

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 1: Inception

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria..."

War. War never changes. It had consumed our home, a war fought by foreign aggressors until great and terrible magics had been unleashed to burn all the world to ash and dust. Only our constant devotion to the Princesses had carried us through that terrible war, just as our unwavering faith in the Overmare maintained our continued survival within the earth. Trust in the Overmare; obey the Overmare.

The grating buzz of my alarm yanked me away from sleep. I stuck my left foreleg out from under the blankets, away from my head, felt around for the end table next to the bed, found it, and proceeded to whack my PipBuck against the tabletop until the right button was hit and the noise stopped. I groaned and smacked my lips, tasting the sour gunk in my mouth before rolling onto my back and huffing softly, "Good morning, Blackjack. Welcome to another thrilling day in Stable 99." I half crawled, half rolled, half fell out of bed and gave myself a vigorous shake. Life in Stable 99 was routine, with any deviation punishable by the security mares. I had half an hour to wash, half an hour to eat, and an hour to report to my duty station. The same as it had been every day since I'd gotten my cutie mark.

Slowly, I shuffled through the copious junk I'd accumulated. It was mostly recycled food chips and old drink bulbs, though I liked to pretend that some of the open bottles on the dresser were some sort of fermentation experiment... Maybe a pet? Colonization by our future fungal overlords? Heh. A mare could dream... My horn glowed white as my magic lifted my uniform from one of the heaps. I gave it a test sniff... ew... unacceptable. I tossed it back on its pile and sifted around for another. Sniff... sniff... yeah, this'd work.

Trotting down to the showers, I passed the murals designed to inspire camaraderie and cooperation... at least, according to what I'd been constantly taught in classes. 'We are all the Overmare's foals' declared the caption of one picture of an abstract white unicorn hugging dozens of tiny ponies in her hooves. Another showed one lone weeping mare under the caption 'Selfishness Separates'.

I trotted into the sector's communal bathroom, and immediately my ears perked to a familiar giggling. Walking past a stall, I glanced in at two mares employing unauthorized and probably ineffective washing techniques. According to the training manual, behavior like that in public spaces was punishable by whipping and restriction to C class rations, so it was pretty understandable that the pair looked up with some trepidation when they spotted me.

"Oh, it's just Blackjack," the dappled mare, Pastels, said in relief before flushing and snapping at her partner, "I swear, you are trying to get us flogged!"

"Fun," giggled the white mare, Misty Hooves from the bakery, nuzzling her. Misty was a chronic offender. I didn't know if she liked the kiss of the whip or if there was something else wrong with her. Or both.

I sighed. In theory, I was supposed to discourage this kind of thing. However, it fucking *sucked* being the mare who was supposed to discourage this kind of thing. "You won't think so if it's Daisy doing the flogging," I commented, and instantly their smiles disappeared. I couldn't blame them. With the constant duty and honor bullshit, a little flank spank was one of the few reliable means of recreation, and a lot of the security mares got really... enthusiastic about it. I stepped under the spray and immediately jerked. "Cold!"

"Yeah. Heating talismans are really slow today," Misty said.

"Well," I said after a moment, "go back to your quarters and finish up your fun. Make sure you're back in your beds by curfew." That's me, big badass security pony. The pair glanced nervously at each other and then quickly finished their showers.

"I wonder if we can do it in the atrium and not get caught," I heard Misty mutter to Pastels as the two trotted out. I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Some mares have all the luck. Not that they were the only two, or even the worst two. Half the ponies in the stable seemed to have at least one flavor of crazy. I supposed it was only inevitable when half your day was devoted to keeping this place going.

And we had to keep it going. If we didn't... don't think about it.

Stable 99 was all that was left. Every filly learned that as soon as they could read; the megaspells unleashed across Equestria had sterilized the surface. Radioactive death was all that awaited us outside. So we kept the stable working. We kept order. We kept loyalty... because at any moment... any moment...

"Fuck, Blackjack. Don't think about another Incident," I muttered softly. "The Overmare Protects"... but I felt a gloomy specter rising inside me at the thought of the entire stable being in the hooves of a filly a year younger than me.

There were exactly five hundred jobs to be filled in Stable 99. Four hundred and something were covered by mares like myself who inherited our jobs from our mothers. My mom was security. I was security. When I had my daughter, she would be security. And so on and so on. In the rare event of a mare dying before she could breed, a lottery would be held for some other mare to produce an extra filly for the spot. Because the population had to stay at five hundred. Everypony had to behave and follow the rules. Otherwise... there'd be an Incident.

Stable 99 couldn't take another Incident. This bathroom alone showed the flickering lights from overtaxed generators and the water that couldn't settle on whether it wanted to be freezing or boiling. You couldn't think about it; all it would take was one thing to go wrong and we'd all die. One busted generator... one broken recycler... one accident, and we'd all be choking on our own unrecycled breath.

"Fuck! Don't think about it..." I said, trying again to shove it from my mind. That was made ridiculously easy by Midnight trotting past me towards the atrium. Instantly, my ruby eyes popped wide at her cute flank and graceful tail. Black on black and *oh* she needed to be mine! "Hey! Midnight! Midnight! Hey! Hey! Wait up!" I shouted as I tripped and raced to catch up with her. Of course, she didn't wait; she never did. Instead, she picked up her pace. "Damn it, Midnight! No running in the halls!" I shouted as I ran after her. What? I was security! I was allowed to break the rules when pursuing a fine flank!

Unfortunately, there was a flash, and a pair of hoofcuffs materialized around my forehooves. "Oh sh--" I barely got out before rolling head over hoof. I glared around at the source. It could only be... "Daisy. Marmalade. Excellent cunt block... top notch." The pale earth pony mare and honey colored unicorn both smiled at my predicament.

"No running in the halls, Blackjack," Daisy said, stepping out of the side hall she'd been lurking in. When Stable-Tec made the stable, clearly they hadn't had mares of her size in mind. Her ears nearly brushed against the ceiling as she looked down at me with her snide little grin. "Not even after pussy." Marmalade gave an echoing little snicker.

"Right. You got me," I said as I held up the hoofcuffs. "So?"

"Aww... don't know the spell yourself? I thought all the security unicorns did. Marmalade does,"

Daisy taunted as she stepped over me, making her way towards the atrium stairs. The vapid unicorn gave a slack grin and nodded, and then both of them had a good laugh as they trotted away. I rose, glaring at their backs before hobbling after the pair.

All security unicorns were supposed to know a selection of spells for policing the stable. Me... I had telekinesis... and telekinesis... and oh! Did I mention telekinesis? I couldn't cuff or stun or do interrogation spells to save my life; all the practice I'd put in merely gave me a migraine. I'd have been better off being in maintenanc-- wait, that would mean I'd be responsible for the stable. Strike that... better I were in food prep. Nice, low-responsibility food prep. That was the life for me...

But I was security. Because Mom was security. Because her mom had been security. All the way back to the legendary Card Trick, the one who'd carved 'Security: We Save Ponies' above the entrance to the security level. Hurray for completely irrational expectations! I knew I'd never save 99. I couldn't even get out of these hoofcuffs.

Whoa, pity party; table for one! Or not. I didn't have any time for the 'poor me' routine. Never played well. Nope! I just had to get out of these cuffs... and I had an idea how...

The huge atrium was the heart and soul of pony life in 99. Almost half the stable could fit in the room for large events, more if everypony was really friendly. Huge support pillars had been sculpted in a parody of tree trunks, and the support beams had been fashioned to resemble branches. That was about the extent of trying to make 99 look like something outside. Besides, the effect was ruined by the huge banners of the Overmare smiling down at us all and her stupid patriotic slogans of 'Help the Overmare, help 99' and 'Stableity over all'. I mean, really. 'Stableity'? The music piped in was half parade march and half hymn.

Any wonder I tried to stay out of this place? There was also the fact that most ponies refused to look at me. They'd drop their conversations, look aside, or leave. It didn't matter that I tried to be nice; the fact was that all I had to do was drop a name and they'd be hauled in for interrogations. I'd witnessed enough to know I didn't want to drop a name... besides, I'd already tried it once. Never worked for the ponies who deserved it.

I passed the cafeteria where ponies loaded bowls with green recycled algae slime, scooped recycled fungus cubes onto trays, collected synthetic recycled carrot sticks and apple flakes into bowls, or heaped up stacks of green recycled grass chips, brown recycled hay chips, and white recycled cake chips upon their plates. All the food in 99 was recycled into more food. All the waste in 99 was recycled. We were recycled. And yes, even having lived here my entire life, I still found it easier to pretend that the machines just magically made the food poof into being. Still, despite being made out of recycled poo water, the chips were pretty tasty!

You just had to not think about it.

Midnight was talking with Rivets and Textbook, and the black unicorn's eyes widened at the sight of me hobbling to her table. "Mind if I join you? No? Great!" I said as I set my hooves on the table before she could shoot me down. "Hey, Riv. Hey, teach..." the earth pony school mistress sniffed disdainfully at my intrusion.

"We were having a private conversation," Textbook said sullenly as she glared at me. Rivets, an older gray earth pony, showed far more amusement at my predicament.

"Great. Do I have a story to tell! Here I was, just minding my own business, hurrying to catch up with a particularly lovely mare, when these hoofcuffs appeared on me like magic! Can you believe it?" I asked with a grin as I tapped them on the table. "So, there I was, pondering and bemoaning my fate, when I remembered a certain vision of angelic equinity whose magic far outshines my own and whose kindness and generosity would surely compel her to free me from my predicament!" I said, grinning ear to

ear as I fluttered my eyes at Midnight.

"Blackjack, I'm a PipBuck technician..." she began.

"Which means you're intelligent. Skilled! That you possess far more competence than a lowly security pony like myself!" I said as she hesitated. I almost had her convinced! "I'll pay you in oral sex!" I blurted. Textbook turned the shade of a spoiled apple, and Rivets covered half her face as she chuckled.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Midnight said to Rivets as she trotted to another table.

"I'll be telling your mother about this," Textbook added to me before going to join Midnight.

I groaned and pressed my face into my bound hooves. Rivets patted my shoulder. "Oral sex, huh? What's the going rate on that?"

"I'm an idiot," I muttered. Rivets chuckled, certainly not arguing.

"I had no idea. I didn't think you were into mares," Rivets said with a smile, munching on her grass chips.

"Eh..." I shrugged. "It's more the fact she always tells me no." I glared down at the cuffs on my hooves, growled, and then bit the conjured metal. "She always plays hard to get..." I said around the mouthful of metal.

"Well, it's your time to waste. Her spot on the queue's up, though, so I really doubt she'll have time for you," she said matter-of-factly.

"Really?" My red eyes widened and then drooped along with the rest of my body. I slumped till my chin rested on the tabletop. "Bummer."

"We all have our little trials," Rivets said with a sigh. "I've got to get Duct Tape's filly on the duty roster. She's taking over for her mom." She sighed. "Hopefully she knows which end of the wrench goes on the nut."

"Duct Tape died? How?" I gasped. She was one of the nicer ponies in maintenance. I frequently bumped flanks with her on C shift, though never actually talked with her, of course. After all, I was security, and she was scared to death of me.

Rivets snorted in irritation. "Don't you ever pay attention? She died a week ago. Tried servicing the Overmare's terminal, and it blew up in her face. Power junction wasn't closed."

"But Scotch Tape doesn't even have her cutie mark yet, right? She's still in school," I pointed out, twisting my hooves errantly in the cuffs to try and free them.

"Does that matter? I've got a hundred and fifty maintenance mares to manage, and I've got a hole on the C shift and she's got to fill it," Rivets said firmly, narrowing her eyes as she pressed her lips together. "I feel for the kid. Really. But the stable takes first, last, and middle priority. She'll just have to get over it."

"Really? I thought it was Overmare first, last, and middle," I replied, enjoying a little smack talk. Normally it would get a grin. The look on Rivets's face now, though... I'd never seen her look so angry in my life. My black-and-red-striped mane itched terribly, and I just wished my hooves were free so I could scratch it.

Rivets groaned. "Don't talk about the Overmare to me. She's been throwing all kinds of special work orders and studies my way. The little foal is demanding peak efficiency, and she's countermanding my work assignments to make damn sure it doesn't happen." She reached into one of the many pockets

on her utility barding and drew out a notepad. "Last month she ordered the stable recreation broadcaster in Maintenance One overhauled, but then she collected every piece of scrap electronics and conductor for inventory and kept the entire terminal crew occupied with 'searching and cleaning' the stable databases!"

Maintenance One was the little closet of a utility space next to the stable maneframes and the massive Stable-Tec hatchway right outside the atrium; I sometimes used it for naps when I knew the Overmare was out. "Did she say why?"

"Do overmares ever?" Rivets countered with a snort. "Her mother was bad enough; I sure didn't shed any tears when she died last year. But that little tyrant is going to..." and she drew herself up short, realizing that even though I was the most irresponsible mare in security, I was in security. She coughed, then gave a little shrug. "I'm just concerned about the stable. That's all."

And that was the story of my life. No matter how friendly I was, I was security. She wasn't. I enforced the Overmare's rules and punished those who didn't. I sighed, my ears drooping a little. "Well, see you at the card game tonight?"

There was some considerable doubt in her eyes as she stared at me. She rose with a cool, "Of course. You're always welcome at the game." Not because I was actually *welcome* welcome, but more because having me there would assuage fears that the game would be raided. After all, I was the only pony in security who liked associating with the maintenance mares after hours. "It's in Atmospheric Maintenance Three this time. Bring your bits." Because I would be leaving with exactly as much as I came with, because I was tolerated. Not wanted. Goddesses, why was my mane crawling thinking about the look that she'd just given me?

I looked at the cuffs on my hooves, feeling as if there were something I was missing, then growled as I narrowed my eyes and bit them again!

* * *

There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99, and one tenth of them were resigned to the duty of protecting and safeguarding the stable and executing the will of the Overmare. Unfortunately, we also had to frequently tackle the question of which one took priority. The briefing room was festooned with graphic reminders that 'Service to the Overmare is Service to the Stable'. I hobbled in just as the security head started with the evening briefing.

The security head was Gin Rummy, a middle-aged unicorn who still looked better than several of the younger mares. Her purple and red striped mane contrasted well with her lavender coat and bright pink eyes, and those pink eyes looked right at me with immediate disapproval the second I hobbled in.

Gin Rummy trotted up to the podium and flipped through the notes organized on her PipBuck. The microcomputer on the leg of everypony in the stable had a ridiculous amount of data storage space on it, but I wagered hers was nearly full. She'd been head of security for longer than I'd been alive, and I'd never known her to not be organized, confident, and secure in her knowledge of what was going on in Stable 99. Daisy and Marmalade snickered as I limped in, and I gave the rest of the security mares a sheepish grin and a shrug before taking my seat. Gin Rummy just sighed and looked at me with a slow, disappointed shake of her head. Still, wasn't much she could do.

"So, everypony. I want to thank you for your hard work. Stable incident reports are down to under five percent this month. There hasn't been anything more severe than a few class C incidents of violating curfew. Springs was caught this morning hoarding Med-X, but she surrendered her stash willingly. Punishment will be twenty lashes in the atrium tomorrow morning."

"Ohhh! Ohhh! Pick me! Can I do it?" Daisy asked with a grin, waving her hoof in the air. Gin Rummy did not share her humor.

"Punishment will be administered by a random pony from A shift, Daisy. You know that," she replied firmly. Daisy snorted, glaring at me. I responded with my best 'what?!' expression.

"In other news, medical reports that we're missing a male. There's a new P-21 to round up for retirement, but he hasn't reported back after his last breeding assignment. C shift, your job is to sweep the stable. If a mare's sheltering him, write up the incident and escort him to detention. If not, find him," Gin Rummy said firmly. Daisy rubbed her hooves together gleefully. Most mares simply looked bored. I tried my best not to squirm. Damn it, why were hoofcuffs so hard to get out of?

Everypony in Stable 99 had a job assigned to them from birth. Maintenance ponies maintained, security ponies secured, and baker ponies baked. The forty or so males in Stable 99 were no different: they were breeding equipment. From birth, they had their segregated quarters in medical and were signed out by mares for reproductive purposes and, more frequently, recreational. There were twenty unicorns and twenty earth ponies on the breeding rotation. Once a male reached... how old was it? Twelve? Fifteen? -- they were put into breeding. Of course, to keep the number in rotation the same, that meant that a male had to be taken out of breeding and retired.

"So, if there's nothing else?" Gin Rummy's pink eyes scanned the assembled security ponies before landing on me. "Very well. Oh, and tomorrow, I'd like any ponies confused about how to dispel a hoofcuff spell to please report to security at twelve hundred hours for remediation." Maybe I could do more than telekinesis after all. I was in the front row, and yet, magically, I still knew that every eye was on me. Amazing. "All right. A shift and B shift are off-duty. C shift, stable is yours." Daisy nodded in response. And with that, the mares dispersed to get their last shot at dinner before curfew went active.

"Thanks. I really appreciate that," I said as I looked at the head security mare sourly.

She returned the look coolly. "You're not a blank flank anymore, Blackjack. You have duties and obligations to this stable. If you can't fulfill them, then it's my obligation to train you to meet them."

Yeah, except nopony ever asked me if I wanted them. She started for the exit. "Hey..." I called after her, and when she looked back, I sat down and raised my cuffed hooves. "You mind, Mom?"

She sighed as she looked at me for a long moment and finally went from being head security mare to being my mother. Trotting back, she lowered her horn to the cuffs, and with a flash she dispelled the summoned restraints. Technically, every security unicorn was supposed to be able to do that. Technically, every unicorn, much less every security unicorn, was supposed to be able to do a whole slew of spells that I couldn't. Maybe Mom would get lucky and outlive me. One thing was sure: the second I became head security mare, Stable 99 was doomed.

"Marmalade's work?" she asked in that tone that always seemed to prelude her fighting my battles for me. It was really tempting, I admit. Of course, this was why even most of the security ponies gave me a lot of space; nopony wanted to offend the boss's daughter.

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I can handle it," I said, trying to put on my big girl look. Okay, I was definitely old enough to have it by default, but she always looked at me like I was her little blank flank... when there was nopony else around to see, of course. Thank the Goddesses.

I trotted out after everypony else, pretending not to hear her sigh. Yeah, that just about summed up my feelings on the subject as well.

Outside, I glanced down the hallway. The uppermost levels held security, the armory, the Overmare's office, and all the maneframes that ran the stable. Down at the end of the hall were the Overmare's office and the maintenance room with the maneframes. The Overmare was talking very agitatedly with Midnight and a few of the other mares responsible for the information systems. The dirty white unicorn filly who was our supreme leader looked mad; there was nothing new about that, but tonight

she seemed like she was in a grade A pissed mood and was determined to share it. I'd never seen Midnight looking so upset.

"Get out! Get out get out get out! Leave before I have you all shot! You're useless!" the Overmare concluded in high-hysterical shrieks. It was at moments like this that I was glad the laws didn't allow summary execution. Really glad.

"Midnight!" I shouted as the Overmare returned to her office.

She looked back at me, ears drooping as she rubbed her eyes furiously. "I don't have time for your flank spank right now, Blackjack. The Overmare's pissed."

"Yeah, I got that around 'have you shot'," I said as I fell in beside her as we trotted back downstairs towards the atrium. "Why?"

Midnight looked at me, then sighed and shook her head, "She wants a data file. An old one."

"And you couldn't find it?" I said with a frown. Unlike me, Midnight was actually competent.

"No, that's just it. It was already found by Duct Tape weeks ago. The thing was buried deep in the stable's archives, but she found it. Goddesses know how," Midnight said as we stepped into the large chamber. The stable chimed out that curfew was about to begin and all mares not on C shift were to report to their quarters.

"So what's the problem?"

"It's encrypted," she said with a sigh. "We can't get it to open up for transfer. She wants us to break the encryption, but we haven't been able to all week." She chewed on her lip. "I thought that if we got it ready to transfer into a PipBuck she'd be... well... less pissed, but she was hysterical! I've never had the Overmare say I should be shot!" Clearly, Midnight was shaken. I could relate. There was bitchy Overmare, and then there was whatever I'd just witnessed.

"Mom wouldn't let her," I said, and for the first time in about forever received a small smile in return. "Look, don't worry about it. You'll get it eventually."

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said with obvious relief.

Okay, this was my chance! I grinned. "So... I've got ten minutes before I have to start my rounds. Can I swing by your quarters on my way for that flank spank?" I gave her my best 'I promise you'll enjoy it' look.

She snorted, looked at me, and gave a flat 'in your dreams' "No." Then she trotted away from me as I sat down hard, watching her go.

"Oh come on! I was being sympathetic! Nice! Midnight?" But she didn't look back as she disappeared down towards the residential quarters with the rest of the mares. "Ugh, what does a mare have to do to get a little service in this place?!" I sighed, head hanging. "So unfair..."

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Stable 99 was arranged with one level atop another. At the apex were the Overmare's office, security, the armory, and the maneframes. Underneath that were the atrium, cafeteria, stable entry, and the two dozen or so recreation, education, and medical facilities. Underneath that were the residential quarters for the stable's population. And underneath it all lay the utility and maintenance levels, a section larger than all the rest of the stable combined. The recycling systems were all found down here, as were the magical generators that kept everything going. Manufacturing equipment, storeroom after locked storeroom, and, of course, all the little hidden fun spots: the makeshift stills, the love nests, and the nooks

for gambling.

Most security ponies stayed at the top of the stable. The tunnels below were dark, undecorated, and filled with the stench of all kinds of foul leaking fluids and chemicals used to keep the stable habitable. The Overmare might have had complete authority over the top half of the stable, but this was Rivets's domain. She and her maintenance mares were always the most rebellious and independent element of the stable. One day... no, don't think about it. If there was an Incident between the Overmare and maintenance... well, I knew which side had all the guns and which side knew how to keep the stable alive...

"Hit me," I shouted over the hum of machinery as I looked at the worn playing cards. They were so old that I'd bet Rivets could tell them by the wear patterns. Good thing this wasn't poker. Rivets dealt me a four of spades; I really had no idea how earth ponies managed cards. They just did. Me, I levitated them around as I looked at the other players.

Tonight I was even less welcome than usual. The other four ponies kept muttering to each other, telling jokes and stories that left me out, and my winnings were virtually frozen. No pony mentioned the Overmare; clearly, they were watching themselves around the security mare.

Because one word of sedition or talk about getting at the armory and we'd have an Incident. Please, don't say something that would cause an Incident...

"So, Blackjack, I notice you keep getting shit from Daisy and the others," Rivets said amiably as she smoked on her cigar. She'd offered me the cigar at the start of the game, a blatant class B violation that I'd never ever report her on. I had no idea how she manufactured them, but it was just another indication that things were painfully tense in the stable. After one puff, I'd coughed so badly that she'd taken it back. "They've been doing that for... what... three years now?"

"Oh, longer than that," I said with a small smile. Ever since my first big fuck up. "But what can you do?"

"Well, that is the question, isn't it?" Rivets asked with a spread of her forehooves before dealing out the cards. "We can't do anything. Daisy is security. You get your job and it's yours, no matter how you abuse your position." She chuckled, friendly like, but I knew enough laughs to tell it was an act. "Don't get me wrong, your momma is a fine mare. She's always tried to do right by the stable. She just won't do more."

Oh, Rivets, please don't go there. "Well, it's the way of things, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Rivets asked in return with a look that made my mane crawl. "You think it's right that ponies like Daisy and Marmalade get to give you that ration of shit day in and day out?"

"Well... no. But what does it matter what I think? It's the way things are," I swallowed, noticing that no pony else seemed to be interrupting.

"But does it have to be?" Rivets asked. There was one answer she wanted to hear and a whole slew of wrong answers. I shrank back; why did she have to be asking me stuff like this? Couldn't we just play the game?

I needed to change the subject, fast. "So... what is the Overmare up to?" I asked as I glanced at the others. They looked at one another, then at Rivets. She was still smoking her cigar with slow, steady puffs. I snorted. "Look, I know everypony's a little more on edge than usual, but this is Blackjack asking. Come on, Rivets. I got my cutie mark here." In fact, I got my queen and ace of spades playing this very game. "You can talk to me."

Rivets chewed slowly on the end as her eyes measured me up. Finally, she gave a minimal

shrug. "You tell me. Overmare has us running like crazy for a month updating her on the stable, seizes inventory, and Duct Tape dies doing work for her. Now she's screaming at Midnight that she's going to shoot her and has her own little guard of security ponies following her around tonight."

"She what?" I blinked, having left with Midnight so quickly that I hadn't heard anything about that.

Rivets nodded slowly. "She's got all of us really concerned. *Really* concerned. Some of us wonder if we're all safe with her in charge."

"She's the Overmare. It's her job to keep us all safe," I replied, almost by rote as my red eyes looked from one to the next. Only Rivets met my gaze.

"Some ponies don't think she has a clue what her job is. Heck, some ponies don't think she even knows herself. And some ponies have to wonder why Blackjack's so insistent on coming to this game. Maybe to keep tabs on all of us?" Rivets asked as she nodded to the equipment around us. "After all, with all the interference, I doubt you can track us by our PipBucks."

The foreleg-mounted minicomputers were marvels of arcane technology; even if I didn't understand the first thing about how they worked, I had to admit that they were useful. One of the functions most used by security was the ability to, if you had the correct address tag, track any other PipBuck. All I had to do was put in their name and I could find their location almost anywhere in the stable. Down here, though, it was another story. Probably why the missing male had gone to ground down here.

"Look, I just wanted to have some fun!" I protested. Was it really that hard to believe? I looked from one to the next; these were all mares I'd known my entire life. Heck, Rivets was virtually my godmother from all the time I spent down here! But from the looks I got... yes, yes it was.

I slowly slipped back from the table, leaving my bits behind. "I'm going to go... you know... do security stuff. Got a stallion to round up and... um... stuff," I finished lamely. All of them watched me back slowly out of Atmospheric Maintenance Three. Not one took their eyes off me.

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Several minutes later, I took a breather. Rivets was just pissed. She always bumped heads with anypony in authority, always sure nopony knew as well as she did how to run the stable. As soon as the Overmare calmed down, everything would settle down and we'd be able to get back to normal. Don't think about it. It was how everypony in the stable survived. I'd just forget about it and, in a week, Rivets and I would be laughing as usual!

Please, let everything be alright.

Well, with the game a complete fiasco, Midnight continuing her cold shoulder, and me with six hours left in my shift, I might as well actually do some security work. Mostly the ten or so of us on C shift patrolled and wrote up any mare violating curfew. Down here, I might find more interesting violations, but it was rare that I'd ever run into anything major. I snapped on another function of the PipBuck: the Eyes Forward Sparkle.

Instantly, a number of yellow bars filled my vision as the arcane device detected the number of ponies within a few hundred feet. It also had a few red bars, likely a few hungry radroaches looking to take a bite out of me. The E.F.S. was a function few ponies used regularly. After all, it only gave direction and hostility, and the indicator didn't even tell you how far above or below you the bar was. For all I knew, that yellow bar was around the corner or a floor up. I entered in the P-21's PipBuck address, but the little icon twitched around spasmodically. Likely he was down here... somewhere.

It wasn't often that we had a buck who tried to hide from retirement. Most just reported to security

or medical to get their shot and that was that. Occasionally there'd be a crying or screaming fit in the atrium. Rarely, they'd suicide... ugh, please don't let me find him hanging or poisoned down here. The plain fact was that this was a stable; the only exit had been sealed four generations ago during the last Incident, and eventually he'd starve to death. It wasn't like bucks knew how to get into food stores and the like. They just bred. That was all they knew, all they needed to know.

Right?

I trotted past a row of gurgling pieces of equipment barely lit by wan yellow spark lamps. Knowing my luck, the yellow bar ahead of me was actually one or two floors above me. If I was lucky, I could get through this shift without any more disasters and, if I was really lucky, talk to Mom and not the head security mare about the rising tension. The former might be able to do something. The latter would have to crack down on Rivets, or, worse, tell the Overmare.

Then I heard a faint sniff and soft sobs over the hum of the equipment. Looked like I'd found my pony. "Okay, come on out and let's get you up to security. A quick shot and it'll be all over."

The sniffing stopped, and then a tiny olive filly with teal eyes peeked out at me. My jaw dropped as I saw the pain and fear in her eyes. "Oh! Ah... you're not... ahem..." I sat hard and rubbed my head. Could this night get any worse? "You're not supposed to be down here. It's dangerous and after curfew. Where's your momma?"

She just stared at me, and her eyes dropped to her hooves. "Recycled..." was all she blubbered. She touched her PipBuck and her ID flashed. 'Scotch Tape, Maintenance Shift C'.

Oh... I tried to think up some creative profanity but... eh... I got nothing. "Oh... well... ah..." What was I supposed to do? If this was Duct Tape's kid, then she was supposed to be here. Should I say something about her mom? Give her a hug? Tell her she's doing a good job? Tell her not to be a cryfilly? "Um... sorry about your mom. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get the hang of it." I grinned at her as she clenched her eyes closed, pulled a wrench from her barding, and nodded before trotting back between the massive round machines.

I trotted away as quickly as I could. "Wonderful, Blackjack... 'You'll get the hang of it?' What is wrong with me?" I berated myself as I glanced back over my shoulder.

I really wasn't good at this whole life and death thing. Really. You just didn't think about death in 99. It wasn't really like 'death' so much as one day you're there and the next day you're replaced by your kid. And someday they'll be replaced by theirs. I was glad that Mom would probably last forever. I didn't know how I'd handle the stable with her gone.

I couldn't help but reach out and touch the steel walls of the stable. Somepony had daubed 'Fuck the Overmare' on the gray metal in flaking white paint. A shout of rebellion from the Incident almost a century ago, the last time the stable had torn itself apart. Back then, it'd been bucks challenging the Overmare and the rules imposed by Stable-Tec when the stable had been established. Today, it was Rivets against the Overmare.

Why'd I have to get stuck in the middle of this shit?

And, just as I was getting a nice batch of self-pity whipped up, I stepped right in a puddle of leaking sewage. My hooves slipped in the slippery mung and I went over, getting a faceful of the cold sludge. Coughing and retching I kicked away, wiping my face furiously. My red and black striped mane and tail were smeared with grunge as I leaned against the wall, coughing and spitting. How nice that the Goddesses were making my metaphoric life literal.

I tried to think about what I knew of the newest P-21. He was green... no... brown? Ugh... I paid more attention to the unicorn breeding population than the earth ponies. I'd heard that this P-21 was

already notorious for 'disappearing', though, so it wasn't much of a surprise that he'd pulled another vanishing act. Nopony was sure how he managed to get out of medical. Males weren't supposed to be smart enough for that.

Wait... what was that?

It was another yellow bar, but one that, when I moved my head, changed direction far faster than any of the others. That meant that it was a lot closer. As in right on the far side of a door marked 'Emergency Storage #3'. I frowned, tried the handle with my horn, and was astonished to find it unlocked! Not even Rivets left these unsecured. Slowly, I levitated out my baton, opened the door, and flipped on the lights. Row after row of metal boxes lay on dusty shelves for the day another Incident occurred. Of course, there weren't any weapons or ammo, but clearly some of these boxes had been opened.

I toggled the lamp on my PipBuck, flooding the far depths of the chamber with light. There, in the corner, hid a blue earth pony mare in ugly gray utility barding. I immediately relaxed as she watched me with worried blue eyes. "Sweet Celestia, what are you doing in here? I thought Rivets kept this place locked up tight."

She just looked at me with wary eyes. "Just... getting some stuff for Rivets." Her soft voice was surprisingly deep for such a puny pony. "I'll just get it to her," she said, slipping on her saddlebags and starting slowly towards the exit. But as she drew close to me, I frowned. I knew all the mares on the C shift, and the only blue earth pony was a medical mare. "What shift are you on?" I asked with a little frown.

"Um... C shift... of course..." she swallowed as she turned, facing me and backing away.

"Right," I said as I frowned at her, slipping into full security mode. I might not have found the missing male, but hopefully this would redeem me a little in Mom's eyes. Still, why anypony would want to steal century-old supplies was beyond me. "Identification, please."

She gave it by turning to bolt for the door. Now, I might not be very good at magic, but I definitely knew how to swing a baton and tackle a fleeing thief. She made it a half dozen steps out the door before my glowing stick swept her legs right out from under her. As she went down, I jumped on her back and was amazed when she went completely still. "Okay! Identification!" She didn't move, didn't respond in the slightest. She just lay there, shaking and crying silently. I frowned and reached over to use my security override.

'P-21: Breeder. Retire from service immediately,' flashed on the screen of her... no... his PipBuck. "You're the new P-21," I muttered, staring down at his saddlebags and clothing. Keeping him pinned with my hooves, I stripped him of his stolen goods. Sure enough, those were parts that didn't belong on any mare! "What... what the hay is going on here?"

He didn't move. He simply lay there with his eyes closed, curled up. Saddlebags full of food. A utility mare's outfit. Had he planned on trying to actually live down here? Like all bucks, his cutie mark was a white male symbol with dots underneath it; his had two rows of ten white dots. Below that would go one more dot... though I was never sure why, since after that he'd be heading straight to retirement.

Well, time for the next bit. "Ahem... according to Overmare and Stable-Tec bylaws, you are to be escorted to security for final processing and chemical retirement. You are obligated by stable laws to accompany me or you will be compelled. Do you understand?" Goddesses, I hated playing the security mare part. He knew the rules. I knew he knew. He knew I knew he knew. Why did I have to pretend? Meanwhile, he just lay there like a blue doll, his eyes wide and glassy.

"Just kill me... it's what you do, isn't it?" P-21 muttered.

I blinked down at him in confusion. "Um. It's not my place to kill you. I'm not an executioner.

You're going to be... ah... retired." I tried to grin and put him at ease, because bucks sometimes did stupid things. It wouldn't be the first time one attacked me without provocation. He looked back, and his eyes slowly drew into focus. I'd never seen a male look at me like that before. The cold anger inside made me wonder if he really was going to do something crazy.

"Like you retired him," he replied softly, his storm blue eyes darkening as he stared at me.

"Uh... I think you're confused. Medical takes care of the actual retirement process," I said as I backed away.

"You're all murderers," he muttered as he rose to his hooves and looked back at the stolen clothes and supplies. "I was so close, too..." With that, he started to walk slowly towards the stable's central staircase.

"Close to what?" I asked, but he didn't answer. I couldn't blame him. If I were about to be retired, I doubted that I'd be in a chatty mood. Still, it was hard to take him calling me a murderer. I'd never killed anypony! I followed him closely, baton ready in case he came back at me. We trotted past an open doorway to a storeroom, and the olive filly peeked out with a sad eye as we walked by.

I wish that that was all that happened.

Just as we reached the stairs to the higher levels of the stable, a baton wielded by a pale yellow mare whirled out from a side hall and struck his rear knee with the sickening, tearing *pop* that signaled a damaged joint. He fell to his side, screaming in pain as Daisy and Marmalade stepped out. The huge pale mare spat out her baton, caught the strap on the end of her hoof, and twirled it. "About time we found the missing penis." She slammed her hoof into his face as he tried to curl up into a tight ball. "And he's with you," Daisy added with a grim grin. "Bonus."

"Daisy! Marmalade! What the fuck are you doing?" I asked as Marmalade's floating baton thumped hard against his ribs and Daisy smashed him with her hooves again.

"Saving medical some work. This little fuck's had us down here for hours," she said as she grinned at Marmalade. "So I figured we'd take care of him ourselves."

What the fuck! "You can't fucking do this! Medical retires ponies, not security!" Was I actually quoting stable bylaws now? The worst security pony in the stable? What the hell was happening here?

"Oh, he's fighting us," Daisy said as she circled him, and brought her hoof down on his swelling knee. "Resisting security. A real dangerous case, right Marmalade?" The honey colored mare nodded with a dumb grin.

And just like that, they set themselves to beating him to death before my eyes. I wondered if this was some kind of nightmare that I'd wake up from... but as he cried out in pain, I clenched my eyes closed. Just wait a few minutes and it'd be over. Just do nothing, Blackjack. Don't think about it...

Don't think about it. Don't think about the thumps and the cries and the sobs and the begging.

No.

Security saves ponies.

I looked at the pair beating him in glee and charged Marmalade first. Last thing I needed was another pair of hoofcuffs on me! Her orange eyes widened in shock as the baton cracked loudly against her skull with such force that she tumbled over. Goddesses, I hoped I hadn't killed her.

Daisy's shock transformed into rage much faster. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? He's a fucking worthless male! He's disposable!" She charged, and while normally I'd back away from her

kicks, this time I charged to meet her. Our chests slammed together, and it was all I could do to keep from being crushed under her. Sweet Celestia, how much did she eat to be this strong?

As we struggled, though, I still had one advantage she didn't. My horn flashed white as I wielded the baton in my magical grip. And one more thing I could do with telekinesis: with another thought, I triggered my PipBuck's 'Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting System'. The S.A.T.S. was a magical spell that momentarily slowed time almost to a stop and let me line up my attacks perfectly. Each attack cost some spell charge that had to build back up over time, but right now I wasn't going to waste any of it. Three baton strikes to the head. The spell even gave me the probability of each strike landing!

Triggering the spell, time sped up but still seemed to move at a crawl as my baton rose and fell soundly upon her head. The first split the skin above her eye. The second busted her nose. The third... missed. Still, when the spell faded and time fully resumed, she staggered back in shock. I stood over the fallen stallion, swinging the baton with all the force I could as she retreated for once.

Then Marmalade rose, looking at me with a hurt, betrayed expression. Suddenly, this looked bad...

Then our PipBucks crackled, the built-in radios squawking, "All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security. Repeat. All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security."

Daisy stared into my eyes as we both panted, my baton trembling in the air before me as I stared at her, heart racing. This wasn't training, with Mom watching and other mares keeping an eye on me. If they came at me, it would be to kill the male beside me. Even if he was slated for retirement, he didn't have to die like that! No pony should have to die like that. Period.

"Forget it. You can handle the little cock. I'll report you're bringing him in," Daisy said sourly as she touched her bleeding nose and then glared at me. "One day, I'm going to have your fucking head on a stick, Blackjack. Promise you that."

I swallowed, doing all I could to keep my magical focus on my baton. "Maybe, but not today." The metal rod wavered in the air, my heart thundering in my chest. Despite the fear in my gut, the baton remained upright.

She harrumphed and made her way up the stairs. Marmalade gave me one last confused, injured look before following her up. I felt bad for that. I doubted Marmalade would have ever hit any pony if Daisy hadn't hit him first. Once I felt that they weren't going to double back, I knelt and began to see to the stallion. Aside from his swelling bruises, the worst thing was his rear leg. Limbs really weren't supposed to bend that way. I swallowed as I looked around, feeling panic rising in my throat. I wasn't a medical pony. I couldn't do a healing spell to save a leg!

Then I spotted the olive filly watching us from down the hall. "You! I need a first aid kit, please! Right away!" She gasped, and for a moment I was sure she was going to run. "Please! Help me!" She swallowed, gave a nod, and disappeared.

"Why?" he asked softly, eyes clenched in pain. "Why did you stop them when they're just going to kill me anyway?"

"Because..." I felt lame and confused. "Because... I had to. All right? Now stop thinking about it and just hold on." He didn't say another word, instead simply looking at me with confused anger. I needed to keep him talking. "What's your name?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot, despite the pain in his eyes. "I'm P-21."

"That's your designation, right? What's your name?" I asked as I looked in the direction the filly

had gone. It was more to stall for time than out of any real interest; after all, he was going to be retired soon.

"P-21 is my name," he replied softly, with a touch of irritation.

"Oh..." Males in 99 lived in medical and were identified on their breeding roster by their designations. P for earth ponies, U for unicorns. Don't ask me why the former wasn't E; I'd never gotten a straight answer. Maybe the Overmare who set up the system was a lot like the current one. 1 would be the newest buck on the breeding roster, 20 the oldest. Being 21 would mean that a male was to be retired. Somehow, though, I always figured they had their own names in their quarters. Names were like cutie marks; everypony had them, even males. Then again, looking at the breeding mark on his flank...

Funny... but when I was with a male, conversation was the last thing on my mind. Heck, this was the most conversation I could recall ever having with one.

I thought for a moment that maybe the filly had run off, but she returned a minute later with a small yellow medical case marked with pink butterflies. Setting it next to me, she opened it up and I was at once glad to see that nopony had cleaned it out. The cases were supposed to stay stocked at all times, but sometimes ponies would steal the contents for one reason or another. There were two healing potions, small bottles of rich purple fluid capped in plastic. All a pony had to do was to bite hard on the end, crack the seal, and suck down the magical healing contents. As he gulped down the contents of the bottle, the bruises immediately began to disappear. His leg, however... "I'm going to have to set this," I said as I looked at the limb.

"You know how to do that?" the olive filly asked. P-21 just groaned as he clenched his eyes shut.

"Nope," I replied and took out the syringe of Med-X painkiller. I yanked the cap off the needle, jammed it into his leg, and squeezed the soft plastic tube to force the drugs into his system. 'For all your hurting ouchies'. Well, this was one doozy of an ouchie. He relaxed a bit as the drugs took effect. Then I looked at the leg, bit my lip, and hooked it with my forehooves and magic.

"On three..." I said as I looked at him. "One. Two..." And on two I pulled and pushed to bend his leg back into proper position. There was a pop from his knee like a gunshot as he screamed, the limb jerking back into place. The poor olive filly looked like she was going to be sick. I didn't think it was broken, exactly, but it sure didn't look good.

"Was that the plan?" he asked weakly.

"I never was good with waiting," I replied before shutting him up with the other healing potion. Unlike the beating, his knee didn't seem to heal much. When he tried to move it, he cried out despite the painkiller. I looked at the filly, "Is there a brace or anything in there?"

"Oh... um... maybe!" she said as she set aside a second syringe of Med-X and a container of Buck labeled with a muscular mare flexing. It was technically a class B controlled substance; I'd be scrubbing the bilges for a month if caught with it. Surprising to see it outside medical or security. Then she pulled out a black leg brace for broken limbs.

He jerked away from me as I grabbed his uninjured haunch to pull him around. "Oh, stop it, you baby," I muttered, but he simply closed his eyes and shook as I strapped the brace in place. Bucks were so weird; would he have preferred hobbling up the stairs to medical with a bum leg? Finally, I moved away from him and shook a tablet of Buck out of the jar. "Here. Eat this," I said as I pressed the carrot-flavored medicine to his lips.

Slowly, warily, he chewed it. I looked at the filly. "Thanks for your help."

She gave me the first hint of a smile since I'd seen her. "Sure. I better get back to work before

Rivets blows a seal or something.” She gave a little wave before running back the way she’d come.

The chems fortified him enough for him to get to his feet. “Why do you keep helping me?” he asked as I supported him enough to get his legs under him. “You’re just going to kill me...”

I lowered my gaze. “Well, I can’t stop that. But I can at least try and help you. It’s what security mares are supposed to do.”

* * *

Security during C shift was normally a place of quiet tedium. Reports for the next day had to be filed and firearms practice had to be carried out, but neither of those were what anypony would call exciting. As we finally reached the top of the stable, though... something felt very wrong. There were only ten security mares on C shift, including me, and, for the first time since I’d started working security a few years ago, we were all in here together. The seven other mares clustered around Daisy and Marmalade, talking in low voices as I limped in with P-21.

Worse, they all stopped talking as soon as I entered. Great. My mane itched fiercely as we walked slowly past them to the cells. I got the PipBuck key and magic-male-dot-maker-pen-thing from Mom’s desk drawer, then carefully removed his PipBuck and added the last white dot. I could wait until morning to notify medical, though. No need to rush with everything being weird. I took his PipBuck and closed the cell door just as the Overmare stalked out of her office.

Some ponies liked to say she looked like my little sister, though never in earshot of Mom, of course. The Overmare’s white hide was a little more dingy than mine, and her eyes were a lighter pinkish color. Her mom had once styled her mane in elaborate curls and dressed her up in fancy outfits, but, since her death a year ago, the Overmare had chopped her dove gray mane short and worn nothing save her PipBuck, almost flaunting her Stable-Tec logo cutie mark.

I always assumed that being Overmare was a stressful condition. You had the whole stable on your shoulders. Despite that, the Overmare usually managed to keep a neat appearance. Now, though, she looked like hell; her eyes were bloodshot with huge bags beneath them, her mane resembled tangled wool, and she smelled. But there was one thing above and beyond all that which made my blood run cold: she was smiling.

When she saw P-21 and me, her smile only widened. “Oh... you found my trick pony!” she said, clapping her hooves together in glee. Her trick pony? P-21 stared straight ahead, his eyes unfocused pinpricks as she walked up to the bars. “Oh we’re going to have so much fun. Oh yes we are. Yes we are. You’re going to be mine forever. Yes you are.”

I glanced at the other security mares. Not one looked back at me. The Overmare suddenly seemed to remember I was there and glared at me. “So. Have a nice time in the bottom levels? Have a nice meeting with Rivets?”

“I... wasn’t meeting with Rivets,” I said, trying to look more clueless than usual.

“Lies,” the Overmare hissed. And then went back to smiling. “But that doesn’t matter. Not anymore. This is my stable. Mine. And I’m not going to let that gray nag run it any longer. It’s mine!” she declared as she she looked out the window to the atrium.

I caught P-21’s look. He was glancing at my PipBuck, then his... then mine... then his...

Huh?

He swallowed and mouthed the word, ‘copy’.

I glanced at the Overmare as she addressed the others, thanking them for their loyalty and devotion. Once more, I'd seemed to have slipped her mind. I quickly connected the two PipBucks with a cable. I hit the 'Copy All Files' button and dumped the data into an evidence file. I might not be able to manage a security spell to save my life, but I could at least move bulk files from A to B using the clearly labeled button for it. In my E.F.S., I saw the progress bar slowly fill.

"Is that his PipBuck?" the Overmare asked with a snap.

"Um... yes," I said lamely as I cuddled it in my hooves, hoping she didn't see the connection.

"Give it to me," she replied imperiously.

"Um... certainly," I asked, wondering how I could stall as the little bar filled up. "What for?"

"That is stable security business," she replied in a low, dangerous voice.

Almost done. "Aren't I in stable security?"

Her lips turned up in a nasty smile. "I don't know. Aren't you? Why don't you tell me where Rivets and thirty other maintenance mares are hiding? Do they have weapons? Are they planning on sabotaging my stable?"

"I... don't know?" I muttered lamely.

"Lies," she hissed, and her magic reached out and grabbed his PipBuck from my grasp just before the files finished transferring. A big error message flashed across my vision. She tossed it to Marmalade. "Make sure everything on there gets deleted. I don't want anything going wrong," she said as she trotted to the armory door and opened it with her PipBuck. "Everypony get armed." And then she looked right at me. "Except for you."

"What are you doing?" I asked as Daisy came up and shoved me hard into the cell with P-21. The PipBuck key fell out of the pocket I'd stuffed it into and clattered to the floor, making me wince; if it was damaged, I'd get another speech from Mom about taking care of our tools.

"Taking back the stable," the Overmare said with a satisfied smile as everypony else armed themselves with shotguns and security barding.

"With nine security ponies?" I gaped.

"I can't be sure of your mother. I've ordered Rivets arrested several times, and she always gets in my way." Because without Rivets, the stable was doomed. "I don't know who I can trust on the A and B shifts. Who will side with me and who won't." She smirked as she looked at Daisy. "Fortunately, some ponies have proven themselves far more loyal. So you just sit tight. This will all be over in a few hours."

After that, the ten of them marched out of security. Daisy looked back at me with a decidedly nasty grin. Why'd I suddenly feel like P-21 wasn't the only pony in deep in the recycler?

* * *

Whatever they were doing, they were certainly taking their time. I was left in one corner while P-21 sat silent as a blue statue in the center of the cell. I looked at the diminutive pony; there was something vaguely familiar about him, but I felt that way about half the stable.

All I knew was I needed to get out of here and... what? Tell Mom? Would she actually stand against the Overmare? I wanted to say yes, but the more I thought about it, the less certain I was. She'd never countermanded the Overmare unless she had some clear evidence that what the Overmare was

doing would endanger the stable. She always put the stable first. Always.

That left me locked up with a buck who wouldn't say two words to me, flipping through all of P-21's files trying to find something... anything... that I could use for when Mom got here at the start of A shift. Unfortunately, the broken connection had given me a whole slew of static and corrupted files.

"Do you know what she's doing?" I asked for the umpteenth time. But he just looked at me and then looked away again. Given he was set to be retired in the morning... unless the Overmare did what she was planning... whatever that was? "Arrrrgh, why couldn't they do this to a smart pony!?" I insisted, getting a small smile for my trouble. No answers, though.

His breeding queue for the last few months had been booked almost solid by the Overmare, and then... Duct Tape? No mare ever got exclusive access to a buck like that. I glanced at him and stumbled across an intact audio file. I didn't have anything better to do, so I played the intact section.

It crackled once and then began to play the noises of two ponies bumping flanks. I felt my mane crawl as I heard the Overmare's joyous shrieks and a male's grunts of... something. Then her door chimed, and a moment later a mare asked, "Overmare? You wanted to... oh... my..."

The sounds of coupling trailed off, and the Overmare grunted, "You're early, Duct Tape." There was a strange wet noise I didn't even want to imagine and the sounds of belabored male breathing.

"I... I didn't want to be late," she said in a worried voice. "Is he... is everything all right?"

"Tisk, it's nothing serious. He's such a good little pony," the Overmare said in tones that made my mane crawl. "Now, were you successful?"

"I... ah... I... did as you asked. I've a list of... of everything you need for it," Duct Tape said in a little, timid voice. "But really, this is something you should talk to Rivets--"

"No! No, thank you. Rivets has so much going on that I wouldn't want to trouble her." The Overmare continued smoothly, "The question is, will you be able to carry out the repairs?"

"Me?"

"Yes, Duct Tape. You. This is a special project for the wellbeing of the entire stable. You're the only maintenance mare on C shift I can trust to carry this out... with care. After all, I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise."

I didn't have any trouble imagining the mousy gray mare blinking at the word 'surprise'. We didn't know each other well; I think I scared her just by being in security, but I remembered that she always liked nice surprises. "I... but... I mean... I suppose I could, but--"

"Excellent. Excellent. I can't tell you how relieved I am to find a mare willing and able to help the stable." Then the Overmare hummed softly. "You deserve something special for all your hard work!"

"I... don't think so. I mean... um... shouldn't we get him to medical?" Duct Tape said in clear worry.

The Overmare didn't answer for a second. "You like this buck?"

"Well... I suppose. He helped me with Scotch, after all," she replied in far softer and warmer tones than 'suppose'.

"I see. I see. He is a gem of a pony. Wonderful technique. Truly," she said matter-of-factly. "If you're doing such excellent work for me, I see no reason not to put a word in with medical. You might be able to spend a lot more time with him."

"Really?" There was no missing the eagerness in Duct Tape's voice.

"Really. Provided you keep it from Rivets and everypony. This is a critical project. Without it, I fear, the stable will not survive."

"I... well... I mean... that might be very... nice... I'll give it my best! For... for the stable, of course." Oh Goddesses, I could practically hear her blushing. The Overmare's titter offset the warm and cozy feeling.

"Good. Everything you need will be provided for--" and with those last words from the Overmare, everything dissolved into static. I thought about that. If I hadn't just seen the Overmare... ugh, but that wasn't enough!

The Overmare's position could not be challenged at any time. Period. That was the law. A stupid-ass law, but my mom always honored the law. Sometimes she seemed a little neurotic about it, actually, and a sneaky conversation between the Overmare and a dead maintenance mare didn't seem like anything that would get her to violate the law. It would have to be something big. Damn big.

I wished I could just tell my mom things, but there was always a line. She would be my mom until a point was reached, and from then on she was firmly 'Head of Security'. And that always came first.

I glanced at the silent blue buck. "It sounds like Duct Tape was fond of you."

"She was fond of anypony who gave her love and attention. It's why she had her foal," he replied quietly. "They didn't even need to force her. I was just bait to shut her up while the Overmare worked."

"There's something important on here, isn't there?" I said as I waved my PipBuck at him. "She knew you had something, didn't she? That's why she made sure to have it erased." He grit his teeth, closing his eyes; I imagined he wasn't feeling too good right now with the Med-X wearing off. "Help me!" I finally exploded at him. "Why won't you help 99?"

"To hell with you, this stable, and everypony in it!" he shouted back at me, his eyes blazing as he looked for a moment like he wanted to attack me. Then he slowly relaxed, fighting for calm, "My whole life, you mares have fucked me. Now you're getting fucked by your own. It's nothing less than what you deserve."

I blinked at him in shock. "How can you say that? This stable is your home! We're your family. We're all that's left in Equestria!" He gave me a sharp, angry look. I couldn't believe how selfish he was being! "If that's how you feel, then why tell me to copy the files at all? Why not just let her destroy them?" His angry eyes looked away. Slowly, I approached him, and he winced as he backed away into the corner. His eyes kept twitching from mine to the floor and back again; it was annoying! "Look. I'm sorry the rules are what they are. If I could just let you go, I would. But I can't. If you know what she's doing or what's going on... something I can bring to the head of security... then help me."

He clenched his eyes shut. "If I help you... you have to help me." He looked at me again with a ferocious glare. "You have to let me leave this place," he said in slow, even tones of carefully measured control. "Even if I die outside in ten seconds, at least it will be ten seconds free." What, he wanted to die outside rather than be retired? Ooookay...

"I... if there's any way I can... I will." I nodded. He stared back at me, and I gave him the most sincere smile I could. Finally, he nodded as well. "Sweet. It's a plan," I said as I clopped my hooves together in glee. Okay, my only ally at the moment was a reluctant, wounded, pissy male, but I'd take what I could get.

He stood, then lifted his tail, carefully pulled out a bobby pin, and extracted a small screwdriver

from his... body cavity. I blinked, realizing that I'd botched search protocols. "Listen to the last recording I made with Duct Tape," he said as he walked to the lock, wiped off the screwdriver, stuck it into the lock with his hooves, fed the pin in with his teeth, and began wiggling them around. So that was how he'd gotten into the supply room. I wondered what else he'd broken into, or out of. Also... ew.

I flipped through the files, looking at the tags and scanning for 'DT'. I might not be able to do magic to save my life, but I only slept through half my PipBuck training (in my defense, it was the boring half). Finally, I found the last file tagged DT; it was dated a few weeks ago.

It began, as I expected, with the sound of slapping flanks. I blushed... listening to Duct Tape doing it was different than listening to the Overmare. She actually sounded like she really liked it. Funny, I never expected her to be so... loud. Afterwards, they settled down into the little kisses and nuzzles. Then her soft sigh. "This has been so wonderful. It feels like a dream come true. The Overmare's been so wonderful lately."

P-21 said nothing right away, but then muttered in a low, flat voice, "Yeah. She can be nice... sometimes." From the way he said it, I expected that 'sometimes' meant 'the times when she wanted to get something from somepony'.

Duct Tape gave a little giggle. "I was talking about you to her the other day, P-20. She says that, when her plan is over, you can stay with me forever. You can be my... my... what was it again? Oh yes... husband. We can be the first ponies married in 99 since... you know... the bad thing happened." That had to be the Incident she was talking about.

P-21's response was a monosyllabic 'mmmm'.

"And we can have another foal together. Or two. Because once we're out, we won't need the quotas."

"What?" P-21 said softly. "Out of what?"

Duct Tape cursed softly under her breath and then sighed. "Well... I guess you won't tell anypony." She gave a little giggle, but P-21 remained silent as Duct Tape went on. "The Overmare has gotten in contact with Stable-Tec! The outside is safe and clean and we're all going to be able to leave the stable soon!" She gave another joyous giggle. "In fact, she's getting a broadcast from Stable-Tec right now!"

What the fuck?

Stable-Tec built Stable 99 and set up the rules and the Overmare. Going outside? But every day, the stable broadcasts told us that the outside was a death trap.

"How? The door to the outside was sealed after the Incident..." he muttered softly.

"Well, just because it was sealed once doesn't mean it can't be unsealed. You know all the parts that the Overmare is inventorying? Well... I fixed the door! I even programmed the Overmare a special code to open and close it. See?" I heard the sound of a PipBuck beeping.

"And she said that the outside is safe?"

"Mhmm! I even took a little peek myself. I think it's... what did Text call it... winter? It was all cloudy... but I saw trees. They didn't have any leaves, but they were trees!" I couldn't imagine a tree... not really. Trees were pictures in books, so I could only picture grainy green blotches as far as the eye could see. "You could survive out there. We all can. We don't have to stay here anymore."

"But... why keep the secret? If the door is open and it's safe outside..."

"Well, Stable-Tec is afraid that all the ponies in here will freak out. The Overmare wants to avoid a panic, so she's only told a few ponies. I don't even think Gin Rummy knows. Stable-Tec says they need a special data file from the stable that will tell them how we've been doing the last two centuries. EC-1101. So she's had me extracting it from the system. It's a doozy of a file, and buried pretty deep."

There wasn't a response from P-21. Then she said softly, "I thought you'd be happy."

"What? Oh... I... it's just a lot to take in," he said quietly. Then he said softly, "Duct... do you trust the Overmare?"

"Of course! We all must trust the Overmare. She's our protector and our guardian. We'd be lost without her," she said in rote fashion like half the mares in 99. Of course, I'd say the same, but I'd be thinking sarcastic thoughts while I did.

P-21 was quiet for a minute, then said softly, "Don't trust her. Not for a second."

"What? How--"

"You remember how you saw me in her office?"

"I..." she trailed off.

"Don't trust her. You've been... nice. One of three. And so I'm telling you... don't trust her. Protect yourself. Protect your filly."

There was an uncomfortable silence. "I... I suppose I could throw an encryption on it. Something she can't crack till she promises to let us out..." she mulled softly. "Maybe make the password that name you liked so much..."

"Huh? Which name?" But she was going on about algorithmying or something, and a few seconds later the recording cut off.

Stable-Tec! Going outside! This was huge! Epic! A real game changer! With Stable-Tec here, all the Overmare and Rivets's ponyshit didn't matter. Maybe I wouldn't have to be security anymore. Maybe...

Don't trust the Overmare. That was what P-21 had said, and that was the look in his eye right now as he worked on picking the lock on the door. And suddenly, I remembered an old pony saying: if something sounds too good to be true... it probably is. If the Overmare were serious about this, she would have told Mom.

She's getting a broadcast right now... I glanced at my PipBuck. There were dozens of radio channels on it, but only six were used by the stable. I clicked to security, but it was dead during C shift. Then to maintenance and the dry chatter about a recycling pump malfunctioning in the bilges and that Scotch Tape should get right on it. Service was dead since the cafeteria and food recycling were shut down during curfew. Medical just had the automated message about locating P-21 for retirement. Recreation had the regular looping brass band and glory to the Overmare. Education had a dry recording about how Stable-Tec had placed the Overmare for our protection... which would be suspicious if I hadn't heard it a million times.

Then I clicked over to the next channel. Static. The next... and the next... and next...

"Beep be booop beep be beep boop bip beep..." suddenly streamed out of my PipBuck. I had no idea what it could be; some sort of PipBuck jabberese? It was faint, though, and with many little crackles and breaks in the signal. That meant that it was probably coming from outside the stable. It was so weak that I doubted the signal would be detectable on the lower levels even if a pony was bored enough to go

flipping through the static. I recorded about a minute of it, hoping it would be enough.

That was it. I needed to get out of here. I needed to talk to Mom...

Except... would it be enough? Mom... I wanted to think that she'd believe me. That I'd be more than 'Blackjack the screwup'. That she'd take it seriously because it came from her 'little blank flank'. Or that she'd stay in 'security head' mode but accept the evidence I had... and would do something about the Overmare.

Then there was a soft click and the door to the cell opened. I gaped in astonishment as P-21 put the bobby pin back in his tail and... okay, closing mouth before it becomes an escape route for my stomach contents. "You did it. How... where did you learn that?"

"Have you ever spent a week with a bobby pin, a screwdriver, and nothing to do but wait for a mare to want to breed you?" he asked back. "I'm sure even you could figure it out eventually."

"Don't count on it. If I need a lock opened, I get a key," I countered as I pushed open the grate and trotted into the deserted security section. Oh, key; reasoning that I might as well not make things worse, I scooped up the PipBuck key and pen-thing and put them back in the drawer. Right, back to the Overmare going crazy. I could try and get Mom on the radio, but I knew Daisy and the others would be listening to that channel. Everypony else would be asleep or under curfew. "Look. I need to get down to tell Gin Rummy about this." Then I looked down the stairs... I also needed a gun.

Goddesses, was I really thinking of shooting security ponies? Even Daisy... the thought of such a thing made my stomach churn. No crime was worse than murder in the stable. Killing another mare was robbing the stable of somepony needed to keep everypony alive! But if the Overmare was up to something... I trotted to the armory door and hoped I wasn't going to set off an alarm or something. Normally Brandybuck would be stationed outside it during C shift, but she'd left with the others. "Can you open this?"

He glanced at it and then moved over to the terminal next to it. "Um... maybe? With some time?" Unlock the door with the terminal? He caught my surprised look and rolled his eyes. "Look, don't you have a mare to warn?"

Right. Right. He was a smart pony who knew about locks and terminals and, despite being a male, probably a lot of other things I didn't. Great, even the *males* were better than me. Enough of that! Now was *definitely* not the time for self-pity. "Okay. I'll be right back." Oh, how I hoped I'd be right back with Mom and all of A and B shifts behind me.

I picked my way down to the atrium and heard the Overmare and Daisy's voices raised in argument, but with the echoes and distance I couldn't make out specifics. I crept across the wide open space, trying to use the reinforcing columns as cover. Then Marmalade glanced back across the atrium at me. She blinked, then gave a simple little smile and a little wave of her hoof. Smiling slackly, I returned it and nipped into the cafeteria before anypony else noticed. My heart hammered in my chest, and I didn't dare glance back towards the tiny chamber off the atrium. I didn't know what the Overmare was planning, just that it was time for the shots to be called by a smarter pony than me!

I scrambled down the stairs past the medical clinic, school, and other support rooms. I was in such a hurry that I smacked my head on the door to the living quarters before it fully recessed into the ceiling. Eyes watering, I rubbed my noggin and clenched my teeth. "Mom! Moooom!" I shouted as I raced to her room. Then I saw that her bed was still neatly made, and for a moment I felt my heart stop. She wasn't here? Why wouldn't she be here? She was always here!

Except now. I sat hard on my rump, thumping my head with a hoof and not helping my headache at all. "Think, Blackjack. Think think think!" Unfortunately, saying it didn't really help my brain any. Her tag! I punched it into my PipBuck and brought up my E.F.S. Then I turned in a circle, looking for the little

arrowhead.

Nothing.

I screamed a little in frustration, beating my hooves in front of me! Of all the times for her to disappear! She could be blocking her tag. The head of security could do that, I think. Or she might be somewhere in the stable where she couldn't be traced. Oh... what if something happened to her?

All that didn't mean anything. The Overmare was doing something. I needed to know what. I needed to know what all those signals the Overmare received meant. I needed a smarter pony that actually knew something about PipBucks.

Well... I'd been looking for an excuse to bug Midnight in her quarters for months. Looked like I finally had it! I stopped only long enough to write a note; 'Overmare up to something. Stable in danger. Gone to Midnight's! BJ.' Then I was hurrying down the residential quarters to Midnight's.

Being a security mare, I had certain privileges. Like being able to override most residential door locks with my PipBuck when the stable was in danger and I didn't have time to knock.

I wish I'd knocked. Actually, I wished I knew another mare in data systems I could go to.

The sight of pink U-10 huffing and rutting away froze me in my tracks. Oh, yeah... she was on the breeding queue now, wasn't she? I blinked and tilted my head. U-10 certainly went at it with enthusiasm... ugh! What was I doing! "Midnight..." I muttered as she gave a little whinny. "Midnight." They still slapped flanks. I rolled my eyes; for the love of Celestia... "Midnight!" I shouted.

She shrieked as he finally stopped ploughing her plot and the two gawked at me. The pink buck pointed at me in confusion and Midnight's pupils constricted. "B... Blackjack?"

U-10 pointed his hoof at me. "I didn't know I was scheduled for a double," he said as he checked his PipBuck.

"Midnight, I need your help," I said as I approached her bed. Unlike my room, she kept hers spotless. Her terminal and workstation were both sparkling clean.

"Get out!" she shrieked and charged me, hammering at me with her hooves. "Of all the times to come to me for flank spank you choose now? Get out right now or I'll--"

I grabbed her shoulders and stared right in her eyes. "This isn't about flank spank, okay? It's not about sex of any kind. And if you help me I promise I will never try to get under your tail again, all right?"

She closed her mouth, looking annoyed, then troubled, then a little pouty. "Alright. What do you need?"

"The Overmare is getting a signal from outside the stable," I explained as I found the recording on my PipBuck. "I need to know what it's saying." Playing the odd string of beeps and boops seemed to finally convince her I was serious.

She gave me one last long glance and then sighed, trotting to her workstation. "You are going to owe me so much for this, Blackjack," she muttered as she activated her terminal, her horn's magic pressing keys infinitely faster than I could. She attached a cable to my PipBuck. U-10 hummed to himself as he stood patiently off to the side by the door, looking over Midnight's knickknacks. Midnight's roommate was nowhere to be seen; no surprise. I knew I wouldn't want to be around another mare on the queue... Probably.

"It's a Stable-Tec transmission code all right. Old one, too. None of our stable security modifications," Midnight said softly as she worked. Time was crawling by, and I kept swapping my tag

back and forth. Mom was off the system. Daisy was... by the main entrance, I thought. So was the Overmare. Now Daisy was moving... back to security? My ears twitched as I thought I heard... something. One benefit of life in Stable 99 was that the quarters were nearly soundproofed. "Shouldn't be hard to clean it up," she said as she manipulated the file in her terminal. "And... done!" she said triumphantly. Then she frowned. "Wait... it's a text file."

I blinked, leaning in to make sure I didn't mistake it: *Stable-Tec security forces incoming tonight, 0100 hours. Have EC-1101 prepared for extraction. You're doing the right thing, Overmare. You'll be getting control of your stable back. Deus.*

"Stable-Tec wants that program? Why?" Midnight blinked. "We haven't removed the encryption on it yet!"

"I have no idea," I said with a sigh. "Where is this EC-1101?" Wait... forget the file.

"In the stable's communication maneframe; you can access it in Maintenance One outside the Overmare's office. Since we couldn't break its encryption, I had it bundled for transfer to a PipBuck. It's a weird file. I had to package it in a permanent rewrite protocol," she said in a rush. My ears twitched again at a distant sound. What was that noise and why was my mane crawling? She must have taken my look for confusion, because she simplified herself for me. "Once you put that file on your PipBuck, there's no way to take it off. It'll be permanently etched into a PipBuck's data matrix."

I looked at her. She was still talking about the file? I looked at my PipBuck. One of the most commonly used features was the chronometer. The time? 0122.

There was a beep of an override on the door, and it hissed open. U-10 smiled genially as he turned to face the door beside him. There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99. I might not know them all by name or even quite all of them by sight, but looking at the mare in the doorway, there was no possible way that she could have been from our stable. Her mottled hide was a stained and blemished yellow decorated with scars and bite marks. The whites of her eyes were stained a solid piss yellow. Her mane had been pulled into bloody spikes. She wore barding made of strips of leather and tires and decorated with countless nails jutting out. Her reeking brown teeth curled in a grin of pure glee.

And if any of us had the slightest doubt remaining, she blew off U-10's head with the sawed-off single-barreled shotgun clenched in her jaws. Bits of blood, bone, and brains splattered over both of us as the pink unicorn dropped in a thrashing heap. The mare spat out the gun, casually reloading it as she giggled. "Bang... yer dead..." she slurred around a bloody tongue; it looked... chewed.

Midnight stood there stunned and wetting herself. I was not far from that state myself, but, unlike her, I was security. The fear and horror I felt were unceremoniously shoved into the closet in the back of my brain where I put all the things I didn't want to think about, leaving me with enough wits to telekinetically pull out my baton just as the mare snapped the shotgun closed. With a crack, the glowing metal rod tore the bite grip from her rotten teeth and, from the sound of it, probably broke the firearm.

Unlike Midnight, this mare wasted no time in counterattacking. Rearing up, she slammed me to the ground next to U-10's body with enough force to make me see stars. The baton went bouncing away somewhere out of sight. Then she was on top of me, drawing a rusty carving knife from a sheath at her shoulder. She jabbed the dull tip into the neck of my security barding, twisting her head back and forth as she tried to work it through the tough fabric and into my throat. I glanced at the slain unicorn beside me and at the paralyzed Midnight who'd be next.

I looked down at that knife and applied all my magic to the blade, fighting to twist it away. The rusty metal shook as the mare bit down even more tightly. Then the rusty knife snapped in two and I reversed the tip. With a telekinetic shove, I rammed the sharp metal as deep into her throat as I could. Her yellow eyes shot wide as her sliced throat spurted blood over my chest and neck, smearing my

barding with her gore. Finally, something gave inside the nightmarish mare, and she slumped limply against me.

I gasped, my heart hammering as I kicked my way clear. I'd just killed a pony... a diseased and demented pony, but a pony nonetheless. Before I let that train of thought go any further, I wrestled it into that closet with the rest of the things I didn't need in my head right now. Because right now, Midnight was going into shock as she stared at the corpses in her quarters. I looked at the bloody PipBuck on the murderess's foreleg; it was from Stable 99, and from the gore covering most of it, I doubted it had been removed or donned with a key.

"#340," I said softly. "Snowdrop." A loyal, quiet security mare who'd always been cool to me. One of the nine that'd been with the Overmare.

"You!" rasped a pony from the door, a unicorn floating a rusty razor blade in front of her. I found something better... I hoped... in the rusty twenty gauge shotgun dropped by the earth pony I'd just killed. I didn't even need to use the mouthgrip. I slipped into S.A.T.S. as she charged, the blade slashing wildly in front of her, the world dropping to a crawl. In the spell, I could target her legs, body, or...

Time crawled forward, and the cone of lead blasted out the end of the shotgun. I watched with sickening clarity as the lead abraded her face. She screamed, slashing blindly, kicking and biting in a frenzy. I grabbed her with my hooves to hold her still, reversing the butt of the gun and bringing it crashing down on her skull. Again. Again. Then two things broke: the butt of the gun and her skull. She flopped over limply, twitching spasmodically as I fought furiously to keep my focus. Don't think beyond right now. That closet was getting pretty full, though.

Midnight was making little screams in her throat and I stood, blocking the sight of the bodies. Two... had I really just killed two? No. Don't think about it. I should be good at that. "Midnight..." I said sternly, staring into her pinprick eyes. "Midnight!" I shouted, and because I'm not a medical pony and couldn't think of anything else to do, I smacked her hard across the face. That snapped her out enough to look at me. "The stable is being invaded. You've got to find security ponies and my mom and get everypony else down into the maintenance tunnels. Find Rivets. She can take care of everypony. Okay?"

"Find security... get everypony down below..." she muttered weakly and then nodded. "What are you going to do?"

That was a very good question. Fortunately, there was a simple answer as I found my baton and levitated it up. "Well... guess I'll thump 'em with my stick." Goddesses, it must have sounded sick to crack jokes now, but I had to ignore everything I'd stuck in the back of my head.

Of course, as good as my stick was, a gun was better. Sadly, the shotgun was out of commission; the broken butt had bent and unseated the breech. That was probably for the best, though; I'd been lucky it hadn't blown up in my face. There was an easy way to tell which way the raiders had come: they'd left a trail of blood from residential door to residential door all the way down the hall. Since there wasn't any blood past Midnight's, I hoped it was clear. "Go, Midnight. Go," I urged as I made my way carefully down the hall, trying to be as quiet as possible.

I didn't understand these ponies, if they really were ponies and not some sort of mutant pony-shaped predators of some sort. They reeked. They seemed to revel in bloodshed. I had no idea how they could have penetrated the stable... unless they'd come in when the Overmare opened the door.

Inside one room, I saw a red bar moving towards the door, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. the second her head was in view. My glowing baton crushed her windpipe in a single lucky hit. Her yellow eyes bulged and rolled as she dropped a .38 revolver from her mouth; hey, I might have slept through two thirds of my classes and Textbook's lectures, but I paid attention to my firearms training! My backswing

smashed her temple, sending her slumping against the door frame.

She was so dirty I couldn't tell what color she had been originally. She'd mutilated her own cutie mark. I hesitated as I pointed the baton at her. "Who are you?" I asked as she choked, coughed, and inexplicably started to giggle between gasps as she looked at me... and insanely went for the gun! I kicked it away. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

Then I saw the blood smeared over her grimy lips and took my eyes off her to look into the room she'd been in. Air Duct and her filly Vent were laying still on the floor... but the smears of blood... holes chewed in the blue filly's side... the blood splashed about. The psychotic mare finally gasped one word, "Yummy!" Then she lunged, grabbing my leg and trying to bite through my security barding!

"You! Sick! Fucker!" I yelled, bringing the baton down with each word. Her skull finally cracked, blood leaking from her orifices, and with a sigh she went still.

Okay... murderous? I got that. Crazy I could deal with, too. But how the fuck did these ponies get into the habit of eating other ponies?! I looked at Vent... had she been dead when...

Oh, puking now. I couldn't help myself, my lunch coming up in the doorway. When I finished, I did all I could to lock that thought in with the others and push a mental dresser against that closet door in the back of my mind. I could freak out and deal with this later. I checked the revolver. Four rounds... and six more on the earth pony mare.

Three down... how many to go? There was an awful lot of red in my E.F.S. as I made my way towards the stairs to the Atrium.

"I can't stand these sick fuckers," a buck said from the stairs above me. That it was a buck made me guess that they weren't quite the same ponies as before. "Murdering, psychopathic rapists the lot of 'em." Maybe there was the possibility of negotiation?

"Look at it this way: they'll exhaust themselves killing every last motherfucking pony in here, and then we can get rid of them easily," a mare answered, snuffing any thoughts of working out a deal before continuing callously, "Deus gets that program he wants so desperately. My boss is happy. The Reapers are happy. Everypony wins." Except my damned stable, you mule.

"Makes me wonder what's so damned special about it," the buck muttered as I crept up the stairs. "Deus just grabs a dozen of us at random from the arena, trots us out here, fetches these nutjob raiders, and waits for the stupid cunt to open the door?"

"It's smart. He knows a Flash Filly like me would never work with a Halfheart Gang loser like you to screw him. This way, everypony gets their caps and everypony's happy," the mare said matter-of-factly. I could make out her head now, and I pointed the rusty .38 revolver at it. I licked my lips and swallowed. All I had to do was pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger...

But she wasn't like the other murderers. She seemed sane, if callous and wicked. Somehow, I had no doubt she would have the same hesitation if I were in her sights. But that was the difference. If I killed her... I tried to push myself. The pale mare was dirty and streaked with blood, her shaggy black mane smeared with gore and some kind of grease. She had a necklace of cheap looking gemstones. She was a pony, a person. How could I just... just shoot her?

Then she glanced at me, and her eyes widened and then narrowed as she smiled. "Awww... stable pony's got a piece. Bet she can't fire it," she said as she ducked her head to a leg holster and... drew a weird metal box with a mouthgrip? It didn't matter, though; if she was pointing it at me, I doubted it was anything good. And from the look in her eyes, the pale earth pony was dead certain I wouldn't fire back.

I wasn't sure I could either.

The shot was luck. Pure luck. It caught her in the left eye and blew a bloody chunk out behind her left ear and over the buck. Sprayed with brain and skull, the brown stallion staggered back as the pale mare dropped to the floor, muscles writhing a moment before going still. The buck levitated a piece of sharpened rebar like a spear as I tried for another shot, but the revolver gave an unhealthy ping of rust and stopped, hammer drawn back.

I ducked under the deadly spur of metal and scrambled for the mare's strange box... weapon... thing! There wasn't even a trigger! What was this thing supposed to do? "Never seen a beam gun before?" A what gun? Then the metal was whipping towards me again and I barely brought the beam thingy up in time to block the tip. There was a flash, a fizzle, and the metal spur continued on with no hesitation right into my flesh.

I screamed as the sharpened steel caught me above my collar and ripped a hoof-long tear along the side of my neck. Again it was only luck that protected me as I fell back, tumbling down the stairs as my own blood smeared my barding and spattered the steps. I landed on my back as the scraggly brown buck descended with the crude but effective weapon ready to spear me like a radroach.

"Stupid soft stable ponies..." he said as he raised the sharpened bar. I watched, unable to move, sure I was about to die.

Then there was the resounding sound of a gunshot in the halls, and a hoof-sized hole appeared in his chest. His eyes popped wide as he jerked back, staring down the hall past me.

"Nopony kills ponies in my stable," Mom said firmly, her sidearm floating precisely over her eye. As her second bullet caught him in the face and tore off half his head, I doubted that she even needed S.A.T.S.

I stared at his body as all those thoughts I'd stuffed into that mental closet started to tear down the door. My throat began to work as I stared at the draining holes in his head. I had to do something... something... scream... vomit... wet myself... curl up in a ball sucking my hoof till this was all over. Something!

"Blackjack." Mom's voice cut through all that, and I tore myself away from the blown-open corpse. "We still have a stable to save." Her calm words were a layer of concrete across the closet door in my mind. As much as I'd love to fall apart, I couldn't. Not now. Not in front of her. Even if I was the worst security pony in Equestria, my stable was in danger.

"Yeah. Sure..." I said as I stood on my hooves, and in her eyes I saw her overwhelming pride. It helped reinforce that concrete. "So... is there a plan?" A plan would be nice, so long as it wasn't my plan.

"I still don't know what's going on or how these... things... got in here," she said as she checked her sidearm. "Somepony taught them the basics of how to use PipBucks. They went right for security ponies' quarters. I'm just glad they didn't get far." Distracted by all the foals to slaughter. Damn it, if I'd just been faster I could have... done... done something!

"Yeah, but how'd they get them on?" They would have had to... oh, don't think about that. "Okay, well, they're here because the Overmare let them in." And in that comment I saw several fuses blown in my mom's mind. "I'm pretty sure she wanted to use them to take on Rivets."

"Take on Rivets? Rivets is the head of maintenance!"

"Well, tell it to the little psycho when we find her," I countered. "She got Duct Tape to open the

hatch and find something these invaders wanted. These ponies didn't just come here to kill. They came here for some program the Overmare found in the stable."

"A program?" my mother asked with a frown. "Why don't they just take it and leave?"

"Cause they're evil?" I suggested, looking up the stairs towards the atrium. She didn't laugh, but she did give me a ghost of a smile. "If I can get to the terminal in Maintenance One, I can put it on my PipBuck and then... do... something." Something to get them to leave the stable, but what? Throw it out the main hatch and close it behind them? No... that wouldn't work!

"Ugh, why can't a smart pony figure this stuff out?" I whined as Lock and Barrel, two A shift security mares, came up with batons out. For them to leave, the program would have to leave too. Somepony would have to take it out. "What if I took EC-1101 outside? They'd have to follow me then, wouldn't they?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. It's certain death outside," Mom retorted immediately.

"It's pretty reliable death in here, Mom. Erm... I mean... Miss Head Security Mare... ma'am..." I fumbled, blushing a little. She swept me up in a hug. Okay, now I was blushing a lot. She quickly let me go, reddening herself. Mom never was very good with being Mom. Not that she was a bad mom, just... Ugh! Why'd I have to get so many conflicting things going on in my brain right now?

Gin Rummy took point, going up to the atrium. As we advanced up the stairs, I heard a filly squeal. Harsh laughter filled the air as we reached the doorway. Carefully, we peeked around the corner. The invaders were on the far side of the atrium, right outside the door to the stable entry. At least a dozen mares were dead; from the smears of blood, they'd been dragged here from their quarters below. The door to security was clear.

"Come on. We can run for it!" Lock said eagerly, then without waiting jumped out the doorway. The blue mare was fast; in recreation, she could do a lap around the exercise grounds in under a minute. This was at most a hundred feet.

Thunder filled the atrium, and Lock exploded in bloody chunks. The wall behind her buckled. But despite all that, I didn't stare at the heap of her remains.

I stared at where the thunder had come from.

From the midst of the staggered invaders rose... a thing. A thing of pony and metal. Hydraulics braced the metal plates attached to its hide as it stepped forward. For all its mass, it seemed to trot almost effortlessly. Red eyes stared at where Lock had been blown to pieces. Two huge guns pointed over its shoulders, cannons built into its body.

Then it slurred in a metallic sounding voice, "Cunt thought she was fast. Cunt was wrong!" The invaders laughed in agreement. "Now, watch that door. Might need to go get another batch of raiders." Go get more? As long as that thing was here and the door open, why not? It could just keep sending in more of these killers. A half dozen moved forward, one of them wearing a bloody PipBuck.

"Hey! Red bars!" he crowed in glee. "These fuckin' things are great!"

"Cunts still got some fight in them! Cunts are fucked." And from the laughter of the others, I really couldn't disagree. We fell back.

"Now what?" Barrel asked, the green mare visibly shaking in fear.

"I'm open to suggestions," Mom said grimly.

I frowned, then looked back at the landing. "I've got an idea..."

* * *

This was a terrible idea... but it was mine and the only one we had. I'd shucked my security barding and was now putting on the ratty clothes of the unicorn mare. Our coloring was close, and Mom was blackening the red in my mane with grease from a maintenance closet. "Good thing your horn is so small, little Fishy," she said, finally past all her arguments about why this wouldn't work. Mom was lavender, Barrel was green... I was the only filly that looked close to the mare I'd killed.

"Mom, I'm about to pretend to be a psychopathic wild pony," I replied flatly. "Please don't call me that." The last thing I needed was that stupid name... and her talking about my horn. Which wasn't that small, anyway... it was just... compact.

"This is suicide," Barrel muttered as she smeared more dirt in my mane and tail.

"Then they won't expect it," I said.

"How are you going to get past their E.F.S.?" Barrel countered.

I rounded on her. "Barrel, do *you* want to do this?" The green mare looked like she wanted to crawl under her bed and cry. I knew I did. I looked at Mom. "How am I going to get from security to the entry, though? Folks will notice too soon if I just trot out past them."

"There's a passage from the Overmare's office to the entry chamber. The Overmare's grandmother used it to sneak out of her quarters after curfew," Mom said as she transferred a code to my PipBuck. "That should get you through. I doubt the Overmare even knows it exists." She sighed as she looked me in the eye. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm the only one who can," I replied evenly. It wasn't like there were countless pale security mares. The only other two were Daisy and Snowdrop. "So... if I make it... close up the stable as quick as you can. Heck, I'd reseal it if I were you. If that door opens again, 99 is doomed."

I floated the weird box gun into my holster and checked one more time in the mirror to make sure my horn was covered by matted mane. This wasn't even barding! It was... clothes. Rummaged together clothes to try and make a sort of intimidating outfit. I felt like a two bit trick pony. The only good thing was that it covered my cutie mark. There was no way I could mimic the two gold coins on the dead mare's rump.

Making my way back towards the atrium I heard a pony scream and somepony else cackle, "She bit it off!" I didn't have any time to speculate on who was biting what as I approached the door. Another pony yelled, "Here comes another one!"

"Don't fucking shoot!" I bawled as I stepped out. There were a whole lot of guns and eyes on me and I gave up any and all thought of shooting. Hell, I didn't even have a weapon. "It's me," I said, encouraged by the lack of gunfire. The feeling of pieces of Lock under my hooves was simultaneously trying to make me throw up again and giving me a really, *really* good reason not to do anything that might break my cover.

"Two Bit?" the buck wearing the bloody PipBuck said. "That you?"

"Of course, who the fuck do you think it is?" I countered, and my belligerent tone seemed to put him at a sullen ease.

"What the hell is going on down there? I thought the scum had taken out all their fighters," he said sourly.

"They got security ponies and are putting up a fight," I countered.

Then a metallic voice grated, "Then what are you doing up here, Cunt?"

I stared up at the metallic monster, and our eyes met. I heard a tiny whirr as its red, glowing eyes tracked my movements. "I... I..." I nearly died right there, because in that instant I almost forgot that I was supposed to be an earth pony. I ducked my head, bit the mouth guard, and pulled the damaged weapon from my holster. Apparently, something about that struck half the ponies as hilarious.

"Flasher lost her flash! Ha!" the buck wearing the PipBuck roared in glee. I wanted to balk. Instead, I glared over the mouth guard. But the metal monsterpony didn't find it funny.

With shocking speed it swatted the gun out of my mouth, and suddenly the only ponies laughing were the yellowed-eyed mangy ponies with their insane giggles. "Cunt doesn't have her gun. Cunt is useless, then. Cunt should be fucked, huh, Cunt?" He placed an armor-plated hoof on the dropped weapon and leaned on it. The casing gave and flattened with a crunch. At the moment, I was pretty sure that I knew how it felt.

I suddenly became very aware of one part of him that wasn't mechanical. A part that I was fairly sure was going to be inside me in a few seconds. I became aware of a whimper and looked over at a prone white shape. The Overmare. One of the filthy, yellow-eyed ponies was pinning her down and raping her, her mouth and flanks bloody. The idea was utterly alien to me, and I did all I could to tear my eyes away and hide my horror. Mares might occasionally force another mare against her will, a class A crime, but for a buck to do that to a mare was... focus, Blackjack!

"I'm not useless," I answered as evenly as I could. "I heard one of these stable ponies talk about the program you want and where to get it. It's set for a one-time transfer onto these PipBuck things."

He looked over at the Overmare. "So the little cunt wasn't lying."

"I told you," she sobbed as she lay like limp meat, blood streaking her muzzle and flanks alike. As much as I didn't want to get blown into pony pieces, I'd take it over that.

"I'll go get it for you," I said evenly.

His red glowing eyes drilled into me. "I'm getting bored, Cunt. Fifteen minutes, then I'll make my own door," he said with a nod at the huge cannons.

A brown unicorn buck stepped forward. "You can't, Deus! If you destroy the terminal, then Sanguine will *never* get the file!" This unicorn didn't fit in with the others. Despite the fact he wore the same dirty clothes, he still seemed cleaner. Healthier, though still scrawny. The PipBuck on his leg didn't look like it'd been stripped from another mare. Then I glanced at his flank: a blue male symbol with twenty-one dots beneath it.

A Stable 99 buck? How?

"I don't care. I want these cunts dead. Fucked and dead or dead and fucked, I don't care. This is taking too long!" he said almost in pain before he stared at me. "Fetch, Cunt! Kill the ones left up there and bring me the program! Do it now, Cunt!" Wow, Deus sure had a favorite word, didn't he?

"I should go with her. I should be the one who gets it," the brown unicorn whined. Now I recognized him. He'd been in my breeding queue once. The whimperer. U-21 now. I'd never signed up for him again. I'd thought he'd been retired a month ago...

"I don't care who gets it! Get it!" he bellowed, and now seemed like the perfect time to run to security.

U-21 scrambled past me to get through the hatch first. "Okay... get the program... don't get

killed... get the program... don't get killed..." he muttered.

I stopped him at the foot of the stairs, hearing banging from above. "What's going on up there?"

"What's going on? Those two security mares who escaped barricaded themselves inside! That's what." He stared at me in confusion. I felt a little stir of glee. And Deus, massive as he was, couldn't fit through the door and couldn't blast it bigger without risk of breaking the program.

"Daisy made it?" Of course she made it! She was too tough and mean to get killed by anypony!

"Daisy?" His eyes popped wide, and he reached up a hoof to brush my matted mane aside to uncover my lit-- my compact horn! "Blackjack!"

"That's me. How did you end up with--" But my attempts at interrogation were for naught as he opened his mouth wide to yell. I shoved my right hoof in his mouth. "Really sorry about this," I apologized, then swung my PipBuck hard. The reinforced casing smacked his head once, twice... thrice. Finally, he went down in a quaking ball; not concussed but too traumatized at the moment to bring shit down on me. "Like I said: really sorry." Unless he was involved in all this...

I ran up to the security level and heard the yelling and banging. There was a door that divided the Overmare's office, armory, and some utility rooms from detention, briefing, and the gun range. The door itself had been forced open, but Daisy had barricaded it with a desk. Now a huge red mare with a fire axe was chopping her way through it. Three more cheered her on, shouting encouragement as they either brandished their own weapons or giggled in glee. One dingy unicorn mare chewed on her own bloodied hoof as she rocked in place and fiddled with the security shotgun in her faltering magic glow. A second earth pony buck brandished an automatic pistol as he growled and spat cheers around the mouth grip. The last was another yellowed buck grinning in glee and anticipation and knocking a baseball bat between his forelegs as the red mare chopped again and again.

"Hey, can I see that?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at the shotgun and a grin at the mare.

The pupils of her yellowed eyes were pinpricks. Who the fuck gave this mare a gun? She was chewing on the end of her leg so much that I thought she was going to gnaw it right off. She gave a delighted giggle and pointed it at me. "See?" I nearly soiled myself as she pulled the trigger.

At least nopony had been dumb enough to give her ammunition. "Give me that!" I said as I grabbed the floating weapon with my hooves. Her magic was shit and collapsed as I tugged it from her grasp. "Where are the shells?" I asked the automatic-wielding buck. He arched a brow skeptically, looking at my empty holster. "It broke, okay!"

He snorted and tossed me a small bag of twenty gauge buckshot shells. My horn glowed as I loaded the rounds into the gun. He spat his pistol into his holster to speak. "Just make sure you keep it away from that psycho," he said, not taking his eyes off the barricade and waving a foreleg at the mare I'd taken the shotgun from. "Why the hell Deus brought them along, I'll never know."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Who knows? Raider scum like her are all alike," he muttered. "Once they get that way, they're as good as dead." He looked at me as I racked a shell into the chamber. "You know how to use that thing?" Then his eyes widened as he took in the glowing shotgun. "Wait... weren't you..."

"Yep," was all I replied. I looked him right in the eyes as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and realized what I was about to do. What I was really about to do. The sane raiders I'd killed had been attacking me, and she'd died more by accident than anything. But now, with time practically frozen, I looked into his eyes and deliberately toggled two shotgun blasts to the head. It was still self-defense. I was security and I was protecting my stable.

It didn't make it any easier, but it did make it possible.

Time returned, moving as if in molasses. The Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting Spell slowly discharged, and I watched the cone of lead fan out in a narrow wedge of death. I watched his flesh pulverize and tear away around each pellet, his head deform, and blood and bone fly away behind him. The second shot repeated the devastation, and I watched in horrified fascination as his head detached completely and he dropped like a sack of meat.

I stood there for a second, staring in shock. I'd just decapitated a pony!

It was a second too long. With a scream, the mare with the bloody hoof launched herself at me as the buck with the baseball bat swung it wildly. The clothes I wore were little protection against the heavy impacts of the bat; sweet Celestia, he'd driven nails through the end! I cried out in pain as the rusty lengths pierced deep into my shoulder. This seemed to make the mare enter into a frenzy of biting and chewing, snapping at my neck as I tried to shove her away. The only upside was that, with the two crowding me, the mare with the fire axe couldn't chop me down. Unfortunately, she had the presence of mind to dive for the dropped automatic.

S.A.T.S. took a while to recharge, so in the meantime I backpedaled for the stairs, firing wildly at the maddened pair. One of the perks of a shotgun was that 'close' was good enough in tight quarters like this. The shotgun held five more shells, and I pumped them out as rapidly as I could, the buckshot peppering them with oozing wounds. It was nowhere near as effective as those first two shots, though; S.A.T.S.'s accuracy was truly terrifying. I was glad that none of these ponies seemed to have access to it or knew what it could do.

The buck went down with the fourth round, giggling even as foamy blood poured out of his mouth. The fifth shot missed the mare entirely, and she slammed her bloody hooves against me in a frenzy, cackling all the while. I saw the red mare pick up the dropped automatic pistol and turn towards me. "I don't have time for this!" I shouted, throwing my hooves around the frenzied mare's throat and twisting as my horn furiously scrambled to reload.

The pistol's nine millimeter rounds thumped into the mare with abandon; clearly, these psychotic mares were disposable. She didn't even seem to realize she was shot, but I certainly did as I felt the bite of one that travelled through my temporary shield. "Hugs," the mare rattled in my ear before she slowly slumped down out of my grasp.

Fortunately, I'd reloaded my weapon, and the red mare seemed to realize that shotgun trumped pistol and axe. I fired as rapidly as I could as she snatched her axe in her mouth and raced across into the briefing room. Reloading, I ran to the door. There were a few offices and detention through there. She could be--

Then there was a bang behind me, and ten red hot needles stabbed into my rump. Screw this plan! I was never ever going without barding again. I saw the honey yellow glow around the shotgun and cried out, "Marmalade! It's Blackjack! Stop shooting me!" I could feel the burn of the pellets in my backside. Sweet Celestia, I'd never get shot again if I could help it!

I slumped as I heard the barricade being drawn back. The red bar wasn't moving towards the door. Maybe she was waiting for help to arrive? It didn't matter. In just a second, Daisy would--

--smash my rear legs out from under me, kick me on my back, and knock the wind out of me with a blow to my gut. Okay, not what I'd been expecting! I screamed as I rolled over onto my back just in time to block her next strike with the reinforced casing on my PipBuck. "Daisy. It's me! Blackjack!" I coughed and sputtered.

She looked at me coolly, spitting out her baton and twirling it on its loop around her hoof. "I know.

If we're all about to die, at least I get the pleasure of finishing you off!" I stared up at her, and oddly, the word Deus was so fond of roared through my mind. My anger was enough to get a little more oomph from my horn, and I grabbed her baton, using the loop to twist her foreleg in and up. Overbalanced, she crashed forward on her side and I rose, pressing the shotgun to her face.

"I don't have time for this," I said, my heart thundering in my chest. The shotgun shook as my magical focus was rattled and I hoped that closet would stay sealed closed. "I know we got problems, but I have a plan to save the stable. So please cut the ponyshit, and you can just kill me when I get back."

"Back?" Marmalade blinked slowly. She'd been badly beaten and had blood matted around her mouth. "You're going somewhere?"

"Outside," I said as I turned away from Daisy. I couldn't kill her. I had a better chance of killing her by accident than intentionally.

"But you'll die," Marmalade said softly. "I don't want you to go."

I rose to my hooves, my backside really complaining as I limped to the door. "Really? Why?"

"Cause you're my friend," Marmalade said simply with her wide, vapid smile. "Why else do you think I fooled around with you all the time?" She levitated a trio of healing potions from a medical kit. "Here. I was gonna use 'em, but you're all shot up."

I stared at her with a worried frown. Marmalade? Friend? She'd always been the slow pony in Daisy's shadow. Too stupid to work alone, so simple she was annoying... nopony I'd ever called a friend. I drank the potions, glad for the cooling, healing sensation on my hindquarters, and looked at the honey colored mare with unease. "Well... thank you, Marmalade." She smiled and gave a little nod.

Daisy shoved past me. "Yeah yeah yeah. Sunshine and hugs and all that horseshit," she said as she slammed the barricade back into place. Her angry scowl turned skeptical as she regarded me. "You're really leaving?" Was I about to faint, or did she really sound the tiniest bit concerned?

"The raiders are here for a program. I'm going to steal it and hope they all come chasing after me. Then Mom and you can retake the stable," I said with a little nod, stripping off the useless clothes. Marmalade gave a soft 'ooh' of comprehension and, without another word, shrugged out of her security barding and handed it over.

"P-21? Are you here?" I asked as I pulled it on. I gave Marmalade a grateful smile.

"That useless cock pony?" Daisy snorted.

"You called?" P-21 said dryly as he stepped out of the door to Maintenance One. There was an unmistakable smug look on his face at the shocked expression on Daisy's face. His eyes met mine and his smug expression disappeared. "You changed your mind. You're retiring me after all," he stated flatly as he glared at me.

Daisy chuckled in glee. "Now we're talking. Just hold still..." she said, taking a step towards P-21.

P-21 slowly limped backwards. "You never pass up a chance to break a male, do you?"

"Male? Pssh... I never miss a chance to break anypony..." Daisy said with a sharp grin. Okay, this nonsense needed to stop now!

I racked a shell into the shotgun, and Daisy turned to look at me. Had to be careful. I only had a dozen or so shells left and wasn't going to rob Marmalade. The armory door was still closed tight. Probably needed the Overmare's or Mom's personal codes to open it. I thought of the cornucopia of weapons stored for an Incident and thumped my hoof against the floor.

"Look, now really isn't the time," I said firmly. Okay, if I was being the voice of maturity, then Stable 99 was officially doomed. I looked at P-21. "The plan's changed a little. You're still getting out of here, but I'm going with you."

"Not happening. You're big. Noisy. Obnoxious," he stated flatly.

"Ugly. Oh, and fat," Daisy threw in.

"Really lazy... a bit of a letch..." Marmalade added. "And her horn's so tiny..." Hey!

"And female," he concluded in a tone of finality.

Okay. Didn't I have an ego? Oh, yeah, there it was. That mashed up thing on the floor. "Maybe, but I'm also the pony with the plan. Here it is. I get the program. I run out of here with all of them chasing me. Mom and the rest of security push them all out. Door gets sealed forever. If you think you can sneak past and make it outside on your own at any point in that plan, feel free. Otherwise, I'm going with you," I said as I thumped his chest. P-21 glared in return. Sweet Celestia, what was his problem?

"Fine," he finally muttered. "But after we're out, you're on your own."

Right. Probably for the best, anyway. "So, Midnight said that there was a program on the terminals up here. EC-1101. I need you to transfer it on my PipBuck." He nodded with a scowl and led me into the little closet dignified with the name of Maintenance One. There was barely enough room for both of us as he connected my PipBuck to the machines. I noticed Daisy following, walking a little stiffly. "What's the matter with you?"

She flushed furiously. "Go buck yourself, Blackjack."

"Sodomized," P-21 said simply. I was really glad that Daisy didn't have a shotgun at that moment. She did, however, launch herself at P-21 with the clear intention of smashing him into blue jelly. I was barely able to stop her. What, was he trying to get killed?

"How'd you know?" Marmalade asked curiously, but he just gave her a flat look and went back to work. "Rude."

I watched him work. "I wonder what it does."

"Opens a camera," Marmalade said, looking hopeful that she was being helpful. "Well, that's what they said it did."

What? I shook my head; this was Marmalade, after all. "Nevermind. Is it transferred?"

"Almost. And there's a whole bunch of Overmare files here I'm adding. Just in case..." I always thought it was cute how it looked like earth ponies were prancing on the keys with the tips of their hooves. Then he pushed one more button.

The stable around me vanished as my E.F.S. went crazy! "Whoa whoa whoa! Hey, what's going on!" Columns of numbers and diagrams and maps and -- what the hell was that supposed to be?! -- all flashed by one after the other. Then, as quickly as it began, it ended. A tiny cursor appeared.

>Permanent transfer completed.

>EC-1101 transferred.

>Warning: unknown encryption detected.

>Warning: biomedical peripheral insufficient.

>Warning: navigational data unavailable.

*>Warning: Equestrianet data connection not available.
>Please commence manual transmission.*

Please what? I opened my mouth to see if a smart pony might have an explanation for what just happened, but at that moment there was a roar from the atrium followed by an explosion that shook my teeth. I suspected that Deus had gotten tired of waiting. "Okay! The running part of the plan!"

"Problem," he muttered, pointing at his injured leg. Oh, yeah. That.

I pulled out another syringe of Med-X, jabbed it into his leg, and injected the painkiller. "Problem solved." I could have used some myself; I had a hell of a headache from that light show!

We moved into the Overmare's office. The room looked ransacked; it had probably been searched before Daisy and Marmalade got away. They hadn't guessed that the program was in a little room right next door. Though it looked like somepony had pissed all over the Overmare's huge ring-shaped desk, it was still intact, as was an old piece of paper taped behind it. The title caught my eye: 'Enemys' was crookedly scrawled at the top of the page in large, block print. There were a lot of names on that list. Topping it, and circled: 'Overmare.' She counted herself as an enemy? Rivets's name was right underneath it. Mom's name had question marks around it. Daisy was on it?! Not me, of course. Oh, wait! There I was... at the bottom...

Uuugh! Focus! No time for this! I accessed her terminal and used the code Mom had given me. The desk hissed as it slowly rose into the air on hydraulic legs, revealing stairs disappearing into the gloom below. I activated the lamp on my PipBuck and threaded my way down with P-21 right behind me. A minute later, the desk closed behind us as another impact reverberated through the stable. We moved down the hall to a second door, and I used the code again. Slowly, it opened. Very thankfully, the noise it made was relatively quiet compared to the racket in the atrium.

The entry hatch to the stable, a massive cog-tooth-edged slab of metal, was rolled away to one side, and a long rough-rock-walled tunnel led up beyond. Bones lay crushed on the other side of the door, mashed by the entry of Deus and his raiders. "Better get a head start," I warned P-21, nodding to the tunnel. He nodded back and began making his way out. I wondered if he'd stay with me longer than ten seconds. Probably not.

Going to the door from the entry room to the atrium, I saw the Overmare lying limp against the larger room's wall. I supposed the raiders had gotten tired of her. Even she didn't deserve that... but I had bigger problems. Or, rather, I was about to.

"Hey, doofus!" I bellowed across the atrium, and to my shock, he froze completely. Then his head slowly turned to look at me. I saw certain annihilation in those eyes. "I got your program here, jackass!" The raiders around him looked even more shocked than Deus!

Then he was turning and I suddenly had a vision of a cloud of Blackjack settling around a PipBuck and hoof. 'Ohshitothshitothshit!' I thought as I turned and raced for the stable door. "Cuuuuuunnnnnntttt!" he roared, and the shells detonated behind me. Luck saved me from a messy splat as bones churned beneath my hooves.

I caught up to P-21 and shouted, "Running now!" From the roaring behind me, the plan had worked. I was leaving the safety and security of my stable with a pissy, hostile male, an unknown destination ahead, a mechanical nightmare pony of death behind, and a mysterious program that apparently sparked it all. Odds were that, if I survived the next five minutes, I'd be wishing I were dead inside a month.

So why was I smiling so much?

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Rapid Reload - All your weapon reloads are 25% faster than normal.

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making this worth reading. Huge thanks to the readers who supply the feedback that keeps this whole thing going.)

(Author's note: When I started Project Horizons, I had an ending and a beginning, and I wasn't putting any thought into Chapter 1 beyond 'Okay, how does BJ leave the stable?' I never really gave it the time or tightening it deserved. So, now I've gone back and fixed some things, added others, and taken out a few to hopefully make the rest of the story more enjoyable. Doubtless this is going to have a ripple effect, so please bear with me till the ripples are brushed out.)