

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 18: Monsters

"It seems like the only thing royal about you is that you are a royal pain!"

What is 'security'? I know I have the word on my barding, but what does it really mean? For most of my life, security meant walking two hours' patrol through the living quarters, listening for the occasional alert, and long tedious hours writing reports so banal that I could fill them out in my sleep. Security was keeping the peace, maintaining stability, and preserving order.

But what is security in the Wasteland, where there's no peace, stability, or order left to keep? Am I supposed to create them on my own? I'm just one mare. I'd tried to instill them in a community where I thought security was needed. A gift, or so I thought. But my attempts were seen as threats, an attempt to usurp Flank from ponies ultimately content with the discord, instability, and disorder. I wasn't just unwanted; I was everything they opposed.

What am I supposed to be doing in the Wasteland? All my life, I had a role. P-21 rebelled against his, but while there aren't words for how much I respect him for that, my role was comfortable, and in a way I've grown even more attached to it since I left the stable. Damn me, I like being security. When I see the raiders, slavers, bandits, and thugs that infest the land around Hoofington, standing in opposition to them makes me feel like I'm a little bit above the rest of the heap. Call it pride, if you want. But more and more I feel... lost.

And through it all, resting in my PipBuck is EC-1101, a mystery that I am simply not smart enough to solve. So what is my place here? Am I to simply find somewhere to call home and defend it to my dying breath? Chapel. Even Megamart. They wouldn't be bad places to live. The question is, would I be able to close my eyes and cover my ears to everything beyond?

What's better, to fight against the entirety of the Wasteland and fail, or to care for a small part and ignore what remains? How can I do better?

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The rain dripped in streaks along my glasses as we trudged along the road northeast towards Chapel. The fact that we were heading to one of the few decent places in all of the Wasteland didn't do much to raise my spirits. That snide little suspicion was already whispering: something was going to go wrong. Something always went wrong.

I glanced at P-21 as he rode in the wagon next to Thorn. Well... maybe not quite always.

The wagon was full of gear from Deus's camp; despite the few survivors of the Battle of Flank who'd stopped running long enough to loot the place, there'd been more locked chests and ammo boxes than the bounty hunters could open. Most of it was junk, but some of it was useful. P-21 busied himself with cracking the containers open as we travelled along the broken asphalt past rusting wagons. I could only watch in awe as he ignored the swaying and errant bouncing.

We stopped for a break outside a Hippocampus Energy skywagon battery-swapping station as the rain picked up. My throat felt all scratchy and my nose wouldn't stop running. Thorn wasn't doing much better. Rampage busted some Sunrise Sarsaparilla crates into fuel for a fire, and Roses started to boil water in an old coffee pot. P-21 stayed in the garage, continuing to work. When he started on a heap of medical boxes, I nudged his flank. "Let me try those? You can tell me what I'm doing wrong."

I don't know why, but he actually smiled. Ugh, bucks are weird. "What brought this on?"

"Roses almost died because I couldn't open a lock. I don't want that to happen again," I said as I levitated a bobby pin out of his cardboard box. "So tell me what I'm doing wrong so I can do better?"

I hated picking locks. I hated having a cold. I hated being clammy and shivery all the time. As unlikely as it was, I imagined Lighthooves somehow manipulating the weather just to make me miserable. It felt good to have somepony to blame. Still, I had to admit that this was nice, just lying side by side while I winnowed down his supply of bobby pins.

"A little farther... now tap, don't twist. That's it... almost..." And SNAP. I thumped my head against the yellow case, loathing pink butterflies. "Well, close."

"Unless there are healing grenades in there, I don't think close counts," I said with a sigh, sliding the box over to him. "Sorry for wasting your time."

He blinked, waving the bobby pin at me with his lips. "Excuse me?" he asked around the mouthful.

"With trying to help Flank," I said as I looked out at the pouring rain. "If I hadn't been clueless and actually realized she was Caprice... I dunno."

"You think that somehow you could have magically made them good and deserving ponies?" he asked with a half smile, arching his brow. When I nodded, he sighed and shook his head. "Blackjack, I wish you were right. I thought that Flank was... okay. Maybe a little too vice oriented, but okay. But the ponies there made up their minds a long time ago about the kind of people they were going to be. You can't make ponies change just by wanting it."

"I know, I was just so stupid," I muttered. He thumped the back of my head, then opened the medical kit with a flick of his screwdriver. I don't know which stung more.

"You were optimistic, Blackjack. It's one of your best qualities. I wouldn't have tried helping them. If you were wrong, then some lousy ponies would luck out and get something they don't deserve. If I was wrong, ponies who needed our help wouldn't get it. Which sounds better to you?" It did make a little bit of sense. I coughed, turning my head. I definitely didn't want to share my budding cold.

"So what's inside?" I asked as I flipped the hatch open with my horn. The rotten egg stench hit me immediately. The healing potion inside was so corrupted by Enervation that it'd eaten right through the metal stopper on the bottle. Two needles of Med-X looked intact; the bottle of filtered water, too. I looked out at all the rain. Maybe I could replace it with whiskey. "That's what, the fifth spoiled potion?"

"Twelfth, if you count the ones that were so weak they looked like water," he said as he set the goods aside and threw the case out into the rain with the others. Some of the potions were so corrupted that I swore they were moving inside their vials. He glanced back at me. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you about Caprice, Blackjack," he said softly.

"I must have looked like quite the idiot," I said with a little smirk, then coughed hard.

"You looked happy," he replied. "I think you really liked the idea of helping ponies out just because it was the right thing to do. I couldn't have done that."

I crossed my forehooves. "I was happy. And it was nice, even if it wasn't real." But I remembered Pinkie and that horrible glee that seemed to rot away into a begging mess before

disappearing. Had the pink party pony really been happy? I'd never seen a poster of her without a smile on her face. I looked at P-21 with a little smile. "So... what makes you happy?"

He blinked in surprise and then shook his head with a smile. "This," he said with a sweep of his hoof.

"Rain? Picking locks?"

"Everything. Oh, sure, there's a lot of it that pisses me off, too, but I'm alive, Blackjack! I've spent every year of my life knowing that, when I got that twenty-first dot, I was dead. I spent a year trying to think of a plan to escape and now... I'm out. Thanks to you," he said with a smile as he looked down at me. "I'm pretty sure that someday the Wasteland might take that from me, make me bitter and disappointed, but right now I couldn't be happier."

Then he chuckled softly and corrected himself, "Actually, I would be happier knowing that 99 had ended its reproductive policy."

"I think so. I mean, with the Overmare dead and the attack and the stable's problems, they just can't keep going. I know Mom will get things in order, and then they'll have to come out. And if they don't, then when we have EC-1101 worked out, we'll go back and bring 'em kicking and screaming outside," I said with a smile.

"And will you be able to give justice to those that won't give it up?" he asked before picking at a case with a tight, tiny little lock. I had no idea how he managed to open it up, but a stack of bright orange shells greeted us. They were each almost as long as my hoof, and I curiously brought out Folly and slipped one in. No dice. These shells were still a little too small.

I sighed softly. "I don't know. I realize that the only way to really stop a pony is to kill them, but I think that if I start killing ponies... even if they deserve it... I won't be able to stop." I turned the shell over and looked at him. "Why didn't you kill him?"

He sighed, looking at his hooves. "Because I really... really... wanted to kill him. If I'm going to kill somepony, I don't want it to be because I'm getting back at Stable 99."

"You're a good pony, P-21," I said as I set the shells aside... and then noticed a small wooden box taped into the corner of the case. What really drew my attention, though, was a written note on it that simply read 'For Security'. "What's this..." I muttered. My horn glowed--and P-21 reached over and touched it with his hoof, looking serious... okay, more serious than usual. The contact broke my concentration and set me blushing furiously.

Carefully, he nudged the tape back and checked around the sides of the box. Then I saw the tiny wire connected to an adjacent explosive shell. If I'd just pulled the box, it would have yanked the wire, detonated the explosive shell... and all the others. I felt like I'd been plunged into a tub of ice water. He nudged the lid of the box open slowly to reveal a folded-up note and a glowing memory orb. These I carefully levitated out. Once the box was empty, he carefully lifted both box and shell and trotted out into the rain.

I unfolded the note.

Security Cunt, I know it's you reading this. I know because any other fucker is blown to bloody chunks. That's good. This orb has a little message from me to you. Look at it. Don't. I don't give a fuck. But I want every bitch and bastard to get what they deserve. Especially you. Especially him. Especially me. From the pits of hell, fuck you Security.

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"You can't seriously take him up on his offer," P-21 said softly as he looked over my shoulder; I hadn't heard him come back.

"Of course not," I said as I levitated the orb. "This is probably some kind of deathtrap or something. I mean, I really wouldn't be dumb enough to do what he wants; even I'm not *that* big an idiot," I said with the most wide and sincere grin I could manage. I tossed the memory orb out into the rainy night. "There. See?"

He relaxed a little. "You had me worried there for a moment. Memory orbs from psychotic Reapers are nothing you need to experience." He looked at the rest of the boxes and then back at me. "Why don't you head inside? I'm down to my last bobby pin. I'll go in as soon as it snaps."

"All right," I said as I stood and trotted towards the door to the store, pausing to glance out at the rain. "I didn't need his orb anyway. I don't want anything Deus can offer."

Inside, the lavender unicorn boiled water inside a rusty coffee can. All her worldly belongings were in two ragged saddlebags, but among them was some kind of grass. Her purple eyes were scared to death of me, but her kid looked at me more curiously now that she was sure I wasn't going to hurt her mother. Rampage had found a sock and somehow fashioned it into a crude horn puppet that she wagged on the end of her helmet's spike.

Glory brought me a coffee cup full of water that smelled of weeds. "Roses made some tea."

"Tea," I muttered slowly as I took the steaming cup. "I'm drinking a letter?"

"Just drink it, Blackjack. It'll help with your cold," Glory said, giving my shoulder a nudge. I took a slow sip of the warm water that tasted like weeds had been boiled in it. "Swallow!" she ordered me as my cheeks bulged. But I couldn't swallow this disgusting slop! "Do it!" My eyes watered and I gulped it down. Okay, it did help my throat, but... ugh! Glory relaxed a little. "Now drink the rest of it."

"Can I put some RadAway in it first?" I muttered, getting a dangerous look from the gray pegasus. She'd swapped her uniform for regular black wastelander clothes. I wanted to get her something a lot more substantial, at least on par with security barding, as soon as we reached Megamart. I sullenly drank the boiled weed water.

"She can gulp down hangover shots like they're nothing, but balks at tea," Rampage muttered softly, shaking her head.

"So... what are your plans?" I asked Roses as I set the cup aside and scrubbed my tongue.

"Take care of myself and my daughter," she said in a soft, hopeless voice. "I don't know how I can do that, though."

"Without being a slaver, you mean?" I said with a frown. She looked at me nervously and nodded. "How the heck did you get into that, anyway? I can't wrap my head around it."

"I was originally a caravaner. There were more villages back then, little stops along the Sunrise Highway," she said quietly, keeping her head bowed. "One day, I was at this little village where they were about to hang a pony. Murder... rape... I can't remember the crime anymore." She looked at her daughter, but the pink filly was captivated by the dirty little sock puppet. "I thought it was stupid. He was strong and healthy... and the Society always needed more workers. So I offered to take him off their hands for a hundred caps. It was a win-win for them. They got paid and he was taken away. I sold him

at Elysium for five hundred caps. After that, wherever I went I kept my eyes open for ponies who were selling other ponies. Usually criminals, or accused criminals.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “It wasn’t easy work. You have to keep slaves healthy and calm, or they’ll get sick or fight. There were always raiders to worry about. Pay for food and the like. One day I came across a village that’d been hit hard. Bandits, I think, since there was more stuff stolen than murder and cannibalism. There were four survivors. They were starving, so…” She sighed and shrugged.

“You enslaved them,” I muttered.

“And saved their lives,” she added sharply. “I know it sounds terrible, but most places take care of their slaves. Food. Shelter. It’s not a nice life or a long one, but it’s life. If they work the slaves to death, then they have to shell out the caps to replace them.” Roses shook her head. “I don’t know how operations like Red Eye and Brimstone’s Fall can operate. They must spend caps out the nose to keep buying at those rates. It’s insane.”

“Money tends to make some ponies like that,” Glory observed dryly.

“I have a kid,” she said quietly. “Flank may not have been the best home for her, but it was a home. I know what I did was wrong, but I had to do it.”

“And would you do it again?” I asked levelly. She shuddered and shook her head, but now I could see it in her eyes. She would do it again, if she had to. “Hopefully you’ll be able to find something in Chapel. A better life.”

“I hope so,” she said. Because if she didn’t, she might try to be a slaver again, and if she did that then I’d turn her into paint. I wondered if I actually could. Or would I just chicken out once again?

“Hey, Blackjack. What is that?” Glory asked as she pointed a wing at the instrument case.

I rubbed my runny nose and adjusted my glasses. “Just an instrument. I don’t even know how to play it or what it is.”

“Then why bring it?”

“I don’t know. Why not?”

Glory smiled and arched a brow. “Because it’s the size of a tank?”

“It’s a contrabass,” Roses said softly as she rose and walked to the case. She opened it up slowly and sucked in her breath. “A very good quality contrabass.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I worked with the Society. You have to pick up these little things if you want to get ahead with those ponies. I can even pretend to like opera around those folks,” she said as she plucked a string, the note sounding sour and short. “It definitely needs some tuning.” She looked over at me and managed a shaky smile. “I can show you some basics on how to play. In return for everything.”

“I thought unicorns made their music through their horns,” Rampage muttered.

“If they know an appropriate spell, and even knowing the spell they might not know the first thing about playing. I could make a sound like a flute and play a few tunes, but it’s much harder to sound

good.” She looked at the sheet music. “And if you want to impress the Society, then you have to be good.”

I looked at the others, but saw only polite curiosity. “Okay, but I apologize for bleeding ears,” I said as I lifted the bass with my magic and then stood behind it. Roses immediately smiled. “What?”

“You’re holding it like an earth pony. You can just use your magic,” she said as she lifted a sheet of music and flipped through it. Her own magic was barely strong enough to turn a page.

“This is the way that feels... right,” I muttered, already self-conscious. Ugh, even Rampage and Thorn were watching! I felt a little weak in the gut. This was going to be terrible.

I lifted the black-haired bow, pinching it behind my fetlock, and drew it across the strings, a smile rising to my lips at the note. Roses started. “I... guess it doesn’t need to be tuned.” She turned to the music and explained the notes and how each one corresponded to a position on the instrument. To my amazement it came to me as easily as cards.

“You’re certain you’ve never played before?” Roses asked as everypony looked on.

P-21 came in, looking curious. He smiled at once. “Well, I’ve made noise, but I’ve never actually played something.” Looking at the music was like looking at a hand of cards; I could see each value between the notes, half notes, and quarter notes like different suits. “This is going to be terrible. You all know that, right?”

“Oh, just play. It’s not like we’ve got much else to do tonight,” Rampage said with a snicker as she sat Thorn in her hooves, holding her gently. Roses looked a bit nervous, but I pitied anything that dared threaten the foal at that second.

I looked at the notes. Slowly. Relax. Don’t worry about it. And the bow began to stroke over the strings. See the note, execute. I could have been practicing with a baton as I moved the bow and tried desperately to get the song right. At least I had accompaniment.

“Twinkle twinkle little star; Luna alone knows what you are. Up above the world so high, like a pony in the sky. Twinkle twinkle little star; Luna alone knows what you are.” I had to admit, I was more on key than she, but Thorn was ten times more fearless than I!

“Blackjack! That was amazing! How... that can’t have been your first time!” Glory gushed.

“Really. It was,” I said, feeling lightheaded. “Can we do another?”

Roses turned to the next one in the book. The song was unfamiliar. Something about cupcakes, and it was much faster than the first. Still, I focused, trying to get every note right; I didn’t, of course. No pony seemed to mind the occasional slip as my hoof pulled the bow back and forth against the strings. When I finished, I panted at the exertion. Playing music was harder than I’d anticipated.

“You’ve got a real talent for that. I’m really shocked you don’t have musical notes for a cutie mark,” Roses observed as Thorn clopped her hooves vigorously upon the floor. Her simple statement struck me.

I’d never had a choice. As I touched my cheek to the neck of the instrument, I realized that from birth I’d never have been allowed to do this. I was security. I was allowed to listen to music, but play it? Create it? It was like listening to Sweetie Belle for the first time, or hearing that chorus ringing through the chapel and aching within to join it. My eyes met P-21’s. Had I gotten my cutie mark simply by default? I was good at cards and luck, but could I have been something else?

I'd always thought being forced into security had been an annoyance. I'd never imagined that Stable 99 had robbed me of something so personal.

"Well, that was incredible," Roses said as she flipped through the book. The next one was about dresses and much slower, but somehow richer. Then one about winter; did Equestria even have a winter anymore? I probably butchered both, but at this point I didn't care. She turned to the next. "Oh, you'll love this one, Thorn," she said as she turned it to the next page, "It's your favorite." My eyes went straight to the notes, glad to play for the delighted filly.

Then I played the notes. Thorn clopped her hooves in glee and sang off key, "Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head..."

My poor, diseased heart tightened into a hard gnarled hoof in my chest as I continued to play. I bowed my head, not needing the music. Not needing anything but to stand there and endure. I could see Thorn, not sitting safe in Rampage's lap, but trapped within the glassy pod wearing the wire mesh cap. I could hear the fans in the machines dying one after the other. The silence growing as I killed them.

The bow clattered from my hoof as I hugged the instrument and slowly slid down to my knees. I hid my face behind it, fighting to keep the sobs quiet. "Wha... what is it, Momma? Did I sing bad?" Thorn asked in worry.

"N... no. Blackjack loved your singing," Glory stammered as she rushed to my side. "She's just..."

A murderer. A monster.

I put the instrument away in its case. Everypony just stared; some in confusion and some in worry. Glory wept, of course. "Blackjack..." she started to say as I walked past her. I saw her extend her hoof after me, P-21 stopping her with a shake of his head. Thank you, P-21.

I stepped out into the night rain. Just like that first time that seemed so long ago, the day when I'd killed my first young filly. My legs gave out beneath me. I closed my eyes, raised my head, and prayed desperately for the rain to wash it all away. I heard that song over and over in my sick heart, feeling hot tears mix with cold rain.

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The best thing about being cold, wet, and sick to your heart is that your body couldn't care less. And so, in the middle of the night, I felt the call of nature and stirred to my hooves. There was a ditch beside the station that would do. I had done my business and started back when I spotted the faintest mote of light in the wet, dead grass. Slowly, I walked over to it and looked down at the memory orb I'd thrown into the rain.

I lifted it, staring at the memory of a monster. I'd thrown it away with every intention of letting his vileness be lost to the Wasteland. That was before I was reminded of my own brand of vileness. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe this was one of those orbs that would kill me. Lock me into unconsciousness. I wouldn't put it past him. He'd wired it to a bomb, so I had little doubt that he wanted me dead. He was a monster.

So was I. I might have been a monster who felt guilty, but I was a monster all the same.

"So..." I muttered as I stared at the orb, its light casting my features in its ghostly glow, "One monster to another... what's on your mind, Deus?"

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It was a trap.

Pain shot through me from head to hoof. Every motion, every breath, even the beating of my heart, ripped through me in a chorus of screams. I wanted to howl, but I had no mouth; to run, but I had no legs; to beg for release, but I had no life to snuff out. My body moved, and I felt mechanisms pull and pinch and tug at my bones, muscles, and flesh. A thousand upon a thousand nerves rasped and rubbed against inorganics trapped inside me. I wanted to take my dragon claw and rip them all out!

Then my host lifted a needle and jammed it into his neck. I felt a burning sensation as the agony melted away. And then I heard his voice, that faintly metallic speech. "Not fun, is it, cunt?" he asked low and soft as he trotted in front of a mirror. Even with the chem, I felt the pain chewing on my nerve endings. The only part of him that wasn't on fire was his crotch. "This is five times stronger than Med-X. It'd kill anypony without a cybernetic heart. I've got no idea where Sanguine gets it, or how he makes it."

He stood in a tent before a broken mirror, holding the empty syringe before his eyes. "This was my last fucking needle, cunt. Last. Fucking. Needle." His hooves came together, crushing the syringe. "So as soon as I'm done here, I'm coming for you. Since you're listening to this, I'm probably dead." He took a deep breath. "Thanks for that. Hopefully it was quick, but I wouldn't bet on it with my fucking luck."

I'd never had a chance to truly look at him up close. Now I could see the raw, angry flesh around the protruding bits of metal, the way his eyelids had been ground away by the mechanical devices implanted in his sockets. I could feel how horribly heavy his body was, how the implants inside him tugged and twisted at his insides.

"So... I've got a choice. I want to fuck him. I want to fuck you. I really want to fuck you both, but if I had a choice... it would be him. So listen up. Sanguine does his business out of Paradise, but he keeps a special lab north of the Arena. Hippocratic Research." He gave a little snort, but his smile melted away. "Some prewar technology place where he tries to make... monsters... like me."

He sat hard, and I wanted to scream as I felt something internal tear. He didn't even flinch. "He didn't make me, though. I was always a monster. I just needed some armored organs for everypony else to figure it out." He looked at me with those ragged, torn eyes. "I'm glad you were a better fucking monster than me. And I hope you get put down before you're a worse one." He turned to look at a blue unicorn standing beside him, and then paused.

Then he scowled as he looked at himself in the mirror, seeming to be pondering something. "If you want to fucking know... if you care... go to the Miramare Air Station. There's special lockers there. Fifth one. Password is... 'Momma'. Have my shit. Enjoy it. And just know that... fuck... I didn't want this. None of this." And for a moment, the monster slipped away, and I looked at the face of a tired old buck in pain and suffering. Then the moment passed, and he turned to the unicorn and shouted, "Now get this shit out of my head and lets go kill this cunt!"

oooOOOooo

With that, the pain ended, but not its effects. I lay in the wet grass, my limbs twitching as phantom pain shot through them. My eyes were wide as I stared off into the night. He hurt. I had never imagined, could not imagine, pain like that. I'd never imagined that the implants forced into his body would be painful. Every inch of reinforced flesh came at that horrible price. Only one region had been unenhanced and free of pain.

I'd changed that. I could only thank Celestia that he'd died so soon afterwards.

"Don't you have the sense to get out of the rain, Blackjack?" a tinny little voice asked above me.

Slowly, I turned over, the pain slowly fading from my twitching limbs as I looked up at the bobbing spritebot overhead. I sat back up, my head throbbing, my throat scratchy as I croaked, "Watcher?"

The tiny bot bobbed slowly as it watched with its large blue eyes. I looked up at the clouds, wishing I could just fall into them. "You look rough." I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. So I did the absolute worst thing possible.

I bawled like a lost foal.

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Sitting in the shelter of the garage next to empty footlockers and medical boxes, I told him everything. Everything I could. Everything I could think of. I told him what happened in the Fluttershy clinic. I told him about Brimstone's Fall and failing to stop the execution. Failing to save Glory from betrayal at Miramare at the hooves of her own people. I didn't stop, couldn't stop. I told him what I'd learned about Stable 99, about how I'd hurt P-21. Of sparing a slaver only to have her become a victim, freeing a slave only to have him become her rapist. Of failing to make any part of the Wasteland a better place. I even told him what I'd learned about Deus just minutes ago. I stopped only because my inflamed voice gave out.

For the longest time, the little robot just hovered there. I wondered if he'd really been listening. Finally, he just muttered, "Wow. And I thought LittlePip had it rough."

"Who?" I croaked.

"Just another mare with a talent for diving headfirst into trouble," Watcher said with a dry little chuckle. "I've been trying to keep up with you and P-21, but you've been moving and running around all over Hoofington so much that it's been tough. I guess that bounty doesn't make things easier."

"Am I a monster, Watcher? I mean, you must have seen monsters before, right? Watching?"

He was quiet for far longer than it took to say 'of course you're not'. "I don't think you are. I've seen real monsters. But the terrible fact is that every real monster I've seen started as a pony just like you. Monsters are made, and the Wasteland's great at picking at exactly the right thing to make you into one. If it can't tear you down from without, it'll do it from within. If it can't get you, it'll go after your friends. And if it can't turn you, then it will try to make you so miserable it will destroy you."

I hugged myself as I shook. "I'm such an idiot to think I could do this."

"No!" he replied at once, and then repeated at a lower volume, "No, Blackjack. No. You are doing it. What you've gone through... what you've survived... is amazing. It's more pain than a dozen ponies could endure, and you still haven't lost yourself. I won't say there's no risk of it, but you've stuck by your friends rather than abandon them. You still care, even to a fault. I know you see yourself and think that you're failing. Trust me, you're not. Not like me..."

"Like you?" I asked, rubbing my nose with a hoof and getting it all snotty.

"I sit here watching the Wasteland, hoping to help in the smallest way possible while I watch amazing ponies do what I can't." He let out a tired sigh. "And sooner or later, they fail. But I just hope that one group might turn things around and make the Wasteland a better place. LittlePip... you..."

"The Stable Dweller," I added. "She's incredible... what she's done."

There was a momentary silence and then a restrained laugh. "Well, I hope she hears about the Security Mare someday." He let out a sigh. "I just... wonder... if I can trust you..."

"Trust me?"

"Not you, personally. Well, not exactly." He paused, and I imagined him struggling a moment. "I've seen so many ponies try and step up, only to be torn down. Some I've helped. Others... I couldn't. But eventually, there's a point where they ask me to do something. Talking to a bot isn't enough; they want to talk to me in person, or have me do favors for them. And as much as I might want to... I can't trust them." He gave a soft sigh. "I think LittlePip's reaching that point... the questions she's asking. The things she wants me to do. I don't know if I can handle it if I have to tell her no, too."

"Well, you're talking about it," I said with a small smile.

"You told me so much," he replied. "And you don't seem to care who I am."

"Cause I'm an idiot," I said with a chuckle. "You want advice from a brain-damaged mare?" I offered. "If she asks, let her."

"But..."

"I don't know who you are, Watcher. You might be DJ Pon3. Sanguine. Somepony else messing with me. And I really doubt I'll find out. But you've been trying to keep ponies away, and it doesn't sound like it's working for you." I closed my eyes. "Sometimes, if you really are a friend, you have to prove it."

"I know, but it could destroy everything," he muttered.

"Or maybe, it could be exactly what you need," I said, then turned my head, coughing and hacking. "Please be aware, this advice is coming from the most unqualified and reckless pony in the Wasteland. I don't even have the sense to stay out of the rain with a cold." Or to not look into memories left for me by my most hated enemies.

There was a long silence from the bot. "Maybe. I'll think about it." I imagined he sounded skeptical. I would be, too, with advice from me. Then he chuckled. "And in return, let me give you some advice. Get in out of the rain, Blackjack. I know your friends are worried sick about you."

With that, the bot chirped and bobbed away playing a marching song. Definitely not something I could play on the contrabass. I rose to my hooves and walked slowly to the door. Despite myself, I felt a little better. Hearing those words from Watcher had cheered me up a bit.

I started back towards the door inside, my body finally separating out the pain that was mine from the pain that was Deus's. It still wasn't happy with me. Just as I reached the door, I spotted something at the edge of the dead trees. Maybe my eyes hadn't quite sucked up enough radiation; maybe what I thought I saw was just my imagination.

Princess Luna was standing there, watching me.

Of course, given my head, clearly this was just some sort of hallucination. I rubbed my eyes hard, and when I looked back she was gone. Back into the depths of my subconscious, where she belonged.

* * *

P-21 looked up immediately, as did Glory. Rampage lay on her side, snoring like her ripper weapon, with Thorn in her hooves. Roses looked pensive. I sat down between P-21 and Glory, and she immediately gave me a hug and pressed her hooves to my brow. "I can't believe you were out there for so long. You're running a fever." Her lips pressed together as I saw concern vie against the desire to tell me what an idiot I'd been.

"It's okay. I needed to be alone for a bit. That song..." I shook my head. "I thought I'd put all that past me." Now I wondered if I ever would. I wondered if I ever should. Was a brain filled with mental landmines the price of virtue?

"I was afraid you'd do something stupid..." P-21 began softly. Then I lifted Deus's memory orb. His eyes widened, then he closed his eyes and shook his head with a groan. "I should have known. So... what did it do?"

"Hurt," I replied. Glory brought me another cup of boiled weed juice, but with how my head and throat felt, I really couldn't bring myself to complain. I held the drink between my hooves, looking down at my steaming reflection. "Did you know that Deus was in agony? Constant agony. I've never hurt so bad. Sanguine was the only source of the painkiller that made it bearable." I glanced over at Rampage. "He thanked me for killing him. And told me where Sanguine is hiding."

"I don't get it. If he was in such pain... why..." Glory began and then flushed. "Why didn't he just... kill himself?" she asked in a near whisper.

I closed my eyes as I thought a moment. "Why don't you? Why don't I? He might have had a shitty life, but it was his. He wasn't going to just check out. He had to go out fighting. That was the kind of pony he was." I couldn't think of him as a monster anymore. A vicious and dangerous pony, yes, but he'd had reasons for it. I don't think I could have stayed sane with that constant pain.

Monsters come from somewhere, Watcher had said. I might not be able to save them, and I might not prevent myself from becoming one, but I could at least give him a little sympathy. After all, he'd been a Marauder... once.

* * *

Continuing down the road in the morning, I had to admit I was feeling... rotten. Okay, my head was two sizes too small for my brain. My throat felt like I'd scrubbed it with a wire brush, and I had green snot oozing out my left nostril. Still, I was better than last night. Thorn had apologized in a near constant stream since she'd woken up and found I had returned, and I could only assure her over and over that it wasn't her fault the song made me cry. It was a very good song, I promised her.

I managed an hour before Glory ordered me into the wagon with P-21 and Thorn. Since we'd gone through half the locked boxes from Deus's camp before exhausting our bobby pins, there was enough room for me.

We listened to DJ Pon3 as the rain continued to drizzle. I smiled, thanking the Stable Dweller for recovering brand new Sweetie Belle recordings. Rampage trudged along, eating her occasional Mint-al and poking fun at Glory, P-21, or me. We were getting close to Chapel, and despite myself I found I was looking forward to seeing Priest and the Crusaders again. Even the capmonger would be welcome!

"So, in case you've been living under a rock, or you have a rock for a head and have been listening to Redbeard Radio, it looks like there's been one heck of a fight on the streets of Flankfurt. On one side, a motley alliance of thugs and gang ponies under the Pecos out for revenge, and on the other, a

wicked band of bounty hunters working for the Reaper Deus. What were they fighting over, you ask? Why, the head of the Security Mare, of course!

"You may be asking yourself which side of this terrible clash came out on top. Did the Pecos manage to get back for Security's help with freeing Brimstone's Fall, or did Deus finally get his mare?" DJ Pon3 gave a hearty chuckle. "Well folks, it's my delight to tell you... neither! When the dust finally settled and ponies dared poke their heads from their homes, it was Security who greeted them with a grin on her face! The Pecos are scattered all across the Hoof, and Deus, the Reaper who started this whole mess, is dead.

"That's right, folks. For twenty years Deus has been the nightmare of Reapers, but this time he was outclassed by a single security mare. People out there may want to keep that in mind when they start thinking about doing things like hunting down ponies working their tails off to make the Wasteland a safer place."

I groaned and stomped my hoof on a case. "Damn it, DJ! I didn't do anything but get shot at!" I said, drawing a startled look from Roses. "Gem and P-21's bomb were the ones that actually killed him. And even then, it was all his ammo blowing up that finished him off!"

"Yeah, but you've got to admit that you killing him is a better story," Glory said brightly.

"In other news around the Hoof, it looks like there's been a recurrence of raiders hitting the Manehattan Highway and the Sunset Highway between Megamart and the river. Looks like you can't keep the psychopaths down, so be sure you double up if you have to go anywhere near there. And if you don't have to go, don't go!

"Now, if you'll excuse me, hot damn, it's time to get my toaster fixed!" And with that the music resumed. I blinked in confusion. *His toaster fixed?*

"I guess he *really* likes his toast," I muttered cluelessly.

Rampage snorted as we crested a ridge. I could see the towers of Hoofington again, and the bridge, and even the tiny white spire of Priest's chapel. There were some ruins off to one side of the road; some kind of large house. "Yeah, well, I bet you he's getting--"

Roses threw a tin can at the back of her head, glancing at Thorn. Unfortunately, at that moment a hard wet gust cut down the hillside, and with a deep rumble of thunder a torrent poured upon us. This was more than just a Hoofington drizzle; the cold deluge soaked through my barding in seconds, and Thorn yelped as she hid inside a wooden crate.

"Of course! Of course you pick now!" I yelled up at the rain. I stood in the back of the wagon and thrust my left forehoof up at the black skies. "Well, forget it! We're going to Chapel and there's nothing you can do to--"

The world turned white.

* * *

I knew I was alive because death didn't hurt this much. I thought for a moment that I'd been dumped back into Deus's orb, but then I realized this pain was mostly external. I lay naked on a mattress with a blanket over me. "Oh... I could really use a day when I..." But my raspy quip died the second I looked around and realized I was alone. Slowly, I sat up and winced as I looked at bright pink patches on my white hide. Funny, but they seemed a little familiar. Then I looked over at the pile of scorched metal plates that was the utter ruin of my barding. Glory must have used every healing potion we'd gotten from

Flank.

The room I was in wasn't much better. Bookshelves, filled with rancid and pulped books that tainted the air with a sour milk smell, ran floor to ceiling. A chandelier still hung from the cracked and water-stained ceiling, dusty crystals giving off a wan greenish-white glow that rose and fell like a breath. The fine carpet underhoof had transformed into a blackened rag that looked liable to disintegrate at a touch. I could feel the spongy floorboards underneath it.

And worst of all, my PipBuck was dead as a doornail. Burns ran from the end of my hoof across my body; the ones on *me* were already partially healed, thanks to Glory, but the ones running across my PipBuck's screen... E.F.S. Navigation. Inventory. S.A.T.S. Everything was gone. Suddenly, I had a far better understanding of my friends. I'd never been in a situation where I couldn't detect something in the next room or past a door. Slowly, I pulled myself to my hooves.

"Oh boy," I muttered as I looked around for my gear but found only a few empty crates. From the mattress and the tipped-over table, it looked as if they'd hidden me here and then fled. I coughed and rubbed my drippy nose. "So... alone... unarmed... unarmored... PipBuck dead and I've got a cold... did I miss anything, you bony old bastard?" I muttered. From outside the windows came a white flash, followed at once by a booming crash. "Right! Almost forgot." I walked to the door and then quietly pushed it open.

A pony in bloody plate armor loomed up before me. My horn glowed, but I caught myself before releasing the spell. It wasn't a pony, just armor. The metal had transformed into an almost solid piece of rust; it'd clearly been posed in the rearing posture. I let out my breath. The hall, if anything, was in worse condition than the library behind me. Sandbags were stacked in barricades across it with pony remains crumpled behind them. Of course, their weapons and barding were all long gone.

I moved as silently as I could, knowing that eventually I'd hear one of my companions. *If they were still alive*, added a fatalistic portion of my head. I found myself missing the old card-shuffling bastard. This'd be the perfect chance for him to read my hoof with some cryptic clues. Then again, as I passed beneath a mold-spotted oil painting showing a grinning white unicorn buck, the place was creepy enough already.

An inequine scream tore through the house, making my mane stand nearly straight on end. Okay, my heart did not need to hear that! Finding friends and getting the hell out of here! Now!

I heard something moving on the far side of a door. The steps were slow, heavy, and relentless. Now I knew that opening that door was a bad idea. I knew that that wasn't Rampage strolling in a corner. But I also knew that there was a chance that one of my friends might be trapped inside. I opened the door, the hinges creaking as it swung.

The pony within looked as if it'd been cooked far too long on a stove. Its once elegant dress now hung in tatters upon its frame, blending with the flaps of hide dangling off its body. Its dull green eyes took one look at me, and it reared with a scream that sounded like it'd have stripped the flesh from my throat if I'd tried to echo it! I activated S.A.T.S. and--

The charging ghoul rammed into me as my routine failed me. I barely had time to fire one magic bullet into the ghoul's chest before it was upon me. Without S.A.T.S., I couldn't fire magic bullets quickly and accurately enough to have them do any good! Jagged teeth gnashed as the monster lunged hungrily, jagged hooves digging into my unarmored hide. Its unnatural strength bowled me onto my back as it snapped at my neck.

I had one saving grace: the reinforced casing of my PipBuck rammed through broken teeth and knocked the ghoul back. My horn glowed as I flung anything and everything into its face, distracting it

long enough for me to get to my hooves. I reared up, smashing the dead PipBuck against its head again and again as hard as I could. Finally, its skull burst like an egg, splattering me with clammy, partially rotted brains. With a sigh, it slumped down into a heap, and I took a few seconds to finish smashing its head.

Finally I slumped, looking at the still twitching undead pony before I sneezed and blasted snot all over it. "Ugh... gross..." I muttered as I wiped my nose... and smeared glowing ghoul brains over my nostrils and upper lip. I froze...

Balefire bomb me now, Celestia. Just do it. Get it over with.

This room had been some sort of study; it seemed to have far more filing cabinets than books. Most of them had been pulled out, the files scattered and trodden upon until mold and moisture rendered them into pulp. The ghoul still had a trio of bobby pins in her mane... as well as a half dozen bottle caps embedded in her hide? Huh. There were two other ponies, but they were long dead, their formal wear rotten and threadbare.

'LIAR' had been painted across the wall in black... no. Nevermind. Not paint. Oh boy, my mane was crawling, and I could feel the scissors snipping at my... I smacked my forehead into the wall as the tremors started. "No! We are NOT thinking about that now."

The skeletal ponies did give me something useful, though. I left the study with one of their thighbones in my telekinetic grasp.

The next room was empty save for decaying stuffed beasts and... things I hoped were beasts. That one looked more like a sand dog from Maripony's memory. As I started to leave, something caught my eye. Was that... yes! The room wasn't quite empty after all; built into one corner was a gun cabinet! It was locked, which meant that it probably hadn't been looted already, but... I swallowed and tried to focus on P-21's lessons as I scrabbled at the lock. It was harder than most, and I winced as one pin snapped. The second opened the case with a click. I felt pretty good as I pulled it open and... saw a box of twelve gauge shells and a tube of Wonderglue. Yay... I didn't even have a way to carry them! I made a quick jaunt back to the library to snag the blanket. Torn in half, it would at least make for an impromptu sack.

I looked at the bones, the glue, and the stuffed canine and slowly smiled. Ten minutes later, I trotted out with a thighbone studded with claws and fangs. As I turned the corner, two more ghouls screamed and charged me. I really wished I had S.A.T.S. to ensure my hits, but my magic was good enough as it swept the jagged weapon in an upwards arc that shredded the front of one ghoul's throat and tore away its lower jaw. I stood on my rear hooves and rammed my PipBuck into the maw of the other as it lunged with a bite. Hugging its head, feeling its cold, slimy mouth slobbering on the end of my leg, I focused on bringing the thighbone around in a smash that tore off the first ghoul's pulpy head.

One down, I tightened my grip on the other, twisting my forelimbs and body around till my weight levered it onto its back with me around to lying on top of the undead monster. I pinned it as it struggled and flailed. I looked down into its one cloudy eye and one empty socket and shouted, "Where are they? Where are my friends?"

For a moment, I thought it was going to answer. Its eye narrowed and met mine. Then it looked at my horn and screamed, "Liar!" then lunged for my face.

You keep trying to save everypony... I closed my eyes and brought the bone down again and again on its skull till the creature shuddered and went still.

Then I found the foyer. Sandbags had been made into barricades across the front door and built

up in both windows. Machineguns that were more rust than gun lay amid the bones of ponies who had used them. The ammo containers were another story. Carefully, I pulled them open, looking at the well-preserved five point five six millimeter rounds. Rifle ammo and me with no rifle. One of the barricades had been stoved in fairly recently. I peeked out into a courtyard filled with pony remains. I could also see a dozen ghouls shambling about the yard... and our wagon. I could see the fine marble walls pitted with bullet holes and blackened by fire.

Again, more signs that something had gone terribly wrong. I looked at the carved busts of dignified stallions smashed and broken against cracked tile floors, and moldy tapestries creeping slowly down the walls they once decorated. There were wire nooses dangling over the edge of the balcony, and somepony had spray-painted vile epithets against the nobles... and even Celestia and Luna as well. After experiencing that memory, I wanted to kick the hay out of them!

I looked down another hall and I froze as my brain let out another spurt of craziness. Luna had returned, standing on the far side of the hallway with the foul water swirling around her ankles. "So... are you going to deal some cards, or what?"

She just looked at me and then at the swirling water. Then I saw this water was a lot more... colorful... than it should have been. My mane started to itch as I backed away from the dark alicorn. "Right. Radiation is bad. Good thinking, me. I'll just go this way..." I turned to peek down another hall, and when I looked back Luna was gone. Of course she was... she hadn't really been there... right?

Okay, time to get my friends and get out of here! I moved along the first floor of the rotting manor as quietly as my hooves could carry me. One peek in the banquet hall at the ghouls sitting expectantly at their tables and I closed the door as softly as I could. My ears strained for something that could hint at where my friends could be. Everywhere I looked were signs of battle, a mob of ponies storming the manor in one last desperate surge.

In one room that held the fanciest terminal I'd ever seen, the logged in screen told me that P-21 had at least gotten this far. I looked at the files. They appeared to be some sort of correspondences.

> To your eminence Lord Brandybuck of Trottingham,

>Surely you can't be suggesting that ponies of our breeding and lineage retreat to a common stable with the rest of the herd? While existence within Stable 1 might be appropriate for ponies of our standing, provided the Princesses attended, I suspect that ponies such as yourself demand a sophisticated stable appropriate for the aristocracy. Fortunately, I know of just such a stable in development. It is being produced clandestinely, outside the notice of the ministries or Stable-Tec. Imagine a stable with appropriate waiting staff, stocked with provisions as befits our refined palates? A stable to preserve not just our lives but the culture and dignity our status demands as well?

>However, such a stable will require a significant amount of capital if we are to be prepared against every contingency. A minimum investment of one million gold bits per household member is required to secure our proper future free of ministry meddling and the common rabble. I have every faith in your strictest confidences in this matter. I await your reply.

>Prince Blueblood.

The next three were the same, asking for vast sums for inclusion in an 'exclusive' stable. The final message was different, though.

>It happens today.

>When the fine nobility of Equestria is ready at your manor, we will transport all of you securely to the stable. Make haste. It won't be long now.

That simple message froze my blood. Had there been ponies who had known of the balefire attack in advance? Suddenly, I thought back to Mr. and Mrs. Cake, and the Hoofington Museum. The automatic fire in the first two. The riot here. Somepony had known, had taken advantage... but why? What good was anything of the old world if it was blown to hell? I found one of the heaps of old bones in the hall with a folded paper spotted in brown mold. The words were hard to make out, but if I squinted and rotated the page...

'I found out from a friend that there's a huge stable hidden right under Blueblood Manor,' the note read. 'It's three times bigger than any other stable. A super stable! Just for those aristocrats. I couldn't get a straight answer from Stable-Tec, but there's something to this. Keep your eyes open and your hooves ready.'

Something bad had happened in Hoofington. Something that had gotten a lot of ponies killed, but why and for what? I slowly looked over the decayed manor, the torn apart rooms, the desperate fighting by the aristocrats and their guards. And worse, why did my mane itch like mad the more I thought about it?

* * *

My hoof for a shotgun. Trying to bash and ram these ghouls to death -- or redeath... or whatever killing ghouls was! -- had me exhausted. Of course, that might have just been the cold that brought every ghoul in earshot whenever I coughed or sneezed. Which was frequently. Why couldn't I be trapped alone and naked while healthy?

The first floor offered little. I found evidence of Glory in the form of pink heaps of glowing dust and of P-21 in a few fresh detonations in the halls. Some ghouls that were crushed and dismembered had to be the work of Rampage. Whatever had happened to my friends, they at least had their weapons!

I found new annoying, nagging clues: an auditorium with weapon turrets and destroyed robotic sentries... and a lot of dead aristocrats. A makeshift gallows off the foyer. A skywagon that had been dropped into a conservatory, smashing through the glass, scattering its load of yellow barrels and littering the room with pools and splashes of rainbow-colored goop that'd crept to every inch of that wing of the manor. Oh, forget my shotgun! I'd give anything for my PipBuck to be working!

But first, I needed a kitchen. Not just because I was hungry. I tried to stay as quiet as possible as I trotted past the banquet hall and down into the adjacent disaster area. Instead of my eyes, I used my ears. The kitchen had flooded with rancid water that had become a kind of soup of spoiled rot. Pausing and listening, I heard the slow gait of a ghoul.

Or two. Or three. I was on my fourth thighbone; two hundred years in the Hoofington damp did nothing to help preserve these remains. If I was lucky, though, the kitchen would have something more substantial.

Then my ears twitched. "Taking forever... really... how does he expect me to create masterpieces in these conditions?" The voice sounded like a rattled cup of rusty nails. Carefully, I poked my head around the corner and looked around with my amber gaze. A large ghoul stood patiently before a stove, apparently unaware that it'd long since stopped working.

I took one step into the muck filling the kitchen and his remaining ear twitched; he turned surprisingly quickly and looked right at me with yellow eyes. A cleaver and a carving knife levitated around him. "Who dares trespass in my domain?" Our eyes met, and the boiled-looking pony suddenly grinned. "Eh? A glow job? Nice. He finally hired some quality wait staff for poor Cookie?"

I see 'em all the time on ghouls. I must have sucked up enough radiation for my eyes to glow like those rare ghouls, and given the mess that was my coat, I supposed I looked appropriately ghoulish. "Yeah. What do you need done, boss?" My cold-ravaged throat made me sound just as nasty as he. I saw a disintegration pistol on the counter beside him and edged closer.

"Boss, huh? I like that." The ghoul grinned from ear to missing ear. Actually, that was all he could do. I got the impression he wasn't exactly all there, as most of his kitchen lay half submerged. "These nobles... always in such a rush. Why don't you set started on dicing the vegetables while I get ready for the main course," Cookie said as he pulled the hatch open a little. "I hope they like the new menu... Ooooh, the turkey is almost done."

"Let me out!" Glory screamed at the top of her lungs from the depths of the oven.

I'd moved closer, looking for what I needed, when my thinking stopped. Without a moment's hesitation, my horn grabbed the largest, heaviest, and probably dullest cleaver on the counter and swung the chopper into his spine. The last vestiges of sanity went out at that moment as Cookie whirled; apparently ghoul anatomy differed a bit from that of the living, as his animated flesh continued moving. He let out that mad scream as he reared up.

This time, their habit helped me. In that second, I yanked out the chopper and brought it sideways through one of his rear legs. Despite the rusty edge, the weight of the blade was enough to cut clean through the limb. He fell back against the stove, and I was on top of him, trying to keep him pinned as the chopper fell again and again. Finally, it finished cutting through his thick neck with a solid 'thunk', and the massive ghoul fell still.

"Glory!" I shouted, yanking open the stove and looking into the tiny space. Her pinprick pupils stared back at me as she lay there, curled up in the stove. I could see and smell that being trapped in the tiny space had been too much for her. I reached in and pulled her out, hugging her tightly as she shook more and more. "Shhh... Glory... it's okay, Glory. It's okay. You're okay. You're safe," I said over and over again.

How did Glory and I help you? Finally, the shock broke as she sobbed into my shoulder. I stroked her mane with a gentle smile, and she started to calm down. "You're alive. You're alive," she muttered in relief as she pressed her face to my shoulder.

"Glory, what happened? Where are we?"

She looked at me in surprise, then sighed. "You got struck by lightning, Blackjack. Right in the PipBuck. It was bad. I think most of the charge went through the plates in your barding, but it heated them till they melted through your armor." She blinked and tapped her hooves together. "Oh. And your heart stopped. Roses managed to conjure a spark strong enough to restart your heart, and we gave you every healing potion we could. I even almost used Hydra," she confessed, looking guilty.

"The storm was getting worse, so we headed for this manor. Unfortunately, as soon as we got inside, the ghouls attacked! P-21 dragged you off somewhere. Roses and Thorn went upstairs. Rampage and I were forced down here." Glory started to shake as she pointed to a small door. "We thought to hide... okay, I wanted us to hide in there but... there was a hole. She fell in."

I walked over to the door she'd pointed to. The little alcove was just big enough for two ponies. "What hole?" Then my hoof felt the rusty edge. There had been a metal lid, but it hadn't been up to holding the weight of the Reaper's armor. "I think... I think it's a well," I said as I looked at the still water.

"Poor Rampage. I can't believe that's how she'd go..." Glory said softly.

I felt a niggling horror. "Glory... I doubt she is."

Glory looked in the room and then at me. "You think she's still *alive*?" She started shaking. I had to admit, it was unnerving to me as well.

I couldn't imagine Rampage not trying to drown herself. "We'll need some rope or chain or something. If she's alive, we can't leave her down there," I said, wondering how deep the water-filled pit was. Why was it never easy?! I raised the chopper. "Get your pistol. Once we find the others, we'll try and get her out, and then we'll have to get out of here. I dunno how bad it is, but we're sucking up radiation." One of the many PipBuck functions I missed terribly.

"It's broken. Too many shots without replacement parts," she said as she splashed through the muck to the burned-out weapon and her shredded gear. "What should I use?"

I looked at Cookie's cleaver and lifted it into the air before Glory. She looked ill. "Or would you prefer knives?" Now she looked really ill. "Just think of it as really intense surgery. The procedure is head amputation." Okay, that got a little crooked smile.

"Blackjack, how can you crack jokes like this?" she shouted, then reached out to take the cleaver between her hooves, looking both upset and a little amused despite herself.

"What? I should be scared?" I said as I looked around the kitchen, grinning as if it were nothing at all. I couldn't help it! "Why..."

"When I was a little filly and the lights would turn down looo-o-ow.
The darkness and the shadows would make my fear grooo-o-ow.
I'd hide under my bed from what I thought I saw
But Gin Rummy said that wasn't the way to deal with threats at all!"

"You're... singing?" Glory murmured in shock as I strode out into the hall, calling out like a bucket of rusty nails and drawing every hungry bastard in earshot. "How can you be singing?!" Unfazed I continued:

"She'd say: Blackjack, you need to stand strong,
Lower your center of maaa-a-ass
You'll see that they can't hurt you
If you cut them off with a paaa-a-ass!"

The ghouls that spilled out after us met each swing of my rusty chopper, heads and legs parting under its heavy, jagged blade. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" I laughed out with each sucking 'thock' of the blade into the monsters in the hall as we advanced. If I didn't get one, Glory finished it off behind me, watching me with astonished eyes. "Sooooo..."

Chop up all the ghosties!
Tear up all the grossly!
Glare up at the creepy!
Smash up any weepy!
Kick out at the kooky!
Slice up all the spooky!"

A final surge of ghouls charged as I spread my legs wide in the hall, bracing myself and swinging the chopper as I shouted, "And cut that big dumb scary face and kick him hard in the throat if he won't leave you alone and if he comes at you again then he's got another think coming and the very idea of him hurting you just wanna... hee hee HAHAHAAAA!" I laughed wildly as I lunged forward, the jagged

chopper tearing the ghouls into piles of parts as I finished with one horrid buzzing note, “Choouoooooooooooooop!” With my last swing, the head of the last ghoul arched over my back to land at Glory’s hooves.

Standing in the hall with snot running down my face, grinning from ear to ear, my eyes glowing like amber moons, I looked back at her. “See? Just need the right weapon and the right attitude.”

Of course, that was the moment when, as we stood exposed in the main hall beneath the balconies, a half dozen ghouls charged, and these had died wearing body armor that still looked intact enough to be trouble. Still, have chopper, will chop!

Then something metal pinged off the ground in the middle of the crowd of undead and an explosion ripped most of them to pieces. I glanced up at P-21, who was looking at me in furious frustration. “Hey, P-21. Good timing,” I said as I walked, taking off head or limb, whichever I got to first, into the midst of the ghouls as they struggled to rise. Behind me, Glory looked at one squirming ghoul and gave a hesitant little chop that just made the corpse jerk and squirt semi-congealed blood on her face. I think she was about ready to climb back into the oven.

“Blackjack, are you brain damaged?” he shouted down at me.

I blinked, thought about it for a second, sat on my haunches, and held my forehooves a few inches apart. “Little bit.”

“Little... I... oh... you...” He stomped his hooves as I strolled towards the stairs. “You are... the most... the... I...” He was actually sputtering by the time I reached him.

“I missed you too,” I replied as I nudged his hip with my own, cutting him off. “And thanks for taking care of me while I was out.”

Now he’d gone from babbling with fury to stammering with embarrassment. “Ah... yeah,” he said as he stepped back from me, rubbing his head and apparently unsure how to react. “You’re okay? Right?”

“You and Glory are. If we can free Rampage and find Roses and Thorn, I’ll be fucking ecstatic,” I chuckled, looking at a second set of barricades at the top of the steps. “Please tell me you found some working firearms?”

“Not unless they shoot rust. I’ve got some shock grenades and a magic grenade left, and that’s it.”

P-21 went over to Glory, and I sighed and bent over, coughing and hacking, spitting phlegm over a fallen picture of some pretentious-looking unicorn. I took a few breaths, trying to steady myself. “How is she?” P-21 asked Glory; I was surprised I heard them at all.

“She’s doing it again,” Glory muttered softly, probably watching me in worry.

“Pushing herself?”

“Mhmm...”

I turned and gave them both a smile. “Hey. I’m fine. I’ve fought Deus. A head cold is nothing,” I said as I rubbed my sweaty brow with a hoof. Oh Goddesses, how I could use some Buck right now. “Come on. Let’s find Thorn and Roses.” I looked at the three second floor wings. “Have you checked them all?”

"All but that one," he said, nodding his head at a barricade before us. The fancy furniture was sprinkled liberally with bullet holes and shell casings. From the corpses on the far side, it clearly hadn't been enough to keep out the vengeful ponies below; we carefully picked our way over the top. Fewer attackers had made it this far, so the vandalism was somewhat reduced. Generations of handsome unicorn males decorated the walls, fungus nibbling away at the once vibrant colors of their portraits.

"I don't suppose you know how to get this working, do you?" I asked P-21 as I waved the PipBuck at him.

"What do I look like, a PipBuck technician?" he asked with a worried little smile.

My ears twitched and I raised a hoof to my lips. I walked to the door and pressed my ear against the paneling. "Shhh... be very quiet and the bad ponies will go away," whispered a voice. I checked the door. Locked. I stepped aside to let him at it. Two bobby pins later, the lock opened.

I knocked on the door. The pair stared at me in shock. "Bad ponies don't knock," I said before opening the door and stepping inside.

A nursery. Oh sweet Celestia, full of grace, don't make me fight ghoulish foals.

The bright colors were faded, the edges of the room sporting faint decay. The toys had definitely seen better days, and the books, for all the care paid to them, were clearly on their last legs as well. Sitting on a soft couch was a surprisingly young ghoulish mare. Her decayed teal wings spread out to protectively hug the dead pony children around her. She wore a faded and threadbare nurse's uniform. "Please... don't hurt the children..." she whispered softly, her cloudy eyes following me warily along with the gaze of the dead foals.

And one live pony.

Thorn rose out from under her wing. "No, Miss Harpica. This is a good pony. This is Miss Blackjack," she said softly as she wiggled out of the cluster and gave herself a shake before she smiled up at me. "Are you okay, Miss Blackjack? You don't look so good." She then turned to face the other ghoulish foals. "She got zapped by lightning!" That was apparently quite impressive.

I didn't feel so good, to be honest. I hadn't healed fully from my 'zap', my coat was scratched all to hell, and to top it all off, I felt dead on my hooves... well... relatively. "Yeah. I'm just a bit sick."

The foals slipped off Harpica's lap and moved to different sections of the nursery to play with the toys. There was something disturbingly... methodical about their play. The actions weren't done out of joy. The children played because they had always played. The rote behavior was all they knew. Harpica stood, and the undead pegasus approached with a nervous look. "Um... miss... if it pleases you, miss... may I suggest a rejuvenation potion? Or I could try and summon the nurse for you. Things have been such a mess since... well... the bad night."

"Well, a restoration potion would be wonderful but..." But she was already trotting over to the medical box. I didn't know how to explain that by now the potion was likely so much sludge.

She returned with a vibrant purple bottle. I took it from her, staring at it dumbfounded. "Is something the matter, Miss Blackjack?"

"I guess there aren't any Enervation fields here," I said, smiling and glad to finally get a break. The restoration potion soothed delightfully as it went down my throat, its magic restoring and regenerating my aching body. The wonderful sensation tickled from horn to hoof. Despite the exhaustion and the

sickness creeping through my body, I found myself oddly refreshed.

Glory looked around the nursery. "Ah... Harpica? What happened here?"

"Oh. Well. You see, their parents came here expecting to go on a journey to someplace safe. It was a bit of a festivity, you see. Quite the to do. I wasn't really a part of it all; my place was here with the children. However, I understand there was some problem with the sky carriages being late. The guests all became very nervous. And then... then there was the most horrible flash. And another. And another. The guests were all terribly upset with the good Master."

"I'll bet. He seems an easy pony to be upset at," I muttered. The ghou's cooked-meat-colored cheeks creased faintly as she fought to hide a smile. Then it faded.

"There was a problem down at the door. Apparently, many ponies from the surrounding towns and villages came here thinking there was safety. They claimed the good Master had a stable built below the premises. I thought it quite odd; if he had such a thing, why wouldn't he have gone inside? But the ponies, they were convinced that safety was within. Then the fighting began. Master Vanity came by and offered to help me escape... but..." She looked at the ghou foals with a sad smile. "But I was hired to care for the children till their parents return for them. I couldn't leave them."

I felt a chill rush through me. Were all pegasi so loyal? Without really thinking about it, I put a hoof across Glory's shoulders and hugged her closer to me.

"Finally, there was a great crash, and soon after that the fighting stopped. It became very quiet. I peeked downstairs and found the skywagon and the dripping barrels. I felt... quite odd. When I returned, I think I had some of the... stuff on me. We've been waiting since then." She looked at the foals and gave a little nod. "They've all been quite well behaved. Even with..." She glanced at her ghouified flesh and sighed.

"Waiting for what?" P-21 asked with a sad frown.

Harpica just gave a small smile and shrug.

Then I blinked. "Master Vanity?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, the good Master's younger sibling." Her lips curled in a fond smile. "He was quite kind..." Then she immediately blushed and added, "Not that I'm thinking above my station, miss! I believe he had his eyes on another pegasus any... oh dear, now I'm gossiping! I'll lose my position."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," P-21 said dryly.

"You said that Vanity helped ponies to escape? Did he leave with them?"

Her smile grew. "Master Vanity was positively valiant. He single-hoofedly fended off dozens of attackers. He always was the superior duelist."

"And did he escape as well?" I asked with a smile, imagining the roots of King Awesome and the Society.

Her smile faded a little. "His room is just down the hall, miss."

I swallowed hard, looking over my shoulder. "He's still here?" The suddenly solemn pegasus nodded once. "We'll... be right back."

"Blackjack? What are you doing?" P-21 asked as we stepped back into the hall.

"He was a Marauder! One of Macintosh's Marauders," I said with a little hop on my hooves. "He might be able to tell me about Macintosh and Maripony."

"He might eat your face," P-21 suggested.

That sobered me. "Then he needs to be laid to rest," I muttered softly.

We carefully checked the other doors for some sign of Roses, though I liked to think that Vanity was protecting her like he had the others that terrible day. The bodies in the hall were arranged in odd crescents. We came upon three more roaming ghouls, their guard livery rusted into plates on their undead hides.

Finally, the last arc of slain foes lay right outside a pair of double doors. I swallowed, wishing that I had my E.F.S. and could have some clue if he was hostile or not. Finally, though, I sighed and knocked on his door. No response. Not good. I swallowed and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"You know this is a bad idea," P-21 muttered before he knelt and started to open the lock.

"You didn't see him. He's a hero. A real, true war hero," I said, nearly bouncing on my hooves in eagerness. When the lock clicked open, I opened the door slowly and stepped into a room lit by a flickering magical chandelier. Dust covered every surface, and the lack of tracks on the carpet dashed my hopes of finding Roses in here. A huge canopied bed was draped in fine sheets that stirred faintly at our passage.

Then I spotted him sitting before a desk. He was lying back in his chair in that odd fashion that I occasionally assumed, his eyes closed, his hide in surprisingly good condition despite being a ghoul. Oddly, he still possessed his slightly faded emerald mane. "Vanity? Um... Prince Vanity...? I've wanted to meet you ever since I found out about the Marauders. I wanted to ask..." My voice faded away as I saw he hadn't moved.

My horn glowed, and I gently brushed the dust off his features. No facsimile of life lingered in his dull eyes, nor had his skin sloughed away. He sat in perfect repose as he had for two centuries. Black powder lay thick over his lower limbs where it had pooled and spilled. In his lap lay a silver picture frame. Ever so carefully, my magic reached out and brushed the dust away.

Jetstream grinned up at me with a faintly blushing and awkward-looking Vanity sitting beside her. They both looked so young in their brand new uniforms, he dressed in purple and she in blue.

P-21 opened the desk drawer, making me jump. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if he has anything useful. Like, say, a gun?" I hated to admit it, but he was right. Sour as it was, he might have something we could use.

The only thing of note was a carefully folded piece of paper resting on a wooden box. I lifted it and unfolded the paper.

Dear Director,

Courtesy demands that I say that I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirits. In honesty, however, I pray you are suffering as slow and terrible a death as I. Project Redoubt has been successful beyond your dreams. It is my sincerest hope that you die in your hole; you have doomed

hundreds with your duplicity, and I have been complicit in their murder. My lesser regret is that I will never be able to deliver this resignation in person along with a blade through your callow heart. For my greater regret, I can only pray that someday, somehow, she retrieves these. I held them for her, as I swore I would.

Celestia and Luna, forgive your nephew for my perfidy.

Vanity.

A war hero... he was supposed to be a war hero. I hadn't imagined him as something else.

Project Chimera. Project Eternity. Project Redoubt. I could scream. Had there been a *Project A Clue for Blackjack?*

I opened the wooden box and looked at the four orbs within. One had been smeared with blood, the black streaks marking it the most recent.

"No, Blackjack. You are not jumping into memory orbs right now," P-21 said as he reached over and closed the box. "We have to find Roses."

"Yeah," I muttered as I backed away. Was it just my imagination, or was Vanity smiling?

* * *

After half an hour and a dozen rooms, we'd found no sign of Roses. My nose was running, my throat burning, my body aching, and my mane itching. I'd really had enough of the creepy house. My only relief was that the pale bastard hadn't shown up with strange little teasers and ominous card tricks. He was really missing out on his opportunity here. The levels of weirdness were increasing exponentially as we went from room to room.

In one, there was an art gallery dedicated to Fluttershy, apparently done when she'd been young and... a model? That was what it looked like, though I had a hard time imagining the yellow pegasus surrounded by screaming fans. Strike that. I could imagine it easily. There were also pictures of a younger, lighter-haired unicorn who bore a striking resemblance to Rarity. 'Sweetie Belle'.

A second room seemed devoted to the Ministry of Image, ranging from pictures of the buildings in Canterlot and Hoofington to internal papers and documents to news clippings about the Ministry Mare, which seemed few and far between. It looked like the M.o.I. was not big on self-promotion.

Another room held pictures of Rarity. Many of these pictures were more clandestine in nature, ranging from a few official pictures of the great mare to secretive photographs.

One room was completely empty save for eight defense turrets and a pedestal holding a wedding ring. I thought it best not to investigate further.

One room was full of dresses...

Then Glory's ears twitched. "Is that music?" I paused and listened. Definitely chamber music, recorded, by the scratchy sound of it... and an oddly familiar contrabass. "Hurry," I said as we ran. The double doors were blocked, but I could see through into the decayed ballroom. Roses stood in an elaborate and fine ball gown. Dozens of bruises bloomed across her face, blood leaking from her nose and split lip.

Most ghouls were, of course, disturbing. Seeing one dressed in formal attire was slightly more

so. However, this buck's cheeks had rotted away clear to his ears. His lidless eyes transformed his entire countenance into that of a monstrous mad horse. Grayish-brown mane stuck out in tufts along his spine down to his threadbare tail. I could only hope he was insane; I could not imagine existence with such features.

Strike that, I really hoped he was sane... and nice... and had saved Roses from some other source of injury.

From the look of terror on her face, I doubted it.

"Now!" he said grandly, his boiled-sounding voice booming over the scratchy recorded music. He gestured to a silk rose in a small jar. "Say it... right." He took a deep breath and gestured to himself, his breath hissing through those horrid vents in his face.

"Well, Hello. I am Prince Blueblood."

Oh, sweet Goddesses, did he just waggle his eyebrows? Did the pony that once bragged the war would only last a month just... hit on a beaten unicorn?! In what universe did alicorn Princesses have to die while this... this... *thing*... was allowed to persist!

"And I am... Rarity?" Roses whispered.

"No!" he shouted, reared up, and slammed his forehooves into her face. As she lay there, sprawled and quivering, he knelt and then said in a softer voice, "Oh dear, you've fallen. Let me help you back on your hooves." His magic hauled her upright.

The three of us shared a look and immediately started to tear at the desks and boxes blocking the door.

"Please, let me go," Roses begged, sobbing as she slumped. "I have a daughter. Let me go back to her, please."

"No! No! No!" Blueblood screamed down at her. "She doesn't have a daughter! She was supposed to have sons. MY sons. But she didn't. She wouldn't. She dared... dared... reject me! Didn't she know who I was? I would have made her a princess! I would have made her everything." He then levitated a sword off the table beside him. "Now, dear lady, I pray you, say it right."

Roses looked over at us trying to break through the doors. Just another minute or two and we'd be through.

"And I am R... Rarity," Roses said in a shaky voice. She looked over at the fake flower. "Oh my, w... what a lovely r...rose."

I think he was actually trying to grin; too bad it was already his default expression. "Why, you mean, this rose?" He swept it up, held it in his jaws, and then neatly slipped it into her hair. "It goes with your lovely eyes."

Roses gave a shaky smile as Blueblood lifted his hooves and held her shoulders. "Did I say it right? Are you happy now?" His voice rose higher. "Are you happy now? Are you? Are you happy?!" he screamed in her face. "Did I do it *right*?"

"Yes!" she screamed in desperation.

"Liar!" he roared, plunging the sword into her chest. "You always lie to me!"

"Roses!" I screamed as I hacked at the last barrier blocking the door.

From down the hall roared a mare, "Move, Blackjack!" I turned in time to see Rampage, lacking armor and dripping wet, racing down the hall towards me. I barely had time to leap aside as she rammed into the barricade with enough force to crash through the wardrobe blocking the door.

Blueblood gave a long-suffering sigh as he twisted and withdrew the sword, muttering, "Wonderful. Peasants."

"You bloody animal!" screamed Rampage as we followed in behind her. The ghoul simply raised his sword before him with a bored expression. At the last moment he stepped aside, the sword flashing in her path.

With a thump, her head went rolling across the ballroom floor, her body walking ahead a few more feet before collapsing.

"Such rude interruptions," he muttered, then his eyes landed on me and they brightened. "Sweet Rarity. Have you come to reconsider my offer?"

"I've come to kick your ass," I screamed as I brought the chopper around in a sweeping arc. He jumped over the jagged edge with shocking ease. I didn't care. The sight of Roses stabbed through the heart and of Rampage's head lying there with a slack, confused expression fueled me to destroy this monster. Especially before I started to care about it.

"No!" he yelled as his sword feinted around my wild blows and chops. The tip sliced into my hide as he adopted that hissing voice of horrid geniality. "You are supposed to say: sweet Prince Blueblood, of course I accept your proposal of marriage. That is what you are supposed to say!" He hissed through those gaping teeth, "Then we live happily ever after! Like we're supposed to!"

I swung the chopper about as I bled, my wilder swings gouging out chunks of moldy dance floor as I struggled to get clear of his blade. His fine steel grated and rasped against the heavy edge of my own weapon as we circled each other. Worse, as effective as the chopper had been against mindless ghouls that charged recklessly forward, it was painfully useless against his darting and slashing saber. He danced away from my awkward swings and around me as if this were a ball, while the tip of his blade sliced and nicked my exposed limbs and hide. For all his pomposity, two centuries had clearly been long enough for him to get really good at slicing a pony up. Maybe some magic bullets would work? The first glowing cone of force smacked into his torso instead of his face and didn't seem to faze him at all, and the second he actually dodged! Without S.A.T.S., I could barely hit him with them, and it looked like they wouldn't hurt him even if I could! As much as it galled and terrified me, I didn't know how I was supposed to beat him!

"I'd say Rarity had you pegged perfectly," I said as defiantly as I could, panting as blood pattered under me. He was standing with alert poise, not even looking at all tired. As ravaged as his body was, none of it was due to me. "You don't deserve a mare like her."

"I am a prince. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find a princess that meets the proper standards?" he said grandly as he looked down at me with that mocking, endless rictus. "I would have made her everything. Her children would have had the blood of alicorns in them!" His voice rose more and more and I hoped he'd made some mistake I could exploit. "And why? Because I refused to eat her friend's carnival fare? Because I didn't want to walk through a puddle? I am a prince! There are expectations of me that she could never understand!" I watched Glory move around behind him, but with contemptuous ease he whipped the tip of his blade at her. She dropped her cleaver and fell back, pressing her hooves to the left side of her face.

His voice dropped back to a calm hiss. "Something peasants like you... and she... could never appreciate." He advanced for the kill. "I would have made her glorious."

"She made herself the mare that she was. She didn't need you for anything!" I charged again. He ducked his head under my desperate blow as his sword flashed. I knew that feeling. I knew it all too well as I fell on my rump, my forehooves hugging my gut as I felt my insides threatening to spill out once more. Oh... please don't vomit in front of this... thing... I could only barely keep my magical grip on the chopper as his sword floated around and pressed to my throat. "She didn't need you..." I whispered softly, shaking as I felt myself near my limit, the blade starting to slice into me.

"Of course she didn't. No pony did. But I needed her," he hissed softly.

"Hey, Prince Asshole!" P-21 shouted from the doorway. "You need this?" he asked as he held up the wedding ring and then set it atop the green magic grenade. He flicked the stem away and ran, dragging Glory with him.

"No!" Blueblood screamed as he ran toward the ring and grenade. The flash of magic disintegrated most of his face, his chest, and his sword, sending him sliding back towards me. One eye still focused on me as his corpse was cooked for real. "Ra... ri... ty..." he gurgled in his throat, extending a hoof towards me.

Blood dripped over my squeezing hooves as I looked down at him. "I'm not Rarity," I said as I raised the chopper with all my focus above his smoking neck. "But even if I were, the answer would still be no!"

And the heavy thud of the cleaver echoing across the ballroom reinforced that.

I slumped on my side, feeling the disturbing sensation of my blood spilling and my guts trying to slither out of my abdominal cavity.

"Nice job," Rampage said with a grin as she looked down at the decapitated ghoul.

I stared up at her pink eyes and scarred hide. I looked over at her severed *head*. Her thick red mane hung in tangled curls around her striped body. P-21 looked even more astonished. Glory, however, was still curled up tightly and shaking, clutching her face as tightly as I held in my guts.

"He cut off your head!" I groaned.

She just looked at me with a smirk that didn't reach her eyes. "Eh, I got better."

* * *

I'd like to say that I marched triumphantly out of Blueblood Manor, but the fact is that they dragged me out on the bloody dress. P-21 and Harpica brought out Roses covered in a dusty sheet. Rampage fetched her armor from the bottom of the well -- I didn't exactly want to know how -- and obliterated the few remaining feral ghouls outside around the wagon. The rain may have been miserable, but at least the lightning had let up. From the blackened trees around the manor, going inside had been the right thing to do.

I didn't anticipate sharing the wagon with thirteen foals, however, dressed in their prim cloaks and summer hats against the weather. The ghouls seemed positively thrilled, thought they kept it more or less to themselves. After all, I was bleeding out slowly and Thorn was now an orphan. "We know how you feel," one of the ghouls told the pink unicorn. "Our parents are dead too."

As we left, I glanced back at the wing where I hoped Vanity rested peacefully. Once more I glimpsed the dark alicorn, this time looking out a window at me before walking out of view. My mind was playing peekaboo with my senses. All I needed now was an obscure reference to card houses or a sight of Celestia poking around and I'd be set.

* * *

Our arrival at Chapel was a bit chaotic. Priest immediately rushed to Glory, who then turned him firmly towards me. That was about the time the amount of blood still in my body dropped below the amount of blood needed to remain conscious. I am pleased to note that in this state of unconsciousness, I had no dreams that involved metaphoric fatalistic card hustlers. Sometimes even I get lucky.

I came to slowly, lying on a mattress with the strangest sense of having done this before. It was the same cellar as last time, only now there were two IV racks that held a slow drip from a blood pack, another from a pack of RadAway, and one of Med-X. My entire torso was wrapped in healing bandages. I might have been put out with Scalpel for working with Caprice, but right now I could really use her healing contraption.

"Hey," a tinny, mechanical voice said above me.

Slowly, I looked up at the strange little bug robot. "Hey," I replied weakly. "Let me guess. I look bad?"

"You look pretty awful. Yeah," Watcher replied as he lowered himself down to eye level. "I heard you killed Blueblood. I didn't even know he was still alive."

"He was too obsessed to die. Even at the end, he wanted the one mare who told him no," I said, shaking my head with a groan. "I think he wanted a second chance with her, but had to win." I shook my head a little. "I feel sorry for him."

"Well, I was going to mention this to LittlePip, but I think I'll have to save it. No way anypony would believe this," Watcher said as his wings buzzed almost inaudibly. "She's coming to see me."

"She is?" I blinked, in a bit of a sick, Med-X haze. "She is... way to go."

"I thought about what you said and... you're right. For two hundred years I've been trying to be like Blueblood. Have everything just so. Everything the way I want it to be, nice and safe. But if I keep that up, eventually I won't be able to reach out to anypony. I'll just be stuck here forever."

"I hope it works out. I know that LittlePip must be a special mare for you to take this chance." I gave a lazy little grin. "Need some pointers? I've dealt with professionals."

There was a momentary pause. "What?"

"Well you... and her... together for the first time?" I gave a lazy smile.

There was a long silence, and then, "Blackjack, that's just wrong on so many levels." I hoped that he was laughing in those pauses. I think he was. Hoped so. "I also wanted to say congratulations. A friend of a friend told Bottlecap that you had the money together, and she told that friend to tell her friend that she was going to arrange for the meeting. You'll finally find out what EC-1101 is."

"Yeah, about that..." I sighed and pulled my hoof out from under my blankets. I held up the charred casing and burned-out screen. "Is this gonna be a problem?"

Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Ghoulfriend -- 10% more damage to ghoul targets and an opportunity for additional speech options.

(Note to the Curious from Hinds: I'm still here, if anypony was wondering. Somber just didn't add the endnote to this one. I assume that Bronode will be going over this at some point, too.)

(Cause Somber is not a smart pony.)

(No, because Somber is a pony who got up at three in the morning and spent nine hours writing this chapter.)

(Exactly! Not a smart pony!! ::Flops over unconscious:: Oh... and you are awesome, Kkat... awesome awesome.... snnnzt....)

(Greetings to everypony from sunny Spain! Too sunny, actually, I like your work, Celly, but *goddamn!* Bronode here, and yes, though I may be delirious from the heat, I will indeed be giving this a look over and sending updates as soon as I'm able since I don't even have access to a goddamn phone line out here. Somepony wanna trade places? *Anypony?*)