!”

* * *

I had to admit, I felt a little bit guilty about Twister’s predicament, but it was her Enclave’s stupid rules and paranoia that had grounded her here. It’d taken about five minutes of weeping, hoofstomps, and shooting manticore corpses before she finally realized that, either way, she was fucked. She could

try and go back and get shot for her troubles, stay with me, or kill me and be stuck down here alone and *really* fucked. I took the time to harvest manticores' venom sacs. They were the only part that seemed to have some value.

Once more I was riding her through the air, keeping an eye out for more of the flying beasts. She alternated between cursing and flying silently. We managed to reach Pony Joe's before she finally put down for a breather.

I swept the inside, but it was still clear and clean. "So. Mind if I ask you something?"

"Shut up. I'm busy bein' pissed right now," she drawled.

"Yeah, I know. But you can be pissed and educational," I replied softly, stifling a yawn. "You're not a Thunderhead pegasus... I got that. So... why are you so pissed off at them?"

She looked at the café sullenly before she shrugged. "They think they're so special... like prancing artistoponies or some shit. Ain't a pegasus outside Thunderhead that don't hate them something fierce." That surprised me. From the way Glory made it sound, the rest of the Enclave should be thankful.

"Look. Enclave is a whole passel of towns trying to do our best to survive. We do what we got to do to protect our own. Always have. Always will," she said, and added without bitterness, "Even if we gotta cut off one of our own to do it." I guess idiotic levels of loyalty weren't just a Glory thing. "But it ain't easy. You probably don't realize it, but clouds ain't exactly the best place to grow crops. One mistake in management or just an unlucky equipment breakdown, and a town can face some hardship pretty quick. But we pull together and help our own.

"And Dunderheads don't help no pony at t'all," she said grimly.

"I don't really follow."

She sighed. "When the bombs fell, what we had is what we got. You ever try and get a gun to work without fail for two centuries? Ain't happenin'. And gems don't grow in the sky. But Thunderhead had something none o' the rest of us did: Shadowbolt Tower." At my blank look, she sighed, "Dirt ponies don't know nuthin'...

"Back durin' the war, Hoofintun was the biggest target in all o' Equestria. More so then even Canterlot, it seemed. There was something here that really twiggged them zebra off. So when Rainbow Dash founded the Shadowbolts, their primary base was here. Shadowbolt Tower. Fuckin' city was building like crazy, and they took the Awesome hub and just kept building higher and higher. Said they were going to build clear to the moon."

"That... sounds about right," I muttered, remembering 'Hoofington Rises'.

"Yeah, well, when the bombs fell, the Tower stood. It was so damn high that the top levels weren't irradiated. It had all sorts of magical fabrication equipment. Arms stores. Weapons. A fuckin' treasure trove. But that wasn't the most important part. Shadowbolt Tower had something nowhere else in the clouds did."

I thought for a moment, and then caught her staring at my horn. "Unicorns? Of course! Unicorns." After all, Minty Fresh had been working with them.

"Mhmmm." She nodded slowly. "The tower's arcane science and technical staff pretty much all made it to the top of the tower before they died from the radiation. And they've been helping

Thunderhead ever since. A fertilization talisman burns out? A unicorn can fix it. Need new beam weapons? A unicorn can make it. Clouddamned hornheads keep Thunderhead sitting pretty.”

“But... they’re still a member of the Enclave, right?”

“Technically,” she said with such disgust that I doubted it was more than a formality. “To listen to them, they’re the most important member. But the thing is, they don’t just help the rest of us. Heck no. They’ll trade talismans for favors. Extra food for favors. Technical assistance for favors. All them favors add up to a right comfy lifestyle for them and a downright shitty deal for the rest of us.”

“So why doesn’t the Enclave do something about them?”

“Tried.” She huffed softly. “Nearly went to war to take the Tower. Don’t know the details at t’all... it was my grandma’s time. Finally, there was an agreement made. Thunderhead disarmed, agreed it wouldn’t have firepower greater than them Vertibuck contraptions. No Raptors or nothing, and they’d provide parts and technical assistance, and Thunderhead got to keep its unicorns and a no fly zone from the rest of the Enclave. They’re the most independent group of featherbrains in the clouds and don’t give a shit about the rest of their own kind.”

I recalled just how angry Glory got at the idea of disloyalty. If she felt that way as a Thunderhead pegasus, I could start to imagine just how furious the rest of the Enclave was. “So wait. If Thunderhead disarmed, why not just take it anyway?”

“There’s this little thing called honor. Look it up,” she said dryly. “But besides the treaty, I don’t know. Times are damned strained right now though. Hell, half of us were watching the dragon and the other half were watching the Dunderheads. Now they’re pulling this volunteer crap, violating some of our most basic rules and laws. All ‘cause they can.” She tapped her hooves on the tabletop. “It ain’t gonna end well.”

I had to agree with that. “Any chance your folks will come for you?” She looked at me in confusion. “I mean, are they really just going to leave you here?”

She definitely didn’t like thinking of this. “If it was anywhere else, I’d probably be tracked down, extracted, questioned, and hopefully put in decon. And you’d be questioned,” she added, reminding me we weren’t exactly on happy-happy terms. “Unfortunately, I’m a Neighvarro pony in the no-fly zone and now everything’s political. If the Dunderheads got their hooves on me...” She suddenly blinked. “Oh, horseapples.”

“What?” I blinked and rose to my hooves. “Can they track you?”

“I gotta get this off me. I got to get out of here right now! They’re probably on their way!” Twister shouted as she started to disconnect the seals of her armor.

“Can’t you just deactivate whatever they track you with?” I asked, wondering how the hay anypony was supposed to get in and out of that getup.

“Maybe. The transponder’s there,” she said as she reached back and opened a panel on her flank. “I honestly didn’t expect to ever find somepony with such skills though. Where’d you learn Enclave power armor maintenance?” she asked as I moved to her side. She blinked as I loaded a round into the shotgun.

The blast of buckshot knocked her right off her hooves with a shower of magical sparks, sending her rolling across the aisle. “I didn’t,” I confessed as she lay there groaning. “You okay?”

"Dirt ponies... suck..." she groaned.

"Yeah. Did it work?" I asked as I looked at the smoking arcane devices. It sure smelled disabled.

"You almost took off my leg, you idjit." She groaned as she stood and looked back at the wreckage. "Yeah, but we got to move. Thunderhead probably already sent a team the second we left that point. Can't believe I didn't think of it sooner. All this damn dirt's making me stupid," she said as she started for the door.

"What will they do?" I asked, and she gave me a scared look back. "They wouldn't kill you, would they?"

"Dunno. Every Enclave pony 'recovered' by Thunderhead ain't right afterwards. I don't wanna find out," she replied nervously as she looked around. Something knocked faintly against the roof; it wasn't much of a noise, but we were both jittery and my mane was itching like crazy.

"Quick, out the back!" I shouted, and we rushed to the back door. I nearly tripped in astonishment; one of the bulbous, armored Vertibucks has hanging directly overhead; it must have bumped the building while coming in. Any second now, pegasus soldiers would come spilling out the rear hatch. If they didn't decide to just use the autocannons.

I sprinted for the trees, jumped the ditch running along the side of the donut shop, and ran into the dead woods as Twister glided almost even with the ground in front of me. We put a few dozen more trees between us and them. Twister paused and canted her head. "They're broadcasting for me to come out. Says they're here to extract me." She spat to the side. "In a pig's eye."

"Does your armor have an Eyes Forward Sparkle?" I asked, looking up.

"Yup." Great. So an errant glance in our direction would give us away. Now we really had to get moving! "Leastways it does when the visor's not all shot up," she added, looking at me sharply.

"You were trying to arrest me," I countered.

"You were dealing with that dragon," she snorted.

I rolled my eyes as I ducked under a branch. "It was just a friendly visit. 'Hi. How are you. Nice gems you have here.' That's all," I said with a smile.

She looked at me sharply. "Oh, yeah. Just bein' neighborly with yer local dragon?"

"What, I should be a jerk to something that can eat me?" I countered. "I might be stupid, but I'm not *that* dumb." Then a red beam lanced down so close to the front of my nose that I nearly went cross-eyed looking at it. "Not smart enough to shut up and keep running, though!" I shouted as I pulled out Taurus's rifle and hit S.A.T.S. Three rounds to the head... and I bucked my dumb ass brain for forgetting I had hollowpoints loaded. The rounds shattered off the armor.

Her crimson beams were definitely more effective as the Thunderhead Enclave peeled off out of her line of fire, their armor smoking and crackling from the damage. I loaded the rifle for more armor piercing rounds. "Damn, they're on us now." She glanced at me. "Only chance for you is to get out of here."

"Not happening."

She arched a brow skeptically. "Uh... you don't owe me anything. Quit being so damn stubborn

and git! I'll fly circles around these buzzards." Before they shoot you out of the sky, I added for her.

"I got you into the mess. If I had just shot you in the head, none of this would have happened," I said as I tried to track one of the red bars from behind us. More red bars ahead of us. Damn, did a second Vertibuck arrive? Then I glanced over and saw her incredulous look. "Well, you'd be dead and all, but still."

"Yer one twiggid mare," she chuckled as she strafed the sky.

Then I frowned. Knot of Enclave behind us... but... I raised the scope in time to see a raggedy pelt, leonine fangs, and a scorpion tail through the trees. "New plan! Back to Pony Joe's!"

"Plan? How you figger that's a plan?" she asked in bafflement. "That's not a plan! It's a direction!"

I fired the rifle, aiming for the manticores' flank. It let out a roar that was echoed by the rest of its kin. Meanwhile, I was running straight for the Thunderhead Enclave behind us. "See? Plan!" I laughed as the beasts closed in.

The whole pride (or flock... whatever!) of manticores was fast on our heels. Twister stared at me in wild eyed amazement. "You're plum loco is what you are!" The Thunderhead Enclave seemed to share the sentiment as they stared at us racing past. Then the snarling, stinging beasts were upon them. The animals seemed to take particular aggravation with the Vertibuck, latching on with their claws and scratching at the armor in an attempt to get at the pegasi within.

With both enemies more interested in shooting at each other, we raced south towards Megamart.

* * *

"That was insane. Absolutely crazy," Twister said as we trotted towards the overpass between us and Megamart.

My treacherous body was already giving me a doozy of a headache; oh, alcohol, why must you hurt me so? "It worked, didn't it?" I asked with a shrug.

"You could of got us shot. Or ate. Or shot while getting ate!" she pointed out crossly.

I smiled and shrugged. "Yeah. But I didn't. Things just sort of work out... or they don't." And I do my best to live with the mistakes... The really big and terrible mistakes. My whole body shuddered with the force of my yawn. "Sweet Celestia, I'm tired. I need a few hours' sleep or a few more bottles of Buckweiser."

"Is this life on the ground?" she asked as she looked at the stunted and gnarled trees.

"This your first time down here?" I asked her.

She looked a little sheepish and nodded.

I sighed and gave a wistful little smile. "Pretty much. The Wasteland breeds trouble like radroaches. And Hoofington breeds them like bloatsprites on a dead pony. Thing is... I've also come across things so beautiful they almost hurt. Like the sound of a church full of children singing. Or seeing slaves freed from bondage. That really struck me. Or finding a pony's personal treasure two hundred years after they died." I saw her looking at me oddly and smiled a little. "I know, it sounds a little bit corny, but if the Wasteland was nothing but pain and suffering, eventually you'd get numb to it all. It has

just enough good to be worth fighting for.”

And to really make you feel the horrible parts.

I yawned again and put on DJ Pon3. Pretty soon, I'd be sleepwalking at this rate. There was a crackle, and suddenly an old buck cackled around us, making my whole body shiver. “She’s getting awfully big, Mari. Who’s a big pony? Yes she is! Yes she is!”

What the hay? I looked at the PipBuck screen; in my stupor I'd loaded the other audio note from the recorder I'd found on Star Point.

“Unca Hoss! Hat Unca Hoss! Hat! Pleeeeeze!” a filly squealed.

The old buck chuckled softly. “Here you go, Tarot.”

“Now be careful. That hat’s as old as your uncle Hoss.”

There was an old chuckle. “An’ nearly as tough, too. Don’t worry none, Mari.” There was a squeal of joy that faded a little as a filly sang, ‘I gots a haa-aat!’ The old buck asked quietly, “How are you holding together?”

“Day by day, like everypony, I imagine,” Marigold said softly. “I keep waking in the middle of the night thinking that we missed the signal and we’re going to die. I feel as if, any second, something terrible will happen. Everypony is telling us to get into the city. That the spell shields will keep the bombs out... but I can’t leave Star House. Tarot loves it there.”

“Spell shields?”

“Horse installed them. One of his first ‘projects’ as the new director.” She snorted scornfully. “I hope they work, but Horse’s grandstanding isn’t doing anypony any good.”

“Mmmm... well, give an idjit some power and watch him turn into a mule,” Old Hoss grumbled. “You still working on your book?”

“Yes, I picked up this recorder. Army surplus, not pretty, but at least I don’t have to worry about Tarot accidentally breaking it when she plays ‘Star Rangers’. She loves that show...” There was a pause, then a little sniff followed by a sob. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“This stupid war’s getting in the way of living,” Hoss muttered.

Fortunately, Tarot hadn’t seemed to notice as she shrieked “Oh noes, it’s a horn eating monster. Eeeee! Momma! It’s eating my horn!” A pause. “Momma... it’s *eating* my *horn*.”

“Oh? Oh! Ahem...” Marigold cleared her throat. “Evil horn eating monster! Star Ranger Mommy will stop you!” Tarot giggled in glee as Marigold made zapping noises. “Are you okay, Miss Junior Star Ranger?”

“Yes, Star Ranger Mommy!” she said with a giggle. “Common Star Ranger Hat! Let’s explore for cookies!” With a wooshing noise Tarot ran off.

“Landsakes. In my day it was ponies versus buffalo. I was always the buffalo...” he mused.

“She probably did that just for me. All this fighting... it’s even getting to Tarot a little bit. She doesn’t know why I’m upset, but she knows I am.”

"You should see a physician, Marigold," Old Hoss said softly. "Yer way too young ta be driving yerself crazy like this." He chuckled and added, "Of course, once ya get to my age everything turns out ta be a case of 'old'."

Marigold laughed softly, mirthlessly. "I can't. You've heard the stories of how they're handling cases of war fatigue. Memory wipes. Drugs. Other spells. I can't risk anything happening to Tarot. She's everything to me now." There was a soft sigh. "Funny, considering she's not mine."

"You're her mamma. You clean up after her, see she gets fed, and worry about her night and day. If that ain't a mamma, dunno what is." He hesitated, hemming a little before he asked softly, "Has her first mamma..."

"No. I don't know who she is, and if Fluttershy did what she said she did, I doubt her real mamma knows she even is a mother." Marigold let out a sad sigh. "She'll never know what a wonderful child she gave up."

"Yer a peach, Marigold..."

"Sometimes though... I wonder..."

"You can't have regrets, Mari."

"No, not regrets. I just wonder... what would have happened if her mother had kept her? Would I have gone into space again? Would the rocket program have kept going? Would things be different?" Marigold sighed softly. "I didn't anticipate being a mother. Just being pregnant was scary enough. I thought that... I'd have her and that would be that. I never imagined just how much she means to me."

"Heh. Like I used to tell Missus Hoss back in the cave pony days, we love 'em so much so we don't put them on a spit and eat 'em!"

They shared a laugh. Then there was a shrill beeping. "Oh no..." she murmured. "My stable pass is active. But 90 is all the way past Flankfurt! It will take us hours to get there by hoof!"

"Now relax, Marigold. It's probably just a drill," he said comfortingly. "They've been testing the system all month." But neither of them talked as the pass continued to go off, an annoying little beep that went on and on while Tarot played.

But it wasn't a drill. From the direction of the city came the long low wail of a siren. It rose and fell, echoing out over the countryside in a faint, ghostly call. It was a herald of doom as the pass beeped continuously. "Mamma... I don't like this, Mamma..." Tarot whimpered in the voice of a child who still had faith in their mother to do anything. Minute after minute crawled by, the dread deepening.

Then we heard it. From the recording came the sound of an explosion that shook the house to its foundations. Tarot shrieked as things crashed in the background. Then a terrible silence fell. Hoss muttered breathlessly, "Miramare. They hit Miramare."

"Come on, sweetie. We have to go to the stable now... Maybe... maybe the Sunset Highway is still intact..." But there was another explosion. Then another. Another.

"Mommy. What are those lights?" Tarot said in worry. "They're scary!"

"Come here, Tarot. It'll be okay."

Old Hoss rumbled and coughed in his throat. "You have to head for the stable up on the hill. It ain't the one ya were assigned, but a pass is a pass."

"Come with us?"

"Aw, now, no sense in that, Marigold. You know it. I'm just an old buck who's stuck around to the end of things. You get that filly where she'll be safe."

"Unca Hoss! Your hat!" Tarot said in alarm.

"Keep it, hun. I don't need it anymore."

"Nuhuh! It's your hat, Unca Hoss. Your head'll get cold. No Star Ranger wants a cold!" Tarot said with a sniff. "Please, Unca Hoss. I'll wear it when I get back."

Suddenly all three of them began to cry out as if in pain, but all I could hear was a terrible silence. Then there was a distant crack and a great wind that gusted through the leaves of the trees around the farm. Distant cries and wails sounded through the night, growing and falling and building as the survivors ran through that horrible time.

Old Hoss murmured softly, "Princesses... Hoofington... what... happened...? What was that... screaming...?"

"A bomb inside the shield. They must have smuggled one inside... oh sweet Celestia..."

"You go, Marigold. Hurry. Just follow all those ponies. You see to your little one."

"Thank you."

"No regrets, Marigold. You just do better than those idjits that caused this mess."

"Goodbye," Marigold whispered. "Come on Tarot. Stay close, honey. We need to get to our new home in the stable."

"Bye Unca Hoss! I'll see you soon."

"Luna protect us, I hope not, sweetie," Hoss said quietly, and faintly I heard the old buck murmur, "Guess I'll see you soon, Smith."

The recording turned to static before it cut out completely.

That was what it sounded like when worlds ended. One second, you're playing Star Rangers with your foal, visiting a friend. Then you're giving your child away to a complete stranger in the knowledge that she'd die otherwise.

I felt shivery all over. What were the odds that the bombs would drop on that day, when they were visiting the farm? If they'd been in Star House, they would have gone to the doomed Stable 90. What were the chances they'd run across Card Trick, who'd take her in as her own? What was the chance that I'd have found this recording when I was so desperate to pull the trigger?

How could I have been that much of a fucking idiot?

I'd never kill myself now. I might want to, but I'd never be able to throw away a life that was the product of those extraordinary circumstances. The odds were nothing less than miraculous. And I'd

almost thrown it all away. I might have thrown away my friends in that moment of horrible weakness.

Thank you, Marigold. Hoss. Fluttershy.

"I can't believe that's what it was like," Twister drawled, looking down at my PipBuck in astonishment. "I mean, we hear 'bout the Emergency Broadcast and the Great Recall in school... but hearing those bombs go off... they talked about a scream. What was that?"

"I don't know," I replied, looking at the lavender Enclave pony. "I didn't hear anything."

"Hoofington must have been packed when the bombs went off, if folks thought magic shields would keep 'em safe," she mused aloud. "But it looks like the only thing that worked was closing the sky."

"Yeah. War's over now, though. You can open it back up again," I muttered as more fat drops of rain started to fall.

Her ears drooped a little. "Not an option, sorry to say. We need every bit of cloud we can get for food. Sorry." She looked out at the dreary landscape. "I never thought it'd look like this, though."

I looked at her; this was how pegasi became Dashites. I could see the guilt on her face; she might have thought it necessary, but she didn't think of it as right.

"Can I ask you a question?" She looked back at me coolly but curiously. "Why didn't you just fly off and leave me back at Star Point?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. "I've been out of basic for two years now," she said. "You know how much action I've seen? Zero. We fly around, do our formations, shoot target practice and play the occasional war game. And we're told it's all for our people." She took a deep breath. "Fact is that was the first fight that felt like the good fight." She kicked a muddy clod. "Like I said. Dirt's making me stupid."

Then the Enclave found us.

Fortunately, the bars were amber as one landed in front and the other behind. "Twister! We found you!" called out a mare. I looked at the scorched armor of the mare with the gatling beam rifles and the male I'd nearly cut.

"You..." Twister's eyes widened in shock. "You came after me?"

"Well, o'course! Couldn't leave you in the hooves of this surfacer terrorist," the buck growled, his missile launcher pointed right at me. Oh sure, he was brave now that I didn't have a razor sharp claw to his genitals. "Want me to blast her? Make sure she cooperates."

"No Boomer. She got me away from the Dunderheads," Twister muttered numbly, then shook her head hard. "But what are you three doing? We're all contaminated now!" Twister pointed out with a glare.

Sunset shrugged, a weird sight to see in power armor. "Eh. We'll say we were lookin' ta kick some Dunderhead tail. Get two weeks detention."

Boomer nodded. "Can't toss ya in a cell if we back you up, right?"

"You two idjits... ugh... I'm gonna be stuck with paperwork for a month for this..." She looked at me. "You're sure I'd have to eat... you know... to get sick?"

"Ask your own medics," I replied with a shrug. "But you should be fine."

"What's she talkin' 'bout?" Boomer asked, keeping that missile on me.

"Nothin', Boomer. Nothin'." She looked at me then smiled. "Well. You take care o' yerself, Blackjack. Got to say this has been a hell of a night."

From the slightly less dark and gloomy east, I could tell it was nearly morning. "Yeah. For me as well."

* * *

Megamart's guards took one look at me and opened the gate, not bothering me for caps as I stepped through. Either I was so damn scary-looking they didn't want to, or they took pity on a mare who'd been through a rough night. I didn't care. I had to find my friends now and apologize. Grovel for forgiveness.

Inside, business was oddly quiet. The vendors were moving into their booths, but their eyes slowly followed me nervously. Were my glowing eyes freaking everypony out that badly? I tried to remember where I'd left my glasses. Star Point? They were probably in the ocean by now. Where were Bottlecap and Keystone? I'd expected them coming as soon as I showed up. I headed over to the clinic where the old doctor lay back on his own operating table, snoring loudly.

"Hey. Hey Bonesaw." I nudged him hard.

He jerked upright and banged his horn against the light that dangled over the table. "Gallstones..." he swore, clenching his eyes shut as he hissed. "Clinic is open when I am! Go away."

"Bonesaw. It's me. Security?" I asked with an awkward smile.

He cracked open an eye, then the gap-toothed old unicorn gasped. "You! You're here. You can't be here! They're here for you!"

I immediately focused my E.F.S. No red bars, yet.

"Who is? Enclave? Zodiac? Usury? Killer zebra death commandos?" I asked as my eyes swept through the crowds.

"No... them!" he said as he pointed a hoof.

From down the aisle approached three ponies in traditional raider attire... No. That was backwards. Every raider I'd ever seen had been trying to copy this look. The confident swagger in the three mares. Tough eyed, tough hided, wearing spikes and chains. Their leather barding had the unmistakable muted hues of being ponyhide. And their weapons were top notch and well cared for. These were ponies who were ready, willing, able, and eager to kick tail and get kicked. Not out of madness, but sheer confidence.

These were Reapers.

It made sense; they couldn't all be monsterponies like Deus. He'd been a special project, connected to Sanguine through the need for his super painkiller. But I had the clear impression that these three ponies still knew a lot about fighting.

And I was about to get a firsthand lesson in it.

I glanced up at Gun. The weapon was already turned towards me, as if anticipating I'd fire a shot. "I need a weapon," I said tensely, not taking my eyes off the three mares. Two of them were earth ponies; one swung a weighted chain lazily in her jaws. The second grinned around the handle of a fire axe, one without even a spot of rust upon it. But the unicorn's weapon put them all to shame. The mallet had to be nearly as long as her body, with a huge reinforced head of steel, and she floated it without the slightest bit of strain.

A scalpel floated into my line of vision.

"Thanks," I said as my magic gripped the tiny blade. I slowly trotted down the aisle towards the three.

"You're Security, right?" the unicorn asked. I was hoping she'd be fiddling with that hammer, or scornful of the tiny blade. She wasn't. I could tell they took me seriously. No taunts. No insults. They were just as serious about kicking my ass clear to Flank.

"Yeah," I said as I wondered if my magic bullets would register as gunshots to Gun.

"You're coming with us," the unicorn said as they started to spread out. This was a far cry from what I was used to: no charging in for the first hit or quick kill.

Great. "I don't think so. I just want to find my friends, beg their forgiveness, and sleep for six or seven hours." I kept looking at Chain and Axe; the earth ponies were moving more and more to flank me as I backed away. Hammermare just stayed right in front of me. "Is this about that stupid bounty? Deus is dead, Usury's gone... give it up!"

"Piss on my horn... she told us you were stupid, but I didn't expect it was this bad," Hammermare said as she turned the head of the mallet around in her magical grip. "We do this three ways. You let Cuffs lock you up nice and neat, we beat you unconscious and lock you up anyway, or we kill you. Those are your options."

"Right..." Well I knew this was coming. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and selected my attacks. I charged forward as my magic stabbed the scalpel right at her face. She raised a hoof, the blade drawing blood as it stabbed into her forelimb. I lunged to tackle her, raising my hooves to knock that massive hammer out of the way.

Funny. I really hadn't expected her horn to be that strong. The floating haft of the hammer didn't budge an inch; instead, I was halted in place gripping it and staring stupidly down at her. She grinned even wider and the hammer shoved me away, then swung in an upward arc with an ominous hum of magic.

My only saving grace was that I got the PipBuck raised in time to prevent my face from getting crushed. That didn't prevent the blow from knocking me clear off my hooves and bouncing me on the concrete floor once before sliding away. I shook my head, wondering if my leg or head were busted. That blow nearly took off my horn!

Then Cuffs swung her chain around my rear leg, and like that she was racing back towards Hammermare and I was being dragged along behind her. The glowing hammer lifted, the hum growing as a talisman in the head built up energy. I did the only thing I could and rolled to the side, the taut chain cutting underneath Hammermare's hooves and knocking her down atop me. We rolled as we were dragged along, kicking and biting before she finally fell away.

Cuffs didn't stop, though, as the chain-draped mare raced towards the end of the aisle. She snapped around the corner, swinging hard and I wailed as I was slammed hard into a stack of scrapped generators. Then she was off again, dragging me back towards the other two. Hammermare raised the powered mallet for another blow, and Fire Axe likewise readied the sharpened spike on the end. "Enough of this!" I shouted as I curled up and sent three magic bullets right at Cuffs's rump. One caught her square in the flank, and she staggered enough that I was able to hook my forehooves on a heap of scrap. With a jerk, the chain around my rear leg went taut and Cuffs fell to the ground. I did not like that pop in my rear knee nor the pain that radiated from it, though.

I pulled myself to my hooves, watching Hammermare charge. I shook off the chain before it could be yanked again. The bullet spell hadn't triggered Gun, but seeing how tough these three were, I wasn't sure it'd be enough to drop them. What I needed was a decent weapon!

Fortunately, Fire Axe had one.

My horn flashed, trying to twist it out of the Reaper's mouth. To my shock, she grit her teeth and fought me.

And that hesitation gave Hammermare the opening she needed. The mallet slammed into my side, and I felt several ribs snap as I once more slid all the way to Bonesaw's clinic. I opened my mouth and gasped, then coughed a mouthful of blood over the floor. The old buck stared as he backed away, not getting involved in this fight. I couldn't blame him.

But, he did have medical supplies.

"Bill me," was all I choked out before yanking open his cabinet, grabbing an ampule of gray sludge, and injecting it into my side. At once, I felt the disgusting regenerative potion at work as the Hydra mended my ribs and did... whatever other damage it was doing. I chowed down a Buck and injected a Med-X for good measure before slugging down his freshest healing potions. I rose to my hooves and faced the three. My eyes felt like they were glowing like the fires of hell. "Okay! You three are between me and my friends and I am fucking sick of it!" The sensation of my knee being pulled into place made my stomach churn.

Hammarmare looked a little surprised that I still had some fight in me, while Cuffs and Fire Axe backed away a few steps. I charged at the unicorn, who readied herself, hammer held parallel to the ground before her like the first time. I leapt and hooked my forehooves around the handle. As before, it didn't budge.

Which let me swing my rear legs up and smash both my rear hooves into her face with almost as much force as her mallet. She reared and fell back as I flipped in the air and grabbed the mallet from her faltering magical grip with my own magic. She had just enough presence of mind to lift her hooves and catch the hammer on them rather than her chest, but from the crack, I knew I wasn't the only pony who'd need Hydra after this fight.

Fire Axe and Cuffs didn't abandon Hammermare, though. The red earth pony swung the axe with swift and sure cuts that had me dancing back as I countered with massive blows of the heavy hammer. I wasn't quite as strong as Hammermare, but at least I was holding my own. Or at least I thought I was when Cuff's chain whipped around my throat and went taut. The chain yanked me back, making me rear up as I struggled to defend myself against Fire Axe.

The heavy metal axe head slammed against my gut and blasted the breath from me. Levitating the hammer, I swung wildly behind me. There was a dull thump as I connected with something, and the chain relaxed enough for me to suck a gasp of air. Fire Axe charged in while she still had the opportunity, but I slammed my forehooves hard against her face, knocking her to the floor.

"Hey Security! What's soaking wet and clueless?" a mare called out above me. I looked up in time to get a bucket of water, bucket included, dumped on my head. "Your face!" she snickered, then hit me so hard that I was knocked bouncing across the floor again.

I pulled the bucket off and looked up at a yellow pegasus with sweeping golden hair and a decidedly bitchy grin on her face. Arcane devices on each of her hooves sparkled with energy similar to Hammermare's super sledgehammer. "What the fuck..."

She laughed as her blue eyes looked down at me. "Aww... do you want me to kiss it and make it all better?" Her wings snapped and she slammed the sparkling power shoes against my face with another blast of magical energy. I brought up S.A.T.S. and tried to blast her with magical bullets, but two missed and the remaining two didn't do enough to take her out completely. Oh Goddesses, did my horn ache right now.

Butterflies with razorblade wings... that was a new cutie mark.

Then she was smashing her hooves against me again and again as more Reapers showed up. "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" she shrieked with glee. "Don't you just love me?"

"Psychoshy!" snapped a familiar voice from the end of the aisle. I groaned as I sat back up again. Rampage slowly approached with a solemn look on her face. "That's enough."

"She's weak! She's useless!" the yellow pegasus said in disgust as she landed beside my friend. "We should just take back her head."

"She's fine. You just caught her at a bad time," Rampage said softly as she knelt and looked me in the eye with a sad smile. "Hey, Blackjack. Everyone's okay. Nervous, but okay. I'm really glad you made it back all right."

I lay back, my head spinning after Psychoshy's beating. "Rampage, what's going on?"

She sighed softly. "Bad news. We're at war, and you've been drafted," she said as she looked down at me. "Welcome to the Reapers, Blackjack."

Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Terrifying presence -- When you've got that shooty look going, you can make lesser enemies run in terror and balk greater opponents.

((Huge thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria, to Hinds and Bronode for making this worth reading, and to everypony that keeps me slogging through chapter after chapter.))