

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 30: Allegiances

"What I meant is, you should get to know these tribes and decide which ones you like and which you don't!"

She shot me. You shot me. You shot me in my face... What is it with people shooting me when my guard is down? That's twice in two days.

I hung above the abyss for what felt like an eternity, listening to the grinding, grating, shifting stone and tortured girders as they distorted under the stress. Nestled in a forked beam, my PipBuck kept me anchored and secured. Dust had transformed my world to gray as I hung there in that great and empty space. The entire world was empty. My eye watered from the grit, not sorrow. I was so far past sorrow that I wouldn't have been able to see it with my rifle scope. I was just so much more debris at this point. Not even a pony. Just meat.

The collapsing floors were obscured beneath me by the dust swirling in the air. Would I be forced to see her broken on the immense slabs of collapsed concrete? Impaled on the metal beams and pipes that littered the floor beneath me like shrapnel from some immense bomb? Or was she just gone completely, ground to paste in the press of rubble?

I felt as though Leo's beam had shot clear through me once more, and this time I didn't know how I was going to recover. I didn't even want to recover... but I had to. Somehow. I didn't have Glory to save me this time...

I told you, I'm sick of being useless all the time. I couldn't even help Blackjack against Blueblood. He cut me without even looking back, and I just sat there as he gutted her! I nearly got her killed! I can't do anything.

You caught me. You caught me again and again. Innocent. Naïve. Good. The first truly good pony I'd ever known. Who never stopped being good. Who never stopped believing in her people or what they stood for. Even when Lighthooves betrayed her. Even when she was branded. Even when her own sister forced her to adopt that ridiculous pseudonym 'Fallen Glo--'

I gasped and choked out a faint sob as I hung there. My chest burned from the dust I'd inhaled. Tears turned to mud on my cheek. Glory had never fallen. Never. I'd staggered between monsterdom and nobility with all the grace of an inebriated mule. She'd been my constant. And when I parted from her, I only wandered, looking for death. When we reunited, I had drive, purpose, and meaning. I had hope.

Don't do that. Don't tear yourself down like that... even if you're joking. I'm glad I was finally able to do that with you. I don't want to do it with anypony else.

She'd given me her heart and her trust. Most importantly she'd given me her forgiveness when I'd screwed everything up. It had been a precious gift; one that I'd squandered. I should have told her about the disease. I should have involved her instead of just throwing my PipBuck through the door and gassing everypony... and myself. I should have told her how I hurt. What I was thinking of doing. She'd

loved me completely. I'd shut her out.

I'm not a smart pony.

"H- hey? You still alive?" came a thin shout from above. Slowly, I turned my head, looking up at the tan and brown buck. My face was a glass mask; the slightest expression and I was sure it would shatter. He looked down at me from his perch on a narrow ledge. "Don't worry. I'll get you down." Though, from the searching, uncertain look on his face, I guessed that he was reconsidering the offer.

He hadn't been worth it. If it'd bring her back, I'd toss him down to the rubble below. EC-1101 hadn't been worth it. Saving Hoofington wasn't worth it. Glory was a million times more precious than anything else. He must have caught my look, because he shrank back a little. It was a joke, anyway; he couldn't help me. He didn't have a gun.

You were gone, and I was... I had nothing left, Blackjack. No family. No home! No Blackjack! Nothing! Do you understand? Nothing!

Yeah, Glory. I understand. I understand perfectly now. I dangled over the abyss now in complete silence and knew that the Wasteland had finally made everything square.

Then I heard the sound of beating wings and I looked down. My weeping, bloodshot eye widened as my breath halted altogether. Had a miracle happened? Had she... somehow... some way...

Then I saw the black power armor rise up from the swirling dust below. Like a demon from some hellish otherworld it lifted slowly till it hovered effortlessly before me. Then the helmet retracted, and the crimson features of Lighthooves looked upon me with an expression of faint satisfaction. I looked back. I didn't feel rage, or hate... I felt relief. It wasn't suicide if an enemy killed me.

"Hey," I said weakly as I hung like a doll before him.

"You truly are remarkable," he said softly. I didn't want his praise. I wanted four blasts from his Novasurge rifles. "Only you, out of all the ponies in the Wasteland, would drop a building on your enemies."

I didn't bother to correct him. "I didn't have a boat," I rasped softly, coughing from the crud in my throat. Let him ponder what that meant. "So... gonna shoot me? Sting me? Give me a flying lesson?"

"Oh, I would sooner destroy a rainbow window than an artist like yourself," he replied. "However, since I can't have you doing something stupid either..." And the stinger tail slipped out and jabbed me in my rump. A lethargy began to overtake me. "Please understand, I hold you in the highest respect."

"I am so going to kill you," I breathed quietly, almost in a loving whisper. "The second I get my magic back, I'm going to take your wings like you took Glory's cutie mark. You'd best kill me now, Lighthooves." I felt myself slipping away into unconsciousness.

"That would be the most prudent course of action, I agree. However, it's not part of the deal." I only hoped that I'd never wake. But of course, I would...

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Everything's big when you're little, and trying on Mom's things was a way to prove that I was

getting bigger. That someday I'd be all grown up and ready to take on my job as a security mare. I was going to be a pony who saved ponies! So I trotted out of Mom's room wearing her security barding and a helmet so big that it rattled around my horn like my teacher's bell. It was all I could do to not trip and f-- whoopsie. One misstep sent me sprawled out in a tangled mess of blue. I blushed furiously as I pushed back the face mask enough to see if Momma had noticed.

But Momma was crying. I'd never seen Momma cry before. It wasn't a thing mommas did. Most grownup ponies never cried because they were grown up and it was silly for a grown pony to cry. "Momma...?" She must have been crying because of what I did. I wasn't supposed to touch Momma's work things. Especially not her shiny gun. "I'm sorry, Momma. I didn't mean to."

She sniffed and looked at me with a small smile, even though she was still crying. "Oh! Oh, Fishy. I'm sorry. No, sweetie, you didn't do anything wrong." She spread her lavender forelegs wide and pulled me into a hug. Now she was laughing and crying at the same time, but apparently I wasn't in trouble. My shame transformed into confusion as she kissed my horn and wept in my mane. "You know Momma's friend Steam? Well, there was an accident."

Ooooh, accidents were bad. I knew this because I caused so many of them myself. Steam was always a funny mare who brought me highly illegal and very fun toys made from maintenance supplies. Steam also brought toys she took into Momma's room when she and Momma made all the oohs and ahhs and 'yes' noises doing stuff I wasn't supposed to know about till I was in filly school.

"Well, Steam was hurt very badly," Momma said as she nuzzled my ear.

"The medical ponies will make her all better, Momma!" I said, trying to explain the obvious. The medical ponies made everything better, even me when I'd stepped in a radroach trap poking around maintenance where I didn't belong. But when I said that, she shuddered and held me even tighter. "They can make anything better, Momma."

"Not this, sweetheart." Momma swallowed hard. "She's dead."

Dead? Dead. Dead! Dead dead dead dead. Deaded? Deads? It sounded like a stupid word. "What's that mean?"

"It means that she's not alive anymore. She's gone, and we'll never see her again," Momma said quietly as she hugged me tightly, looking with her sad pink eyes as she nuzzled me. Now I was starting to cry too. Gone? Gone where? And why? This was stupid! Steam made Momma and me happy! It wasn't fair that she was gone!

"Well, just... go and bring her back!" There. 'Nuff said. Momma could do it. Momma could do anything.

Except this. "I can't, Fishy. No pony can. She's gone into the everafter to be with the Princesses. So I'll see her again, someday." She sniffed. "Until then, I'll try to be the best pony I can be. So that when we meet again, she'll be proud of me." That didn't make any sense, though. If she was gone forever, how could Momma see her again?

"How, Momma?" I asked in confusion, blinking up at her. She stroked my mane gently as she hesitated, then smiled.

"Everypony dies someday, Fishy." I held her and heard her heart beating. And then I had the thought. That horrible thought that every foal has sooner or later.

"Even you, Momma?"

"Even me, Fishy." She said it so gently that somehow it hurt even more. Like a dress rehearsal for when the day came. "But as long as we remember how they loved us, they're never really gone. Okay, Fishy?"

"Yes, Momma, I'll remember," I'd promised. I'd forgotten a week later, till now.

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I came to lying on my side on a mattress draped on some ugly, rusty, wrought iron bed frame. When Momma had died, I hadn't really wept. So much had happened that I'd just been swept up. I'd always known she'd die someday, and as I'd gotten older we'd grown apart. I was the disappointing daughter, she the stern, authoritative mother. Why had we fallen into such stupid roles? What would Momma think of me now? Would she accept that I had no other choice in 99? That to save the stable, I had to destroy the stable? Would I even get to the everafter? I certainly didn't deserve it.

And now, I still couldn't weep for Glory. What would she think of me now, lying here and wallowing in... whatever ponies wallowed in?

I was stripped of barding, braces, weapons, of course; everything except my eyepatch. I was filthy everywhere that hadn't been covered by my barding. Somepony had fixed up my right foreleg; the joints ached, but nothing too terrible. It didn't matter. I wasn't going anywhere. There was nowhere to go. No reason. I honestly didn't even want to kill Lighthooves anymore; it'd be a bonus, but it no longer mattered. I closed my eye, feeling the bandages that'd been wrapped around my injuries. Somepony had patched me up while I was out. The place they'd brought me was just another filthy room somewhere in the Wasteland. It didn't matter where. No place mattered if she wasn't there.

Still alive without her. I supposed Lighthooves was going to question me, maybe torture me, maybe kill me... it didn't matter. Without Glory, a massive hole had been ripped clean through me; I no longer cared about what they planned to do to me. I missed her so much that my brain tormented me with memory after memory of her...

I could still smell her sweet, clean scent. Even in the Wasteland, she smelled clean. I could feel the gentle tickle of her feathers on my legs. Her legs hooked around mine. Her nose nuzzling my mane...

Wait...

I carefully lifted a hoof and felt the leg curled around my side. I looked at the cloud-gray feathers resting gently along my flank and lower leg. I felt the warmth of breath on my neck, and for the longest time I could hardly breathe. Slowly, I summoned the courage to turn my head and look over my shoulder.

Glory. Sleeping. Breathing. Warm and soft and wonderful. This was a dream. I was still unconscious. Or crazy... or dead... I slowly turned, and my motion made her stir. I held her in my rubbery hooves and pressed the side of my head to her chest. Her heart beat slow and steady and sure.

The greatest sound in the world.

Her purple eyes opened slowly, meeting mine. She stroked her hoof through my mane. I saw her lips curl into that gentle smile, and then she murmured softly, “Hey.”

Everything broke in a great tearing sob as I clenched my eye shut and pressed my face to her chest. If this was a dream, I'd never wake. If I were crazy, then I never wanted sanity. If this was the everafter, then it was more than I ever deserved. I couldn't talk or breathe or think. All I could do was feel and cry and cough and make a complete mess of myself. Finally, I wiped my snotty nose with a hoof and squeaked out my own “Hey.”

And then there were two crying, laughing, hugging ponies instead of one.

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It was a while before my brain reset enough to be able to handle things. I was pretty sure I'd feel some significant emotional bruising from the mood whiplash I'd just suffered. My brain was coming up with half-baked plots of putting her in power armor, with one of those force shield thingies, one of Rampage's regeneration talismans, and the HMS *Celestia* to keep her safe. Maybe there was a 'protection' megaspell? Nah. We could just banish the two of us to the moon and be safe forever and ever. Lacunae could teleport to the moon, right?

I wasn't sure if we were still in Flash Industries or not. Actually, make that 'not'. From the rotten maps on the walls marked with rain clouds and smiling suns, I gathered we must be in a weather station. I glanced at my PipBuck navigation: 'Weather Monitoring Station #1'. It made sense; weather stations had been used by pegasi before and had all kinds of transmitters. Since I didn't have my braces or my gear, there wasn't much for me to do but wait. He hadn't even left me with a spoon. That didn't let me do much besides cuddle next to Glory and try not to think about our immediate peril.

That was incredibly easy. Glory was alive! I was dancing with my mental ponies in glee. Even the Dealer had seen fit to grant us some privacy for a bit.

“So... *Lighthooves* saved you?” I finally asked, once I'd calmed down enough to be able to ask questions rationally. We were prisoners in some grimy building, captives of one of my friend's greatest enemies and looking forward to an unknown and ugly fate. I still didn't care. I could have blasted a hole in the wall with my happy feelings alone.

“Northstar, actually, one of the pegasi with him. She caught me when I... I fell.” For a pegasus, falling to your death had to be high on the list of ways not to die. She stroked her hoof along my dirty striped mane. I needed a shower... and probably help washing, given my bendy legs. I knew just who to ask. “Lighthooves decided not to kill me, though,” she said, adding after a moment's hesitation, “And I made a deal with him to stop him from killing you.”

“What kind of deal?” I asked with a little frown.

“Targeting talismans for your life. The deal was that he save you, patch you up, and let us go, and I'd tell Northstar where to find more targeting talismans in the Wasteland once we were free.” Glory bit her lip as she dropped her gaze. “It was all I could think of.”

“It's fine...” And, honestly, at that moment, I couldn't care less. I was sure that, eventually, I'd

find out what he wanted them for and be all angry about it, but right now I'd have giftwrapped the talismans for him.

"He's also going to check your PipBuck for any files or recordings you've made of him," she added as she sat up. "Do you think he'll honor his part?"

"I certainly hope so," the crimson pegasus said from the door. In his black Thunderhead uniform, he certainly cut quite the sinister figure. "I've come to the decision that, when it comes to Blackjack, one must proceed with care."

"You're a murdering bastard and a monster," I pointed out, scowling at him as I shifted myself into something like an upright position on the bed. For once, though, I didn't wonder if I could take his head off now.

"And you fed my subordinate to a raider," he replied smoothly, making Glory blink in surprise.

I gave a sheepish little smile. "Ah... I'd just discovered their 'laboratory'. I got a bit carried away." Glory looked as if she both wanted to hear more and would rather we never speak of it again.

"You tend to do that," Lighthooves said dryly. "In any case, let's not quibble over each other's degrees of monsterdom. Please believe me when I say that everything I've done has been to preserve my home and my people," he said calmly. I really didn't want to hear it. Give me my braces and gear. I had a shower for two to arrange. By the Goddesses, I would build a shower for two just for us if I had to. Just watch me.

"Yeah, I've heard it before. You're trying to protect the Enclave from the surface," I said with a dismissive wobble of my hoof.

"No," he replied evenly. "I'm trying to protect Thunderhead from the Enclave."

Huh? My confusion must have been particularly evident, and I was glad I wasn't the only one. Glory was frowning, looking just as baffled as I. He sighed, shaking his head. "I expected Blackjack to be ignorant of our politics, but you should know better, Morning Glory. May I rant a little? I think that, since you've seen fit to give me the role of a villain, I'm entitled to give a little explanation?"

I looked at her, and she shrugged in return. Finally, I sighed, snuggled up against her, and spoke. "All right. I could use a good story."

He chuckled. "I'm sure you'll find it quite dull. Once upon a time there was a great war, and over time the stresses of it pushed the pegasus people away from unicorns and earth ponies. When the bombs fell, the Equestrian Skyguard made the decision to fall back and close the skies. We'd already lost Cloudsdale. With the air full of radioactive dust, we did what we could to save ourselves. And yes, I acknowledge that, in doing so, we abandoned countless ponies, as well as our own Ministry Mare.

"For a time, there was great uncertainty as to what should be done. Food stores were running low. Fear was at an all-time high. Exploration teams that went to the surface reported only death and destruction. Everything was at a tipping point... and then the eclipse happened."

"E-what?" I asked with a little frown. The look of fear on Glory's face made my mane prickle.

Glory bit her lip. "It was an event... ten... twenty years after the bombs fell. The sun and the

moon... they were in the sky together. And then... then they came together.” I gawked at her in shock. They couldn’t come together. How could they ever come together?! “Pegasi thought that it was some final zebra superweapon. That the moon would burn up, the sun would go out, and the world would end. But apparently, it was only temporary. The moon had moved between the sun and Equestria... but the chaos was terrible.”

Lighthooves nodded grimly. “In the end, it was the military that restored order. Martial law was declared. Neighvarro and Thunderhead dispatched troops to quell the rioting. And when it was over, the military formed into a unified force that’s persisted to today. The Enclave. The Grand Pegasus Enclave,” he said with a mirthless smile, “and its lie of democracy.”

Glory immediately huffed, rolling her eyes. “Not this garbage again. You sound like some conspiracy theorist. The Enclave’s charter states that its leaders are chosen through civilian elections. There’s no way we’d tolerate its rules and laws otherwise.” Glory sounded disdainful, but I couldn’t help but think that Lighthooves was the kind of guy who’d be in such a conspiracy.

“Democracy is a tool used by the strong few to convince the weak many that *they* are strong. But every serious political candidate in the Enclave has ties with the military. Every political decision takes the military’s needs first and foremost. Every political challenger to the military drops out or gets arrested, discredited, or converted. And every twenty or thirty years, the Enclave faces a threat that only the military can resolve.” He chuckled as he looked right at me. “The last was the attack by the dragon Fiendfire against Shadowbolt Tower. What a coincidence that the Enclave had Raptors nearby conducting training drills and that your father’s team was prepared to repel the beast.”

“Are you saying the military knew Fiendfire was going to attack?” Glory said skeptically... but with worry. “That my father...”

“No. I’m saying the military encouraged Fiendfire to attack,” he said with terrible certainty. “An elaborate show to keep the public safe and thankful for the military’s protection. Your father was likely ignorant of the details. Heroism is so difficult to fake and plays so well to the masses. But when he returned with your mother... well... that threw the narrative completely off. Everypony was supposed to be celebrating the triumph of the Enclave and giving their thanks for the military’s protection... not starting to think about helping the surface.”

I snorted softly. “Okay. So the Enclave military are a bunch of dungbags. What does this have to do with you?”

“It’s very simple. It’s been thirty years since Fiendfire, and the military is looking for another ‘display’ to justify its existence. Neighvarro has been mobilizing its Raptors and Thunderheads for ‘training drills’. Personnel have been recalled and mobilized. The ‘academic experts’ have been chattering about potential threats. A surface power. Zebra forces. A reorganization of the griffins or another dragon attack. There’s even been speculation of a threat from the stars.”

“Please. No pony takes that sort of thing seriously,” Glory said with a dismissive wave of her... stump. The perfunctory gesture made Lighthooves look a bit ill before he recovered his usual level of snot.

“It’s not meant to be taken seriously. It’s meant to get the masses thinking about the possibility of an attack. Because ponies are increasingly questioning the need for the military. Why not allocate more resources to food production? Establishing new cloud settlements? Or...” He stared right at Glory.

"Helping the surface?"

Glory flushed and retorted "Well, why not?"

Lighthooves sighed. "The military has no interest in the surface beyond possible war resources, but when Thunderhead had the audacity to buck the mandate of the Grand Pegasus Enclave and actually allow civilians to go to the surface... it was a slap in the face of Neighvarro. It was virtually a declaration of independence." He chuckled before continuing. "For the first time ever, the public of Thunderhead violated the cardinal rule of the Enclave and did what they thought was right rather than what was in the military's best interests."

Lighthooves looked coolly at Glory. "And, in doing so, gave the military its next target: Thunderhead."

"What? Are you..." Glory rose to her hooves. "That's insane! The military would never attack Thunderhead."

"They could, they would, and they would enjoy it." Lighthooves replied calmly. "Neighvarro has never approved of Thunderhead's autonomous zone, and in establishing the Volunteer Corps, you have given them every incentive to attack. Word is getting out to other pegasus communities about the metal trading, and they are questioning why they don't implement similar programs. The moral questions that were so easy to ignore a century ago have resurfaced with terrifying swiftness. You very nearly sparked a revolution with blueberries."

"They'd need a pretext..." Glory muttered. "They couldn't just... just attack us! We're all Enclave!" She started to shake, but the thought was sinking in.

While Glory was trying to cope with the implications, Lighthooves looked on with a small expression of satisfaction. "So, what's your part in all this?" I asked.

He hesitated, then gave a minute shrug. "Mine is simple: to prevent a civil war within the Enclave at any cost," he replied evenly.

The shooty feeling was rising inside me. "So you made a biological weapon to wipe out the surface ponies?" And my stable.

"No," he replied firmly, shaking his head. "There are more than enough problems for ground life. The contagion we discovered at Yellow River wasn't appropriate to our needs. You see, we don't want to reclaim the surface at this time. If the military could no longer dictate food allocation, if it could no longer manipulate resources, then it would lose more and more control and power. And if we killed off all the primary threats, then there'd be no strong arguments against colonizing the surface. No, my goal was to adapt the disease to make it infect pegasi."

"You wanted a real plague to keep us off the surface," Glory said softly.

"Indeed. With the VC ended, the status quo could endure. The military will find or invent some other threat. Maybe that elusive dragon that finally left its lair for the first time in recorded history. And Thunderhead will endure until such time as it can lead the way to re-establishing surface life."

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. I did not want Lighthooves thinking about Spike.

"You think you should return to the surface?"

He nodded grimly. "I think it's imperative. The cold truth is that, while we might be surviving cut off from the surface at the moment, it is not a true solution. Entropy itself will one day bring down the S.P.P. towers, and that's if some outside force doesn't threaten them first. Food supplies will grow more and more scarce, the military will demand ever more resources from the public, and suffering will spread. Thunderhead is the only Enclave city with the vision and forward thinking to return to the surface and make a new reality."

"But... but then why aren't you supporting the VC?" Glory asked. "You should be helping us!"

Lighthooves shook his head, finally snapping in anger. "Haven't you been listening? The military is looking for a war! We are virtually defenseless! We might have the tower, but in a fight against multiple siege platforms and Raptor flights, we would be overwhelmed! Thunderhead would be placed under martial law and likely a third of the population will be shot for treason, including both our families." For an instant, through the cracks in his calm facade, I saw what drove Lighthooves: terror. He was scared to death of his own people. Then he took a long, slow breath, the cracks closed, and he was back to 'normal'. "I would happily... gladly... support the VC's aims... but only after Neighvarro's forces are eliminated. We've been carefully, systematically, undermining them for years, but unfortunately I doubt that we will be ready within my lifetime."

He gestured abstractly with his wings as he paced. "Ideally, I would have us return to the surface as a military venture. Controlled and organized to prevent as much disturbance as possible. A process backed by a new Thunderhead military after surface threats were eliminated and challenges destroyed and cowed by our superior firepower. And with Hoofington as a base of operations, we could expand slowly and deliberately across Equestria. Monsters like the alicorns and relics like the Steel Rangers would be eliminated, and eventually a New Equestria could be founded. Unicorns from Shadowbolt Tower would repopulate their race. Earth pony survivors would remain, given that they're as tenacious as radroaches. And the Wasteland will be no more."

"And taint?" I asked, making him blink, but then he gave a dismissive snort.

"Any medical or magical maladies will be dealt with in time. I'm certain that we'll inevitably find a solution." But somehow, I didn't see the Elements of Harmony arising from some covert military operation. And in the meantime, how many thousands would he kill? Worse... his comment about Spike becoming a 'war excuse'. Had those Neighvarro pegasi been watching the cave, trying to find out if Spike would be a suitable target?

Did I mention I really didn't like the Enclave right now?

But... did that put Lighthooves and me on the same side, then? At least temporarily? I didn't like *that* either... but he'd saved Glory... and me.

"So... now I've got to ask: why save us?" I glanced at my love and saw her worry. "I'm pretty sure that you've got other ways to get information." Glory looked shocked, but I remembered that pen in Miramare. They'd burned her cutie mark off to frame her and brand her a traitor and even manipulated her own sister to kill her. No, Lighthooves and I were not on the same side. We might have a shared enemy, but he was on one side of a line and I was on the other.

The crimson pegasus rubbed his nose with a wing, his eyes half narrowed as he looked at both of

us. "Yes, it might seem more prudent to interrogate you, extract your memories, and learn everything you've done for the last few weeks. But there are some benefits to simply letting you go," he replied as he walked to a rotten map of Equestria taped to the wall. "Expedience, for one. We may have years before we must act, but we might have only days. The other reason is simple: you are exceptionally disruptive, Blackjack. With you trotting around, my opposition is far more likely to waste time dealing with you than paying attention to me. Also, there's the slim chance that you might come to realize that I'm right. A mare of your talents could be a potent asset."

Then he paused, his smile widening. "But mostly, I saved the mare you love. And I know that for a pony like you... that's no small thing."

I *really* wanted to shoot him right now. Really wanted to... but there was just one problem: he was right. About this, at least. He shrugged. "Maybe it'll backfire. Maybe it'll blow up in my face. Certainly possible. But Thunderhead Intelligence's learned that, sometimes, the unexpected is the most effective move of all." He looked at Glory with a small smile. "In any case, I'll get what I need, likely with far less bother and fuss than dealing with a snotty gang of Wasteland mares."

I sighed, looking at my PipBuck, then at him. Maybe... "The Flash Fillies. You probably picked through most of their headquarters while helping them?"

"For the most part. They kept their stores well guarded from us, though. They never let more than three of us in at any one time," he replied, looking at me curiously. "Why?"

"Did you get a chance to poke around their maneframe?" I asked, and Glory gasped.

He looked coolly from Glory to myself. "Yes, but the data within was encrypted."

"Do you have a copy?" Glory asked. Now he was smiling again.

"Right..." I sighed. "What do you want for it?"

"An unencrypted copy might be enlightening--" he began.

"Do I look like a decrypter? I just need it for trade. What else?" I said flatly, squeezing Glory's hoof with a leg to keep her from protesting. I couldn't let him realize the potential of cyber pegasi.

The crimson buck rubbed his chin with a wing. "Well, I don't need you for that..." he mused aloud, then smiled. He looked at Glory long and steadily; it made my mane twitch. "A confession."

Glory gaped. "What?"

"I would like a full confession and formal declaration of leaving Thunderhead and the Enclave," he replied levelly. "There were some problems with the first version. Little errors that gave rise to questions of its authenticity." No surprise, given that it was a fake. "I want a sincere confession. One that will remove any doubt as to your allegiance to Thunderhead. Or, rather, the absence thereof."

"But it would ruin Father," Glory said as she held my floppy hoof tighter.

"And save his life," Lighthooves countered.

"What?" I asked, keeping my eye on him.

The crimson pegasus began to pace slowly. "Do you really think that the Enclave is going to blissfully allow such a high profile figure as Sky Striker to continue to call for helping the surface? No. They are going to act to silence him. The usual methods have failed to remove, disgrace, or discredit him. In fact, they've only reinforced his popularity. That means that the only standby is assassination."

"They wouldn't," Glory muttered weakly.

"They already tried this morning," Lighthooves replied gravely. Glory gasped and leaned forward to ask the obvious. Lighthooves raised a wing to stave off the question. "He was unharmed. He was to give a speech in his old power armor. Somepony had sabotaged its spark generator. He was very fortunate it was discovered, and we are fortunate that it's being dismissed as an accident. And, of course, the assassination of such a prominent figure would necessitate a response. A trade embargo. Cutting off food surplus shipments. Something. And in response to *that*... war." He said it so simply.

War. It made my stomach clench. Was there anything... ever... more stupid and wasteful than war? It'd destroyed the world! You'd think that would have been enough. But here we were, two centuries later, and we still had situations where group A and group B had a problem and couldn't think of any better way out of it than killing each other!

As I looked at the crimson pegasus, I had to admit a grudging respect for him. He was still a vile pony, but now that I was facing the prospect of stopping a war myself, I felt a small appreciation for what he was attempting to do. I'd never approve of his means. There were just some things you didn't do; I knew that now. I'd smell chlorine and hear the scream of 'murderer' for the rest of my days. But the goal itself, trying to prevent war? That was respectable.

And so I was completely useless when she looked back at me. I smiled. Of course I wanted the Steelpony data; I could actually give it to ponies who needed it. But I couldn't ask her to resign herself to live here, especially when I wasn't going to be around much longer.

Finally, she took a deep breath. "No," she said, and his amiable expression hardened a moment. Then he shrugged as if it was no matter. But from the look on her face, she wasn't done yet. "No, but I will talk with him."

He rubbed his chin, "I see. And you'll convince him to end the Volunteer Corps?"

"No. I said I will talk with him," she replied. "Your fake confession didn't do anything. A coerced one won't be much better. So let me talk with him about your concerns. Maybe he'll change his mind. Maybe not. But it'll be more likely to succeed than what you're trying."

I smiled... okay, grimaced... at him. "Sometimes the unexpected is the most effective." Ooooh, see what I did, Lighthooves? See? I used your own words against you. Point, Blackjack!

"It'll take some time to set up a secure channel. I trust the two of you will behave until then?" he asked as he looked at us.

"Yeah. Sure," I replied with a smile. "I don't suppose there's a chance we can get a hot shower, is there?"

He curled his lips. "Of course."

* * *

Okay. I might have asked for a hot shower, but I'd settle for a bucket of relatively clean and only mildly radioactive water and a sponge. As I started washing the dust, grime, and tears off my face, I stared at the sponge, trying to think what to do next. She'd have her chat, I'd get my data, we'd leave, she'd tell one of his ponies where to find the targeting talismans. As a show of good faith, they'd brought Glory her gear and my braces. The rest of my stuff, on the other hand, they'd probably drop from a quarter mile up just to make sure they were away before I was locked and loaded.

"Please tell me you're not trying to think of ways to kill a pony with a sponge," Glory said in concern as she nuzzled my neck.

"Huh? What? No..." Besides, I'd have to shove it really far down their throat. The bucket, on the other hand... If Glory kicked out the bottom and smashed it flat, I'd have a nice jagged edge. Effective against eyes and-- Glory started kissing along my spine, and thoughts of weaponizing sponges and buckets went flying out of my head. Oh yes... this was nice... this was very nice...

Except...

"Glory, I really... I don't think..." What was the matter with me? We had privacy. I was probably the cleanest I was going to get in a long while. Goddesses knew I needed it after that little 'adventure' with Rarity and Vanity. But for some reason, my mind was telling me this was wrong and I should stop it.

It was official. I'd gone completely batshit crazy.

The gray pegasus rolled me on my back and kissed along my chest before she looked me in the eyes. "I'm... I'm sorry. But I don't think I can do this." She just waited and I fidgeted, turning away. "I don't deserve..." I trailed off lamely, unable to finish.

"Oh. I see," she said calmly, then seemed to think about something. Finally, she looked me in the eye. "Do you trust me?"

Huh? "Of course..." I murmured, shocked she even had to ask.

"Absolutely and completely?" she pressed as she smiled at me. I nodded, and she dug through her bags a second, withdrew a blindfold, and tied it in place. "Don't touch it," she said firmly. O...kay... Then she was off the bed and rifling through her saddlebags. I fought hard not to peek as she returned to the bed. Then she pressed my forelegs over my head through the gaps in the bed and... my ears twitched at the sound of hoofcuffs being locked around my legs.

"G...Glory?! What are you doing?" I gasped, and then I felt my rear legs spread quite far apart and cuffed to the hoofrail at the bottom on the bed.

She moved over me and whispered in my ear, "Shhh... trust me." And a rubber ball was pressed into my mouth and tied in place around my muzzle. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. Couldn't speak.

But, sweet Celestia save me, I could feel! And what was inflicted upon me was some of the most intense feeling in my entire life. Some sour, rational, sane part of my mind grumped that it was no time for... this! That part was grabbed by the rest of my brain, beaten with rubber hoses, and tossed into that

closet in the back of my mind. I crested, wailing into the gag, and she didn't relent.

Glory had to have been related to Vanity... somehow. She paused only to remove the gag and let me catch my breath before silencing me with a very lovely something else. I returned the favor in desperation, rewarded with noises of her bliss and the feeling that I was a very good pony.

When we'd finished she'd returned my sight to me, and I was feeling quite confused and exceptionally buttery inside. I wanted to ask where she'd learned to do such things, but the taste of mare had completely overridden my ability to think. Good thing too, because my brain was trying to come up with all kinds of reasons for why what we'd done was wrong and undeserved. I was a bad pony who'd almost got her killed... but that voice was dulled by the fact that Glory had done almost everything. She'd decided it and done it. And so that sour pony lurked in the back of my mind muttering bad things about me.

She washed me a second time... and herself... before finally unlocking me from the bed. I had to admit, I was so relaxed that it felt like all the rest of my bones had changed to rubber too. "Wow..." Okay, so at the moment, complex sentences were beyond me.

"Never done that before?" she said, seeming quite happy herself. I shook my head vigorously back and forth. "Like it?" I nearly strained my neck nodding. She gave a pleased nicker. "I'm so glad I didn't mess it up, then. Dusk thought you'd like it."

Did I mention how much I loved Glory's eldest sister right then? Really! Lovely mare! "But where did you get... oh. That shop?" She grinned sheepishly, blushing. So adorable! Then I arched a brow. "Did you get anything... else?"

"Maybe," she replied in a playful tone that screamed 'yes.' Then she gave a little murr and kissed me softly. "If you're a good mare, you'll find out." Oh, okay. I'd be good. I'd be the goodest bestest nicest mare ever, yes sirree!

"Got to say it was unexpected," I said with a flush as we cuddled together.

Glory seemed quite amused by my embarrassment. "I thought that you'd done tons of stuff like this?"

"Are you kidding? Mom would have thrown me in detention and spayed me. I got to have nice, predictable, scandal-free sex. It was everypony else who had all the bizarre kinks." I had to admit I was a little worried. I'd never ever had sex like that before. I was still tingly. It was as if I discovered an entirely new part of myself but was just a little leery about getting to know her better.

The one part I couldn't shake was that I'd liked it. I'd liked it a lot. And from the look on Glory's face, she had too. I felt that emotional whiplash setting in. A few hours ago, I'd thought she was dead. Now I was left feeling giddy that I'd just been cuffed to a bed. Maybe I should try to cool this down. Get some control. Something. Then I caught her purple eye and saw just how screwed I was. Oh Goddesses...

She was helping me put on my leg braces back on when there was a knock and a midnight blue mare with a starburst cutie mark poked her head in. "We're ready, Morning Glory."

Glory nodded. "Thank you, Northstar." The gray mare helped me to my hooves as we trotted

through the weather station. There were eight or nine pegasi working on imported terminals and checking paperwork; most of them gave at least a glance in my direction as we passed.

On the wall was a black banner of a purple eye in the center of a vaguely shield-shaped dark green cloud with a bright green lightning bolt behind it. Written around the edges was the motto 'Enclave Intelligence: protecting against threats from below and above, within and without.' "Threats from above?" I asked with a little smile as we entered a small room with a terminal and camera set up on a table. Lighthooves stood calmly in the corner, out of sight of the camera.

"Enclave Intelligence is supposed to be ready for anything," Northstar said softly. "We're not the military. We don't have Raptors and siege platforms. The biggest things we're allowed are Vertibucks. We're supposed to be smarter and sneakier than our enemies. We're supposed to cheat," she muttered sourly. "Of course, we'd be able to be much more effective if we didn't have to approve every last op with Neighvarro. Can't believe they're restricting our flights over the Everfree and Fillydelphia, now of all times..."

I looked at her in response. "It sounds almost like the Ministry of Awesome."

She suddenly grinned in approval. "I never expected a dirtsider to notice that. If it wouldn't completely tick off Neighvarro, we'd still use that name. Neighvarro was the base for the Equestrian Skyguard after Cloudsdale was bombed. Thunderhead and Shadowbolt Tower were the Ministry of Awesome's headquarters. Oh, sure, everypony thought that the Canterlot office was the main one, even when it was turned into a warehouse. Just as Rainbow Dash planned." She sighed, looking pensive. "If things had gone a little differently, everypony in the intelligence service would be a Dashite. If Rainbow Dash had just *waited*..." But she gave a little shake of her head.

"But... but you branded Glory," I pointed out. "Burned off her cutie mark and... and..."

"We did what we had to. Would you prefer a war?" she asked bluntly. Point taken.

Lighthooves brought his wing up across his lips. "Ladies."

The terminal screen flickered for a moment, then coalesced into the image of a middle-aged buck just approaching elderly status. His coat was a rich plum and his purple mane was shot with gray. I noted, with a touch of concern, he also had an eyepatch covering his left eye and the left side of his face rippled with old scars that hadn't quite worn away. His gray eye widened in shock and he half rose to his hooves. "Morning?"

"Hello, Father." I was surprised at the formal tone she adopted. "I'm glad to see you well."

He slammed his hoof on the desk. "Pissing rainbows, Morning, don't give me that! What the hell have you been up to? First a confession that you've gone Dashite, then Dusk reporting you'd been killed without verification, and now a report that you..." but he then trailed off as she shifted. She flushed and turned to block the view of her stub. "Where are you? I'll fly right down there myself and pick you up!"

"No, Father. I'm fine."

"You are missing a wing, Morning! That is the opposite of fine!" he roared. "You are coming home and that is final!"

"No, Father. I'm not," she countered with her own scowl. "There're things going on right now..."

"I don't give a thundering fart what things are going on!" he said with another imperious slam of his hoof. "You are coming home right now where it's safe. Then we can see about getting rid of those scars."

"You can't tell me what to do, Father! I'm not a filly anymore!" Glory shouted at him with a very un-Glory like scowl.

"You're just like your mother," he muttered darkly. "Stop being so stubborn!"

"I'm doing important things, Father!" she snapped back. "Stop telling me what to do! I am a Dashite, okay? I might love Thunderhead and believe in the Enclave, but my home is down here now! The mare I love is down here!" Oh, what was that burning smell? Ah, it was me blushing.

He seethed but sat back and slumped a little. "You disappear for a month, and the first thing we do when I see you is scream at each other." He shook his head with a deep sigh. "I've been yelling at security and your sister for weeks now. Ever since that forged confession popped up. Now I get an 'update' and it's you..."

"I'm sorry, Father. I know you want to keep me safe, but I'm not your little sunrise anymore," she replied. She glanced over at Lighthooves and then back at the screen. "I'm here with an Operative Lighthooves. He says that things are bad between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Really bad. And the VC is driving it." Tell him Lighthooves burned off your cutie marks, Glory. I wanted to shout it, but Northstar looked at me and shook her head slowly. I bit my tongue.

"Things have been shaky ever since your mother. This is nothing new. Neighvarro will call us petty names and sulk till a harvest goes bad or a talisman breaks. Then they'll change their tune. It's been the same old dance for the last two hundred years."

She glanced at the crimson buck before looking at the screen again. "He says otherwise. That the military's looking for a fight... like when Fiendfire attacked. And that Thunderhead might be the next target. He says they might try and kill you, Father."

He harrumphed. "There's at least twenty ponies I can think of who'd want me dead. It comes from being a politician." Glory started to say something, but he coughed and raised his wing. "I won't hear any more conspiracy nonsense. Neighvarro needs Thunderhead. They'll huff and puff and snap their wings, but when the sun sets they'll be the ones asking us for help."

"What if they're not, though?" I asked as I stepped up next to Glory. She stared hard at me, her feathers ruffling. Her father glared at me, and I wondered if his remaining eye could disintegrate me through the terminal. "Mister Sky Striker, I grew up in a stable. We were attacked, and afterwards, I thought there was no threat... but in the end, everypony I knew and loved was dead. Is the risk to Thunderhead worth more than scrap metal and blueberries?"

He looked at me in such a way that I realized I was in trouble. The exact same expression was on Glory's face as well. Big trouble. Lighthooves looked as if he were doing all he could not to laugh as he just smiled.

"Morning Glory, who's this?" His tone was light, but I suspected that his death gaze was merely

charging up.

"This is Blackjack," she said pleasantly enough, but there was an undertone that said that I was in so much trouble right now. "She's my dear friend," she said, and I suddenly realized that 'dear' could mean 'idiotic' from how she said the word.

"I see," he replied evenly, and muttered, "I'm never getting grandfoals at this rate..." Then his eye hardened on me. "Miss Blackjack, I've been guarding and protecting Thunderhead my entire life. Thunderhead needs the VC. We're just realizing how badly we need metal and materials from the surface. And we're becoming an example of just how much the surface offers us. In time, the Enclave military and other cities will come around to our way of thinking. The military won't risk damaging Shadowbolt Tower. They need it."

"But--" I began weakly.

"I won't hear any more on this," he said with finality. "All this talk of war and pegasus turning against pegasus simply undermines us. We are all Enclave. We are all in this together." Suddenly, I had an overwhelming appreciation for just what Lighthooves was dealing with. It was like Miramare all over again. How do you convince somepony who's completely made up their mind before their cutie marks are burned off?

"Right," was all I could mutter.

"Very good." His gaze pinned me in place as he stared at me, "Now. Miss Blackjack. You care deeply for my daughter?" I swallowed and nodded. "More than anything?" I nodded faster.

"I'd give my life for her in a heartbeat," I replied.

"And have you screwed it up?" I winced, looking at Glory with a worried frown. He took a deep breath. "I see. Well, if she's forgiven you, then I suppose there must be some merit to you. I did the same for her mother... but, if the next time I see my daughter, she's without her other wing, I swear you will be the one to answer for it. Is this understood?"

"Yes sir!" I said with a gulp. Maybe put her in the HMS Celestia on the moon... that'd keep her safe, right?

"Very good," he said before his eyes returned to Glory. "Now, Morning Glory, have you found what you're looking for?" Glory glanced at me nervously, then at the screen, and then dropped her eyes.

"No, Father. Not yet," she replied before looking back at him. "But I'm still looking." He just sighed and nodded.

"Too bad."

"And the twins?"

"They miss you badly. Lucent got in a terrible fight at school over the recording. Lambent is more quietly upset. She pours herself into her studies. I hope you get to see them again soon."

"Me too, Father," she replied with a small smile. "Maybe someday in the future you can bring

them down to see the surface.”

“It’s hard to get over the dirt,” he replied with a small roll of his eyes. Finally he sighed. “It was good talking with you again, Morning.”

“And you, Father.”

“Sunshine and rainbows, Morning Glory.”

“And clear skies ahead, Father.”

Wait? Wasn’t she going to tell him about Lighthooves? Or what he did to her? Or the contagion he was working on, or anything?! My jaw dropped as she reached over and turned off the terminal, looking at Lighthooves. “So?”

He looked at her for a long moment as he rubbed his nose with a wing, then nodded to Northstar. This was it! His sudden but inevitable villainous betrayal! The midnight blue mare trotted to the terminal and began typing on the keys before she looked at me. “Well, do you want the files from Flash Industries or not?”

I felt concussed. “You’re giving them to me? But... but she didn’t convince him to stop like you wanted!”

“She really isn’t a smart pony, is she?” Lighthooves murmured.

“Father would never just change his mind like that. It took ten years for us to finally get him to stop singing in the shower,” Glory said softly. “All I agreed to do was talk with him. Hopefully it’ll make Father think about what he’s doing and why he’s doing it. He can get reckless sometimes,” Glory explained as Northstar hooked my PipBuck to the terminal.

“But... but half that conversation was a fight and the other half you didn’t say anything!” I gawked as I looked at her. Northstar began typing, and a little message asked me if I wanted to do something with Project Steelpony. I hit accept as I looked at the pair. “I mean...”

The Dealer coughed in my mind; I had no time for him right now. I mentally mashed accept over and over again.

Glory sighed softly as my PipBuck did... something. There were all these blurred letters and numbers streaming by in the corner of my vision. “Blackjack, I don’t think you realize it, but I fight with everypony in my family. Father. Dusk. Moonshadow. Even the twins.” Glory? Nice, sweet, wonderful Glory? ...Okay, yeah, I guess I could see it.

“But you didn’t say anything about the contagion or talismans or the like!” I protested with a frown.

“Of course not. Do you want to give Lighthooves a reason to kill both us *and* Father?” Glory responded.

“I would prefer to avoid it,” the crimson buck said offhandedly. The two sounded like they were bantering about our deaths. They *were* bantering!

“But I... you... she... we...” I collapsed on my haunches with a clatter. “What the hell is wrong

with all you pegasi?! This cloak and dagger stuff... it just isn't healthy!" All this intrigue was starting to make my head hurt. The flashing and numbers didn't help much either. What the hay was my PipBuck doing?

Suddenly, as abruptly as it began, it ended. About time, too. I checked my PipBuck memory, and... oh, look! Another quarter of nigh-infinite memory power taken up with 'Steelpony.acv'. Good. Something for smarter ponies than I. I reached over to the terminal to pull out the cables, then blinked as my hoof passed right through it. "Bwah?!" I gasped as I waved my hoof back and forth through the computer. "Wha... how...?" I stammered as the computer swirled and then seemed to resolidify on the table. "That's weird! You're weird! Everything that flies is weird!" I pointed at the computer, my mane bristling. "This is not natural!"

"Relax, Blackjack. It's just made out of clouds," Glory said as she rested her hoof on top of the terminal easily and unplugged it with her mouth.

"Clouds?" I blinked and pointed at the screen. "That's a cloud? Terminals aren't made out of clouds! Terminals are made out of... whatever non-cloud things they're made out of!" I started to trot around the room. "Is this made out of clouds? Or this?" I asked as I went and kicked everything that looked remotely pegasus-built... and was shocked to find my hoof passed through most of it. "Ahhh!" I tried to flip away a container with my hoof, but my leg went right through it.

"She fights monsters, has a building collapse under her, smashes through an interrogation window, tears apart soldiers in a chem-induced fury... and *this* is what freaks her out? I don't know if I should be impressed or disappointed," Lighthooves commented.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we were out of there. I had a splitting headache from that download, I really did not want to be around Lighthooves any longer, and almost everything around me was made of clouds! Intangible gear was where I drew the line! Lighthooves seemed exceptionally pleased with himself, which didn't do me any favors either. Fortunately, Glory and I were escorted out of Weather Monitoring One by Northstar. I'd poked her black carapace armor and was relieved to find it quite solid under my hoof.

"Quit it," she'd murmured, but every other minute I'd give it a test poke... you know, just to make *sure*.

"So, ahem, what do you want with off-the-books targeting talismans?" I asked the armored mare with a grin as she handed over the rest of my gear. Northstar looked amused, and Glory just smiled and shook her head. "What?" I asked as I floated my barding into place. Glory helped me adjust it.

My gray love sighed softly. "You don't just ask, Blackjack. You talk around it. Work your way towards the answer. Be subtle." This from the most literal mare I'd ever met?

"Of course, you could always join us," Northstar said casually. "As they say, 'if you can't beat 'em...'"

I snorted. "As if Lighthooves would ever go for that. As if Glory would go for that!" I laughed as I finally checked my firearms. Then I saw their serious looks and my laughter died off. "I... you... you're serious?! You're actually serious!" I stammered and pointed my hoof at her flanks. "He burned off your

cutie marks, Glory!”

“To prevent a war,” she replied softly as she shivered, dropping her gaze a moment. Then she looked back up at me. “Even if he’s wrong, I can’t fault his intent. I agree his means are wrong, but his end is to protect my home.”

Yeah, unless he’s lying! I almost said it, but at the look on her face the retort stuck in my throat. Maybe it was a pegasus thing, or maybe it was a Thunderhead thing, but they didn’t do or take lying well. The feigned confession hadn’t worked and they didn’t lie... exactly.

I wasn’t on the same page as Glory and Northstar. Clearly, they appreciated Lighthooves in a way I couldn’t. He was using misdirection against an Enclave military that apparently had superior firepower and a need to use it to justify their existence. Maybe there was something noble about that, but I couldn’t respect a pony who twisted the truth to the point of making it almost unrecognizable to get Dusk to kill Glory or try to smear her father’s name. You just didn’t do some things. And *still* Glory believed in the Enclave and Thunderhead. Maybe not as callously as Lighthooves; I couldn’t see Glory comparing earth ponies to radroaches, but she was still convinced that her people and her home were the best future for Equestria.

And maybe she was right.

But despite that, there was something about Lighthooves, beyond what he’d done, that bothered me. He was a schemer, somepony trying to manipulate the world around him. And after encountering Goldenblood... well, I was suspicious of anypony who tried to get others to do their dirty work for them. I got all the same vibes from Lighthooves as I did from Goldenblood: he was a pony who would get a lot of ponies killed if he thought it was worth it.

“The talismans are in the Robronco maintenance center in Flank,” Glory told Northstar. “If you can’t find any there, you might try at Exchange. I sold them to a bluish-white mare with a wrench cutie mark.”

Northstar sighed. “And she’ll probably send me somewhere else. Why is nothing ever easy?”

I chuckled. “Cause then it just wouldn’t be any fun.”

When she was gone I looked at Glory. “What?” she asked a little nervously.

“Nothing,” I said as I stretched forward to nuzzle her. “Just... I don’t like that we helped him. I know what he told us. I just... I think it’s going to end badly. That’s all.” I’d gotten what I wanted. He’d gotten what he wanted. That was fair, right?

So why was my mane going so crazy?

* * *

The west side of the river had been dominated by dead forests and residential areas. The northeast was one big industrial ruin. The roads were choked with debris ranging from chunks of buildings to collapsed steel girders, making a maze that has us constantly backtracking and working our way around obstacles. I needed to find someplace to hole up while we tried to reconnect with P-21, Scotch Tape, and Lacunae. I had Scotch’s PipBuck tag and she had mine, so it was inevitable that we’d

meet sooner or later. The question was, what would we meet in the meantime?

There wasn't really anyplace safe to hole up here. Most of the buildings were collapsed, and every now and then my PipBuck let out its clicks to remind us that this was no spot for resting. The problem was that it was starting to get dark. I'd sucked up enough radiation to let me see clearly and had my E.F.S. to warn me about things, but Glory didn't have either of those advantages.

"What do you think it was?" I asked as we carefully picked our way down a street littered with rusty barrels and pools of rainbow-hued water. "In Diamond's office, I mean? The thing that cut all the Flashers to pieces and tried to get my PipBuck?" And why had it tried to impersonate Goldenblood, of all ponies?

"I really don't know," she replied as she kicked out at a radroach that'd been looking for a nibble.

Well, I... actually, I *did* know one person who could take over a system like that. I rose to my hooves and flicked my ears. "Listen," I said as I looked around the dark, drizzly ruins. "Can you hear a tuba? Trombone? Tambourine?"

She looked at me oddly. "Should I?" There was a little worry in her voice; I guess, when it came to a mare as messed up as I, it was valid.

There it was. Distant music barely audible over the rain. I half-guessed the direction and trotted as fast as I was able through the shell of some factory. For once, luck was in my favor: the music was getting louder. It was that obnoxious 'ompaa ompaa' playing that nopony in their right mind could like! Then I spotted the little flying spritebot. It'd clearly seen better days, given it was missing one eye and made a decidedly staticy noise. "Watcher!" I leapt over a mucky storm drain and grabbed the robot with my magic.

"Watcher?" Glory asked in confusion as I pulled the spritebot in front of me.

"A... a friend. He's sort of given me help now and then. He can take over computer systems and stuff. He might know." I grinned as I looked at the robot. "Hey, Watcher! Watcher?" I frowned and gave the robot a vigorous shake. "Watcher!"

"Easy, Blackjack! Don't break it!" the bot suddenly said in that mechanical voice. "Nice to see you again too, Blackjack." After a moment, the bot crackled again. "Whoa. What happened to you? Nice eyepatch!" Then the bot turned and faced Glory. "Oh..." Yeah, awkward.

"Trust me, I'd rather have kept the eye. Listen, I need to ask you a computer-smart-pony question. How do you take over the spritebots? We've run into this... this thing. It's doing the exact same thing... taking over computer systems."

Spike coughed. "Well... you remember the thing in the place?" I glanced at Glory's confused and faintly annoyed expression, then nodded. "Well, it's one of the most powerful of its kind ever." A Crusader Maneframe. A magical and technological wonder. "There were only a few made across Equestria, and only for critical projects."

"So you think that... that thing... might be using one of those?"

"Maybe. Or it's possibly a knockoff. Or maybe somepony in the Wasteland found enough parts

to make one. After all, why only make three when you can have nine at triple the price, only the six get to be kept secret for your own sinister ends?"

"I see." So if there was a Crusader Maneframe out there, or its equivalent, then somepony was using that to take over systems. Somehow, it had animated an entire factory to try and take EC-1101 by force. Then it had tried to trick me... badly... using Goldenblood's illusion. Both felt... sloppy. Blunt. Like whoever was behind it really wasn't putting much thought into it. "Can you think of anyplace around Hoofington that might have a top secret you-know-what?" I asked with a grin.

"If you'd asked anywhere else, then I might have a clue. There might be one hidden in Tenpony, but they'd never confirm it. Robronco wanted one in the last year of the war, but Apple Bloom turned them down. It's a fair bet the O.I.A. had one somewhere. Maybe one in the M.W.T. hub in Canterlot or Hoofington; again, nothing confirmed. Hoofington was Equestria's biggest research hub. Even if there wasn't a you-know-what, there were enough research maneframes that somepony might be able to come close. Sorry. I know Stable-Tec built them, but that's about all."

"Thanks, Watcher," I said with a smile. "How are things in the rest of Equestria? I haven't had time to listen to Ho-- erm... DJ Pon3." I glanced at Glory with a sheepish grin. From her look I had yet more explaining to do.

"Weird. LittlePip was in Fillydelphia a little while ago. Now she's off to Splendid Valley... and I'm not sure why. Red Eye's got an army moving around Tenpony. For a while, I'd hoped that the Rangers might do something about it, but they're all heading to Celestia knows where. Something's going on and I don't like it. How are you doing?"

I sighed. "Okay. I've got a few months to live. Taint and cancer." And that was all there was to say about that. Then I looked at Glory and gave her a crooked little smile. "Hey. Could you please give me a little privacy? I need to talk about you behind your back."

Glory looked at me with a sharp frown, pointing her wing at me before sighing and shaking her head. I watched her move to the other end of the factory, looking back frequently. "Blackjack?" Watcher asked.

I turned my back to Glory so she couldn't see my face. "I almost lost her, Spike," I said softly as I looked at the spritebot's remaining eye. "She was right there in front of me and I... she... she fell. And I couldn't do... do anything!" I felt myself melting down as I let myself finally face that horrible truth. "One of my enemies saved her to fuck with me... and I'm so happy she's alive. Goddesses... I'm so happy! But I'm scared shitless it'll happen again, Spike!" My legs were shaking so badly that I couldn't hold on to the robot. I took a deep sniff. "I don't know what to do. I don't. I want to keep her safe... and happy..."

The bot was silent for the longest time. I glanced over my shoulder. Glory was shielding her eyes with her wing as she kept an eye on the radroaches scurrying in the ruins around us. Damn things were cluttering up my E.F.S. with red bars. Finally, Spike answered. "I don't know what to tell you, Blackjack. I really don't. You can't send her away; she doesn't seem like a mare who'd just trot off even if you asked her to. So just do your best to make her happy and keep her as safe as you can. That's all you can do."

"But... what if she dies?" I whimpered, feeling like an absolute foal. I needed some adult to tell me it was going to be okay.

"Then... that's a real bad day. But you have to remember all the good parts. That knowing her is worthwhile. I miss Twilight every single day because I remember how much she meant to me. You have to do the same for Glory for as long as you can."

I sighed. "Really? I was hoping for some kind of miraculous solution you might have. I've got to do something to keep her safe before this taint eats me alive." I sniffed, but it was impossible to tell if I was crying or not. I just never wanted to feel that way again. "Oh well... hopefully we can at least work things out between the Reapers and the Rangers." Stupid war... I hated war. I hated the whole concept. Ponies should not know war!

"Rangers?" Was it just me or did the synthetic voice sound alarmed? It was starting to smoke. "You're going near them?" I gave a little nod. Then it buzzed sharply. "Blackjack! You can't... make sure... see..." And then the sprite bot gave one last anemic crackle and with a loud pop dropped in front of me. I caught it in my hooves. "Watcher? Watcher!" Somehow the sight of the poor dead spritebot made me want to cry.

"Can I come back now?" Glory asked. I put the little bot in my bag with a sniff as I looked back at her. She saw the look on my face and her irritation slipped away. "Talking about what happened?"

"Yeah," I replied and wiped my face for any treasonous tears as I trotted towards her. "Well, nothing's going to stop u--" A spasm of pain shot up my leg and it was all I could do not to scream as I sprawled out on my face in the muck. What in the Goddesses' names wa--

The manticore's claws snatched inches from my spine as the winging monstrosity landed almost on top of me. With rainbow muck on my cheeks, I stared up at the monster as it crouched beside me. My horn brought Vigilance around and I slipped into S.A.T.S. for three rounds to its body. I didn't want to wait for a clear shot at its head. The firearm roared above my head and carved great bloody holes in the beast's side. Hot wet guts and gore spattered out, but it wasn't dead yet. The beast reared around and half rolled, half flailed away as its fangs chomped inches from my belly. A green beam struck it, and with one deep growl it shuddered and fell in a heap.

But it'd already given our position away. The manticores were winging in from every direction at once. By the time they were in range for my E.F.S. to pick up, they were diving down on us. In this building's shell, we were effectively in a great big food bowl. I fought to ignore the throbbing pain. Not now, body. I need you to work!

"We've got to get out of here!" I shouted. Twenty to two were NOT odds I liked. I got to my hooves in time for a stinger to catch on one of the ceramic plates over my rump; I blasted the beast in return. Glory sent emerald beams slicing through the air, the glow illuminating the others circling around to make their attacks. I looked in the direction we'd come, but three crouched there behind some cover. The beasts were learning!

"Hey, Security!" yelled a mare from the darkness above. "I was thinking... why don't you make this easy, huh? Give up. We'll make it clean and quick."

I couldn't help myself. Wiping the grime off my face and ignoring the clicking noise, I laughed at the shadows above. "Oh Goddesses, do you have lousy timing or what! You think you're going to be able to get me to give up after I just got *laid*? I can take all you fuckers on!" I floated out Taurus's rifle. Come on, monstermare. Show me your face before you tell me your sob story and give me a whole new

world of guilt!

"Funny. So did I," Cackled the monsterpony somewhere above me. "My pets are very well trained." Okay... ew!

Still, she wasn't taking the bait. We couldn't go up. Couldn't go any other direction. That left... "Glory! The drain! Get in the drain!"

"The what?!" she shouted, staring at me in shock. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes! Now shoot that grate and get down there!" I yelled, wheeling as I saw another manticore making its dive. Two rounds made it veer off, but another swept by and raked me with its claws. I nearly went down. Glory shot the drain cover with her beam rifle but hesitated. Now that we had a route of escape, the monster mare gave a bestial shriek, and the flying creatures began to move in all at once.

I holstered Vigilance and ran to where Glory balked on the edge of the hole. "Going down!" I shouted and gave her a shove. She shrieked. Two flew in, mouths stretched wide as I leapt in after her. The beasts collided inches from me as I disappeared into the frothy depths below.

The fall wasn't that far, but suddenly I realized how much of a bad idea this was! I'd envisioned a nice big sewer we could trot along. What we'd jumped into was a pipe. A pipe almost completely full of very cold and very fast water. It was all I could do to keep my face in the narrow pocket of air at the top of the storm drain. Bits of junk, mud, and rock ground against me as we shot through the earth.

I bumped into the thrashing Glory and wrapped my hooves around her. I found her neck and lifted it above the water. She screamed, but it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard! She had to be alive to scream! If we hit a block we were dead. If we hit a pump or something, we were dead. If we ran out of air...

And just like that, the pocket of air disappeared. We were going down and moving faster! All I could see in that mutated darkness was Glory's mane. My lungs burned. Any exposed skin flared from where it'd rubbed against the interior of the pipe.

And then we were in air again, *in* the air, falling and tumbling in a great open space. Glory slipped from my grasp as her wing beat instinctively and with futility. We were in a great shaft of tumbling water from a dozen drains. Over and over I flipped in the grip of gravity till I landed with a great frothy crash at the bottom of the shaft. A cascade of water poured down atop me, and I became aware that the water was moving in a circle around the bottom of the shaft. There was a terrible force pulling me downward.

"Glory!" I shouted, looking around as I instinctively flailed my limbs to keep me up. There was so much noise that I could barely hear myself. Then a green light flashed in the darkness from the edge and I saw a rusty stair. She clutched it, breathing hard. Her mouth moved as I swirled around and around. There was that noise, that horrible noise I'd heard in the Fallen Towers. It was deeper, though, and beneath me. And as I spun, I became aware that this water wasn't flat... it had a depression in the middle. A depression I was slowly sinking into...

Did I mention there wasn't a swimming pool in 99? Oh, and that I was wearing combat armor? And that I had four surprisingly heavy leg braces on? I swam like I had an orange pony bellowing in my ear to keep moving. Be strong! Be tough! Don't let this stop me! I couldn't let this stop me. I could hear

grinding below me... and I imagined a pump with great chopping blades to break up the garbage pulled through it.

I wasn't making any headway, but I wasn't getting pulled in further.

Then I was hit in the face by a wingful of wet feathers. I couldn't grab, so I bit. She had all four legs gripping the rail as tight as she could as she pulled. The stair was jerking as the force started to pull bits of it free.

I was going to get us both killed.

And just like that, I knew what it meant to be holding on to a limb. Just what had gone through her mind. What I'd do to her if I let go and allowed myself to be pulled into that watery maw. I saw her wide, terrified eyes. Her lips moving. 'Don't let go.'

I don't want you to die, Glory. Just like she didn't want me to die in Flash Industries. But she'd have a whole life before her; I only had a few months. I knew she couldn't see me in the dark gloom. I wanted to let her know it would be all right. It would be okay. It would.

And then she was firing her beam rifle at the stairs. What was she doing? With a metal shriek an entire section of metal stairs broke free, dropping us both into the churning water. Why, I wanted to ask. But then, I wasn't a smart pony.

From beneath us came a resounding clang as the rusty lengths were fed into the grinder. There was an ear splitting squeal as something beneath us exploded and the water started to churn furiously. We embraced in the middle of the raging flow as the suction abruptly stopped. Spinning round and round we held each other in the middle of that shaft.

That shaft that was rapidly filling with water!

Up and up and up we were carried as it filled. I could see the domed top. The open pipe. It looked really small... barely enough room for a pony. The noise rose higher and she took a deep breath as she ducked down. With a whoosh I was pushed into the pipe. Up... and up and up and up and the pressure built more and more. I took a breath and held it.

There was a metallic explosion, and like that I was once more in the air. I tumbled end over end for a moment in the jet of water before I finally slipped off and landed on my back. Glory flopped down next to me, coughing and hacking up water. The end of her rifle had snapped in a sharp L shape. I had no idea how she was supposed to fix it now. I looked up at the gray clouds and did the only thing appropriate at a moment like this.

I started laughing my fool head off right there in the middle of the pitted street.

And an old buck chuckled, "Well, damn! Don't you two know just how to make an entrance!"

* * *

Contrary to what some may believe, travel by pipe, while fast, is neither comfortable nor safe. In a few minutes, we'd travelled nearly a mile west and popped out right next to a battered but intact fire station. From the second floor I could see a glimpse of the naval base and harbor to the north. Downstairs, next to the rusting fire pump wagons, the old buck's brahmin were warming up and taking a

load off their powerful frames. A filly was feeding them piles of yellowed grass and thorny bushes--brahmin could apparently eat anything, no matter how radioactive or poisoned--while a sour-looking mare scraped away shovelfuls of their reeking dung.

The old stallion in charge of the caravan was a wrinkly yellow earth pony buck with a gray mane. He wore a nice brown canvas coat and a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, and he'd braided his mane, tail, and brushy garlic bulb of a beard and decorated them with shiny pieces of foil. I was rather astonished to see a PipBuck on his right foreleg. His bright, shiny blue eyes sparkled despite his age. Something about the way he grinned made me blush.

Keeper, as he called himself, had picked us off the street and hauled us to the firehouse as the manticores wheeled around where we'd disappeared a mile or so to the east. His ghoul bodyguards Charon and Cerberus hadn't said a word as they trotted along in their black combat armor and machinegun-armed battle saddles. Unfriendly, unconcerned, or unable, I didn't know, and I wasn't sure how to broach the topic. Fortunately, with us relaxing in the old fire station's bunkhouse, Keeper was more than happy to talk enough for three ponies.

"Never seen the like! Ground rumbling and shaking fit to split in two, and from it issued not just a fountain but two of the greatest beauties as could ever be imagined. I confess I could tell this story to everypony I meet the rest of my days and they'd never believe it!" he said as he slapped his hoof on his knee. I had to admit, I didn't feel very beautiful. My barding was thrashed and waterlogged, my leg braces were bent, and I was missing a patch of skin along the left side of my face where it'd brushed against the side of the pipe. Glory was even worse off. Her legs and rump looked as if they'd been sanded raw.

"We're really glad you carried us out of there, Keeper," I said. Glory kept her eyes on her beam weapon, the snapped barrel bringing tears to her eyes as she tried to figure out how best to repair it.

"Thank Charon and Cerb. If they hadn't been willing to carry you, I don't think my old bones would have gotten far." He looked over at Glory. "If you're looking for an AER-10, I'm pretty sure that Megamart would be a good place to start. Bottlecap keeps a pretty nice stock of weapons, even with all her troubles."

"Hmmm?" Glory looked up and blinked. "Oh, well, I might be able to convert it. The emerald's still intact, but the internals probably wouldn't fit in a 10's frame without major modification... And Megamart's out of our way, anyway." She looked at him speculatively. "You know about magic weapons?"

"Oh, I know enough to get me in trouble, but not enough to be dangerous," he said enigmatically as she flushed. I rubbed my missing eye with a wince at a dull throb in my head and leg. I must have banged myself up pretty good. "How about an AER-20?" he asked with a grin.

"But that's a gatling beam frame!"

"So? Make it into a gatling beam weapon," Keeper chuckled. "It just so happens that I have an AER-20 that I swapped at the air station for three or four cartons of boysenberries. Can you imagine that?" he said with a little wink. "Might be worth considering. I can let you have it for... ooh... eighteen hundred?"

"Twelve hundred," she countered at once.

He chuckled and then reached into his bag for a little plastic box. He pulled off the lid. "Well, now, that's a fair offer. I might have to mull that one over a spell." He deftly shook a little purple berry into his hoof and popped it into his mouth. He chewed with delight, smacking his lips. "Not bad. Not bad." He lifted the box. "Care to try one?"

Glory frowned but then held out her hoof. He shook not one, but three into it. She looked skeptical but popped one in. Instantly, her eyes shot wide, and the second one followed the first into her mouth. "Oh, wow..." She groaned with a shiver.

"What? What's it taste like?" I asked, lifting the last one from her hoof with my magic.

The gray pegasus lunged, snapped the berry out of the air, and munched furiously. "My berry," she said firmly. "I get the berries. I was the one who was shoved into a pipe."

"I was saving us from getting chomped by manticores," I objected.

"I got shoved into a pipe. I get the berries," she replied firmly.

"Well, if you like 'em so much..." the buck said. "How about... eighteen hundred, but I throw in the berries, some scrap electronics, and some gem power cells for the weapon?"

"Deal. Gimme!" She lunged for the container and he held it out for her to snatch away. Holding it in her mouth, she trotted away and began to munch them one after the other with a blissful look on her face. Suddenly, the earlier comment about them being a controlled substance didn't seem quite so ridiculous.

I counted out the caps and Keeper just chuckled. "She's lucky. Awesome might sell a dozen cases a year... tops. Fortunately, I got connections with connections. Always nice to find a mare who admires quality food."

"I guess," I said as my lovely marefriend made rather post-coital noises as she lay on one of the bunks and devoured the berries one by one. "Got any shotguns?" I asked with a grin.

"I've got an IF-80 and an IF-84 Stampede riot gun," he replied.

"Twelve gauge?"

"Of course."

I rubbed my chin. "How about an IF-88?" I tapped my hooves, wondering if it might be possible...

"The Ironpony?" I nodded vigorously, and he gave a soft sigh. "Sorry, kid. Never put in production." He shook his head. "It'd be worth its weight in... well, I'm not even sure what if you found one."

"Pfft. As if I'd ever sell such a piece of beauty," I said, pining over a gun I'd only seen once. For all I knew, it kicked like an orgasming mule and jammed like a virgin on... oh Goddesses, was I feeling the itch again already? "What are the odds I could get more of those berries?" I asked as I looked at the

lovely berry fiend.

“Good luck,” he replied with a chuckle. “Fact is, a few more days and those would have spoiled, so... eh...” He gave a shrug as he took his caps and carefully measured them out in stacks to count them. He looked at me and her, then sighed.

“What?” I asked with a small smile. I’d seen that look before from Mom: vaguely disapproving but with a hint of amusement.

“Just mourning on behalf of all of masculine ponykind for the loss of fine femininity as yourself,” he said with a rueful chuckle. “But I know love when I see it. Try not to poach on that sort of thing.”

“You mean you... and me...” I sputtered, then flushed at his easy smile. “You just met me!” It was impossible. He was... he was... old! And... old! And... in very good shape for his age.

“Well, I like to think myself adventurously optimistic; if I lose, then I’m out nothing but a few bruises to my ego. And if I’m right...” he gave a shrug and a look that had my ears flaming. “But I can tell you two have been through a bit too much for the usual games.”

Glory returned and offered me a small corner of the purple berries, looking a touch ashamed. “You look familiar, Keeper. But I’m fairly sure we’ve never met,” she said as I tried a berry... then, with no further hesitation, dumped every last purple wonder into my mouth and chewed on a pulpy mouthful of orgasmic bliss!

He chuckled and scratched his onion tuft of a beard. “Oh, I get around a bit.” And then he winked at me!

I had to admit, it was true, though. Something about him... a yellow pony... a yellow pony. A merchant pony... Bottlecap... I suddenly blurted, “You’re Bottlecap’s father!” And then I was wiping gobs of purple off my lips. Swallow, Blackjack. Swallow. Then speak. Of course he was her father. He was Finders Keepers, the founder of the Finders! Heck, his name was painted right over Megamart!

“Guilty as charged,” he chuckled amiably as he lay back on his bed, tapping his hooves together as he pushed back his floppy hat.

“I didn’t know you were a stable pony,” I said as I looked at his PipBuck. “I didn’t know there were any other stables that... well... survived.”

“Stable 95 was... well, pretty darn close to here, actually,” he said. He dug into one of his bags, took out a strange brown cigar, bit off the top, and then took out a brass lighter and lit the end with that earth pony deftness I so admired. What they did with their hooves was as magical as what I did with my horn or what pegasi did with their wings. “Pretty funny stable, now that I think about it. Whole place was based on money. Overpony was whatever pony had the most money. Everything was for sale. Everything! You could buy, borrow, rent, lease, exchange, or barter anything and everything you wanted. Sell your kids. Sell yourself. One big endless market of wheeling and dealing. And if you went broke, you got kicked out.”

“And you went broke?” Glory asked.

“Oh, heck no!” He broke out laughing. “Me? Go broke? Why, you are looking at a three time

Overpony of Stable 95! Nah. See, some of us were really good at the game. So we changed the rules. Charged what we wanted and kept most of the stable dirt poor. Good for us. Bad for everypony else. Then some poor pony in 95... and this was when I *wasn't* Overpony, I must add... figured out that, if they wanted all our comfy things, then all they'd have to do was take them. So they rounded up a dozen of us and tossed us right out the door." He rubbed his chin. "Might be that charging ponies for air was going a mite too far."

I glanced over at Glory. *Really? You think?* I smiled. "So what happened then?"

"Well, contrary to popular belief, the Hoof back then was a nasty piece of work. Less Enervation, but more radiation and constant damn rain. First ponies we ran across were slavers, and eight of our group sold the other four."

"You sold each other?" Glory gasped.

"Now, I know it sounds harsh, but we were buying and selling each other in 95 well before all this. Granted, I wasn't too happy to be one of the ones shoved in a cage, but it saved my life. I learned a lot from the nomads I was living with. Those eight, well, they might have had some guns, but I never did hear from them again. I made myself a useful slave and within two years purchased my freedom from the tribe chief. Got out on my own, hooked up with a ghoul to start our business; I was the handsome face and she was the set of wings that got us from place to place while she was hammering out a guide to the Wasteland." He groaned and rubbed his hooves. "When I think of her wanting me to sneak into a radigator nest to 'observe wasteland wildlife'..." He shivered and shook his head. "Eventually, we parted ways... she wanted to sell it for cheap. Me... I fell in with a crazy bunch who'd be my friends."

"Big Daddy. The professor. You were one of the companions!" I said eagerly as I rubbed the tender right side of my head.

"Companions? You make it sound like it was a big thing!" he chuckled. "Nah, we were just friends. I figured they'd be handy to hide behind while everypony was shooting at us. They probably would have been dead a dozen times over if it wasn't for me. Did you know that the professor wouldn't loot corpses? Guns, ammo, caps and chems just left behind before I came along! And Big Daddy wouldn't haggle. Just took whatever price was quoted him!" He sighed, took a long pull on the brown wrap, and let out a long stream of rich gray smoke. "But they were a good bunch in a world full of bad."

I groaned as I rubbed my eyepatch. That banged-up feeling wasn't getting better. In fact, it felt like my sinuses were just... pressurized. Great. Getting sick again... "What were you all like? At the start, I mean?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Oh, well, that's easy enough. There was me. Big Daddy was about one step away from being a raider... heck, sometimes not even that. He was one tough sucker, drank zebra potions like a fiend. Personally, I thought they also shrunk his taters, but I'm no doctor. Then there was the professor. Tenpony mare, so she was like a stable pony, only worse. Odd duck. Knew the cagiest things, but we didn't have a clue why at the time. Crunchy Carrots was an acolyte at the time, and boy she loved technology. Me and her used to fight for hours over whether it was okay to sell a beam pistol. Then, of course, there was Awesome. Lord Awesome. Crack shot with whatever firearm he got his hooves on. We roamed all up and down Equestria looking for technology to send back to the Rangers. One day, we came across some nasty slavers with an actual pegasus, and not one from the clouds, neither. Dawn. Shy, quiet, but damned strong. She knew herbs, critters, and the land. But most importantly, she was

from Hoofington.”

Then he gave a long sigh. “Sometimes, I wish we’d never thought of coming out here. Even FillyDee isn’t as bad as this damned city. But we were young and sure of ourselves and DJ Pon3 made us an offer to re-establish contact with the MASEBS towers out east. So we trotted all the way out here.” He gave a sad smile. “Might be I was a touch nostalgic for old 95.”

DJ Pon3? Homage hadn’t looked that old! Then again, she also really hadn’t looked like the stallion she sounded like, so... eh, considering everything that was going on, this was pretty low on my list of mysteries.

Keeper looked out the window towards the green-rimmed towers of the Core. “I reckon Crunchy nearly had a heart attack when she saw that the Core was still standing. Big Daddy was happy to find new ponies to pound on. Awesome was looking forward to being the biggest damn hero in Equestria. The prof was eager to find some steel pony she once knew.” He looked over at Glory. “Funny. Dawn and I were the most worried. Me, because I knew there was such a thing as too good to be true. Her, because she knew the Hoof.”

“And so you set out to save it?” I asked, trying to ignore the throbbing headache.

“Save it? Fuck no. I set out to *plunder* it! And you can’t imagine how much plunder there was in this place. A cornucopia of caps, bullets, bombs, beams... like half the weapons of the war just here for the taking. Saving the Hoof grew up bit by bit. We found Dawn’s tribe slaughtered. We kept coming across more and more ugly sights. 95 was gone... some genius had opened the stable to the outside to ‘trade’ and discovered just how nasty the locals were.” He sighed and shook his head. “Never would have happened with me as Overpony. No siree.”

“So what happened?” Glory asked. He took another long, slow pull off the cigar. “It didn’t happen all at once, mind you. Just... little things. Maybe all the rain got to us. Maybe the fighting just dragged on and on. Crunchy became a big muckety muck in the Rangers from the stuff she discovered. Big Daddy was the nightmare of every raider. The prof kept on finding all this old data from centuries back. And Awesome was Awesome, what can I say? But we weren’t making any progress. Hadn’t breached the Core. Hadn’t really accomplished much. It was like the Hoof was toying with us.” He gave a deep sigh. “And it was.”

“What do you mean?” Glory asked. I fished out a Med-X while they talked and sighed in relief. I’d have Lacunae heal my head when she caught up with us... or when we caught up with her, if my friends hadn’t found us by morning.

“I am the lootingest looter who ever picked a lock, hacked a terminal, or swept clear a store. I am the damndest best acquirer of goods in the Wasteland. For the last thirty years I’ve been around the Hoof a hundred times, and I can tell you that I can pick up as much gear today as I could when I first got here,” he said grimly.

“So... that’s a problem?” I said with a frown.

“You ain’t hearing me. I’m just one of hundreds of scavengers. There’s a point where all the good, easy salvage should be stripped away. That ain’t the case in the Hoof though.” He pointed his cigar at a row of lockers. “Let me show you my point. I was in here six weeks back. Cleaned it out.

Check in there.”

I frowned but rose and went through the lockers one after the next. I took what was inside. “Not much. A dozen caps. Some ten mil ammo. A coffee cup. No big deal,” I said as I returned. He just smiled in a not so happy way. “What? You missed a little garbage. That’s all.”

“Ain’t missed nothing a day of my life,” he replied firmly. “Those lockers were empty when I was last here.”

“So... so somepony stashed some... some caps.” Twelve caps? Pretty lousy stash. And eight bullets? And who would ditch a coffee cup? I looked back at the lockers.

“I’ve come across ammo containers I’d emptied and tossed aside now miraculously holding more ammo. Never completely full, always with just enough ammo to keep me going. I’ve picked locks on safes only to come across them locked and filled with new plunder. I’ve hacked terminals only to find the passwords changed. Found food where we’d cleaned everything out,” he grumbled as he took another pull. “I know, most folks just assume I’m mistaken. But findin’ things is my special talent.” He pointed at his flank, where a wandering dashed red line ended at an X. “I remember every place I’ve found loot. And I’m telling you, something in this place is fucking with us.”

A few weeks ago, I would have just snorted at the crazy old buck past his retirement date. Now I was staring at those lockers. If I came back in a few days, would there be a few more caps, some scrap metal, and a pencil? “But why?”

“Well now... it depends. Professor liked to say that maybe a spirit of discord was floating around putting bottlecaps and trash in places to tease me. The rest didn’t think it was a big deal,” he muttered sourly with a scowl. Then he sighed and shrugged. “But me... I don’t like it one bit. It ain’t a natural market. So I got to thinking... why do ponies come to Hoofington?”

I’d asked that question a lot. “Salvage is what I hear the most. Ponies come from all over the Wasteland hoping to strike it big.”

“And most of ‘em do. They find the damnedest stuff.” He held up the cigar. “Take this, for instance. Found three of ‘em in a burned out store, nice and dry as you please.” He puffed on the end as he looked at me. “But do they get to trot on out of here with it? Does the Society export their food all the way to Tenpony? Does anypony actually ever leave this damned city without a gut full of regret and misery?”

I stared out the window at the towers. “No. They don’t.”

“Ponies, zebras, Red Eye, and now Enclave...” he said softly. “We got so many damned ponies living around this city that we’ve got an actual war brewin’. I can’t think of anyplace else in the Wasteland that’s got a big enough population for a war. But we do.” He sighed as he lifted another cigar. “Eventually, it got to my friends as well.”

“What happened?” Glory asked.

“Dawn,” he muttered, then looked at her. “Found some buck who’d tumbled from the sky all burned up. Nursed him back to health. Awesome didn’t like that one bit. He’d always been sweet on her. So when the buck wanted to go home and offered to take Dawn with him...” He blew out a long

stream of smoke. "Got ugly. Awesome called her a whore. Big Daddy beat the snot out of him. Carrots said she should go. Prof wanted her to stay. Dawn left in tears."

Glory turned her head away as she sniffed. "Mother." I felt lightheaded. Of course, it made sense, but I felt like an idiot for not seeing it sooner. My pounding head wasn't making thinking any easier.

He nodded slowly. "I figured that might be the case. Same coat. Same eyes. Saw you lying there on the road and it took me back. Whatever happened to that little bird? She always wanted a family safe from the Wasteland. Especially from the Hoof." His eyes lingered on her missing wing sadly.

"She... she got one. For a few years. But she kept saying Thunderhead needed to help the surface," she shook her head. "She came back years ago. You haven't seen her?"

"Sorry. Pity too. Of us all I think I'm the one she'd meet first. She and I, we were from the Hoof. We understood each other." He gave a small shrug.

I held her as I looked at Keeper. "So, what happened next? Why'd the rest of you break up?"

"Oh, Dawn leaving started the split. After that, we just... pushed apart. Awesome and Daddy wouldn't speak to each other. Awesome took his groupies and Daddy his thugs. Crunchy went to establish a Ranger base. For a time, it was me and the professor, but eventually she settled down." He chuckled. "Me, I tried the whole family thing. Over and over again. Bought mares. Wooed mares. Seduced mares. Heck, even had a few seduce me. Had a few kids here and there, but most of them had the sense not to look for me. I'd always start roaming around the Hoof again. Just not a family buck, I suppose.

"For a time, I figured we'd make things better on our own. I had a reputation as a fair business buck... maybe a bit of a loose wag... but folks saw trading as a better alternative to taking. Did all I could to keep trade going. I figured we'd be like the Ministry Mares of old... the five of us would just work until finally the Hoof's problems were gone. But it didn't turn out that way. The Society ponies used the Collegiate to make their plantations, then screwed 'em. The Rangers and the Collegiate fight over scraps of technology. The Reapers and Rangers rip each other apart on general principles. And the Reapers and the Society ponies are in a take and take relationship. Only us Finders have managed to keep ourselves out of it. Till Usury had to go and start slaving." He sighed at my scowl. "Now she's scraping up brahmin turds."

I scowled, then my eye popped open wide as I looked to the door leading downstairs. "That's Usury?" I clattered to my hooves and lurched. Damn, even with the Med-X, my head was killing me! "I need to talk to her. Ask her about Red Eye! Find out if they're going to be a threat," I said as I trotted towards the door.

"She's a pretty abrupt thing, ain't she?" Keeper muttered. I pretended not to hear Glory's giggle as I headed down the stairs.

I made it to the fourth step from the bottom when there was a sudden stabbing pain in the crook of my left foreleg. The limb folded beneath me, and with a groan and clatter I fell down the rest of the stairs. The yellow unicorn filly jumped to her feet as the sour yellow mare with a cutie mark of a red ink bottle sneered in delight. One of the brahmin heads looked at me and muttered, "Nine point one."

The other head looked at its partner and snorted. "You crazy, Bill? She botched the landing. I give her a six and a half."

"Are you okay, miss?" The unicorn filly said as I lay there in a heap. I'd landed right on my head. Normally I'd make a joke about that being the hardest part of me, but it flipping hurt! I felt like I'd broken my horn, and actually reached up to touch it to make sure it was in place. My head just ached, despite the Med-X. I covered my face with my hooves,

"Oh... yeah..." I said as I rubbed my face hard. Definitely sick. I pushed my eyepatch off, groaning. Everything felt puffy on that side of my face. I dropped my hooves and smiled at the yellow unicorn. "Good thing I landed on my head, huh?"

But the filly wasn't laughing. She was screaming, backing away as fast as her hooves could take her. A few moments later Glory ran down the steps. "What? What is it? I know I'm ugly but..." Except Glory wasn't laughing. The filly hid behind the brahmin. The brahmin's heads muttered to each other. "What's the big deal?" Old Keeper looked even more grave. Then I looked over at Usury... but even she wasn't smiling.

Glory slowly knelt in front of me, and I saw her gulp and turn pale as she looked at the eye socket that had been taken by Enervation and taint. "Blackjack. Does your right eye socket hurt?"

"Yeah... why?" I gave a little grin. "Am I finally growing that eye tentacle penis?"

Glory wasn't laughing. I started to reach up towards the right side of my face and she stopped me. She took a deep breath. "We're going to need a scalpel, forceps, vodka, a spoon, any healing potions you have that are still purple, a fire, and a memory orb. A very long memory orb."

Keeper nodded and turned to the filly. "Little Bit? You have a memory orb for the nice mare, right? Something long and pleasant?"

The filly nodded, not taking her eyes off me as she backed away to her bags and dug through them with her hoof. Finally, she pulled out a golden memory orb. She passed it to Keeper. It was like she was afraid to get near me!

"How... how bad..." I muttered as I reached again. I forced myself to blink that eyelid... and felt... oh Sweet Celestia! What was that? "Get it out..." I whimpered as I felt my heart start to beat faster and faster in my chest. "Get it out, please... please get it out..." Glory kept my hooves away from my face. I blinked again and I felt the urge to cut it out myself rising.

"I will, Blackjack. I will," she promised softly as Keeper passed the memory orb to her and then trotted to the brahmin packs. "How long is this orb, sweetie?" Glory asked the filly.

"I dunno..." she muttered, swallowing. "An hour... two...?"

"I hope it'll be long enough," she muttered as he returned.

"About the cost..." Keeper said as he passed her a bottle of Stalliongrad's Finest.

"Afterwards," Glory said firmly. She lifted the bottle to my lips. "Take a good long drink... in case this memory is shorter than we think it is." I did, feeling the alcohol burn down my throat and settle in my stomach. "Another," she said firmly. Well, always follow the orders of your medical pony. Gulp. "And

one more for luck," she said with a nervous smile. I closed my eye and took three gulps off the bottle.

"*Spasiba...*" I muttered as I touched the golden memory orb with my horn. Wait, what'd I just s--

oooOOOooo

Okay. Try not to think about what Glory was doing. Focus on a memory orb. A nice... boring memory orb. This was a buck. Let's see... horn. In a luxurious skywagon with its own terminal. And... and... his chest hurt. He rasped with every breath as he levitated papers in front of him.

Sweet Celestia. I knew this buck.

Goldenblood lay on his side on some pillows, and there was a head resting on his flank. A head with luxurious silken pink hair, with just a few streaks of near-white near the temple, that spilled over his rear legs. "Are we almost there?" a mare whispered in a timid voice. A pair of beautiful teal eyes dared peek up at him through the hooves clasped tightly over them.

He murred as he turned, nuzzled her hooves aside, and kissed her gently. I was astonished at how soft her lips were. "We're an hour away at least," he said softly. "You could have gotten Twilight to teleport you."

"I know, but she's always so busy. I don't want to be a bother," she replied in the sweetest little voice I'd ever heard. "I'm glad you came with me, though. Rarity was tied up with ministry business."

"She'll be there. I'm hoping to have a little chat with her. You could have asked Pinkie Pie," he rasped, breaking into a hacking cough. Each breath burned; did it ever heal? Fluttershy held him and passed him a purple healing potion. After he drank it, the coughs subsided a little. "Thank you. As I was saying, she'd have been happy to attend any party. Even at a hospital."

"No. I couldn't. She's... she's changed," Fluttershy said softly as she looked at him. "She's always so... so frantic. And I know she's smiling and laughing, but sometimes she scares me."

"Believe me, she worries me too," he murmured softly. "I never expected her to be so... zealous. She's rooted out a dozen traitors to the kingdom and had us seize their assets. I would have thought that that was enough. But, if anything, she seems more determined than ever to root out bad ponies."

"Applejack says Pinkie ordered a bunch of stuff for her ministry," Fluttershy bit her lip, her eyes darting away evasively.

"What is it?" he asked in his raspy burr. When she didn't talk, he stroked her wings gently. "What's wrong with Pinkie Pie?" His voice was no firmer, but it had an authoritative tone to it that made me want to sit up straighter.

"Please don't use the director voice," Fluttershy said as she closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he replied immediately in his softer rasp. "It's my job, though. I have to keep Luna informed."

"Please don't tell her. It was just one time!" Fluttershy said, then clasped her hooves over her mouth. Slowly, she melted as he just looked at her. Finally, she squeaked, "She collapsed at work the

other day. She'd been up for days working and working and working. She's taking this... thing. It's called Dash. She had little inhalers all over her office. Apparently, she ran out and was trying to make more when she collapsed. Her secretary found her."

"Is she all right?" Goldenblood asked as he continued to pet her wings.

Fluttershy sighed and shook her head. "She's back at work. She ignored me and her doctors and everything. She was... she laughed at first. But then she gave me a look. An... an angry look. She told me to buzz off and leave her alone." Fluttershy trembled. "My friend would never say that," she said as she hugged her middle gently.

"She's under a lot of stress. You all are. Especially you," he said as he kissed along her yellow neck. "How are you feeling? Still sick?"

"No. That's passed," Fluttershy murmured and gave him a little smile. "You don't need to worry about me. I know all about babies."

"You know all about other ponies having them. This is the first time you're doing it yourself. Remember what Trueblood said and take it easy. Let Redheart and Cheerilee take care of the hospital and school openings after this one," he replied. "You probably should have had them take care of this one, too..."

"Well, it is named after me," she said delicately. She looked at him and gave a little smile. "And what happened to 'It is absolutely vital to the future of Equestria that you oversee all activities of the Ministry of Peace', hmm?" She suddenly balked. "I'm sorry. Was that rude of me? I didn't mean to be rude."

"By all means, be rude. You can be positively snitty if it makes you feel better," he said, then laughed. Then he sighed as he stroked her middle. "I still have to figure out how to break this to everypony. Luna will have to know first. Then Rarity."

"Do you think I could tell all my friends together?" she asked in her cute little voice.

"Maybe. We'll have to see," he replied softly.

"I love you," she murmured, arching her neck to kiss him gently.

"I know..." he replied after the kiss was broken.

For a moment, I was afraid I was going to have to endure another marathon sex memory, but the pair simply cuddled. Fluttershy wore glasses as she shuffled through papers and he read reports about the Equestrian Space Program. He asked her about her forays into memory modification spells for dealing with emotional traumas. She asked him what names he was thinking of for the baby. "As long as it doesn't have 'blood' in the name," was his only requirement.

As they approached Hoofington, he opened a drawer with his magic. "Here. I planned on giving this to you at the party, but..." And he levitated out a delicate silver butterfly mane clip. She gasped, flushing as he moved it over and pinned her hair out of her face. The rose quartz wings sparkled softly. The detail was such that it almost seemed as if it'd take off flying.

"It's lovely! Did you get it from Rarity?" she said as she nudged it with her hoof.

He hesitated before smiling. "Something like that." She started to protest about it being too nice, and he silenced her with a kiss. "And I know you know some patient who will love it as well." She smiled and relaxed, nodding.

Finally, they arrived at the huge concrete building. Fluttershy sighed as she looked out the window of the covered wagon. "It's so... so..." she murmured, then glanced back at him. "...nice."

"It's hideous. All buildings in Hoofington have to be hideous. It's in the building code," he said, then smiled and got one in return. "Just be glad it's not one of those black monstrosities they're building in the Core."

"Yes. I really don't know why Hoofington embraces postmodern minimalist brutalism as its primary architectural style," she said as the wagon touched down on the roof of the hospital. Post what? What post? Was she talking about the buildings looking like posts? She stood, and I didn't get an answer. Redheart was standing near the landing pad.

Goldenblood rose and nuzzled Fluttershy softly. "Take care of yourself, mommy."

She giggled and nearly bounced on her hooves at that word, then flushed profusely and nodded. "I will. You take care of yourself, too. Make sure you keep some medicine with you." Then she trotted out of the wagon, looked back once to see him before finally disappearing inside.

He sighed and pressed a button. "Robronco HQ, please, ladies," he said into a speaker. The wagon lifted into the air and started towards the city core. If I'd thought he'd use now to dig up all kinds of secret information, I was disappointed. He settled back, took out a picture of Fluttershy, and just stared at it for almost the entirety of the flight. Finally, the skywagon landed, and his horn packed up several things into his saddlebags before he stepped out. There were four pegasi harnessed to it and four more armed with high-power automatic rifles. "Thank you, ladies," he said with a respectful nod to the team before trotting towards an elevator.

Hoofington was half reconstructed at this point. The ministry hubs were finished save for the midnight blue ministry of awesome that rose twice as tall as the rest. The ugly black buildings had an unsettling uniformity, but they seemed undoubtedly sturdy. Clearly, it would take something substantial to take down this fortress of a city. Too bad balefire bombs counted. A balefire bomb with a blast contained inside a shield that liquefied its occupants...

Inside, the building had a very incomplete feel to it. After stepping out of the elevator, we passed by several unfinished rooms with ponies still installing parts and panels. Goldenblood seemed to know his way around well enough, walking through the hallways and intersections without hesitation. He finally entered some sort of engineering workshop; there was heavy equipment everywhere that looked quite out of place in the super-modern city.

"Director Goldenblood! So nice to finally meet you," the yellow buck with the thin mustache said brightly as he looked up from some piece of machinery.

"Horse," he replied with a nod of his head. "I would have come sooner, but you seem to have your hooves full."

"Settling in to our cozy new accommodations courtesy of the Ministry of Wartime Technology and

the Hoofington Reconstruction effort,” he replied. Goldenblood looked at several metallic spheres. “Ah... is this that spritebot I’ve read up on?”

“Actually, we’re almost ready for production on that model,” he said as he covered the balls with a sheet. “These are for something else. Now, what brings the director of the O.I.A. to see me?” he asked with a broad smile.

“This,” he replied, as lifted a flap on his saddlebag and pulled out... a metal rod? It was silvery white, maybe as long as my hoof was wide, and thin as a pencil.

He floated it to the yellow earth pony, who took it in his hooves. “Well now, what’s this?”

“You tell me,” Goldenblood said with a thin smile.

“Well, it’s not any alloy of steel I’m familiar with. Not aluminum.” He juggled it from hoof to hoof. “Not Celestium or Big Macintoshium...” he tossed it into his mouth and sucked on it a moment like a metal candy cane. “It doesn’t taste like silver,” he spat it out and caught it right on the end of his nose. “What are you?” he asked the little rod.

“We don’t know. We’ve been digging up ore of that metal underneath the city. I’m curious about its properties,” Goldenblood said as he tapped his hoof on the desk.

“This ore wouldn’t happen to be found alongside strange zebra ruins, would it?” he asked with a speculative grin.

“You’d have to ask Rarity about that,” Goldenblood replied in a tone that was suddenly far cooler.

Horse seemed to get the hint as he looked cross-eyed at the bar balanced on his muzzle. “Well, we can do chemical analysis, magical analysis... but personally, I like starting with good old fashioned physical analysis,” he said as he trotted to a massive machine that was all hydraulic pistons and gears. He slid the metal into a little gap in the middle and then began to crank wheels to lock it in place. “This will tell us the tensile strength of this baby. Give us an idea of what we’re working with.” He pulled some levers, and there was a hum as a large gauge started to turn. “One kilomac... two kilomacs... three... huh... four?” The needle was now in a yellow bar and steadily climbing. “Five kilomacs!” Horse exclaimed.

The needle started into the red, and the machine began to make ominous whining sounds. “There’s no deformation at all...” Goldenblood mused.

“Gotta shut it down before it blows the safeties,” Horse said as he moved to the side and started to tug on the levers. They didn’t budge. “Hey, what’s wrong with this thing?” Goldenblood didn’t move. He stared right at the silver rod of metal. “Director! Move out of there.”

Suddenly, the whole machine shook just as a buck walked in the door to the lab. The machine gave a resounding bang, and the rod went flying through the air, buzzing an eerie high-pitched song. It seemed to curve midflight, passing right by Goldenblood’s ear as it flew straight into the head of the buck in the doorway behind Goldenblood. He dropped instantly, falling in that boneless way that signaled a terminal injury.

“Calipers!” Horse cried, rushing to the fallen buck. Then the yellow earth pony screamed, “Medic!

Someone get a medic!"

Slowly, Goldenblood approached the pair, looking down at an inch of rod protruding from the buck's skull. It glowed with his magic as it was slowly pulled free. "Director!" Horse protested at first, but then gaped. Little silvery wisps were rising from the wound and disappearing into the metal rod. "What... how... what is that metal?"

"That's what I need to figure out, Mr. Horse," Goldenblood said softly as he stared at the blood and brains on the tip of the rod, the last wisps disappearing into the silvery metal. "That's what I need to figure out..."

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory was like slowly shoving the right side of my face into a basin of boiling water. I sprawled on my side in Glory's hooves in a corner away from the brahmin. It was dark, the fire station lit only by the flickering flames of the wan, shielded campfire. A bandage had been packed around my right eye, and I tried to ignore the bloody scalpel and a coffee cup filled with... with... flesh should not be that color!

I jerked, choked, and retched as I brought up the contents of my stomach. Which wasn't really much at this point. It turned out, though, that berries weren't so good the second time around. I felt Glory's hooves move to turn my head. "I'd hoped you'd be out longer," she said as she kept my face down and stroked my mane. "It's okay. I got the tumor and cauterized the rest of the socket." Okay, I really didn't want to know what that meant.

"Hurts. Bad," I said, feeling the alcohol barely keeping the burning sensation at bay. I closed my eye and pressed my left cheek into her stomach. "I'd like to nominate this day as the most messed up in Equestrian history."

"Oh, it's not all bad," Glory said with a sniff. "You found something that caused Enervation... stopped a slaving tribe... helped me... went for a ride through Hoofington's storm drain system..."

I smiled as I nuzzled her. How in Equestria did she keep smelling so good? She was just as muddy and messy as myself. "That's why I said messed up. There're just too many highs and lows in this day." I felt the alcohol slowly win, clouding my thinking. I waited a minute, then smiled. "Six months was pretty optimistic, wasn't it?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. The tears falling on my mane told me enough. She muttered softly, "Maybe if we were in Chapel... or some low radiation... low Enervation... some better place... This damned city is aggravating the cancer."

Funny, I'd found Hoofington pretty aggravating too. "Mmm... well, that's too bad. I'll just have to end things with the Rangers pretty quickly."

"Sanguine..." she began, but I silenced her with a shake of my head.

"I don't want to live as a Gorgon or a manticore-thing. And my life isn't worth the damage he'll do to the Wasteland with Chimera," I said softly.

"How... how can you say that?" she sobbed softly.

"Because it's true, Glory. I'm not that important. Even if he could give me a brand new body... I still wouldn't take it." She hugged me a little tighter, and I sighed. "Listen... when I'm done, I want you to go to the Collegiate. Help Zodiac with Steelpony. You know about medical technological stuff. Or help out in Chapel. They'll need a good doctor. And somepony needs to make sure P-21 doesn't get too sour and grumpy. Okay?" She sniffed and nodded and I smiled, remembering, "Oh, first we'll have to unseal Steelpony somehow..." Lightheaded... getting sleepy now...

She sniffed and nodded. "Let me worry about that. I'll take care of it. I'll take care of you, Blackjack."

Somepony taking care of me. I didn't deserve it... but it certainly felt nice. I smiled as the alcohol, chems, and fatigue overtook me. My mind sank into a deep dark sleep, and for once there weren't any dreams. A dress rehearsal, I supposed, and better than I could have hoped.

* * *

I felt the firm ring of a gun barrel against my windpipe. Slowly, I opened my eye and looked up into the furious gaze of Usury. The gun was a simple single-barrel twenty gauge, but right now I figured it would do the trick. Tears poured down her cheeks as the gun trembled in her grip. Glory was asleep. So were the brahmin and filly. I had no idea where Keeper or the ghouls were.

Looking up into her eyes, I just couldn't work up the will to care. I simply stared. This wouldn't bring back her life. This wouldn't restore her. It would do little besides end my pain... and then hers, once Glory was finished with her. She'd lost everything, and I was the perfect one to blame, though I doubted she'd be in a position to collect the bounty she'd posted. The sallow, sullen mare just stared back as her lips worked on the mouth grip, and I smiled.

"It won't really change anything but put me out of my misery a few months early," I said quietly as I levitated the bottle of vodka over and took a drink, feeling the bite of the gun barrel as I swallowed.

I'd never seen a mare destroyed before. In that moment, I took away everything from her, even her revenge. She pulled the gun from my throat and trotted away to a filthy corner. A few more weeks of me in misery was the most she could hope for. I wished there was some way I could have helped her. Something I could have given her. At this point, even revenge would have been a gift to a mare who had almost nothing. She was left following her father, cleaning up after his brahmin.

I suppose I should have hated her. Punished her for what she'd done in Paradise. But, honestly, all I could spare right then was pity.

* * *

The next morning, we finished our deals with Keeper. The only charity he gave was in the bedroom, but he seemed to be cutting Glory a little slack. I had a decent drum-fed shotgun. She had her gatling beam gun. Ammo. Chems. Some purple healing potions for any superficial wounds we received over the next few days. A tip I bought from Little Bit that Lacunae might be able to recharge them if she had a healing spell. Useful. Definitely useful.

Glory was finalizing things when I spotted something in the corner. The sight of it made my heart beat a little faster as I stared at the black case. "Add this too," I said as I picked it up with my magic.

Keeper looked curious, Glory skeptical. "Where'd you get this?" I asked softly as I turned it over.

"A ghoul who said he picked it out of Stable-Tec HQ all the way down in Fillydelphia. I figured it had to be worth something, but in twenty years I've never found somepony interested in it. Never could open the damned thing, either," he said. "Hundred caps and good riddance." Glory looked at me and paid the pittance. From the weight, it was clear that there was another silver bullet inside.

I opened it slowly, licking my lips. Instantly, my PipBuck started clicking from the radiation coming off the shell. As with the others, there was a piece of paper folded up with the bullet. I pulled it free and then closed the shielded case.

'Sorry, sis. Definitely not my field. I heard Twilight sent hers to Horizon Labs to be cut open. Maybe they know what these things are? Hope things are better soon. PS: You have any idea what's eatin Scoots? She's been actin funnier than usual.' -Apple Bloom.'

"Interesting. So what kind of gun does a bullet like that go to?" he asked as I tucked it away.

"A big one," I replied, sticking my tongue out at him. Last thing he needed to know about was a megaspell gun... though I had to wonder just how many caps a fully operational Folly would be worth.

After that, Keeper and his caravan started packing up. I walked up to the old buck. "Thanks for all your help, Keeper."

He chuckled. "If you really want to thank me, I think I can spare a bit of time..." he said with a roguish wink that made me blush. He was old enough to be... still really good to look at. "Otherwise, don't worry about it. Your mare paid everything up nice and square." Glory smiled, nodded, and put her wing across my back possessively.

"I was just wondering, though... the Reapers and the Rangers... who do you think I should back?"

His smile disappeared at once, and he sighed. "Neither."

"But--" I began, but he shook his head firmly.

"Those two are working off thirty years of hate. Yer not going to be able to convince 'em to stop fightin'. It's foalish to even try. Best stay clear of the whole mess," he said flatly as he sat, crossing his forelegs over his chest. "That's how I've always made my way. Don't take sides."

"I can't," I replied, shaking my head.

"Well, then I'd keep your barding pulled down over that PipBuck of yours," he said grimly. "I know Steel Rangers who think it's their Celestia-given mission to take that off your leg and put it in some damned shrine or something! Crunchy Carrots might be smart enough to not try and take it, but I can't say the same for the rest of 'em."

After that, the caravan moved off to the northwest, heading towards Toll. The early morning was punctuated by gunshots, faint explosions, and the reek of cordite and rocket fuel. Scotch's PipBuck tag was just south of us, but I wasn't quite up to walking around the Wasteland just yet. That meant sitting around in the firehouse. Waiting. Well, at least I did have some other things to do. I munched a box of Carrot Crunch and flipped through my PipBuck to the Steelpony file. "So, how am I supposed to open this

thing with EC-1101?"

Glory moved next to me, snuggling beside me as she looked at the screen. Then she frowned. "You don't have to. It's decrypted."

"It's what?" I stared at the file. "Well... when the heck did that happen?" I shrugged, feeling... actually, a bit uneasy. "So, you're saying I don't have to go meet somepony on the other side of the city, struggle with some horrible internal dilemma, or pay a ridiculous price?" Anything being this easy in the Wasteland was just wrong! I half expected my PipBuck to explode or something.

"You sound disappointed," she said with a smile.

"Eh. I'm getting crotchety and cynical in my old age. Give me a year and I'll be almost as grouchy as P-21," I said as I flipped through some notes at random.

"I'd love to see that," she said softly as she kissed my left cheek. Me too...

"Now I just have to trot it all the way back to the Collegiate," I groaned. "I'll probably wipe out two settlements, save a baby, destroy a dam, have a mind-blowing revelation, and have my hoof fall off before we get there... what do you think?"

"I think you might be able to just broadcast it." She tapped the black casing. "This is a broadcaster, right?"

"Um... I sort of don't know how," I muttered, my ears burning. Off to the side, I spotted the Dealer; was it just me or did he look less decrepit? Or course it just me! He was my crazy after all. He just shook his head, the cards shuffling in his hooves.

She smiled and shook her head. "I know the basics. First we go to the 'Broadcaster' menu, and then we need a network." I stared as a short list appeared, and even she seemed a little shocked. "Well. 'Hoofington Civilian Grid'. 'Hoofington Defense Grid'. 'Stable-Tec Information Network'. 'M.O.M. Spritebot Network'. 'M.A.S. Emergency Broadcast System'."

"Use the MASEBS," I said. If it was good enough for Homage, it was good enough for me. Besides, the thought of sending anything that might summon that cybermonster thing made me leery.

She selected it. There was a flash in my vision, scrolling data ending with 'Access granted'. My PipBuck chirped, and Glory gave a slightly astonished smile. "Wow. It... looks like we can now contact the entire active MASEBS network." From the number of 'node unavailable's on the list that was scrolling up the screen, that wasn't as much as it could have been. Glory deftly selected an option marked 'Contacted Nodes'.

I was surprised at the length of the new list that appeared; it was longer than I'd anticipated. Most of them were mind-boggling streams of number and letters, but a few stood out. Stable 89. Miramare Air Station. Rainbow Dash Skyport Terminal. Chapel Post Office. Hoofington Planetarium. '[node name unavailable]' stood out as being neither a recognizable name nor a line of gobbledegook. "So I can contact... any of these?"

"It looks like it." I selected the Planetarium, and Glory nodded. "Now hit 'Connect'."

I did and there was a beep. Then another. Again. "Is it supposed to be doing that?"

"Ask somepony in Intelligence. I've just read a book on these things," she replied.

Suddenly, there was a crackle, and a synthetic mare's voice said, "Blackjack? How are you contacting me on the MASEBS?"

"Ask a pony smarter than me, Professor. I got Steelpony," I said with a smile. "I'm going to try and send it to you."

"You... I... thank you, Blackjack." The synthetic voice seemed quite speechless.

"Don't thank me. I have no idea if this will work," I replied. I selected 'Send file' and looked through the list until I found 'Steelpony.acv'. I selected it and confirmed.

My E.F.S. filled my vision with more streaming numbers, and then it stopped. To my alarm, Steelpony.acv was no longer in my PipBuck's memory! "Um... Professor?"

"Thank you so much, Blackjack," she said quietly. "I have it. I have... everything..." I checked to make sure that I hadn't sent EC-1101 too. Fortunately... or unfortunately... that was still in my PipBuck.

"Professor," Glory said, "Now that you have it... are you sure there's... there's nothing you can do for Blackjack?" She bit her lip as she looked at me. There was a long pause.

"I'm sorry, Glory," she replied. "If I had a full fabrication facility and staff, yes. We could start making the things Blackjack needs in a few hours and begin installing them tomorrow. But right now, all I have are assorted pieces collected from all across the Wasteland. I even purchased Deus's remains, but..."

"Don't worry about it, Professor. Just do something good. Alright?" I asked softly.

"Absolutely, Blackjack," she replied, and then with a click the connection was broken.

Funny. I felt good. I might be dead in months, weeks, or even hours, but at least I would be able to say that I'd done something... substantial. Something that would really matter.

I checked Scotch Tape's tag. She was just a half block away. "Come on. Let's go meet our friends."

"You know, I'm pretty sure this is the point where something goes terribly wrong," muttered the Dealer and I stopped in my tracks.

"That's it." I whirled on him and narrowed my eye, "I am sick of you and your snotty attitude, mister! I'm happy! My friends are safe. Everything is going sunshine and rainbows so I do not want to hear it! If you can't say something nice then just get back in my head with all the rest of my doubts because I do not want to hear it!" Okay, Glory looked like she wasn't sure if she should be confused or amused, but the look of shock on the Dealer's face had been worth every single word.

My braces chafed, my insides hurt, and I was about to deal with ponies who had some kind of weird technological fetish. But I still felt good. I gave a smile to Glory, who'd mounted the very formidable-looking gatling beam weapon she'd purchased on her barding. For once, life was good, and things were going my way. I turned slowly to face the a cracked road and a collection of blue bars

approaching the crossroads.

A lot more than just three blue bars...

Lacunae stepped around a smashed wagon, her magnificent frame chained and bound. A very familiar collar rested around her throat. The sight of it gave me the curious sensation of my blood both boiling and freezing at the same time. Beside her trotted P-21 and Scotch Tape, equally bound, though at least the filly wasn't collared. A half dozen Steel Rangers surrounded them. At their lead was the biggest suit of armor I'd ever seen; it looked as if it had been custom built to contain the size of the pony within. Its matte black frame was gilded in golden leaf, and all four hooves ended in glittering hydraulic rams. The enormous Ranger looked down at me and said in a deep, booming voice, "Step aside! We are escorting these prisoners to Ironmare Station."

Ante up.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk Added: Eye for Eye -- For each crippled limb you have, you do an additional 10% damage.

(Authors notes: Huge thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria and congratulations for finishing it. Also, thanks to the three musketeers for making this worth reading in the first place. Finally, a huge thanks to everypony who leaves comments. They're what keeps this whole thing going. Lastly, if anypony wants to help support the author, the bit jar is at paypal to David13ushey@[gmail.com](mailto:David13ushey@gmail.com). Every bit helps. Thanks for reading.)