

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

### Chapter 41: Paths

*"Biting off more than you can chew is just what I'm afraid of."*

"So, was that how you beat Deus and Gorgon? By hugging them to death?" Psychoshy drawled as we trotted east along the highway towards Megamart. Despite being out of the woods, so to speak, Scotch Tape was looking at several days' recovery with regular infusions of healing spells from Lacunae. After a few hours P-21's body had begun to shake, and we were out of Med-X. We'd left him behind at the medical center, enjoying my selection of memory orbs in the recollector while we got some more chems for him. At least, I hoped he was. It was hard to tell with him just lying there. The trip to Megamart would also be a good distraction while my hide knit back together; it felt like I had little bugs scrambling under my grafts, but the rule for recovery was 'do not scratch.'

"Something like that," I replied, looking over at the adolescent Rampage. "There might have been heavy machinery and explosives involved too." It was early morning... so early that I could see stabs of actual sunlight in the gaps between the mountains to the east. "So where did you two go last night?" Boo gave a little snort and yawn; she hadn't been happy about being awake at this hour, but I hadn't been able to convince her that she could stay with Glory.

"Up on the roof," Rampage said, looking at the yellow pegasus as she clicked along on the power hooves. "Somepony needed a hug."

"You little striped cunt!" Psychoshy snapped and dove at her, streaking past my nose. My magic wasn't nearly enough to stop a speeding pegasus, but that was what fingers were for. She jerked to a halt, going 'Yeep' as I slid a few feet. Then she looked back at me and bucked my hand away before pointing an accusing hoof at Rampage. "You said you wouldn't tell." I retracted my fingers as she glowered at my friend.

Rampage blinked. "Did I? I don't remember that. That must have been one of my crazies making that promise." She looked up at the skeptical mare. "Really! I don't remember it. Complete blank." She swished her tail as she looked at me. "Anyway... we were talking about her future."

"What future?" Psychoshy muttered. The early morning air was oddly hot and still; it made me feel as if the skies were holding their breath. It felt like rain, but the road east was nearly dry and the skies pressed down upon us as we walked. For once, I wanted the rain to fall; my mane crept of its own accord, giving the sensation of something bad happening.

"Yeah, that was it," Rampage said as she rolled her eyes.

"You're tired of being a Reaper?" I asked in surprise.

Rampage screwed up her face. "Reaper is sort of a dead-end career. Don't get me wrong: nice perks. Arena housing. Thugs are usually easy to come by whenever you need more hooves. But really... it's not exactly satisfying work," she said as we trotted along. "Really, it's just Big Daddy making sure he's got the best fighters at his beck and call and keeping the peace between the gangs. I mean, how many cage matches can a girl do before she's bored with it? So we generally find other ways to

pass the time. Deus found new and clever means of buggery. Gorgon trained radroaches to wrestle.”

“And what did...” I began before I saw Psychoshy’s glower. “Ah. Sanguine.”

“Yeah. Him. Helping him with... everything,” she said as she looked away.

“Well, that sounds like a problem. Have you thought of being a Zodiac? You could get one of those cutie decal things and beat up bad ponies,” I suggested with a smile.

“I beat up ponies right now. Besides, Big Daddy frowns on moonlighting with them. He’s never forgiven Bulldozer for leaving us to become Taurus,” Psychoshy said irritably, and I glanced over my shoulder at the rifle slung across my bags. “But then, he was a Highlander, and they’ve always been a bit funny.”

“I thought the word was ‘inbred’,” Rampage snorted. Boo tried to eat a mouthful of dead grass, made an icky face, and spat it out. The pale pony immediately nudged my hip; she might not have been verbose, but she definitely knew where I kept the food.

I floated out a snack cake as we walked, holding it in the air beside me. “Highlanders?” The name sounded familiar. Boo lunged forward to take bites from the cake, and I occasionally lifted it up out of her reach. She seemed to like the game, watching for it to dip low enough for a bite. Psychoshy watched the two of us with an angry little scowl. Hey, if she was jealous, I’d float a cake in front of her mouth too. Practice for me, either way.

Rampage chuckled. “Weird pony folk. Always been a twiggid bunch. They were crazy even before the war. Lived in the eastern mountains, were way too friendly with goats and sheep, and couldn’t care less what Celestia wanted. Nasty in combat, though. Zebras learned that the hard way. Some fighters think it’s clever to go after an enemy’s crotch in a fight. Highlanders think it’s a hoot and will pound each other all day.” She snickered softly. “They’re the only ponies I know that either were happy the bombs fell or still haven’t noticed.”

“They’re also the only ponies in the valley who have told Big Daddy to go buck himself. Two years ago, Big Daddy himself led the biggest stomp short of the war with the Rangers to put the Highlanders in their place. Three days later, he was still fighting their chieftain, White Lightning. Nearly killed each other,” Psychoshy marveled, shaking her head. “Hardest damn fight of my life. Great fun.”

“So who won?” I asked with a grin.

“No pony,” Rampage snickered. “The star spawn in Black Pony Mountain came and ate Reaper and Highlander alike. Technically it was a draw. Still, White Lightning called Big Daddy the toughest damn son of a mule that ever walked the Wasteland. That’s high praise, coming from her. And the Highlanders have a spot in the Arena and fought the Rangers, so I guess they’re a part of the Reapers.”

“Till they get drunk, bored, horny, or distracted by something shiny,” Psychoshy said dryly. “The only thing they were really good for was fucking up zebras. They really... really... don’t like zebras. During the war the zebras had to push through their territory. Bloodbath every time, for both sides.”

I was on the fence when it came to zebras myself; I hoped that if I ever did meet more, they’d turn out more like Sekashi and less like Lancer. “So, if Zodiacs are out... what do you want to do?”

"I want to kill you," Psychoshy growled as she stared at me. "So stop playing nice." I looked back with a sigh. Was I just going to have to start killing everypony who kept on messing with me, like P-21 suggested?

"Annnnnnd that's what we were mostly talking about last night. Her wanting to kill you. You mashing her into pony butter. She'd be dead. You'd be whiny and angsty. Everypony loses," Rampage said with a roll of her eyes. "And I so want to avoid hearing more Blackjack whining."

"I don't whine," I muttered, flushing.

"No?" Rampage grinned and mimicked my voice with disturbing ease. "Oh why couldn't I save them? Why couldn't I stop it? Why can't I do better? Why can't I be the saint pony of the Wasteland? Why can't we all just get along? Why do I keep getting my ass blown off? Why why why?" she moaned.

"I don't sound like that." I pouted. Why did everypony give me flak about trying to do better?

"I could take her," Psychoshy muttered.

"Yeah. That's what Deus thought. You think you could beat him?" Rampage grinned up at the yellow pegasus.

"She didn't beat Deus! She just got some other pony to do it," Psychoshy said with a sharp glare. I just sighed again. I was trying to be kind, particularly after everything she'd been through, and this was the thanks I got?

"Exactly. That's just my point. In a one-on-one fight with nopony in sight, sure... maybe if you took her by surprise from behind. But she's a cybernetic unicorn, Psycho. You're a pissy pegasus pony with daddy issues. I think she has you outclassed. And even if she didn't, she has at least a dozen ponies willing to throw themselves in harm's way to protect her because she's so gosh darn goodie goodie," the striped young mare drawled sarcastically. Then she laughed. "That's the thing you and Sanguine and other ponies keep missing. Blackjack is a good pony. She fucks up, sure. But she's good. She wants to help. She wants to give folks a second chance. Heck, she's giving you a second chance right now. And some folks respect that."

"If she's so good, then why do I hate her so much?" the pegasus growled. "She killed my father."

"You heard it. Sanguine wasn't your father. Not really. He might have raised you. He might have even cared about you, but you weren't his family. His family was three ponies in stasis and a memory of a life that was over. If he'd survived, I'd have given him a day before one of his family died and three days before his wife took his kids and ran for it," Rampage said, looking up at the suddenly stricken pony. "But we're just rehashing was we said last night, Psycho."

"Look, Psychoshy... I'm sorry I've hurt you. If things had been different, I would have found a better way," I said.

She sniffed. "Shut up! I hate you! You hear me? I hate you, and some day I'm going to kill you!" she screamed, then streaked away down the road in a gust so strong that it nearly knocked me from my hooves.

"And to think, her mom wasn't much of a flyer," Rampage said, then sighed. "She'll be back."

"How do you know?" I asked with surprise and a small frown. "She just said she hates me." Boo suddenly drew up short, her ears twitching, and I stopped walking. Funny, no red bars in sight. "Something wrong, Boo?" But the pale mare sniffed at the air and looked down the road.

"Well, she'll either be back to kill you, or she'll be back because you're the closest thing she's got to a role model now," Rampage said with another sigh.

"What?!" That was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. "Me? What are you talking about? Why would anypony look to me as a role model? Besides, she hates me!"

Rampage snorted as we resumed walking again. Boo kept looking about the dead, dark woods as if expecting them to rush us... actually, now I was getting a little nervous, too. I'd had trees try and eat me before, after all. "Nah. That's just the hurt and the hormones talking. Fact is, much as she's upset with you, she's pissed off with herself even more. She feels used and duped and a little bit betrayed. Sanguine was just treating her like a trophy or tool or something. She wants to be liked... I think, deep down, she wants to be loved like Fluttershy was. 'Course, she's also crazy, so watch out that you don't push a button that makes her take your head off and turn it into a hat."

"I thought you said I had her outclassed?" I asked with a smirk.

"Yeah, but never underestimate the capacity of crazy ponies. I mean, look at the ponies who underestimated your own crazy. Deus... Sanguine..." she chuckled.

"I thought you said I beat them because I was good?" Had I imagined their whole exchange?

"Good. Crazy. Same difference. Good is just a kind of crazy most ponies like 'cause they think they can use it. Then you do something good they'd much rather you hadn't, and suddenly you're crazy." Rampage looked in the direction Psychoshy had gone. "Me, I'll take good crazy over evil bloody crazy any day."

"You sure like pushing buttons," I said as I looked down at her with a small frown.

"I don't like ponies sitting alone quietly falling apart," she replied, looking up at me. "Seeing P-21 this last week made me want to scream. Scotch Tape is your daughter. Fucking acknowledge it. But no, she needs to nearly fucking die before he finally... finally... admits he's a mess and a shitty father." Rampage glowered. "If she'd died, I was going to punt him right off the hospital."

What the fuck? "Rampage! What the... he's my friend!" I gasped. Were my friends seriously planning to kill each other behind my back?

"He's your shadow," she replied with a frown. "He's too weak to live on his own, and if he was strong enough, I think he'd be a bigger monster than Deus without you around. You've been keeping him alive since 99. If he doesn't like the fact he's a father, then he needs to face it, not hide from it. There's enough shitty fathers that the world doesn't need more."

We trotted along past one of the massive MASEBS towers. "I take it Psycho's not the only one with daddy issues?"

"Now who's pushing buttons?" she countered, then sighed. "I don't remember my mother or father, Blackjack. Maybe one of the other ponies inside me does. All I think of when I think of the word

'father' is an empty feeling and an urge to kick something."

I looked down the road and froze as I spotted a cluster of blue bars ahead. Then, suddenly, they flashed bright red! "Whoa whoa whoa! What's going on?" From up ahead came a gunshot, then several gunshots! The lone remaining blue bar wobbled a little, and I spotted Psychoshy flying back. Angry shouts filled the night air. "What did you do?"

"I thought every damn pony loves you!" she yelled, looking at a bloody bullet wound in her rear left leg.

"Um, you have kept up with just how many ponies have tried to kill me, haven't you?" I pulled off the gauze around my neck and shoulders with my horn and wrapped it around her bleeding leg. I had no clue how sanitary it was, but none of us had healing potions and I didn't want her to leave a blood trail. "What did you say to them?"

"I said 'make way for the mighty Security Pony', and they freaked out!" I saw the pinpricks of torches and flashlights in the distance. "If you're so good, why does everypony want to shoot you?"

"You tell me," I asked, looking around. Ironshod R&D was north of here. Or the weather station? On the other hoof, there was a red tunnel in the MASEBS buildings. At least, I'd gone right by a door marked with the tower's name in my madcap dash. If the worst came to the worst... "The tower. Hurry," I said as we raced off the road to the south. Funny, last time I'd been here I hadn't appreciated just how big it was on top of its hill.

Psychoshy flew sideways in front of me. "Uh... why are we running? I mean, even four to one we should be able to mop the floor with them. We can even make a game of it."

"Because I don't kill ponies if I can help it," I replied as I looked around for the door. Now, getting in might be a catch without P-21 to work his magic... I saw the lights milling about in indecision. I didn't want to wait to find out which way they were going. They were close enough for E.F.S.

"Um... they're trying to kill you, Blackjack. Doesn't that sort of give you carte blanche to tapdance on their heads?" Psychoshy said in the tones of trying to explain the obvious to an idiot.

We reached the landing where weeks ago I'd smashed off Roses's horn trying to free some slaves, one of whom had later raped her. Really, if I could go back to when I left the stable and tell my old self about the things I'd done, I don't think I would believe it. The broadcast tower loomed overhead, disappearing into the night gloom.

"I don't care. I don't want to kill ponies if I can help it. No good comes from dead ponies. That includes you," I said sharply, finding the door and the terminal beside it. Okay... terminals. Terminals... what were some of P-21's tricks for terminals? Terminals 101... oh poop. I looked at the screen and its selection of twelve possible passwords all ten characters long, gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and stretched out my hoof. I tapped a key; exploding terminal in Blackjack's face?

There was a beep, and I peeked at it.

*>Access granted.*

Huh. That was easy.

I glanced at Psychoshy and Rampage watching me, the former with near pity and the latter with disappointment. "Is she always such a spaz with terminals?" asked the pegasus.

"You should see her with elevators," Rampage replied as the door clicked open and the pair entered.

"You know, given the past month, I think I'm a little bit justified in my paranoia," I said after them. I slipped in, made sure Boo was inside with me, and pulled the door closed, muttering, "I am not a spaz." I knelt and held Boo's shoulders. "I'm not a spaz, am I, Boo?"

The pale pony gave a carrotty-filling-scented belch and then smiled at me. "I'll take that as a no," I said with a grin as I rubbed her ears.

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When in the Wasteland, when you weren't getting shot at, you were looting. Once we got past the whole 'Reapers don't pay' attitude, even Psychoshy got in on the act, and I found a pair of utility coveralls that would make do for minor protection and had even more pockets than my saddlebags offered. While we weren't exactly hurting on caps, every little bit helped, right? So I cleared out the utility spaces, collecting anything portable and sellable.

"Reaper to common pack mule," Psychoshy muttered as she held up a dead spark battery and tossed it over her shoulder. Boo did her best to help out, picking up a wrench in her mouth and bringing it to me. Then a hammer... then a wrapper... then a rusty tin can... I gave her a snack cake, and she ate her reward gleefully and stopped bringing me junk.

"Oh, come on. You're a flying, sullen, bad-tempered, psychotic Reaper pack mule. Nothing common about that," Rampage said brightly.

"Big Daddy should just take over the Finders. Honestly, it'd make life so much easier," the pegasus grumbled as she put a good battery in her saddlebags. Really, what was it with some ponies not wearing barding? "We could just take whatever we wanted from them."

"Right. Because folks dig through dangerous ruins just to turn over valuable goods out of the kindness of their hearts," I said as stowed some pilot lights in my pockets. Psychoshy opened her mouth. "And when you threaten to kill them if they don't... well, then you're a raider. That makes you a bad pony. And that's bad." Psychoshy closed her mouth with a sour frown.

"Would still be a lot simpler," she muttered.

"You have to understand that Blackjack wasn't in a gang, Psycho. She had her own weird, twisted upbringing in a stable where they beat males and did whatever their boss said," Rampage said as she trotted over,

"How's that so different?" Psychoshy asked in confusion.

"Their boss wasn't the biggest or the strongest pony in the stable, or even the smartest. They followed her because she was the daughter of the previous boss... who was the daughter of the previous boss... and so on... even though she was nuttier than you," Rampage said, and I huffed, my ears burning. Really, it hadn't been that bad... okay, maybe it had. But still, it was better than just taking

whatever you wanted.

“Are you serious? That’s crazy,” Psychoshy said, then pointed her hoof at me. “You’re crazy! You seriously let her tell you what to do because her mother was boss and her grandmother was boss? None of you were looking around going ‘Uh... maybe we should stomp this cunt and put someone who has a clue in charge’ or something?”

“We tried it once and almost killed everypony. Even then, we were getting around to it again,” I replied defensively, turning on her. “It’s just... in the stable, we were told that everything outside was death. We had to play our roles and do what we were told. We shared almost everything because the consequence of fighting was that we might break the stable. We couldn’t do that. The stable was our whole world, and we knew that if something broke or went wrong, then everypony was dead.”

“Looks like you were right,” Rampage replied, looking up at me. “Something went wrong and everypony died. So if the gangs are still alive and your stable’s dead, then who has the better philosophy?” I frowned; why was she asking me? Smart ponies were supposed to answer questions like this! I was just a security pony.

“We do,” I defended. “Even if it failed, the stable lasted two centuries, longer than any gang... and life was better than out here... at least, for mares, it was. I’m not saying it was perfect. I’m not saying there weren’t things wrong even before Deus broke in. I’m just saying that ponies working together is better than ponies killing, taking, and ruling over others. In the end, that was exactly how the stable fell apart.”

Both of them looked skeptical, but I supposed that that was the best I was going to get. I noticed some stairs heading up. “Hey... I want to check something upstairs while we’re here,” I said, nodding towards them. “DJ Pon3 said that the towers in Hoofington were blind. I want to see if we can find out why.”

“You know DJ Pon3?” Psychoshy said skeptically as we made our way up to the MASEBS broadcast room.

I glanced at Rampage looking at me in confusion, and opened my mouth... then closed it again. Rampage just knew Homage as a nice Tenpony unicorn who threw us a dinner party. “Well, we’ve met his personal assistant, Homage. That’s kinda like knowing DJ Pon3.” Psychoshy snorted and rolled her eyes.

Meh... Homage was cooler than DJ Pon3 anyway.

Inside the broadcast room was the familiar layout of terminals and monitors. On one, I saw a dozen or so ponies making their way further south towards Riverside, carrying a banner marked with the black towers. Another showed several small burned-out encampments. Megamart was in one, and a massive hole gaped right over where Gun used to sit. I could barely make out Chapel in one screen. It looked dimmer and smaller without its little white church, but there was no missing the white dots of the graveyard all over the hillside.

Oddly, though, more than half of the screens weren’t pointed at the ground but at the clouds.

In the middle of the floor, in front of the controls, was something that didn’t belong here... a terminal like the ones I’d seen Lighthooves using. This terminal, though, bore a slightly different logo. I

reached out a hoof and watched as it melted around my limb. I swept my hoof back and forth several times, and each time it just pulled back to its original form.

"Whoa," Rampage gasped.

Boo tried to pick up one of the cloud cables in her mouth... or she was trying to eat it. Either way, it didn't work, and she stuck out her tongue and backed away, definitely not liking cloud technology any more than the rest of us.

"Freaky," Psychoshy agreed. "What is it?"

"An Enclave cloud terminal. Only pegasi can touch it. No idea what it's doing here, though." I tried pressing the keys with my magic, but that too had no effect. "I have no idea how we're going to shut it down."

"No idea? I thought you were supposed to be a Reaper now," Psychoshy snorted as she flew over the terminal. "We smash it!"

"No, wait!" I yelled, wanting Glory or P-21 to have a look at it. Unfortunately, Psychoshy wasn't exactly a waiting kind of pony. She brought her rear hooves down, and there was a low boom of thunder and crackle of lightning as glowing rainbow colored circuits and wires disintegrated in a cloud of evaporating color and flickering light. The terminal rolled away in a carpet of mist, snaking along the cables where they connected to the broadcast controls.

"Well, you have to admit, there are some things Psychoshy excels at," Rampage said, and the pegasus beamed. I had to add 'getting on my nerves' to the list. I looked at the broadcast controls and tapped them a few times. At least I could tell Homage what I'd found.

The studio lit up, and for a moment I thought it was empty. There was the microphone... the controls... but no Homage. Well, it wasn't like she was there all the time, right? I didn't know of any way I could leave a message... maybe I could write a note and tape it to the wall? Write it on a billboard? Something...

Then I heard the soft sob over the speakers. I looked around and saw a knob marked 'volume' and slowly turned it up. The sound of crying increased. "Homage?" I asked, then looked around at the controls. I spotted the 'Send to linked station' button and pressed it. "Homage?"

Then from below the studio control console rose the pale unicorn. She was a mess, a complete and total mess. Her eyes stared at the screen in a heartbroken gaze. "Blackjack?" she asked thickly. There was only one reason she should look like that: something bad had happened to LittlePip. There was bad... and there was *Bad*.

I looked back at the pair of Reapers. "I need some privacy, please. Right now." Boo blinked at me, tilting her head. "Well... except for Boo." I doubted she'd tell anypony Homage's secret.

"Why does that little freak get to stay while I have to go? If she stays, I stay! I don't..." Psychoshy began when Rampage bit her tail and dragged her out like a fluttering kite. "Hey! Let go! You're not the boss of me!" I closed the door behind them.

I took a deep breath, remembering the serious little unicorn with the weight of the world on her

shoulders. Please, don't be dead, LittlePip. "What happened to LittlePip, Homage?"

She clenched her eyes shut, gritting her teeth as if she couldn't bear to spit it out. "Oh, Blackjack... I... she..." She hung her head. "I think... I'm afraid... I think LittlePip has... she's done something terrible."

I tried to think of what Glory would do. Of what Lacunae would do. Heck, what LittlePip would do. "Just take a deep breath, Homage. What happened?"

It took Homage a few seconds to pull herself together. "I got reports of an attack on the Steel Ranger base on the Bucklyn Cross. I... I was keeping an eye out for trouble, with all the fighting between the Steel Rangers and Applejack's Rangers. That's when I saw this..."

She touched some keys, and one of the screens next to me swapped from clouds to a huge segment of rusty suspension bridge still hanging from its tower in the middle of a river. The camera zoomed in, and I immediately saw LittlePip in her thrashed utility barding; wow, she really needed a replacement. There was Calamity and Velvet... I thought I saw another, but I couldn't be sure from this distance. There were a number of ponies pointing a lot of firepower at her.

Then suddenly everypony was shooting! The Rangers had clear numbers on their side, but in five minutes they were decimated. Two actually leapt into the water to get away... I had no idea if or how long they'd survive after a fall like that! And just like that, the shooting was done. LittlePip had completely cleaned out the Steel Ranger base. I saw Calamity picking through one of the buildings as LittlePip sat there being comforted by Velvet Remedy.

"Okay... well... something must have happened! Somepony shot and... LittlePip defended herself! She wouldn't just take over a Ranger base like that without good reason," I said as I looked at Homage.

"Wouldn't she? The Steel Rangers attacked her home. They attacked Stable 29, where the Applejack's Rangers have been gathering. Maybe she thought that they were loyalists and were fair game," Homage said, sniffing as she rubbed her eyes. "The only report I've gotten on that attack was a distress call they sent out, saying that LittlePip demanded a water talisman. Then it was shooting and screaming. I'm trying to get some sort of... something to explain what she did."

"There had to be a reason, Homage. She wouldn't just turn Reaper on ponies, even enemies." I hadn't seen a lot of power armor or the like in that fight. Had somepony pulled a trigger by accident? Or had LittlePip decided to cut to the chase?"

"I know. I know. I'm looking for one. I'm looking so hard for one," Homage said, pulling herself together as she typed more keys. "But as bad as that was... it was nothing... nothing compared to this."

The screen changed. The view slowly panned across a village, then zoomed in. There was the Sky Bandit parked beside some buildings. I could imagine Homage, frowning in worry as she worked the controls and watched LittlePip from afar for trouble or for some explanation for the attack. Who had shot first? Was LittlePip okay? There were two windows in the Qwik-Kare building the camera was focused on; I could see two older ponies and a younger mare around a table. It was hard to make out specifics past that.

Then there was LittlePip in the window facing the other three. I hadn't known LittlePip long or

well. She was a good pony. Serious, but true to making the Wasteland a better place. The LittlePip I saw now was not that mare. Fury was etched in every line of her face. She gazed at the three with a look of profound rage that made me watch in horror. The unicorn mare at the table tried to magically fling a knife... a knife... at LittlePip. Then all three were smashed against the wall by the little mare's incredible telekinesis.

Dangling by the throat, the older stallion kicked over the table. There was a gun or something strapped to the bottom. The mare levitated the table, turned it towards the small unicorn, and fired, but she either missed or else LittlePip was at the point of not caring if she were shot or not. The three writhed as she slowly crushed them to the wall. The stallion pointed a hoof.

Then LittlePip raised a rifle... and lit them on fire with burning bullets.

I think if I had had a heart, it would have stopped.

I just watched. No... no no no... she turned and walked out, leaving the crushed and burning ponies behind her as she strode into the night like she was bringing all of Hell with her. As she departed, her telekinesis vanished and the guards dropped to the floor, mercifully out of sight below the windowsill... until one of the mares flopped back into view, struggling to put herself out for a few agonizing seconds. Then she lay still at last.

In the street was a pony... a merchant or something, from the look of his gear. The small unicorn assaulted him, her mouth screaming something. Then he immediately swayed and started vomiting.

And then LittlePip went on a slaughter.

The fight with the Steel Rangers had been a fight... albeit a short and terrible one. This wasn't. This was butchery, plain and simple. Only the young were spared, shielded by Velvet Remedy as all who tried to face LittlePip were torn to pieces by flaming bullets. I only had slightly inebriated knowledge of LittlePip in battle... was this how she usually fought? I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen. Finally, the image blacked out. I looked at the stricken Homage and wished there was a way to hug her through the screen. "When?" I asked when I regained the ability to speak.

"Just a few hours ago," she said with a sniff. "I... I can't bear to look back again. Why would she do that? Why would anypony do that?" I could think of a few reasons, but they all applied to ponies more like Psychoshy than LittlePip.

I felt cold inside. Cold and still and dead. "I don't know. I can't... mind control? Blackmail? Maybe she was drugged out of her skull on Stampede? Something... something had to have made her do that?" I couldn't shake the image of her crushing those ponies to the wall. They'd been helpless. Utterly helpless... and she'd *burned* them.

"I don't... I don't think I want to know. I can't tell people what she just did. I can't," Homage said as she shook her head. "I don't want to know the truth. I don't want to imagine a chance that she... Blackjack, she killed everypony! It was just a village. It'd been there forever, never bothering anypony."

I couldn't blame her. "Homage... you have to know. You have to find out, and you need to be the honest voice. Find out why she did this. There has to be a reason. You know that. Find it. And make sure everypony else knows, too." It would be better than sitting there getting twisted up in knots.

Homage rubbed her eyes as she stared at me. "And what if... what if I find out she has broken?"

"You know what," I replied. For a moment she looked at me, stricken as a tear crawled down her cheek. Then she sniffed and nodded once.

"Tell the truth... no matter how bad it hurts," she answered, clenching her eyes shut and nodding her head. "You're right. I need to... to make sure folks know. So they can take care if she has."

I nodded and stared at her. "And Homage... if you find out... if she really has broken... I'll go find the Stable Dweller, and together we'll bring her back to you and not let her go till this is made right again. Okay? I promise you that."

For some reason she looked at me oddly, then broke into a sad smile and laughed softly, "Good one, Blackjack. I think I needed that." She rubbed her eyes as I blinked at her. Huh? "I'll take care of that in a bit. Need to make sure folks don't wonder why DJ Pon3's been crying his eyes out." She sniffed and looked at her controls. "You got MASEBS Thirteen working? What happened?" Then she looked more concerned as she looked at me. "And... what happened to your face?"

"Ugh... long and ugly story. I'll share it with you some other time," I said as I looked away. Funny, mentioning the gauze suddenly tripled its itchiness factor! "As for the tower, there was an Enclave terminal wired into the controls. I don't know what it was doing," I said as I glanced behind me. "The feather head I'm with smashed it to pieces."

"Enclave?" She blinked in confusion, clearly glad to have something to focus on besides what LittlePip had done. "The pegasi? Why would they..." She sighed and frowned, shaking her head. "Mmm... too many mysteries." Welcome to Blackjackville, Homage; population two! "Still... I'll have to look into it... after I find out what happened in Arbu. I've lost contact with four more towers near the Everfree and two more in the southeast. All far from anypony who'd be interested in them."

"Who'd be interested in the towers?" I asked with a frown.

"I don't know. Red Eye, or just high-aiming scavengers, I suppose," Homage said, finally composed. She took a deep breath and gave a wan smile, "Okay. I have a broadcast to do... oh!" She blinked. "Helpinghoof wanted me to tell you something about that wired-up ring you found." I straightened, leaning forward as she lifted a sheet of paper. "He said there wasn't any change in the healing potions..." I deflated a little. "Until Mrs. Ivy had a heart attack. She was brought to the clinic, but he wasn't able to save her. Afterwards though, he checked on the potions. He said there was a slight decrease in their potency. He also heard something... a note."

"Like a scream?" I asked, and Homage blinked and looked at the paper, then nodded.

"Sounds like there's big stuff happening everywhere," Homage said as her ears folded. "All I can do is sit here..." She trailed off. I knew that 'getting sucked onto the mattress' look, and I was seeing it on the face of way too many good ponies!

"And find out about LittlePip. Right? No matter how bad it hurts?" She sighed and nodded, now looking at me firmly. "Take care of yourself, Homage. And let me know about LittlePip. And make sure the Stable Dweller knows too. She might want to help."

Homage gave me the oddest look again. "Ah... yeah... Um... Blackjack?"

I smiled warmly at her as I leaned forward, putting my hooves on the console. "Yes, Homage?"

"LittlePip is th--" And then her lips moved silently before me. I blinked, then looked at my hoof resting on a button marked 'mute' on the console. I looked up and saw her lips moving. I tapped the button, but the damn thing was stuck. I frowned and tapped it repeatedly and looked up with a slightly tense smile. Please let me not have broken one of her M.A.S. towers! Then she gave a tired, slightly sad smile and a little wave before the screen went black.

"LittlePip is... what?" I muttered as I saw Homage walking up to the microphone in a different screen. "LittlePip is the one to worry about? LittlePip is... the really cute one? LittlePip knows the Stable Dweller?" I paused, my eyes widening a moment. "Wait... Could it be...? Could she really?" Then I snorted, laughing. Okay... LittlePip was a lot of things, but the Stable Dweller? The biggest, baddest, bestest mare in the whole wide Wasteland? Come on! She was... small! She blushed explosively and was reduced to baby talk if Homage nibbled on the tip of her ear! She couldn't possibly be the Stable Dweller. Badass, yes, but not her.

I fiddled with the button, trying to unstick it. I only caught the very end of the broadcast. "Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts," DJ Pon3 rasped out. I supposed I could have stopped her then and asked what she meant before she got cut off, but she had things to do and so did I.

"You betcha," I said as I screwed up the side of my face and took the opportunity for a little clandestine scratching before going to find the Reaper duo. Since I was half a Wasteland away from wherever LittlePip was, I'd have to leave that up to her. I still had my own trials to face.

Like... shopping.

\* \* \*

"Wow. I really would have expected this place to be a lot deader," Rampage said as we looked around Megamart. "Didn't Sanguine and Vermilion smash this place trying to draw Blackjack out?" The superstore had a lot more light with a hole punched in the roof. Gun lay on its side beneath the hole, several levers and cables evidence of trying to put it upright. The vendors, however, were swamped with ponies buying and selling ammo, armor, and scrap metal, yelling and hawking their wares back and forth. Apparently the slaughter of the past month hadn't done much to discourage ponies from shopping.

"Actually, we stopped by your stable first, then here. We figured we'd just hit everywhere you'd been till we found something you cared about," Psychoshy said as she floated above the crowd. "Of course, the longer things took, the more pissy that griffin became, and the more desperate Sanguine got."

"Desperation. Mother of atrocity," Rampage remarked.

A herd of a half dozen robed zebra passed silently by. Two goats bleated counteroffers to a pony selling barrels of scrap metal. A posh Society unicorn painstakingly accounted for every cap's worth of her produce while her shabby servants made sure everypony stayed back. "Vermilion and his boys took out the turrets and blew out the roof. Then they flew around and shot the place up for a few minutes, left, and waited for you to come running."

Boo was nearly grafted to my side. Clearly, crowds and her were not a good mix. I'd put another

bag over her head and tied the straps to my barding. I may have gotten a few odd looks, but other ponies had more pressing issues. "Really... I'm astonished they let you in here."

Then a mottled green mare launched herself out of the crowd to tackle Psychoshy. The pegasus nimbly flipped backwards in the air, but the green mare clung to her tenaciously. "Murderer!" bellowed Keystone. The shoppers in our immediate area backed away, but immediately there were bets being placed.

"Fifty caps on Psycho," Rampage said, and then nudged me. "Hey, Blackjack? Spot me fifty bottlecaps." I didn't respond as I watched Psycho flip upside down and somehow slam the other mare back into the ground with a crash. Keystone still didn't let go though, and they rolled back and forth. The yellow pegasus smashed the back of her head repeatedly into the earth pony's face. Keystone bit on Psychoshy's ear, drawing blood as the Reaper thrashed. I was sure that, any second, Psychoshy's ear was going to tear completely off.

"Enough!" yelled a familiar voice, and the crowd parted to admit Bottlecap. The mare had swapped her store uniform for blue combat armor; her battle saddle had two automatic shotguns. Suddenly, the fight was a lot less interesting for ponies down range. More security ponies came out of the woodwork. Still the pair continued to struggle.

So Bottlecap shot them.

I very nearly had Duty and Sacrifice out before I had three sets of guns on me. I froze, partly out of survival instinct and partly because the rapid fire barking hadn't reduced the pair to bloody sludge. Instead the two parted, shielding their bodies as well as they could. Small cloth beanbags lay scattered around them as they yelped and curled up. I returned the revolvers to my holsters.

"What's the big idea?" Psychoshy bawled as she pointed at the limping green mare rising to her hooves. Even in combat armor, I bet those bags had to sting. "She assaults me and now you shoot me? I thought this was a place of business!" she said as she pulled herself to her hooves.

"Remember when you attacked us? We do," Bottlecap replied. "You and that ghoul you were with. I lost three good employees and one hell of a piece of equipment in your attack. Why shouldn't I switch to flechettes?"

"She was a mercenary," I blurted, drawing a surprised look from the yellow mare. "Sanguine hired her. She's got caps to spend." I gave a slack smile. "Business. Trade saving the Wasteland... all that?"

Clearly, both were stunned by my defense of Psychoshy. Bottlecap recovered first. "Blackjack. Glory was able to save you after all." She stared into my eyes for a moment, then shivered and looked away. Her gaze returned to the yellow pegasus. "Are you saying she's with you?"

"It's something like that," I said quickly. "She was just working for Sanguine. It's something Reapers do. You wouldn't hold that against her. Not when she has caps to trade."

Bottlecap pressed her lips together as she glowered at the pegasus. "Fine. She can stay and pay like everypony else."

"But... you mean I got to pay?" Psychoshy scoffed. "Reapers don't pay." The sudden cocking of

several automatic shotguns gave a pretty convincing counter argument.

Bottlecap smirked with evident satisfaction. "Yeah. You do. New times. I can't count on Big Daddy to keep trouble in line, so now you get to pay the same as everypony else. Don't like it? Leave," Bottlecap replied sharply. I smiled, shaking my head, and received a sharp look. "Something funny?"

"Hey, I pay my bills," I replied, lifting my hooves. "Just had a talk about the morality of thug economics on our way here. That's all." She relaxed a bit at that and even smiled.

"Well there goes the neighborhood," Rampage sighed. "Steel Ranger toys getting blown up. Reapers actually having to pay! What's next? Enclave actually doing something productive? Alicorns with personality? Sunny days? What's the world coming to?"

"These are interesting times," Bottlecap said as she looked around. "Never seen business like this, though. You'd think the attack would have put ponies off, but we've got more folks coming in all the time. Those Harbingers are swapping loads of fresh armaments and old food stores for information and followers. And yesterday we got a boat from Zanzebra landing at the boardwalk."

"Harbingers?" I said with a frown.

"Oh yeah. You've got to have seen them around. Green banners with black towers? 'Hoofington Rises'? They say that soon the city's going to open up and start a new age. They've found so much stuff that folks are saying there's got to be something to it." She looked at Psychoshy and Keystone. "Let her shop. If she starts anything, turn her into a pincushion." The mottled green mare nodded once. Bottlecap looked at Rampage. "Am I going to have to worry about you too?"

"I'm just shopping. Was thinking of picking up a few value packs of Mint-als and Med-X. Is there a sale going on?" she asked with a smile. Bottlecap looked at her a little bit longer, then nodded her head in the direction of the clinic. The young Reaper saluted and trotted away with an angry, confused Psychoshy.

Bottlecap looked at Boo quizzically, but then shook her head and gestured for me to move to the side towards her office. Once we were out of the noise, I took the bag off and she blinked and shook her head. "Do I want to know?" Bottlecap asked as Boo started to explore the office.

"Probably not," I replied.

"You know that that cult is looking for you, right?" the yellow mare said as she looked at me in concern.

"Yup, it's Deus and the bounty hunters all over again," I replied with a sigh. I watched Boo wander into the office bathroom. Good. She was finally figuring out where to do her business.

Bottlecap looked nervous, glancing over her shoulder. "It's a lot worse than that. Deus's bounty hunters were generally poor and poorly armed. The biggest threat to you was Deus himself. These cultists, though, are coming up with ordinance I've rarely seen before. Anti-machine rifles and marksporny carbines that are brand new, out-of-the-crate quality. They're all wearing Equestrian Army combat armor and they've got ample food stores."

"But they're just... desperate ponies, right?" I asked with a nervous glance at the door.

"For now, but the more powerful they become, the better the quality of their fighters and the bigger a threat they are. It's hard to pass up free food and protection. They're even giving it away for information on you." Bottlecap sighed. "They haven't actually gotten smart enough to verify the info... yet. I mean, everypony knows they'll turn over ridiculous amounts of goods for a rumor you're out east or west or somewhere between," Bottlecap said before she chewed her lip. "Or else they've got so much they can just throw it all away for the smallest rumor."

Yick, I sure didn't like that possibility. "How many? Do they have a leader?"

"Dozens, at least. They're following somepony called the Prophet... no clue who that actually is. They're all broken up into cells. They're absorbing a lot of the newcomers to the city... but there's a massive creepy vibe to them. Most of them give food and care, but others are really well-armed and looking for you. They call themselves Seekers. They want your PipBuck big time."

"Doesn't matter. It doesn't work without a Ministry Mare's descendant." But I frowned. They weren't looking for one of those, so... did that mean that they already had somepony related to the Ministry Mares?

Bottlecap shrugged. "Whatever. They want your PipBuck really bad. I'm glad you ditched it somewhere," she said as she looked at my hoof. I decided not to inform her that Glory had rewired it inside my leg.

"So is me being here going to be a problem?" I asked nervously.

"No. The Finders are absorbing a lot of these new ponies too. And while we may not be as good as these cultists are at finding treasures, we are making quite a haul the last few weeks. Found some kind of bunker facility up north. Should be loaded with goodies," she said as she rubbed her hooves together in glee.

"Bottlecap, that's my stable!" I cried, wiping the glee off her face. I mean really, did she honestly plan to loot my home? That was just... "Besides, it's filled tight with poison gas and raider plague." And soon Steel Rangers as well.

"Oh. I... huh..." She rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "Well... I guess I'll tell Digger's crew to move on to picking over the bunkers the Rangers left behind at Ironmare. Funny, he didn't say it looked like a stable but... eh... I guess one bunker looks like another to a professional scavenger." She coughed, then sighed. "Look... Blackjack. Could I ask you a favor?"

I arched a brow. "Sure. Asking is always free."

"The Finders really need Paradise Mall back," she said as she looked at a city map on the wall. A big red circle had been drawn on the east side. "You got the Eggheads, Scrapyard, Rocket Town, Meatlocker, and now even the Enclave out east, and we have zero presence there since Usury lost the mall to Red Eye's forces. Most of his troops are going back to the Everfree region, but there are some still holding onto the mall and Keeper really needs them beaten back. They're being commanded by a griffin named Vermilion."

"I've met him," I said absently, looking at the map as I rubbed my right temple. My head was running slipshod through memories of that night, my meeting with Usury, and where I needed to go next. "Well, I'll think about it; I have no problem helping the Finders so long as you ban that whole slavery

thing.” My eyes danced over the east side of the map, drawn more and more to one section. Why was it so hard to focus? My eyes finally locked on a green X north of Paradise marked ‘Meatlocker’. It was drawn over a square labeled ‘Hoofington General Hospital’. And just north of that? ‘Hightower Jail’.

“What do you know about this place?”

“Hightower? Used to be a prison before the bombs fell. Don’t let the name fool you, it’s not a little ‘jail’ but a serious high security prison. Today, it’s a huge feral ghoulish nest. A balefire missile fell on it but malfunctioned. Instead of leveling the place, it just irradiated it. Or, heck, maybe that’s what it was supposed to do. All the prisoners died slow. Most of the sane ghouls set up shop to the south in Meatlocker, the old city hospital before the Fluttershy clinic was built in the reconstruction. You get a few ghouls that try to scavenge there but...” She shrugged.

“Probably don’t last too long,” I replied. “Well, I just have to get flown on top, and then I’ll be on my way. There’s got to be a way in from above, right?” I said with a grin... one she didn’t share. I groaned, folded my forelegs on the desk, and buried my face in them. “What? What is it?” Mutant cyber attack dogs? Ghoul ninja guards? Spectral gangsters?

“Well, the prison’s been on lockdown for two centuries. There’re beam turrets all over the roof and walls to prevent jailbreaks, plus sentry robots. They’ve got some sort of repair talisman thingy, so even if you disable them, they’ll just fix themselves. It’s the other reason why nopony scavenges there. You’d have to break in and lift the lockdown to get anywhere.”

I looked at her for one long moment as my eyelid started to twitch before I waved my hoof at her, as if I could just ward away what she’d just told me. “No! No, I just broke into one death trap! There were killer trees and magic blue death weeds. It had flesh stripping poison gas! And mutating gunk and there was a robot! A giant killer robot with this rainbow beam cannon and this grenade launcher that hosed exploding death at me. No! I just want to fly to the top, go inside, and take it easy.”

She stared at me a moment, then gave a wan smile. “Your life is so much more interesting than mine, Blackjack.”

“Yeah! A life. And I’d like to keep it. I’ve lost one already. Are you honestly telling me I have to break into another place where everything is trying to kill me? No! I refuse! I protest! There is no way I can be expected to do this twice... no wait... three times if I count the tunnels. Four if I count 99.” I groaned as I paced back and forth. “Goddesses, what is it going to be this time? Am I going to lose the other half of me? Become Blackjack the Robopony? Securitron? Am I going to become ‘a cyber ghoulish unicorn Reaper what the fuck’?!” I cried as I threw my hooves in the air. “And my friends... I almost lost Scotch Tape the last time. And Glory got turned into Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash!” I said as I pointed at her.

“Rainbow Dash?” she asked flatly, as if wondering whether I’d completely lost it. It was fair to say I was rather close to listening to the Dealer, tossing EC-1101 into the river, and trotting out west to help LittlePip or the Stable Dweller.

Then we heard a wet gulping noise and both turned to see Boo with her head in the toilet bowl. Slowly, we looked back at each other, and I felt myself going red. “What?” I asked, gesturing at the pale pony with a hoof. “How else is she supposed to get a drink?”

“I should probably get back to the floor. I just wanted to warn you... um... good luck,” Bottlecap said with a forced smile, then turned and trotted rapidly from the office. I groaned and buried my face in

my crossed hooves on the desk. Again... I was going to have to break into an armored building of death... *again*... just to find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go.

Boo trotted over and gave my uncovered cheek a toilet-bowl-fresh nuzzle. I sighed and muttered, "Thanks Boo. Thanks a lot." And then I got to thinking of what I'd need.

\* \* \*

"So you're going to Hightower? Why? There's nothing in Hightower but a whole lot of ghouls," Psychoshy said as we made our way back towards the medical center. Ever since I'd filled Rampage in, the pegasus had proven incredibly curious. "I mean, I can understand it if you're suicidal, but if that's the case I'd be happy to spare you the trouble," the mare said with a wide grin as we trotted along.

"Thanks, but I swore off suicide," I replied, wondering just how Spike was doing at the moment. Being all alone in his cave... Was he watching when LittlePip slaughtered that town? I'd tried to tune in to the radio show, but so far all I'd heard was music and announcements of other things happening abroad. Had he had any better luck finding ponies to bear the Elements of Harmony? I kept coming up empty-hooved every time I even thought about it. Priest would have been a shoo-in for kindness... if he wasn't dead. Could Bottlecap have been honesty... or was it generosity? Well, there was always *Charity* as a candidate for that spot, too...

Ugh... saving the world was hard.

We'd picked up all the staples we'd needed. I'd traded what P-21 and I had looted from Hippocratic Research and what we'd picked up in the MASEBS tower for Med-X, Rad-X, RadAway, Fixer, fresh food, and ammunition. I'd thought about swapping Duty and Sacrifice, but until my magic could handle bigger weapons, the twin revolvers were my best bet. Since I'd shredded my Reaper barding getting free, I'd bought the best armor I could find: some old combat armor, complete with helmet.

I'd bought Boo a fresh, plague-free apple; I doubted I'd ever trust fresh produce again myself. It'd been a hundred caps, but the look on the pale mare's face had been worth it. She still trotted along with a blissful look on her face. I'd tried to put barding on her, but she'd freaked out so badly in the store that I'd given it up and bought her a carrot instead.

I wished I could get more apples for Boo. And something to help revert Glory.

I really wished I could get my hooves on some radiation suits.

I really, really wished I could peel this gauze off and scratch these skin grafts.

My wish list was getting kinda full, wasn't it?

"So if you're not going for a nasty ghoulfication, why go? Hightower isn't like the Core. I doubt you're going to find any crotch-moistening salvage or weapons there," Psychoshy said as she tapped her spiked horseshoes together, something that provided her immense amusement and me incredible annoyance. The two were probably related.

"Blackjack has her reasons," Rampage said as she trotted along in her reinforced metal armor. It wasn't nearly as fancy as the spiked, articulated set that'd been blown apart when she detonated outside Hippocratic Research, but it had the attribute she required the most: mass. She'd kept her distance from the zebras the entire time we'd been there, and they'd stayed back from the striped young mare. Still,

she spoke in Zebra for half an hour after we left, and I suspected it wasn't anything nice.

"And those are?" Psychoshy pressed as she flew over my head. Even in the feeble daylight, the clouds still looked particularly heavy and swollen. I just wanted it to rain... even as depressing and uncomfortable as that was, the rain would cut this muggy pressure that was making my ears ache. I wondered if the clouds were just going to fall out of the sky and cover us all.

"You remember EC-1101?" I asked as I looked up at her. She frowned but nodded. "The program is trying to find certain ponies. Really important ponies centuries ago. I want to find out where those ponies are and what they did. And the program says 'go to Hightower and find where to go next.' So that's why I have to go."

She flew sideways, keeping pace with me. "That's it? That's your reason for trotting all over the place? You're just going where the program is telling you to go? That's crazy! You're crazy! Has it occurred to you that the program is trying to get you killed?" she asked, then pointed at Rampage. "And you're actually helping her with this, Rampage?"

"Well, she does take me to some pretty interesting places," Rampage replied. "You should have seen the screaming room." Psychoshy mouthed the words 'screaming room'. Then Rampage grinned up at the yellow mare. "A much better question, Psycho, is why, now that you know why Blackjack's trotting all over the Wasteland, are *you* still following *us*?"

Psychoshy's pupils shrunk. "Oh fuck..." She clutched the sides of her head, ignoring the spiked shoes dimpling her hide. "It's infectious, isn't it? That's why all of you follow her. She infects you with her crazy suicidal stupid thoughts and you follow her into places that you know will get you killed."

"Well, that's P-21's most popular theory," Rampage replied. Boo stopped short, her eyes wide as her ears swiveled. I stopped too, but I couldn't see any bars, red or otherwise. "Personally, I think that she's got some kind of freaky mind control powers that constantly broadcast 'this is a good idea'."

"Isn't the heroine embarking on her noble quest to save the city supposed to get a little respect?" I asked in annoyance. The pair simply stared at me a moment, then both flopped on the ground, laughing outrageously. "No respect at all." I snorted and lowered my head sullenly.

The round buzzed so close past me that it had to have been in flight before I moved. I hit the ground as two more zipped through the air above me. Boo flattened herself to the ground in fright.

Okay, snipers outside the range of the E.F.S.? I really didn't like that one bit.

"What the fuck? Is somepony shooting at us?" Psychoshy said as she crawled away towards the edge of the road.

"I dunno," Rampage said as she rose. Instantly there were three pings made by her metal armor and she jerked. "Yup!" she gagged, puking blood as she grinned. Now I could see the red bars, four in the front and four to the south. More rounds slammed into the Reaper, hitting so hard she staggered back a few steps. "Anti-machine rifles... Fuck!" Her regeneration was keeping up with the brutal onslaught, but sooner or later they'd figure out that they were blasting a pony who couldn't die. The rest of us weren't so lucky.

We were dead if we stayed here. The two teams of four were advancing slowly and carefully,

firing wild sprays of automatic rifle fire, the kind of fire of somepony not shy about sharing five millimeter ammunition. Rampage was a decent decoy, but even she couldn't protect us against that.

To the north was the gravel pit where I'd fought the radscorpions a lifetime ago; it was the only cover in the place, but it was also a box. I really didn't want to go inside it.

A five millimeter round pinged off my helmet, making the choice for me. Psychoshy crawled like an earth pony into the pit, and Boo was right beside me as I wiggled my way to cover. If they surrounded it, they'd be able to chew us to pieces or pin us down. I looked at the crushers, belts, steam shovel, and heaps of gravel. Not a lot of *protection*. The north and west sides were almost sheer and the east side was sheer and occupied by a giant muddy pit. I could see the radscorpion hole in the north face, but that would be a spot for a last stand.

Rampage trotted down after us with a half dozen holes punched through her armor. The striped young mare spat out a huge bullet; definitely a fifty caliber anti-machine round. Psychoshy took one look at her and shuddered. I swallowed; we didn't have very long. "Okay. Here is what we need to do. They're after me. I'll put Boo somewhere safe and take cover in the cabin of the steam shovel and make sure they see me. Rampage, you take care of the ponies with the carbines. Psychoshy, you take out the ponies with the AM rifles."

"They put holes in my brand new used armor," Rampage said, making a face. "And I think I've got one of those bullets lodged in my spleen, so I'm in a real bad mood now." She looked at me, pulled out a strapped injector from her bags, and slapped it on her foreleg. "Mmm... Ragey goodness..." And then she ran off with a laugh.

"You expect me to fight ponies armed with guns that shoot that?" Psychoshy asked, pointing at the glistening bullet Rampage had spat into the dirt.

"No. I expect you to wait till they're about to snipe my head and then attack them from behind," I replied flatly as I started for the steam shovel. I needed some place for Boo that was safe. I looked at the metal scoop and carefully lifted her into it. "Stay Boo... stay..." The pale mare blinked at me, and I gently pushed her back down out of sight.

"Oh, well that's different," Psychoshy said, and then gave a nasty grin. "What if I just let them take the shot?"

I looked at her. "Are you telling me you're going to let somepony else kill me while you just hover there?" The yellow pegasus frowned as she thought about that, and I turned and clambered up into the steam shovel cabin. I looked down at Boo and tried to give her a comforting smile.

"It's crazy. Infectious freaking crazy. That's what it is," Psychoshy grumbled as she snapped her wings and darted for the trees to the north.

I'd let the murderess take care of the details. I pulled out Duty and Sacrifice, telekinetically loaded them, and got ready. I had a few advantages; the back of the steam shovel pointed south, so anypony coming after me would need to circle around to get a clear shot. Rampage would deal with any in the pit. Psychoshy would bag the snipers. All I had to do was survive... and hope my little mind game with the pegasus paid off. My E.F.S. saw the red bars moving closer and closer, but much too spread out.

I popped out around the corner and spotted a mare moving down into the gravel pit, an earth pony in green camouflage combat armor. She had her eyes down, looking at her unstable footing. Then she raised her head, and I saw the green face of a mare not much older than Scotch Tape. Her eyes met mine; she wasn't a killer. Just some mare who'd put on the barding and the battle saddle, then strapped two carbines to it and came after my head. She stared right at me; I gave her at least two seconds as I raised the revolvers and sighted along the barrels.

Two seconds was an eternity she let slip by. Then I fired; the range was such that I seriously doubted I could kill her. Not this far away with revolvers. Then the two heavy rounds struck her cheekbones and her head vanished in a spray of red, green, and white. All that fancy armor and weaponry thudded to the ground in a heap.

I stared at the smoking barrels and then at the heap lying at the base of the slope. "Sorry kid," I muttered. She'd wanted me dead; I hadn't wanted the same.

My shot had given away my position, and they started to strafe the steam shovel cab as I drew back. Every now and then, the rusted metal let out a resounding 'pong' as the AM rifles took a shot, the bullets punching through the metal and peppering me with spall and other metal fragments. I just kept my eyes on the E.F.S. One drew close around the west side of the cab, and I stuck my hoof out and back in. Two metallic booms sounded out, ringing the cab like a bell. I leaned out and looked down at the gray old buck. His jaws tightened on the bit, but he was too close. The rifle rounds sparked off the rusty metal around me.

I pointed the pair of revolvers far more accurately; I didn't even need S.A.T.S. Duty boomed and tore off the left side of his face. He fell to the ground, screaming. I felt a twinge beneath my bandages. A second later, Sacrifice punched through his barding and into his chest, silencing him.

It was a second too long. There was a boom, and I was slammed almost completely out the empty front windows of the steam shovel cab by the impact of the fifty caliber round. Then my barding started to sizzle and smoke as the incendiary round burst into flame. It was like a searing brand in my chest, but I didn't have any time to deal with it.

"Die, motherfucka! Die die die!" screamed a ganger with way too much ordinance as he raced around the front of the steam shovel and strafed the cab. Tears ran down my face and smoke obscured my vision. Another armored mare was crawling up into the east side of the cab, this one with a heavy revolver of her own, teeth clenched on the grip.

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and carefully aimed. Time returned as the pistols fired in unison. Duty tore into the ganger dancing like an idiot in the front. He stopped dancing when one round punched between the plates on left foreleg and shattered the joint. He sprawled on his face in the dirt, and the second round ripped into his gut. He began to scream as he lay there. Sacrifice's first shot missed the mare. The second tore through her neck like a dragon's fang. She jerked, firing wildly in the few seconds she had; her bullets hit my chest like hoofblows, but the armor stopped them. I couldn't risk a lucky shot, though. Both revolvers blasted her fierce and desperate tallow-colored eyes into a memory.

Only then did I take a moment to pop out my fingers and pry the enchanted incendiary round from my chest plate. I tossed it out the window. Four down. Eight to go. Things were looking up!

Then a glowing grenade was tossed around the corner and into the cab. I tried to throw it out the east door as I ignominiously flopped out the west. My magic wasn't able to manage two pistols and the

grenade while I spilled out, though, and since I hadn't turned into an alicorn in the last few minutes, gravity had me land square on my head as the grenade went off. I sat up and then flipped over as I tried to pull myself to my hooves.

The flop saved my head, again. Another sizzling incendiary round fizzled against the side of the cab as I struggled to my hooves. I saw two crumpled mares where Rampage had been hard at work, but as I swayed on my hooves, another pony came racing around the corner, carbines blasting. Between the mare in front of me, guns chewing into my armor as her horn levitated another grenade off her bandoleer, and the AM rifle sniper blasting chunks out of the floor of the gravel pit around me, it wasn't looking pretty. I spotted Rampage far over on the south lip of the pit, smashing a Seeker. Psychoshy hovered over to the west, then divebombed into the trees.

Only one thing to do. I charged into the carbine mare's fire, making the brownish-yellow unicorn's eyes widen in shock as I closed the distance. She dropped the grenade back onto her belt as she backpedaled and tried to keep the fire on me, while her magic drew two combat knives. I tried to fire, then cursed as the hammers landed on spent casings. Five chambers. Five. Not six.

The mare's eyes widened in excitement as her carbines chewed into my armor. Until I flung both revolvers in her face. An earth pony wouldn't have moved; there was no way my horn could actually throw something hard enough to really injure her. But the brown mare flinched instinctively, jerking back and spraying above my bleeding neck. I sprang before she could recover and hugged her neck with my forelegs as the rest of my body swung beneath her.

I yanked her down face to face, taking the momentary cover she offered from the sniper. There was a sharp grating as she tried to saw and cut her way through my legs gripping her neck. She'd need something a lot more substantial than a combat knife for that, though. I stared into her eyes, and I felt an anger building inside me.

"Why?" I asked as I stared into her wide eyes. She grinned in anticipation. "Why are trying to kill me?"

"I have to. You have to die so Equestria can live!" she yelled in my face. "It's for Equestria's future. My future! A better tomorrow!" Maybe it was what I'd seen LittlePip do. Maybe it was the fact that I kept trying to help ponies who tried to kill me. It was probably the knife that had found a gap in my armor's side and was working its way between the ceramic plates.

I was sick of being a good pony.

"You don't get a tomorrow!" I shouted as I kicked out with all four legs, sending her flying as my horn glowed. She landed in a roll, clearly used to fighting, and tumbled even further away before rising to her hooves. She pulled the apple grenade from her combat armor with her magic.

I lifted the glowing pin I'd pulled when I'd kicked her away.

The grenade went off next to her face, and she went down in a heap. I stared at her, moving slowly as I looked at the bloody mound. I glanced around, but couldn't see any more red bars. I lifted the twin revolvers, shook out the spent casings, and reloaded them. I really hoped Psychoshy had taken out all the snipers and that one wasn't lining up a headshot on me as I walked towards the mare. The left side of her face was ground meat, and she gasped for breath as she looked up at me.

"She tried to kill you, Blackjack," Dealer rasped at my left. His head was bowed, hiding his face as he shuffled his cards. "Rampage was wrong. It doesn't matter how good you are. It doesn't matter how hard you try. They'll always think killing is the right thing to do. And they'll keep trying to do it."

She started making little hitching noises in her throat as I stared down at her. I thought of LittlePip coldly slaying those ponies in that village. What had pushed her across the line? Had she realized that it didn't matter how hard you tried, and that killing was just easier?

I pointed Sacrifice at the mare's head. The right side of her mouth curled upwards a little.

"Just pull the trigger, Blackjack. Move on. She's dead anyway," he rasped. It would be so easy. Merciful. I caught Rampage staring at me as I stood there. *Be kind...* Death would be a kindness. *Do better...* The Hoof would be better without her. Platitudes couldn't help me anymore. Spare her and she'd just try and kill me again. Stop trying. Stop pretending to be Security. I couldn't save ponies. Not really... I couldn't do anything except give her an end to her pain...

*You take the hard road no matter how damn much it hurts you. Every single time I think you're going to do what's wrong and easy, you surprise me.*

I dropped Sacrifice back into my holster and knelt beside the gasping mare. Fortunately, I had an obscene amount of chems on me and jabbed her immediately with some Med-X. Then I lifted a vial of Bonesaw's own personal healing potion to her lips. "Drink. Come on... drink," I said, holding her head in my hooves as I dribbled the fresh healing potion into her lips. Finally, she swallowed once and coughed.

"Why?" she asked in a raspy whisper as blood flowed thick and red from her nostrils. "Why save me?"

"Shut up and drink," I said sharply. But she wasn't; she just coughed it up. Her eye kept following me, though. "Drink so you have a tomorrow, damn it! I can at least give you a chance!" The potion dribbled onto the dirt. "At least tell me your name!" I yelled.

Slowly, her eye relaxed. The tiny curl in the corner of her mouth remained. My generous second chance lasted all of ten seconds. My horn dropped the vial, the rest of the purple potion trickling into the dirt. My chest burned, the gunshot wounds throbbed, and my E.F.S. was flashing all kinds of warnings and information that didn't mean anything to me as I slowly laid her down again.

Psychoshy landed next to Rampage, staring at me in confusion. "Is she... like... upset? I mean... she was trying to kill her." I saw her expression turn almost to one of horror. "That's... that's crazy. Like... really crazy."

"Blackjack's... complicated," the striped pony replied softly. Boo wiggled out of the scoop and trotted over to join us. She sat, blinking in confusion as she looked at me.

I sniffed and turned the unicorn's head so her mutilated face was hidden. "I just... like second chances. You screw up... make it good. Do it right. Do better..." I made sure her eye was closed. If I pretended really hard I could almost make myself believe she was simply asleep. "Someday... I hope I figure out how to do it myself."

\* \* \*

One good thing about fighting these Harbingers: they had great stuff, and so much of it that I

couldn't carry it all. While the weapons were new, they'd been badly mistreated; I found one carbine that looked like somepony had used it to mix up soup! I repaired my armor as well as I could; even I could swap out damaged plates. When I was finished, I had one anti-machine rifle slung across my back, a couple apple grenades, and a second suit of combat armor. The food I kept; maybe Glory could test it for mind control drugs. The rest was stashed in the cab of the steam shovel.

Then, much to the complete bafflement of Psychoshy, I gathered up the bodies of the ponies I'd killed and put them into the hole the Radscorpions had used as a nest. The brown mare I'd tried to save was put in last. She had a slice of bread for a cutie mark. What had her name been? Had she been a ganger? A Reaper? Had she lived in a village I'd failed to save? Had she come from some distant place, lured by the promise of a better tomorrow? Family? Friends? Children? She'd known how to fight; she'd been better with her battle saddle than I was with mine.

She'd tried to kill me. I'd killed her. That wasn't my fault... but damn how I wish there'd been some better way.

After laying her on top, I backed away and floated two grenades over the rock face. When they were wedged in place, I flicked away the tabs and ran. The two exploded, and a moment later a chunk of the face tumbled into the hole. I looked on as the dust swirled and stilled. There was no sign at all that anything lay beneath the rubble. The four watched me, Boo in confusion, Rampage in concern, and Psychoshy in wariness.

And the Dealer? His pale eyes held nothing but pity.

"Come on. Let's go. P-21's waiting," I said as I turned and headed for the slope to the south. The gray and yellow rocks lay behind me, now still as the bodies they interred. A thousand years from now, maybe they'd be unearthed. Hopefully... in a better tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Loaded down with the mother of all rifles--seriously, any bigger than the IF-100 Thunderhoof and we'd be getting into Deus autocannon territory--we trotted our way back towards the medical center as rapidly as we could. The ponies at the entrance gave us a pass through at once. I spotted Splendid and Archie talking off to the side, and they waved me over.

I paused to pass Rampage the Med-X and Fixer. "Take this up to Glory, please?"

"Aw, do I have to? I was thinking of seeing if I could make myself so numb that my legs would turn to jelly. That's a pretty fun sensation." I gave her a firm look. I just wasn't in the mood for jokes. She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Serious Blackjack is no fun. Alright, I'll get it to her." She snorted as she trotted for the stairs. "You'd think there was a well-armed cult of fanatics out to kill you, or something." Psychoshy went with her. Boo, as usual, stayed close by my side.

Archie looked at me and flushed at once, but Splendid just looked... well... splendid. The blue-maned unicorn brushed his coiffure back and gave me a look that weeks ago would have turned my insides all buttery. Instead, his look made my insides twinge reflexively, and I gave a polite yet firm smile back. His own smile slipped a little, then shifted to a more friendly and less trying-to-get-me-in-bed look. A smooth operator.

"Blackjack, is everything all right with you and your friends?" he asked calmly as Archie started opening his mouth to speak. The nerdy buck looked sullenly at the handsome stallion. The Eggheads

were restocking their supplies and setting up new beam turrets, and I was glad to see that they were going to try and use this place for healing rather than strip it bare. Of course, if they'd restocked it sooner, it might have saved me a trip to Megamart. From the many strange and sickly ponies hanging around it was clear that there was need. And anything that took recruitment from the Harbingers was good news to me.

"Everything is fine for the moment. How are things with your father?" I replied. Boo yawned, curling up on the floor and taking a little nap.

Splendid sighed and rubbed his nose. "My father had some choice words about the idea of placing him within a stasis pod."

"Didn't he say 'no self-respecting king rules from a fridge' or something to that effect?" Archibald asked as he adjusted his glasses.

Splendid allowed just a little bit of his irritation to show. "Yes, those were the words he chose, Archibald."

"I believe he also included the words 'you featherbrained nincompoop'," Archibald said.

Splendid's eye twitched a little. "Why yes, Archibald. I think he did say that. How silly of me to omit it. Whatever was I thinking?"

"I think you were trying to improve your reproductive odds with Blackjack," Archibald said. "I'm fairly sure that you were going to offer blatant and obvious praise of her appearance, ability, or intellect next." I couldn't help but smile in amusement as one of Splendid's perfectly groomed hairs popped free. "Perhaps you'll suggest some sort of classically romantic venue back in Elysium--"

"Thank you, Archibald!" Splendid said sharply as he whirled on the buck, his lips pulled in a tight grimace. Finally, he sighed and brushed his mane back in place. "Anyway, Father refuses to let us put him in a stasis pod, so it will be interesting if he lasts till the anniversary ball. If he'd just pick a successor..." the prince murmured with a frown.

"There's a ninety-two percent chance he would be assassinated by his successor within twenty-four hours of the announcement," Archibald replied as he pulled a frame with beads on it out of... wait, where had that come from? He rapidly slid the beads back and forth on the frame. "So I estimate only a three percent chance that he would make any such announcement in the near future."

In other words, King Awesome wasn't King Stupid.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you ponies are trying to make something out of this place," I said as I looked towards the emergency room and the ponies receiving treatment.

Splendid sighed. "Yes, well... while I'd hoped to use the technology here to help the Society, the Society having an outpost here in the north is useful. And, of course, there's offering help to ponies who need it."

Archibald nodded. "And this facility will someday be vital if the Collegiate is ever able to produce Steelpony implants in sufficient quantity. If we can, then both the Collegiate and the Society will profit from sales. The surgical robot is likewise quite priceless." He put the strange little beaded frame back...

wait, where had he put it? Was this some kind of freaky egghead magic or something?

I sighed and gave a little smile at the pair. "Well, we're done here. I'll make sure everypony cleans up before we go. And by the way, thanks for taking care of the bodies."

Splendid flushed a little as he said, "Well, it was the right thing to do."

Archibald frowned up at the handsome stallion. "I thought you said that it was because they were starting to stink?"

Splendid smiled at me, and then that stray blue lock popped free again. He put his hoof around Archibald's brown neck and pulled him close. "If you'll excuse us, Blackjack, I need a word with my Collegiate partner in private." And with that he hauled the Collegiate pony away.

I smiled and shook my head. Maybe it was petty of me, but with everything going wrong in my life, I had to admit that seeing another pony flustered was satisfying. Boo immediately rose to her hooves and trotted after me as I headed into the medical center.

I trotted past the atrium and began the climb to the fifteenth floor. I hoped that the next time we visited, the elevators would be working properly. Not that climbing the flights wore me out; a few sapphire chips and I was right as rain. It just took a while to make it all the way to the top. That, and after four flights of stairs, I was carrying the tired Boo the rest of the way up.

I started towards Scotch's room when I trotted by the hospital room I'd found Glory in earlier and noticed a blue bar inside. I smiled, imagining Glory cleaning up her mess. I poked my head into the bathroom. "Say, when'd you get demoted to jani--"

The yellow earth pony inside the bathroom jumped to her hooves and spun around to face me. Her orange mane was a bit straggly, but not really messy. She looked like a pony not long out in the Wasteland. She wore bulky, reinforced leather armor and a respirator, and a camera hung around her neck. She cupped a leather bag in her hooves. "Don't shoot!" she shouted in a drawling accent as she raised her hooves defensively.

"Wasn't planning on it," I replied. She pulled off the respirator. "Who are you and what are you doing up here?"

She licked her lips a little nervously. "Aw, tarnation. I ain't nopony. Call me Chicken... everypony does," she said as she looked at the massive AM gun across my back and gulped. "Just poking round, trying to find stuff out. Ain't been in Hoofington more than a week." She pointed at the multicolored mane clippings lying all over the floor. "Is it true? Is... is she really here?" the mare asked.

"Who?" I asked with a frown. Boo sniffled at the yellow mare's saddlebags. Said mare looked at the pale pony uneasily and pulled an apple out of her bag as an offering. After one chomp, she had made a new friend. Boo licked her lips and gave the mare a friendly headbutt that put Chicken a little at ease.

"Ya know? Her? Rainbow Dash?" she asked with a nervous little smile. "Heard folks down below say she was up here in one of them there stasis pods. Was hopin' ta get me a picture," she said as she lifted a camera from a strap around her neck.

"Oh, yeah." I really did not want to introduce anypony to Glory in her current state. "We found

her in a hidden pod in the back, but she took off for the clouds. Woosh! She sure can fly.” I grinned at the nonplussed mare.

“Wow! That’s... that’s unbelievable,” she said as she swept up some of the clippings with her hoof. “Just a momento... Otherwise they’ll never believe me back in Appleloosa!” she said with a grin. “Did she say where she was going?”

I thought fast. Usually I liked to have a little more time when constructing my fibs. “Uh, yeah. Flying back to the Enclave to buck their butts into gear. You betcha...” She blinked at me in surprise and confusion. “Anyway, sorry you missed her.”

She gaped at me for a second before she shook her head hard. “Me too. I mean... Rainbow Dash. That’s just amazing. Can’t believe I missed her,” she sighed. “I got ta say though, when I came all the way out here, I didn’t know how dangerous this place was. I mean, Appleloosa’s no Tenpony, but sheesh. Wars. Gangs. Crazy cult ponies. Somepony down there mentioned there was some kind of flesh eatin’ plague too.”

“Yeah. It contaminates food. If you eat it you can get sick. Soon you’ll be eating anypony in hoof reach. Be careful if you come across mystery meat or strange food. I’d buy from the Society if you can afford it.”

The mare frowned. “Not them there Volunteer Corps? They seemed like friendly sorts back in Flank, with good, cheap food. You don’t believe them there tales that they’re behind that plague? I hear anypony with feathers can’t catch it.”

“Not if Operative Lighthooves has anything to say about it,” I muttered, and she widened her eyes even more in baffled shock. I sighed and covered my face with a hoof. “Look, there’s all kinds of... stuff... going on here. Just... your safest bet is to get back to Appleloosa as soon as you can. Hoofington’s really dangerous right now.”

She gave a nervous little grin. “Y’all don’t say. Seems like everyplace down here’s a right tangle o’ peril.” She rose to her hooves. “Well, thank ya kindly fer satin’ my curiosity, Miss...”

“Blackjack,” I replied.

She blinked, then smiled. “Oh... right. The Security Mare. Well... I’ll be on my way. Take care o’ yerself,” she said as she hurried past and left the room, turning to trot straight for the stairs down.

I frowned after her, then looked around the hospital room. Even if none of the supplies here were particularly valuable, most of them were useful. She hadn’t touched anything.

Huh. Apparently Appleloosans were a little more twigged than your standard mares. Maybe she’d been too excited by what I told her? First rule in the Wasteland... I stood there for a while as Boo just watched me curiously. Funny, now my mane was every bit as itchy as my face.

\* \* \*

“How is he?” I asked Glory as she carefully peeled away the gauze from my face. I kept my eyes upraised, trying my best not to scratch. Boo had gotten a strip of medical tape stuck on the end of her muzzle and was now wrinkling her nose and doing her best to shake it off.

"Better now," the pegasus said as she peeled the wrappings away from the left side of my face. "He's been on Med-X for years, though. It's not going to be a simple fix."

"I thought you could just mix up some sort of chem cure and woosh, all better!" I said with a hopeful grin. She just gave me one of those patient smiles that said she didn't want to call me stupid. I pouted a little. "Is there some sort of magic spell or something?" I smiled as Boo got the tape off her muzzle... and now shook her hoof in a vain effort to free herself of it.

"Unfortunately, this isn't a fairy tale, Blackjack. You can't just trot up, give a doctor a hundred caps, have them wave a magic wand, and be all better. Now, if it was a recent addiction, sure, I could do something to reduce the physical effects, but he's been on Med-X for so long that his body doesn't know how to function without it. I could flush every trace of the chem from his body right now. Unfortunately, it'd probably kill him."

"And that would be bad," I said softly. The gauze pads were slowly pulled away from my face.

"I'm glad you feel so," P-21 rasped from the doorway. Lacunae pushed two glowing wheelchairs before her as she trotted in, with Rampage and Psychoshy behind her. P-21 looked as bad as you get without an Enervation field sucking the life out of you. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot, his normally steady limbs now twitching. Scotch Tape, in the other wheelchair, looked equally pale and tired but gave me a small smile.

"So... how bad is it?" I asked, steadying myself for the blow. Maybe I could fashion some kind of mask if it was hideous.

"It's fine, Blackjack," P-21 said faintly, then hissed through his teeth and writhed with a groan.

"Are you okay?" I asked, then smacked myself for the stupid question. "I mean, are you going to be okay?"

"I feel like I've been dropped down a couple flights of stairs. I'll be fine. If Glory can do for me what she's done for your face... I think I'll be brand new," he said with a wan smile.

"Really?" I blinked as Lacunae floated a small mirror in front of me. I gaped at my own reflection. Where before my face had been a mangled mess of meat and metal, there was now a smooth white sheet of unblemished, scar-free hide. I stared, pulling at my cheek. Never before had I appreciated looking like a pony. Maybe it was vanity, but as I stared I felt a great weight lift. "Glory! You're a genius! You... you saved my face!" Now we just had to go and--

"I like your face," she replied, and the tired pegasus reached out with her hooves to hold me. Rainbow Dash's lips might not have been quite like Glory's, but at this moment I couldn't care less. Glory's wings popped up behind her; that was new. Was that a Rainbow Dash thing? Finally, she broke the kiss and started to peel off the rest of my bandages. "Besides, I can't even take most of the credit. You've got a regeneration talisman. All I had to do was replace the missing tissue, and it did the rest."

"Sweet. We need to give Blackjack the woodchipper test then," Rampage said with a grin.

"Regeneration, not super freaky come-back-from-a-pile-of-mulch regeneration," Psychoshy snorted.

"You're just scared," Rampage replied, sticking her tongue out at the pegasus. Glory then floated over me and began to scratch my hide vigorously with her hooves. I could have melted like butter then and there.

"Oh, I love you so much," I said as she scratched along my mane.

"I love you too," she replied, landing beside me, and we shared a second round of smooches. Psychoshy made a retching noise as Scotch gave an 'awww' of delight.

"And how are you feeling?" I asked Scotch as I hugged Glory. I could guess just by looking at her. She appeared a little better than her father.

"I got a wicked scar," Scotch said weakly as she lifted her throat and pointed at the shaved strip. "And I'm sick too."

"That's just a postoperative infection. You'll get over it soon," Glory said with an unvoiced 'I hope' that hung in the air. Then the blue mare gave another yawn and slumped against me. "I haven't been this tired since all-nighters at school."

"Don't worry," I replied with a smile. "A few hours of sleep, and then we can be on our way to Hightower, lickety split!" I suddenly became aware that every set of eyes was upon me, and most of them wore expressions that told me that I'd once again said something particularly stupid. "What?"

"Blackjack... we're not in any shape to go anywhere," Glory said firmly. "Scotch Tape and P-21 are both looking at several days' recovery in a non-Enervated environment. Both of them are going to need frequent healing treatments from Lacunae and myself. I'd take them back to Tenpony if I could."

"Sadly, that is quite outside my range," Lacunae replied.

I sat down hard. "But... EC-1101. The glorious quest! We can't just... put it on hold..." What, were they crazy?

"Why not?" Glory asked, and I pulled away to look at her for some sign that she was joking. Instead, her eyes were firm, compassionate, and serious. "Are we being chased by somepony at the moment, or need to chase down somepony before they get away?"

"Well, there are those Harbingers," I said with a little frown and received a blank look in return. "The cult ponies? We saw them outside Flank? They're looking for me and they're packing some serious ordinance. We ran into a pack of their Seekers on the way here."

"But there's no deadline of doom looming in the immediate future? No 'got to get it done or we all die'?" Glory pressed. I shook my head. "Then we can hide out for a while. Go back to Star House where Scotch Tape and P-21 can recover in comfort. Blackjack, we need a rest. If you keep pushing like this, somepony is going to die. It'll just be a couple of days, a week at the most."

"Why not just stay here?" Rampage asked in confusion.

But Scotch Tape shook her head and then coughed. "I'd like to go back to Chapel. I want to make sure Precious is alright."

P-21 looked into my eyes as he said, "It's only a week, Blackjack."

"Only a week? A whole week?!" I said as I jumped to my hooves. "Are you serious? I can't just take a week off." I started pacing back and forth. "Do LittlePip and her friends take a week time out? Does the Stable Dweller? No! I know where I have to go next, and we can't just..."

"Blackjack," P-21 said softly, making me freeze. I slowly looked at him and his tired, pained smile. "I can't keep up with you anymore. I'm sorry. I wish I could, but I can't." He turned and stretched out a trembling hoof, resting it on the arm of Scotch's wheelchair. The green filly reached out and hugged his leg between her hooves. "I want to spend some time with my daughter. I need a few days where I'm not being shot at."

I felt sick as I looked at him. "Come on, P-21... I... You know we can do it. We took on Hippocratic Research and got out alive. We can't just... stop..."

But he shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack, but no." He smiled, and there was no anger or animosity in his eyes. There was a strange kind of calm I hadn't seen in them before. Like he was finally starting to emerge from whatever shadow had consumed him. I couldn't make him follow me now... not after he'd finally started to deal with his problems.

I saw how ragged everypony looked. Even Psychoshy drooped from her recent experiences. Only Rampage smiled at me and shrugged, ready to fight on. Glory smiled as she moved in front of me and gave a worn smile. "Even I could do with a few days' recuperation," the blue pegasus said softly as she walked up to hug me. "And I think you could too."

I looked blankly at her; I wasn't used to hearing Glory say something so ridiculous. "Me? Me? I'm Blackjack the cyberpony. I'm not sleepy. Heck, I feel jazzed up and ready to go."

Glory looked up at me and brushed my mane back between my ears. "Blackjack, when was the last time you slept?" I stared at her; had she really just asked me that? That was on par with a Blackjack question!

"I don't need to sleep anymore, Glory. I've got a power core and legs that keep working no matter what," I said as I jerked back and started to trot back and forth. "I don't sleep, I eat gems and metal, and you don't want to know what comes of that. I'm not tired and I don't need to sleep."

"Blackjack, sleep is for more than just the body. It's for the mind as well," she said as she stepped towards me.

"Your mind, maybe! My brain is just fine with the whole never sleeping again," I said as I pointed to the clock. "Look at what I got done... a whole shopping trip while everypony else was sleeping. And now I don't need to sleep. Why, now I've added a whole third of my life of getting stuff done by not sleeping." I grinned widely as I backed away, staring at them all. Why didn't they get it? I couldn't stop for a week while they recovered. I couldn't even stop for a few hours' sleep.

Glory just looked at me for a long, sad, tired moment. "Will everypony please excuse us? We need to talk alone."

"Shit! Just when things were getting good," Psychoshy said as she put her forehooves on her

hips. "I was so sure that she was going to snap just then."

"Blackjack doesn't do her crazy by halves," Rampage said as she bit Psychoshy's tail and dragged the protesting mare out after her. P-21 just gave me a long, sad smile as Scotch rested her head on his foreleg and closed her eyes. Rather than disturb them, Lacunae levitated both chairs and floated them out in front of her. Then she lifted the baffled-looking Boo and carried her out as well.

The sudden silence was overwhelming. Suddenly I wanted to run. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get to Hightower. I couldn't stop. Stopping would kill me! Glory slowly walked forward and I backed up till my rump hit the pod behind me. I sat down and leaned back, trying to will myself to move away. "Blackjack..."

"What, Glory? What... why are you talking to me like this?" I stammered, glancing at her eyes and looking away. I wanted the Dealer to distract me. "I told you, I don't need to rest, sleep, or stop. I was damaged and now I'm fixed and regenerated and ready to go. I don't see why I need to waste a week of time..."

"Blackjack," she began softly and put out her hooves. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I told you, I don't need to sleep. I am Miss Blackjack the cyberpony, and I don't need to sleep. Sleep won't do me any good anyway. I'll just have somepony else's freaky dreams. Or nightmares. There's no point in stopping to sleep." I rambled on, looking away and blinking. Funny, I couldn't stop blinking.

"Blackjack, when was the last time you slept? Was it back in Chapel?" Glory asked.

"Look, I was unconscious for a while in Hippocratic Research. Had some wonky dreams. I figured that was enough sleep for a few days," I said as quickly as I could. Why couldn't she just accept that I didn't need to sleep?

"Did you sleep at all in Tenpony?" she asked, calmly and reasonably.

"No, we had sex in Tenpony. Remember? Great fun. Let's do it again!" But I didn't want sex. I didn't want to rest. I didn't want to stop. "Look, you know me. If I wait around I'll get all mopey and you'll be annoyed and everything. Just... let it drop. Okay? Please? Let it drop?" I begged as I closed my eyes. I felt like a stupid foal. If I couldn't see her then I didn't have to listen either.

Her legs wrapped around me. I wished I could shake. I wished I could gasp and my heart could thunder. Instead I felt still and calm in every part of me except my mind. That was racing faster and faster with every second. "Why can't you sleep?" she asked.

"Because I'll die! I'll die again!" I screamed at her and shoved her away. I hadn't meant to do that. She slid across the polished floor almost to the far wall. I stared at her as she pulled herself to her hooves. I shrank back. "Oh, Goddesses, I didn't mean... I... I..." I buried my head in my hooves. "Glory..." I whimpered.

Then I felt her hoof on my mane. I sniffed. "I can't sleep, Glory. Sleeping... I... I drifted off on the boat there and... I just know that if I stop and sleep that everything is going to stop again. I'll die. I'll die as sure as if you put a bullet through my head. I'll go to a bad place. I don't want that. I don't want to

die again,” I said as I quivered. “I can’t do that. I can’t...”

Security... terror of Hoofington... bearer of the coveted EC-1101... complete basket case. Psychoshy was right. This had to be some kind of crazy. Some level of madness that I no longer knew how to deal with.

“Blackjack...” Glory murmured softly as she stroked me. “You have to sleep.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” I said quietly. “I don’t have my own dreams anymore. I don’t... Glory. I’m falling apart. The only thing keeping me together is that I keep moving. If I stop... I’ll... something. Something bad.”

“I know, Blackjack. But you can’t keep going forever,” she said as she stroked my mane again and again. Finally she curled up against me. I lay still as a sleeping foal. Still as a corpse. But inside, my mind was screaming.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, she was asleep. I wasn’t. Carefully, I shifted her onto my back and carried her to the room opposite Scotch and P-21’s. She needed to sleep and rest. She’d pushed herself saving the lives of my friends and trying to help me, and now she was spent. I looked in and saw P-21 and Scotch curled up together, with Boo beside the olive filly. Lacunae looked on, a silent sentinel, a protective goddess.

The next room over, Psychoshy was taking a nap. She twitched in her sleep with little jerks and once whispered the name of the ghoul she’d lost. Rampage looked up at me and raised a hoof to her lips. She trotted out and closed the door behind her. “You okay, Blackjack? You look really spooked.”

“It’s nothing. Nothing,” I said as I sat. “Rampage... do you ever need to sleep?”

“Nope. Don’t really have to, as I never get tired,” she said, and I wanted to cheer. Hah! See, Glory? Not all ponies have to sleep. “But I do, from time to time. I catch little naps here and there when I can.”

“You do?” I blinked in surprise.

“Sure, Blackjack. Everypony does. Heck, even ghouls do, and they’re *dead*. A pony has to turn off the brain occasionally, or she’ll go bouncing-off-the-walls crazy. Even I’ve done that.”

“Really? What happened?”

“No idea, but for a while twenty or so years ago, there was a myth about the Bloody Beast of Hoofington that went around slaughtering all kinds of creatures before it mysteriously vanished,” she said as she shuffled nervously. “Understand, that was before I ran into Priest. But yeah, even I occasionally need to calm down and let my thoughts straighten themselves out.”

“But how do you do it?” I asked, chewing on my lip. “If you never get tired...”

“I just do. I cut out the Mint-als for a few hours. I close my eyes and try and push everything away and imagine a big, tangled knot. Then I slowly unravel it. Eventually, my brain just kicks over.”

She sighed and rubbed her mane. "It's a little bit scary. Sometimes, I have dreams that make no sense... and sometimes I'm scared that when I wake up, I won't be... me. But the alternative is a bloody beast." She smiled and shrugged.

"Right..." I murmured softly, looking away. The Cyberdemon of Hoofington... I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Are you okay, Blackjack? You've got a funny look on your face. You've had it all day," Rampage asked in concern. "Not your shooty look. Just... more crazy than usual."

I grinned. "Hey. Don't worry about me. I'm Blackjack the cyberpony. I'll be fine. I just need to calm down." She returned my smile a little uneasily, patted my shoulder, then slipped back into the room.

My brain, though, wasn't calm. My thoughts smashed from one side to the other. She was right; I needed to sleep. No, I couldn't sleep, sleep was bad. But no sleep make Blackjack go crazy. But Blackjack was crazy already. So then no sleep make Blackjack go crazier. But sleep kill Blackjack. But sleep wouldn't kill me. Then sleep would bring the bad dreams. But sleep was important; Glory said so. But sleep would bring dreams that weren't my own. Besides, I wasn't tired.

My thoughts mashed and crashed and crushed against each other. A flesh and blood pony would get exhausted. She'd *have* to sleep. But my body just kept on going. I started pacing in the hall. I had to go. I *had* to. I couldn't sleep. Somewhere in my mind was a certainty that, if I did, I would die. I'd just float away from my body and leave a Blackjack-shaped cyberthing behind.

I already saw the Dealer. What would happen if Psychoshy was right about how crazy I was? What if I did completely lose it? I saw what had happened to LittlePip. What kind of damage could I do?

Cyberdemon of Hoofington.

Didn't matter. Wasn't sleepy. Had to go. Had to go now. I was halfway down the hall before the thought slammed through: couldn't go. Couldn't do that to Glory. Not again. I trotted back between the rooms. Couldn't stay. Couldn't go. Couldn't sleep. There was only one thing to do.

Check and see if the bar was open.

\* \* \*

"Blackjack? What are you doing?" Lacunae asked softly as she trotted into the storeroom where we'd found Nurse Redheart. I had arranged the five figurines in front of me, set out little paper cups in front of them, and then poured them each a drink. Since they couldn't drink, I was drinking for them. Their normally bright and happy faces looked oddly sad for some reason.

"I'm having a tea party," I replied to the immense purple alicorn. "Only I didn't have any tea, so we're having booze instead. I guess that makes it a shots party." I waved the bottle at her.

"Blackjack. That is rubbing alcohol," she said aloud in shock.

"Yeah. Stuff is shit compared to Wild Pegasus. I went all the way to Megamart and didn't pick up some quality booze. Irresponsible," I said as I lifted Pinkie Pie's shot. "Come on, Pinkie. Drink up. It's a party!" I lifted it to the grinning pink pony's mouth with my magic. "Drinkie drinkie!"

A purple hoof crushed the paper cup.

I slowly looked up at her. Her magic then swept the cups, bottles, and remains into a garbage can in the corner. I stared up at her and sniffed. "... um... I..." I looked at the five figurines around me and then back at the purple alicorn.

What the *fuck* is wrong with me?

"I... I..." I stammered like an idiot as I looked up to her, like Mom catching me sleeping on my shift or something. My throat closed up.

She sat beside me and pulled me into her hooves and held me. I clenched my eyes closed, imagining it was Mom holding me in her hooves. "Please... please help me..."

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I can't..."

"Cast a spell. Please," I begged, like a filly pleading to their parent to make it all better.

"Unconsciousness isn't sleep, Blackjack," Lacunae said quietly in my ear as she rocked me. "And I'm sorry... the Goddess isn't interested in helping you anymore." I heard her sigh quietly. "I wish I could. I wish I could cast a spell to take away your fears and calm your thoughts enough that you can sleep. But I can't. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I can't help you. I'm so tired of not being able to help the ponies who need it. What kind of goddess can't comfort a troubled friend?"

"Can you... can you take it from me? Please?" I didn't even know what 'it' was. My fear? My craziness? The anxiety twisting around in my brain like a frantic radroach trying to chew its way out? The parts of Blackjack I didn't like anymore?

Really... could I blame the Goddess for what she did to Lacunae?

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," Lacunae whispered again as I was held and rocked.

I tried to imagine a knotted rope. It didn't untie. Instead, it became a noose in a cage.

I visualized an IF-88 Ironpony and tried to disassemble it. Instead, I imagined a mare in black gunning down a hospital.

I tried to clear my brain of everything in it, but it was like trying to stop sand with my hooves. I'd just treated all of Twilight's friends like toys.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I'm sorry," I murmured quietly into her chest, listening to her slow and steady heart.

\* \* \*

It was midday when everypony finally started moving out. Glory had all the chems she needed to treat Scotch and P-21. The blue pegasus wore a disguise that was really not much more than hospital linens sewn together into a sort of pajamas and cloak to cover her, but it was better than nothing. Rampage and Psychoshy were talking about what they'd have to do to keep everypony safe... well, Rampage was talking about that. Psychoshy was talking about looking forward to smashing more ponies.

Scotch and P-21 rode Lacunae, who carried them both without too much effort or complaint.

The purple alicorn did comment on the anti-machine rifle I'd picked up, though. Her magic lifted the gun effortlessly, and she smiled as she sighted through the scope. "Wonderful high caliber weapon. A bit too much for sniping, though; the accuracy falls off after a thousand yards." She worked the slide and smiled in satisfaction, loading a magazine. The size of the weapon and the fact she could handle it at all with just her horn reminded me of LittlePip. It must be nice to be able to handle heavy weapons with just your horn.

"You like it?" I asked with a small smile as I teased Boo with a carrot.

"Like... no. But I respect it and admire its craftsmanship and capabilities," she said as she pointed it up the hillside to the west, looking through the scope. Then she paused with a frown. "We're being watched."

I frowned too, extended my fingers, took out Taurus's rifle, and looked through its scope. There, at the top of the low ridge almost a mile away, I could make out a cluster of ponies watching us. Behind them, I could barely make out a banner of green and black.

Harbingers, a half dozen, at least, watching me with binoculars and scopes. Had they been watching to see when we left, or were they waiting for more members?

"Want to go smash them?" Psychoshy asked with an eager grin.

I took one look at P-21 and Scotch on the alicorn's back. "No. If they're just watching us, they'll scatter. And if we head towards Chapel, then we're looking at an ambush... or worse... another attack on Chapel itself." I couldn't do that to the Crusaders.

P-21, Scotch Tape, Glory, and Lacunae all needed to go to Chapel. I didn't. Not in the way that they did.

"We split up," I said softly.

"I'm going to have to file that under 'really bad idea', Blackjack," Rampage snorted.

"Look... they're after me, right?" I asked as I whirled on them. Having a threat helped me focus and pull my head together. "If they see me leave with you, then they're going to attack us sooner or later. But if they see me trot off east and you go south, who are they going to follow?"

"You want them to chase you?" Glory gaped and I felt myself grinning.

"Sure! I'm the one with the robolegs, remember? I'll lead them away from you till you're all recovered. They'll get tired long before I do," I said as the plan came together.

"You should still take Flutternut and me with you," Rampage said as she looked at me.

"I don't want the Harbingers getting the idea of taking hostages. I need you with them. I know they'll be safe with you, Rampage." And I was faster than the steel-clad mare.

"Well then, take Psychoshy, at least," she pressed. The yellow pegasus grinned wickedly at that

suggestion. I gave Rampage a slightly sardonic look, and she sighed. "Okay, maybe not..."

"I need to be sure that you're all safe. This way, they'll be chasing me, and then later we'll meet up," I said as my thoughts oriented from the dread of sitting around to the plan of action.

"But... how will we know how to find you?" Glory asked.

"We have her PipBuck tag," Scotch Tape replied as she leaned back in P-21's embrace. Glory looked at the PipBuck she'd purloined from Psychoshy. "We can find Blackjack anywhere in the city."

Glory still frowned. "But how will we know if you're all right?"

"Duh. We'll listen for her," Scotch Tape said with a small smile. "Remember on the *Celestia*, Blackjack? Your PipBuck is a broadcaster. So all you have to do is send a signal, and we'll know if you're okay or if you need the cavalry to come." Glory chewed her lip, and I went to her and held her in my hooves.

"This... are you sure about this? All alone, with no friends?" she asked as she stroked my restored cheek.

I smiled and kissed the end of her muzzle softly. "I won't be missing any friends, Glory. I'll have you with me... no matter where you are..."

She kissed, and I kissed back. Now that I had a plan, all the skittering doubts were scurrying away into the corners of my mind. "Get some sleep... please try..." she said quietly as she bumped her forehead against mine.

"I will," I said with a small smile. But I doubted I was going to get much of a chance in the next couple of days.

Suddenly, I became aware of a hissing above me and glanced at Psychoshy hovering there. "Don't move!" she said around the mouthgrip of a spray-paint can. I groaned and closed my eyes. Did I really want to know? Finally, she finished and tossed the can away.

"So... what did she do?" I could always replace the armor with some I'd stashed.

"She wrote 'Security'..." Lacunae said softly, "Only she left out the 'i'."

"And she drew a bullseye beneath it," added P-21 dryly.

I sighed but smiled. "Well, I'd wanted them to follow me."

"Wait one moment," Lacunae said as she lifted the tossed can and sprayed a few more times. "There. Better." I blinked and looked back at the little white rearing filly she'd deftly painted on my armor's rump. "Your good luck symbol, as I recall."

"Yeah, I guess it is," I said with a smile. I wondered what Scoodle would think of the 'stable pony' now? I turned to her and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry for what I did with your friends."

"I'm sorry too," she replied, stroking a wingtip along my cheek.

"For what?" I asked. For the Goddess being a tool? For not being able to help the craziest pony

in Equestria? But she just smiled sadly and shook her head.

It took some time to convince Boo to go along. She looked just as uncomfortable with my plan as Glory. Finally, I'd had to tie a bridle and give the lead to the pegasus. The pale mare looked hurt and confused, no matter how I stroked her milky mane or ears.

"Please take care of yourself. Please, Blackjack. I don't like the idea of you being alone."

"I won't be. I'll know you're safe. And we'll be together soon. I promise." The heat and damp pressed down, and the fat, swollen clouds overhead rumbled low and deep as if some great stratospheric beast's stomach growled in anticipation of the impending chase.

We shared one final kiss, and then my friends started off to the south. I watched them go with a bit of trepidation. There was no guarantee they'd reach Chapel safely, but right now they were as safe as I could make them. When they were out of sight along the Sunset Highway, I looked back at the hill and saw every set of eyes locked on to me. In spite of everything, I couldn't deny an unmistakable thrill coursing through me.

"Okay! Catch me if you can, you miserable herd of mules," I said as I opened the panel in my leg, showing the black screen of the Delta within as I waved to them. Instantly, the six set off down the hill towards me. One fired a red flare into the air as they ran. The heavens let loose a flash of lightning, splitting the clouds, and the rain began to pour. I snapped the panel shut and tore down the road east as fast as my legs could carry me, shouting, "Ante up!"

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Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: As always, I want to give thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Snipe, Bronode, and Hinds for their oodles of hard work and yet another weekend sacrificed to make this actually worth reading. I'd also like to thank everypony who gives me feedback and comments in EqD that helps keep this story going. Lastly, everypony that wants to help support the author can leave bits at the Paypal tip jar. David13ushey@gmail.com.

Also, more specifically... at this point PH is longer than the original FoE. It's well on its way towards being a bajillion pages long. Is this story taking too long. Should I just wind it up and have it done with? Once I break 1.1M words, we're getting into Harry Potter territory... like... all of Harry Potter. So I just want to know if things are dragging or not. Anywho, I hope you enjoy the story... dragging terribleness or not.)