

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 29: Mortality

"Now listen here. What I'm sayin' to you is the honest truth. Let go, and you'll be safe."

I want to do the right thing. Isn't that simple? It should be. It's supposed to be! There are rules; you follow them. There are choices; you consider them and then make the right choice. Then you live with the consequences.

Like males being raped by an entire community. Like Caprice selling me out to Usury. Like me killing a stable full of innocent ponies.

Is there a right choice anymore? Has there ever been a right choice? Maybe. Helping those ponies against the ghouls the other day. Freeing Scrapyard from Red Eye's raiders. Those were good. But sometimes, it feels like all my choices are between 'lose' and 'lose more'. I want to win. I want a clear victory. I want a frigging carrot thrown my way and a pat on the head and a 'Good job, Blackjack' for once.

Is that so wrong?

Maybe... I didn't go through the trouble of helping Glory just so she could tell me what a good pony I am. I didn't take away Scotch Tape's memories so that she'd like me more. I did them because they were the right things to do. And if that meant I got shot up a little more, or mutated a little more, or died a little more, it was worth it because they were better. I had to do better, damn it. Or what was the freaking point?

What did my life matter if it bettered theirs?

And yet... I'd crossed Rampage. I'd hurt all of us by placing her in a lose-lose position. Stay with us and she'd kill Scotch. Leave, as she had, and Scotch would feel like she'd done something wrong. Because she didn't understand how much Rampage wanted to help her... and how quickly she'd kill her to give her mercy. So what should I have done? What was the lesser evil?

Sometimes, even when you win, you lose.

* * *

The rain hissed and splashed into the cold, wet, slimy, and, from the faint ticking from my foreleg, mildly radioactive swamp water slogging around our hooves. Rotting logs and tangled weeds poked out of the obscuring rain, and only my E.F.S. indicated if they should be avoided or not. The only thing I could hope was that anypony, or *anything*, that could possibly give us trouble wouldn't be stupid enough to go outside in weather like this. An acrid chemical smell was blowing from the north. Not much we could do about that besides breathe through our mouths and made the best time we could.

The plan was simple: head north to EC-1101's last routing point in the Ironmare Naval Base's command center. Somewhere along the way we'd run into the Steel Rangers. Find somepony in charge. Explain how we started this whole mess and get them to stop fighting with the Reapers. Yeah, that should be easy... right... In the meantime, Flash Industries, the O.I.A. office, and Horizon Labs were all in

a relatively straight line north of us. I checked my PipBuck again. My eyes kept drifting to that empty square off to the west near the river, just southeast of Toll: Hippocratic Research.

Psychoshy had said that Sanguine could save my life. Regrow Glory's wing. For all we knew, he might be able to turn us all into alicorns. I glanced over at Lacunae; if the Goddess knew where Project Chimera could be found, would she try something? Lacunae I trusted. The Goddess, not so much.

I looked at the map display again. It wasn't really all that far off our path...

"Euch..." Glory exclaimed as an ambitious leech tried to wiggle its way up her flank; instead, the black slug got kicked off into the murk. Lacunae was flying low overhead, levitating Scotch Tape safely above the mire. The filly had her hooves extended as Lacunae flew her around in circles; since the alicorn's magic shielded her from the rain, she was the driest one of us in addition to the happiest.

"Flying is the best thing ever!" she cheered as she swooped around Lacunae. I liked to imagine that, somewhere, the Goddess was watching this. It was the first time the olive filly had smiled since we'd left the Collegiate.

"She's going to draw trouble," P-21 muttered.

Glory snorted. "Oh, let her have her fun." Glory was watching Scotch, her eyes silently agreeing with the filly's statement. I wondered... Lacunae could lift me, after all...

We moved through the rotting, flooded houses. I kept up a constant watch for red bars on my E.F.S., looking away only to flick off the more determined leeches that started to make holes in my barding. I saw two fat frogs watching us pass. Was it just me, or did they look familiar? Nothing remained of the hopper P-21 had killed earlier, not even bones. Eaten, or liquefied in its own acids? I didn't want to know.

A deep, reverberating roar blasting through the rain sent all of us diving for cover, frogs, leeches, and ponies alike. Lacunae and Scotch winked into one of the buildings, P-21 dove behind a mossy wall, and Glory and I took cover in some thorny bushes. The roar sounded again, deep and heavy, building and falling and squealing, but sounding distant through the downpour. I couldn't tell how far away it really was. Was there a dragon in Hoofington? That was all I could imagine making a noise like that! Nothing on my E.F.S., though, so either it was too far away to register or it was huge and invisible.

...Now wasn't *that* a pleasant thought?

Slowly, I crept through the rubble-choked gap between two buildings. The rain pattered off the spongy beams and decaying masonry underhoof, but besides that, silence. There was nothing on the other side of the gap except another row of decaying homes and the dark outline of a large building beyond them.

...A building that moved...

I ducked out of sight as it growled long, low, and deep. I didn't know what it could be; I didn't want to know. I just didn't want it to come this way. I backed carefully away as it growled and squealed for a moment... then growled again. Could it hear us? Smell us? It rumbled as it moved... but its rumbles were growing softer.

The roar sounded one more time, fainter and to the northeast. Lacunae and Scotch Tape cautiously emerged, the alicorn so apprehensive that she dirtied her hooves and carried Scotch on her back rather than risk being a flying, glowing target. P-21 crept out a moment later. "Right. Do we want to speculate on what that was?" I asked, looking from one face to the next. I didn't see one spark of curiosity. "Right. Moving on! Direction: any but that one!" And, ignoring the leeches, we put as much distance between us and that... thing... as we could.

* * *

After reaching Celestia Boulevard and getting out of the mire (and shedding a dozen slimy hitchhikers), we started looking around for someplace to dry off. The rain gave no indication of letting up; if anything, it seemed to be falling even harder. We staggered into a ruined shop in the center of a strip that still seemed more or less intact. It was dry, at least... well, drier. I guessed from the large sheaf of wheat on the hanging sign outside the door that it had been some sort of food shop. Empty Dash inhalers, used syringes, and busted bottles of booze made it pretty clear what it was used for now... and, in true raider fashion, somepony had dressed up some yellowed ponnequins in studded bondage gear.

'Cause that was what passed for humor in the Wasteland. A ponnequin in a leather gimp suit...

"Okay. Glory, what is the deal with all the rain?" I asked as I shook myself hard. "Is the Enclave trying to drown us?" The question was only half hypothetical.

She flung water off her wing before blinking. "Oh, no. Not at all. Believe it or not, this is all natural."

"This... is natural?" I gaped as I pointed out the window. That wasn't natural. We'd be swimming at this rate!

"Mhmmm. Before the war, clearing the skies over Hoofington was a full time job." She cupped her hooves. "The Hoofington valley is basically a great big bowl thirty miles across with mountains to the east and west and the highlands to the south, so all the wet air off the ocean gets blown into it and the bowl fills up. The higher you go, the colder it is. All that wet air has nowhere to go, so it cools and forms clouds and then rain. Hoofington had major problems with flooding even before the war. It gets about two hundred inches of rain a year." I gaped. Two... *hundred*... inches?! ...Was that a lot? A glance outside suggested yes. Glory looked out the grimy window at the brown river coursing along beyond the road. "All the pegasi had to do was stop working, and nature clouded the skies for us. It probably doesn't matter much today, but Hoofington used to be a major cloud exporter to Appleloosa and other dry regions."

I tried to imagine teams of pegasi bundling together huge trains of wet gray clouds and pushing them out to the rest of Equestria. "I'm amazed there're any tunnels under the city that aren't flooded." Then I mentally kicked myself and glanced at Scotch Tape, but she was more interested in the ponnequins. Apparently, she really didn't remember.

"If there wasn't power, there probably wouldn't be," P-21 said as he rubbed his rear leg. "If you look along the riverbanks, there're outflow pipes constantly emptying into it. Without those pumps, everything below river level would be underwater."

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"I'm fine," he muttered, frowning at the limb. "It just hurts a lot."

Glory frowned and knelt as she looked at his limb. "It shouldn't," she said, glancing up at him but not touching it. With his glower, I couldn't blame her. "I checked Triage's files. You practically have a brand new leg."

"Then they botched it up. It still hurts," he muttered as he rubbed it with his hooves.

"Here," I said as I floated him a syringe of Med-X. "It's probably from walking in cold water in the rain. Can't be doing it any good." Glory frowned as he jabbed the needle into his leg and some of the stress and anger left his face.

"Thanks, Blackjack," he said as he swung his leg with obvious relief. Rising, he moved further back into the store. "I'll check and see if I can find anything valuable."

Glory frowned at me as he started poking around in the back. "Blackjack, you shouldn't have given that to him. At least not without letting me examine him first. If there's something wrong with his leg, then he needs treatment. Maybe he has a pinched nerve or something."

"Glory, P-21's not going to let any mare examine him." She started to argue, and I shook my head, "Just let it go. If he says it hurts, then it hurts. He doesn't make stuff like that up," I said as I looked at some photographs along the wall. She huffed and moved off to explore as well, also looking at the various outfits and restraints on the dummies. She seemed to be turning far redder than Scotch, though.

The photographs were of a blue-gray unicorn mare; I couldn't quite make out the color of her mane from the faded images, but I thought that it might have been pink. She was dressed... oddly. Not like Rarity, whose outfits were purely for decoration. It looked almost like casual apparel. Next to her was a buck wearing some kind of strange leather hood. A caption was written at the bottom. 'The Crop: for when your seed needs sowing.'

The rest of the pictures were hard to make out, but from what I could see I started doubting my theory that raiders had dressed up these dummies. There was one of Rarity looking fabulous and giving the cameras a very 'Wouldn't you like to know?' glance as she held a shopping bag in her mouth, the gray unicorn looking on in glee. Another was of a fancy pony with a lace fan cutie mark. Not nearly so fabulous, but still. Wait... Fluttershy?

Okay. I stopped looking at the pictures. They made my brains hurt. I sat down on a mattress that somepony had dragged from Goddesses knew where and waited for the rain to let up...

...

I hate waiting.

I lasted ten minutes, checking my pistol and shotgun, organizing the potions and chems in my pockets... digging in my saddlebags...

I came across the memory orbs from Blueblood Manor. Maybe there was something in there about Vanity's nephew? No... honestly, of all the Marauders, Vanity had seemed, after Big Macintosh, the one most concerned with his teammates. I lifted the orb and caught Lacunae's eye. "I'm going to take a peek, okay? So no hanging me upside down off the front of a boat," I warned. Seriously, I'd come

out of enough bad memory orbs and in enough bad ways already.

She nodded once and continued to gaze out at the rain, looking a little pained. "Enervation?" I asked.

"For the last hour, but nothing serious. Just a drain on our potions, I suppose." She gave a little smile. "Really. You'd think the Goddess would provide me with a simple healing spell."

I guessed it was an indirect 'screw Blackjack.'

Gently, I tapped the orb against my horn. "Okay... I'm safe... this is Vanity, so it should be okay... come on... come on..." Hmmm... it wasn't working. Was there a password or something? I thought of the Marauders... Goldenblood... Princesses... Ministry Mares... I glanced up at the picture of Rarity with her shopping bag. A spark, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Okay... not *quite* what I was expecting.

Soft sheets. Green velvet drapes around the bed. A very nice-smelling mare. And two ponies having a *very* good time. I gave a mental roll of my eye and did my best to think of the Ironshod Firearms catalogue. Okay, IF-80 is a twenty gauge... nope, that's a twelve gauge... shotgun. Pump... action. Shoots a variety of ammo types including... buckshot... Sweet Celestia, shoot me now. Why on earth was he licking... oh... okay... that's new...

Check, please. Why wasn't there a cancel feature on memory orbs?

Finally--really, *three* times?--finally, they rolled off each other, and a shimmer of blue swept the drapes back to reveal the bedroom. The mare gave a groan of complete delight as she lay back in the sheets. He started to kiss along her pale neck, but then the doors banged open. Like magic, the mare was transformed into a ball underneath the sheets as Blueblood stomped in.

I'd never really seen him up close pre-ghoulification before, but Blueblood was clearly a suave-looking buck, even if he was more than twice my age. Right now though, he was a complete mess, his mane long and straggly and his eyes bloodshot. He smelled of stale grapes and pony sweat. "Vanity! Are you here? Vanity!"

The emerald-maned buck shook himself and rubbed his temples. "So nice to see you're back from Canterlot early. You know, even the Princesses don't attend to others in their beds, Blueblood. If the manor isn't aflame, then can this please wait for later?" The mare looked as if she was attempting to dig through the mattress to escape.

Blueblood seemed completely oblivious to both Vanity's comment and the ball under the covers as he threw his forelegs wide. "She's gone, Vanity! She was here, right here in Hoofington, at some tawdry shop. And then she was gone!"

Vanity sighed, making a face of annoyed resignation. "Good Goddesses, pull yourself together. If anypony sees you like this, they're never going to stop talking!" He herded the exhausted, frazzled-looking Blueblood out the door. "Now, get some sleep, get something to eat, and, above all... wash. Then we'll schedule a proper grooming. You simply have to put her behind you. She's just one

silly old mare who can't appreciate you."

Was it my imagination, or did that lump under the sheets give a soft snort of outrage?

Vanity's attempt to mollify the morose buck failed. "She's not one mare. She's *the* mare. The only one who could ever complete me. Am I supposed to court Twilight Sparkle now? Or Fluttershy? No! How could she..." At the moment, I was guessing it was pretty easy. Of course, I also remembered him running his sword through Roses's heart. A minute later, Vanity returned to the room, closed the doors, locked them, and then, after a moment's hesitation, levitated his heavy desk against them.

"Just another mare, huh?" a very familiar unicorn said. He turned to look at the mare sitting upright in his bed. Her purple mane disheveled and tangled about her shoulders, she looked at him with hard blue eyes. "Silly, am I? *Old*?" She said that word almost as if it were an obscenity.

Vanity chuckled as he sat down beside her on the bed. "Most sincere apologies. I had to get him out of here somehow. Your rejections completely broke him. I don't think any mare in history has so... thoroughly... turned down a proposal."

"If I knew what a big baby he was going to be, I would have passed it on to Luna." Rarity sniffed disdainfully. "I'm sure she would have helped him get over it far more efficiently and effectively. Likely with a wartime commission," she said sourly as she flopped back against the pillows.

"I shudder for the war effort," he replied as he lay beside her, stroking her cheek. "We could just let him catch us," he said as he kissed her throat.

She murred and sighed. "A few minutes of satisfaction, at the most, followed by the scandal of the century and the utter disintegration of my career and reputation. Hmmm..." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Not that it isn't tempting, but I simply couldn't leave my friends alone. They need me. Besides, some scandals never fade."

"Would it really be so bad?" he asked as he cuddled with her.

"Yes, Vanity. It would." She touched her chest lightly. "A mare who is desirable, but unobtainable, has power over those who covet her. She is a priceless commodity. But if they know that another obtained her, then she is cheapened and no longer priceless."

"Really? But you clearly wished to be obtained," he chuckled as he smiled.

"And how," she said with an unapologetic smile and yet also a demure blush. "I'm not made of stone, you know."

"Indeed, I noticed," he said with a soft poke to her belly. "The most delightful marshmallow in Equestria." And he proceeded to nibble gently on that marshmallow, much to the barely stifled giggles of the mare.

She sighed and pouted playfully. "Oh, why did I have to pick such a cruel consort?" she said, throwing a foreleg across her brow dramatically.

"Sometimes we make mistakes in those we choose to love," he replied softly, and her smile disappeared as she looked away. He stroked that rumpled mane. "How's Fluttershy?" he asked in a

gentle, concerned tone.

"As well as can be expected after what that bastard did to her. She's throwing everything into... something. Some special project she thinks will change the war and end it." She sighed softly. "It's been almost four years now. This war and these ministries are like a fashion that's grown quite noisome. I'd quite like something... fresh." She looked at him and sighed. "And since he's tiptoeing around the corners of the conversation already, what is that bastard up to? Suffering, I hope."

Vanity sighed. "Actually, I think he is." Oddly, Rarity's satisfaction seemed to turn to a thin sympathy. "He never meant to hurt her. But he did, and he knows it. And I don't think he'll ever forgive himself for it."

She sighed and buried her face in his neck. "Why couldn't we have met under different circumstances? One where there was no war. Or killing? Or plots and secrets? I'm so dreadfully tired of intrigue. Or fears of our loved ones being hurt. I'd thought I'd be married by now. Perhaps even a mother. And now..." She sighed, one hoof rubbing her tummy slowly. "I am starting to turn into an old mare."

"A stunning, lovely old mare," he replied, and she gave him a small smile in return. "We do live in interesting times. I'm just trying to keep my nephew under control and prevent him from hurting anypony. Himself. Others. I recommended he take a leave of absence. Instead, he's just throwing himself into his work even more." He pressed his lips together. "I've contemplated leaving the Marauders so I can supervise him."

"You'd leave Jetstream?" Rarity asked softly, her tone concerned as she stroked his cheek.

"The memory modification went perfectly for once. She doesn't remember Stonewing except as another soldier. She's focusing on her work, too. Macintosh is keeping her busy." He sighed and shook his head. "I guess it is a way to handle grief."

"Why didn't we meet at the gala all those years ago?" she said with a faint sigh. "Then we could have had our wonderful happily ever after."

"As I recall, you saw Blueblood and quite ignored the younger prince with the acne problem behind him," he replied with just a hint of reproach.

"Oh. Yes. Well... you must understand that those were my silly... flighty... days..." she said with a furious blush. He smiled down at her and kissed her softly upon the lips. Forget Rarity, I wanted to marry Vanity! When their lips parted, she groaned. "Ugh... stop. Please. I simply must get back to Canterlot. My staff gossips quite enough. I don't have time for a fourth..."

"Or a fifth? Or a sixth?" he teased as he nudged her hip.

Or a seventh? Sweet Celestia, did Vanity compete in marathons?

Afterwards, they were panting and spent. She looked at him flatly. "You... are a monster."

"But a very *good* monster..." he said, his lips parting in a grin as Rarity turned red once more.

"Enough! Enough! I am going... before you tempt me into disaster." But she did have time for one more kiss. Then she emerged from the bed and gave herself a shake; magically, her mane returned

to its luxurious curls. Okay. That was a neat trick. I'd like that trick... then she blew him a kiss and, with a blue-white flash, she disappeared from sight.

oooOOOooo

I awoke and looked around as quickly as I could. Okay, no monsterponies, cyberponies, Enclave hit squads, Remnant hit squads, cyberdogs, manticores, giant frogs, boats, Zodi... wait. Nevermind. I swapped out Zodiacs for... nightmare hitponies dressed in black! Instead, I was almost disappointed to find myself still on the mattress. No bullet holes. No horrible wounds. Nothing...

So why were my friends all staring at me? P-21 was smiling faintly and kept glancing over at me from his textbook. Scotch Tape was giggling. Lacunae was... blushing? And Glory was looking at me with a very... strange... smile. The gray pegasus cleared her throat softly. "So. Good memory orb?"

I hesitated before I answered warily, rising to my hooves. "Y...yeah..." What was going on? P-21 coughed, looking like he was actually fighting the urge to grin.

"A very good memory orb?" Glory asked again. My confusion started to give way to irritation when I sniffed, and blinked. What was that smell...? Wait... I knew *that* smell... and *that* smell was coming from *me*.

"Blackjack's been naughty!" Scotch Tape fell over laughing. I went as red as the stripes in my mane. Dear Luna, I was sore! How could I be sore? I hadn't done anything!

"I... it wasn't me! They were... and it was... I--" I finally lost the capacity to speak altogether and just stammered hopelessly, incapable of explaining.

"Mhmmm... very naughty," Glory replied with nod as she walked along behind me. "We'll have to deal with that later." She stepped next to me, her side rubbing against my flank. And then her tail snapped against my rump. I think my blush jumped into the infrared!

Funny, I seemed to remember not long ago that Glory was the one who could be rendered speechless through sex. I definitely recalled that to be her thing, not mine. So why was I suddenly incapable of talking besides stammering incomprehensibly? Scotch Tape seemed to find this a source of endless glee.

"Mares," P-21 said in summation, despite the glares three of us gave him for it. He rose to his hooves and stretched. "Well. Now that you're... ahem... finished... Shall we be on our way?"

Yes. Yes we shall. I could do with a walk in the lovely... cold... rain. Really. A cold rain shower never looked more inviting.

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I really wanted to go back into the sexy memory orb now. I really did.

"Who killed them?" Glory asked in a horrified whisper as we trotted past. She had her wing draped over Scotch's face and the filly wasn't arguing.

"Think it matters to them anymore?" P-21 replied softly.

It mattered to me. It was all so... so stupid. Life was already hard enough; why were we killing each other? For caps? Bullets? Technology? What was the fucking point? I couldn't tell if they were raiders, gangers, settlers... and like P-21 said, what did it matter?

"We should search them," P-21 muttered. I hissed softly, but then nodded. He was right, as much as I hated to admit it. And he could do it. Glory took Scotch around the corner. I saw her peeking. Rampage had been right. I wanted to protect her innocence, but there was no such thing in the Wasteland. How could you protect them from this?

Bodies. So many bodies. And from the smears of viscera, some of them had died badly.

He came back with a scattering of ammo, caps, and a blue-banded grenade which he stowed away. And then we just left them; we couldn't tear up the asphalt for a grave, and nopony could make a fire in this place.

I was soon corrected.

A block later we found three suits of blackened power armor inside a charred café. Wood had been piled beneath them. Blackened skulls hung out of the hulks. They'd been cooked inside their armor.

I looked at the Dealer. At his somber expression. Smile, damn you. Laugh. Be somepony I could focus all my hate upon. I needed that hate. But he simply watched with tired eyes. I guess even death could get sick of himself.

* * *

The rain hadn't let up much. It came down in heavy sheets that seemed to wave over the cracked ground. I felt physically bruised, despite my barding. Lacunae's rain shield barely covered herself, Scotch, and P-21. The only silver lining I could think of was that the rain kept visibility to almost nothing; as long as I had an E.F.S. and anything dangerous didn't, we'd probably be able to avoid hostiles. We were now following the churning brown flow of the rain-swelled river. The further north we went, the bigger and more elaborate the shops became. The ones here were built along a walkway, the opposite side of which had a railing and a wall straight down to the water.

Then it started to hail. You know, I really hadn't realized it was possible for memory-orb-sized pieces of ice to fall from the sky. Now I had. And suddenly, I wanted to go back in time, find whatever pony had discovered this valley and thought 'Lets live here!', and throw buckets of ice at her head.

We finally reached a plaza, and I swore the chunks were reaching hoof size. "We can't stay out here!" I shouted over the cracking and pinging of ice blocks bouncing off the broken pavement around us. I might make it, with my head harder than any lump of ice, but from how weak Lacunae's shield appeared, it wouldn't be long until it failed under the withering barrage. I pointed at a large three-story building. 'Silverstar Sporting Supplies'. There was a mess of debris blocking the doors, but it seemed to have the most important thing: an intact roof.

The five of us darted across, and one chunk of ice made me reassess my estimate of my head's toughness. It nearly took me off my hooves for a minute before I was able to shake it off. We managed to shift the mess just enough to open a door... after P-21 unlocked it, of course. I took that as a good

sign.

We pushed our way through and pulled the door shut, locking it behind us. A few seconds later there was a buzz, then a flicker as some of the lights tried to come to life but only made it halfway. The speakers crackled, and then some tune involving a piano and... banjos?... started to play softly. The few lights that had managed to stay lit illuminated large paintings of a gray cowpony sheriff poking fun at a bunch of scowling brown brutes. I had no idea what they were supposed to be; but apparently, from the pictures on the walls, they were big, strong, and stupid.

The square building had a large, open, airy build, with the second and third floors as balconies overlooking the large sales floor. There were more doors on the far side. One wall and most of the ceiling were glass panes, but water fell in strings and ribbons through dozens of cracks, saturating the filthy apparel that lay in heaps around the first floor. Every step squished as we moved deeper in; the junk and sodden clothes had congealed into a pasty mass.

"No red bars," I murmured. Nothing invisible rushing out to attack us. I trotted to the far doors, but they were locked as well. There was a camp over by the cash registers, with heaps of dried food containers around four skeletons. They all had oversized cowpony hats like the one worn by the cartoon sheriff on the walls. The store employees, I suspected. I levitated two hunting rifles, but two centuries in the wet had made them poor clubs, let alone firearms. There were other guns, too; I was a little surprised, but the moisture hadn't treated them any better. The brass- and copper-jacketed hunting rounds had fared much better inside their boxes, though, even if the boxes themselves were soggy. "Might as well see if there's anything valuable in here," I said as I looked around the cavernous space lit only by scattered, dim, flickering lamps and whatever sparse light managed to get through the clouds and windows above. Why was my mane not liking this?

I really wished I had Rampage here right now. She'd know if we were in the Flash Filly territory or not. I wanted her here just to crack off some joke and relieve the tension. I just wanted her here.

Scotch shadowed me as she checked the bullet primers for rust. I cleared out the bits in the register for trade down the road. I looked at them, an image of Princess Luna stamped on one side and one of Princess Celestia on the other. Then I heard the filly sniff, and I looked over to see her push up her goggles and rub her eyes. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Huh?" I knelt down to look her in the eyes. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Then... then why wouldn't Rampage talk to me? Why does she hate me now?" she said with a sniff. "We were going into the tunnels, and then I wake up and you're missing an eye and Glory doesn't have a wing and Rampage doesn't have her armor and everypony keeps acting funny. So... I must have done something wrong," she said as she hung her head. At least she hadn't come out of the procedure early enough to also wonder why Rampage was mysteriously only a few years older than her.

Not remembering sucks.

I took a deep breath. "Rampage doesn't hate you, Scotch. She had Reaper things she had to do. She'll be back someday." Oh I really hoped that that was true. I sighed and fed her the only line I could think of. "Don't think about it, Scotch. There's nothing down there you'd want to remember. It was really bad," I said as I stroked her mane. "I wish I didn't remember," I said sincerely. But then I never deserved to forget.

I saw the hurt in her eyes. Not from anything. Just... hurt. "Yeah," she said, frowning and kicking an empty tin. "I guess..."

"Come on. Let's find the others," I said, walking towards the back rooms. We found P-21 tapping away on the manager's terminal. A picture on the wall showed an aged gray buck grinning smugly with a huge cowpony hat on his head and a sheriff's star on his vest. Beneath the picture, a plaque:

'Our Founder

"Sharing and caring is for suckers."

There was an odd word... an obscure word rarely used in 99. I'd always wondered about it, but it seemed to summarize the picture perfectly: Schmuck.

"Find anything good?" I asked P-21. Scotch Tape picked up an intact book off the desk and began flipping through it.

"Unless you're really interested in this place's earnings for the last quarter, no. The only thing in here that isn't related to business is this." He opened a file.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro. Sorry you missed another session. It was fucking wicked. Calamity crashed the fucking train into the possessed Ursa Major! Primrose was like 'So what's the damage for a train?' I just lopped off half its hitpoints right there. Still was a tough-ass fight, though. Had to pull a few crits and Calamity still lost her leg. And the Doc got eaten but, eh, Brandywine can just make another character.

Anywho, hope things are okay on the base. We all miss ya,

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Brooooo! Where are yoooooooouu?! We got another mare in the group, named Parsley. Let her play Jack since you were gone. It ain't the same. She's got the game system down but she just can't play a guy. You know? Anyway, Bro... old Silverstar was pissed. Apparently we got big fat roaches and not the good kind, bro.

Anyway, make the next game, bro. Parsley's like bam and whoa and shwing and yeah! You can get rid of that cherry now, Bro! Hear me? Easy poooon! Talk to you soon.

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro. Sorry to hear you won't be able to make the game anymore. No, I don't have a problem, but I dunno where we're gonna find another Smilin' Jack. I can't believe you're going to leave me alone with all these mares in the wasteland. How could you be so cruel? Let me know if you ever want a chance to play. I know things are ten gallons of suck right now for everypony. Just yesterday I got chewed out by the Sheriff about the bug problem. Got something to take care of it, I hope. Better not be

like last time.

So take it easy. Brohoof.

Bro.

PS: Know where we can pick up some male gamers?

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro, you okay? I tried to call but Miramare says you're not there. Bro, come on and talk to me. This is Bro. I know things aren't cool right now, Bro, but just talk to me. I still got Smilin' Jack.

Hope I talk to you soon. Want to take you out for another romp in the wasteland.

Bro.

"In the wasteland?" I read aloud again, feeling a shiver down my spine.

Scotch Tape looked up from the book. "Around Appleloosa. Fighting off windigos, zombie buffalo, and mad science mares while dealing in dark magic, bullets, and grit." Then she held up the hardback book. "See?" I leaned in a little. 'Wasteland, a game of Western horror.' I looked at the cover art of a steam train like I'd seen in picture books being pulled by... ponies... while a half dozen skeletal pegasi flew overhead, kept at bay by an earth pony buck with some sort of steam driven gatling gun, a black pegasus casting a spell from floating playing cards, and a unicorn who reminded me of Vanity shooting two floating revolvers.

A game? Real life horror wasn't bad enough, so ponies had to make up others? It didn't seem like any kind of game I knew. I looked around the filthy, derelict office. "Well, if all this is a game, I'd sure like to quit and play Happy Fluffy Bunnies Land." P-21 snorted softly and even Scotch Tape seemed to like the idea. "So, nothing else?" He suddenly looked evasive, his eyes darting to the side. "What?"

He looked at the terminal and sighed, bringing up another.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Bro. I don't know if you're alive, Bro. I'm not sure if anypony is still alive. Everything's crashed. The shield went up before the half dozen of us could get in the city. I dunno if you're going to get this, Bro. I don't even know if you're around to get this. There's green snow everywhere. Prim went out to look for survivors, and when she came back, she was dying. Gone the next day. So the rest of us just holed up in here. Just feel like all kinds of nasty.

Believe it or not, I've been making Wasteland characters to try and get by. It's fucking crazy, bro. After the bombs and death and everything, it's all there is to do. Ironic, huh? Well, that and fuck, but I'm worn to the fucking nub, Bro. Like, can't even get it up anymore. Yeah, just like grandpa. Never thought I'd say that, man. I wish you were here so you could finally take care of that cherry of yours. Fucking ironic.

Fuck. You're probably dead and I'm giving you shit. Sorry Bro.

Lights are flickering again, dunno how much longer we'll have power. Shields are still up, so

hopefully somepony comes out of the city to get us. Just wish shit would stop screaming. I think there's somepony nearby that keeps on yelling... I'd bring them in here if they'd just stop. Makes my head hurt. Till then, we'll just keep hopin'. Take care.

Bro.

Shit. Now I knew why P-21'd not shown me that one. Those little reminders of life... of millions who died for no reason. As 'millions of ponies', you could ignore it. 'Lots of ponies died. Whatever.' But turn one of those millions into 'Bro', and suddenly I was sniffing and rubbing my eyes. The Dealer just looked at me from the corner office, his lips pressed tightly together in a stark frown as he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

The lights were growing stronger now. The music crackled a little less and started playing a little message about a two for one special. 'Don't be as dumb as a buffalo, Pardner!'

"Hey... Blackjack? How many ponies do you think died in here?" Scotch Tape asked with a frown.

"Six... according to the messages," I replied, feeling tired. I thought of going back to the bedrolls by the counter. My head was killing me!

"Then why are there seven skeletons?" Scotch Tape asked. "Or eight? Nine?"

There'd been four out by the register. Three in the office... and was that all of them? I stood and trotted out into the hallway. Bones. You overlooked them in the Wasteland; there're so damn many that, eventually, you just shrug and go 'oh look, more dead.' But now I was taken in by the sight. I grabbed the sodden, rust-stained clothes and lifted them from the mess. Raider style.

"The door had been locked..." I murmured.

"To the outside. There wasn't anything to stop us from locking it once we were--" P-21 began, then stopped. He looked around. "Do you hear that?"

I did hear that. A high and distant noise... like a scream.

I ran out into the main floor, grabbed the closest mound of sodden cloth and heaved with my magic and my hooves. The lump broke free with a sickening wet pop, and soaked bones clattered free. Another. And another. There weren't six bodies here. There were dozens.

"Lacunae!" I called out. "Glory!" Glory staggered into view on the edge of the third floor balcony. "Find Lacunae! We've got to get out of here." I walked to the doors out, my already unsteady hooves not finding purchase on the sloppy ground. Now that I was paying attention to them, it was impossible to miss the bones sticking out of the rotten clothes. Most of these looked like scavengers. What a score, they must have thought. Started collecting all the things left behind... and then fell asleep wondering who was screaming. I wanted to fall asleep. My heart flopped in my chest; I swore I could almost hear the wet, slapping noise inside my chest cavity.

But that was nothing compared to the screaming.

It wasn't a true scream, not like somepony yelling for help. It was a steady sound, almost mechanical. I wasn't sure if I was hearing it with my ears or with my head, but it was growing louder and

more distinct.

I ran to the doors and shouldered them hard, but the junk stacked up behind them didn't budge. I tried each one in turn but couldn't find the one we'd cleared away. In desperation, I lifted my shotgun and fired two rounds; the ballistic glass chipped. "Goddesses-damned overbuilt garbage!" I screamed as my friends staggered out onto the main floor with me.

This whole building was a trap. Ponies would come in, not notice the Enervation until it was too late, and keel over dead or die in their sleep. Others would come in and see the bounty of salvage and die before they could escape. It was like Flank and the tunnels. I felt so tired, my head pounding. Worse, my taint just seemed to go nasty around the Enervation fields. My heart was... crap... I couldn't even describe it. It didn't feel like beating so much as undulating.

Six months might have been overly optimistic.

"We've got to get out of here. We're up to our horns in Enervation," I said as they looked at each other. "Ideas?"

"Shoot our way out?" suggested Glory, starting to stroke her remaining wing in worry. I pointed at the door I'd shot. She still blasted it with her beam rifle, but it merely scorched the glass. "Oh, darn... no wonder this place is intact."

I looked at Lacunae, but she could barely stand, let alone teleport. "Okay. We're stuck, but we know about it. So, nopony fall asleep. If your healing potions have any purple at all left, drink them. If not, toss them." Stupid country banjos played some folksy tune as the lights now filled the store with steady illumination.

Most of my potions were an unwholesome shade of brown. That was fast... really fast. But if the Enervation here was that strong, why hadn't we noticed immediately? Why had those bodies rotted? The Enervation still wasn't strong enough to liquefy flesh, but it certainly seemed strong enough to prevent rotting. I drank the watery potion that remained; at least the others' healing drinks were in slightly better condition.

Okay, right now, I was really missing a super-strong striped mare. If she showed up before we keeled over, I'd give her a nice big happy kiss. "Okay. Glory, look for a back door or window or anything. I'll take a broken leg jumping from a third story window at this point." She nodded at once and headed for the stairs. "P-21, can you rig a bomb to blow open the doors?"

"I'll have to convert frag grenades into a satchel charge. It'll take a while," he said as he bit his lip, then winced. A trickle of blood dripped from the bite. "I'll get right on it."

"I'll help," Scotch said at once, and P-21 looked shocked. "I don't know much about bombs, but I know enough about fixing things to hand you tools and stuff," she said as she gestured to her utility barding. Finally, he nodded and trotted to the registers, fishing out the apple grenades from his saddlebags.

That left me with Lacunae. I trotted to where the mighty alicorn slumped and pressed my horn to hers. Suddenly, that scream increased to the point that it felt like rusty claws in my mind, like it was trying to tear me right out of my body. "Why didn't you notice sooner?"

"It... increased..." was all she said before collapsing. In that last moment, I sensed she was fighting just to keep herself together.

Increased? How could it increase? I rubbed my runny nose as I looked around the brightly lit shop. We'd moved the scrap, picked the lock, come inside, and started scavenging. I looked at the cartoon buffathings and the grinning sheriff. I'd preferred it when the lights were dim... it looked less like the cartoon was mocking us.

Wait... A little pink pony clicked on a lightbulb in my mind. The lights came on... but not nearly all of them, at first. Slowly. We must have tripped some sensor that started an automated system. As the power turned on, the Enervation increased. Something here was causing the Enervation...

If it hadn't been bad with the power off...

I raced towards the back of the store. P-21 was busy; if this didn't work he'd be our best shot at getting out of here. I licked my lips... and tasted blood. I rubbed my muzzle again and looked at the crimson on my barding. Oh, not good.

I really didn't want to be reduced to bloody goo and bones.

Rushing into the manager's office, I looked at the terminal. The menu didn't offer much hope. Sales figures, inventory, employee hours, messages... then I spotted, at the bottom, 'store functions'. I scrolled down to it and clicked.

>Store automation: On

>Lights: On

>Ambiance: On

>Coffee Machine: Warning. Critical failure!

I didn't look much further than that. I turned everything to 'off'. The lights flicked off one after another, then music crackled and went silent. The screaming continued. Okay. Plan B. I pulled back my barding, took off a brace, and with my sword sliced my foreleg. Holding the floppy limb outwards I started to sweep it back and forth.

If whatever was doing this was deep underground, we were screwed. But then I felt a sharp stab in the outstretched leg... the wound seemed to be spreading right in front of my eye! I did the worst possible thing and started to limp in that direction, into the back of the store. There were just heaps of ruined clothes and other litter, but I kept walking. Kept walking even as my insides clenched. Whichever way hurt more, that was the way I went.

This was a really bad idea. I could feel the injury spreading. But the idea was working. Whatever the source, it seemed to be in the far back of the store. Almost there... almost... and then I came to a concrete wall and groaned. My head was splitting; my whole body ached. There was nothing here but a stupid metal box on the wall.

A stupid metal box straight ahead of me. It wasn't big, maybe the size of my hoof. It read 'Roseluck' something or other. My eye wasn't seeing very clearly. I slowly opened the box. Inside were a pair of wires attached to a metal ring that let out a baleful green glow. Just looking at it made my eye

throb.

This... little thing? This was the source of the Enervation? Or was it magnifying it somehow? I tried to reach for it, but the muscle spasms in the limb made my whole body ache. I lifted the shotgun with my magic, but my focus was shit. Once again, earth pony firearm techniques saved the day. I fired into the box again and again, my ears pounding.

Seven shells later, the box was scrap. The thin metal ring flew into the air and disappeared into the mess. It didn't matter, though. The glow was gone and the agony in my skull retreated to a dull throb. The screaming faded to a whisper and then to silence. Slowly, I started back, the end of my left foreleg looking like it'd been put in a food processor. It wasn't hard to find my way. Just follow all the red. I limped onto the sales floor just in time to meet Lacunae coming towards the hall.

"Feel better?" I asked, and then my eye rolled back and I passed out on the filth-covered floor.

* * *

"The Goddess wishes for me to remind you, once again, that this does not constitute gratitude or obligation to you. She merely does not wish for so valuable an asset to be lost to the vagaries of the Wasteland unless it can suit her purposes," Lacunae said as her horn glowed a faint purple. The dark alicorn's lips curled a little more. "Oh, she apparently did not want me to tell you that last part." The magic was knitting together flesh and tendons under Glory's watchful eye.

"Yeah, yeah. I love her too," I muttered sarcastically as my injury slowly healed. I would have liked it even more if she'd healed Glory back when she'd gotten injured... but that was apparently too much to ask back then. "I'm glad the Goddess finally taught you a healing spell."

"Oh, she didn't teach it. The spell is Windyreed's. She was a medic during the war." Lacunae made a face. "It was simply put into me by the Goddess. To learn it would have taken far too long."

"So why doesn't she just put a bajillion spells into every alicorn and take over the Wasteland?" Glory said as she supervised the procedure. Apparently having the spell didn't make her an expert on how to use it.

"She's tried that. The results were unfortunate. The mind would have so many options, most of them alien to us, and we would make mistakes. Rather, we are given a minimum of spells to focus on, but we know them exceedingly well. And we are always learning new applications for them. There is one mare in particular who is definitely pushing our learning curve." She gave a little smile. "I am something of a special case, though," she added.

I looked at her, the alicorn dustbin of unwanted thoughts and feelings. The pony who never was a pony. I wanted to ask who she was before becoming an alicorn. Family. Friends. A life. All those things she'd never had.

"This is amazing, though, Blackjack," Glory said, once more excited. "No pony has ever been able to find a source for Enervation! It was always assumed to be some kind of magical damage to the environment or some zebra weapon, but its distribution's been a mystery. If it's caused by devices, then we might be able to eventually remove them!"

"I don't know what it was. I was pretty messed up at that point. But I don't think it's gone gone."

Just turned back down to normal,” I said as I watched them work in the normal Hoofington gloom. Evidently, after turning everything off, I’d powered down the terminal. Now we couldn’t get it turned back on.

“Still, it’s a phenomenal breakthrough,” Glory said with glee. “I so can’t wait to write my teacher about it. Hee!” She was literally dancing on her hooves. I listened for Rampage to make a sarcastic quip about Glory being an egghead... but nothing. Goddesses, I missed her. P-21 was packing away his satchel bomb; Lacunae could teleport him outside to reopen the door. Scotch Tape was looking for any food, medicine, or ammo that was still good. She was almost as good at scavenging as her daddy... but I kept that to myself. See? Blackjack can be taught.

So when we came in, that box powered up and started killing all of us. Why? How? No idea. But at least we knew what was causing it. I tried to think of what was written on that box before blasting it. Roseluck... gardens? Businesses? Security? Ugh, now I was afraid I was making stuff up trying to remember.

We’ve dodged another bullet, I thought as Lacunae finished. Not that I’d say it, but her healing had left me stiff and sore in that limb. Well, beggars can’t be choosers, Blackjack. The bony bastard hadn’t taken me yet. But as I looked at the bones behind the register, I heard the shuffling in my mind. ‘Just wait,’ they seemed to say.

* * *

We reached a major road that came out of the Core; another four-lane highway that cut straight as an arrow... due east. Okay, so it wouldn’t be much good for us. The bigger concern was the broken bridge that had once spanned the river. What remained of the huge concrete arch was covered with wagons of all types, and they’d been cobbled together into a settlement of a decidedly unpleasant sort. Spiked decorations were never a good sign around Hoofington.

“So... what are we going to do?” P-21 asked as he looked up at the... town.

“Can’t we just go around?” Glory asked, pointing at the wet walkway that went under the bridge.

He pointed a hoof up. “Would you look at that place? Are you telling me we should just leave it? They could be raiders!”

“Could be, but they’re not attacking us. Hoofington is dangerous enough; are you suggesting we go out of our way to pick fights with whatever ponies we come across if we don’t like the look of them?” Glory countered with a scowl. My friends glared at each other.

“Hey. Hey. Simmer down a notch,” I said in concern. Glory and P-21 weren’t usually on the same page, but they rarely looked ready to blast each other. I looked over at the worried Scotch and sighed. What I wouldn’t give for Rampage to be here right now... “Look, there’s a really simple way to resolve this.” Both blinked at me; I supposed that Blackjack as the voice of reason was a little surprising. “I’ll trot up there and say hi. If they shoot at me, we’ll know that they’re bad ponies.” Like that scavenger near the MASEBS tower? I winced inwardly. “Um, if they shoot at me a *lot* while shouting about how they’re going to rape me or eat me or fuck me up... *then* we know they’re bad ponies,” I amended.

Okay. Now THAT was the look I was more familiar with.

"Blackjack, are you trying to get killed?" Glory blurted. "We just healed you!"

"That has to be one of the most idiotic plans I've ever heard!" P-21 retorted simultaneously.

I stomped... and the effect was ruined by me splashing myself with muddy water. My lips twitched for several seconds before I pointed a hoof at Glory. "You're right. We shouldn't just shoot everypony we come across." And then I pointed at P-21. "And you're right; if they're all cannibals or something, then we've got an obligation to prevent them from hurting anypony else. So, do either of you have an alternative?"

P-21 looked up at the bridge; the first fifty feet were completely open. "No..."

"Okay. So, I'll trot up and say hi. P-21, you sneak up while they're paying attention to me in case they're bad. Glory, hang back with Scotch and give me cover in case I have to run. Lacunae, if things go real bad, pop in and shield me so we can fall back. Remember, this close, the city's air defenses might find you a fine target, so no flying." Lacunae nodded once.

This just screamed 'bad idea', but what could I do? Somepony had to pry into other ponies' business. Might as well be me. "Well, let's go say hello..."

* * *

I walked towards the settlement with Taurus's rifle beside me. I needed a name for the hunting rifle... Bulldozer? Nah. Old Bull? Maybe, but it needed to be cooler...

As I stepped onto the bridge, my PipBuck chirped. 'Fallen Arch' appeared in my E.F.S.'s navigation tool. Now there was a name to inspire trust and community. As I approached the main gate, the back hatch of a covered steel wagon, the two watchponies stationed above it turned and started. They began banging on a metal drum, calling more to the gate.

"Who goes there?" called a buck through the downpour as they mustered atop the metal wagons blocking the bridge. I glanced to the side and saw P-21 wiggle underneath one of the old vehicles and disappear from sight.

"Security!" I yelled back. If anything was going to make them start shooting... but they hadn't yet. I took that as a good sign.

"What do you want?" the buck yelled.

I'm contemplating wiping all of you out. "Just to get out of the rain," I answered.

"Go away," the buck retorted.

"I got caps for trade."

"I said go away!" A rifle shot pinged off the asphalt before me.

Then I saw P-21's face emerge from under the wagon. He looked me in the eye and shook his head slowly, drawing a hoof across his throat.

I sighed and then narrowed my eye at the half dozen ponies on the wall. "Now listen up! I am

wet, tired, and now cranky. You will drop your weapons and open the door to this place. Whatever messed up shit you're doing in there will be ended, and then I'll be on my way. Otherwise, I am going to bring down such a fury upon you that you'll wish you were never born. I will tear down this fucking bridge with my bare hooves and dump it all into the river and let Celestia deal with you in the everafter!" I shouted as I started to pace. "So what is it going to be? Because I'm sick of waiting!"

They stared at each other as I stood there with rain dripping off Taurus's barrel. I could see a sniper rifle, but its owner was out in the open. He was first... then...

Then weapons hit the ground and they were scrambling out of sight.

I blinked in surprise. "Huh," I muttered lamely as a terrified buck pushed open the doors to the settlement. Slowly, I approached, watching my E.F.S. for red among the blue.

"Please don't kill us," he begged as I passed. I looked back at Glory, Scotch, and Lacunae and gestured for them to stay back. I walked through the wagon; the far end had been cut away.

Fallen Arch wasn't much as far as settlements went. I gathered its name was due to the hundred-foot span of fallen bridge it backed onto. A half-dozen wagons had been converted into rusty shelters. "I need everypony out here right now," I called out into the rain. One by one, the bucks emerged... and only bucks. There were maybe eight or ten. My eye swept the rusted shelters... but there was one building full of blue bars. "I said everypony!"

Then the door opened and two more bucks emerged, a mare wearing a filthy rag trailing them. One of the pair had his mouth clasped on a detonator. The other, who I took for a leader given that everypony kept looking at him, cleared his throat. "Hello. My name is Collar." Oh, this boded well. "I'd welcome you, but I'm afraid you're going to have to leave here, Miss Security. You have no business being here and no right to judge us."

I looked over and picked out P-21's blue bar off to the side. He peeked at me, and I looked back at the leader. "Well, that sounds like there's something here that needs judging. I'd really like a peek inside that wagon there," I said as I pointed with my PipBuck, glancing over at P-21 again. He gave a tiny nod and then disappeared.

"That holds our mares and foals," he replied sharply. "You will not deny us our property." Property? Then my eye picked out the collar on the mare's throat. Slavers. Collar coughed. "However, we are not unwilling to compromise. Leave now, and we shall allow you to take Clover with you."

I felt a loathing like I hadn't felt in a long time. Raiders were sick. Gangers were violent. However, nothing churned my stomach like the thought of a pony selling another pony. It reminded me of 99.

"Now, that sounds pretty generous," I said as I saw P-21 slip as quietly as a ghost through a window in the trailer; there were advantages to being an undersized sneaky pony. "But I'm afraid it ain't quite enough. Why don't you let all those mares go, and I'll call it fair."

"These mares are our property and our livelihood. Without them, we are as good as dead. If you try and take them by force, then we may as well liquidate our stock," he replied calmly. Liquidate? Seriously? And I wasn't taking his property; I was freeing ponies! I was burning to vaporize his head in

the worst way...

"Your livelihood? Your... your property?!" I fumed, my eye narrowing as I glared at him. "You're telling me the only way you can survive is by selling the flesh of other ponies?" I knew that right now P-21 must have been taking off those collars. I had to buy him time. "Find another way! A better way!"

"This is the better way!" he retorted. "For generations we fished the scum out of the river, salvaged what we could, and hunted what we found in the marsh, and still it wasn't enough! I watched my grandfather get consumed by disease and my father taken by famine! Finally, we sold our surplus population and purchased enough food for the rest to survive. I sold my daughters myself, rather than see them starve. We rent our females, or sell them, to sustain the community. To sustain civilization. We've done what we must to survive."

Wait... "You're telling me..." I couldn't even finish that thought. These weren't just captured ponies... these were their own families? 'Surplus population?' They didn't just hold mares as slaves, but bred them! Now I was glad I'd come up here. "Well. How nice. What you must do to survive now is take off each and every one of those collars and toss them into the river. You want to sell somepony into slavery, sell yourself!" Shit, I needed to stall. Stall! But I felt as though everything was just sweeping me along.

It looked like he wasn't in the mood for banter. Honestly, neither was I. The leader sighed. "I have no wish to fight you, Security. I have no doubt of your peril. But this is our community and we will ask you one more time to leave." The mare stared at me with wide, terrified eyes. She wet herself like an animal. The sight made my heartbeat pound in my ears.

"You want to fucking die?" I shouted. The buck with the detonator in his mouth flinched.

Clover exploded.

It wasn't like a grenade or anything I'd experienced. In fact the detonation was a sharp 'Krak' noise. The explosion was focused by the heavy metal collar. After all, nopony wanted a slave whose death might injure the owner. The resulting blast sent a pink hourglass fanning out above and below the collar as everything between her head and shoulders was atomized. Pieces of hot pony mixed with the rain.

And that was the point at which everything transformed into one red scream.

I took one look at the one with the detonator in his mouth, hit S.A.T.S., and with three magic bolts of energy vaporized his head and the detonator too. I barely felt the impact on my left; the stallions there had taken advantage of my blind side to rearm. My barding soaked up the impacts, and my jellied bones bent rather than broke; a small blessing, I supposed, as I spun around and levitated out my shotgun. Black antipersonnel shells were loaded, and the flechettes stripped pony flesh from pony bone as I blasted cloud after cloud of razor sharp darts into the stallions.

The plan now was simple: kill every last one of these fuckers before they could get to another deton-- shit! I twisted around, looking for the leader. Where was he? Red bars were milling about all over the place. Green flashes and white arrows of magic announced Glory and Lacunae's arrival. I just had to find the leader. If there was another detonator, he'd have it!

I figured the most intact wagon would be his, but they were all pretty thrashed. I ignored the

bullets biting into me; the burning pain helped me focus as I reloaded the antipersonnel rounds. I saw a door closing and raced to it, ramming it open with my shoulder. A stallion was trying to hide under his bed! Not the buck I needed, though!

I grabbed his tail in my teeth and yanked him out. "Where is Collar?" I shouted, glancing at his own hoofcuff cutie mark. I kicked him hard onto his back. I wanted to kill him then and there. I pressed my shotgun to his crotch and screamed, "Where is he?"

"Next door!" he cried, losing control of both his bladder and bowels as he sobbed. "Please don't kill me!"

I wanted to. I wanted to kill every last one. Chapel didn't need to sell ponies. Riverside didn't. Megamart didn't. Hell, I hadn't even seen a slave collar in Flotsam! If other places could have society without this shit, then so be it.

But I'm not an executioner. I didn't kill Roses. I wasn't going to kill this one. But Celestia save me, I *wanted* to.

However, I couldn't just trot away either. The shotgun butt on his reproductive equipment might have been excessive, but it wasn't fatal. He curled up, whimpering. "Get another life. I see you like this again and you're paint!" I wasn't sure if he understood me, curled up and sobbing like that, but I'd wasted too many seconds on him. My hooves slipped out from under me as I skidded on the wet asphalt, my braced limbs flailing in the air as I struggled back to my feet. My friends were shouting for me, but I couldn't wait. I couldn't listen. And I charged into the last wagon, slamming it open with my shoulder.

Collar turned to face me, snapping a bomb collar around his neck. His eyes were hard, his scowl contemptuous... but his smile was triumphant. I panted as I lifted the gun, looking for another detonator. There wasn't one. "Selling yourself now? Does that mean somepony is actually going to listen to me for a change?"

"You scrapped my only detonator." Why didn't I feel any better as he reached up to the clasp of his collar? "Ever hear of linked collars, Security? Without the detonator setting them off... if one goes off... they all go off." I felt a sensation like I'd just had my belly sliced open and everything had tumbled out.

"Don't you want to live?" I asked desperately as I took the gun off him. I only had one or two magic bullets left in me. Could I take him out with two to the head? ...did I want to risk it? "I'll let you walk out of here! Right now. I'll fucking pay you!" I shouted at him. "I got six thousand caps on me right now! Just... don't!" If I killed him, would it go off? Did he have to open it or yank hard enough?

He spat on my chest. "You killed my son just now out there, Security. And you've killed my daughters. You've destroyed my home. Just like that. Was it hard for you? Did you even work up a sweat when you came and judged us?" he replied as he stared into my eye. I knew that fucking look, and brought the shotgun back around. "You should have just walked away, Security." I pulled the trigger as his hoof jerked hard on the bomb collar. The boom mixed with a sharper *Krak*.

And the sounds of popping filled the air outside. I stood petrified as Collar's decapitated body swayed and collapsed. I stood there, spattered with blood like rain water. My lip trembled. "I would have let you live... I would have paid you... damn it..." I clenched my eye shut and covered my face. "Damn

it!" I yelled into my hooves.

No matter what I did... no matter what I tried... the Wasteland won. It killed a little more. It cut a little deeper. The Dealer just looked on at the far side of this little hovel, and I screamed as I pointed the shotgun and unloaded every round into him. When the gun was expended, I loaded explosive rounds next; I didn't give a damn what they did to the condition of the weapon. Again and again the shotgun roared as I destroyed everything in sight. I didn't care if there was life's supply of Wild Pegasus in here. Everything was blasted. Incendiary rounds lit the bed on fire. The stove was soon ablaze.

For a horrible instant I wanted to stay in there and burn too. Then I smacked that idea and myself for thinking it.

I couldn't do this. Not now. Coughing and hacking, I staggered away. Slowly I stepped out into the rain. Step by step I walked towards the wagon trailer that had held the slaves. How many had he been able to save? How many... I saw Glory and Lacunae huddled around P-21, keeping the rain off him. Scotch Tape was being violently ill.

No other blue bars. Not a one. If there was a survivor, they'd fled out of range.

Fallen Arch was a slaughterhouse and I had been the butcher. Had I just walked past... no, that would have perpetuated this. So now was quick atrocity okay if it stopped an ongoing one? I walked slowly to P-21 as he shook so hard that Glory could barely get the Med-X into him. His forehooves had been blown off. Blood was painted across his face. He stared up at me, tears running down his cheeks. "I tried... I really tried..." he whimpered. "I didn't let them die, Blackjack. Please. Please believe me."

Did he think I would believe he'd just stood back and let their collars be detonated? As if I'd ever think he'd do such a thing...

As if he'd ever do such a thing...

No. Don't think about it. I couldn't say a word as Glory injected him with Hydra. She didn't raise the smallest concern or complaint; P-21 needed his hooves back. A little taint was a small price to pay. The poison spreads a little more.

I looked at the bloodsoaked bodies. Pony blood flowing like a river out the door. Pony blood mixing with the rain... Flowing out to meet the river. I'd never been happier for the rain. Never. It washed everything away.

Afterwards, I had to do something for the bodies, but I was at a loss. The slavers were carrion, but their victims deserved... something! Ponies weren't exactly flammable... there wasn't any ground suitable for burial. The thought of dumping them into the river chilled me even more, but it might be the only thing we could do.

Then Lacunae stepped forward and her horn glowed. "What are you doing?" I asked softly.

"What a Goddess should," she answered, and the first body lifted in her magical grip and started floating higher and higher over the river. A red light atop the massive war wall surrounding the Core grew brighter and brighter, and then a beam struck the body. For a few seconds a star burned over the river before the ash was scattered.

Then another star. Another. Another...

Another...

Lacunae was gracious enough to tend to the fallen slavers as well. She was a better pony than I. There'd be one corner of the Wasteland devoid of bones. Glory had to do the scavenging, and she managed only a hoofful of bullets and caps. To be honest, I couldn't care less. I just wanted to get going. I was sick of the rain all of a sudden. Sick of the blood. Sick of everything.

* * *

It wasn't my fault. I knew that. It wasn't P-21's, either. He wouldn't have lost his hooves and nearly his face if he hadn't been trying to take the collars off. The fault lay with Collar. He and the others had decided years ago to engage in selling out their own. It didn't matter if they justified it as simple survival. You could justify anything if you worked at it long enough. They'd set up a community based on an atrocity and then had the misfortune of me trotting along.

So why did I feel guilty? Was it because I'd been cocky, striding up there all brash and bold? They ought to rename Dash 'Blackjack', then. I could have stalled longer. Heck, I could have pulled out... but would Collar have planned something once he knew that I was around?

The Dealer walked beside me, but I wasn't talking to him and he wasn't talking to me. He'd already said his piece. There wasn't anything more to add. 'You're afraid of screwing up...'

Why? I was so *good* at it.

Clearly, I'd never really appreciated what 'inches' of rain was really like, but at least we were fortunate enough not to have to measure pounds of ice. The only sign left of the hail was the occasional overlarge ice chunk melting beside the path. Still, the rain was strong enough that nothing else was stupid enough to be following the river in it. We were passing the twisted remains of a marina, the boats and docks and pilings all tangled together in heaps from the river's powerful flow.

The rain was so heavy that we almost missed the sign. That was a trick in and of itself given its size; it was painted over a billboard that had slid down the face of an apartment building. Somepony had painted, in deep red letters, two words.

Hoofington Rises.

I felt a prickle along my spine and glanced over at the Core. Hoofington Rises? A slogan from two centuries ago reappearing here? Now? The paint wasn't weathered much. My friends watched me as I trotted towards it and put my hoof on the red letters. No one paints a thirty-foot-wide, twenty-foot-tall slogan randomly. "Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern, snapping me out of it. We were getting soaked. Well, except for Lacunae and Scotch, of course.

"Nothing. Just... don't you think it's weird?" I asked, and Glory gave a crooked smile in response.

"Blackjack, we just escaped from a sporting goods store that was killing us with some sort of arcane device. Yesterday, we met a two-century-old pickled pony in a jar. And the day before that..." She trailed off, glancing at Scotch before she coughed. "Anyway. My wierdometer's been busted for some time now." She laughed as she nudged my rump, then frowned. "Actually, I've never had one. I

mean, what would it detect, and how would you scale it..."

"I get the idea, Glory," I replied with a smile, the first little smile I'd given in hours.

"It's just a sign, Blackjack," P-21 said quietly as he flicked his mane, trying to shake the water out of his eyes. He still had little pieces of pony in his hair, but at least he still had his hooves and his face.

"Yeah," I muttered, giving the sign one last long look before continuing along the hoofpath that ran above the wave-bashed marina. Just a sign...

* * *

"Okay. It's official. Hoofington gets two hundred inches of suck my dock!" I muttered as we continued north while the river curved away to the west. The buildings were changing from fancy shops to more businesslike structures. Most were five or six stories; nothing compared to the towers in the Core, of course, but tall compared to what we'd been seeing for the past while. We were going slightly uphill, which, combined with all the rain pouring down on us, meant that half the time it was like we were trying to wade up a creek. The storm drains couldn't handle all the water, and so it was surging and trickling around us all over the place. I was up to my knees in the cold flow.

Then the ground exploded.

Of course it exploded! Everything spontaneously explodes around me! Pipes! Vertibucks! Mares! Hell, I made Deus explode twice! So, really, I should not have been as surprised as I was by the missile blast that knocked me off my hooves and sent me rolling back till I hit P-21 and Glory. Lacunae, who'd kept herself and Scotch aloft, immediately raised her shield. Good thing, too, given the barrage of gatling gun fire that sprayed against it. I followed the blinking line of fire to a balcony...

Oh. Hello, Steel Rangers.

A pair of them. They were firing missiles and guns at my friend and the filly levitated alongside her. The mare's purple shield flashed white with every impact. Lacunae focused all her strength on keeping it up, and more missiles from one of the suits of power armor streaked towards her. The shield flashed again and again as she struggled to maintain it.

I'd seen Steel Ranger power armor before; frankly, I wasn't all that impressed... mostly because I didn't have any. But having some suits fire at me now, I had to admit that I really did not want to fight these ponies. The heavy metal seemed much more... substantial... than I anticipated now that it was firing at my friends.

Then the shield exploded as a blast knocked both of them from the air. Scotch gave a shriek and I spun as I reached out with my telekinesis to try and catch her. I barely slowed her, and I heard the crack of her landing hard. Lacunae screamed as bullets sawed through her hide while she tried to raise another flickering defense. Scotch Tape wasn't moving.

I chowed down on a tablet of Buck and charged at the cover of the first Steel Ranger. My inventory said I'd picked up some Flash from somewhere. Fuck it. I floated it out as I ran as fast as my clattering braces allowed and bit on the tube, letting the chem fill my lungs. Time slowed to a crawl as I

closed the distance. The Steel Ranger seemed to realize there was a threat other than my alicorn friend. I left the Flash-induced acceleration just in time to enter the slow time of S.A.T.S. and toggle four shots to the Ranger's skull.

The first blast blackened her armor. The second shattered the glowing eyepiece. The third opened a foot-long crack in the side of the helmet. The fourth peeled away a jagged spur of metal. I saw pink skin and a terrified blue eye staring back at me as the targeting spell wore off. I pushed hard, my Buck-infused body lifting and shoving. I felt like I was an orange mare pushing over a fully loaded apple cart. One brace gave beneath my barding, but still I lifted until the whole suit of armor fell over with a metallic crash. Vigilance pressed against that eye as I stared down at her.

The Dealer stood a short ways away. *Pull the trigger*, his solemn face seemed to say. What's one more body? You bitch and moan about the dead, so make some more. Ponies fall like rain in the Hoof. Pull the trigger. Do it.

I'm so sick of bodies.

"She's okay, Blackjack!" Glory yelled. My eye bored down into the Ranger's. One more body. One more. What was one more?

Be kind. Do better. Be strong. I had one Dealer and four ponies all fighting with the overwhelming urge to light a bonfire. But slowly, bit by bit... I reasserted my control.

"I don't want to fight you," I said slowly, my voice trembling. "I don't want to kill you. So stop fighting me... please..." I didn't quite trust myself as I pulled the gun back. She slowly rose to her hooves. The armor gave a pink flash and repaired itself before my eye. If there'd been a chance to kill her... it was gone now.

"Salad? You okay?" asked the second Ranger as I backed off. For a moment I was certain I was finished. The other stood on a balcony above us, still raining bursts of gatling fire down on Lacunae. Her magic arrows had gouged holes in its armor, but it still fired.

"Hey, knock it off, Radishes!" boomed the first to the other as she rose. She had a missile launcher and the biggest machinegun thing I'd ever seen. It looked like it fired grenades; the only guns I'd seen that were bigger had been Deus's cannons and Gun. The other was armed with a gatling gun and something... was that an IF-100 miniature howitzer on her other side? I'd only seen one in the Ironshod Firearms Special Edition Catalogue! "These aren't Flashers or Reapers... I think." I gave a terse nod. The Buck was making my heart beat so bad that it felt like it was going to crawl out of my chest.

"But that one's an alicorn, Fruit Salad. Aren't we supposed to kill those on sight?" said the other as she jumped from the balcony and landed with an easy crash. Somehow that simple, agile, and carefree act scared me even more than the guns. The howitzer flipped out as she spread her legs, bracing herself. Suddenly, that feeling of them not wanting to fight was diminishing rapidly. "I bet Brown Betty can get through that shield."

I rose to my hooves and shook myself hard. Think, Blackjack! What was a good excuse for my friend being... different? "My friend isn't one of those... ah... monsters," I said as I pointed at Lacunae, who looked back at me in surprise. "She always said she wanted to be like Princess Luna and she came across some killing joke!" I grinned, trying to will them to believe my flimsy lie as I added lamely, "We

came out here to get away from those... monsters!" We were doomed...

"Er... that's right," Lacunae said, looking down at me in some confusion. "Call me... Luna."

The pair looked at each other, and then Radishes shrugged and Brown Betty retracted and folded in. Fruit Salad still seemed to be regarding us suspiciously, though. "Well, best stay away from Ironmare. Actually, it's best if you turned around and went somewhere else. Anywhere else. This whole area's a warzone. Who are you ponies?"

"I'm Security, and these are my friends," I said as I gestured behind me. "We're actually looking for the Steel Rangers. We need to talk to somepony in charge about this war." And find some way to stop it. They looked at each other, as if trying to decide whether to believe me or not.

"Well, that's not me, ma'am. The pony ultimately in charge is Elder Crunchy Carrots aboard the HMS *Celestia*, or you could talk to Star Paladin Steel Rain at the front. Otherwise, you'd need to see Archivist Napalm Strike." Fruit Salad pointed to the north with a hoof. "I've got to warn you, though, we're not exactly open to outsiders, so your business had better be serious. It feels like we're fighting half the Goddesses-damned Hoof right now."

"They could talk to him," Radishes said. "I'm sure he'd be willing to listen. He's always willing."

"Him? Him wh--" Fruit Salad began, but suddenly shook their head hard. "Oh no, not him! That's crazy, Radish! That guy's a nutcase!"

"Who's a nutcase?" Honestly, with my track record, I might be better off with a nutcase. And boy, that wasn't saying much, was it?

"Paladin Bombs," Fruit Salad muttered. "Personally, I'd stay away from him. The guy is a complete freak."

"You just don't like him because he's a unicorn," Radishes chided.

"No. I don't like him because he's a *nutcase* who sawed off his own horn to become a paladin," Fruit Salad countered. Okay, maybe the nutcase option wasn't so good.

"Not that this conversation's wandering into Freakyville territory, but what are you two doing out here?" P-21 asked as he looked at the pair.

"Well, you're not Reapers, so I suppose it'd be okay to tell you. We're skirmishing, trying to keep all the gangs from organizing. We're outnumbered but not outgunned," Fruit Salad said, and the machine gun thing let out an ominous 'klak' as something loaded. "We were playing tag with some Flash Fillies near their base when they hit one of us with a spark grenade. Completely fried his systems. He's probably dead. Of all the gangs, the Flashers pose the biggest threat with their shock mines. One or two of those and we're sitting ducks."

"He's a male. You know Flashers like to play with them before finishing them off," Radishes commented. I gave an inward groan. Doesn't anypony just have *normal* sex in this place?

"Are they holed up in the Flash Industries building?" Glory asked as she looked from the Rangers to me.

"Yeah. That's their main base. Not a settlement, just where their leader, Diamond, issues orders."

"Anything else? Numbers? Do they keep slaves?" I asked, and saw P-21 wince.

"A few dozen, and no, Flashers don't do that slavery thing. Robbery and release, mostly, unless you're a buck. Or a Steel Ranger. Then they'll dust you," Radishes said. "Not at all like the Burner Boys. Those freaks are sick. They like taking families, wiring up mom and dad, and sending them out as suicide bombers. Otherwise they'll cook the kids. You see anypony wearing red, kill 'em."

"Red, it's dead," I muttered with a small smile. "I think I can remember that. Any other gangs?"

"There's the Halfhearts, though they're mostly out west. Grimmiest damn ponies you're ever gonna meet. And the Highlanders, but they're not as bad as the rest. You can find them off to the east. Some zebra tribals or something to the northeast. Ghouls, of course, creeping all over the place. And the damned Enclave." Radishes said, and at once Glory stepped forward.

"What's that about the Enclave?" the gray pegasus asked with a worried frown.

"They're skulking all over this fight. Not really picking a side... we think. But there're a lot of Reapers with bright and shiny energy weapons and spark grenades," Fruit Salad said as the Ranger looked to the north. "Might be from the Fillies... but they usually don't give away their toys. If you could confirm it, I know Star Paladin Steel Rain would appreciate it."

I chewed my lip in thought. "I'll see what I can do," was all I could say. I'd have to get a better look at what I was dealing with before I could commit.

"Thanks. Gotta get Hoofington under control. Like the star paladin says, it's our duty to safeguard the technology of the kingdom. Can't let these Reapers control the city," Fruit Salad said, turning to Radishes. "Come on. Let's go play some more tag." The two disappeared into the rain.

We took some cover in some ruins, mostly to get out of the rain again but also to talk. A stream trickled through the middle of the blasted shop we were using. Not exactly a place to hole up for the night. "So... is there a plan?" P-21 asked softly, rubbing his leg idly as he looked me. His eyes seemed to say 'more of a plan than at Arch?'

There damn well better be. "We need to get in good with the Steel Rangers," I said as I looked in the direction the two had gone. "Otherwise, they're never going to listen. And hopefully, if we make them like us before telling them, they'll forgive us for starting this fight in the first place."

"And what if the war doesn't stop?" Glory's question was one I didn't want to try to answer. Her eyes fixed on her hooves before she glanced at me and continued, "Are we just going to walk away and let them rip each other to pieces?"

I sighed, rubbing my temples. I wished Rampage was here. She'd been our guide, of sorts. She could tell us about the Rangers and what their goals were. Give me a hint if I should back them or not. But she wasn't, and I had to make a choice again. I looked at Scotch, who had busted a leg in that fall. It could have been her neck. Fortunately, Lacunae was healing her snapped limb. Another injury for following me.

It was scaring me to death.

Just hours ago I'd made a choice and it'd killed thirteen mares. It hadn't been my fault, but there was no denying that I was the instigator. And while I didn't feel that it'd been wrong to try and do the right thing...

I closed my eye and watched Clover's head blast apart.

"We'll worry about that later." I looked at Lacunae for a long moment. "Do you know anything about the Steel Rangers?"

Lacunae huffed softly, looking sour. "The Steel Rangers are a relic. Two hundred years ago, they were founded by Applejack for the war effort. They were elite shock troops of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. When the bombs fell, they weathered the attack better than the rest of the military and government. They retreated to their bunkers, made their silly oaths, sealed them up, and waited. When they finally crept out of their holes, they found themselves a formidable power. However, their ideology utterly prevents them from assisting others."

"Why is that?" Glory asked in concern. I could understand why; swap a few words and you'd be talking about the Enclave.

The alicorn fluffed her wings in irritation. "They have the capacity to be protectors, but their ideology is to be stewards of Equestria's technology. Their oath is to protect technology, not ponies who would benefit from it. Over the last two centuries, that ideology has defined them. Most couldn't care less about the scum living here if it meant hoarding more weapons and technology from the past. As I said, they are a relic. Outdated ideals and misguided motivation. If they had known about EC-1101, they would have gutted your stable to possess it and then locked it up somewhere rather than use it."

Great. Another group looking to get my PipBuck. I supposed the only reason those two didn't pounce on mine was because it didn't look anything like a traditional PipBuck. I was surprised at her bitter tone, though. "Sounds like you have a problem with them."

Lacunae blinked, then shrugged. "They're not capable of fixing anything. The Goddess wishes to protect pony life, transforming it into a form able to withstand the threats of the Wasteland. Steel Rangers simply pillage and hoard. They also recognize that alicorns are the future of the pony race and so persecute us with extreme prejudice. Most of our losses have been to their weaponry." She looked thoughtfully in the direction the two had gone. "I was honestly quite surprised that they believed you, but I suppose your excuse was explanation enough for why one of my kind would be alone with a group of ponies."

Well, that was going to be a problem. And the fact that these Flashers were not going to mix well with P-21...

I closed my eye as the rain streamed in ribbons around me. I felt something crumpling inside me as I leaned back against the cracked wall. It was like I was a bag that was slowly deflating. The Wasteland had beaten me once in 99. Almost again out on Star Point. And now I felt it creeping through me. Insidious thoughts. Horrible thoughts. It was like there was a battle going on inside me and I was losing.

Because I didn't want my friends hurt anymore.

"What are you thinking, Blackjack?" Glory asked as she knelt beside me, shielding me with her wing. I opened my mouth and closed it again. It was like a band slowly constricting on my brain. I had to say it, but it was like the words were in some strange language.

"I..." I rasped, then choked. I couldn't say it. I had to, but I couldn't.

"She doesn't want us to go with her," P-21 said quietly. I kept my eye squeezed shut and nodded. There was only the sound of pouring rain.

"But... why?" she asked in a hurt tone. I would rather get shot in the face again than hear that note in her voice.

"I don't want to lose you. I... I don't want you hurt. None of you." The words were like poison dripping out of my mouth. "I don't want P-21 to have to fight mares like... like the Overmare. I don't want Lacunae killed for being what she is. I need to keep doing this... but you... you don't. You can leave... go back to Chapel. Go have a life that's not following me around getting shot up." I kept seeing Clover exploding before my eye, seeing Glory's wing peel away, seeing P-21 raped by the Overmare, me ramming Vigilance into Lacunae's mouth. Images coming again and again. I imagined a small pegasus with a sweeping mane holding me like Mom.

"You don't have to come with me. You don't owe me anything... I'm just... I'm scared. All right? I'm scared to death that I'm going to get you all killed because I screw up." I saw Clover exploding as if in S.A.T.S., the fear in her eyes frozen between the instant she was alive and the instant she was dead. It was as fast as that. One mistake. One moment of random chance. I had no idea who she was... just a name and a face and a death because I couldn't keep a cool head.

Nopony spoke for the longest time. Then Glory asked faintly, "Do you think I have a life in Chapel?" I turned to look at her, to ask how she could say that. Her moist eyes stared into mine. "My life is with you. Not in Chapel. Not even in Thunderhead. With you."

P-21 just rubbed his hind leg, looking down at the knee. I still remembered the sound of Daisy's baton striking him. "I... can't make it here without you, Blackjack. I thought I could, once. I thought that, once I was out, I'd leave and find... something. Something better. And maybe there might be something... someday. But right now, you're the only thing keeping me... together. Maybe someday Chapel will do that for me. Maybe. But..." He trailed off and sighed. "Sorry. I'm not smart when it comes to this stuff."

"Stable ponies got to stick together," Scotch Tape said, swinging her limb experimentally. "Chapel was nice, and Virgo is funny. She just loved my PipBuck. But I want to be with you, Blackjack. You're the closest thing to family I've got." Oh, that made me cringe inside, but P-21 didn't say a word. He just kept rubbing his aching leg.

"Damn it! Being with me is going to get you killed!" I snapped at the four of them. There was no answer right away. "I don't want you to die for my... my stupid quest!"

"There are worse things to die for," P-21 said quietly. "Everypony dies eventually. We could die in five minutes or fifty years, with you or on our own. You can't protect us by sending us away. Chapel isn't safer than anywhere else in the Hoof, really. Even 99 wasn't safe." Scotch sniffed and bowed her

head. The blue buck pressed his lips together and looked away from us.

Glory sighed softly. "I know that you're scared about losing us, Blackjack. I am too. But I'm more afraid for you. You want to help everypony so much, and you want to help us, too. Let us help you, Blackjack. If something bad happens... it happens. But as long as we can, we'll be with you."

I could still see their bodies. Lacunae blown to pieces. P-21 hanging from that wire. Glory's wing coming off. Scotch Tape lying so terribly still. "Alright. Well, let's learn from Fallen Arch. Get a good look at the place and see if we can come up with a real plan that's better than trotting up and saying 'Hello, I'm Security. Mind letting us through?'" See? I can be taught.

* * *

Flash Industries had at once point been the premier designer of arcane energy matrix devices, specializing in beam and pulse magical energy weaponry and protective energy fields. It was one of dozens of companies started and supported by the Ministry of Wartime Technology and was dedicated to giving Equestria a brighter, safer, flashier tomorrow. Tours of the building were every morning and evening, ten bits per adult, five for colts and fillies, foals get in free. I knew that from one of the hundreds of brochures that littered the ruins around the building. Said building was scorched, but the company logo still glowed brightly on the front face: 'FLASH', in white with rainbow lines underlining the name.

There'd once been several other buildings around the main office structure, but they had crumbled and fallen in on themselves and made a wall of rubble with the old front gate as the only convenient way through. The ten-story headquarters also had rooftop turrets. From the third floor of a gutted office building nearby, I picked out two entrances besides the front one. The front entrance had at least a dozen Fillies around it, but the second had only two and the third was unguarded.

Lacunae had taken a bath in some radioactive sludge we'd found in the office building's basement (and what it was doing there I didn't want to know) to regenerate her injuries. There was something fundamentally disturbing about the way she splashed it all over herself. No pony should have that much fun in magical waste. Once she rejoined us, I pointed out the unguarded door, letting her see the location through my scope. "Can you teleport us all to that little side door?"

"The distance is considerable, but I think so. They will be upon us quickly, however." There wasn't any cover around the door at all, and we'd be trapped.

Fortunately, I'd caught up with two ponies who'd be overjoyed to play tag at the front gate.

We went back down to the main floor and Lacunae trotted off to soak up a little more radiation while I explained the plan to Fruit Salad and Radishes. "That's not much of a plan, but if you're sure she can get you inside... well, we'd be happy to keep them nice and riled up out front. How were you five planning on getting out?"

"Let me worry about that..." Because *oh* how I was worrying about that. "Just keep them busy at the gate for as long as you can."

The pair nodded, and then Fruit Salad stepped closer. "Your friend... she really is an alicorn, isn't she?" she asked in a low voice.

I pressed my lips together for a moment. "She's my friend." That's all I needed to and would say

on the subject.

Fruit Salad shook her head. "Only in Hoofington. Good luck. I hope you get Turnip out of there. Radishes wants our brother back bad." Oh... saving her brother. Knowing how my day was going, I'd be lucky if I didn't shoot him myself.

Way to keep up the positive thinking, Blackjack.

We all gathered together on the third floor, Scotch Tape's PipBuck and my own clicking ominously from the radiation coming off Lacunae. I watched the gate through the scope. Glory was off to the side with Lacunae asking her some questions about her regeneration. Scotch was just acting nervous as she chewed on the end of her blue mane.

"It was my fault," P-21 said in a voice hushed with regret, and I slowly turned to look at him. "In Fallen Arch. I saw the collars were synchronized. And... I froze. I once read a method for breaking the synchronization, but... but just then... with all of them staring at me... I just couldn't think of it." He looked at me with his severe blue eyes. "They were so desperate to be free. Just like me. I tried to save one... just one. She was even younger than Scotch Tape. And... she moved. I jerked the collar and..." He sighed as he looked at his regenerated hooves. I just looked at him. He was blaming himself for Fallen Arch?

Of course he was. Because he was just like me. Smarter, way too serious, but just like me.

"It wasn't," I replied. "Collar put a collar on himself. Then he yanked it before I could stop him. I offered him every cap on me. Spite was more important than survival." Only in Hoofington, I supposed.

P-21 didn't say anything, but he gave my hip a little nudge with his. I smiled a little.

Then I learned how Steel Rangers played tag. Brown Betty let out a surprisingly soft 'krump' noise before the howitzer shell blew out a chunk of asphalt and sent the Flashers running for cover. Fruit Salad's missiles blasted at their cover, and that machine gun/grenade launcher -- seriously, how was anypony supposed to survive that thing? -- opened up with a line of explosive death. It didn't take long for the Flash Fillies to start returning fire with their beam weapons. Then they started yelling for reinforcements.

That was our cue. I nodded once to Lacunae, and there was an electric flash that blurred out the world. The distance was only a thousand feet or so, but apparently that was more than enough for Lacunae. The alicorn slumped; all of us had arcane soot residue on our noses and manes, and I had spots dancing in my vision. I checked the door; locked. I nodded for P-21 to get to work as we crouched down as much as we could. If this turned nasty, I'd just killed my friends...

No. A little blue rainbow-maned pegasus reminded me firmly that my friends chose to stand by me. And that even if this wasn't a great plan, we were still awesome for trying it. I took a slow breath, feeling that, at any second, a Filly would look back and spot us. Any second... okay, maybe Brown Betty was pretty hard to ignore, but twenty to two wasn't good odds. The Rangers were already falling back.

The lock clicked. I pulled the door open with my magic, and my friends darted inside. I hopped in last and we pulled the door shut. The narrow hall was strewn with junk, but nothing recent. Finally, we'd gotten lucky; it looked like nopony used this section of the building. It'd been picked through at least once, but despite everything, we scavenged up some junk that might be useful as we moved through the

choked offices.

Then Scotch Tape nudged a terminal and there was a crackle as the monitor flickered to life. A mare's voice started speaking, "...don't like it, Diamond. Using magic like this to kill our enemies just seems wrong. It's not a spell. It's a killing machine!" My ears perked. I knew that voice!

"So you're saying that we should limit our troops to guns while the zebras are free to employ whatever talismans they wish?" a mare said in brisk tones. "I thought that your ministry was all for arcane sciences. That's what you're for, right? That's what you're supposed to do. So why are you here, now, tying my hooves? Magical weaponry is the next evolution in warfare."

"I don't want the next evolution in warfare. I want the fighting to stop," Twilight protested.

"Darn tootin'. I don't much care for this business plan of yours 'tall. Finding faster and flashier ways to kill somepony ain't my idea of a good thing," Applejack agreed.

"Funny, because that is what our enemy is doing right now," Diamond said irritably. "We only have so many unicorns capable of combat spells. They are few and far between and are always targeted with extreme prejudice in battle. By making weapons such as this, we can give some of that power to earth and pegasus ponies. It could turn the tide and finish this war."

"I really hate to admit it, but it'd be a lot easier to fight if we didn't have to worry about lugging around boxes of ammo up there," Rainbow Dash said. "Not that we can't do it, but..."

Twilight's voice frayed in frustration. "But why can't we use something else? A nonlethal spell?"

"I agree," Fluttershy chimed in. "I vote for the nonlethal."

"Oh, so you Ministry Mares are going to use Luna's mandate to research a 'let's all hug' spell. Great," Diamond muttered. "The zebras are getting more creative with their weapons. This year they used the Pink Cloud in Littlehorn. Tomorrow, who knows? We need to return the balance of power to our favor. These weapons can do that!"

"Making a device that casts an incineration spell as a beam at the enemy is just wrong. And these other spells you're trying to incorporate? Lightning? Disintegration? Somepony needs to draw a line. Otherwise, we'll be the ones committing the next Littlehorn massacre," Twilight Sparkle said firmly.

"Twilight," rasped a rusty voice that made my mane stand on end. "You know what you agreed to do."

"I know. It's just..." Twilight trailed off.

"I don't like it much either, sugarcube. But she has a point. If zebras are using poison like at Littlehorn... well... compared to that, I guess this isn't so bad."

"I know... but... I thought I'd be researching new spells for the Princess. Not helping ponies make things to kill."

Diamond snorted and said derisively, "You'll merely provide some magical expertise, and nopony's asking you to put your hoof in personally. For instance, we're trying to find a gem that's better

than diamond for the spell matrix. Diamonds are useful but horribly expensive."

"You'd want something like a ruby or red sapphire, preferably a well tuned fire ru--" Twilight started to say in a perfunctory tone, then cut herself off. *"Oh..."*

"See?" Goldenblood said in his raspy, hacking voice. *"That's not so hard after all."*

"So, will you support Flash Industries, Applejack?" Diamond asked.

There was a low grunt. *"I don't like it... but all right."*

Diamond's sharp tone relaxed a bit. *"Well, I'm glad that's over with. Don't worry, Twilight. I'm sure that, with your ministry's assistance, Flash Industries will be able to explore... non-lethal options."* There were sounds of hooves trotting away. *"So many things to do..."* I heard her mutter before she trailed off completely.

"Well, that mare's as sweet as a case of rotten apples," Applejack muttered. *"Hey, Goldie. Why ain't Pinkie or Rarity hereabouts?"*

"I'm sorry, but they had other business to attend to. Rarity's meeting with media outlets and... and Pinkie Pie's been a bit... erratic in her organization..." The rusty voice broke into deep, wet coughs. It made me wince to hear.

"Goldenblood!" Fluttershy gasped. *"You're burning up. Oh, why didn't you tell me you were feeling feverish? We need to get you in bed to recover."*

Goldenblood drew a slow, wet, rattling breath. *"Your ministries take priority, Fluttershy. There is so much to do, and only I can do it. I'll be fine. Just get me to my hooves."* There was a pause and then a thud followed by deep tearing coughs.

"Is that blood?" Rainbow Dash asked hesitantly. *"Maybe you should go rest... you look half dead."*

"One would hope," he muttered.

"I'm taking you someplace you can rest, Golden," Fluttershy said firmly... or as firmly as Fluttershy ever said anything. *"If that's okay with you."*

He drew a shaky rattling breath, then muttered, *"You are... too good... for this world, Fluttershy."*

The coughing grew fainter and fainter. Finally, Twilight Sparkle said, *"Is he trying to work himself to death or something?"*

"I reckon there's something mighty powerful behind all that. T'aint fair. This war seems to ruin the best of us," Applejack muttered. *"Least Luna listened to him about postponin' the Gala. Shoot, having a party while trying to get all this stuff organized? T'aint happening."*

"Pffft. My ministry's all done," Rainbow Dash chuckled.

"Easy when yer ministry's not doin' nothing."

"Hey, we do things. Awesome things. Which is why we're done first." But I thought about the

conversation she'd had with Goldenblood and that ratty book from Rivets's ancestor. What was the Ministry of Awesome really planning? *"Anyway, all these stupid meetings made me miss breakfast. Want to go get some lunch? We can hang out together like old times!"*

"Oh... I can't. I only came here to meet with Diamond. I've got an appointment with the Princess in an hour and need to get back to Canterlot," Twilight Sparkle said awkwardly.

Applejack sighed. *"Yeah. And I got... let's see here... meetin'... meetin'... meetin'... oh, lookie here... another meetin'."* She sighed. *"I'm plum meetin'ed out."*

"I thought being in charge meant we could tell them to buck off and do what we want to do," Rainbow Dash protested. *"I never get to see you guys! I don't think the six of us have been together since we started this whole thing."*

"Well, it's important, Rainbow. All of Equestria counts on us," Twilight said reasonably. She really sounded as if she meant exactly that.

"Yeah. It's a peck more responsibility than just applebuckin', that's fer sure."

Rainbow Dash sighed. *"Just don't like it. Well, then, I guess I'd better get back to Cloudsdale... or something."*

"Cheer up, Rainbow. I'm sure that, when this war is over, we'll all be together again," Twilight Sparkle said brightly. *"You'll see."* The terminal crackled again, the screen now flashing an error message. No matter how P-21 fiddled with it, the terminal refused to work.

So Twilight hadn't been eager to adapt magic into magical weaponry. Had it been Goldenblood nudging her along, or had the flow of urgency just swept her into it? I didn't know, but I felt better about her reluctance. *I know ponies whose fuck ups killed millions;* I wondered if Spike might have been referring to Twilight just a little. I saw both points, and honestly, I probably would have been like Applejack. If the zebras were doing it too... ugh, but they'd be doing it because we'd been doing it! No wonder nopony stopped till everything blew up. What would have happened if everything hadn't blown up? Would we have had cyber alicorn dragon hybrids fighting alongside sentient megaspells against giant zebra-shaped robots?

We picked our way through the trashed offices. There were a few other terminals with snippets of information. Apparently there were shipments being misplaced; spark batteries and generators for stables 90 and 92 were missing. Heads were going to roll. Questions about the AER series and the swap from rubies to emeralds. A notice of a pony having a baby. A notice of praise for the mother. Five nasty comments about how she got that way. Honestly, didn't ponies have anything better to do two centuries ago?

As we picked our way through, radroaches scurried forward for a meal. My sword slipped out and smoothly dispatched them as silently as possible. There were a lot of red bars on my E.F.S. I didn't want to fight them all; I needed some information. If I couldn't find out where Turnip or the maneframe were located, we probably wouldn't make it out of here. Then I smelled a sharp, sweet stench. It looked like we were getting close to the Fillies' bathroom.

Idea...

It only took twenty minutes for one of the Flashers to get the call, and she trotted through the door in her white gang barding and rainbow-dyed mane. A tribute to Dash, or just coincidence? She walked over to the ditch cut into the cracked tiles and concrete as some mares called out, "Hurry up, Sparkler! You're gonna miss all the fun!"

The blue earth pony mare flushed. "Shut up! I'll be there soon as I'm done shittin'!" she bellowed back, then she clenched her eyes and got to work. Clearly somepony needed more fiber in her diet. She was so focused on the task at hoof that she didn't notice the glowing sword, horn, or eye till she finished. "Holy shit..." she muttered as the color drained from her face. Well, except for the strange red and green paint she had smeared on her hide.

"Nope," I replied, keeping the saber to her neck. "Now, I don't want to kill you. If you're smart... and quiet... I won't. Deal?"

"You're that psycho that beat up Fluttershy!" Sparkler scowled at me.

"No. That was a different psycho. I'm the psycho holding a sword to your throat." Honestly, did all slavers and gangers get their sense of survival taken away as soon as they signed up? "So, are you going to play along, Sparkler, or do I wait till another Filly needs to go potty?" Me knowing her name seemed to take a lot of the attitude out of her.

Even better, from the look that spread across her face a moment later, she'd finally clued to the fact that the sword was quite sharp and I did not look like miss happy pony. She came quietly along back into the offices and we had a little chat. Occasionally she lapsed into threats about how the Flash Fillies were going to dust me, but a little tap of the sword against her neck snapped her out of that.

Turnip was being held in the CEO's office, which was locked. Diamond, the gang leader, had the key. Duh. The maneframe was in the R&D lab. I was a cunt who was going to get my mare bits turned into a holster for her beam rifle. Okay, so not all the information was as useful as I might have hoped. And now that the other questions were done, we were left with the one of what to do with Sparkler. Clearly she was of the opinion that now we were going to slit her throat. We certainly took all of her stuff... but then what?

Wonderglue is aptly named.

With all four hooves glued to the floor and a rope gagging her, we left Sparkler where she'd eventually be discovered... hopefully after we were gone. Sooner or later, she'd chew through the rope.

We trotted onto the second floor of a large lobby, overlooking a floor covered in crates and containers. Magical projections showed the company logo in the empty space. There were mattresses all over the balcony, and spent beam cartridges were littered all over the place. To our right, I could see the battered doors of an elevator. Down below, I heard voices raised.

"I don't care, we can't move it until those Rangers are taken care of. If you want to speed things up then fly out there and help!" The irate mare was an albino unicorn who had streaked rainbow paint over her body and mane. She wore barding that was half armor and half something from that shop we'd rested in earlier. To be honest, I barely paid the slightest attention to her; all of it was on the buck in power armor she was speaking to: Operative Lighthooves.

"The Enclave is not yet prepared to engage in open hostilities with the Rangers, Diamond. Our

arrangement was with you. And you have yet to fulfill your end of the agreement,” the pegasus replied calmly and reasonably. He had two power-armored pegasus troopers with him, and Diamond had a half dozen Fillies around her. “We need those systems.”

“I don’t care what you need! I care about what I need! I’m the Diamond Flash of the Flash Fillies. My needs are more important. We need your vertithingy to haul some more weapons to Big Daddy,” she said as she swung her hoof imperiously. “Now stop wasting my time with stupid questions or you’ll never get those talismans.”

Talismans? What kind of talismans? What did Lighthooves want with talismans? And why wasn’t I putting a bullet through his head right now? Because it would get us all killed, Blackjack... and you’re not an assassin. Damn... two good reasons. Slowly, we moved along the balcony towards the elevator. Most of the gems in the control panel were dark, but those for the lobby, the second floor, and the top floor were lit. No matter how much I pushed the button for the top floor, though, the car wasn’t moving. Damn. I scowled at the keyhole next to the button. It was so tiny that I doubted a bobby pin would fit!

Why was nothing ever easy? We needed the key. Diamond had the key on her barding. Diamond was also surrounded by her gang, Lighthooves, and two power-armored pegasi. One of us would have to go down there and get it. “Any ideas?”

Just one. But it wasn’t going to be pretty.

“I hate this. I hate you. I hate everypony!” P-21 protested as Glory tugged the filly’s uniform further down over his flank. Lacunae was working some magic to help straighten his mane while I worked Glory’s manebrush through it. Scotch smeared some of the Flasher’s paint on him in an approximation of Sparkler, who stood frozen nearby watching with shocked amazement.

“You’re the only pony who can do this,” I reminded him. “My leg braces are too conspicuous, he’d recognize Glory, Lacunae’s too big, and Scotch has a PipBuck. You’re the same color and almost the same size.” His anger was just barely covering his fear and discomfort at the four of us dressing him up. Glory was taking great care not to set him off with a careless touch back there. “Go down, get the key, meet us in the elevator.”

“Get the key? Just like that...” he muttered. “Gee, you make it sound so easy.”

I sighed and looked him in the eye. “P-21, if you really don’t want to do this... tell me. We’ll figure something else out.” Maybe we could take them by surprise? That was a lot of ponies to try and surprise, though.

He sighed and looked away. “No. I think I can do this. Just... if something goes wrong... I don’t want to fail you again, Blackjack.” He rubbed his regenerated forehooves against each other.

“Then don’t,” I replied with a smile. “And don’t worry about failing me.”

“Yeah, worry about getting caught,” he muttered. There wasn’t much difference between him and Sparkler now, and the mare was just watching us with a disturbed look. He trotted to Sparkler, who tried to pull back, but with her hooves glued to the floor, well... He whispered something in her ear, and her eyes widened. She nodded absently, then started and glared. But that seemed to be answer enough.

"Some things never change," he muttered and then took a deep breath. "Just promise me... whatever happens... do NOT start shooting. All right?" That made me even more apprehensive about this plan. It would have been one thing if it were me down there, but... P-21 seemed to know what he was doing.

Please know what you're doing, P-21.

We moved over to the elevator as I watched her... him... damn, where'd he learn to walk like that?... walk down towards the meeting with a casual step. Just another Flasher coming up to back up her boss. Nothing unusual. Just turning towards her pockets...

"Bitch!" Diamond roared as she wheeled on P-21, the other Fillies turning on him. Instantly, I brought up my gun, sighted her skull, and nearly took her head off before I saw P-21 looking back at me as he was set upon by her guards. Then he was saying something about turning over technology to its rightful owners; I couldn't quite make it out amid the babble. Suddenly, Diamond's lips curled in a nasty smile.

"Oh, so the Rangers sent one of their little spies. Came here to free your 'brother'?" She snickered. "Sucks to be you. Now I have a new boy toy." I saw the tremor run through him and licked my lips in apprehension, moving the crosshairs from him and back to her.

Lighthooves frowned as he looked at P-21, then at the paint-smeared boss mare, "We need to kill him. Word cannot get out that I'm assisting you." Now my rifle was on him... but... ack, why couldn't I snipe eight ponies at once?!

His demand, however, prompted an even nastier smirk from Diamond. "If you want him dead sooner, then you'd better get that Vertibuck here and get these guns to Big Daddy. We're going to wipe the Rangers out of the Hoof once and for all. Then you can take your VC idiots back up to the clouds where you belong."

"And the status quo is preserved," he finished, frowning at P-21. "You'll be sure to dust him when you're finished playing?"

"Well, I'll have to share him first. Give the other ladies a ride. *Then* I'll dust him. It'll be over in a flash," Diamond said as the unicorn floated a key out from around her neck and passed it to one of her guards. "Take him upstairs. While you're up there, you can have the other one. I'm done with him." The unicorn guard prodded P-21 with her beam pistol and he rose sullenly to his hooves.

"So. You've got a Vertibuck to call and two Rangers outside to go dust. I have to make sure it's ready to move," she said, and then feigned remembering, "Oh yes. And get you those worthless talismans. Honestly, doesn't the Enclave have targeting talismans of their own?"

"Of course. And they are very carefully inventoried. I need talismans that are off the books," he said slowly and carefully as P-21 was marched to the lobby elevator.

"Enclave games. Honestly..." Diamond said as she trotted towards a guarded door with Lighthooves following in her wake.

The elevator doors beneath us chimed faintly and then opened. A moment later, they closed again. I tapped the gem beside the elevator doors on our level, and they opened. The Flasher stared at

me in shock just long enough for me to slam Taurus's rifle butt into her face. In seconds, we'd ponypiled into the now cramped elevator. I looked down at P-21. "You planned to get caught?"

"I asked Sparkler if Diamond always got first shot at the bucks she captured," he replied with a smile. "I figured it was an alpha mare... thing." I squealed in glee, hugging him tight. I love a smart pony! He gasped. "Touching! Too much touching!" I released him, both of us flushing.

The elevator rose up to the top floor, and my jaw dropped. I'd only come across a hoofful of places that were actually clean. But this wasn't just clean. This was... spotless! Shiny, even! I gawked at the sight of it and immediately felt my mane start to crawl. The reception room was polished marble, the walls decorated with glowing magical lines of red, green, and blue. Magnificent wooden doors bedecked with gems glittered before me as if tantalizing me with what lay beyond. "What is this?" I asked, then looked back at the concussed guard. Damn, now I wished I hadn't hit her so hard.

We trotted out into the pristine space. As clean as it looked, it still had the musty reek of below. There was a primly dressed mare behind the desk, next to the door. She looked up from her magazine and smiled pleasantly. "Hello. I'm sorry, but Miss Diamond isn't available at the moment. If you're here for an appointment, I will try to reschedule. I apologize for any inconvenience this has caused you." I gaped at her in shock, then arched my brow.

"Uh, we don't have an appointment," I replied lamely.

"Oh! Well, then, welcome to Flash Industries, home to many amazing and miraculous magical products. I'm sorry, but Miss Diamond isn't available at the moment. I'm sorry, but all senior staff are unavailable at the moment. If you would like to schedule an appointment, I will do so now. If you would like to wait, I would be happy to answer any and all questions you might have about Flash Industries until somepony becomes available to see you." The white mare smiled as she stared at me with her blue eyes. She reminded me of a cleaner, nicer version of the mare below.

"You're Diamond's secretary?" Glory asked with a concerned frown.

"I am an automated photonic answering service based on Miss Diamond's secretary, Miss Beryl. I'm afraid that Miss Beryl is out of the office at this time. Would you like me to contact her for you?" the projection asked brightly.

"No," Glory said quickly, then looked back at me. "Notice the resemblance?"

P-21 nodded, and I looked from one to the other. "What?"

"I'm guessing that Diamond downstairs is a descendant of Miss Diamond's secretary. The system thinks she's still alive."

I pointed at the mare behind the desk. "Then what is that?"

Scotch Tape trotted up to the mare and stretched out her hoof. The mare flickered in place as she smiled pleasantly down at the filly waving her hoof back and forth inside the hologram. "Cool!"

So she was a projection too, like the professor, only a machine. "I need to get inside Miss Diamond's office real quick."

"I'm sorry, but that's not allowed. If you would like to wait until Miss Diamond is available or

schedule an appointment, please do so now," the projection said brightly.

"What are you?" Scotch Tape asked. "A ghost?"

The projection regarded her fondly. "I am an example of some of the most exciting holographic projection technology developed at Flash Industries. Although we are well known for our line of magical personal defense equipment, Flash industries is also a leading developer of light manipulation magic. Thanks to our partnership with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, Flash Industries has worked to produce our latest and most exciting creations."

"What kind of creations?" Glory asked.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to be more specific. Are you interested in our personal defense equipment? Holographic technology? Magic shielding technology? Or other technology?" the projection asked in a slightly condescending tone.

I was about to ask about Project Steelpony when Glory said, "Personal defense technology? Do you mean weapons?"

The projection frowned. "Flash Industries dislikes the negative connotations associated with that term. Our personal defense products are designed with the intention of protecting our users from harm through the application of potent, pinpoint magical force. While most famous for our beam weaponry, we have also branched out into alternative magical effects. However, please be aware that such items must be contracted through our military or Ministry of Awesome sales representative."

So they didn't like the word 'weapon'? Surprise surprise. "What about--"

"What are holograms?" Scotch Tape asked, then shrunk back a little at my eye twitch and faint growl. "What?"

"Flash Industries has developed an exciting line of magical projection technology able to duplicate almost any image with ninety nine point eight percent accuracy. Utilizing multiple projection points, we are even capable of maintaining images when a single projection source is blocked. No more annoying shadows in your image! Combined with our shield products, we are predicting exciting new hard light products to be made available at Flash Industries in years to come." Her cheeriness was getting on my nerves.

"Okay. So tell me--" I started.

"Magic shields?" P-21 asked with a frown. I hissed through my teeth as my eye went flat. He's a smart pony, don't shoot him. He's a smart pony...

"Our latest and most exciting products to date are our magical shield products. By projecting a barrier of arcane energy, we have been able to protect vital military and government properties all across Equestria. While not available for private purchase at this time due to security concerns, we predict that within twenty years all ponies will enjoy complete personal protection through our magical shield products. Here at Flash Industries, we are proud to provide some of the strongest and most comprehensive shielding technology in Hoofington or abroad!"

"But it didn't have enough power," I blurted. "The Hoofington shield failed because it didn't have

enough energy.” I looked out the window and... looked at a perfectly intact city! It was even sunny. The Core rose like a cluster of smoky quartz. It even glistened. But... there was something off about the image. I stretched out a hoof and the entire window shimmered where my hoof penetrated. I felt grimy glass beneath it.

“I’m sorry, but to discuss specific technical inquiries, I’ll have to refer you to our engineering department. Would you like to make an appointment?”

I sighed, about to ask about Steelpony when I stopped at looked at Lacunae. “Well?”

“What?” she blinked in confusion.

“Aren’t you going to ask about other technologies?” I asked.

“Flash Industries isn’t only involved in products involving light.” I covered my face and screamed into my hooves as the projection went on. “We have numerous other projects all across Equestria, such as our partnership with Hippocampus Energy at the New Hope solar array, various energy distribution services with the Hoofington reconstruction effort, and work with the Hoofington Planetarium and Black Pony Mountain Observatory. We also--“

“Shut up! I’m here for Project Steelpony!” I snapped.

The projection froze. Uh-oh... Then she frowned. The mare’s voice changed to that of a deep buck’s. “I’m sorry. Please remain where you are until appropriate security personnel arrive. Proper authorities have been alerted. If you attempt to leave, then lethal countermeasures will be employed. We apologize for this inconvenience.” And that was when the alarms began to sound throughout the entire building.

Why did I have a distinct certainty that it wouldn’t take long for Diamond and Lighthooves to come up here and check?

The walls around us began to shimmer and coalesced into two glowing white alicorns. Beads of blue glowed at the tips of their horns as they approached. I hoped the goddess would be flattered as I raised the shotgun and blasted a round of buckshot at the ghostly apparition. The lead pellets passed right through it without effect. Glory’s beam rifle did, if anything, even less. Magical arrows penetrated without a ripple.

Then a blue light washed over us and... I yawned? Indeed, the lethargy was spreading through me with alarming swiftness. Even Lacunae seemed tired, and she didn’t have to sleep! Non-lethal weaponry, I remembered. It seemed like Diamond had been true to her word to Twilight. My eye watered as I struggled to keep awake, peering up at the blue light at the end of the alicorn’s horn. There was a tiny sapphire talisman floating at the tip!

I slipped into S.A.T.S. before my eye closed completely, queued up two attacks, and hoped for the best. My first shot ignored the giant glowing target and struck the blue gemstone squarely. It shattered with a tiny pop of blue smoke. The other fractured and I had to blast three times before a lucky pellet smashed the gem. The alicorns winked out. “Don’t worry about the alicorn. Target the gems,” I said as they reappeared, this time with red gemstones. Beams of burning energy swept across the reception room, and all of us save Lacunae dove for cover. Glory yelped as a line of char was drawn from her scarred flank down to her hoof. I swore, aiming for the fire rubies. However, a small shield

appeared around each, and my pellets were harmlessly deflected.

The crimson beams dug into Lacunae's raised shield, drilling through it at the alicorn and Scotch Tape. Suddenly, her eyes flashed. "Pitiful phantasms! You dare to challenge a true Goddess?" she declared. She reared and shouted in a booming, resonating voice, "BEGONE!"; from her horn erupted a stream of magical arrows that swept out to home in on the brilliant fire rubies. They not only shattered the two above the alicorns but sought out every gemstone emitting a hologram. When the storm passed, the reception room returned to the same rotted state as the building below. Two or three patches of light flickered anemically, and the once formidable doors were revealed to be an empty door frame.

Okay. Color me impressed. Lacunae looked at me and declared imperiously, "The Goddess shall NOT be mocked."

"I'm not mocking you." I looked at P-21. "Are you?" He shook his head vigorously. "You?" Glory's jaw just hung loosely open. I grinned sheepishly. "See? No mocking here!" She huffed softly, looking slightly mollified as she ruffled her feathers.

Head held high, she strode through the doors into an office decorated with more holograms. It appeared spotless, but you couldn't hide that reek of mold and mildew. "Turnip?" I called out as I stepped through afterwards.

"Hey baby. I'm right where you left me. Ready for another ride on the Turnip wag... oh?" The tan buck was tied spread eagle on a bed that looked very out of place among the holograms. From the looks of things, he was far from distressed... "I thought you'd be someone else."

"I'm Security. I'm here to rescue you," I said, a little skeptically. "I mean, if you're not busy?"

Glory covered Scotch's eyes with her wing again. The filly brushed it aside and looked critically at the bound buck. "Eh, I've seen bigger," she said flatly. For some reason, that seemed to blow something in Glory's brain as whatever she'd been about to say died in her throat. I was a little surprised too. Hadn't Glory heard of sex-ed? Enclavers were weird...

Turnip was a pretty plain looking earth pony buck: tan with a brown mane. He gave a small grin. "Well... you don't have to... I'm fine here."

P-21 sighed, covering his face with his hooves before he said, "I'm your replacement. She's throwing you to the rest of the Fillies, then you'll be dusted." His face added an unspoken 'idiot'.

Turnip's grin faded and he yanked against his bonds. "Oh. Ah... well... in that case... rescue would be very welcome, yes sir, thank you please!" I shook my head as I approached with the sword. He looked down at his other head. "Stand down, boy! Heh... It's got a mind of its own," he said as I smiled, turning the blade over and over as I grinned down at him. His eyes grew panicked. "Get down!" I rolled my eye a little.

"Don't worry... I promise not to take *too* much off the top," I said as I raised the sword to cut his bonds. Maybe the guy didn't deserve it, but... honestly? Staying here with these gangers for sex? Really?

At that moment, the elevator door chimed and the buck fell from my attention as eight Flashers spilled out and immediately began firing red beams of incineration magic at the lot of us. The bed was the

biggest thing for Glory and me to take cover behind, so we found ourselves shooting over Turnip as I tried to slash him free. Splitting my concentration wasn't doing much good for either accuracy. I swapped to the rifle, saving my S.A.T.S. for Diamond.

"Cut me loose! Cut me loose!" Turnip bawled as we blasted over him, keeping the Flashers back. Scotch Tape, Lacunae, and P-21 were behind the large office desk. Persuasion thumped, but there was a unicorn quick enough with a shield spell that the grenades bounced off and back at us.

"Shut up and think small!" I shouted as I reloaded my rifle. I managed to get through two of the bindings.

Then the elevator door chimed again and out stepped more Flashers. Behind them was Diamond, a gatling beam weapon floating above her and a sphere of shimmering light surrounding her. "That's enough! Time to dust all these freaks!" I jumped into S.A.T.S. and aimed four rounds right at her head... and saw a zero percent chance of hitting the extremity. I saved the charge and eyeballed the shot.

The bullets just flicked right off the shield. Shit, I hated being right sometimes. Diamond set herself and the glowing gatling beam weapon began to strafe over the entire office in a rain of red blasts. My barding sizzled and Glory barely ducked as the beams walked from one end of the office to the other. Some miracle reached out and shielded Turnip's bits from being vaporized. "You're dusted! All of you!"

Okay. Now I could use some Goddess badassery, but it was all she could do to keep her shield up protecting Scotch Tape and P-21. Suddenly, she winked away, taking both of them with her. Something thunked to the ground, rolling out from behind the desk. Diamond paused and suddenly shrieked, "Who stole my kills?!" That was a partial relief. But it also meant that the three of us were suddenly about to be dusted.

Then the holographic office flickered and died, revealing the scummy and decayed surroundings I was so familiar with. The gemstones set in the walls near the ceiling flickered and filled the room with a strange corona of light. "What... what are you doing?" Diamond asked as she backed towards the door.

Suddenly, a crimson beam flashed out from one gem and swept across the ponies in the doorway, each exploding in a cloud of glowing ash. Two beams. Four. Ten. The entire room was filled with flashing and flickering light. Scarlet lances darted back and forth, catching each Flasher in red lines of death. Two, three, sometimes four beams converged and transformed the Fillies into crackling piles. The beams were so intense that they melted criss-crossing lines in the floors and walls.

"What... what did you do?" Diamond screamed as she turned to bolt for the elevator. Every single line of burning death caught her shield. The collar around her neck crackled, and the diamond gem popped. An instant later she was transformed into a glowing pony-shaped collection of dust that collapsed silently in a heap. The beams flickered, and then a pony appeared. A very familiar pony.

Goldenblood.

"Well done, Blackjack. I'm so glad that I could meet you face to face," he said calmly, the illusion flickering before me. "I've been trying to make direct contact with you and EC-1101 for the longest time. So glad I could help you now." The golden eyes. The scarred white hide. The sincere smile...

"You're Goldenblood," I murmured softly. I was having difficulty standing... even breathing.

Here was the pony behind everything... the ministries... the projects... so many old secrets and lies that were fucking with my very immediate life. If not for him, 99 wouldn't have been exposed to the raider disease. If not for him, Luna might not have formed the ministries. Here was a motherfucker I could blame for everything!

He was after the program? I slowly approached the projection. So perfect in image. Showing up like this... now? So blunt and to the point? So... not Goldenblood. He should be schmoozing... trying to make a connection between me and him.

"What was the name of the mare you sent down the shaft?" I asked louder.

“Glory. Get Turnip out of here. Now.” I tossed my sword onto the bed. The hologram was already starting to distort. Golden seemed to be coming apart in little spirals. “I don’t know who this this is, but it’s not Goldenblood.”

This... thing... could have just burned through my leg. Instead, it was simply going to tear it off. I gritted my teeth, not giving it the pleasure of screaming as I felt my leg bones start to stretch. I wondered what would be the first to give. My 'bones'? Muscles? Skin?

Except that Glory wasn't running for the elevator with Turnip. She was running towards the desk. Running towards the small object that P-21 had dropped: the metal apple with a blue band.

“NOOOONONONONONONOOONONONNOOOOOONONONO!!!” it screeched and filled the room with a wild barrage of red. The floor began to sag beneath me from the myriad blasts. I could do nothing... nothing but scream. Nothing but watch as that force grew more and more. I felt something in my shoulder give. Tears ran down my face in my certainty that at any moment that she would transform

into so much dust.

But Glory was a pegasus; she might not have been a soldier, but in that moment she was faster and more graceful than I ever could have imagined. Even as the floor started to give, she moved without a single misstep. I don't think I'd ever seen her more beautiful. Leaping the last yard, she slid into the grenade and bit the stem. She pulled the stem free and threw the orb into the center of the room. Beams moved to cut me to pieces, burn her to ash, and blast the grenade to scrap.

A blue band flashed.

The electronic voice screeched and blurred into one long crackle before cutting off completely. The gemstones gave one last flash, then shattered in rapid succession. I dropped in a heap, my limbs screaming in pain as I lay there on the slumping floor. Slowly, I sat up. My right foreleg dangled at my side. I wondered if it even worked anymore. I looked at her, with the stem still in her mouth, and gave a weak grin as I wept at the same time.

Then there was a resounding crack and rumble, and my world began to fall. I just looked helplessly as Glory leapt back at me. I thought that I had seen her move fast before. Now time seemed to stretch out as I felt the collapsing floor shift and give way beneath me. Her wing beat as if trying to fly the distance. I was measuring time in heartbeats... and there was an eternity between each. She reached me, scooping me in her hooves. Lifting me... moving me to the side. To safety... almost.

My PipBuck lodged in a fork of twisted metal as the floor fell away completely. My right foreleg wrapped around Glory and held her tight as we dangled over the wreckage a dozen feet below. Sweet Celestia, it hurt. It educated me in all kinds of horrific experiences of pain! I wasn't even sure if 'pain' was what I was feeling anymore. But it didn't matter. Glory was alive! I was alive. I looked into the most beautiful eyes in all of Equestria.

I'd been mistaken. This was the most beautiful I'd ever seen her.

Then the floor below us gave a colossal shudder and broke free with a roar that made my ears throb. The entire building shook, and I felt the PipBuck start to twist out of that metal fork. The next floor gave. Then the next. And now the entire gutted shell of Flash Industries was full of collapsing concrete and steel, noise and choking dust. My eyes burned, but I couldn't look away... she was starting to slip from my grasp. I could barely breathe... could hardly see... as the collapse finally reached whatever depths were in the tower, probably crushing the maneframe to dust. Bit by bit, I felt my left leg stretch. The brace began to give way. "Hold on!" I yelled, unable to do more than hang there. I felt the PipBuck slowly working free.

I felt Glory slipping away.

I looked into her eyes. So calm, so beautiful. I saw her wing... saw the stub beside it... the final price for my failure in the tunnels. I couldn't speak. I could only pray she could read my mind as I thought with every fiber of my being, 'Don't let go.'

Please, dear Celestia... save me...

She smiled. The tension on my left leg suddenly released. She dropped...

And stopped just beneath me in a white glow. I clenched my eye shut as I focused every bit of

my will through my stupid tiny useless horn. I'd never been a strong telekinetic. All I could do was shoot things with it. But by Luna, I would happily lose my magic forever if I could just lift her up to the ledge. Take my magic Luna, but let me save her. Please. My horn throbbed in time with my worthless rotten heart. Do this! If I was ever going to do anything... do... this!

I dared to look. Slowly, she rose. A foot. Two. I reached out my foreleg to her as she stretched out hers to touch my hoof ever so gently. There was no fear in her eyes. Simply wonder. Simply love.

And then there was a terrible stillness in my horn, and the glow vanished. I was trapped in that horrible moment, staring into her eyes... feeling her hoof upon mine... and then...

Glory fell.

Her screamed name seemed to echo on and on for eternity.

Glory.

Glory.

Glory...

Footnote: 75% to level.

(Unending thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And tons of thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this chapter worth reading. Huge thanks for everypony that leaves comments that keep me writing. And any pony who wishes to help out the artist, bits can be donated through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com.)

(Oh... and... um... sorry...)

(Hinds here (I mentioned it in the comments, but I'd like duplication): We've changed Blackjack's magic color from red to white, so *please* let us know if you spot any instances we missed in earlier chapters.)