

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 25: Competition

"I was gonna say 'In all of Equestria', but that might be gilding the lily."

"Psychoshy, Security," Rampage said as she gestured from the hovering yellow pegasus to me and then back again. "Security, Psychoshy. If you're going to kill each other, do it in the arena where we can all watch the show." She stepped between me and the pegasus, dragging her hoofclaws over the concrete. "Understand?" she asked in a lower, more menacing tone.

"Sure. She's not worth my time anyway," the mare said as she flicked her mane dismissively. "Her blue buck is much more interesting! See you later, Wahhhpage." With a snotty little giggle, she flew off through the store.

"Wow. I can't think of a single pony who's gone from 'complete stranger' to 'pony I need to kick the crap out of' faster than her," I groaned as I lifted myself to my hooves. Then I shuddered; my heart was beating... wrong. It hurt like it never had before, and its usual steady, paired beats had been replaced by what felt like some complicated, energetic dance. "I... I just need a second here..." I groaned again as I lowered myself back to the ground, rolled over onto my back, and listened to the irregular thudding in my ears.

"Why is it I keep meeting you when you're half dead?" Rampage asked, rolling her eyes. She grabbed the collar of my barding in her teeth and started dragging me back to Bonesaw. Hammermare was sitting on a couch, her forelegs twisting as the bent limbs were tugged back into place by his healing potions and Hydra. She didn't look all that pissed at me. Quite the contrary, actually.

"Hey, Mallet," Rampage said around my collar.

"Rampage," she said respectfully, flushing a little.

"You owe me some caps," Bonesaw said sourly as Rampage dumped me on the operating table.

My striped friend gave him a level look, and he muttered under his breath as his horn glowed and he started trying to fix the damage the chems and taint had been doing to me. "Don't worry, you old goat. You'll get paid." The old buck's grumbling died down a bit, though he still didn't look happy. Rampage popped a Mint-al into her mouth, chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then spoke. "So... what happened?"

"Long story short, went to go kill myself, ran into somepony who talked some sense into me, walked back here," I said with a half smile.

"And we couldn't have talked some sense into you? Glory was hysterical when we told her." I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. She sighed. "You're an idiot, Blackjack. Don't do that to your friends. Okay?"

"Yeah. I won't. I think I worked all that out of me." She smiled, looking relieved. I looked around. "Where *are* Glory and the others?"

"Glory's on the roof with Lacunae. Scotch and P-21 are in the office. I made damn sure that the ponies watching them aren't stupid." She looked over a few aisles to where Psychoshy was fluttering over a small crowd that seemed quite excited to meet the pretty pegasus psychopath. "Psychoshy wanted them taken as hostages. Since that'd get a lot of ponies killed, I told her you'd be fine coming

with us to the Arena to meet Big Daddy Reaper.”

My heartbeat was stabilizing even as the ache in my chest grew. That Hydra had been a bad idea. Knit ribs didn't help when the rest of me felt like it was falling apart. Rampage arched a brow. “Are you fine with coming with us? Because I really don't want to call Cuffs over here.”

To be honest, this was so far out of left field that I didn't know how exactly I felt about it. “Some explanation would help. What's going on?”

Rampage sighed. “You remember when you killed Gorgon? Well, he was one of us. Gorgon the Stonegaze. Not really all that popular. One of Sanguine's ponies. He left three months ago to help with production at Brimstone's Fall. Then, two weeks ago, we find out from DJ Pon3 that the mine's been liberated. A few questions later and we found out it was liberated by a mare who killed Gorgon all by herself. So Big Daddy sent me to find you.”

“Why me? I'm not interested in joining the Reapers.”

“Yeah. I figured as much, but you have to understand that the Reapers survive by being the biggest, baddest gang in the Hoof. If there's a pony strong enough to kill our own, we want them as a Reaper. If they won't join, then we come down on them hard. We just can't let powerful ponies get away to start rival operations.” The striped pony rubbed her nose. “I figured out pretty quickly, though, that you weren't all that big a threat of becoming a rival. If you'd stayed in Flank, maybe you might have been, in time. But that didn't work out.”

I groaned and closed my eyes. “I still don't follow. You're not here to kill me, so...”

Rampage sighed again, this time in annoyance. “Great. Well, it's about history, and I'm not much of a history teacher. You can ask Big Daddy to explain it.”

“Come on. At least give me the abbreviated version?” I asked, then winced as something inside me squirmed. Oh, I really hoped that it was supposed to do that.

Rampage rolled her eyes. “A while back, there was a group of six ponies that tried to clean up Hoofington. They went from one end of the city to the other, and, believe it or not, Hoofington was even worse back then. Big Daddy was one of them: the biggest, toughest, meanest pony ever to wander the Wasteland... if you listen to his version.”

I winced as I felt... something... inside me move in response to Bonesaw's magic. “You're done,” he said as he nudged me off the table. “Next!”

I slipped off, feeling... ‘better’ wasn't quite accurate. ‘Intact’ worked. My insides felt like a bowl of giant leeches. I did not want to imagine what they looked like. Maybe they were like rotten loops of guts with... ugh, stupid brain. “What happened to them?”

“They split up. Not really sure why,” Rampage said, giving me a significant look. Probably because one of them ran off to do something foolish like killing themselves. “After that, Awesome crowned himself King Awesome of Hoofington, Crunchy Carrots went back to Manehattan and came back with a whole slew of Steel Rangers, Keeper went his own way to set up the trade routes around the city, and the professor established the Eggheads over at the university.” She rubbed her chin. “There was a sixth, but I dunno what happened to her.”

Six friends? Why'd that make my mane all twitchy? Right; that didn't matter now. I'd stalled long enough. Unless the Reapers or somepony were going to ambush me... I had to do this. “Where's Glory again?” I said as I stood... well, lurched to my hooves. Goddesses, I was tired. It'd been a hell of a night.

Rampage walked towards a metal staircase that led up to the roof and nodded her head at it.

“Word of advice: she still loves you,” Rampage said softly, then added, “Oh, and word of warning: if Psychoshy or anypony else finds out I’ve been giving relationship advice, I’ll have to kick a lot of ass. Including yours.”

“Thanks.” I paused, fighting the urge to yawn as I looked at her. “You’re not mad at me?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I know what it’s like to find life unbearable. I’m just glad you found a way to bear it.” She patted my shoulder. “But if you ever do that to your friends again, I’ll consider it a form of suicide and squeeze you in half.” She gave a grin and a wink. “So just keep that in mind next time you plan on leaving a *note* behind.”

“Right,” I said with a little nod before making my way up the stairs. Funny, but after riding a dragon and a pegasus, the drop to the floor of Megamart... was still enough to make my insides squirm. Wasn’t I supposed to eventually get used to things like this? I clambered through the hatch to the roof and the rain. A number of metal crates had been converted into shelters for the vendors who worked below.

Lacunae and Glory were with two more Reapers. I couldn’t say they were the best guards, as both mares were locked in a hoofwrestling contest, but at least neither Glory nor Lacunae seemed to be threatened by the two. Glory lay curled up as tightly as when I’d seen her trapped in that stove. What an unbearable shit I am. I didn’t deserve her, and she didn’t deserve this.

I approached quietly, the two guards barely acknowledging my presence as I walked slowly towards the little gray pegasus. Lacunae’s dark purple eyes followed me though the Hoofington drizzle, her magic deflecting the cold spray from both of them. “You broke her heart, Blackjack,” was all she whispered in my head as I sat down beside Glory. I reached out and ran my hoof gently along that splendid amethyst mane and down to the graceful curves of her wings.

“Yeah,” I murmured softly. “Cause I’m an idiot.” Looking back, I couldn’t believe what I’d nearly done. To myself, my friends... her.

She stirred and opened one bloodshot, puffy lavender eye. “Blackjack?” she whispered, looking at me. Fear and hope mixed in one terrible note.

I took a slow breath. This wasn’t going to be pretty. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” she whispered as she slowly rose. Clearly, I was not the only pony who had been up all night. “Sorry?” Her body trembled and her lip quivered, then she hung her head. Purple mane hid her face. “You... I... you come back and...” She lifted her head again and glared at me. “Blackjack, you... you...” I sighed as she flapped her wings hard enough to lift herself off her hooves and then brought both of her forelegs down on my head with a cry of “Idiot!”

Lacunae rose, and the two guards broke off their match to watch the show. The alicorn in the lacy funeral dress looked coldly down at both of them. “Um... we’re supposed to... watch?” Then they flinched and trotted off for the stairs, Lacunae accompanying them, as Glory pummeled every inch of my body she could reach.

“You... you fiend! You monster! You creep! You filly seducer! You... you... bad pony!” Glory said as she thumped me over and over again. The magic had left with the alicorn, and the Hoofington drizzle poured down on both of us. “How could you do that to us? How! I’ll... Ohhhh! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” she chanted over and over again as she kicked at me. I put up only a halfhearted defense.

"Ow! Glory! Let me explain!" I begged as she gave me a particularly good clop upside my head.

"I don't want your explanations! I'm going to beat every last little drop of stupid out of you so you never ever do that again!" she cried and sobbed. "... we met with P-21... and he was crying... crying! And you! You were gone, and I was... I had nothing left, Blackjack. No family. No home! No Blackjack! Nothing! Do you understand? Nothing!"

"I... didn't..." I said weakly, not having the slightest clue what to say. What could I say?

Then she collapsed atop me, sobbing as she held me tight in her hooves. "I thought I'd lost you... I thought you were dead..." she whispered as she shook. I held her, marveling at the softness of her wings, the silkiness of her mane. She was a gem in the Wasteland.

"You did lose me. I lost me," I said softly as I nuzzled her ear. "I couldn't handle it. If Lacunae hadn't covered for me, I think I would have lost my mind completely." She sniffled as she looked up at me with her hurting purple eyes; my magic brushed her mane from them. "I killed my stable... I know I had to... I know it wasn't my fault... but I was the one who pushed the button that gassed foals... my friends... my home. I couldn't handle it... it killed me. But Lacunae took me away before I died."

"Why didn't you just tell me? Talk to me?" she asked softly. "I would have helped you. We all would have."

"I didn't want help. I was stupid and cowardly. I wanted to escape. I can still smell the gas. Right now, holding you, I can smell that chlorine. I can hear Midnight calling me a murderer." I closed my eyes, a part of me trapped in 99 forever. "I couldn't live with it. I couldn't handle it. I ran to either find something to keep me going... or... or end it."

Glory trembled as she looked away. "And... I wasn't enough."

"No." I turned her face back towards mine as I repeated softly, "No. Glory, you weren't 'not enough'. You were too much. Too much good and wonderful that I didn't deserve. That I still don't deserve," I said as I closed my eyes. "I wanted... needed... to punish myself. I couldn't do that with you with me. I was falling apart and dead inside." I sighed as I stroked her wet mane. "I should have turned to my friends. Not away from them..."

She sniffed as she looked at me, then she finally gave me a small smile. "Idiot..." she said softly, reaching up and tapping the side of my head. "I... don't know if we can be like we were, Blackjack. I just don't know. I... you make me happy. But you hurt me, too. I'm going to need some time."

"Take as long as you need," I said as she slowly pulled away, looking down at me with an expression equal parts affection and wariness. I slowly rose to my hooves, the cool drizzle welcome for once on my battered flesh. "What do you think about these Reapers?"

"I expected psychopaths," Glory said, gathering herself and readily accepting the change in subject. We started back towards the hatch downstairs. "But, aside from that unpleasant yellow mare, they seem much more... together. Horribly aggressive and violent, but... considering what we've encountered in the Wasteland so far..." She gave a little shake. "Fortunately, Rampage seems pretty well respected by them."

"Eating a minigun and living will do that," I replied as I pulled open the hatch and started down. "So. To avoid another massive fight, we're going to go with them and--" But then my hoof slipped on the wet metal and I rolled and banged the last dozen feet or so to the ground. Glory flew down as I lay there groaning. "Gravity... sucks." Then I glanced at my forehooves and stared at the slick black oil on them. I looked back at the steps.

"Gravity doesn't suck. You do," Psychoshy snickered as she walked past us, snapping her tail at me.

"Are you kidding me..." I muttered, staring at her as she walked out of sight. "I fight off a swarm of manticores and Enclave and I now have to put up with adolescent jerk ass school pranks!?"

"Or you could... you know... shoot her," Glory said as she helped me to my feet.

"Tempting, but, Gun aside, I think I should talk to Big Daddy first before killing Reapers."

She smirked. "I didn't say kill. Just shoot her a few times. She pulls a stupid prank? Shoot her. She acts mean? Shoot her. Think of it as a spanking with bullets." Our eyes met, my lips twitched, and then we were both laughing as we walked to Bottlecup's office. We might not be lovers anymore, but at least I knew I still had her as a friend.

"So..." she said, "tell me about these Enclave you mentioned?"

That sent my spirits down again. This was going to be tricky.

"Well... I was up in the mountains, and I can't tell you why, or how."

"Blackjack..." Hearing the disappointment in her voice made me want to tell her the whole story right there, but... I'd promised Spike, who was protecting the best hope for Equestria's future, and I really didn't want to get a dragon mad at me.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, but it's *really* important and I made a promise," I said with desperate hope.

Then was an eternity of silence as she considered, and then, "Alright. I'll trust you." *Be worthy of it this time*, she didn't say.

"Thank you. So... anyway, I was climbing back down, when these three pegasi..."

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"... so then they flew out again, back west," I finished as we reached the door to the manager's office. I was dead on my hooves, but I needed to talk to P-21. And then Lacunae... and Scotch... ugh. Suicide would have been easier...

I stomped hard on that thought. Never again.

Glory, for her part, found Twister's paranoia more amusing than ominous. "A touch overdramatic. We'd have just extradited her back to Neighvarro with a slap on the hoof for violating the no-fly zone." Hm. Glory might still have faith in the treaty, but after Miramare and Lighthooves, I'd stay on the skeptical side of things.

I passed by Cuffs, Mallet, and Smokey, the mare who'd wielded the fire axe just half an hour ago. To my surprise, there was no animosity. Mallet asked about a rematch, and Cuffs asked Glory if she needed some quality chain to keep me from getting away. I flushed as Glory looked at me in consideration of her offer.

Then Smokey looked over at something. "Look out. It's Psycho," the red mare muttered, and all of them watched sullenly as Psychoshy slammed her hooves against a nearby merchant's counter,

apparently haggling to get the price to zero.

"You don't like her either?" Glory asked in surprise.

Mallet snickered. "Of course not. She's a complete cunt."

"And one of Sanguine's suck ups," added Cuffs. The turquoise mare looked a little nervous.

At my questioning gaze, Mallet sighed. "Most Reapers work up from our gangs. We work to be the best of the best before trying to join the Reapers. Sanguine, though, he finds ponies and gives them powers. Gorgon. Deus. Anypony associated with that ghoul is fucked up. Everypony knows he's a horned undead leech." Psychoshy trotted away from the shaking vendor with a ransom of little treasures. "Psychoshy's that ghoul's favorite trick pony. We hate her. And she knows it."

Trick pony... if it was anything like what P-21... that had to be like getting fucked by a jerky stick! Okay... there was a mental image I wanted burned from my mind. "And Rampage?" I asked curiously, though honestly I was more interested in banishing the image of... stop it, you stupid brain!

Mallet gave a wary sort of smile. "She's cool... weird... super weird... but cool."

"Anypony who can survive decapitation automatically gets points with us," Smokey agreed. "Even if she's... weird." So surviving decapitation wasn't the weird point. Welcome to the Wasteland, where the surreal was cool and the psychological weird.

"Oh, I'm not so bad once you get to know me," Rampage said softly in just the precise tone to make even the three Reapers' manes stand on edge, not to mention mine and Glory's. She put her hooves around Mallet and Smokey's necks, pulling them into a headlock that had both strong mares struggling. "Now, why don't you three help me get our wagon ready?"

"Sure, Rampage. We're on it," Cuffs said quickly as the other two gagged for a few seconds more before they were released and ran for the door.

"Kids today," Rampage sighed, and shook her head as she trotted after them.

"Are we sure we want to do this?" Glory asked me, watching them go in concern. "I mean, we might be able to sneak away."

"I don't want to leave Rampage," I said softly, dropping my gaze. "I snuck out on my friends once. I'm not going to do it again." I caught Glory's smile. I might not be the smartest pony, but I could be taught. A little. Slowly.

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The stench of fecal water hit my nostrils like a hammer as I pushed open the door to Bottlecap's office. A filly inside gave a garbled war cry accompanied by a furious splashing, and I poked my head inside to see Scotch Tape gripping some kind of crankcase in her jaws as her forehooves turned the pedals at a furious rate, making a cable disappearing into the toilet spin and thrash filthy water. Behind her stood P-21, looking a little lost, as he gripped a plunger in his mouth. The yellow merchant mare watched anxiously from behind both.

Bottlecap spotted me first and at once smiled with a small look of concern as we walked in. She leaned towards me. "I thought a little job might keep them distracted for a bit..." She looked apprehensively at Scotch Tape as the young mare cranked the levers like mad. "I didn't expect her to be quite so devoted to... fixing my clog."

I caught the change. The turn of a blue ear. The slight widening of his eye followed by a slow sag of his body. His teeth tightening on the handle of the plunger. Eyes that refused to look away from Scotch Tape at work. He was pissed too, and hurt, and I knew that, unlike Glory, he wouldn't do the sensible thing and beat the stupid out of me. Oh no. He was going to bottle it all up and be in a complete snit till it finally exploded.

Well, not if this security mare had anything to say about it! I trotted right up next to him, smiling as I watched Scotch Tape at work. Then I turned my head and licked him from jaw to ear in one long wet slurp. His blue eyes shot wide, the plunger falling from his shocked mouth as he jumped away. "Damn it, Blackjack!" He scrubbed at my lick with a hoof as he looked at me in shock and embarrassment. "Fine! You're back! Glad you're not dead."

"Hey, P-21," I said as I looked at him sitting his rump down with a sore wince. Bottlecap nudged Glory out the door and followed her, shutting it behind them, and Scotch Tape seemed completely fixated on consulting a magazine on plumbing and repairs. I sat before P-21. "So... you miss me?" I said, giving him a small smile, hoping he'd get the clue that this was when he got to beat the everloving snot out of me.

But he didn't. I'd hurt him again. Wronged him. "No. I didn't," he replied with sincerity before reaching into his bags to pull out my Delta PipBuck and throw it in my face. "Don't leave your junk with me next time, Blackjack." And with that he trotted from the room.

I took a deep breath. What had I expected? I'd run out on my friends. It wasn't like I could just come back and everything would be wonderful again. Face it, I'd gotten lucky with Rampage and Glory.

Suddenly, there was a gurgle of water and a flush accompanied by Scotch letting out a whoop of glee. "Hah! Never met a clogged toilet that could stop me for long!" She grinned back at the office, then pushed her goggles back, blinking. "Awww, man. Victory of a lifetime and nopony gets to see it?" Then she looked at me. "Oh, you're back. Guess you didn't kill yourself, huh?" Well, neither anger nor tears...

"Probably. I might be a ghost though." She immediately blanched under her grime. "Kidding! I'm kidding. There aren't ghosts in the Wasteland... I think." Were there? I'd have to check the survival guide. "So... why are you fixing a toilet?"

"Cause everypony was going crazy with you gone." More guilt? Yes, please! "Glory wanted to fly off and find you. Rampage wanted everypony to wait here. P-21..." But she just shrugged and shook her head. "So, that Bottlecap mare mentioned that she had a nasty clog and she'd pay to have it fixed."

"Yeah, but how do you know how to fix toilets?"

"Ugh, 'cause I've been doing it my whole life?" she said with a huff as she coiled up the cable on her stained utility harness. "Maintenance mares generally gave me all the muck jobs, and that includes toilets." She looked at me oddly and asked, "Weren't you practicing shooting and fighting when you were little?"

"Well..." I hadn't really thought about it. Wrestling, practicing with batons, training with BB guns, firearms training... and of course lots of bullshit indoctrination lessons about how we had to serve the Overmare without failure or question. "I guess I was." I watched as she pulled out a rag and wiped her face. "And how are you doing?"

She gave me a wary look I knew well. Then she sighed as she looked away from me and shrugged. "In 99, I was forced to fix pipes and unclog toilets. Out here, I'm fixing pipes and unclogging toilets, and getting shot at by killer robots... using guns... under that big freaky open sky thing." She

shivered and then shook her head. "I dunno how I'm doing. Just... bit by bit, I guess."

"You don't have to come with us if you don't want to. I'm sure, after fixing this, Bottlecap can help you find a job." Megamart had to be safer than following me around. I was just one long string of disasters.

She looked worried as she looked back to her tools, making sure they ended up in the right pockets. "Thanks, but... you and P-21... you're the most normal ponies I know now." And didn't that make me cringe a little inside. "I'll just stick along."

"All right... but make sure you wash?" I wrinkled my nose.

She snorted in scorn. "You spend a few weeks on the surface and get so soft you can't even handle the smell of honest work. Sad, Blackjack. Really sad," she said as she passed by me.

"I... you smell of poo water! That's not soft!" I yelled after her. "I've had boats dropped on me. You can't survive that if you're soft! Hey!" The door closed behind her and I pouted a little. "I'm not soft..."

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An hour later, we were more or less ready to leave. The Reapers had a large covered wagon rigged up and a harness for four. A shield of corrugated metal sheets extended around the front of the wagon to provide some cover. Three 'normal' Reapers were on the roof watching for trouble, leaving the rest of us to crawl inside.

Glory took one look at the confines of the trailer and swallowed. "I'll scout from above."

"Aww, don't want to be inside the tight, narrow, crushing wagon?" Psychoshy snickered, then said with false concern, "Oh, does it feel like it's getting smaller... and smaller... and smaller?" Her grin widened with each 'smaller'.

Glory looked back at her flatly as she hovered. "How is it nopony's killed you yet? Really?"

Psychoshy grinned as she flew closer. "Think you'll be the one to pull it off, Dashite?"

"I'm not a Dashite," Glory replied, her purple eyes narrowing. Psychoshy snorted as she turned towards the wagon. "And neither are you..." Glory suddenly yipped as the tip of Psychoshy's tail snapped the end of her muzzle.

"Hey, Psy," Rampage said with a small smile. "Your turn?" The simple question made the pegasus hiss through her clenched teeth before she glared at Glory.

"Don't pretend like you can ever know me, turkey." Psychoshy's angry gaze promised a murder, and Glory swallowed hard as she backed away a little. Smirking, the yellow pegasus swooped into the trailer.

"She's such a ray of sunshine, isn't she? Put me through a wood chipper when I first joined the Reapers," Rampage said as she trotted to the back of the cargo wagon.

"She put you through a wood chipper?" Scotch Tape gawked at Rampage skeptically, then glanced at me for confirmation. I smiled and shrugged.

"Mhmmm. Industrial strength." She rubbed her chin and then glanced at Scotch Tape. "Oh, it

wasn't so bad. Just a burst of pain and then coming back together. I think reforming on the far side was the most infuriating day of poor Psychoshy's life."

"Why?" Scotch asked in confusion.

"Cause she said she'd go through it too, so long as I went first," Rampage said with a decidedly unhealthy grin, "And I can't wait to see how well *she* handles it."

Okay. This opened up whole new vistas of the fucked-upness that was Reaper life, and I really didn't want to see more of them. I glanced at P-21 but saw him not paying attention to us. Certainly not to me. I needed to talk him out of this. Find some way to make amends. I needed to... oh, look. There were mattresses inside the trailer. I'd... just... lie down... and talk to... P-21...

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I walked through the yellow-green haze, lungs burning, eyes watering, as the shouts and screams echoed through the metal halls. Every breath burned inside my lungs, but, though froth dripped down my chin, I didn't fall. My eyes watered, fighting to open. To see where I was going. I had to stop this. The screams and cries echoed and built as I pushed my way along the halls. It was more by feel than anything that I found my way through security.

The Overmare stood at the window, gazing out at the thickening poison with a smug grin on her face. My horn flashed once. Twice. Three times. The world crawled as if it were in S.A.T.S. as her skull exploded. Black and red mane flew in all directions, two glowing eyes turning into luminescent pulp. I struggled to her desk, my hooves working the controls. Slowly, magically, the gas began to clear.

The Overmare's office was actually the atrium, and I was surrounded by dozens and dozens of friends, coworkers, and mere acquaintances. They looked at me, stomping their applause as they smiled. As they grinned. As they giggled. As they closed in. I'd saved them! I'd saved them! They fell on me, teeth biting. Rending. Tearing.

I stared up at the round window, looking at the Overmare with her black and red mane, her glowing eyes. I saw the cold contempt on her hard face as her horn glowed. The gas began to slowly hiss into the room.

I watched as the yellow gas filled the atrium below. The foals and mares milled about, screaming in pain, fear, and confusion. 'Murderer' echoed through the stable; never diminishing, never ending. The gas grew thicker and thicker. The door opened and admitted the security pony. Her horn flashed. Once. Twice. Thrice. My skull exploded.

I walked through the yellow haze...

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"You're a masochist. Do you enjoy this?" the Dealer asked softly as we sat together at one of the atrium tables, the air clear and the stable empty. Quiet. Still. Nothing lived here, because I'd killed them all.

"You tell me. You're my crazy," I said quietly as I rested my chin on my crossed hooves. The Dealer looked younger and healthier, the pale buck looking at me with mature eyes. Where had I seen them before?

"I think that you have a confused self-centeredness with a need to martyr yourself," the Dealer said calmly as he dealt me five cards. Celestia. Luna. Twilight Sparkle. Goldenblood. Myself. "You

think that, if you can just die in some appropriately gruesome fashion, particularly if there's lots of pain and suffering beforehand, that somehow you'll save the Wasteland." He said 'save' with a vague smile and a wave of his hoof.

"Makes sense," I replied, discarding Goldenblood. "Security is supposed to save ponies," I said firmly, and he smiled as he dealt me a Fluttershy. "I think I got a straight. Or is this a flush?"

"Yes," he replied, and I laughed. "But does it beat mine?" He showed his hand: P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch Tape. Then he reached over, took the card of me grinning like an idiot, and added it to his five. "I think this is a winning set."

I frowned at them. "I don't deserve them."

"I. I... I... I..." He gave a great sigh. "You must be the most self-centered pony in all the Wasteland, you know that? Not everything is about you, Blackjack." He lifted the card between his hooves, the picture changing before me. Blackjack grinning like a fool. Blackjack crying. Blackjack looking broken and hollow. Blackjack looking shooty. "Why do you always assume that you're the beginning and end of everything that matters?"

"I don't know. I've always been that way," I said softly, looking at the spinning card. Blackjack the foal, crying for attention. Blackjack the filly, getting her friend Daisy beaten by doing what she thought was right. Blackjack the security mare, breaking the rules to cross the Overmare. Blackjack, invisible and sneaking off rather than admitting to her friends that she wanted to die.

"Do you really think everything is okay, Blackjack?" the Dealer asked.

I slammed my hooves on the table. "I know it's not okay. I should be fixing things right now. I need to apologize to P-21. I have to find out if Rampage is really okay after I ate her heart. Or Lacunae. I need to know how Scotch Tape really feels about what I did!"

"I. I, I, I again," the Dealer rasped softly as he shook his head. He didn't take his eyes off me. "Didn't I just tell you? It's not about you. Not your needs. Not your wants."

He lifted Glory's card. "What about her? What does she need? What does she want?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Before 99 I could have answered that. Now... "I don't know..."

"Oh... and here I thought you loved her."

"Shut your mouth!" I shouted, rising to my hooves as I pointed at him. "I..." and the rest of my objection died in my throat. Was he right? Was I really that self-centered?

He just looked at me for a moment, then lifted P-21. "And what about him, hmmm? What is he feeling? What does he want?"

"He's pretty angry at me. He probably wants to shoot my ass," I muttered.

"I... me... my... It's not all about you, Blackjack," he said softly as he collected the cards. "Is that your virtue? Selfishness?"

"I don't know," I said as I looked down at my clasped hooves. "I don't know anything anymore." Everything had been broken in 99. I'd broken. I used to think my life had been divided into before leaving the stable and after leaving it. Now I knew better. It was divided into before killing 99 and after killing 99.

"My suggestion? You'd better find out," he said quietly as the gas started to hiss. "Otherwise, you'll really wish you'd stayed in here." He turned, walking through the swirling poison vapors as the screams began once more.

"Wait!" I shouted after him as the thick rolls of burning yellow gas rolled between us. I struggled after him, tripping over pony corpses as the wailing increased. I tripped upon a still body and fell to my face. Then another mare fell upon me. And another. And another. And another...

~ ~ ~

A particularly jarring bump brought me to consciousness and my eyes opened to look into P-21's face. His gaze lingered in the past, lined in hurt and betrayal. He lay on the mattress next to me. I stretched out a hoof towards him. His distant eyes focused on mine, and for one foolish moment I was certain he'd accept it. Then his eyes hardened, and with a grunt he turned away from me. I held my hoof out, hoping that somehow he'd look back at me. He didn't.

You're the most self-centered pony in the Wasteland, Blackjack. I did what I wanted. I got what I needed.

All it cost me was a friendship.

* * *

A few hours later, I woke again, this time to the sound of yelling. Not screams, but cheering. It was like being back in Brimstone's Fall, walking to that train cart. Thankfully, my dreams were fading away. They'd kept drifting among Boneyard, the hospital, and 99. Screw suicide, I just wanted a bullet for my subconscious.

"What's going on?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, a little groggy but no longer exhausted. The wagon was empty and I staggered out, not sure if I should be fumbling for my guns or not... shit, where were my guns? I had my combat armor, but no weapons. A strange yellow light was filling the air and I blinked at the sudden brilliance. Despite myself, I gazed up at clear blue skies. The sight of it made me land firmly on my rump.

Only then did I note the holes in the sky.

What I'd taken for sky was in fact the inside of a large arcing dome that had been enchanted to look like a sky. The large oval space could have easily fit a thousand times the number of ponies that were now inhabiting just one end of it. The field of grass in the middle was carefully fenced off, and I realized that here was another powerful lure for ponies: the promise of steady meals, even if they were only grass. The cushions that once held the rumps of thousands of ponies had been torn up, and platforms and structures had been built along the terraces. Tents and shacks of all sorts were oddly spaced apart from each other. All of them flew flags with strange markings: crossed guns, an axe in a brahmin skull, some kind of paw print.

The wagon had been parked with some others at one end of the arena. On the far side was a huge scoreboard covered in flickering neon lights that boldly declared 'Hoofington Sports Arena' and, beneath that, 'Home of the Hoofington Reapers'. A cartoon mascot of a skeletal pony wielding a scythe made me imagine shuffling cards.

A large stage had been built up in the opposite end zone, and atop it was a massive caged dome netted in barbed wire. Beside it were smaller rings fenced in and surrounded by seats. Curiously, I saw that the track that ran the perimeter of the field was still clear of debris. While hoofball might not be

played here, they still had a variety of competitions. As I walked towards the end with the scoreboard, I passed by clumps of bandits and gangers hoof wrestling, sparring, drinking, and practicing. I had to admit, the amount of muscle I saw made my horn twitch nervously. These ponies were buff and denoted their allegiance with scarves, tattoos, brands, and other markings.

"Boy, can you sleep," Mallet said, the caramel-coated unicorn floating her hammer overhead. How she managed that weight for that long baffled me, but the buff unicorn handled the weapon with familiar ease. "Rampage went to go tell Big Daddy that you'd arrived. Your friends are being given a box seat for your stay."

"As long as nopony tries something like taking them hostage," I warned, looking at the knots of ponies in their little camps. "Where are my guns?"

"Safe with Rampage. No one carries firearms in here. It tends to prevent things from becoming messy," she said with a grin as she twirled her supersledge. "Melee weapons are exempt, of course."

Great. And my favorite melee weapon was lying in so many pieces of burnt bone on a mountainside somewhere. I looked sourly at the various ponies warily watching us. "Are all these ponies Reapers?"

"Mostly just the ones in ponyhide," she said with a wicked grin, gesturing to her barding.

Ah, yes; that. Now that I could actually focus on it, I couldn't help but feel more than a little creeped out. "Yeah... about that; you all really wear ponyhide?"

"Oh, most of us who aren't the top ten. They're tough enough to wear whatever they like." She grinned at me almost teasingly. "And there are some cryponies who just wear normal barding."

"When did this become a good idea?" I asked, looking at her clothes in disgust. "It seems kinda... morbid."

She rolled her eyes. Clearly, I was falling rapidly into 'crypony' territory. "It's simple. If you challenge us or try to join and fail miserably, then everypony who sees us wearing you will know the price of weakness," she said with a smile and a shrug. "Every pony you see in my barding was somepony I had to kill to become a Reaper."

"Okay. I guess that makes sense... in a grisly kind of way," I admitted, still feeling a little squeamish. "So, who are all the rest of these ponies?"

"Most of these are thugs, gangers, and tribals," she said as we trotted towards the scoreboard and the pens. "There're really only sixty or so Reapers, which still makes us one of the biggest and toughest gangs around. Those are the Flash Fillies out of Progress," she said, gesturing to two mares with white collars and power shoes. "Over there," she said, looking at the bonfire burning in the next little encampment, "are the Burner Boys. Nasty rivalry with the Fillies on account Burners are all assholes. There's the Flotsam Four... the Pecos, or what's left of them now that Dusty's taken over..." She gestured to a half dozen or so forlorn looking ponies. They glanced at me and immediately ran into their shack.

"Looks like they remember me," I said as I looked at Mallet ruefully.

"Sounds like you got a good reputation, then," she said with a smirk. "Most of these are aspirants... what we call wannabes. Supposedly, the toughest of the tough of their respective tribes and gangs." She snorted in disdain. "Only a few will ever be tough enough to join the Reapers. The rest are just paying tribute to Big Daddy and hangers-on."

"Why's that?"

"Because nopony wants to get on Big Daddy's bad side. Even the Society sends ponies with stuff they think he wants, and the Society hates the Reapers. Not much love lost the other way, either," Mallet said as we headed up the stairs towards a sign that read 'Box Seating A-H'. 'Top Ten Only' was painted beneath it.

"Top ten?" I asked as we passed the sign.

"The top ten greatest Reapers in all of Hoofington. Best of the best. Deus was one. So was Gorgon. You killed both, so there's a lot of contestants eager to fill the gaps in the roster. Oh... and that means fighting you."

"To the death?" I guessed, pressing my lips together. She arched her brow, then gave a shrug.

"Not as often as most ponies think," she replied. I must have looked surprised, as the mare gave a chuckle and explained, "Fights to the death mean we lose a good fighter either way. Normally it's just fights to the surrender... though Luna help you if you give up too quick. And accidents happen." She grinned at me. "I'm pushing for Gorgon's spot. Not sure who I'll have to challenge for it, though."

"What about me?" I asked, hesitating to look at two mares sparring against each other with lengths of pipe. Their stance was definitely too narrow, and they were going to break a tooth if they weren't careful.

"That depends on you and Big Daddy. Kill a Reaper and he might let you walk. Kill a top ten? Never happen. Kill two? Never happen twice," she said with a chuckle.

Upstairs, we entered a wide hall that was marginally less choked with debris than the stands below. There were a number of faded posters in broken frames showing the various teams that'd played at the Arena: the Cloudsdale Skykickers, the Canterlot Cavaliers, the Fillydelphia Fillies, and the Appleloosa Pioneers were just a few of the teams that were intact. The best preserved seemed to be to the Manehattan Maulers, which had been converted into a shrine of hatred. Epithets were written on the wall, floor, and even ceiling for ten feet, but the poster itself was untouched. Directly opposite it was a shrine to the Hoofington Reapers, with chipped plastic trophies filled with bottlecaps, magazines, and pictures of the team. Was it my imagination, or did they look particularly unpleasant?

"I don't get it. Most of the other posters are torn up a little. Why not them?" I nodded to the Maulers.

She looked at me like it was obvious, and then adopted the 'stable-ponies-don't-know-nothin' expression. "They were the Reapers' greatest rivals two hundred years ago."

Now I was more confused than ever. Wouldn't that make the poster more likely to get scribbled on? She looked at the poster of the eighteen ponies in green and white. "You don't dishonor your greatest rival. You respect them, and look forward to the day when you can kick their ass." She smirked at me. "You have no idea how hard Big Daddy's tried to find some Manehattan ponies willing to form a hoofball team. I think he could die happy if he could play them himself."

We reached a door marked 'Manager', and she knocked once before stepping aside. I glanced at the caramel mare and then at the door. I took a deep breath, feeling like I was about to step into the security office for a major chewing out. My horn glowed and opened the door.

Inside, there was a threadbare couch in front of a projector pointed at a blank stretch of wall.

There was a bar in one corner with a gnarled old buck mixing drinks behind it. Newspaper sports pages showing the old team were plastered to the wall. I noticed that the Manehattan Maulers seemed to have a lot more wins than the home team. Oddly, one spot on the wall was completely devoid of papers.

Standing in front of the window was the largest buck I'd ever laid eyes on, and I'd seen some pretty big ponies. He had to be a hoof higher than Big Macintosh and even more muscled than Deus. His jet black hide was oiled, gleaming in the synthetic sunlight coming through the window, and his fiery red mane was styled in a fierce narrow fan of hair running down his neck. He wore lengths of spiked chain around his neck and forelimbs as he stared out at his domain.

"Okay. Just nip this in the bud and move on." I gave a glance at the old buck mixing some sort of drink, but, unless he had a gun behind the counter, I didn't think he'd be a problem. I really hoped he didn't run for help. The old buck arched a white brow as he looked at me, his dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. I took a deep breath, put on my shootiest look, and marched right up to the huge buck. "Hey! Big Daddy!"

He turned, looking at me with a scowl as if questioning who was this mare who dared speak to him in such a tone. "What?"

I pressed forward and thumped my hoof against his chest. Hopefully I could just bowl him over and convince him that I wanted no part in his war. "Look, you. I'm not a Reaper and I've got better things to do than beat the crap out of ponies." His scowl darkened into a glare. I thumped his chest a second time. "I don't care if I killed Deus and Gorgon. I had to do it, and I needed help anyway. So give the position to somepony who wants to fight in your stupid war. It's none of Security's business." And some last words in time with more beats against his chest... "So leave me out of it!"

He stared right back into my eyes, his gaze narrowing. I wondered if he could break me with his stare alone. "What are you talking about?"

"I... you... um..." I took a half step back and thumped his chest again halfheartedly before giving a sheepish grin. "Ah... hi! You're not Big Daddy, are you?" I felt myself bending under that glare as I smiled and stroked a hoof over his oiled chest. "Heh... heh... shiny..."

The old buck behind the bar cackled as he trotted out with three drinks on a tray balanced on his head. "Oh, don't you worry none, Brutus. Big Daddy's got some business with this filly," he said in a gruff yet definitely snarky tone as he grinned at me. "I'm Big Daddy, little missy. Pleasure to meet you. Rutabaga smoothie?" Big Daddy offered as he set the tray down on an end table beside the couch.

Brutus leaned over, wrapped his lips around the edge of one glass, and downed the contents in a single gulp before setting it down. "So you'll talk to her?"

"Oh, I'll talk to her, Brutus. Don't you worry about that. And if she don't get the message, then I'll talk to her so she does," the old grayish-white pony said as he pinched a glass between his hooves and slurped up the goopy contents through a large plastic straw.

The huge black buck simply nodded once, his scowl softening before he glared at me and snorted. Then he marched for the exit. When he'd left, the old buck chuckled, "Hope you forgive Brutus his manners. He's having issues with a mare who don't understand that no means 'stop-crawling-in-my-bed.' I swear, sometimes I feel more like a schoolmarm than the head of a gang."

I stared at him. "You're Big Daddy?" He wasn't particularly big... fit, certainly. He was covered by stringy, wiry muscles that stood out in stark relief against his scarred hide. A raggedy white beard dangled under his chin. He bobbed his head once. I pointed a hoof at him. "You're... Big Daddy..."

"At your service," he said with an amused grin.

"But you're... old..." I finished lamely.

He blinked and suddenly swayed. "Oh my goodness... you're right... oh... there goes my knees. Oh... my back... it ain't what it used to be..." he moaned as he suddenly tottered and began to stagger towards me. "Help me... get me my walker... oh, I'm goin' the way of old Mr. Abernathy..." he whined as he stretched two staggering hooves towards me. Despite myself I reached out to help steady the swaying buck.

My offered hoof was seized in a grip of steel and suddenly I knew exactly why that one spot on the far wall was free of papers. With a resounding thud I slammed into the wall and landed in a heap on my stomach. Little Glories flew around my head as the buck leapt atop me and in one swift grab seized me with his rear hooves, grabbed my left foreleg, and twisted it behind my back. I had no idea how he managed to hold on; the one thing I was definitely sure of was that that leg wasn't designed to bend that way!

"Who's your daddy?" he cried out. I couldn't even see him for a magic bullet spell!

There was nothing I could do but howl out, "I don't know! I think we retired him when I was nine or ten!"

"Wrong answer!" he shouted, twisting my leg even more. "I'm your daddy! Say it!"

It felt like my leg was about to come off. "You're my daddy!" I wailed.

"And your daddy is a young, healthy, handsome son of a mare, ain't he?" he demanded.

"Yes, he is!" I cried out. "And strong! Tough too!"

And with that he let go of my leg. "Wow. You figured that out pretty quick." He got off me and trotted back to his drink.

"How'd you do that?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, my shoulder throbbing terribly. It felt like he'd almost popped the joint out of its socket.

He took a long, slow drink of his pulped vegetables, then grinned again. "Pony I once knew said that a good hooftoss was all simply applied leverage. Me, I love applying... leverage." He nodded to my drink, and, not wanting to be thrown a second time, I levitated it to my mouth and took a sip of the glue-like beverage. To my surprise and relief, I found it quite palatable. A bit like wallpaper paste, really. He nodded in approval, pointing a hoof at me. "That particular recipe I got from a zebra witchdoctor outside Trottingham. Three days' worth of fiber in one glass. Keeps the pipes rust free and flowing easy."

"Mmm! I hope you'll share," I replied as I finished the glass. There was this pulpy tangy goop at the bottom that was pretty bitter but still not bad.

"So. If I recall your little outburst with poor Brutus correctly, you'd like to opt out of the Reapers. Might I ask why?" he said as he trotted over to the couch and took a seat. Then he grinned at me and patted the seat next to him.

With a bit of trepidation, I sat on the other end of the couch. "Well... it's not really my thing. I don't want to be a Reaper. I want to help ponies, not beat the everloving snot out of them." Okay, I could make an exception for Psychoshy, but really, who couldn't?

"Then help ponies and don't beat the everlovin' snot out of 'em," he replied. "Ain't no hairs off my tail what you do with yourself."

Um, once more Blackjack had landed in not-a-clue land. "Aren't Reapers always about beating snot and other assorted violence?"

"Heh." He grinned. "Ohh yeah. There's always a good fight or two with the Reapers. But that ain't the point. No siree. If you think that's what the Reapers are for, you need the bigger picture." He reached into the end table and pulled out a cigar, bit off the tip, then deftly ignited the end with a brass lighter. With the smoking stick hanging out the side of his mouth, he blew a smoke ring in the air above him. "Twenty... thirty or so years back, I and some ponies I knew tried to clean up Hoofington. Oh, it was a mess. Dozens of little tribes butchering the fuck out of each other. There was one lot that actually thought Hoofington was Princess Celestia's resting place and sacrificed ponies by throwing them into range of the defense beams.

"But the six of us, we made a go of it. One by one, we beat the snot out of all of them. Tried to teach them some common decency. Some equinity. And every tribe had some warlord or champion that always thought they was the baddest badass in all the Wasteland. Till I showed 'em different." He gave a throaty chuckle, then looked at me and turned so I could see the horseshoe cutie mark he wore. "You might say fighting's always been my super special talent."

I nodded like it all made perfect sense... "Still not getting it."

"Well, after... Goddesses, was it really five years?" He rubbed his chin, then sighed. "Yup... after five years, guess how much things had improved? I'll give you a hint." He took a long pull on the cigar and blew another ring, staring up at the circle before continuing, "Zip. Zilch. Nada. Not a bit. See, we kill the badass tribal champion? Three months later, they'd be replaced by a new champion that was usually bloodier and nastier than the first. Hell, we could wipe out an entire tribe, and they'd be replaced inside a year. We went through tons of ammunition, piles of healing potions, crates of grenades, pallets of missiles, gallons of flamer fuel... and in the end, the Hoof was even worse for all our attempts to do better.

"See, we simply thought that if we killed the bad, whatever was left over had to be good. Well, turns out that what was left over turned bad pretty quick. Or they'd be killed by something bad that we missed. Finally, after five years, we were sick of it. Sick of each other. We'd stopped trying to do anything worthwhile, fixated on our own plans on how to fix the Hoof."

He pointed at the pictures on the wall with the cigar perfectly balanced on the end of his hoof. "Me, I took one look at the Hoofington Reapers... at the team... and realized that the only real way to calm the Wasteland down and make the tribes behave and play nice was to have a gang so over-the-top badass that all the other gangs would knock the shit off or risk pissing us off. When being a Reaper became prestigious... then the other gangs calmed down even more. We siphoned off their biggest and baddest champions for ourselves; sure, there was lots of fighting involved, but it was more structured. Less 'rape, pillage, and burn' and more 'let's prove we're better than them at the arena.' If a tribe produced a psychopath, we'd kill 'em one way or another. And if they had a pony that had half a brain and could play along, they did all right."

I had to admit, I was a bit taken aback by that. Still, I found the whole thing a little bit off. "So if I say yes, what do I get?"

He flipped the cigar into the air and caught it between his grinning teeth, rolling it to the corner of his mouth. "Plenty. For starters, there won't be a gang or thug in the Hoof that'd dare cross you. You could trot one end to the other, and nopony will give you grief. You'll also find all sorts of ponies are

generous to a Reaper. You'll have room and board here, maybe not as cushy as at Elysium, but comfortable. And you'll have backup from the biggest and toughest fighters in all the Hoof."

"And the catch?" I asked. He considered me for a moment and rolled the cigar to the other corner of his mouth. He stroked his chin as he regarded me through those glasses.

"The catch is you back up your fellow Reapers. That means stomping anypony that crosses us or threatens us. That includes the Steel Rangers, Society, or anypony that does us wrong. It also means proving yourself in the ring every few months. Show that you're tough enough to take on a challenge or four. I heard how you handled Mallet when she was sent to retrieve you. She's good, and you took her and her friends. As far as I'm concerned, that shows you got the guts to shine in the Reapers."

I thought about it. I really didn't owe the Steel Rangers anything. In fact, I didn't know much about them or their plots, period. But I also didn't need to screw them arbitrarily. "And if I say no?"

He let out a long low sigh. "Well, then you go your way, and I hope you come to your senses and change your mind. But the fact is, Security, you've become a bit too high profile around here. It was cute when you were doing Finder errands and the like, but after dealing with those psychopaths in that stable? Somepony is going to want you to sign up with them. And if it's not the Reapers, then I won't need a hundred thousand caps to get every ganger, thug, and killer on your tail. Hell, I'd consider it good season training. But I'd hate to think of the waste of time and life it'd be when we got a scrap brewing with the Steel Rangers."

I frowned at him. "Why are you two fighting?"

"Oh there doesn't have to be much reason, but, you see, we had a ceasefire going since raiders were hitting us, Megamart, and Toll. An agreement in good faith." He snorted two smoke rings from his nostrils. "Then, a few days back, they launched a surprise attack on the Zenith Bridge. Fired a grenade right at our barricade. We responded, and then they had the balls to claim we broke the agreement."

Oh... dear... "This was four days ago?" He nodded once.

About the time we were passing under the Zenith Bridge on the *Seahorse*. Shit...

"I see. Well, then, I'll have to think about your offer," I said as I rose to my hooves again. "One thing though... Sanguine."

He snorted. "What about him?"

"He works for you?"

"Sanguine works for no pony but himself. He keeps my fighters healthy and makes some of them even tougher," Big Daddy said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Got some old world magic from before the bombs."

"And he creates monsters," I added.

Big Daddy grinned from ear to ear around the cigar. He set it in an ashtray and pushed down his glasses so I could see his glowing amber eyes. "Oh, we're all monsters here in the Reapers, Security. Best to stay with your own."

* * *

We'd gathered in Rampage's quarters, which were a little more cluttered than I expected. A

dozen Mint-al tins lay stacked neatly on the desk along with a few candy canes. A bookcase held police procedurals and training manuals. Another corner had three strange wooden masks and a weird curved stone statue that looked like molded rock. She also had a lot of knives displayed on a wall, from rusty metal carvers to heavy mechanical rippers and even elegant single-edged swords. Rampage herself had shrugged out of her armor and lay on the extravagant king-sized bed. Glory was trying to fix a snack in the little corner kitchenette, but I supposed that I'd be the only one with an appetite for it.

"It's not much, but it's home," she said with a thin smile as I looked around. "You could have Gorgon's room, but you'd have to deal with having Psychoshy as a neighbor."

"I'm not sure I'll be taking him up on that offer," I replied.

Rampage sat up, brushing back her red mane. "Are you sure about that? I mean, really sure? 'Cause I'd reconsider if I were you."

"I heard Big Daddy say his piece," I replied as I walked to the window and looked down at the practice rings.

"Let me ask you something, Blackjack," she said as she rolled off the bed and trotted in front of me. "We went a long way from Flank to 99. Did you notice us getting attacked by the Blinkerton Boys, the Choppers, or the Halfheart Gang?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked in confusion.

"Right. You never even heard of them. That's because I was with you, Blackjack. They didn't mess with you because they didn't want to mess with me. The Halfheart gang had us in their scopes all over Riverside and could have dropped all of us without a problem. They saw me. They left us alone," she said as she tapped my chest lightly. "If Big Daddy sends word that you're free game, it's going to be a whole lot tougher getting around. Even me being with you won't be protection anymore."

I hadn't realized it, but it'd been true. We'd trotted across half of Hoofington, and, with the exception of raiders, we'd never crossed another soul. That was a lot of wide open territory for gangs to stake out. "Why not? If you're a Reaper..."

"Big Daddy's call for a stomp down trumps me being a Reaper. Hell, they'll try their best to kill me too." She closed her eyes for a moment. "And I'll be expected to join them."

I felt a cool tingle run through me. "And would you?" Rampage looked at me, then sighed and shrugged.

"Don't know. Ask me when they do. I like you, Blackjack... you got me out of that nightmare in 99. I really... really... thought I was screwed." She gave a little shudder. "But I don't know if I'm willing or able to throw this away. Being a Reaper is all I have. They're the closest thing to a family I know."

"They're not the only thing you have," Lacunae said softly in our minds. P-21 gave a snort of sorts, then a sigh, glancing at me and then staring out the window at the simulated sky outside. I really needed a chance to talk with him about my mistakes.

"Maybe there's something we can do to put us in good standing with Big Daddy but not become a full Reaper?" Glory said as she dumped various foods and drinks into a blender. I'd told her about his smoothie, and she'd been keen to see what she could make blend.

Rampage considered that. "Maybe. He only calls for stomps on ponies that cross the Reapers."

"What if we stop this fight with the Steel Rangers?" I asked.

The striped pony looked intrigued. "Why do you want to? If Reapers are fighting Rangers, then Big Daddy probably won't be able to call a stomp."

"Because it's our fault." I explained how Glory's grenade had kicked off the conflict. The gray pegasus looked horrified at the news.

"I did this?" she asked as she fluttered in place, gesturing to herself in shock.

Rampage snorted. "Believe me, this fight's been brewing for years. It was going to happen, and now it'll keep going until somepony wins. If we back the Reapers, then Big Daddy will owe us big time." I noted her use of 'we' and 'us'. That made me smile.

"And if we help the Rangers?" P-21 asked.

"I don't know," Rampage said, though she didn't look all that enthusiastic at the idea. "Probably, they'd give us some of their guns and bullets. I can't think of more than that."

Lacunae rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Which power would be best to back in Hoofington?"

"Well, there's the Reapers and the Steel Rangers. You've got the Society down south. Finders are all over the place. And the Eggheads in the college," Rampage said.

"The Society ponies are all aristocrats?" Lacunae queried.

"Yeah. They're based out of the Elysium resort, a special spa that was made to cater to the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the rest of the really elite. They control the food and a lot of the money. Lots of politicking now that King Awesome is getting on in years," Rampage said with a sniff.

"And the Eggheads are interested in learning and technology," I said, remembering Archie at the clinic. "Can't the factions get along? Splendid was able to work with Archie."

Glory coughed. "Um... Blackjack, I'm not sure you remember, but when we left you looked like you wanted to shoot both of them on general principle. I don't think they actually wanted to work together." She poured some pickled eggs and Sparkle-Cola into the blender.

I didn't like the Society ponies for using slaves, but I didn't know enough to really decide. The Eggheads sounded good, but, when I thought how hopeless Archie had been, I wondered if they could actually do anything.

"There's also the Enclave to consider," Glory added.

I rounded on her. "What?! There's no way I could assist the Enclave, Glory. Lighthooves--"

"Is one rogue operative. The Enclave is the strongest power in Equestria. Perhaps some elements are... misguided, but the rest are still good and might be capable of helping us. If we assisted the Volunteer Corps, perhaps we might be able to persuade them to investigate Lighthooves closely and make him pay for his disease." Glory looked at the blender, apparently satisfied, and hit the 'on' switch.

"Do we have to pick a side?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean, can't we just tell them all 'sorry, not interested'?" The young olive mare had a point.

"I don't think so," Rampage said, shaking her head. "Big Daddy wasn't wrong. When we stopped

all the raiders in 99, I think all the powers realized that Security's a big deal. We might stall them for a while, but eventually they'll start assuming we're not with them."

I looked at all my friends and then at P-21. He sat quietly beside the window, looking pained. I supposed his knee was hurting him more than usual. "What do you think?"

He looked at me, eyes narrowing, and said in a low voice, "Do whatever you want, Blackjack. You always do." I felt like he'd slapped me as he rose and limped to the door.

"What was that about?" Scotch Tape asked in confusion. "Are all males so cranky?"

I didn't know how to explain to her how I'd betrayed our friendship. Glory poured the blender's contents into some glasses and came to my rescue. "Who wants to try some?" she asked brightly, the glasses balanced on her outstretched wings.

I wished I could have tried it. I could have done with a nice frothy smoothie. I trotted to the door. "I need to find P-21."

"Oh... well, Rampage? Lacunae?" she said, looking to each. Both quickly broke eye contact. She then gave a smile at the curious, if slightly skeptical, Scotch Tape.

"Oh, come on. It can't be that bad. I've had poo water in my mouth," Scotch said with a snort at the other two as I stepped out. There was a loud gulp and then, a second later, a thud.

"Great. You killed her," Rampage said crossly. I glanced back at the green mare curled up in a fetal position, eyes staring straight ahead.

"Momma... is that you?" she whispered in a daze.

"I didn't think it was that bad!" Glory said in a rush, shaking the shivering earth pony.

I closed the door, catching Lacunae's thought asking, "Glory, do you ever actually *taste* your own cooking?"

* * *

I looked all over for P-21, but if he didn't want to be found then I wasn't going to find him without a PipBuck tag. Still, that didn't stop me from looking. From the skyboxes down to the rings, I searched high and low for him. Everypony I passed gave me a look like they were sizing me up for a fight, coupled with expressions that varied from fearful to respectful. I couldn't care less. I had to fix my relationship with P-21 as soon as I...

Sanguine.

The seared ghoul looked quite ironic in a business suit that appeared freshly pressed and laundered. It wasn't even scuffed up or frayed. His eyes swirled with a bizarre pink light I'd only seen on a few glowing ghouls. Pink tendrils of vapor leaked out of holes in his ribs and around his lips. He hummed to himself as he trotted right past me. Then he slowed and stopped. "Well well well..." He turned his head to look back at me. "It's you."

I wanted to drop into S.A.T.S. and plant four magic rounds in his head, but I wanted answers too. "Yeah. I'm like a brass bit. I just keep popping up," I replied as I turned to face him. A number of ponies were noting our conversation; I wondered just how many would come to the ghoul's defense if I shot him. "So, what brings you here? Looking for this?" I asked as I shook my PipBuck at him.

“Actually, I was checking on some clients, what with the upcoming war and all. But if you’d give that to me, I could repay you in some augmentation to make you the terror of the Wasteland.”

“Augmentation? Like what you did to Stonewing?” I asked, and I was overjoyed to see the cooked unicorn ghoul floored in shock.

“How do you know about that?”

“I know all about Project Chimera. Equestria’s little monster making program,” I said softly, my eyes narrowing. “U-21 mentioned it in Flank before he died. Let me guess, you told him that if he got EC-1101, you’d give him powers too?” Again, surprise. “I suppose it’d be an easy offer to give a buck tormented and abused all his life. Easy power.”

“Oh yes. He was quite keen to be crossed with a dragon. As if we would replicate that little monstrosity,” he said with a small shudder. “But he’s dead, you’re here, and you have a PipBuck I want very badly. So let’s deal.”

“Deal? You think I’d deal with you?” I scoffed. “You’ve made my life a living hell for nearly a month.”

“And I’ll happily leave you be once I have that file,” he answered with a grin as if it’d all been some sort of poorly-implemented joke. “To be honest, I’d have tried to buy it from you earlier, but Deus was so determined to get it himself.”

“He was in agony,” I replied, my eyes narrowing.

Sanguine just smiled and polished his hoof on his vest. “Well, the desperate are so much more tractable. That’s why we thought of the bounty. Then Usury kindly doubled it after your bold declaration. I can’t believe nopony was able to bring you down.”

“Not for a lack of trying,” I grumbled.

“Sanggie!” cried a voice from above.

“Speaking of the desperate...” Sanguine muttered, then smiled widely as Psychoshy swooped down into an embrace. To my disgust, the yellow pegasus kissed the ghoul with a positively nauseating amount of tongue. “Fluttershy, so nice to see you again. How are you, my dear?”

“Sanggie, you promised you’d make me better. I’m supposed to be better,” the yellow pegasus said with a pout.

I gaped at her. “Fluttershy? I thought your name was Psychoshy.”

The yellow pegasus gave me an indignant glare. “A horrible nickname perpetuated against the kindest and most wonderful mare in Equestria.” She released Sanguine and frowned as she looked back at him and whined, “We’re going to be in a fight, Sanggie. I need to be better for it. You promised.”

“In a bit, Butterflanks. This mare has the PipBuck I need,” he said. Psychoshy looked at it sharply and then glared at me.

“You have it? A weak loser like you?” I couldn’t help myself, I held it in her face and gave the device a little shake. She snapped, “Give it to me right now!”

I snorted, "As if..."

She narrowed her eyes. "I challenge!" Suddenly the ponies looking on began to talk to each other in excitement. Somepony instantly started to call out bets. The odds, I noticed, were not in my favor.

"Excuse me? You're going to have to explain this Reaper stuff to me," I said dully. Fortunately Mallet appeared from the milling throng, looking flatly at the yellow pegasus.

"What's the challenge?" the caramel mare asked Psychoshy.

"I want that PipBuck," she said imperiously.

Mallet turned to me. "Do you accept her challenge?"

"Wait? Challenge?" I looked at Mallet and sat, thumping my chest with both hooves. "Stable po-nee. I don't know this Reaper stuff!"

"Any Reaper can challenge another pony in the arena," Mallet explained. "She wants that PipBuck. You can decline and give it to her, or you can accept her challenge and name terms of your own."

"You mean a Reaper can just... take whatever she wants?" That seemed ridiculously unfair.

"No, but she can challenge for it. A pony doesn't have to accept," Mallet said calmly.

I could have just handed it over. It didn't have EC-1101, and I needed to find P-21. Still, I had to admit I was aching to thump her ass and this might be a shortcut to getting all the answers I needed. "I accept," I replied. "And if I win, I want answers from him."

"You can't challenge for something of his. He's not fighting!" Psychoshy objected crossly.

Sanguine, though, smiled. "I accept. If you are victorious, I'll answer all your questions."

Mallet said calmly, "A property challenge is to submission. First to yield or be knocked out loses." She looked up to where Psychoshy tittered in glee, dancing in the air as she hovered. "I'll set up the match."

In the crowd I saw the Dealer watching me with a grim, stern expression. I could hear the cards purring in my ears.

* * *

Word had gotten around at the speed of Dash, and soon it seemed that everypony had clustered around the great steel wire dome. I watched as Big Daddy trotted down next to Brutus to take a special seat overlooking the action. This seemed to be the only thing that made the gangs, with their scarves and strange markings, blend together. Apparently, challenges required us to enter in only our hides. The walls of the dome were festooned with just about every melee and thrown weapon imaginable. Some, like a chainsaw, were padlocked. Also padlocked were marked medical boxes. If we fought well, the audience might throw us a key. If not, we'd be left with the most basic and flimsiest weapons.

"Blackjack, what do you think you're doing?" Glory asked as my friends got a special seat with the Hammerdown Gang next to Mallet and Cuffs.

"Getting some answers I've wanted for a long time," I said, as a pony wearing a scuffed PipBuck from Stable 89 removed Marmalade's PipBuck from my hoof with her strange tools. I wouldn't have the advantage of S.A.T.S. in the cage. It would just be me and her, and I was okay with that. I looked around but there was no sight of a little blue pony. "Where's P-21?"

"You were looking for him. Didn't you find him?" Glory asked in concern. No, I'd gotten sidetracked... but soon as this fight was done I could have both my answers and my friend. Then we could decide how we'd end this war.

The day illusion swapped to one of night; it was spoiled only by the wan light peeking through the holes in the dome. A dozen spotlights illuminated the cage and the gaunt unicorn buck standing within from all angles. A top hat perched on his lanky black mane, and long elaborate robes draped over his thin frame as a crystal tipped staff hovered beside him. He brought the tip down with a crackle of thunder, and instantly the crowd fell silent. The crystal began to glow as his lips curled.

"Listen, all!" he proclaimed as he stood on his rear legs, waving his forehooves overhead. "This is the truth of it. Fighting leads to killing, and killing gets to warring. And that was damn near the death of us all. But look at us now! Busted up, and everyone scared of the taint and radiation. But we've learned -- Hoofington learned. Now, when tough ponies get to fighting, it happens here! And it finishes here! Two ponies enter; one pony leaves."

"Um... he knows this isn't to the death, right?" I muttered with a gulp as the crowd cheered in approval and repeated the line over and over again.

Rampage gave me a mirthless smile. "It's always to the death Blackjack. Especially when it isn't. Now hush. It's bad luck to interrupt Dealgood."

The pony swished the staff through the air. "Right now, I've got two ponies, two mares with a gut full of hate and avarice." His voice dropped to a lover's whisper, magnified by the spell as he purred, "Fillies and gentlecolts... Boys and girls... Dyin' time's here!"

He pointed the glowing crystal at me, and a spotlight stabbed down to illuminate me through the mesh door. "From the depths of the stable and into the hard rain she's walked. She's meted out bloody justice with every step that she's taken. She's the hard law of the land, the bloody kick of retribution. She's... the Security Mare!"

I opened the door and stepped in only to be greeted by angry mutters and jeers. "Woohoo! Kick her ass, Blackjack!" called Scotch Tape, pumping her hoof in the air.

"Um... yeah. Yay," Glory added sheepishly, her eyes full of worry.

"Don't die," Lacunae suggested from the back of my mind. Wonderfully helpful advice there!

"And over here, we have your favorite of the Hoofington Reapers. She's the loveliest in all of Equestria. The softest, gentlest, and nicest way a pony could die! You know her! You love her! She's... Psychoshy!" he called out grandly as he looked to the top of the dome.

She flew in from the top of the dome, swooping along the perimeter to the howls of adoration. Ponies with keys waved them at her, screaming for her to splash them with my blood. She landed next to Dealgood and screamed, "You're going to love me!" Her roar, magnified a thousand times by Dealgood's crystal, echoed through the stadium.

Okay... I could admit it. I was fucked.

We trotted in front of Dealgood. "Fight's simple. Get to the weapons. Use them however you can. This is a challenge to submission. Fight as long and hard as you can till your bones break if you must. Tap three times and you're done. Get knocked out and you're done. Die... and you're done," he said with a greasy grin at me. "Other than that, don't worry about the rules. There are none."

"I'm going to break you for being so mean to Sanguine," Psychoshy hissed softly at me.

"Won't be the first time," I countered as we trotted to opposite sides of the dome. A rope was looped around our necks. If I tried to grab a weapon with my magic or she lunged for one, we'd be choked. I looked longingly at a shotgun chained just a few feet from me with a bright red padlock on it. Looking around, the ponies waving the red keys sure didn't look all that interested in tossing them to me. I saw an old, ratty, sharpened shovel to my left.

Then I felt hooves on my tail. "Hey..." I started, but then looked back at P-21. His blue eyes were... strange. Bloodshot. Tired. Haunted. He held my tail for only a few seconds, and then released it. Looking at me, he swished his own tail. What was he trying to tell me?

"Good luck, Blackjack," he said softly. "I hope you get the answers you're looking for." With that, he turned and started back into the crowd.

I turned my back to the fight. Suddenly, the meaninglessness of this fight hit me right between the eyes. I'd forfeit, let him have the PipBuck. I needed--

Then the crowd roared as four hooves smashed me against the door with such force I wondered if she'd snapped my back. I shoved back purely on reflex. "Glory! Help P-21!" I tried to yell out over the crowd as I turned to face Psychoshy. I just had to stomp my hoof three times and they'd have the stupid PipBuck. Once. Twice... but before I could smack my hoof a third time the yellow and gold pegasus whirled through the air and smashed my face with her rear legs.

"Oh, no giving up now," she taunted.

"I need to help my friend! Take the stupid thing," I said as I stomped my hoof again twice, but once again she slammed into me.

"The only way you're leaving here is if you beat me," she said as she grinned down at me from above.

My horn flared and seized the rope dangling about her neck in one fury-empowered yank to bring her down, face to face. "It. Is. ON!" If I had to break her head to see to my friend, then that's what I'd do! Psychoshy brought her hoof up and kicked me upside the head again. My focus faltered just a little bit, and she was able to shove the rope off from around her neck. I wasted no time, grabbing the sharpened shovel and stabbing the jagged edge at her face.

No matter how bitchy and obnoxious she was, she was also fast. Faster than me and my shovel. My stabs and swings had her dodging about, but she excelled at dodging. Worse, more than once she'd swooped in and clipped me with a hoof.

"White Key! White Key for Psychoshy! We looove you!" screamed the Flash Fillies, tossing a key into the air. The yellow pegasus swooped away to catch it before it fell and kissed the mare who'd thrown the key. I wonder if the mare knew where that mouth had been. I looked around for another weapon. Something faster. Rusty knives. A rake. A carpenter's hammer. What I really wanted was the shotgun.

Dealgood trotted atop the cage, announcing in his amplified voice, "Oh, surprise surprise. The Fillies have flung their key into the ring. Well, they've always had a warm and electric spot for the

beautiful, lovely, kindly mare.” I snorted. In a radhog’s eye.

I stomped my hoof three times, but nopony was paying attention. I nearly screamed in frustration. They wouldn’t let me quit till they had a good fight! Then I noticed a tan key being held out towards me. Dealgood caught that, of course. “Oh ho ho ho! It looks like the Pecos out of Brimstone’s Fall have decided to throw Security a bone.” Psychoshy had gotten a power hoof from the Fillies. I saw a tan medical kit and raced over, jamming the key into the lock. I popped it open, hoping for something... anything... that could end this fight early!

What I got was an earthenware jug.

“Well now. Looks like the drinks are on the Pecos. Unless I miss my guess, that’s some of Dusty Trails’s own grade A moonshine!” Dealgood chuckled, “Personally, I’d rather have the power hoof, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

Psychoshy’s hoof crackled with energy as she gave me that grin I knew and loved. There was only one thing to do with a bottle of alcohol. I pulled the stopper and lifted the bottle to my lips. It was like drinking pure fire. Suddenly, my aches and pains didn’t feel like much at all and now I was grinning too. I thrust the jug overhead and screamed at the top of my lungs, “Yeeeeeehawwww!”

They wanted a fucking fight. It would be a fucking fight! Psychoshy charged straight at me, her hoof crackling with arcane energies that’d probably blast my face off. I squatted, dropped the bottle into my forehooves, and then threw the heavy jar right into her face with all my strength. Her eyes went wide as the jagged bits of pottery slashed at her hide and the burning alcohol splashed in her eyes. I reared up and brought my hooves down just as she slammed into me, hitting her so hard she bounced.

She sprawled out on her back before me. “Don’t you get ‘tween me and my friend!” I bellowed as I reared again to finish the fight. Then she drew back her hind legs and smashed both of them right up into my reproductive organs. Moonshine or no, I felt that!

“Ooooh... and Security gets a hoofjob from her loveliness herself. Doesn’t look like she enjoyed it much,” Dealgood laughed from overhead.

I forced myself to my hooves, focusing on standing. I lifted the shovel to block her glowing forehoof, but the weapon shattered under the impact. Slowly I limped backwards. My horn snatched up a rake. Shattered. A hubcap. Shattered. Every weapon I grabbed was busted by that crackling power hoof. I tried to fire a magic bullet at her, but without S.A.T.S. every time my horn flashed she’d dodge aside.

“Awww, fuck it,” I shouted and then lunged forward with no weapon at all, catching Psychoshy by surprise. There were rules to fighting, but right now I was chucking them all out the window! I tackled her instead, and though I wasn’t as hefty as an earth pony, I was heavier than her! We rolled in the dirt with me punching, biting, and kicking every inch of her I could. “You wanna fight dirty? Let’s fight!”

Close in, her power hoof wasn’t as effective. I was too dumb to guess why and too pissed to care. I bit hard on her ear, chewing like it was Rampage’s heart. With a great heave she threw me off and took to the air again, looking hurt and pissed... and worried. I spat a chunk of her ear... or maybe it was my tooth... to the side as I grinned up at her.

“Pink key! Pink key for Psychoshy!” yelled some ponies that looked familiar. I thought I might have seen them around Flank. Psychoshy flew over to the appropriately labeled box and opened it. A restoration potion and some needles lay there. Aw, why couldn’t I have had that key? I charged across the arena, but she gulped down the potion and jabbed the chem into her leg.

"Is that Stampede from the Halfheart gang? Why I think it is!" Dealgood crowed in glee. "Let's get ready to loooooooooove!" I stared in horror as Psychoshy's pupils shrank to pinpricks.

"LOVE!" she screamed as she slammed her power fist at me with a crackle. "LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! LOVE!" With each cry she battered at me with no thought or care for defense. I ate one hit, and after that it was all I could do to avoid another. The crowd was chanting along with her, and each time the word was uttered it seemed to push Psychoshy harder and faster. Even with the moonshine, I was definitely feeling run down.

Then I ducked as she swung her hoof into a metal post, and with sparks and a crackle the power hoof finally died. A united 'awww' of disappointment rose from the Flash Fillies. I turned and gave her face an Applejack applebuck, crushing her nose and knocking her back enough to get some space. I needed something and nopony was offering to help me. I looked at my friends, but they had no key to give me. Nothing to help me. Psychoshy was still under the effects of Stampede; any second she'd be all over me again like fleas in my tail.

P-21... swishing his tail... touching my tail... I lifted my tail and stared at the tiny brass bobby pin.

Of course he'd cheat to help me. I pulled the pin out and jammed it into a dark blue box, much to the outrage of the crowd. I had only seconds to do it, and I doubted I'd have a chance to force the lock. With a click, the container opened and I saw a rejuvenation potion and a tin of Mint-als. Scooping up both with my magic, I jumped aside in time to avoid the hoof that dented the armored healing kit. What did I have to lose? I chowed down on both.

As the healing washed through me, I realized I'd committed a major faux pas. Clearly, using a bobby pin was a violation of the spirit of the game and there were a half dozen offering their keys to Psychoshy now. She was in such a Stampede-induced frenzy that she missed them, but that wouldn't last. I needed something to get them back on my side.

And Big Daddy was watching. Suddenly, I realized that it didn't matter how much I stomped, he was going to keep this fight going. I didn't just have to win. I had to win like a Reaper. Like one of the top ten. And that meant I'd have to put on a show.

"Psychoshy! You're under arrest for being a spoiled brat, a complete bitch, and for getting on my nerves! I'm taking you down," I yelled as I pointed my hoof at her. I had to time it perfectly, but, fortunately, it felt like I was as close to S.A.T.S. as I could be without taking Flash. I smashed her face with my hoof each time she charged. "You have the right to remain silent! Use it!"

That got a chuckle out of some of the crowd. I grinned at them like I was having the time of my life. "Anything you say can and will be used against you to kick your ass!" I was still getting beat on, but there was less and less howling for my blood by the second. "You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you don't have one, you can speak to my hoof!"

Now there were laughs as she was the uninteresting savage and I was the show. They weren't chanting 'love' now. "Shut up!" she screamed at me, but I laughed as I backed away. I wanted to get the hay out of there. I wanted a nice cold Sparkle-Cola bottle between my legs; the healing magic had done little for that particular pain. I wanted to find P-21. But to do that, I had to put on a show.

"Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you, or do I have to beat your ass till you do?" I asked at the top of my lungs.

She darted forward again, but not to kick as I'd anticipated. She bit down on the end of a rope. A rope still around my neck. Oh shit...

I started to lift it away just as Psychoshy pulled it taut. It crushed down on my throat, and I gagged as she lifted me up into the air. My hooves scrabbled as she lifted me to a hook set in the roof; maybe put there for this very reason, and wrapped the rope in place. "Looks like we're going to need another sheriff!" Psychoshy called out, and then she began to beat me as I strangled. "You give up? You give up? Huh, Security? Tap out!" But there was nothing to tap, and I wasn't sure they'd stop even if there was. It's always to the death, even when it isn't.

I looked up at that hook as my vision went red, my heart thundering like I'd just taken a dose of Buck. My throat spasmed as my lungs tried to suck in air. "Tap! Tap!" Psychoshy said in glee as she kicked my dangling body.

I looked up at the hook, trying to concentrate and focus. My magic bullet was shit on metal targets, but what else could I do? No unicorn was strong enough to levitate themselves! Tears ran down my cheeks as my eyes bulged. The first magic bullet went wide, and Dealgood jumped aside as he was narrowly missed. The second just dispersed off the metal. I tried to push everything out of my mind, focus on that hook and my spell. The one spell my little horn could manage...

The bolt flashed from my horn and struck the metal. It creaked, and then snapped free with a resounding ping. I plummeted to the ground like a sack of potatoes and stretched out my hoof to tap it once, twice, thrice.

In a flash, Lacunae teleported above me and pointed her glowing horn right at Psychoshy. "This fight is over!" she roared telepathically in all our minds. Rampage kicked open the door and Glory swooped in, pulling the knot out enough that Rampage could slice it with her hoofclaws. No pony seemed keen on arguing with a giant purple unicorn who could shout in their heads.

My lungs didn't seem to work right. Glory held my muzzle carefully and took a deep breath. Then she blew into my lungs. I felt my chest inflate and gasped, coughing and hacking.

"Hrmmph! Loser." Psychoshy fluttered a little unevenly, the Stampede wearing off, to meet the adoration of her fans. I just focused on the adoration of breathing.

Dry hoofstomps drew my attention as Sanguine approached, my PipBuck hovering beside him. "Well, that was an incredibly amusing fight. Still, I have what I want, and with this some very important ponies will be quite happy."

"You're Trueblood, aren't you?" The well dressed pony gave a wide bow as his cracked lips spread in a grin. "That's how you know about Project Chimera." He looked impressed.

"Of course," he replied softly. "I was involved in Project Chimera from the beginning. Goldenblood's gift to Fluttershy. A project to take her mind off her broken heart. We'd make ponies too tough to kill, adaptable to any environment. It was quite a joy. Truly. Gorgon was the first stable specimen. But, with time, we made others."

Then he let out an irritated hiss. "Unfortunately, two years after the assassination attempt, Goldenblood started having... reservations. He cancelled the project, sealed its findings, and put the specimens in suspended animation. I was transferred to projects making insecticide talismans. Me. The master of biological arcane research... killing bugs." He bristled at the indignity before calming and continuing. "Fortunately, Twilight Sparkle proved infinitely more open to the possibilities of transforming ponies into alicorns." His eyes turned to Lacunae, his glowing pink eyes swirling with speculation. "I'd love a biological sample." Clearly, he wasn't mistaking her for anything but what she was.

"Over your dead body," Lacunae replied coldly.

"Been there. Done that," he answered with a chuckle. "Ah well, with EC-1101, I can make a whole lot of ponies happy... especially myself!"

Now I had my turn. "What are you talking about? I don't have EC-1101."

He froze. "What?" All his smug amusement melted away.

"My PipBuck was destroyed when it got struck by lightning," I rasped softly. His eyes immediately widened and a look of absolute horror washed over his face.

"No. That's not possible!" he stammered. "If it were, Horizons would have--" But then he shut up. His eyes glared at me balefully and a long, thin plume of pink mist curled out of his muzzle like a tongue. "Oh... sneaky. I didn't think heroes were allowed to lie."

"I'm not a hero," I groaned as I rubbed my throat. Rampage handed me my gear and I dug out some watery healing potions from 99. In a few more days, they'd be worthless. "Project Horizons would... what?" I asked as I drank three in rapid succession, healing most of my battered body. I'd definitely keep the bruises around my throat, though.

"Never mind. It must be on some other PipBuck." His eyes immediately latched on to Scotch Tape's.

Oh no, no psychoghoul on her! "You're right," I said as I dug in my bags for the Delta PipBuck. "It's right here." I activated it and brought up the file. To my shock, immense relief bloomed in his face. "Why? What is Project Horizons?"

"Something dead and gone, along with its creator. That's all you need to know about Horizons," he said with dire solemnity. Then he lifted Marmalade's PipBuck with a little half smile. "Well, I'll see if there's anything else interesting on here, Blackjack. Maybe find something else to convince you to hand it over. One way or another."

"Not a chance," I rasped, then coughed. I was going have a hell of a bruise.

"Pity. Well then, it was very nice meeting you," he said politely. "I look forward to when we can do it again." And, with Marmalade's PipBuck floating beside him, he trotted to where Psychoshy was recovering.

"Why didn't you tap out sooner?" Glory asked me as she rubbed my throat. "You didn't have to win her stupid fight."

"She tried, but sometimes Dealgood's got lousy vision," Rampage said with a glare at the gaunt buck and the two floozies that flanked him. "My bet is Big Daddy kept the fight going."

"You'd surely win that bet, Arlostee," Big Daddy said with a chuckle. "I wanted to see for myself just what Security was made of. Good stuff."

I glared at him hard, but he wasn't ashamed of what he'd done. I could see it clearly now. If Psychoshy hadn't challenged me, somepony else would have. It would have been just as deadly, too. He caught my look and pointed a hoof at me. "Oh, don't look at me like that. I needed to know you had the sand, and you did. Even picking a lock mid fight. Ballsy. Then that show you put on for the crowd? Genius."

I couldn't tell if I was drunk or not; the Mint-als seemed to be counteracting the effects of the potent moonshine. I sure was pissed, though. "I needed to find my friend. Something's wrong with him."

"That little blue guy? Didn't see him," Big Daddy said with a shrug as he trotted over to congratulate Psychoshy.

"Where is P-21?" Glory asked in concern. "I saw him at the start of the fight, but now he's gone. He should be here."

"We have to find him," I muttered, rubbing my aching throat. "Glory can search the stands from above. Lacunae and Scotch can look around the tunnels. Rampage, talk to anypony you can. I'm going to the skyboxes to get my gun." I'd be damned if I trotted around here without a firearm any more.

* * *

Once I'd gotten my weapons, I was still sorting out the conflicting sensations of inebriation and being Mint-al'd. With the Mint-als, things seemed sharper and clearer, but the alcohol was making my brain feel like it was running in tar. All I knew was that something was wrong with P-21. The way he'd wished me good luck with that look in his eye... something had happened.

Then I saw the little piece of paper sticking out of the barrel of my shotgun. Slowly, I lifted it, my focus making the paper tremble in front of me as my eyes took in the words.

Can't handle it any more. I'm sorry. Good luck.

Dread flooded me as I stared at the paper. "You're the stupidest, most selfish pony in the history of Equestria, Blackjack," I muttered. I'd assumed that he'd been upset with me. That I'd been the reason he'd looked so hurt and haunted. That I was the cause of his distress, and if I just fixed it then he'd be happy with me. "You idiot. You fucking idiot!" I cursed as my mind raced. Panic must have been cooking off most of the alcohol from my brain as I raced into the hall. If he was leaving us... well, then I probably wouldn't find him. But if he was doing what I'd done... I looked back and forth along the hallway. He'd want someplace to do it alone.

Goddesses, please, no. Luna, Celestia, somepony... help me!

This was what he'd felt. This was what I'd put him through. I'd thought that what I'd done was terrible, cruel, mean, and wrong. I was right. But I hadn't known... really and truly *known*... what it was like till I read that horrible piece of paper. I deserved this.

He didn't.

It was like a little pink pony was kicking my head to get me to look down at the door at the end of the hall. There were two skyboxes not being used... that were empty. I raced to the one with Deus's name on it, but it was still locked tight. I hurried down and tried the door to Gorgon's room.

It opened easily.

Gorgon's room was a disaster area. It more resembled a den than a room, with the walls smashed and kicked. There were dozens of empty syringes lying about and a few filled with rainbow sludge. My PipBuck was clicking softly from the background radiation in the room. The bed was more of a nest than a mattress. The only sign of sanity was a small collection of pictures and a little statue.

But no sign of P-21.

I almost left then and there to tell my friends what had happened when that pink pony bashed my brain with a super sledge and my eyes saw the door. The bathroom. I scrambled across the room,

knocking over a drum of radioactive goo. I couldn't care less. All that mattered was that I find P-21 in time. That was all that mattered. All that mattered.

He'd used a wire.

It was wrapped several times around his neck and an exposed pipe in the ceiling. He'd stepped off the sink. His face was the color of Lacunae's hide as he dangled there limply. My scream died in my throat as I got underneath him and heaved. Take a breath! Breathe! Nothing. I stared up at the pipe and the wire. My horn flashed as I fired bullet after bullet into the pipe. Finally, it snapped, and he fell upon me like a doll.

The wire had cut so deeply into his hide that it'd disappeared from sight. My eyes dripped as I pulled it free from around his neck. "P-21..." I whispered as I looked at his glazed eyes. "P-21!" I pressed my lips to his, blowing in his mouth as Glory had into mine minutes ago. His chest rose. "Damn it, P-21! You can't do this! You were out! You were free!" I breathed again. I thumped his chest, like he was just asleep and all I had to do was wake him up.

He lay there... so very still...

"Damn it, P-21! You have to live! You have to! You can't let this place kill you! Can't let me kill you! Damn it!" I sobbed and tried breathing for him again. Again. Again. "P-21! Please! Don't leave me. Don't leave us. I'm sorry. Please," I begged his slack face. "Call me an idiot! Call me stupid! Hate me! Shoot me! Just don't die!" I begged as my raspy voice burred in my half healed throat. I clutched him, holding him, weeping utterly alone.

"I couldn't save you..."

The whisper was so faint that I didn't know if I'd heard it or imagined it. Maybe I'd finally lost my mind. Then I felt him move faintly in my hooves. There were no words. I just wept like I never had before; like I cried for all of 99 as I just held him. "I couldn't save them... I'm sorry... I couldn't save you..." he whispered.

I hated him. I loved him. The entire spectrum of emotions crashed through me in a storm. I wanted to kill him and yet he was the most precious thing in the Wasteland at the moment. His face was returning to its blue complexion as his throat bled from those lacerations encircling it. I settled on holding him as we wept together. Now I knew. Now I knew what I'd actually done.

* * *

When we'd both stabilized a bit, we sat on the remains of Gorgon's shredded mattress. He couldn't look me in the eyes, so I just looked at his hooves. "I couldn't do anything. When we went back to 99, and we found the males were still alive, I was sure that, given the chance, they'd be like me. They'd want to be free. To live their own lives. To be happy. To be ponies. People.

"They didn't. They... they were more comfortable with the abuse that was familiar to them than the possibility of being on their own. It didn't matter how I cried or argued or begged... they were just waiting for us to leave. Even the new P-20 and U-20..." He hunched over a little and sobbed, "They hated me for being the P-21 who got to live. For cheating. For daring to want to live." He glanced at me, tears running from his bright and haunted eyes. "They told me that I should have died when it was my time."

It would be easy to ask how they could feel that way, but after so much conditioning and trauma... "The mares were the same," I said softly. "They wanted safe and predictable more than freedom. The thought of change was too much for them. The only ponies interested were young ponies

like Scotch Tape.”

He sniffed and nodded. “There was one colt who I thought would leave with us... but the older ones cowed him... told him it wasn’t his place to leave.” He gave a terrible noise, half laugh and half sob. “I always thought it was the mares keeping us down. They didn’t have to. We did it to ourselves. We did it.”

I hugged him, and though he stiffened, he didn’t push me away this time.

“But worst of all was when I made you kill Stable 99,” he whispered, shaking in my hooves.

“What?” That was my call...

“I knew there was a chance the food supply was contaminated. I guessed it’d been contaminated since the first round of raiders... but I was more concerned about the bucks than about making sure that the stable was safe and secure.” He drew a shaking breath. “You’d just lost your mother and found Glory. And, as you’ve said, you’re not the smart pony. I am. I should have done something. Done more. It’s my fault Stable 99 was contaminated.”

“No! It’s my...” When was I going to learn? Everything didn’t begin and end with me. He looked at me, and I realized that he felt every bit as much guilt as I had. How had I missed it? Why didn’t I realize how deeply he’d blamed himself?

What kind of friend was I?

“When you told us we were leaving, I knew you were going to do something about the stable. You had to. I thought, when we were all out, that we’d talk about it. Glory would object. I’d back you up. I was already thinking about how I could collapse the tunnel. Then you threw the PipBuck through.” He shook even more as he sniffed.

“When we told Lacunae what you’d done, she disappeared and then came back with you a minute later... and you were gasping and dying.” He clenched his eyes closed, “I knew you’d tried to kill yourself. I knew that Lacunae was covering for you. But... I hoped... somehow...” He pressed his face to my chin as we wept. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you. I wanted to save you... like you saved Scotch and so many others. But I couldn’t... and when I read your note... when I read it...”

He fell apart again, and I did too a little bit. Now I knew exactly how he felt. I just held him till he quieted. “I wasn’t able to help you... and I was so angry at myself for failing... again and again... and angry at you for not caring... I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t do anything. It hurt so much inside that I’d done that to you and everything I did just made it feel worse.”

“Shh...” I said softly. “If you’ll forgive me for leaving... I’ll forgive you for the same.”

He didn’t say a word. He just gave the tiniest of nods against me.

I wouldn’t tell anypony about this. It was his secret and his shame and his pain to share or keep hidden away, but I would be here for him. I walked a hard road, but I was a fool to think only I felt pain along that trail.

* * *

After we’d put most of our tears behind us, he was cognizant enough to realize that I had rainbow goop splattered across my legs. “Blackjack! You need to wash that stuff off!” he said in alarm as I tried to get to my hooves, failed, and staggered against the bed. My head ached and throbbed and I just sat

there feeling... drained. A plug had been pulled, and suddenly everything inside my head had been sucked away down the toilet.

"Huh?" I muttered dully as I looked at the tingly smears on my hide. He pulled out a scrap of bedsheet and began to wipe it off, cleaning where it'd transferred on to him as well. I couldn't seem to move or think. Some very distant part of me agreed with him that it was bad, but all I did was sit there like a lump.

"What's the matter, Blackjack?" he rasped painfully as he stared into my eyes. I swore I could see little stars in the corners of my vision.

"Just... not feeling good," I muttered as I rose to my hooves, successfully this time... but where was I supposed to go? I couldn't go anywhere or do anything. I couldn't help my friends or myself or anypony. Couldn't do anything. Useless.

"What is this stuff?" P-21 asked as he shoved me away from the puddle of sludge.

"Sanguine made it... made Gorgon..." I muttered stupidly. Because I was stupid. Idiot. Fool. It was like my brain had suddenly transformed into the same rainbow sludge that was spattered over the floor. P-21 was trying to push me even farther from it, but I sat down hard and then slowly walked to the little table.

One picture showed Big Macintosh, Applesnack, Jetstream, and Maripony together at a hoofball game, the huge red buck looking odd out of uniform and the blue mousy mare bedecked with every bit of Reapers paraphernalia she could bear as she peered through her glasses. She had her nose in a copy of 'Hoofball for Dummies' and was smiling shyly for the camera. Another of Stonewing with his left wing around a furiously blushing black unicorn mare and his right around a happy looking Jetstream. Twist, Psalm, and Jetstream all on a beach at the Boardwalk while Doof, Applesnack, and Stonewing looked on appreciatively. A 'Mare's Life' article on Jetstream.

There were medals, too. I didn't know if they were his or not. I lifted one that was a disk framed with two laurel leaves around the edges, a winged thunderbolt down the middle. There was a faded paper beneath it that read 'Commendation of Valor for defense of a wounded comrade at Black Pony Mountain'. A purple heart and matching ribbon with a pair of wings. That had to be when he'd saved Jetstream and lost his voice.

There was only one image of Rainbow Dash.

That was the statuette. It rested on a yellow envelope. Gently, I lifted it in my magic. "It's just like Spike's," I said softly, catching P-21's confused expression out of the corner of my eye. I looked at the tiny words on the base. 'Be Awesome'.

"You're just like her," P-21 rasped softly. No. No pony was like Rainbow Dash, but it was nice gesture. It felt as though a little blue pegasus was gathering up all the gloomy clouds of stupid and clearing them from my mind. In ten seconds flat, I felt better.

"Thanks," I said with a smile. "Stonewing was always a fan of Rainbow Dash. She got him to sign up. He worshipped her. But he missed how much Jetstream loved him."

"Did he?" P-21 asked as he gestured at the pictures. "She's in almost all of these."

I looked at the envelope resting on the table. 'To ta ponee tha kiled me' I looked at P-21 and then slid out the letter inside. The writing was sloppy and in block print, but I could barely make it out.

der kiler

thank yu for killing me. i am sorrie you kiled me. i kno it was hard. i kno i am monsher now. i am not monsher realy but i look liek won. i sorrie. i hope i not hurt yu. i not smart ponee. i had acci- axi- i got shot in my hed and turned into monsher. if you kiled me thank yu. if not stop reding plese.

i wat to say i am sorrie. i am sorrie jetstrem. i kno you liek me. i liek yu too. i just want yu safe and hapy. i am sorry big mak- macen- big m. i didnt men to get shot in my hed and make you sad. i am sorrie i not ther to stop yu from geting shot. i kno geting shot is no fun. espe- expe- especshully wen you get kiled. i was turned into a monsher and so i couldnt help yu. i am sorrie evriepony for geting shot and turned into a monsher.

so plese dont be sad for killing me. you did gud. i am hapy now. i am with jetstrem and big m and all my friends now. i dont hurt anymore. and i wont hurt anymore ponees like a monsher. i am not a monsher. i just look liek won.

i am not a monsher but thank yu for killing me. plese tak care of ranbow dash. she is awsum.

gudbye. stonwing.

My tears smeared the 'gudbye'. Funny. Seconds ago I felt certain that I'd used up all my tears and now here were a few more. Someday I'd pay Sanguine back. When I did, I'd be sure to give a little bit from Stonewing as well. I slipped the statuette into my pouch. "Come on. Let's get back to our friends. Let them know we're okay." I paused as I looked at him. "Are you okay?"

He opened his mouth once, then closed it again. Slowly he took a breath. "I... I don't know. I think I am... just a little bit. I still can't stop thinking about it though. I still remember them telling me that I should have died. Asking when they'd be put back into the breeding queue."

"I still smell chlorine," I said softly and watched him shudder. I nudged his shoulder. "You can always talk to me about it. No more running away. No more notes."

He nodded. "Yeah. No more notes."

The world was full of pain, but we didn't have to suffer alone.

* * *

Side by side, we made our way back to Glory and the others. The gray pegasus took one look at the cuts in his neck and the bruises around mine and gave a soft 'eep' of comprehension. Our eyes met and I smiled and shook my head. She swallowed, nodded slowly, and used my bandages on his throat. I didn't know if there was any healing magic left in them, but at least his injuries would be less likely to get infected.

In fact... I frowned as I looked at that fine field of green grass. At the numerous scars that decorated the Reapers. Everypony healthy. Food growing. Something felt... off. Not wrong, exactly, though.

This place felt like Chapel.

That made me wonder something. As Glory wrapped the bandages around P-21's throat, I trotted up to Lacunae and Scotch Tape. After letting them know that P-21 was okay, I quietly asked Lacunae, "Is this area... um? Different? Special?" She stared at me in shock, and I glanced around before asking even more quietly, "Are there no screams here?"

That made her take a step back. "But... how could you know?"

"I'm not sure. It's just that this place is a lot like Chapel, isn't it? And it doesn't have the same kind of Enervation, does it?" If it had, the constant fighting and injuries would be slowly wearing them away. That also explained why the Reapers were so much better off here than gangs abroad. It was like ponies in a stable: living away from the Enervation, they became fit and healthy.

"If the screams are quiet here, and everypony is healthy..." I frowned and thumped the side of my head as if trying to shake loose the idea. "Perhaps they're connected... somehow?"

Scotch Tape sat on her rump and dug out the Hoofington edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. "Okay... where did I miss the part about screams? I found Enervation under 'E', but there wasn't nothing about screams."

"It's something I hear in my mind. The wailing and screaming of countless ponies. Here it is almost... quiet." Now Lacunae seemed to be pondering the relationship as well.

Scotch Tape just huffed, crossed her forelegs, and sat down. "I wanna go back to 99. I don't care if it's full of poison and cannibal ponies. Screaming ghosts is where I draw the line."

"They're not ghosts," I said, then frowned and looked at Lacunae. "Are they?" Lacunae simply gave a slow shrug. Of all the time for a shrug, now was not it.

* * *

"I'm going to pass on your offer, for now," I told Big Daddy as we met down on the field. I had to admit the act of simply eating grass... not something recycled or cooked or packaged... was definitely weird. Still, it was food... boring bland green food. Gimme Sugar Apple Bombs any day! The PipBuck technician that had removed Marmalade's PipBuck had put the Delta PipBuck back on my left hoof where it belonged.

Big Daddy chewed thoughtfully as he looked at me over the top of his glasses, his eyes glowing. "Well, can't say I'm happy to hear that. I liked how you well you handled Sanguine and Psychoshy."

"Not sure we were watching the same fight. She beat me," I argued.

"You were distracted. In a fair and focused fight, you'd have beaten her. Heck, with enough training you might beat me... when I'm all old and crotchety," he added as an afterthought.

"I've got a mystery I'm trying to unravel. Something bad that happened in Hoofington two hundred years ago. Murders. Conspiracy. Secret projects." I groaned softly as I sat down, looking at the fake sky. Knowing it was a roof stopped my stomach from flopping around. "Why does a not smart pony like me have to be the one to figure all this convoluted stuff out?" I sighed and looked at him. "Have you ever heard of the O.I.A., Goldenblood, EC-1101, or Project Horizons?"

He twirled his beard around his hoof. "Would you stay, join the Reapers, and help us stomp the

Rangers if I did?"

I smirked at him. "Maybe. I told you, though: Rangers didn't attack you. It was us."

He snorted, "Same difference. Rangers want a fight and we're gonna give it to 'em. I look forward to breaking as many of Carrot's toys as I can till she cries for mercy."

"So no chance for peace?" I asked with a soft frown.

He sighed, looking at me skeptically. "Do you really want it? Steel Rangers aren't any better than Reapers. In fact, some of them are every bit as bad as Sanguine." He took a bite and chewed as he stared at me with his own unnatural gaze.

"I want to keep ponies from dying. Too many die for no reason," I said as I plucked a clump of grass with my horn and looked at it, seeing still foals on a stable floor. I looked at him again. "So... have you ever heard of them?"

He sat back as I chewed, gazing at me before he took a deep breath and sighed. "Only the O.I.A. and then only a little bit here and there. Compared to the ministries, they seemed like nobodies. Paper pushing bureaucrats. But I can tell they matter to you." He looked in the direction of the Core. "Thirty-five years ago, we came here from Manehattan. Hoofington was just a dot on a pre-war map back then. We didn't even have access to the broadcast towers here. But when I saw those black towers with the green glow, I knew... I just knew... this was a bad place. Something wrong happened here. Something that could kill us, even today."

I shivered, then asked another question to cover up my discomfort. "Can I ask you something personal?"

"Is it about my age? I think I can make the goalposts from here," he said dryly.

"No. Your eyes..." He looked surprised, then chuckled.

"Oh there's a whole lot of speculation. Lots of ponies think that they're a product of too much mutation. That I can see in the dark... or that I know the flaws of my enemies... there are some ponies who think that I can even kill with my stare." He locked gazes with me a moment. I matched him stare for stare. His eyes slowly narrowed. Mine matched his. Then I broke first with a snort, and he chuckled.

He rubbed his glowing eyes. "Truth is, they're the product of a zebra curse. Back when we were bashing every two bit warlord and champion around the Hoof, we came across an old zebra. Now, most zebras hate the Hoof with a passion that's nigh on religious. But this nutter, he was looking for something. He'd gotten himself captured by a starving tribe and almost ended up on the menu. I happened to free him.

"He fed me some crock about the Hoof being surrounded by evil spirits and that they were drawn here by a great and terrible wrong. Figured he was talking about the Core. Then he blew some glowing sand in my eyes and said it would give me the sight of the sun. The old kook took off after that." He took a deep breath. "I don't know exactly what he did... being I don't have a horn on my noggin... but ever since then, I've been able to look at ponies and see them for who they really are. It's how I know Sanguine's a crooked snake who's going to kill me someday. And it's how I know the Reapers will be good in Brutus's hooves when he does."

"You know he's planning on killing you?" I asked in shock. He looked back, clearly disappointed.

"I look like my mind's going, girl? I could tell he was no good the moment he showed up here

with Deus and Gorgon. He's made of hooks and needles, cutting away pieces of everypony around him. I didn't need magic eyes to tell that. But if he doesn't kill me, old age will. 'Cause I *am* old," he said, thumping my chest with a hoof, making me flinch. "And I'm getting older. And I'd rather die from a knife in my back than from some stupid organ of mine failing."

I looked at him, pity welling up for the old buck. It had to be hard to get old in the Wasteland.

Then he reached out and smacked me upside the head sharply enough to knock me over. The world spun as I clutched my throbbing skull. "What was that for?" I asked. My brain wasn't quite over the hangover feelings from the fight earlier.

"Looking at me all sad like," he said sharply. "Ain't avoiding the fact. Just don't like being reminded of it."

"So... what do you see when you look at me?" I asked with a touch of trepidation.

He stared at me for a long while. My mane began to crawl as I swallowed. I'd just about asked him to forget it when he said softly, "Blood and stars."

Oh... of course...

"Blood of the innocent. Blood of the guilty. Fresh blood. Cold blood. Old blood. You're standing in a river of the stuff. It's flowing through you. Gives you strength. It's also tearing you away and drowning you. And for all the blood that's soaking you through and through... it's nothing compared to all the bloodshed you're going to prevent." He sighed and shrugged. "I also see stars above you... stars beneath you... stars within you. You're made of stars. Bloody stars."

"Is there some sort of rule that old ponies are supposed to give cryptic prophecies to fuck with the minds of the young?" I asked sharply. Then I was practicing my flying skills as his hoof toss sent me sailing towards the goalposts. At least I didn't hit the horizontal bar before landing in a heap. He trotted over and helped me up.

"Sorry about that. Principle. And nope. I just call 'em like I see 'em. But there's one thing that cheers me up about seeing all that," he said with a grin.

"Really? What's that?" I asked dryly.

"I ain't you," he said with a chuckle.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk Added: Nerves of Steel -- You now regenerate AP as if you were Rainbow Dash: 20% faster.

Quest Perk Added: Magic Penetration -- Your magic bullet spell ignores 15 DT of armor.

((Huge and unending thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for spending a ridiculous amount of time making it worth reading, and to all the awesome folk that take the time to read it and give me the feedback I need to keep writing.))