
Fallout: Equestria - Project Horizons

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Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, the virtues of friendship were cast aside in favor of greed, suspicion and war. Finally, the world itself was ravaged by the fires of countless megaspells; civilisation, as it once was, ceased to exist. The city of Hoofington, however, did not die easily. Even with the world shattered, the ominous, irradiated towers of the Core remained standing. Formerly the center of Equestria's wartime research and development efforts, the ruined city now slumbers, a place of poisoned secrets and perilous treasures. One unicorn mare, already burdened by guilt and self-doubt, finds herself thrust into the center of Hoofington's web of intrigue. With a diverse and dysfunctional band of companions at her side, she must unravel a mystery over two hundred years in the making - if the trials of the Equestrian Wasteland don't unravel her first.

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Volume II

Blood and Stars

Free of pursuit for the time being, Blackjack sets to finding out more about the mysterious data file that the monstrous Reaper, Deus, invaded her home stable to find; a task made easier by powerful and enigmatic new allies. More and more, however, thoughts of her past mistakes weigh heavily on the Security Mare's conscience, and the hunt for answers soon transforms into an impossible quest for redemption.

17. Identity

"It's all secrets and lies with those ponies!!"

I'm starting to wonder: Am I still Blackjack? Sure. My cutie mark is the same queen and ace. I have the same security barding, modified and very patched up though it is. I'm still not the smartest pony and I have a terrifying habit of stringing together half-baked ideas on the fly and calling them a plan. I'm still as mule-headed as ever; that will never change.

But since I've left the stable, I've killed ponies. I did that before, too, only I painted it with colorful euphemisms like 'taking out of service' and 'defending myself to their death'. Now, I just kill, plain and simple, with shotgun and carbine and fire axe and my bare hooves if I need to. I'm also more concerned with survival. In Stable 99, everypony knew that the stable was one hard sneeze from failure. Now I had ponies that would kill me for bottlecaps. Heck, even the very land itself would kill me. There was already a time bomb inside me that might finish me, or maybe mutate me and then kill me.

Still, at least spending most of my time almost dead made the few poor bits I had left feel a lot better. Relatively.

There've been changes in me, too. I think a little more. I know that I'm still not a smart pony, though. I just don't know things. I don't pick up on them as I should. I can shoot things and hit things and that's about it.

I find that I care a little more. It's funny to think of myself as less callous outside the stable than inside it, but it's true. I feel bad for ponies who are trying to kill me; how crazy is that? They're trying to kill me, and I feel bad for them about it.

...Maybe it's not that I'm changing. Maybe I'm just realizing that the pony who lived in that stable wasn't who I thought she was. But if she wasn't... then just who is she?

It would take us a while to get down from the top of the Exchange. Walking wasn't the problem; my legs were strong enough, and Deus' final moments had knocked down so much of the walls that we had plenty of slopes we could scramble down. The problem was simply summoning up the will to stand and make our way to the

streets below. While I kept staring out at the rain P-21, ever practical, went to dig out Taurus and check his belongings. I couldn't fault him for that; some scavenger would come by sooner or later for them. The duffel bag carried a few missiles and a few dozen rounds for his hunting rifle.

I had to admit, that rifle was a beautiful weapon. The stock was made of well-worn and oiled tan wood with a brand of a bull on the stock. The action slid like silk, with only the softest rasp, and the scope was cleaner and truer than my assault carbine. I ejected the clip, looking at the armor piercing rounds that had tried to bring down the technomagical monster and failed. I'd done no better. In the end, it was P-21's bomb and Gem's sacrifice that had mortally crippled Deus, and his own weapons that had finished him.

I had so many reasons to be happy for his death, so why wasn't I? I doubted that any bounty hunters would be after me now that he'd been finished off. Heck, technically this made me a Reaper. No pony would mess with me now, right? He'd violated my stable and made my life a living hell with the price he'd placed on my head. He'd threatened my friends and mocked a mortally wounded Mini. So why wasn't I dancing in the street right now and singing 'ding, dong, the Deus is dead!'

"I dunno," answered the old pale horse sitting beside me on the ledge, slowly working the cards between his hooves as he looked at me with his sad, milky old eyes.

"Shut up. I'm in no mood for crazy right now," I said softly as I closed my eyes.

"I reckon not, but here I am," he chuckled.

I rubbed my eyes, then glanced over at him again. The cards hissed softly between his hooves. "What is this supposed to accomplish? I get it. Taint is driving me nuts. So what's with all the spooky little card metaphors?"

He just smiled and shook his head, "Oh, well, us hallucinations need to do something to keep things interesting. Otherwise, some ponies just don't think," he said as he dealt five cards to me and five to himself. "You know why you're not happy, don't you? Deus wasn't exactly the brains of the operation, was he?"

Don't look. . . don't look. "No. Sanguine, and whoever is employing him." I sighed. He'd told me to listen to the recordings and I had.

The cards were right in front of me; I couldn't help myself. I slowly picked them up, looking at the spread. I didn't have any idea what game we were playing now. A pink mare with a curly mane was balancing on a ball on the edge of a cliff, a cupcake on one hoof and a present on the other. A white alicorn grasping a pair of scales with a

sad expression. A pair of red eyes peeking out of a cage of nine swords. An empty bottle of Wild Pegasus with eight upside-down shot glasses on a bar with a mare silhouetted in a doorway. A purple mare hanging by her rear hoof from a rusted street light.

“I think I got a flush,” I muttered, glancing at him. “Why can’t my fucking broken brain just play things straight for once?”

“You tell me. It’s your brain,” the old buck chuckled as he put down his spread next to mine. A moon overlooked by a sad young black alicorn. A handsome unicorn buck smiling, his mane and horn bright yellow. The black towers of Hoofington wreathed in green light. Six swords piercing the clouds with upturned blades. A yellow pegasus with long, beautiful pink hair sitting before a pool and hugging a strange little blue and green ball in her hooves. I couldn’t tell if the card was upside down or not.

“I’m sure that this is all fascinating and chock full of meaning and mystery, but you should know that I’m not a smart pony. I don’t get stuff like this.” I sighed, closing my eyes. “I don’t understand anything any more. Why can’t I do anything? I can’t protect Glory. I can’t make everything right with P-21. I can’t understand Rampage. I can’t even be happy that one of my enemies is dead.” I slowly lay back, rubbing my face with my hooves. “And to top it all off, I’m having conversations with crazy hallucinations that give me mysterious, creepy cards.”

“Blackjack?” Glory asked softly, “Who are you talking to?”

“Just myself, Glory.” I sighed, looking over and seeing that he was gone. I sat up and looked at her again. Her eyes were dull and lost. What could I ask? ‘Are you okay?’ Of course she wasn’t. ‘How are you feeling?’ She was miserable. Finally, I sighed, stood, and walked to her. “What can I do to help, Glory?”

“You can’t call me that anymore,” she replied softly.

I closed my eyes, wishing that I could turn her elder sibling into a feather duster. “You don’t have to listen to her, Glory.”

“I have four sisters, Blackjack,” she said softly. “Dusk is the oldest. Then Moonshadow. Then me. Lucent and Lambent are younger. My father lives on his pension through the Enclave. Dusk is an Enclave security officer. Moonshadow is in research. Lu and Lamb are in Enclave schools. Do you know what a family member turning Dashite will do to them?” She asked as she stood. I shook my head dumbly. “My father will be forced to disown me publicly. Maybe he already has. Otherwise,

he loses his home, his income, everything. My family would be forced to live on some feral cloud near the Everfree Forest, or worse, come down here to survive! Moonshadow might have been bumped from whatever project she's working on. And I know the kind of trouble Lu and Lamb are getting from their classmates."

"How can they do that? How can the Enclave betray you but be so hard on pegasi strong enough to walk away from that?"

"Walking away isn't strong!" She snapped back at me. "Sticking it out, backing your fellow pegasi, doing what must be done. . . that's strength," she said firmly. "The Enclave didn't betray me; Lighthooves did. And every single time some pegasus goes Dashite they completely destroy everything Rainbow Dash wanted to do. Like they decided to drop her loyalty and courage and become the greatest egotists of the pegasi.

"There was one a few years back, a real high profile case. Deadshot Calamity. A legend in the security forces, the kind of pony who could have really forced the council to engage with the surface. He gets an audience in front of the pegasi council. Does he call for opening contact with the surface? No. Does he say we should trade food and medicine to the surface? No. Instead, he spends half an hour calling the entire council cowards, featherbrains, and negligent murderers. Then, when his wing went looking for him to beg him to reconsider, he killed them!" she shouted and stamped her hooves. "That featherbrained idiot almost singlehoofedly destroyed ten years of work getting the Volunteer Corps established!

"So I know just how damaging what Lighthooves did was. And every time there's a report mentioning 'the Dashite Morning Glory', Dusk's career falls a little more behind. Every time a news release talks about Dashites, Lambent and Lucent will suffer the mutters and glares of their classmates. The only way my family gets to have any real peace is if I'm dead. Dusk gave me a choice: die for pretend or die for real."

"Your own sister would kill you?" The idea chilled me; it was like me killing Mom.

"She was going to before you stopped her," Morning Glory replied softly. "But she gave me a choice instead, and that was generous of her."

"So you're giving up?"

"Of course I'm not giving up. I have to find some way to stop Lighthooves and expose him and what he's doing. Not because he wronged me, but because he wronged the Enclave! I can't believe that he's operating with the blessing of the

pegasi council. And if I can prove my loyalty and clear my name, then maybe I can be Morning Glory again.” She sat up and sighed. “Till then, I’ll have to be somepony else,” she said as she stood, looking out at the drizzling rain.

“Morning Glory. . .” I said softly, looking at her. At her burned-away cutie mark and that pale brand on her flank. Did losing your cutie mark change you? Had it changed P-21, or was there a unique mark underneath the spell 99 had put on his flanks?

“Fallen Glory,” she corrected quietly. Then she looked at me with a sad smile as the rain dripped off her purple mane. “I think it’s a Dashite-esque enough name. And besides, you can still call me Glory. You and P-21 are the only ones that really do.”

“Glory. . . you don’t have to do this,” I whispered, looking into her hurt eyes. Just like Mini’s. I couldn’t shake the thought that this was some kind of suicide, bloodless but no less wrong.

Her lips trembled as she closed her eyes. “It’s better this way. What did I have left that was Morning Glory’s, anyway? My career and reputation are gone, my family is ruined, my sister wants to kill me, and I don’t even have my. . .” and she clenched her eyes and teeth in a hiss of pain. I couldn’t tell what was rain and what was tears any more. She drew a shaky breath. “All I have are my friends. That’s more important to me than any name.” Her round, wet eyes stared up at me, begging me to accept it. Accept her.

What could I do? Everything about this felt wrong. . . but. . . I put my hooves around her and murmured, “If this is what you really want, Fallen. . .” She gave a little sob; it wasn’t, but it was what she thought she had to do.

When she stopped crying, I took a deep breath and gave her a look of stoic determination. “I also have to confess something. A grave and dark secret from my past. Something I’ve not told anypony. . .” I said, watching her eyes get round as she braced herself. I took a deep breath. “My name. . . The secret, true name of the Security Mare. . . is. . . Go Fish.”

She blinked at me in confusion, and then I let out a snirk and curled my lips in a smile. She let out a hiccupping little giggle. Then another one. Finally we both broke out in laughter. “I guess you had a really big aquarium in 99, huh?” she said as she gasped for air.

I just smiled and nuzzled her forehead. She didn’t get the joke; she was still my Glory, no matter her name.

When Stable 69 opened its doors, they found me in the tub. Despite being battered and banged and bloody, the cast iron tub in the middle of the street proved surprisingly comfortable as I lay back and occasionally refilled it with water from a nearby down spout. The cute little security mares poked their heads out of the parking garage and stared at the bodies filling the street and the rubble of the top floors of the Exchange. I raised my almost empty bottle of Wild Pegasus at them. "Hey," I called out with a nice, inebriated smile. They disappeared back inside.

"I say something wrong?" I asked P-21 as he came limping up with his dufflebag. With a pull I emptied the bottle.

"Eh. Probably didn't expect us to hang around," P-21 said as he set the bag down and unzipped it. "No honor in the Wasteland, it seems. Anypony who wasn't killed stripped most of the good gear before running. Still, I found a few with some useful things." He scooped up two hooffuls of bullets.

"Ugh... nine millimeter and twenty gauge shells," I muttered as I pawed my hoof through it. Still, maybe we could sell or exchange them for something more substantial. I wanted some more clips for the hunting rifle. "Automatic pistols. Revolvers. Oooh!" I said, sitting up. "An IF-33 Applebuck!" I picked out the weapon and immediately drew back the slide. "Twelve point seven millimeter rounds. Semi-automatic firing. Seven round clip." I pointed it away from anypony and gave a small frown. "Been through the wash a few times, though. Let me guess. No more twelve point seven?"

"Ask your PipBuck. I just collect the bullets. Those are short. Those are long. Those are round and plastic. That's about all I can do," he said with a smirk.

"Right, sorry," I said.

"And a dozen sticks of dynamite. Some frag grenades. A few land mines. This," he said as he pulled out a half-full bottle of whiskey.

"Ooooo, gimmie!" I said with a grin, holding out my hooves. "You are a gentlecolt and a scholar." I said as I swirled the contents and took a pull. Letting out a sigh, I sang in whatever key I stumbled into, "Oh rain may fall and the wind might blow, the earth could quake or clouds bury us in snow, but as bad as they are there's one thing I know... with friends and whiskey is how I plan to goooooo!"

He winced, "Blackjack, that was terrible!"

"You're just jealous that I am a mare of many hidden talents," I said primly.

"I also found this," he said as he pulled out the dark, wickedly curved claw.

“My dragon claw!” I said gleefully, giving him a hug and licking his cheek. I have to admit, I have never seen a buck that stiff before. I could have used him as a hoofball bat!

He shoved me off, looking confused, “Your dragon claw?” he asked, scrubbing where I’d licked.

I lifted it with my magic and inspected it. Still harder and sharper than anything else I’d ever encountered. “I picked it up in a museum and dropped it on the way here. I thought it was gone forever.” I lay back in the tub and took a pull off the bottle. “I might actually get laid if my luck keeps going this way.”

He coughed and flushed a little as he looked away. “And to firmly change the subject off your reproductive organs... why did Glory burst into tears when I called her Morning Glory?”

I sighed and slumped, my muzzle dipping underwater to blow bubbles a moment before I rose and explained, “Glory wants us to call her Fallen Glory now. I don’t get it. It’s like... she’s willing to die just so she doesn’t inconvenience others. Just don’t get it.” Then I looked at him sharply and took a slow pull of the amber fluid. “What about you?”

“What about me?” He asked in confusion.

“Ever think about changing your name? P-21... you could name yourself... ummm... Boomer. The Blue Bomb! Maybe see if Scalpel can remove that... whatever it is on your butt so we can see your real cutie mark under it,” I said as I gave him a smile.

He sighed and shook his head. “No.”

“All my friends keep sighing and telling me that,” I grumbled as I narrowed my eyes with a pout, “Why can’t they ever say ‘Oh yes, Blackjack, you’re so right. Brilliant, in fact!’” I tilted my head back, looking up at the sky and too drunk to care about my stomach falling up. The rain had actually let up a bit. “It’d be so refreshing.”

“I’ve thought about it,” He replied and then quickly added, “The name thing, not the brilliant thing.” Oh, thanks, P-21. Just crush my hopes. Crush them like a tiny crushable thing that is easily crushed... like... meh. I blew a raspberry at him.

“Some bucks think about names in 99... who we’d be if we could be somepony else. Our names. Our cutie marks.” He hooked his hooves on the edge of the tub and rested his chin upon them. “Fact is, I like being P-21. I like that I’m the buck they were supposed to kill but couldn’t. I can’t forget 99. It’s a part of me. So I might as well take some strength from it.”

I pursed my lips and tapped his forehead. “You think too much. How abouts you take some of my fun, and I take some of your smarts, and then we’ll be... like... unstoppable!” I said with a laugh.

The stable security mares peeked out at us. I gave them a sardonic grin and they disappeared once again. “Ugh... why do they keep doing that?”

“No idea,” he said with a chuckle. “But one little piece of advice: When most ponies take a bath, they take their barding off first.” He trotted off to check for more salvage.

I blinked and then leaned over the edge of the tub, shouting after him, “Most ponies haven’t been shot at as much as I have! I’ve got a bounty on my head, you know! My head is worth thousands of caps!” I leaned further and further out as I waved my hoof at him. “How much is your head worth, huh?” And with that I was refamiliarized with the concept of balance as the legless bathtub overturned and sent me sloshing across the crumbling asphalt. The mares by the parking garage just stared in shock.

“I have a very very valuable head,” I muttered to the sky.

A few hours later, after a soggy nap in the street, I was dry and miserable as my treacherous body metabolized the alcohol, dehydrated my tissues, and gave me the sensation of having been kicked upside my dumb head. I knew this because Glory had told me in clinical detail what my body was doing to make me feel so miserable. Of course, my head throbbed far too badly to care. Hah! Take that, smart ponies! The fact that I was still feeling shaky after the chems I’d taken to fight Deus didn’t help much.

We were gathered in the lounge of Stable 69, alone save for the barpony who was mixing up something she called ‘The Price’. She trotted over with a tray carrying a shot glass and a large bottle of orange fluid. “Here you go. Fix you right up.”

“Are you sure we can’t go back to Scalpel’s clinic?” I muttered, looking at the glass. It was filled with some kind of red fluid with a raw egg on top and some sort of reddish-brown...stuff sprinkled all over it. “It smells like butt. It’s gonna taste like butt, too.”

When I’d visited the clinic, Scalpel had just given me a look that said ‘this isn’t chem withdrawal, this is taint eating your heart. STOP HELPING IT.’ and tossed me out on the street. She was very good at giving looks like that.

“She has a standing policy of not treating hangovers,” Barpony said brightly. She had

the most bizarre cutie mark I'd ever seen or imagined: a hodgepodge of a balloon, streamers, glitter, a shot glass, a tiny wrapped present, and a mare's outline, all crammed onto her butt. "You drink this one first," she said, pointing to the shot. "Then you drink the bottle before you throw up. It helps if you pinch your nose shut."

I rose to my feet with a lurch, "I'm going to Scalpel's. I'll pay her double." Glory and P-21 pushed me back down, ignoring my whining.

"She's dealing with injured ponies now," P-21 said firmly. "You're not injured. Drink."

I sighed and lifted the shot glass. "When I throw up, I'm aiming for you," I warned him, then downed the spicy, slimy, egg-y, salty, tomato-y concoction in one go. There was definitely a greasy sense of something trying to crawl back up my throat. Then I blinked as P-21 started to shy away. I held the shot glass out to Barpony. "Not bad. Can I have another?"

"And thus her legend grows," Rampage said with a snicker. I'd no idea what she'd done to improve her mood, but I hoped it hadn't involved maiming. The barkeep with the peach coat looked at me with a surprised smile, then went to mix me another while I drank the orangey-tasting liquid. I had to admit, when I finished it off, I was feeling a bit better.

"What I want to know is where Caprice is after all this! Because I got to tell her that her security stinks. This place might be a lot more fun than Megamart, but I can't believe her only defense was two gates and a bunch of mares who were completely outgunned!" I gave a scornful sniff, then noticed that everypony was looking at me funny; what, were my eyes glowing again?

"Blackjack, I'm pretty sure that that fight last night involved five to ten percent of the entire population of the Hoof. Deus rounded up dozens of ponies hunting you and the Pecos called in favors to get three other gangs to join in. I don't think even Bottlecap's turrets or Gun could have stopped it." P-21 pointed out.

I snorted and shook my head. "Don't use your fancy mathematics to muddle the issue! If Flank had some decent defenses, neither Deus nor the Pecos would have tried storming it. It wouldn't matter if they could. They'd have gone 'nuh-uh. I don't want turret death beams turning me inside out. We'll hide and ambush Security when she comes running for the hills!' and last night would never have happened."

"You wouldn't believe how often I hear that one," Barpony replied as she brought me three more 'Prices'. I gulped down the first. Glory gave one of the glasses a sniff and immediately looked like she was about to be sick. "So what do you suggest? What

would make Flank safer?” She’d also brought me some more of the orange-flavored water; it was kinda like Rad-Away but not as tasty.

I lifted the empty shot glass with my magic and spun it as I tried to think. “First off, one of the best things Bottlecap has are those turrets. Just knowing that they’re there probably cuts off a lot of problems. You’ve got six buildings that would give you an excellent field of fire on the ground. You’d just have to get the turrets, install them, and make sure that every guest knows that doing something stupid gets them shot.”

Glory rubbed her nose as I sipped the water. “It shouldn’t be that hard. A turret is basically a gun, a frame, a spark battery, and a targeting talisman. If there’s any place around here with robots or military weapons, we should find most of what we need.”

“The second thing is this place’s defenses. One gate is hard enough to defend, but two is a real nightmare. Stables have one door for a reason,” I said with a frown as I stirred the contents of the second shot glass with my magic. “Also, that chain link fence might keep some ponies in and out, but the Pecos just blew a nice big hole in the wall and Deus walked right through it. You need something sturdier. Stacked rubble at least. Wagon frames. And then something to keep ponies away except for where you want them. Landmines, maybe.”

“Landmines aren’t hard to set up,” P-21 said, looking a touch green as I gulped down the second shot and swished it in my mouth, “but you’d need a lot of them. You’d also want to secure them so that a unicorn can’t just disarm them with their magic.” The slimy consistency was a little bit seminal, but not that bad. Had to admit, I loved the spicy bite! I gulped it down and watched him shiver.

“How do you do that?” I asked, curious.

“Drill a hole in the bottom and attach a wire to the detonator. Unicorn sees the mine, disarms its detonation tab, picks it up, wire rearms the mine and boom.” Okay. I’d be letting P-21 handle any mines I happened to come across. “The real problem is moving rubble around to make a decent barrier.”

“Pffft,” Rampage snorted. “It’s not like any of those slabs off the Exchange are heavy. Pass out some Buck and some booze and get working. Be cleared away by supertime.” She reached over and grabbed the third shot, sniffing it skeptically.

Barpony looked at the four of us oddly as she said, “Yes, that would be very helpful but...”

“But,” I finished for her, “It won’t mean a thing if Caprice can’t get some decent security ponies in place. I don’t blame them for not being able to stop both those bunches, but I do blame them for running. You were braver than they were.” Barpony closed her mouth, just blinking in shock. “They need some adequate weapons training. They need to be confident that they can handle risks and deal with problems. I saw the security ponies when we were leaving Rooms; they were just standing around and didn’t know what to do.”

The peach-coated mare just looked from one of us to the next, “Yes, that would all be wonderful, but. . . don’t you three have something more important to do?”

I blinked. To be honest, the last couple of days had involved running, fighting, running some more, and fighting some more with interspersed breaks of gloom and depression. Still, she had a point. I had to find this Caprice...assuming she hadn’t just abandoned Flank, in which case I was going to hand everything over to Barpony and get my caps to pay for decoding EC-1101 from her. But for the first time in almost a week, I had something I wanted to do instead of something I had to do.

“You know what?” I slapped my hooves on the tabletop before me. “No, I don’t. Call it a working vacation. This is the first big slice of civilization I’ve seen in a while, and if I can make it secure, then I will.”

“But. . . you haven’t even discussed payment. . .” the peach mare stammered as Rampage downed the shot. I wasn’t exactly sure what I saw in Barpony’s eyes.

I just shrugged. “I don’t care about that. I just want to do something for a change that doesn’t involve me running for my life or killing somepony. Caprice can pay me whatever is fair when she decides to show herself,” I said with a scowl as I looked around the brothel. “Honestly, where is she? I can’t believe she’s still hiding! Or did she run?” The peach mare just blinked at me as if she thought I was joking or something.

Glory looked at me with a worried little smile as she said, “Blackjack, Caprice is—”

Unfortunately, that was the moment that Rampage’s stomach decided that it didn’t like The Price and that the drink should be returned. The rest of the stomach’s contents, in a show of solidarity, decided to follow it out. Vast quantities of semi-digested meat splashed over P-21’s back and he froze in place, twitching. The striped pony scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hoof. “That’s disgusting! How the hell did you swallow three of those?!” she said as she pushed a hoofful of Mints into her mouth and chewed vigorously.

P-21's bright blue glare cut back over his shoulder at Rampage, promising explosive retribution.

I staggered back and then rose to my hooves, waving my hoof at the stench. "Well. . . I guess that's that. Why don't I meet with her security in an hour or two in the parking garage? See if Caprice will spring for the parts Glory needs in the Exchange. And. . . um. . . get a mop?" I suggested.

"Good idea," Barpony said, still finding something about the conversation funny. "Why don't you use room B-10 in the living quarters while I show P-21 to the shower? Eat something and finish freshening up. I know Caprice won't mind. I'll pass on the message to the security ponies to get ready."

"Good," I replied with a nod. My head still wasn't quite over my last bout of inebriation. "And let Caprice know that I really want to meet with her, okay? For one thing, I still need to get paid for these contracts." I looked around in concern; everypony was looking at me oddly again. Well, except P-21; he was looking at vomit.

"What?" I insisted.

Glory just sighed, shaking her head with a smile, "Just... nevermind..."

I had to admit, Stable 89's layout was a lot different than 99's. For one, it was cleaner, with brighter light and no faint tang of mold and leaking sewage. Since Stable 89 was apparently designed for eggheads, there was lab equipment in every room. I passed numerous storage rooms with shelves holding all kinds of chemicals and arcane science materials in jars and containers. In contrast, their security station was barely larger than a closet, and I couldn't even see a sign for an armory.

I could only guess that when Stable 89 had been taken over, the lack of facilities translated to a lack of security. In 99, Security had an entire floor to ourselves. A room for baton training and target practice, a jail for detention and interrogation. Either stable-tec had assumed that a bunch of scientists wouldn't need law enforcement, or it was a pretty severe oversight.

The living quarters were divided into sectors A, B, and C; I supposed it was an egghead thing. A was dedicated to sexing, but it seemed like the other two were for the ponies living and working here. I found B-10 and stepped in, wondering if all the living quarters were unlocked, if Caprice had already set it aside, or if the security clearance in my PipBuck opened it up even though it was for another stable. It didn't

really matter. Aside from an alcove with a work table in one corner, I might as well have been home.

Home. After everything with P-21, I'd thought that Stable 99 would be branded a horrible nightmare, and it was. Yet seeing this neat little steel can, I had to admit that I felt a pang of longing for that hole in the ground. I wanted to play cards with Rivets. I wanted to try and tease Midnight into my bed... oh Goddesses, how I needed somepony in my bed! I missed Mom telling me what to do. It was dull and thoughtless and monstrous, but it had been my life.

I flopped down on the bed, feeling odd little twinges in my horn and head. Hang-over? Taint? Both? "Ugh... I can just imagine what Mom would say: 'Blackjack, you're neglecting your duties and yourself.'" I sighed as I rolled onto my back, loving that wonderful familiar mass-produced Stable-Tec mattress. You sleep on one and you've slept on them all.

Funny thing was that the idea of helping Flank be safer just seemed good to me. I might have first thought of it as some kind of drug den, but having been here and experienced the joy of eating new food, or the music in Mixers, or even the thought of sex in 'Stable 69', I felt that the Wasteland needed Flank. Something to look forward to. Something to want that was more than mere survival. I just hoped Caprice wasn't a complete tool when I finished setting up security; ugh, I was helping this mare, and she couldn't even shake my hoof with a thank you?

...crap, now I was starting to get bored. In fact, technically I was waiting, which was worse than just boredom.

I still had that other memory orb from Miramare...

"No! Fuck no!" I said as I sat up and smacked my temples with both forehooves. "No more orbs, brain. They are not healthy for you. They make you sad, or make me wake up all alone, or wearing a bomb! So no orbs!" Then I blinked and rubbed my face as I realized that the idea hadn't gone away. "If I use one I'll wake up... I dunno... with a tattoo, or two centuries from now, or pregnant, or something!"

I looked over at my saddlebags. Tick... tick... tick... I let out a long sigh of disgust. "This is going to end badly, brain. Very badly." I floated my bags over and set them next to me. "Okay... just warning myself... this is a bad idea. Last chance to do something sensible like... sleep... masturbate... something?" Nope... still wanting to check the orb... I sighed and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Wow... no password or anything? Refreshing... My body was... okay... those were wings... that was a... uhuh... pegasus stallion. He was wearing some kind of armor from head to hoof; not armored barding, but actual plate armor. He had the taste of chocolate in his mouth and his nose itched terribly.

The place seemed to be some kind of fancy tent. A large display showed two train tracks and some sort of railyard. There were dozens, maybe even hundreds of train cars all lined up on the model. There were all kinds of ponies standing around looking grave and talking in low voices. My host carefully snuck out something from under his wing and, under the pretense of adjusting a strap of armor, popped an entire cupcake in his mouth.

“You keep doing that and you’re not going to fit in your armor,” a mare said in a soft, teasing tone. He looked over, and both our hearts stopped as we looked into the bright teal eyes of a beautiful dark alicorn. I was stunned by her beauty, and terribly embarrassed. My host choked down the cupcake in one gulp, fighting the urge to cough as he returned to attention. Then a dark wing stretched out. “Oh look. Crumbs.” The softest feathers imaginable flicked them from his lips.

I’m fairly sure both my host and I could have died right at that moment.

I was used to Princess Luna being a painting on a wall or a picture in a book. The concept of Luna being sent to the moon for a millennium, only to be returned for a few years and then assuming control of Equestria, were some dry chapters in a book for me. Respectable and tragic, certainly, but she wasn’t real.

Not until now. I never could have imagined Princess Luna appearing as a mare a bit older than me. That intelligent, even calculating, look in her teal eyes that seemed to take a measure of everything they looked upon. Her easy smile, friendly yet also mysterious, as if you couldn’t quite be sure what she was smiling about. No pony could have told me of the silvery luster of her dusky blue mane, like a beam of moonlight in the middle of the drab tent, nor of the delicate taper of her horn that caught the light just so and made it appear as though a star alighted on the tip when she moved. Suddenly, I was in the presence of something more, so very much more, than a worthless pony like myself. I wanted to rage at the nobles chatting softly with one another and say ‘Look! Look at her! If you do what you do, then you are going to lose this!’

The flap of the tent opened and Princess Celestia entered. I’d heard her described as a ‘ruler’; I admit, I always imagined her as an ‘Overmare’. I expected something small, petty, fussy, and ruling because the law said so.

With Celestia before me, I mentally bowed along with my host. It was reflexive; had she made a request I would have carried it out that instant. An aura of maternal kindness seemed to wash from her and touch everypony in her presence. Her rainbow mane constantly shifted in an ethereal breeze that I felt only in my imagination. In her sad gaze was a love absolute and unconditional. No pony had ever possessed eyes like that, and none ever would again; of that I was certain.

You lost this? YOU LOST THIS?! For coal and pride and fear you sacrificed this? I wanted to scream at these ponies, and the princesses themselves. I wanted to show them this empty world that would follow them. No price, none, was worth the loss of these princesses. The world was less without them.

My host, however, did not move a feather. I swore his lips still tingled from Luna's playful brush, but all his attention and every sense was focused on Celestia. Celestia's own features were worried, like the sun hidden behind a wall of clouds. Luna immediately approached her, "They said no?"

Celestia took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Your Majesty, this goes beyond insult! That coal was paid for nearly two years ago. It is illegal for the zebras to halt shipments due to a . . . political disagreement!" A fancily dressed mare snorted in disdain.

"The Caesar remains adamant. The coal will not be released until his government can verify the legality of our claims." Celestia said softly as she looked at the models. "His representative also hinted that we should re-evaluate our own gemstone embargo."

"It's a ploy, Your Majesty. The Caesar is just using this as an excuse to extort more beneficial contractual terms in exchange for our gemstones," a unicorn buck harrumphed. "They are simply being stubborn. We can't just bend neck."

A pony wearing more businesslike attire coughed, "It may be moot, your majesty. Zebras do not need gemstones to survive. Hippocampus Energy estimates that, even after cutting back power supply to forty percent, we can only keep power going for another month. After that, Equestria will go dark."

"Somepony remind me whose great idea it was to build an infrastructure on an energy source Equestria doesn't have?" Princess Luna asked in a faintly sarcastic tone. Only Princess Celestia smiled at the attempted humor. The rest of the ponies in the tent looked nervous.

A pegasus in fancy formal dress tapped her hooves. "Well, we have the guard here.

We're in the right. Just take the coal and let the Caesar choke on it. If their king can't govern, why should we suffer?" Murmurs of agreement grew. Celestia simply looked sad.

Then a young voice said from corner of the tent, "That would be a terrible idea."

Every eye in the tent turned to a unicorn buck who seemed to realize that this was not his place to make a comment of any sort. He was the same age as me! Pale of hide and with a straw yellow mane and oddly yellow horn, his cutie mark was a yellow teardrop. I hoped it didn't signify him wetting himself; he certainly looked like he wanted to. Yet Celestia smiled to him. "And you are?"

A handsome unicorn stallion with a compass rose on his flank glared down at the young buck and then quickly chuckled, "Oh don't mind him, Your Majesty. He's still learning his place." And clearly his place was to shut the fuck up; I'd gotten plenty of looks like that from Mom.

The white unicorn with the yellow drop then pressed his lips together and stepped past the larger, "The Caesar is the protector of the zebra people. He's not a king. He's a protector. When the Wonderbolts extracted the hostages off the Barberry Coast, it was an insult to his ability to protect people in his lands. He has to restore his respectability."

"Quiet, you," the handsome buck muttered with a glare before giving a suave smile at the princesses. "Don't mind him, Your Majesties. He spends a few years in their land and thinks himself an expert."

"Perhaps. But I want to hear all options. Continue." The elder unicorn looked like he'd just downed a shot of Barpony's 'Price'.

The yellow-maned young buck swallowed. "This Caesar... since he rose to power, he's suffered many setbacks: monster attacks, drought, and now the hostage crisis. He needs a win, Your Majesty. Give him the gemstone concessions he wants, and when things calm down they can be renegotiated."

The pegasus mare gave an outraged little snort. "That's treasonous talk, putting zebra interests ahead of our own! We can simply take the coal."

"And the Caesar will fight back. He has to. That's his sacred duty." He looked around at all the assembled ponies, "I know it'll take longer and be more difficult, but I'm sure it'll be better than violence." More disdainful and dismissive talk. 'Listen to him,' I wanted to scream! Then he blurted loudly, "Please, listen to me!" Apparently this broke so many rules of protocol that everyone did. "The zebras have a word

for this. It's not a fight. It's not a battle. It's war. They use it when their entire country faces terrible threats. Flights of dragons. Swarms of manticores. They've done wars before, where every zebra is drawn into the fight. And they are terrible things. Please, don't resort to war to try and solve this problem when there are other means."

There was a fragile, momentary pause. Then the unicorn with the compass rose on his flank gave a disdainful snort. "War. Hardly sounds serious. Let the Caesar bring his war."

"Let him. I doubt the zebra have the stomach for a drawn real out battle. I give them six months before they beg us to take their dirty rocks," a buck harrumphed.

A mare laughed, "Three months! And they'll give us their mines too."

"Please, they're only striped mules. Once they face our magic and flyers they'll cower and beg for peace. One month, at the most," the unicorn buck with the compass rose said with a cocky little grin, earning cheers from the onlookers.

Only the business ponies, the guards, and the princesses weren't laughing. The business ponies looked at their clipboards. "Your Majesty, I can't talk about fighting or politics. I can only tell you that without coal our economy will come to a crashing halt. Half of Fillydelphia's work force is on furlough. Manehattan is dark for most of the night. That's right now. If we can't get coal we won't be able to ship food to the large cities. It'll be more than an inconvenience. It will be a famine." The cheers and talking died out.

Princess Celestia smiled at the assembled ponies. "If you gentleponies would please give us a moment alone?" There were mutters and talks as the aristocrats and businessponies were funneled out of the tent, leaving only the guard. Celestia looked as if she was going to cry once they'd left. "How has it come down to this? Taking what we want? Fighting? War?" Celestia rubbed her eyes, "I'd forgotten that word; it's been so long."

"That young buck was mistaken. It's not a zebra word. We invented it. When you fought me," Luna replied softly. "Wyrre... wasn't that how it was said back then?"

"Something like that. I also remember how much I hated it." She took a deep breath, looking at her sister. "What do you think, Luna?" Princess Celestia asked softly.

Luna sighed as well. "I don't really see us having much choice. We've been at this for months now. It's not a question of if we want to fight. We have to have the coal. We could agree to all the Caesar's demands, and it could take months to resume

shipments.” She looked towards the tent flaps, “I wish we’d had that young buck when this started. Who is he?”

“One of my nephew’s children,” Celestia replied with a disgruntled sigh. “Blueblood saddled him with some horrid name. Brandyblood?”

“Another one? And Blueblood actually brought one of his . . . offspring . . . with him to court?” Luna looked disdainfully at the tent flap, “It amazes me that any mare would let him into their bed, yet his bastards clearly show some success in that regard.”

“You almost did,” Celestia said with a half smile, making Luna flush before Celestia continued, “His mother was a friend and died last month. He returned for her funeral. I suggested to Blueblood that the boy might enjoy court. Bring him back from his virtual exile in the zebra lands,” Celestia frowned. “Another good intention gone horribly wrong.”

Luna looked sympathetic, “You couldn’t have known the Caesar would take our rescue so personally.”

“I should have, Luna. I’ve ruled for a thousand years. His father was flexible. And his grandfather. He’s more in his great great grandfather’s demeanor.” Celestia sighed, shaking her head. “Sometimes it’s so hard keeping them all straight over the centuries. I thought the rescue a simple, elegant solution. I feared delay would kill the hostages. And now . . . having lost the Wonderbolts . . .”

“The Wonderbolts saved lives at loss of their own. No pony can do more than that,” Luna said as she put her wing around her sister. “No hope with diplomacy?”

“Negotiations have danced around in circles since then. The solution should be obvious; but for some reason we simply can’t agree. They need the gems desperately; they’re needed for the most potent weapons against the monsters in their lands, but we can’t give in on our gemstone embargo; it’s the only leverage we have.” She rubbed her eyes again. “I miss the days when my biggest concern was a snoring dragon’s smog problem or parasprites in Fillydelphia.” She gave her sister a sad smile, “Want to take over? I could do with a nice long vacation.”

Luna laughed, “Not for all the sugar cubes in Equestria. Besides, I know you’re not serious. It’ll take a lot more than this to make you quit, Tia.”

“True,” Princess Celestia said with a soft sigh. “So then, this is how it starts. I only hope the Caesar realizes how dire our need is and reconsiders.” She levitated a scroll of parchment and pen, deftly writing with the practiced ease of a thousand years. Then she coiled it up and approached my host and a unicorn guard beside

me. “Take this executive command to Captain Lighthorn. He is to take custody of the coal shipments. Take care to keep casualties to an absolute minimum. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” the guards said in unison, the unicorn hovering the instructions as they saluted and trotted out of the tent.

“Can you believe that?” My host muttered, “Intense.”

“We don’t talk about the Princesses’ business, Cupcake.” The unicorn muttered beside my host. Then she looked a touch worried, “But, yes... that was... intense.”

Outside the tents, the nobles had gathered in little herds, while off to the side Blueblood was administering a rather physical education of his own as he smacked the straw-maned young buck over and over again. “How dare you, you little embarrassment? You inconvenient little... squirt!”

The young buck cried and protected his head. “Please, Father! I only wanted to help her!”

“Don’t you dare call me that, you hear me? You have no father,” Blueblood growled.

“Cover for me,” Cupcake said as he made a swift detour. The brown pegasus thrust himself hard between Blueblood and the young buck, “Excuse me sir, but you are distressing the gentlefolk.”

Blueblood scowled down at his son and then glared at the guard before raising his snout into the air and trotting away to make his apologies. Cupcake just sighed and shook his head before looking down at the buck. “Say, are you all right? What’s your name, kid?”

He looked up at Cupcake then and I felt myself start. His eyes weren’t yellow, but a brilliant gold. Blood trickled down between them from a small gash on his brow beside his odd, metallic-gold-colored horn. Despite his tears, his gaze was steady and held a confidence that shook me. “Thank you, I’m fine,” he said as his intense golden eyes stared into mine, “And my name is Goldenblood.”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I immediately jumped to my hooves! Okay, more accurately, I fell flat on my face intending to jump to my hooves! Still, I looked around for the bounty hunter monster pony cyborg ghosts that surely had sprung upon me while in the orb. All I saw and heard was the glow of the lights and the whir of the vent fans. And then I slowly lifted the small glowing orb. Tears trickled down my

cheeks as I stared at the little cloud of light within.

Priest had tried to explain it to me, that memory orbs were more than just experiences. They were testaments, proof of the existence of ponies centuries ago that had shaped the world today. They were more than just curiosities or battles or relationships that played out in better times. They were lessons of just what we had lost and how very far we had to go to reclaim it.

I pressed the orb to my chest, holding the most precious object I could imagine in all of Equestria.

Four hours later, I collapsed against the concrete rail on the top floor of the parking garage. My training session with the security mares, and I use the term because there wasn't a single buck among them, had been an unmitigated disaster. They could shoot and they could swing a baton, but they didn't have the attitude. "That was terrible. Just terrible. Teaching is hard."

Below me, the cleanup of last night's wreckage was just getting started. Slabs of the Exchange were being cut free by Morn- by Fallen Glory's disintegration bolts or small blasts of dynamite. Rampage and a few hardy bucks would slip into straps and start pulling. Unicorns levitated lengths of pipe under the slabs to roll them along. Smaller pieces were heaped up along the fence perimeter. It'd take a while, but with everypony working together, at least the foundations would be laid. Apparently, Caprice had told all the visiting bucks that nopony was getting laid till it was cleaned up. I'd never seen such hard work in all my life.

"Oh, I don't think it was so bad," Barpony said as she pulled out two Sunrise Sarsaparillas from her saddlebags. She'd stopped by to listen and stayed for the whole lecture and even tried to shoot; she was hopeless with a gun, though. I'd given up on finding her name; she seemed too amused by the question to give me a straight answer.

Below us came the sounds of shots and the occasional crash of an empty bottle shattering. I hadn't anticipated that many of them didn't know how to use a gun and swung their batons like they were afraid of hurting themselves. "They were scared of me." I muttered, glancing at her. "Worse, I think I sounded like Mom and made them feel like they were worthless at the same time."

"You just have to realize that most of the ponies here aren't exactly brave warrior folk. They're prostitutes that rotate their security duties, mares who are trying to kick

Dash and Dust addiction, and fillies desperate not to fall into either trap. And bucks who sign up just try to use it to get free drugs and sex.”

“Which were you?” I asked, and then winced. “Um. . . don’t answer that.”

“Prostitute, but I have a lot of side jobs now.” she said without hesitation or shame. “And you are so cute when you get two hooves in your mouth.” I blushed, and I wasn’t sure if it was at her occupation or her flirting. It definitely made me chuckle, though.

“What I wonder is how Flank’s lasted so long without falling before.”

“The fact is that Flank’s always been vulnerable. We keep everything nice and happy, and we hope that if somepony gets out of line, somepony like you will step in. And it’s worked for years; the Pecos were our unofficial security contractors, paid in booze, Dash, and sex. Sidewinder could have taken us over if he’d had a little more sense and a little less whiskey.” I caught a momentary haunted look on her face, but then she caught me looking and smiled.

“Well, not anymore,” I muttered as I looked at the street. Even the rain hadn’t washed away all the blood. The bodies were still being dragged out into the swampy ruins of the town. “So sooner or later, somepony else is going to try something.” Again, that... strange expression.

“I think you did better than you realize,” Barpony said firmly. “I was surprised, to be honest. I didn’t expect you to talk about restraint so much.”

“Why, cause I’m so bad at it?” I asked with a grin and got a nod in return. I sighed, “Well, guess I’m a hypocrite on top of everything else. Still, Mom always taught me that if you can get someone to do what you want by asking nicely, ask nicely. Then escalate. A security officer that goes for their baton or gun first is a thug with a uniform.”

“And is that what you do?” Barpony asked.

“Most ponies I’ve run into are either nice or pre-escalated. Those bounties go a long way towards that,” I commented ruefully, listening to the pop of small arms fire. “When they’re able to put themselves in harms way, they should be much better at security work. I can tell they’re tough mares. It’s just a step from looking out for yourself to looking out for others.”

And just like that, I was being kissed; sweet goddesses was I getting kissed! My eyes went so wide that I felt like they would just roll out of their sockets! My rear legs gave out as I fell soundly onto my haunches and felt her tongue doing things inside

my mouth I could barely imagine. When she finally gave me a breath I felt myself blushing from horn to hooves. “Habazawah...” Then I shook myself hard. “What was that for?”

“I didn’t want to have not done that,” she said as she turned and curled her silky tail around my throat. “Now come on.”

“Huh. . . where are we going?” I asked as I trotted after her. Then she gave me a look and I quivered down to my hooves. “Oh. . .”

When we finally took a break, I felt good. No. Screw that. I felt great! Truly and honestly great. For once, I didn’t have any regrets about leaving my nice, safe, ugly life in Stable 99. From my rear emanated a buttery goodness that spiked through my entire body. Our limbs were tangled together in the middle of my bed. I still had fluttery contractions twitching in my hindquarters.

She was watching me with her amused pink eyes, reflecting the colors like stars. “I felt like I was a virgin there for a bit,” I said, getting my breath back.

“You mean you weren’t?” she asked with a teasing smile. I winced and she gave a soft murr as her hoof stroked my cheek. “I’m teasing. You were actually very sweet.”

“Why is it that you make ‘sweet’ sound like ‘virgin’?” I asked as I knit my brows together in worry.

“Because virgins are sweet too,” she said archly.

I sighed, closing my eyes with a deep breath. “You’re taking advantage of my after-glow. No fair.”

“Fairness doesn’t exist in the wasteland,” she said as she licked my cheek, making me shiver. “Another?”

“I think I’ll melt if you do.”

“Then I’ll just bottle you.”

“Liquid Security?”

“Security-Cola.”

“I’m not sweet enough for that.”

"I beg to differ," she said as she nibbled my ear. "You are very sweet." Okay, blushing now!

Unfortunately, I also had some work to do. "Why don't we take a little break? You can go ask your boss when she plans to meet with me, and I can go make sure things are working out above?" I gave a little chuckle, "You know, the longer I'm here, the more I like this place."

She paused as if considering me, almost measuring me, and then grinned, "Well that's good. That's the point of Flank. Fun for everyone." She said as she stood and gave herself a shake. "You go ahead. Save up some energy for round two. Three. . . four. . . five. . ."

I nearly danced down the hall of the stable, not caring who saw me or what they thought. Maybe it was because I was helping ponies because I wanted to, or maybe it was the fact that miss Barpony could tickle my nethers like I'd never imagined, but I was feeling really good! I know I got all kinds of looks, but I didn't care. Didn't care! Didn't care. Did. Not. Care!

Outside, I found Glory working her magic with the machinery, getting the frames together. Given all that she'd been through, she seemed to be throwing herself into her work. When she spotted me she pressed her lips together and scowled, "Oh look, she emerges."

Okay, sad Glory I could handle, ridiculously loyal Glory I could deal with, but where did pissed off and snippy Glory come from? "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I've just been working my tail off while you've been getting your labia lubed," She said as she grabbed a wrench and firmly tightened a nut. She spat the tool back into a toolbox beside the frame, "I sure hope she was spectacular. She apparently costs a hoof and a half an hour."

"Hey! You don't have to talk about her like that," I said sharply with a scowl. Her angry eyes started to tear up, but she scrubbed them away before I sighed and put a hoof on her shoulder. "What's wrong with what we're doing? I thought you were okay with making these turrets."

"I am..." she said with a sigh. "It's just. . . why couldn't you have asked us about this first? I don't like helping Caprice."

"I'm not that thrilled about helping her either, but there are good ponies here that deserve our help. Why shouldn't we help them?"

"Because she's a drug dealer who now has a monopoly on the addicts of the Hoof?"

Glory said sourly.

I sighed, “Glory, it’s not like that. She can keep the price high and. . .”

“And she can keep the price low too,” Glory responded. “I don’t buy the argument that all those scavengers in the ruins got their drugs from these outside suppliers. I don’t believe she’d undercut her profits through ethics. They’re lingering here, Blackjack. And I know Scalpel’s trying to treat more addicts, but I think she’d be happy with even one additional patient.”

I had my doubts, too. Barpony seemed to know what was going on. Perhaps she could let me know if Glory was right, or convince her that this was okay. I just felt creepiness itching along my spine. “I’m sorry I sprang this on you. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She sighed, looking at me as she seemed to shuffle through her list of things she needed. “Targeting talismans. Without them, these are just weapon display stands.” She looked out over the ruins of Flankfurt. “There’s a Robronco retailer somewhere south of here. It might have working talismans.” I checked my PipBuck, and sure enough, a little navigation icon popped up along with the note ‘Objective: recover targeting talismans.’

Underneath it was another. ‘Objective: deliver Flank’s mail.’ I blinked and started, “What? I’d completely forgotten about that one!” I frowned and looked at the note, “Can’t I just give the mail to somepony here and let them hand it out?” Of course it didn’t answer. There were a dozen arrows on my map around the town. Most of them were in Flank itself, but not all of them; wondering how it knew that was driving me crazy!

“Okay, well it looks like I’ve got two reasons to go out now. Want to come with me when I do?” I asked, and her mood brightened before my eyes.

“I suppose I have to. Do you even know what a targeting talisman looks like?” she said with a small smile, returning to the Glory I knew.

“It’s a talisman with a target on it?” I offered.

She laughed, shaking her head softly. “Okay. Come get me when you’re ready to go.” Victory!

I wandered around, looking for the ponies the letters were addressed to. One to the butcher in the Trough. Another to the robot-masked ponies in Mixers, who apparently never left their armored booth and required me to feed them through a slot. I

wondered how they got food in there, or went to the bathroom. . . okay, not wondering anymore! Two were to Scalpel from former patients. One to Caprice; I'd deliver it when I finally met her.

One was to Octavia. What, I was delivering mail to dead ponies now? At least I knew where her room was, and once the letter was inside, my PipBuck dutifully informed me that this letter was officially 'delivered'. I looked at the yellowed paper envelope nestled between the bones on the bed. It was two hundred years; it really wasn't wrong to read, right?

The old pale buck chuckled softly in my ear, "Tisk tisk. . . tampering with the mail. That's a serious offense."

I ignored the amused hallucination as I tore open the envelope. I wasn't prying, I was reading it to Octavia. . . or rather her bones. . . okay, getting away from creepy thoughts now!

"Dearest Octavia, I am so glad to hear that you've found someplace to rest your hooves. I'm very sorry that Pinkie Pie was so upset about your charity concert. I tried to talk to her about it, but she treats it like a personal snub. She's so odd these days. I can't tell what the matter is with her, but she's changed. I suppose we all have, to some extent, but some days it's like I don't even know her anymore.

"Regardless, I'm sure that with time she'll come around. She still fondly remembers the pony pokey your quartet played for her all those years ago. However, I was not simply writing to offer my sympathies. I wanted to follow up on you after your procedure. Are you noticing any ill effects or differences? I recall how unpleasant the experience was for you, and I don't want you to feel abandoned." I glanced at the terminal. Considering her recorded message to Pon3, it was clear that she had been. She'd never gotten this letter. She'd died alone with her instrument.

"I hope that sometime in the future we can get together. I rarely have time to get away from Canterlot, but I'd like to speak with you more in person. Oh! And there's a certain mare named Glass who may poke about asking about what happened. I hope that you can keep everything in the strictest confidences. She's such a nosy little thing!

Sincerely, Rarity."

That made me blink. The ministry mare of the Ministry of Image checking up on Octavia? Did she have a career resurrection spell or something?

From the taped-up cabinet came a soft thunk, making me jump to my hooves. I

frowned, looking at the tape on the rusty doors. Carefully, I pulled the tape away and opened the doors. Everything was exactly as I had left—no, wait. The pin that had held the bow had fallen out of the back of the cabinet.

I honestly had no idea how to play an instrument. Music was something other ponies did and I enjoyed. The only magic my horn could master was used to kill things. It wasn't my place as security to try and make something... beautiful. I looked at the black hairs in the bow and then at the strings. I sighed softly; this was stupid. I should be doing things... helping... not staring at a musical instrument I had no hope of playing.

Still...

"Ugh, I hope I don't break it or something..." I slowly levitated out the surprisingly heavy instrument and set it on its peg. I looked at the pictures taped inside the doors and carefully stood on my rear hooves. I rested my left forehoof on the strings at the top, right forehoof pinching the bow behind my right fetlock. I pressed the black bowstring to the wires and dragged it slowly across.

The slow, deep note filled the dirty little apartment with a single mournful tone. Carefully I reversed the motion, and played another note. And another. I couldn't call the sounds of me sawing back and forth music, but I wanted to continue. Slowly, the instrument seemed to say. Slowly. No need to rush. I carefully ran the bow across other strings, my ears picking out the different tones as they rose and fell with each of the four strings. I had no idea what I was playing, if I was playing at all. I simply couldn't stop, not right now as I dragged the bow back and forth. This was noise, not specific notes or music, but even then it was beautiful noise.

It took the sight of P-21 watching me with his wide eyed stare before I stopped, flushing. "Ah... oh. Sorry. I got distracted."

"Blackjack, you can play?" He demanded in shock.

"I can't. I didn't!" I blurted as I looked at the pictures inside the cabinet. "I was just copying her."

He looked incredulous as he stared at me. "Well, you fooled me. I mean, I couldn't say what you were playing exactly, but it sounded good."

I extended the bow to him. "Why don't you try?" He looked skeptical, but copied my stance. He held the instrument awkwardly and dragged the bow across the strings with an anemic little noise that made me wince. Yeah, no wonder he had been staring. If I sounded like that playing, I'd stare too, wondering if I should put

the bullet in me or him. “The was. . . nice. . .” I said, forcing a grin and letting out a mental sigh, glad he’d finished.

“If you say so. Still, I’m impressed you got it in tune and everything,” He said as he carefully put it back in the cabinet. “Glory told me you were going to go out looking for targeting talismans?” When I nodded he continued, “I want to go with you and see if we can’t pick up some landmines from Deus’ camp.”

“Are you sure that’s safe? I’m pretty sure Rampage didn’t kill all the ponies he sent into Flank.”

“Maybe, but I know he kept a lot of things locked up, and I just don’t have the mines to really make this place secure. I need a few crates of the things.” He said, glancing to the window. “Besides, I think folks here might be glad for the break. I think we’re freaking them out a little.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned, worried. “We haven’t done anything.”

“Haven’t done anything?” He arched a brow. “You apparently ran in here dripping bloody foam. You then blew up a factory. That was followed by blowing up the number two Reaper in the entire Hoof. And today we’re fortifying the place. It probably looks to them like we’re taking over.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I snorted. “Four ponies couldn’t take over a town.”

He didn’t laugh. “Blackjack, one of us could if she wanted to. Have you seen Rampage today? She’s hauling around rocks with the strength of ten ponies. Heck, with the way things are now, Glory could if she could fly. And with you in the mix. . . Blackjack, I’m thinking leaving sooner is better than later.”

I sighed with a scowl. What was the point of saving this place if somepony else came along and just took over? I wanted Flank secure. “When I’m sure that everything will be okay, then we can go. Maybe even tomorrow, if we’re lucky.” Or the day after that. What’s the rush?

“If that’s the plan,” he said with a sigh. “Still, if we’re going out, we should leave soon. I’d rather explore the ruins with daylight rather than at night.”

“Yeah, and I have mail to deliver out there,” I said as I lifted my remaining letters.

He looked a little concerned, “You know, you can probably just leave them with Caprice and let her handle them.”

“Tell that to this thing!” I snorted, waving my PipBuck at him. He just smiled, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as he stepped out. I sighed and returned to the

opened cabinet, looking at the picture of the gray pony with such poise and confidence. How sad for her to end in this lonely room. I reached out and plucked each string with a hoof, smiling at the clear tones before closing the doors.

With a shot, Taurus's rifle tore out the guts of the sentry robot mindlessly patrolling around the Robronco retail store. Sighting with the scope was immensely more effective than using the lighter assault carbine, and the heavy hunting rounds punched through their armor soundly. It was a bit more challenging than just running and shooting, but infinitely safer.

"You know, I could just run in and stomp them all into scrap metal," Rampage said in a bored tone as she drew a picture of a filly in the mud with her hoofclaws.

"And you'd stomp the talismans with them," Glory pointed out. "That's why I'm not zapping them either." Well, and because her AER wasn't working yet and I had the longest ranged weapon.

"And. . ." I fired off the last shot. My aim was just a little bit off and the head of the robot exploded in a spray of shrapnel. "Awww, horseapples," I muttered glancing at the small pegasus. "Sorry about that."

"Well, we might find more inside. Remember, no smashing the heads if you can help it. Talismans are usually pretty brittle," she reminded us. "Unless they're made out of diamonds, but still." She trotted ahead to examine the robotic remains.

"She still isn't flying?" P-21 asked me softly.

I shook my head, wondering about that. "I dunno why either. . ." Had removing her cutie mark somehow damaged her ability to fly? Was it psychological? Or maybe something else? "Ugh, I am not a smart pony. I don't even know how pegasi fly, period."

"Maaaaagic," Rampage taunted as she trotted past us towards the store.

"Ah, of course," P-21 muttered with a smile, rolling his eyes and limping after her while I picked up my spent casings before catching up. I watched his leg with a sigh. Scalpel could have healed it after a day or two, but the injury had set; it would take a fully operational health restoration matrix to repair it; basically, a medical megaspell. He would still have to wear that damned leg brace. I silently wished the Wasteland could be a little more fair for once. Bust my leg and let him walk. But the Wasteland didn't work like that. He got to limp and I got to guilt.

I loaded Cupcake's revolver and carefully moved into the Robronco retail store. Brown tiles, cracked and water-stained, crunched underhoof as I moved in. Row after row of rusting models stood at attention on their display pedestals. I took three steps before a buzz filled the room and a few lights flickered to life. "Welcome, visitors to the Flankfurt Robronco Outlet Center!" the speakers crackled, and wispy music began to play as we moved through the store. There were red bars on my E.F.S.; clearly not all of these robots were just on display.

As we walked, occasionally an automatic message would spout off as we moved through the display floor. "Here at Robronco, 'Quality is Key' is our motto and the motto of our founder, Mr. Horse. Every Robronco unit comes installed with a spark generator capable of months of sustained operation, and with your own handy recharging station, your Robronco robot can operate indefinitely. It's not just a purchase for you, but for your grandfoals too! Talk to our automated sales rep today."

"You have to admit, machines working two centuries without supervision is pretty impressive," Glory said softly as she looked at the spritebots floating around the store and playing the bland music.

"Why are you whispering?" Rampage asked as she pointed at the machines. "They're playing music, so I'm pretty sure that if something here can hear us, it doesn't really care."

As she returned her attention to the store around us, I noticed that P-21 was looking at her, his eyes roaming over her more closely than I'd ever seen him regard a mare. "Hey, Rampage..." She looked over her shoulder at him, arching a brow. "Those stripes..."

She just smiled like he was a tasty little Mint-al, her pink eyes locking with his. "Yes?" she asked in a tone that did not invite further questioning.

"Well... I..." he began, then swallowed. "Nevermind. I just..." I really wondered if he'd dare trot through this minefield. "Why do you look like a red zebra?"

She blinked, and then laughed. "Oh! Is that all? Wow. I thought you were going to ask me something... you know... personal." She smiled warmly at him as she approached. "Well the reason is pretty simple..."

"Yes?" He asked as she walked towards him languidly.

She grinned as she stretched her face towards his, making him lean back nervously as she replied, "It's cause I want to." Then she turned and continued picking through

the store. He gave a smoldering glare at her and then glanced at me, daring me to comment. I just smiled as I looked at some of the interesting robots.

I passed by the standard 'Protectapony' sentry model and two spidery 'Mr. Handy' and 'Mr. Gutsy' models whose levitation talismans had long ago given out. I noted a larger metallic pony balanced on two wheels between its hooves. A flat screen stared out of where a face would normally go. "The PDQ-88p Securipony is our newest upgrade for home and municipal security. With its automated repair and restoration upgrades, the system will be able to continue performing indefinitely against all threats." There was a momentary pause, and then the voice said, softly and quickly, "Automated repair and restoration options are not yet available at this time. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details."

In the corner hulked a massive four-wheeled robot that looked more like an enormous crab than a pony. Four heavy tires supported each of its splayed legs, and its vaguely equine head was nestled between armored shoulders. A minigun poked from one shoulder and a missile launcher from the other. "The SP 'Workhorse' series of sentry ponies combines maximum firepower with a reinforced and magically shielded chassis capable of withstanding shock spells. When in place, you know the Workhorse is going to be keeping you nice and safe." I looked at the looming mechanical monster, scratching my mane absent-mindedly as the speaker added softly, "Robronco not liable for collateral damage, injury or death thirty days after placement. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details."

"I didn't know Robronco was in the business of supplying tanks," Glory said solemnly.

"Tanks?" Rampage looked up at the machine and snorted, "That's not a tank. A US... that's a tank." Then she stopped and scowled, but I couldn't tell at what.

"A what?"

"Robronco Ultra Sentinel. And if you find one, you'll know. Then you'll be dead," Rampage said as she focused and suddenly struck out with her hoof. The impact left an inch-deep impression in its armor.

P-21 looked at the indentation and then asked with a smirk, "Then how do you know about them and yet still live?"

But for some reason the question really seemed to piss her off. "Cause I'm really tough to kill," she replied with her own scowl.

I rolled my eyes, keeping the revolver floating beside me. The door to the back was marked 'Maintenance Garage: Authorized Robronco employees only.' From the red bars, it was fairly clear that whatever was in there was unfriendly.

I guardedly pushed my way through into a mess. Neat stacks of robot parts had tumbled down and lay rusting in iron-reeking pools. An unwholesome rainbow hue spread around the racks of spoiled electronics and scrap metal piles. A broken pipe near the ceiling sprinkled foul water down into the mechanics pits. Despite the corrosion on every surface, however, the beam turrets near the roof slowly rotated this way and that, searching for intruders, and I heard the odd hum of a levitation talisman somewhere on the second floor.

My PipBuck began to crackle as I walked past a bank of spoiled spark batteries. The burst containers oozed purple and orange glowy fluids into the water around my hooves, and my radiation meter responded accordingly. Without a word, Glory passed out tablets of Rad-X. Rampage looked at it scornfully. "What, you're immune to radiation too?"

"Nope. But it can't kill me," she said as she then trotted ahead of us out into the open. "Enough sneaking around!" She yelled brightly, "This is getting boring!"

"Warning! Warning! You are not authorized to be here! Warning! Surrender immediately!" Unfortunately, neither the robots nor the turrets seemed to recognize 'surrender' and Rampage certainly wasn't in the mood as Protectapony robots shambled forward like metal zombies and the turrets began to spray beams of crimson death at her. Her metal armor blackened as it deflected some of the energy, and she launched herself across the room to rip the robots to pieces.

"Mind the heads— yipe!" Glory called out as the turrets detected us and let out a rapid-fire stream of magic energy that scorched holes in my barding and hide. I narrowed my eyes and brought up S.A.T.S., putting four heavy revolver rounds into the casing. Glory finished it off with two pink bolts of disintegrating magic. Unfortunately, our fire seemed to be waking up more of the machines. They stepped out of their waterlogged recharging stations, dripping rust. In fact, I wasn't exactly sure how much of a threat they were till their unruined heads started to fire.

I put the last two rounds into the chest of a shambling metal pony. Then, with an electric shock, the pony exploded! Hot, sharp metal showered down over me as a jolt shocked my hooves. "C... careful! They're really... unstable."

"They're not the only thing!" Glory shouted, Rampage laughing like a maniac as she bucked the sparking remains into a turret. A door slid open, and out rolled a

Workhorse sentry.

“Rampage! Big one! Sic it!” I shouted as I dumped the shell casings into the water and loaded six more of the large-caliber pistol bullets. The robot’s left shoulder popped open and sent a missile through the air, blasting into the striped pony and sending her flying into a heap of robotic scrap. It rolled slowly around, bringing that gatling gun to bear. “Nevermind! Scatter!” I shouted as I ran across the loading bay, away from P-21 and Glory. Cupcake’s gun barked in rather pathetic fashion, even with S.A.T.S. guiding the shots to the eerie whine of the minigun strafing across after me.

The sensation of being hit by a minigun was entirely different from anything I’d felt before. I felt as though I’d been slipped underneath a sewing machine without thread. From ass to rib, a line of small deadly rounds tried to perforate anywhere not covered by armor, and managed to punch through a few places regardless. I collapsed into the mucky water, falling behind an overturned desk.

“Stay down!” P-21 shouted, drawing a shock grenade as the Workhorse sentry rolled through the water. He tossed it right in front of the robot, and it detonated with an oddly anticlimactic beep and crackle. The robot, however, jerked spasmodically as its spell matrices were assaulted. It didn’t stop, though.

Suddenly, the pile of scrap was tossed aside as Rampage rose with a hysterical laugh. The left side of her face had melted to the bone, yet I could see the flesh crawling back into place. Her lips dripped foam from Stampede and, laughing madly, she charged through the muck towards the robot. It turned its minigun on her, and I watched in horror as the stream of rounds ripped face from flesh and flesh from bone. Yet she didn’t fall! She ran against the stream of fire even as it tore into her chest, as if it was just a light shower of rain! Churned organs fell into the water as she closed the distance. Suddenly the gun clicked, its ammo expended.

Rampage lacked face, throat, and apparently lungs. None of that stopped her from launching herself through the air and slamming into the robot with such force that one of its front legs was torn from its socket. Her head turned and gripped the handle of one of the blades she carried, pulling out something resembling a cross between a chainsaw and a knife. Her bloody jaws clenched and the weapon began to whirr. Hooves locked on, the Reaper began to tear into the body with the sparking saw blade.

The robot responded by simply collapsing against Rampage. I heard bones shatter as even her strength wasn’t enough to stop its incredible mass. . . or was it? Slowly,

she rose on broken limbs and tore her way deeper into the machine with savage sweeps of her head. A panel finally gave way, and with an electric shock it exploded and went silent. Rampage stood there, shaking, a strange pink light seeming to stitch her slowly together as we watched. Glory approached with a restoration potion in her mouth, but Rampage just looked her in the eye and shook her head firmly. Glory brought the potion to me instead.

The strange pink glow faded, her flesh restored. Suddenly, she hunched over and puked a deluge of bloody minigun rounds over and over again. As the magic potion restored my flesh, she screamed and began to claw at herself, tearing open gruesome knots that bulged under her skin. As each tore open, blood and more minigun rounds tumbled into the water. With a scream of rage she went through the shop like an earthquake, ripping and tearing at everything around her in blind fury. We simply retreated upstairs, unsure if she could recognize friend from foe.

Finally she collapsed, shaking as she hung her head and wept. Slowly I approached her. "Rampage? Are you okay?" It was right at the top of my list of stupid questions I shouldn't ask.

She stared right at me with her wet pink eyes and spat a bullet in my face. "What the fuck do you think?" Without another word she turned and walked back out front.

I returned to the others upstairs. "What did that? Stampede?"

"I . . ." Glory opened and closed her mouth in shock. "Nothing could do that! Nothing. Did you see that trauma? She was missing her face! Multiple compound fractures in her limbs and ribs and she still stood."

"Right." I looked the way Rampage had gone and then looked at Glory. "Right. You find your talismans. . ." I looked at P-21, "You see if you can find anything else valuable. I'm going to make sure she's . . . stable." Clearly they didn't envy me my job.

I made my way out in front of the retail store and was met by the sight of Rampage picking her nose with a hoofclaw. I balked a moment as she snorted, and then blew three bloody rounds from her sinuses. "This is a real bad time, Blackjack."

"What are you?" I asked as I walked to her.

"Good question," she muttered.

I stepped in front of her. "I need to know. How did you just do that?"

"Piss off, Blackjack. I don't owe you or anypony else answers."

I sighed. "Rampage. . . I want to help you if I can."

"You. . . you want to help. . . heh. . ." she began to laugh, sitting down hard. "Well of course you do. That's what you do, after all." She grinned at me and I suddenly appreciated how shiny recently regenerated teeth were, "So why don't you go ahead and tell me? What am I?"

"Don't fuck around with—" I began, but she rose and thrust her face into mine.

"What the fuck am I?" She screamed in my face, and it took everything I had not to shoot her with a magic bullet in reflex. "How the fuck do I do what I do? How did I just do that? How do I know what an ultra sentinel is? I've never even seen one before! Why is it I can speak zebra? How come I can drink radioactive waste till I'm shitting rainbows and still not fucking die? Why do I come back again and again and again?" She gripped my shoulders with her hooves, claws digging in as she screamed, "Who the fuck am I, Blackjack?"

"Rampage!" I shouted through grit teeth as her hoofclaws shoved in deeper and deeper.

"Who!? What? Why can't I fucking die? Why!" She yelled hysterically.

Okay. There was 'not okay', and then there was an entire world of fucked-upness that transcended all boundaries of normalcy. I'd visited there for a few days while travelling with Glory. Rampage apparently lived there full time. Unfortunately, Rampage was also about to rip my forelegs off. I hit S.A.T.S. and toggled four magic shots at both her knees. My horn flashed over and over again as the magical bullets tore through flesh and bone. With two small explosions her forehooves came off and we fell away from each other.

She hissed in pain as I panted, drawing the pump action shotgun. I doubted it would actually do anything, but I wasn't going to fuck around. Those claws hurt. Before my eyes the pink light returned and she shook as bone extended from the stumps. Flesh and muscle wrapped around it, and finally skin and hoof materialized.

For a moment I was afraid she was going to charge me, but instead she just took a deep breath and walked over to her own dismembered legs, removing the claws and tossing her limbs aside.

"You don't know who you are or what you are?" I asked softly.

She looked pissed, but finally slumped as she said softly, "My earliest memory was a while ago. Some ghouls found me in the Miramare crater with half a tank lodged in my skull. They must have thought I was a ghoul like them because they pulled me

out. Surprise surprise when I had a pulse. I was completely clueless. They used me, then sold me to some pieces of shit that eventually founded Paradise. After a few years I was sick of getting fucked and broke free.

"I drifted a little bit and found Scalpel when she was still a wandering medic with old Bonesaw. Tried to figure me out. Scalpel eventually found that heap of a healing booth, rigged the auto-doc and put down roots in Flank. Bonesaw settled down in Megamart. Me? I ended up in Chapel when it was just me and a dumb colt wanting to fix up that stupid church of his.

"You knew Priest?" Something about my question make her smirk.

"Knew him? I fucked him," that sent a slap through me, before she added with a chuckle, "Or I wanted to anyway. We hung out together and found more kids; usually the young of ponies making the walk. . ."

"Pilgrims," I muttered.

"Yeah, that's what he called them. Young colts and fillies, though. . . they're tougher, haven't been worn down as bad. They stuck around rather than following their parents, and we formed the Crusaders together." She sighed softly, "I always wished I could be one of them." I remembered what Scoodle had mentioned so many days back.

"Arlosté. . ." I murmured, getting a sharp look. "That's your name."

"It was a name Scalpel made up for me. Before that I was 'the fuckmare'." She said sharply, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Arlosté. Are Lost." She shook her head, "Eventually I got sick of it. I wasn't like him. It. . . hurt. . . to be around him. So I left. Wandered around. Crossed paths with a Reaper named Rampage. She swore she could kill me twenty different ways. I was only looking for one. Turns out she was a lot squishier than me. Big Daddy Reaper let me join. Took her name and her armor. . . I was tired of Arlosté. Too many regrets."

"And then Big Daddy sent you to me," I said in conclusion.

She gave a mirthless smile and shrug, "I want to fucking die, Blackjack. You've been out in the wasteland for a couple of weeks. I've been staring it in the face for years, and it's not getting better. The Hoof is a meat grinder. Ponies keep coming and they keep dying. It's getting worse. The poison spreads a little more every day and one day, if I don't die, I think I'm going to be the last living thing in the stinking corpse of Equestria."

"So just go to the Core. They'll vaporize you instantly and..." and our eyes met. Her

face was a mask of horror. “You’ve been there, haven’t you?”

“I’m not going to talk about it,” she whispered softly.

“But. . .”

Like that she was on top of me. “Not! Talking! About! It!” And looking into her eyes I knew she’d kill me right now rather than say another word.

“Okay. Okay. . .” I grunted in pain; she was heavy in that armor. Slowly she climbed off me. “I just wish there was something I could do. . .”

“Join the club. But that’s the great thing about the Wasteland: it will throw shit at you time and time again, letting you stare at it in frustration like a glass of nice cool water on the other side of some bars while you’re dying of thirst,” she said as she looked at me, “And you want to know the really fucked up part? You’ll go crazy and bash your skull to paste before you die of thirst.”

Inside, I found P-21 in the upstairs offices as Glory examined the glyph-marked talismans glowing calmly on their shelves in a storeroom. He was working on a terminal, scowling at the screen as he struggled with password after password. He looked up at me, “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but how is she?”

“Messed up, so she’s in perfect company,” I replied with a wan smile. “It’s weird. I’m so used to being the nexus of messed-upness in the universe. I don’t know how to handle other ponies’ pain.”

“How did Glory and I help you?” He asked with a smile.

“Lots of hugs, and not killing me,” I added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that last bits helps a lot,” he said, then closed out the screen again. “Ugh, somepony was a paranoid bastard!” He looked at me with a sigh, “This is taking forever. All I can say is, it better be worth it, or I’m going to invent time travel just to kick her ass!”

I thought back to the memory orb of the Princesses. I’d try and do. . . better. . . if I had such a spell.

“Anyway, present for the horn head club,” he said as he reached into his pouch and pulled out another memory orb. “Found it hidden in a drawer. Not sure if you’d want it. . .” he added. “Your track record with orbs is a little spotty.”

“Yeah but. . .” I swept it up in my magic and looked at him. “Like you said. I may as well since I’ll be waiting either way.”

“Sure. We have to do the actual looting while you take a stroll through other ponies’ memories.” From the nervous look in his eyes I could tell he wasn’t serious; he clearly remembered the last time I went into an orb and didn’t come out of it.

“It’s a dirty job, but some mare’s got to do it!” I chuckled and raised the orb in a salute before touching it to my horn, hoping I didn’t come out of this dead, mutilated, or crying. The world whirled away.

oooOOOooo

I was standing in a factory of some sort. A laboratory? Lots of ponies standing around a table looking serious and frowning at a heap of scrap metal. Lots of nervous ponies in lab coats. I was in a mare; no wings, but she had a horn. Somehow things were just clearer when I was in a unicorn mare.

“Three ministry mares for a test demonstration? Is Horse mad?” a mustard-colored mare whispered softly in my ear. Then I noticed the three sets of cutie marks directly in front of my host: Three apples, a group of white stars around a large purple one, and a cloud and thunderbolt.

Rainbow Dash gave a very vocal yawn, “Boring. When’s this thing supposed to start?”

“Shhhh,” Applejack shushed, “He may be a cocky jackass, but Mr. Horse knows robots like no other.”

“I wish he’d start,” Twilight Sparkle said with her own impatient little huff.

“Tarnation girl, you in that much of a hurry to get ta the lunch reception?”

Twilight Sparkle bowed her head a little, “Actually, I had some other things to take care of, since I’m in Hoofington anyway.”

“You actually want to do things here?” Rainbow Dash asked with a small frown. “If Shadowbolt Tower weren’t here, I’d never come. Hoofington’s like the fug-ugliest city I’ve ever seen.” A number of bucks and mares looked at her with poorly concealed frowns and she added, unabashed, “Well, it is.”

“Still, it’s churning out discoveries by the week. If things weren’t so busy in Canterlot, I’d relocate some projects here. It’s nice to be able to coordinate things with the MoP or MoM,” Twilight Sparkle said brightly.

“Speaking of Morale, have you talked to Pinkie Pie, Twilight?” Rainbow Dash asked. “Like, recently?”

“No. Not for almost a month, with everything so busy. Is she alright?”

Rainbow Dash looked hesitant as she rubbed her mane, “She’s... just being way more random than usual. I haven’t seen her like this since-“

“Fillies and gentlecolts, thank you for coming.” A pale gold earth pony buck said as he trotted up to the table with a cloth-covered round drum on his back. He had the strangest little pencil-thin mustache and sparse, narrow brown mane. His cutie mark, perhaps appropriately enough, was three gears. He bucked his hips, caught the round cylinder neatly on his head, and then bounced it off to hold it in his hooves before the crowd. “What I have inside this container is going to revolutionize manufacturing as we know it.” Even Rainbow Dash looked interested now as he set the container besides the pile of scrap metal. “I give you, the mechasprite!”

And he whisked the cloth away to reveal... a glass jar full of ball bearings?

“Uhhh... that’s it?” Twilight asked in confusion.

“The normal ones are annoying enough! Now we’re making our own out of metal?” Rainbow Dash complained.

“I beg you to be patient,” he said with a broad grin, his eyes sweeping the ground and silencing the murmuring. “Think of all the steps involved in manufacturing! Ore must be extracted, refined, and shipped; parts must be fabricated, then assembled. If only there was a way to shape the raw material directly into the end product!” He stroked the glass jar lovingly. “Well today, there is! With the simple application of a magic field...” He flipped a switch at the base of the jar, and suddenly every ball bearing’s eyes lit up. Two tiny wings appeared and the little metal orbs fluttered out of the jar and into the air.

“Well, at least they’re not as cute. Can’t see Fluttershy adoptin’ ‘em...” Applejack muttered.

Mr. Horse continued with his broad, confident smile, “Any design can be programmed into the mechasprites, and they will proceed to seek out raw material, ingest, process, and produce the design. Watch!” And he pushed a button on the base. The mechasprites began to bob in the air with the strangest chirring noise. Then they suddenly descended on the scrap metal and began to take little bites out of the twisted lengths. They chewed up the bits of metal and spat out wads of shiny liquid metal on the table, forming the globs into solid steel. They smoothed

the metal with licks of their tongues and in a minute an automatic pistol lay on the table. “Voila! From scrap to weapon in ten seconds flat.”

Mr. Horse clearly had a strange sense of time, but I saw his point. Wait? Were there more mechasprites? As I watched, one opened its mouth and belched out another Mechasprite that was rust red. “As you can see, the mechasprites will use surplus materials to manufacture more production units. They can even specialize to improve efficiency.”

Twilight Sparkle raised a hoof, “Not to be an alarmist, but what’s to stop them from eating... say... Hoofington?”

“Excellent question, Miss Sparkle,” his grin clearly said he’d hoped somepony would ask that. “Get them outside the magical field and...” He caught one in his mouth and pulled it from the others. Its eyes went wide, and then the wings wrapped around it and it retracted back into a round ball. My host started to fidget with something in her bags.

“Uh... are they supposed to be doing that?” Rainbow Dash asked as she pointed at the table. The scrap metal was all gone, and now a veritable swarm of mechasprites devoured the metal table... and began to gnaw on the metal bleachers the audience sat upon.

Mr. Horse’s smile turned a touch more nervous, “Aha... eager little things aren’t they?” He stepped up to the case and flicked the switch off. The mechasprites, however, continued to eat and multiply in greater and greater abundance. “What... this isn’t possible!” He gasped as he stared at the device.

“Well they’re doing a whole lot of eatin’ for impossible!” Applejack cried out. “Look out, everypony!” She yelled as one of the beams holding the roof groaned and bent.

Mr. Horse gave a frustrated sigh and nodded to ponies watching on nervously. They immediately tossed dozens of apple grenades into the swarm; bright blue bands flashing brightly as the shock grenades scrambled the magic animating the machines. As one, they folded their wings and clattered to the concrete floor.

The yellow buck ran his hoof through his mane, “Well. That was an unforeseen glitch we haven’t encountered before, but certainly you can see the potential...”

“I sure can. Potential for disaster,” Rainbow Dash scoffed. “I don’t think the MoA will need your mechasprites, Mr. Horse.”

“Ain’t nothing good that can come from something based on those critters,” Applejack agreed as ponies started filing out. “Come on, Twilight.”

The purple mare approached Mr. Horse with a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Horse. It really did have amazing potential."

"They shouldn't have done that," he replied firmly.

"Well, something caused them to. I'm sorry. If you like, perhaps we could take a second look at them? Find out where they went wrong?" She asked politely.

He looked at her sharply a moment, but then relaxed. "Thank you, but that won't be necessary. I suspect this is... an internal matter..."

Twilight looked concerned, but finally just shrugged. My host rose and left with the other ponies filing out after the three ministry mares.

"Can you believe that? Mechasprites? I thought this guy was supposed to be some sort of mechanical genius." Rainbow Dash scoffed, "Instead he nearly turned Flankfurt into mechasprite munchies."

"Well, in every harvest you're gonna get a few rotten apples. He'll do better next time," Applejack said with a sigh, "Looks like I'm gonna have to skip lunch. Gotta head over to Aegis next and see how they're working on the latest combat armor."

"Applejack, I haven't seen you in weeks. You promised!" Rainbow Dash said irritably.

"I know, I know, but this is important too. My brother's signed up, and if he's going fighting, I want something protecting him other than his thick skull!"

"Ugh... all right. You and me then, Twilight!" Rainbow Dash said brightly, then frowned and looked over at the purple mare, "Um... Twilight? Equestria to Egghead... come in Egghead..."

She immediately started, "Oh... ah... I actually can't. I have a... um... meeting."

Rainbow Dash hung her head with a groan, muttering, "Worst day ever..."

My host turned down a side hall and went up some stairs to a window overlooking the demonstration floor. Mr. Horse and a number of research mares were gathering the mechasprites into baskets. Then my host took off her saddlebags and pulled out a small arcane device. "It worked," she said softly, passing it to an open door. A hoof took the device and slipped it inside.

A moment later a heavy bag of bits was tossed out at her hooves. "Thank you."

My host nickered happily as she stroked her hooves through the gold coins, "I could do more. I have access. I could completely screw his research," my host said as she tucked the bits into her saddlebag.

“That won’t be necessary,” the hidden mare said softly. “We only wanted to discredit, not disrupt.”

My host frowned sharply at the cracked door. “Well you might want to pay to keep me around and handy.”

The air filled with a tense pause, “And if I don’t?”

My host smirked. “I might feel chatty. . . .”

“I see.” Then I felt something tickle her ear. She looked over and saw the silenced barrel of a pistol floating beside her head. “I would rather Mr. Horse waste his time with this setback, but an equicide or suicide investigation would do, Ms. Fairhoof. And it would be cheaper.” My host’s guts immediately loosened as she started to shake.

“P . . . please . . .”

“Don’t play games with us and we won’t play games with you, Ms. Fairhoof. Trust me, you won’t like our games.” The hidden mare chuckled as the gun disappeared through the door. “They’re killers.”

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory with a chill. First, of course, I checked for inevitable zebra ninja assassins or Enclave agents; damn, it was odd not to worry waking to find Deus sodomizing me. Okay, disturbing image, please go away. Still, I rose and gave myself a vigorous shake. “Everything okay? Nopony dead?”

“No, but somepony should be,” P-21 scowled at the terminal. “Twelve key password. . . all to hide the dirty notes the manager here was passing to the secretary at Robronco HQ. Looks like they were arranging a little party of their own in her office.” He said with a little chuckle, “Has her password and everything. Was sex always this complicated before the bombs fell?”

“Probably,” I said as I lifted the orb. “Where’d you find this?”

P-21 snorted and rolled his eyes. “Taped to the back of her drawer, actually. Guess she didn’t want somepony to find it.”

“Was her name Fairhoof?” I asked as I looked at him. He frowned in confusion. “The manager?”

“No,” he said, “it was Merry Penny. Why?” But I could see why.

There was a grainy newspaper clip on the wall behind him. 'Robronco retail manager dies to runaway robot.' Most of the rest of the article was illegible, but I could at least make out that the manager had been an unicorn mare.

'You won't like our games. They're killers.' Ponies sabotaging other ponies work? Bribes? Murder? "What the hell was going on in this town?" A lot of secrets in the Hoof. Like a country within a country. Why was my mane creeping at the thought of that?

I left first. Our sacks were bulging with nummy looted goods. I was sure that once we converted them into caps, I'd have everything I needed to pay for EC-1101's decoding. Unfortunately, the pensive look of Rampage doused my excitement, but one look from her pink eyes as she slowly chewed on a Mint-al made it clear that pity would be hazardous to my health. P-21 and Glory exchanged a look but kept their comments to themselves. I chuckled softly to myself, wondering if we were the most dysfunctional band of friends in all the wasteland.

Probably.

"So why are we delivering a two-hundred-year-old letter?" Glory asked as we trudged along a flooded street, clammy cold mud squelching under my hooves as I moved in the lead. My rifle swung slowly back and forth at the red bars that inhabited the ruins. Bloatsprites for the most part, and I didn't waste rifle ammo on them. Since I was already running low on ammo for the carbine, I picked them off with that and swapped back to the scope to check for trouble.

Another two bobbing sprites ahead; a swap-out and five shots later, the carbine was dry and the street ahead clear.

"Because the PipBuck says so," I replied grandly as the clouds overhead threatened more rain. "Who knows? Maybe its going to a ghoulish who will be touched that we delivered mail to it and give us a super sweet silver bullet so I can vaporize whatever monster Sanguine sends next."

"Or, you know, eat our brains," Glory added with a chuckle.

"Always with the brains. Honestly. It's not like ghouls can chew through skulls," Rampage said with a scornful little snort. "Actually most ghouls favor the softer organs. Liver. Lungs. Entrails."

My stomach lurched a little. "Yeah, that's more than I needed to know."

Glory frowned in thought and then looked at me. “Is that true?”

“Why are you asking me?” I wondered with a nervous laugh. “I’m creeped out enough by raider cannibalism. Don’t even make me wonder about ghoulish diets. You can ask one when we meet one.”

“I know. I know.” She huffed as she fluttered her wings. “It’s just the scientist in me. I mean, if they’re immortal and healed by radiation, why the drive to eat at all? Is it a reflex? Instinctive? Is there an actual need to eat or do ponies simply taste good?”

“So. . . Fallen Glory is a scientist?” P-21 asked with a small smile, making her almost trip. I frowned at him, but of course he didn’t care.

The light gray pegasus gave a little frown, “I. . . I don’t know. . . but Glory at least is a curious pony.”

I smiled at that. Morning Glory had been a shy, scared, and blindly loyal pegasus. Glory was curious, but wary. What would Fallen be like? I hoped that she’d just be a mask Glory wore when she was around Enclave.

“So who are we delivering this piece of junk to?” Rampage asked as she punted a half submerged skull aside.

I looked at the faded lettering on the envelope. “A Mister and Missus Cake at. . .” I glanced up and my voice trailed away. “Sugarcube Corner. . .”

The rotting structure leaned precariously out over the alley where it slouched against the burned-out shell of its neighbor. The colorful pink paint had decayed into a fleshy grayish tone, the white trim darkened and peeling with the constant moisture. The roof had warped in the rain till it resembled mummified leather. A tower once resembling stacked cupcakes now creaked as it leaned over to the side like a vengeful fist. One wall had blackened, but not burned, a testament to the sturdy building materials. Leaning plastic candy decorations poked out of the muddy ground before the store. Broken colorful glass stood in twisted window frames like squinting eye sockets. Over the front door dangled a sign hanging from one corner. ‘Sugarcube Corner,’ it read, and beneath that: ‘Cakes and Confectionery.’

And there were yellow bars inside.

I put a hoof on the front step, and the structure gave a great groan. I clenched my eyes closed at the thought of being buried delivering mail to ponies probably long dead; Deus would laugh his ass off. “Okay. I don’t think we should all go inside. Just me and maybe Glory.”

“Sure. Somepony’ll have to dig your butts out after it falls on your head,” Rampage muttered as she looked at the tottery structure.

Slowly, we made our way up the steps and past a mold spotted poster reading ‘Official Ministry of Morale Confectionary center.’ The sight of Pinkie Pie popping out of a cake with that grin on her face made me shiver. The waterlogged floor sagged a little with each step. I looked at the walls tilted at crazy angles, the splintered panelling showing the soaked, crumbling bones of the building. I kept glancing at my PipBuck. The second it said this job was completed, I was out of here! There was a little arrowhead on my EFS, but still the note wouldn’t clear.

Clearly, ‘Sugarcube Corner’ wasn’t good enough. One look in the kitchen was enough to convince me not to go inside. It looked like the brick ovens were the only things holding up that half of the building. That left the stairs. I put my weight on the leaning steps, glad they leaned with the slouch of the building rather than against it. My hooves fought for purchase on the uneven surface as the structure groaned and swayed around me. The door at the top of the stairs wasn’t flimsy wood but rusting steel covered by a splintered wooden veneer. Stepping onto the second floor, I noticed that that wasn’t all that was wrong here.

Why would a bakery need a room full of rusted terminals and monitors? A large chalkboard slumped against a leaning wall. On it were drawn three columns: ‘Good Ponies’, ‘Bad Ponies’, and ‘Really Super Naughty Wicked Bad Ponies.’ Only the second and third columns had names in them. There were posters up here too, but of a decidedly different bent. ‘Remember, we keep Equestria fun and SAFE.’ The poster read as Pinkie Pie twitched her tail. ‘Only you can prevent trouble,’ read another.

There were also a lot of bones in here. Now I had a problem. Left was where my PipBuck was telling me to go, right were three yellow bars. Non-hostiles. Well, if I didn’t have to bother whoever was that way, then best to not bother them.

I walked to the left towards an actual bedroom. Two skeletons greeted me, one splayed across a terminal and the other curled up in the corner of the room. I looked at my PipBuck. This was definitely the place. “So, are we done here?” Glory asked.

No. I sighed and remembered what I had done with Octavia. Slowly I tore open the paper and withdrew the letter inside.

“HEY!!!” A giant pink head screamed in glee.

I fell to my rump as I dropped the paper and the tiny pink talisman in the middle of the page shot glitter and streamers all over me. A deep groan rolled through the building. The huge ghostly head of Pinkie Pie flickered as she grinned down at me. “Hiyas Mr. Cake! Hiyas Mrs. Cake! I wanted to try out this super terrific invitation spell and thought that it’d be just perfect for you.” She gave a sympathetic little frown, “I know you two aren’t happy being away from Ponyville, but you’re the only two good ponies who are so super good terrific that you’d never turn your back on me... or say I have a problem... or call me... what she called me...” The smile was now a rictus, her cheek twitching as she stared at me.

It was scary how the friendly smile seemed to melt off her face, her curly mane slowly straightening before my eyes as she quivered, “You two have always been the nicest nice ponies I’ve ever known. You’re like... like my mom and dad...” she said as her head started to shake and she gave a hiccup. “I think... I think there’s something wrong... very very wrong... super terrible bad wrong... and I have to stop it. I’m the only one who can. Then... then maybe... maybe we can have a real party. In Ponyville... like we used to.”

She suddenly stiffened, “but first we have to find the bad ponies in Hoofington. I know Quartz is a no good terrible bad pony. And those Four Star ponies too... but I think there are others. I think... I think the ponies in my hub there are bad. I think they know what the bad ponies are up to. It’s all secrets and lies in that place. No pony is who they say they are. No pony is...”

“Except you two! Right? Right... Right! So... please... find something. Anything. Please?” Hooves covered her face. “You’re the only ones I could give a piece of myself to. You’re my real parents. Please... Mom... Dad... help me...”

With that, the tiny engraved sliver of rose quartz snapped in two, and the glowing ghostly head disappeared, leaving us covered in magical pink glitter and streamers.

Pinkie Pie needing help? I thought she was supposed to be the happy one, yet that was almost her begging. Terminals. Lists of ponies? I thought the Ministry of Morale was supposed to be about fun? How in the Wasteland had she gone from fun time Pinkie Pie to that?

“Can we go now?” Glory asked softly as the building groaned around us. There were faint popping noises in the floor. “Please... Blackjack.” Glory begged as she backed out the door.

“I... wait.” I muttered as I looked to the skeleton in the corner. Slowly I crawled closer. I could feel the floor quivering under my hooves. There! A flash of pink

under the bones. Gently, I reached out with my magic and tugged the tiny pink figurine free. Slowly I pulled it close and turned it with my magic, my eyes widening as I stared at the tiny plaque. 'Awareness: It was under 'E'!' it read. I looked at her mischievous grin, her bright and shining eyes. . . not that desperate and sobbing pony I'd seen just a minute earlier.

Why were the walls around the Cakes full of bullet holes?

I could see them as clear as day through the layer of filth and peeling candy cane wallpaper. The holes were evenly spaced; an automatic sweeping from left to right. This was a murder. Another two-hundred-year-old murder. My mane crawled on my neck as I remembered the ponies in the museum. And then I spotted the writing on the wall. The sort of thing that you might try to write as you bled out while cradling the statue of your surrogate daughter.

Project Eternity.

Then my senses picked up something else: clouds through gaps in the roof and Glory screaming as the room slowly peeled away from the rest of the structure. I gripped the statuette in my mouth and scrabbled for the door as rotten carpet sloughed away underhoof. The rotting turret leaning out over me was starting to collapse as well.

Then hooves wrapped around me as Glory leapt through the door and squeezed me tightly as she flapped her wings for all she was worth. Out we went, over the broken side of the building as the turret crashed down. The wind nearly knocked me from her hooves as it passed. "Glory! You're flying!" I cheered and then looked back. "Glory, we need to go back! There's three more in there and it's about to come down!" Indeed, the entire building seemed to be disintegrating before my eyes. In a minute or two it would pancake flat.

She just looked and then nodded, swinging me through the air back towards the second floor hall.

I ran smack into a buck scrambling for the stairs. Then I noticed something unusual. . . It was under 'E'! For one, he was mostly clean. Two, he smelled of semen and musk. Three, there was blood on his rear legs. Fourth, I knew him. I saw the bow tie on his gray flanks.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, ignoring the shaking building as joists popped and creaked.

"Run! It's collapsing!" He shouted; he hadn't tried to run until I'd fallen out.

My eyes narrowed, “What the fuck are you doing here?” He stared into my gaze and then looked over his shoulder at the back room. I grabbed his ear in my teeth and with a pull threw him over my shoulders and tossed him out over the edge. Fortunately, I was aiming for beyond the wreckage and he landed, thrashing and sputtering, the muck having broken his fall. “P-21, sit on him! Rampage! Prop this building up!” I turned and rushed towards the room with the other two non-hostiles. I could hear the bricks of the stove below collapsing.

Inside were a number of metal bed frames and a unicorn mare and a filly who were bound to one with a particularly bloody mattress. The filly was just tied with rope, but the mare had been chained and hoofcuffed. I made one swipe with my dragon claw and freed the filly. “Get her out of here,” I shouted at Glory as I looked back at the mare.

At the lavender unicorn mare with a broken horn.

‘I just gotta survive, I have a kid.’

A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the tight cuffs locked around her hooves. They were cutting into her hide. Hopelessness bloomed in her eyes. “Please, take care of Thorn,” she shouted.

“Not happening!” I said as I looked at the locks. I had no clue if I could pick them. “You’re going to get out of here...” I focused my horn on the locks. I didn’t even have a bobby pin on hand! Instead I just forced the lock to turn, my eyes watering.

Snap! With that clear, crisp breaking noise, I knew that that the lock connecting the chain to the beds wasn’t coming off. I glared at the two cuffs. Carefully... carefully... my eyes watered as I fought to maintain focus.

Snap!

“Sweet mother fucking Celestia, cut me some slack here!” I screamed as I bit down on the chain, wrapped it in my forehooves, braced my backhooves against the metal headboard, and started to pull. “Come onnnn!” I screamed as I strained, my heart thudding in my chest as if I was riding a high of Buck. Buck! The way my heart was beating now... could I take some more? Be strong. I had to be strong. I had to be better. I levitated the tablet of Buck and chewed. The energy surged to my limbs as I screamed and pulled with all my might. My heart beat so loud that I couldn’t hear the collapsing building around me.

Then the chain gave way with a loud ping. I didn’t hesitate a second as I shoved my head through her cuffed hooves and lifted her onto my back. Ducking my head,

I ran from the collapsing building. The floor dropped out from under us as I leapt for the doorway to the missing room. A great gust of wind picked us up and shot us into the debris as the building collapsed behind us.

We were together in a tangle of limbs, chains, and broken wood. Rampage pulled herself from the wreckage, gripping a jagged spar that impaled her torso and pulling it free as if she were removing a splinter. I knew exactly how she felt. My heart beat so hard it felt like there was a spear of wood in my chest! I really wished I could yank it out, too. I struggled to breathe, but each pant didn't bring in any air! Glory flew to my side, "Oh, you idiot! What did you take? Buck? Hydra? It was Buck, wasn't it?" She shouted as she fought to keep my head above the foul water. "Your heart is going to explode, you jackass!" She shouted at me and then pulled out a Med-X and jabbed it home. The pain lessened and I liked to imagine that my heart rate was slowing down.

"Is she going to be okay?" The unicorn with the broken horn murmured. I was struck by the ironic sight of flowers for her cutie mark. I'd only seen them in pictures.

"No. She is not," Glory said firmly. "She is going to kill herself at this rate. Because she is not a smart pony!"

"She... saved me..." The lavender unicorn said as she sat down.

Glory looked at her broken horn and her eyes widened. "You're that slaver." She winced and her foal ran to her side. Glory looked at the young filly and then at the slaver, "You... she... urrrrgh!" The pegasus walked to one side and began stomping plastic candy lawn ornaments. "I preferred Deus. At least it was easy to hate him..." the gray pegasus fumed.

"No offense, but what are we going to do with him?" P-21 asked as he nodded down to the buck he sat on; P-21 had shoved an apple grenade in the buck's mouth. I wasn't exactly sure if that was the smartest thing to do, but the buck wasn't trying anything.

Slowly I sat up, the Med-X calming me down enough to catch my breath. "What?"

"He's a rapist. Are we going to let him go to do it again?" P-21 asked as he tapped the stem of the apple.

"Take it out of his mouth, P-21," I felt oddly numb. "You're... Frisk, right?" I asked as P-21 removed the explosive. "What the fuck do you think you were doing?"

"Getting even," he muttered as he glared up at me. "When she had the guns she tied me up and was happy to sell me to Paradise."

“And she got her horn smashed for it. Are you saying she tried it a second time?” He just glared up at me. I looked at the unicorn as my heart thudded in my chest.

I heard a whisper in my ears, “So. . . what’s the proper punishment for a rapist?” the old pale buck muttered in a voice like shuffling cards.

“I’m not an executioner.” I muttered.

“Blackjack!” P-21 hissed in outrage. “How is this fucker different from 99?”

“He’s different in that I have to pull the trigger.” I said firmly as I stared down at him. “I won’t make you or Glory murderers.”

“It’s not murder,” P-21 argued.

I looked at him, “He’s unarmed.”

“He’s not Mini. He’s not dying slowly and tragically. This buck is scum.” P-21 argued.

Glory just swallowed. “I know what he did was wrong. And I don’t want him to ever do it again, but killing him isn’t the answer.”

We glanced at Rampage. She cocked a brow and snickered, “What, you want my opinion? She then turned to the foal who watched us all warily, “Did he hurt you, sweetie?” She asked with a surprisingly gentle smile. The filly returned a scared, but slow shake of her head. Rampage shrugged, “Eh, I’m good either way.”

I looked at the mare then; the mare that I had maimed in my own battle rage. “Do you want me to kill him?” I asked, hearing those cards shuffle over and over again. I’m not an executioner. I’m not. This is justice. This is what’s fair!

She met my gaze and gave the tiniest of nods.

Out came the hunting rifle. Funny how I couldn’t hear my heart any more. It was as if everything inside me had gone still and quiet. “Let him up,” I muttered, and with a frown P-21 agreed. My eyes met Frisk’s, “You have till the count of ten to run.” P-21 pressed his lips together as the buck scrambled to his feet. “One.” I said softly.

Frisk backed away slowly. “Two,” I counted as I lifted the barrel with my magic. He immediately turned and ran. I grit my teeth. “Three.”

“Are you going to be able to do it, Blackjack?” P-21 asked with a scowl. Would I?

“Four,” I intoned, watching him run through the ankle deep water. With rubble to either side of him, he could only go in one direction. “Five.” The water sprayed up around him as I leveled the crosshairs on the back of his neck. “Six.”

“You can’t do this, Blackjack. Please. You’re not a murderer!” Glory begged. Was I? I’d always been a killer. Was I ready to becoming an executioner; killing coolly and deliberately?

“Seven.” I’d thought he’d be further along, but he was slowed by the water and junk hidden under the surface. “Eight.” I saw the crosshairs tremble on the back of his head.

Rampage didn’t say a word. ‘You’ll bash your brains to paste long before you die of thirst.’ “Nine.”

Is this how it begins?

“Ten.”

Be kind.

I clenched my eyes shut and collapsed in the water, tears running down my face as I fell to my knees, hugging the rifle to keep from losing the weapon in the muck. I let out a sob as I bowed my head. I could imagine P-21’s disappointed expression as I failed him again.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. Then I looked at the maimed mare. She stared at me in shock. “I couldn’t. . . I wanted to, but I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

The mare just held her wide-eyed foal. Then she said softly, “I really don’t mind. . . you didn’t kill me either.”

“You are one strange pony,” Scalpel said as I stood in her auto-doc, letting the machine probe and restore me through her magic. “Most ponies don’t bust a horn one day and pay to replace it the next.” Roses, the mare I’d rescued. . . and assaulted. . . was resting upstairs with Thorn.

“She quit being a slaver,” I replied softly. “That has to count for something.”

“She lost her gun and her crew. That doesn’t mean she quit.”

“Frisk raped her. She deserves something,” I muttered.

“If it wasn’t in the Flank, doesn’t matter,” she replied as she took another drink.

“It matters.”

“To you, sure. To me, a bit. But to most ponies, it was her own fault getting caught. Hell, most ponies would think it fair payback to a former slaver.”

“She has a foal.”

“Well, that’s a first in the Wasteland,” Scalpel said with a chuckle. “You know what your problem is?”

“Brain damage?”

“You think all ponies are good people, and you want to help them.”

“That’s a problem?”

“It is if you think you can help all of them on your own.”

“Don’t you help everypony you can?”

“Sure do, but I’ve narrowed down my ‘can’ a bit to what I can manage. I recognize that some ponies can’t be helped. Too addicted. Too burned out. Too eaten up. They’ll take every bit of help I can offer and still mess themselves up. So I have to make the rotten call and write them off. And they die, sure enough as if I’d shot em dead. But if I didn’t, I’d be just as dead.”

“So it’s you or them, is that it?”

“They don’t have a chance without me,” she replied with a shrug.

I sighed and closed my eyes. “I could have killed her, but I didn’t want to be an executioner. I wanted to kill him, but I couldn’t do it. Why?”

She tapped my head. “Because you want to save ‘em. You want them to be good ponies again. But ponies ain’t good or bad. Ponies is ponies, and the sooner you realize that, the easier it’ll be.”

“Yeah, but I’m too stupid for easy.”

“Well, I’ll say something nice at your funeral.”

“I get one? Sweet. Will there be cake?”

She laughed as she deactivated the machine. “You are one twigged mare.”

“I’ll take that as a good thing,” I replied with a grin.

Her expression turned more serious as she adjusted her glasses. “Are you looking to take over the Flank?”

“I dunno. Should I?”

“Not if you believe in good ponies.”

“The ponies here aren’t?”

“No pony is. Some try, but Flank isn’t about helping. Here, everypony is looking out for themselves and doing what they have to do.”

I closed my eyes, imagining Barpony. “I know two that are looking out for others.”

“Well, that’s two more than I know.” She replied.

I smiled and gave a shake before slipping my barding back on. “I need to find Caprice. Is she back in her office yet?”

“Ask your friend at the bar,” Scalpel said with a little snicker. “You do know who she is, don’t you?”

“I keep trying to find out,” I muttered.

“Oh, well, I won’t ruin the surprise for you.”

I huffed softly, “And that keeps happening.”

Something was wrong, and once again I couldn’t put my hoof on it. Did Scalpel always look so... tired? “Well, speaking of Caprice, I should probably go and tell her that we’ll have finished fortifying this place soon. And if she doesn’t like it then I’m handing it all to that barpony. Or you. Or somepony. Hell, I can run this place better than she can.” Great. Now Scalpel looked worried.

“Well... I’m sure she’ll be glad to hear that. Why don’t you get a bite at the Trough first, though? Magic is no substitute for food,” she said with her frayed smile.

“Good idea. See you later,” I replied. Walking out, I noticed something else; these were the same addicts as I’d seen before. In fact, they were the same as when I’d first been brought in. I supposed treatment took more than a single day; look at how many times I’d been back to deal with the damage I caused myself.

Still...

Things weren’t much better in the Trough. For some reason, I was noticing how off things were. The bountiful food really wasn’t all that great an amount; they just spread it out more. The ‘fresh’ produce from the Society was withered and pale. The apples on top were decent enough, but most of the remainder were soft and overripe. Even 200 Years Fresh had empty cardboard boxes behind the packages. The only food that actually looked appetizing, I’m sorry to say, was the food in the Enclave shop, and that was closed and locked up.

Something was definitely off. I supposed that, having been around Flank for a while, I'd finally started to notice things. Still, had the security mares always followed me around like that? They didn't look like they were after more pointers. P-21 and Rampage had gone to raid Deus' camp of everything not nailed down while Glory and I returned to Flank. She was now in the Exchange, trying to convert our salvage to caps.

And me? It was time to see Caprice.

I strode into Stable 89, my eyes starting to flicker amber as I'd finally sucked up enough radiation to trigger my mutation. I was resolved to see Caprice and get this done.

Then I saw Barpony chatting with Scalpel. The former seemed to be waiting for me, and my nethers gave me other options as Scalpel trotted further in. I guess even doctors needed to scratch that itch from time to time. "Hey," I said, with an easy grin. She looked good... tired... tense... worried... but good. Really good...

"Hey yourself," she said as she bumped my rump and passed me a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. "Heard you had a busy day helping the town."

"Yeah, something like that." I took a pull off the bottle. It tasted... odd. Sweet, but also bitter. It must have been an old bottle... "But I need to see Caprice. I have business with her." Her eyes twitched to my barding, my guns.

"Oh? Well, she's still out, but how about we go back to my quarters till she gets back?" She asked, and only the thought of her offer kept me from going through the roof.

"Sure," I said with a chuckle, groaning as she nuzzled my mane. I had to admit, watching this filly's flank was even more appealing now. It was like a moon... like a beautiful peach moon...

I had to admit that there was something nice about her room. Maybe it was the light. Everything in the room had a whiteish silvery glow to it. I was glowing. She was glowing. It was like we were making love in the stars.

I just gave such a wide grin my cheeks hurt, "Okay. I'm ready for another."

"Unfortunately, I need to check on a few things, and then I'll be back," she said as she slipped from my hooves.

I closed my eyes again with a soft groan. “So not fair. . .”

“Don’t whine, Blackjack,” she told me with a little wink. “It makes you sound virginal.” With that she slipped out the door and I groaned.

I lay on my back, trying to touch that soft shimmery light. “Blackjack,” the old buck rasped.

“Go away. I’ve orgasmed. I don’t need to talk to crazy.”

“Blackjack. You need to take a Fixer,” he rasped softly.

“Fixer doesn’t fix nothing. That’s what Glory said,” I muttered as I looked up at the colors. “I feel good. Why do I need to fix that? Everything’s so. . . ugly. She’s pretty. She’s nice. Let me feel good. Please?”

“Maybe. But this isn’t real. You need to take a Fixer,” he rasped softly. “She has some in her drawer.”

“How do you know that?”

“You know it,” he replied simply.

I started to cry. “Just let me stay here. Please. I don’t want to go out there where it’s horrible. I am so sick of horrible. I liked it better when I didn’t notice how. . . bad. . . things are.”

“That’s a price you pay for noticing. Look at Pinkie Pie. Look at what she saw. See how it destroyed her? You can’t lie here, Blackjack. Get on your hooves.” I slowly rolled out of bed and staggered over to her desk. I lifted the package of Fixer, wincing at the way the red colors of the packaging bled into the silver glow.

I pressed the bitter tablet to my tongue and chewed.

The glow disappeared and I gave myself a brisk shake. Everything from the hallway to the bed was a blur. My barding and stuff was nowhere to be seen. “Please. . .” I whispered to the memory of long dead goddesses, “Please please don’t let this be a set up. . .”

Her room was decorated with strands of colored lights. Every inch of the room had strange little trinkets and nicknacks. I looked at some of her treasures. A spent magic cartridge? A foal hoof bootie? A kazoo? They were all teasing me; making me wonder about this mare.

I noticed a lot of papers in a waste basket. I probably wouldn’t have paused if I hadn’t noticed the writing was all fancy and looping, like how I’d seen Princess

Celestia write. I floated one out, narrowing my eyes. “My dearest Peach Pie. I look forward to munching on your apricot of love. No words can adequately express how full and throbbing my rhubarb is for your delectable flower. I long to nuzzle your sweet grass and look forward to your lips full of celery. Your sweetest cherry, Lord Orange. Ooooookay. . .” then I glanced down, “PS: I am including an incentive of ten thousand caps to sway you to my garden of love.”

Ten thousand caps for sex? I couldn’t imagine. I looked at her desk and the colorful bottles; not just soda. Perfume bottles. And there were foal stickers all over her terminal. And glitter. And. . .

It was under ‘E’!

Then I noticed it: a little spot of something drab on the bookshelf. Something plain. It wasn’t hidden so much as simply placed behind layers and layers of junk; that’s what all this was. Not trophies or important momentos but simply stuff. Stuff to deceive and mislead. A veil. Slowly I walked to the bookshelf and my horn carefully moved aside the bottles and levitated out a picture in a dusty frame.

Softly I swept it aside and looked down at the grainy, black and white photograph of a grizzly buck standing over three fillies; hugging them all in his hooves. The one on the left, with the disdainful look at the other two, I didn’t know. The one on the right, grinning gleefully up at the old buck, was the barpony who’d given me all kinds of wonderful feelings minutes ago. But in the middle. . .

Bottlecap.

The door hissed open right then and in walked Caprice. Suddenly I could see around her edges. The fear underlying her smooth demeanor. The wariness in her eyes. The fear. She was afraid of me. Why? I wasn’t her enemy, was I?

Yes. . . I was.

“You’re. . . you’re up. . .,” she said, trying to keep her voice smooth. She may have pulled it off before too, but now I heard the strain in her voice.

“Yeah. I think I took something,” I said calmly as I put the picture back and then I levitated the package of Fixer, “So I took something else,” I said frowning. “Why didn’t you tell me you were Caprice?”

“I was just playing. . .” she began, sliding into an easily prepared line. My lips pressed together. That was true, but it wasn’t the whole truth. Not even most of the truth. “Blackjack, please. . . why don’t we continue our fun, hmm?”

I looked at her, not smiling now. I just stared and watched her slowly unravel. The tense smile. The pleading eyes. The nervous shake. A little pressure and they were impossible to hide. “No. I think we’re done with that, Caprice.”

“Please don’t kill me,” she whispered as she shook.

“What? What are you talking about?” I frowned as I looked at her, feeling my mane crawl. “Gemini and Taurus. . . they knew exactly where to find me. And U-21. And Deus. You sold me out!” I shouted at her as my eyes narrowed. “You fucked me!” She started to back out the door, but my stare locked her in place. “You told the security mares to step aside, didn’t you? You wanted me to come into the stable. Make me nice and comfortable. Drug me up and hand me over to Deus? And Taurus knew exactly where that bridge was to cut me off. He could have sniped me easily if I hadn’t trapped Mini.”

“I had no choice!” she cried out. “It was hand you over or Deus would have leveled Flank and buried us alive inside the stable! This town is everything. It’s all I have.” She said as she finally backed away. “Now you’re taking over. Just like Usury did at Paradise and Bottlecap did at Megamart. You’re going to take Flank away from me!” She yelled as she backed towards the door.

“I wanted to protect it. I wanted to protect you. You could have told me! You could have just asked me to go. I wanted to help you, Caprice. Not Flank, you!” I snarled, as the white glow of my magic sheathed my horn. It was like back at the mine; I was looking right at a softer, sweeter Lancer. A snake. If I didn’t kill her now, she’d just bite me again later.

A dry shuffling of cards and an expectant silence.

“But I am NOT a fucking executioner,” I snapped as she backed away through the door into the overmare’s office. I walked over to my saddlebags and pulled out her letter from Bottlecap and threw it in her face. “There! Message delivered. The Finders owe me for three contracts. Pay up.”

She looked at the letter at her hooves, shaking. Without opening it she tossed it into the trash and then walked to her safe. She pulled out five bags marked 1000c and set them on the table. I swept them into my saddle bags. She stiffed me 10%... but I didn’t care at this point. I just wanted to get the hell out of Flank.

“I’m sorry. . .” she muttered softly. “I just. . . liked not being me.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, chewing down another bitter tablet. “I liked you not being you too.”

I'm the security pony. I'm the one that shows up to kill all the fun. Flank was glad to see me go. They had their turrets; the rest was up to them. I'd wrangled a few concessions for our hard work: a working wagon, the contents of Octavia's chest, a few recordings from Mixers. Those two had been the only ones genuinely sad to see me leave. Even Scalpel had looked at me with her tired, burned out eyes and just given me a shrug.

Roses and Thorn would be coming with us to Megamart or just someplace that wasn't here. When Rampage and P-21 returned, we simply loaded it all in the cart and left.

"So. You figure out who Caprice is yet?" The Reaper asked.

"Shut up, Rampage. . ." I muttered.

Ponies is ponies, she'd said. They're not good or evil. Maybe that was true; maybe we were all somewhere on a slope of gray. But I knew there were ponies who struggled every day to stay as high on that slope as they could and others that just apathetically slid further and further down.

Footnote: Level up!

Perk added: Action Mare (rank 2) – +15 additional AP in S.A.T.S.

Skill note: Lockpicking (50)

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 was security in the Wasteland, where there was no peace, stability, or order left to keep? Was I supposed to create them on my own? I was 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 that 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 with 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 monsters of the Wasteland and fail, or to care for a small part and ignore what remains? How can I do better?

The rain dripped in streaks along my glasses as we trudged along the road north-east 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' 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 ammo. P-21 busied himself with cracking them 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 the lavender pony 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 hand 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 hooves, “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.

D-

"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 a 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 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 waggled 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 Rad-Away 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 its 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 quietly. Because if she didn’t, she might try to be a slaver again, and if she did 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 notes. 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; only Luna knows what you are. Up upon the world so high, like a pony in the sky. Twinkle Twinkle little star; only Luna 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 pods 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 mamma? 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.

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?”

oooOOOooo

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 the 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 the 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. Password is ‘Fluttershy’.” 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 my limbs. 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 hadn't been enhanced 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.

Sitting in the shelter of the garage next to empty footlockers and medical boxess, 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 wastelands 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 soft chuckle, “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 as 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 softly. “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' 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 from how my head and throat felt, I really couldn't bring myself to complain. I held the glass 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' 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 myself. 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 startled looks 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—“

I 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’ 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 healing 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 barricaded 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 spraypainted 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 my shotgun. Trying to bash and ram these ghouls to death— or re-death... 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'd 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 duller 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 ghoulish 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. We'd need rope... no! Maybe chain. Ugh, I had neither. Why was it never easy?! I raised the chopper. "Get your pistol. Once we find the others, then 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. "Soooo. . .

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 HAHAHAHAHA!" 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, "Choooooooooooooooooop!" With my last swing, the head of the last ghoul arching 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. It was under ‘E’!

“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. Lets 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 dumb-

founded. "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 ghoulish 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 ghoulish 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 cold 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 ghoulish 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 pegasi 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 Mari pony.”

“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 some-

thing 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 Mol 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 cham-

ber 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 raised 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!"

"No!" 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 don’t know who Rarity was, but I’ll say she 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 ghoul foals 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 ghoul foals told the pink unicorn. "Our parents are dead too."

As we left, I glanced back at the wing where I hoped Valiant 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 Rad-Away, 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 these 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.

19. EC-1101

“Does my crown no longer count, now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years?”

I leaned against the metal railing of the Celestia Bridge, just a few yards away from “Celestia’s Mercy”, listening to the gurgle of the gray water passing beneath me. My eyes looked at the enormous relief of Luna on the floodlit dam. I knew it was Luna, now, after feeling her feathers on my lips. She gazed down at me despite the holes zebras had attempted to blast in the concrete.

“How are you feeling?” Priest asked as the black pony quietly walked up beside me. “Still have a fever?” He raised his hoof to touch the side of my head. I grimaced, pulling away. He kept looking at me with that annoying gaze that wasn’t trying to get me in bed.

I coughed a few times, proud to resist the urge to spit in the river. “Oh, me? I’m fine. I’ve faced the Wasteland’s worst. A little cold isn’t going to nail me.” I tried to keep up the act for a moment longer, then slumped a little. “Honestly, my nose is running worse than this river and my throat’s been scrubbed with a rusty wire brush... but I do feel better. Thanks.” He smiled a little more at that. I didn’t even want to mention the injury to my gut.

“You’re welcome,” he said, hooking his forehooves over the rail next to me and looking at the water flowing underneath on its journey to... wherever rivers go. There was a moment of silence. “You’ve changed.”

I closed my eyes with a little smile. “I picked up this nasty habit called thinking. Pretty bad stuff. Caused me all kinds of misery.” I sighed and shook my head, still smiling. “I’m still not very good at it.”

Since I’d gotten up and about, I’d bumped into Sekashi and her foal. Priest. Harpica. Chapel was starting to look more like an actual village, even if three quarters of its population were still colts and fillies. Of course, one thing hadn’t changed at all: the capmonger had greeted me with a look promising that, when I left, I would be capless. I just hoped she didn’t clear me out before I paid for EC-1101’s decryption.

Provided the file even remained in my Pipbuck after being struck by lightning, of course.

“There were ponies who were very good at it and still didn’t realize that what they were doing was wrong,” he sighed. “Anyway, I wanted to thank you for all your help.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You cleared out Blueblood Manor enough for us to be able to scavenge it safely. The Society will pay nicely for statues, cutlery, and stuff that isn’t rotted. We can use that money to buy some decent building materials and try to expand Chapel. I dunno if you saw, but we’re getting a little crowded.”

Trade is going to save the wasteland? Maybe it will, Bottlecap. A village expanding. Growing. I’d tried to do just that two days ago. I smiled softly. “Well, let me know if you need any help.”

I looked at him again. “Could you not touch one room? Please?” I told him about the memory orb and Vanity and showed him the letter. “He apparently did something bad, but for all that, I still think he was a good pony.”

He looked at me and then gave me a little nod. “So, now what’s your plan?”

“Oooh, I’m a bad pony to ask for a plan,” I muttered. “Something always seems to explode when I plan something. So for now, nothing.” I couldn’t tell him that Watcher had made the arrangements to meet with my data analyst. I’d best stay put until Bottlecap contacted me. . . however she would. “Got a place we can lay up for a little bit? At least till the funeral?” We’d be burying Roses in the cemetery; she might not have always been a very good pony, but I still felt that she deserved to be buried with respect.

“Funny you should ask that. Care for a walk?” he said as he gave me his easy smile. I had to admit, I was a little intrigued. We walked back to the shore, but instead of heading southeast towards the town, he turned sharply south towards the hills and the dam. I could hear the sounds of water roaring through the spillways as we made our way up. Then I spotted the house sheltered from the sight of Hoofington by a low ridge of rock. It looked out across the graveyard’s swath of yellow grass and Chapel beyond.

“I haven’t been inside in years, so be careful,” he said as we walked towards the front door. There were little miracles growing beside the door: small flowers that looked like yellow and gold balls of color. Flowers. Actual flowers! Walking to the door, I reached out to the latch with my hoof and found it locked. Automatically, I reached for a bobby pin and focused, trying to remember exactly how to open it. The pin stuck and snapped, “Shoot.”

He tapped my shoulder and coughed with a hint of amusement. “Ahem.”

I looked up and saw the key floating beside me. “Oh, sure. Do it the easy way.” Still, I took it and opened the door. As I stepped in, I checked my E.F.S. for intruders. Nothing on it, so whether the place was empty or there was a cloaked zebra hit squad in there.... or the damn PipBuck had been struck by lightning and I’d forgotten. Ugh, why couldn’t I be a smart pony?

The cottage hadn’t been occupied in quite some time, but it looked like it’d been inhabited in the last few years instead of just the last few centuries. A layer of dust covered every inch of the place, and there were water stains on the ceilings and floors from old leaks. Still, it didn’t reek that badly of mildew, and what furniture I could see was in pretty good shape. Metal dinnerware was stacked neatly in a corner kitchen, and some old pillows sat before a stone fireplace. There were also stars everywhere. Painted on the ceiling, carved into the stones, made of polished copper, silver, and brass and nailed to the wall around a crescent moon... It had a feeling of great age to it, and I couldn’t help but touch one of the six-pointed shapes carved next to me.

“What is this place?” I asked in awe.

“We called it the Star House when Arlosté and I lived here,” he said with a wistful smile. I glanced at him, wondering if he knew that Arlosté had returned in Reaper armor. I wasn’t sure; she hadn’t come into Chapel with us, saying something about fixing her armor.

“What was your relationship?” ‘Knew him? I fucked him, or I wanted to.’ I couldn’t help myself as I smiled. What was it about good bucks...

He looked surprised, and maybe a little concerned, but answered, “I was an orphan. My parents came here and made the pilgrimage, though of course nopony called it that yet.” He sighed, his eyes looking at something more distant than the walls he faced. “I couldn’t go with them. I stayed behind and eventually wandered into the church. It was a mess, vandalized and defaced, but I felt a purpose in restoring it. I met Arlosté shortly afterwards. She wandered down the road... I think looking to make the pilgrimage herself. Scared. Confused. Maybe even a little mad. We talked for hours, and I earned her trust, and she decided to stay a while.” He chuckled softly, “I thought she was my first success.”

I smiled. It’d be okay to tell him....

His wistful smile hardened, “Then she killed a foal.”

What. The. Fuck? I blinked and cocked my head, forcing a smile... or a grimace, "Come again. . . ?"

He looked at me, both angry and sad in equal measure. "We'd started collecting the Crusaders. For a time, she was. . . happy. Wonderfully happy. She said she'd never gotten to be a Crusader, but she couldn't tell me what she meant by that. Only as time went on, she became. . . odder than usual. The fact she didn't get older was strange enough, but she'd talk to herself or mutter in strange languages. One morning, a foal was found strangled. The hoof marks on her throat were too large to be made by anyone here except Arloste."

Old anger and sadness lingered on his face, "She denied it, but I couldn't trust her alone with the foals anymore. And worst of all, I'm not sure she believed it either. We couldn't kill her. . . she had a strange ability to heal injuries, like she had a built-in healing talisman, but she couldn't stay. A lot of the oldest Crusaders still miss her." And from the tone in Priest's voice, he did too. "So I moved into a house by the road proper and locked this place up."

I thought about Arloste laying with Thorn between her hooves in the garage. If we hadn't been there, what would have happened? I swallowed hard, definitely feeling some hard questions coming for Rampage.

I hoped she didn't kill me for asking them.

"It's a wonderful house. Thanks for showing it to me," I said as I looked at it with a sigh. It was like a house in the stories I got to read as a filly. Well, when I was interested enough in reading, which wasn't often.

Priest chuckled softly. "You misunderstand. I'm not just showing it to you." He floated the key to me and put it in my mouth, "I'm giving it to you."

My butt and the key hit the floor. "You're giving me a house? This house?"

"I don't want it. I don't even count it as mine. I was just holding onto the key," he said as he looked at the stairs. "It needs some fixing, but your friends can help set that up. There's some furniture upstairs...old belongings... We never used it, and it felt rude to just throw it out."

"But why?" I asked, feeling a little lightheaded. "I didn't build you turrets or make walls or kill anypony for you. . . why would you give me this?"

"So you'll stop by Chapel more often, of course," he said with a simple, pleasant smile.

I kissed him. If my legs had been cuffed and hobbled, I still would have found some way to kiss him.

He did not kiss back. And when our lips parted, I looked him in the eye. His smile was polite, tolerant, and forgiving. . . and that was all. I smiled sheepishly at him in embarrassment, then growing confusion. I felt a little ashamed, even if he didn't look angry. "Well, I'm glad you like it," he said, covering up the resounding awkwardness as I blushed and rubbed my mouth sheepishly, kicking myself again and again. I'd acted just like I was back in Stable 99. Had I learned nothing?

"Yeah. . ." I muttered, fighting for a smile. "I like it. A lot."

"Well, I'll let you look around," he said as he walked towards the door. Then he paused. "Also. Could you please tell Arlosté that I'm glad she's okay, but that she shouldn't come into Chapel?"

My gut dropped once more, like I'd just been cut... "Yeah. . . I'll tell her."

He closed the door, and I walked to the nearest wall with an elegant six-pointed star, closed my eyes, and beat my head against it. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

A while later, after my head stopped feeling as if somepony had hit it with a wall repeatedly, I poked it into each of the small rooms. The two other rooms on the first floor had clearly been lived in by Rampage. . . Arlosté. . . and Priest. Thankfully, it looked like they hadn't been sharing them. The first room I checked probably wasn't Priest's, since it still had so much stuff in it, though I wondered if he'd cleaned up; it seemed remarkably neat for what I expected of Rampage. I found a quite dented brass star-shaped badge that said 'Hoofington Guard'. There were also a lot of books: police procedurals, murder mysteries, and books of forensic science, mostly. She'd also collected wooden carvings of ponies. No, of zebras. I frowned as I looked from one group to the other.

Munching on two-hundred-year-old peppermint sticks I'd found in a desk drawer – and only a little bit dusty–, I peeked into what I assumed was Priest's room. It was mostly cleared out, but there were sketches and drawings of the church. A picture of Celestia's window was pinned to a wall over the bed. Beyond that, there wasn't much left. I peeked at the full wastepaper basket and lifted out the wads.

"Why throw these out?" I muttered softly as I smoothed them out.

Arlosté looked back at me. The look was posed, and done with more detail than

even the drawing of Celestia's window. I stared into her eyes. Priest should have had a pencil for a cutie mark.

No wonder he hadn't wanted to kiss me. He'd loved her. Then she'd done... something. Had she really killed a foal? How can you love a murderer?

I picked out the intact drawings from the trash, took the ones on the walls down, and collected them in a small stack in the middle of the room. I'd return them later. I thought that maybe... could there be some way... perhaps if I...

I sighed. Always trying to save ponies.

I wondered just how long it would take for me to be contacted. Would Bottlecap send me directions? Should I be listening for a clue from DJ Pon3? Maybe I should try and find out how to repair my PipBuck? Virgo Zodiac said she studied them, but I had no idea how to find her or if it would be safe to contact her.

I sighed as I walked upstairs. Clearly, this was where most of the belongings of the previous tenants had been stored away. Priest's horn was visible here, too; all throughout the upstairs were nice neat boxes that only showed a little bit of rusting. I walked in on a room with a full moon painted right above the bed. Curious, I opened the closest metal box and saw a number of slightly warped photos and other knickknacks.

A young light blue unicorn in thick glasses and braces grinned besides a far younger looking Twilight Sparkle and Cheerilee. She was levitating a little model of the globe with the sun and moon orbiting it. An award rested around her neck. I reached down and pulled out the little medal still hanging on the blue ribbon that once hung around her neck. "Ponyville junior astronomer award."

Then a picture of her older, still wearing glasses but without the braces. She stood in a blue uniform beside a dozen other mares. 'Spacemares' read a caption under it.

A blue unicorn smiled at me through her thick glasses as she stood before some massive pieces of machinery. Another had her with a small cluster of ponies looking up at a model of the stars and planets. And another with her meeting with Twilight Sparkle and Applejack. The blue unicorn clearly possessed an eager hoofshake, as it looked like she was trying to shake off the purple unicorn's leg.

As I looked at the streaks in their manes, I frowned. It was amazing how similar they looked. Had Twilight Sparkle had a sister? Then I looked at the next picture, and my frown deepened. Was it a... missile? No. It looked much too big for that. Like a

minaret mounted atop a delicate jewel-encrusted and alabaster spire supported by four tapering buttresses. Some kind of. . . rocket?

A picture from the moon.

My entire body went numb as I stared at the image of a world hovering above a gray horizon of faintly luminous white dust and rocks. The sun silhouetted the world above me, but I could see the tiny winking lights of cities, the darkening blues of what I could only imagine were seas. The greens of plains and forests. It looked so small and fragile, surrounded by all that darkness. Yet there was light, too. Motes of light more beautiful for all that harsh darkness around them. The stars seemed to almost be welcoming, teasing, taunting. . . maybe even flirting a little.

We went to the moon. Not in some kind of fairy tale of an alicorn banishing her sister to the moon, but actually travelling there. We did that, I realized as I looked at the next picture, showing the rocket sitting upright on the open and empty plains. It possessed a terrible loneliness, stark but beautiful. Pensive. Like Princess Luna, I found myself imagining.

There was only one picture of the blue unicorn on the moon, and I gawked at the strange bubble helmet and silvery, gem-studded suit she wore. From the way she hovered in the air, upside down as if in the middle of a somersault, I wondered if it was the suit or the moon that was allowing her to float effortlessly like a pegasus.

Another picture showed white, cloudy gems embedded in the stones and glowing with a strange light. The moonstones seemed similar to the talismans that Glory had collected, only lacking any kind of spell glyph within. Maybe they were the source of the moon's gentle glow?

I lifted the box from the stack and set it on the floor before me, looking deeper into it. I perused the newspapers behind the photos. 'Back from the moon!' proclaimed one headline, the picture of the rocket sitting back on Equestria with dozens of ponies gathered around it and cheering. The next had a front page article, 'Our future on the moon.' But it was crowded out by a report of a terrible zebra battle south of Hoofington. The next paper, dated a month later, read 'Scandal strikes the moon program.'

And then 'Astromare Marigold a moon momma? What tricks did she pull to land in the cockpit?'

The last; 'Space program suspended indefinitely pending investigation.' I looked at the picture of the mare smiling radiantly on the moon, then at the picture in the paper

of a tiny-looking mare sitting before dozens of frowning, scowling ponies. A tiny little side article read 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences preserves space explorer Marigold's ministry stipend.' There was a little quote: "Never has a mare sacrificed so much to go so much farther than most ponies could ever dream." –Twilight Sparkle.'

Finally, perhaps most heartbreaking of all, was a small picture. It wasn't of the moon or on the front page of the Hoofington post. It was of a tired and sad Marigold digging in her garden with an old brown buck looking on with his own sad eyes and passing her some of the colorful poofy flowers I'd seen outside. Beside her rested a basket holding a purple unicorn foal batting at a little star tied to the handle.

A wrinkled note lay folded beside that picture. 'Thank you for the flowers from your garden, Hoss. I just know that Tarot will love them... if she'll stop eating them!'

There wasn't anything past that. I wondered what had happened to her. I wondered if she'd died in the bombing. I wondered if there was anything past that sad photograph.

Back downstairs, I looked at the blackened casing of my PipBuck and sighed. I hated waiting. I didn't want to confront Rampage just yet. Glory was avoiding me too, since her own injury. P-21 had said something about haggling with Charity over selling some gear. I thought of visiting Sekashi, but honestly I was simply drained by my disastrous attempt at romance and thinking about that poor mare who'd been to the moon and been ruined for it.

And as for trying to rebuild some sort of relationship with Priest...really, I probably wouldn't have less of a chance than I did now even if I decided to shoot him.

It was probably a bad idea, but I levitated out Vanity's orbs. I glanced at the bloody smear on the fourth and sighed. I didn't want to deal with his death now. Goddesses, I was so sick of death. From Roses to Vanity, why did everypony have to die? Want to die? Weren't there ponies who liked life? Who wanted something new in the Wasteland?

Well, there was P-21. Too bad I'd killed his lover.

Ugh, I needed a drink. Why didn't I ever have some Wild Pegasus around when I really needed it?

I picked up the first orb from the set, then stopped and trotted over to make sure the door was locked. Then I frowned and shoved the entire couch against the door.

Blackjack was not available!

I lifted the first orb to my horn and closed my eyes . I tried to make the connection. . . but it was hard. Not like the orb was locked, but like my horn was scared to make the contact. I supposed that that was understandable. I had to breathe several times before I finally felt the connection take shape and the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Oooooh! A party. As in a full five stars, red alert, don't let the Overmare catch us, wow party! Lights flashed, the music was bright, and I wanted to dance! Not that I knew how dance, but right now I'd have tried figuring it out if my host'd let me! A banner bedecked with balloons and streamers proclaimed that this was 'Ministry of Morale Hub Inauguration Party Time!' Now this was what the Ministry of Morale was all about!

And in the middle of it all, both physically and socially, was a middle-aged earth pony mare with a poofy pink mane just starting to develop gray stripes. "Come on, everypony. I know what'll make you shake your hoove things!" Pinkie Pie cheered as she immediately danced right up against bucks and mares half her age. Her infectious mood spread like a fever.

I was in Vanity; at least my host was a unicorn buck instead of just a buck. Stonewing and Jetstream flanked me. Twist, Big Macintosh, and a yellow earth pony who looked like a geeky egghead brought up the rear. The large gray Doof seemed to be arguing with the ponies at the door. The young mare snickered as she adjusted her glasses, "That was mean, Macintosh." From the rest of her squadmates came highly amused chuckles.

"I just told 'em I wasn't sure he was on the list," Big Macintosh said with a languid chuckle. "Didn't think a buck that keeps on hitting on fillies what aren't interested would be." Twist's smile turned more genuinely grateful as Macintosh's gaze darkened a touch. "If that boy can't figure out how to manage his gun around ladies, then he shouldn't be allowed to have one."

"Hey, hear that, Jetstream? We're ladies now," Twist laughed gleefully.

"Us? Psalm, maybe," the blue pegasus said with a quirky sort of grin. "I can't believe that she passed up a chance at a Ministry of Morale party to go pray."

"Well, could be worse. Applesnack just doesn't have time for parties. Ugh, did that pony get his stick installed before he enlisted, or was it special issue?" Twist asked with a snort, giggling with a little bounce. She pulled out a peppermint stick and

munched on the end. “Ooooh, I love these,” she said around the stick poking out between her lips.

“That one of those ‘special’ sticks?” Jetstream asked skeptically, “You know any zebra crap’s illegal.”

“Oh come on. They’re peppermint leaves. Peppermint! You can’t tell me leaves are contraband now! Besides, the Proditor eat them all the time,” Twist said with an easy laugh as the Marauders started to split up and go their separate ways. Big Macintosh went to speak to Pinkie Pie, the egghead following like his ghost. Stonewing and Jetstream flew up to the second floor balcony, leaving Vanity watching with a wistful sigh. Twist spoke around the candy cane sticking out of the corner of her mouth like a cigar. “I keep telling you, your royalness, munch one of these and you might actually be able to ask her out.”

“What? Who? Me?” Vanity sputtered. “I . . . she’s an enlisted mare and I’m a morale officer. It could never work.”

“Sure. But that doesn’t stop you from wanting to make it work,” Twist said as she bumped her hip against his before bouncing away.

This was clearly not Vanity’s sort of party, and he migrated slowly towards the edges with the other lookers-on, sipping his drink, listening to the music, and keeping his eyes open for Jetstream.

“You look pensive, uncle,” a voice rasped softly in my ear, and both of us jumped. The sound was like the voice of a rusty can, and we turned to look at the fair hide and golden mane of Goldenblood. His brilliant golden eyes looked searchingly at Vanity. As he talked, his breath rattled so harshly in his chest I could hear it over the blaring music. “Hardly the Grand Galloping Gala, is it?”

“Golden!” Vanity smiled and gave his shoulders a friendly squeeze. “I didn’t know you were out of the hospital. You sound . . . better.” To be truthful, he looked . . . probably as bad as me. Dark hollows hung around his eyes, and his hide had unhealthy blemishes on it. He wheezed softly with every breath.

“Thank you, Uncle. I’m sorry I didn’t get to attend your commencement,” he said in that soft, horrid voice. “It’s exceptional that you signed up at all. I don’t know any other aristocrats who volunteered for a front line position.”

Vanity gave a disgusted little sigh, “After so many inspirational speeches, I thought somepony would have to sign up. At least a token noble,” he tried to smile dismissively. Goldenblood’s smile was more . . . aloof.

“So you signed up out of pride then?” Even I caught the note of disapproval. “Not out of loyalty to the Princesses?” The question seemed to catch Vanity by surprise as he focused on his nephew’s earnest expression.

“Well, I suppose for Luna as well. She needs all of our help.”

“Indeed. But I wonder if she has it.” Goldenblood spoke calmly, but even I could hear the tension in his voice. “Do you really think my father is loyal to Princess Luna? Do you believe that any titled pony is?” He swept his hoof to the side. “They hold their balls and galas, wasting their money on their own indulgences as war threatens the kingdom. They use their lineage to leverage safe postings around Canterlot and Manehattan rather than place themselves where they might actually have to fight. Is there any value to the aristocracy at all, Uncle?”

His question struck me as unusually direct, but I also had to admit that Goldenblood had a point. I hadn’t seen anything of Blueblood or the other aristocrats that seemed worth a damn. Vanity was the first and last aristocrat who seemed to care about the actual fighting of the war. Still, his gaze hardened as he looked at the sickly stallion. “Tradition. The noble houses have always existed to serve and support Equestria and the Princess. It is our duty and our sacred honor.”

Goldenblood’s hard look softened slightly, “Undoubtedly, Uncle. But I have to wonder, do they serve her still?”

Suddenly, a leg went around my shoulders, a flash of pink to my left as Pinkie Pie pulled Vanity’s head into a crushing hug. “Hey! Why are you ponies over here looking like such sourpusses? Don’t you know it’s supposed to be a party, smarty?” Somehow, despite her grin, I detected a note of annoyance in her voice.

Suddenly her eye twitched and she went stiff. “Ahh! Left eye blink. Ear waggle. Rump itch? Oooh!” She suddenly head butted the two aside just as a sick Doof was violently ill over the rail. “Ewww. . . somepony partied too hard?” She said with some sympathy as the club’s staff hurried to clean up the mess as the huge gray pony groaned. “Good thing my Pinkie Sense saw that coming!”

“Pinkie Sense?” Vanity asked with a skeptical smile. Goldenblood looked intrigued, however.

“Oh you won’t believe me either,” Pinkie Pie said as she rolled her eyes with a slightly sad smile. “Twilight Sparkle’s been trying to study it for years, and she still can’t figure it out. I just get little feelings that things are going to happen, and then they do!”

“It sounds. . . convenient,” Vanity said as he hid his smile behind a feigned muzzle rub. I had to agree. It wasn’t like you could tell when bad things were going to happen just from an achy knee or itchy mane.

Pinkie Pie rolled her eyes with a sigh. But then Golden said softly, “It sounds. . . lonely. Knowing things that others can’t understand or accept. You bear it well.” Pinkie Pie’s manic grin disappeared as she looked at Goldenblood with a look of uncertainty, then a growing smile.

“You believe me?”

“I think there are many things in this world that can’t be explained rationally, so therefore irrational explanations should be considered.” He glanced up at where Doof hung over the rail. “If it prevents us from getting vomited upon, I’d freely consider it.

The pink pony grinned and swept him up in a hug. “I knew you were a good pony, Goldy Oldie Boldy!”

Goldenblood suddenly hunched over and started to cough and retch. Pinkie Pie immediately released him, patting him on the back. “Oh, are you okay?”

He just gave her a tense little smile and then returned to coughing, stepping away a little. “Just. . . adjusting,” he said as he levitated a cloth from his vest and coughed into it before drawing a slow breath. Vanity looked at the spots of pink and red left behind on the cloth.

Twist bounced her way across the club, smiling like nothing in the world could bother her. She nudged flanks with Pinkie Pie and grinned, “Hey Pinkie, this is a great party, but I’ve got something that will make it even better!” she said as she pulled out one of her candy canes and tossed it to Pinkie Pie, who caught it balanced on her nose and looked at it crosseyed. “You’ve got to try these. Just take one. They’ll blow your mind!” she said with a grin.

Pinkie Pie then smiled and tossed the candy cane in the air, caught it in her mouth, and chewed. “Mmmm. . . pretty sweet, Twist.”

“Yeah. They’re really super, aren’t they? I made them myself!” she said proudly, fluttering her eyes behind her thick glasses.

But Pinkie Pie wasn’t paying attention anymore. The pupils of her bright blue eyes expanded before Vanity’s eyes and her smile grew from ear to ear like mine had my first time playing the contrabass. “Oh wow! This really is super duper trooper good!” The mare said as she bounced gleefully on her hooves. “Wooo! Wooo! Wooo!”

She pointed a hoof at Twist as she started to giggle. "You're still sad about Apple Bloom, aren't ya? I can feel it!" She looked right into Vanity's eyes, "And you keep thinking you're a murderer and scared you're going to turn into a monster. And you are!" And then she looked at Goldenblood, "And you..." her smile slowly faded away. "You..." and like in ruins of Sugarcube Corner I watched as her face turned from glee into an expression of fear. "You're going to hurt a lot of ponies. Lots and lots and lots..."

Goldenblood didn't say a word as he simply looked back with his golden gaze.

"Pinkie Pie. Relax. It's a party," Twist said in worry as she gave Pinkie's flanks a nudge, but now the pink mare wasn't paying any attention to us. Her eyes were sweeping from one to the next. "And he's a rapist... and she's... she's stealing! And... and... no!" She sat down hard, muttering. "Twitchy mane... hot hoof... tingly knee... dry tongue... what's does it mean?"

"We should call a doctor," Vanity said as he looked around. Twist knelt, apologizing repeatedly for the candy as she hugged the trembling Pinkie Pie. The crowd was starting to notice, but that was when a huge cake made in the shape of the pink ministry hub was wheeled in.

Pinkie Pie looked right at it and pointed her trembling hoof. "It's a bomb... it's a bomb... there's a bomb... a really big bomb..." she whimpered over and over again as she shook. Then she looked around at the crowd. "You have... you have... there's so many pony... you have to do something!" Twist looked skeptical. Vanity just shook his head. Goldenblood's face was a stoic mask. Pinkie Pie stared at him, "Please Goldy... please don't let them get hurt..." She begged as tears ran down her face.

Goldenblood closed his eyes, and then said in a tone of command that made Vanity's ears rise up. "Vanity, get a message to the Hoofington Guard; there's a terminal you can use in the club's office. Tell them somepony planted a bomb at Prance. Twist, yes? Find Big Macintosh. Tell him the cake is a bomb." He began hacking and coughing again but struggled to keep his breath. "Pinkie Pie. Listen to me." The shaking mare looked up at him. "You need to smile. You need to calm down. Where you go, the party goes. And the party needs to go outside."

Pinkie Pie stared at him, then swallowed and nodded. And like that she was okay again. Her smile returned, her hair seemed to curl... only her eyes remained terrified. "Oh... sure Goldy. Great idea."

Goldenblood just gave Vanity a look, and my host ran for the office as Pinkie sud-

denly cried out, “Come on everypony! You know what’d be a great idea? A block party! Outside!” she said as she bounced towards the door while singing something about ‘raising the roof’ and ‘a party for Hoofington!’ The cake looked quite forlorn as the club emptied calmly. Prince Vanity’s name seemed to help the city guard take the threat seriously. Big Macintosh and Doof encouraged the rest of the staff to leave.

When the club was almost empty, Vanity carefully scraped away the pink frosting and cake. It peeled away enough for us to see the gray blocks of explosives within. She hadn’t been crazy after all.

When Vanity found Pinkie Pie, she was tackling one of the cooks. “You did it! You made that bomb. You’re a bad pony! I can tell! A mad bomber pony!”

“You’re crazy, lady! I just picked up the cake from the bakery!” he protested as she glared down at him.

She grabbed his head in her hooves and pulled his face within an inch of her own, “Don’t call me crazy, you wicked, bad, no good pony. You’ll tell me what you were doing! I’ve made dragons talk; you’ll be easy.” She looked at the guards, “Can you take him to my hub? I think we’re gonna need a special private party-warty.”

The crowd cheered as the buck was dragged towards the ministry hub, still shouting his innocence. Oddly, Pinkie Pie didn’t look happy with their cheers. In fact, standing this close to her, she looked. . . angry. Scared and angry and her smile was almost vengeful as she trotted out of sight. Vanity and Goldenblood followed. She was pacing. Fuming.

“It’s all secrets and lies. All of it. All those ponies,” she said, almost more to herself than the two unicorns. “I saw what they were doing. I just. . . the pieces all came together and. . . and. . .” Her bright eyes darkened. She suddenly slumped. “I. . . I dunno how I can stop it. I couldn’t stop it when I knew it was a bomb.” She sniffed as tears went down her cheeks. “I’m so stupid. All I can do is throw parties. I don’t know how to stop bad ponies and keep the good ponies happy and safe!”

Vanity just sighed and rubbed Pinkie Pie’s shoulder. “Don’t feel bad about this, miss Pie. Leave it up to the city guard; it’s their duty to keep peace and security. They’ll find the bad ponies.” And for a moment, it looked as if that was going to be that.

But Goldenblood was just looking at Pinkie Pie. Then he answered slowly, “I don’t know, Pinkie Pie. I think you can do more than you know. The Ministry of Morale’s more widespread than any ministry. You’ve got contacts and roots in the community.

And you have the Pinkie Pie sense; that's something nopony else has. If there is any pony in Equestria who can keep us safe, it's you."

Pinkie Pie looked at him, her face a mask of desolation. Then she sniffed and rubbed her nose. "I... maybe. I'd need more of Twisty's candy. And... there's so much to keep track of. I don't even know where to begin."

Goldenblood glanced at Vanity, his lips curling slightly, "Oh, I can think of a few places. After all, I know there's lots of aristocrats who you should use your Pinkie sense on. Especially if they're not helping Princess Luna as much as they could."

Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and then murmured, to herself or to the unicorns, I wasn't sure. "Oh Goldie, I asked you not to let them get hurt..."

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and at once took stock. I was still on the couch pressed against the front door. I wasn't disemboweled. Deus and Blueblood hadn't resurrected themselves and come out of the darkness to gang rape me. No spritebots. I had to admit that, for coming out of an orb, this was pretty smooth.

So for once, I could actually think about what I'd seen. It'd been pretty clear that Goldenblood had a grudge against his father and the other aristocrats. Maybe it was his father's treatment, maybe it was his loyalty to Luna. Whatever it was, he'd clearly set Pinkie Pie on the road to putting monitoring equipment into bakeries and sending her surrogate parents to spy on her behalf. Paranoia, or had Pinkie Pie really sensed something?

Still, I'd heard the argument. The doubt. Goldenblood seemed determined to bring down his father and the aristocracy, and he'd used Pinkie Pie and his uncle. I just wondered...

...why I heard hoofsteps up stairs?

"I could really use an E.F.S. right now," I muttered as I rolled off the couch and readied the dragon claw and Cupcake's revolver. "Actually, I could really use a drink right now." Too bad neither Priest nor Arlosté had kept a liquor cabinet. Slowly, I made my way upstairs. I'd only checked the one room, the one with Marigold's belongings. I'd never checked the other... Images of more ghost ponies peeked into my mind. I cracked the door open.

The unicorn mare in black lace who'd been praying in the chapel when I first visited it was in the house, her back to me. Up close, I could suddenly appreciate how

big she was. Her horn glowed as she lifted away her dress. A dusky purple hide appeared... and wings... and...

Oh sweet Princesses, it was Luna.

No. No, not Luna, I realized. I'd seen Luna. What stood in the room was like a copy, a pale imitation. The light was dull upon her horn, and no magical moonlight seemed to glow on her matte hide. And to seal the appearance, there was no cutie mark on this mare's flank.

Still... what the hay?

I considered my options: A tiny P-21 told me that I had the element of surprise and shouldn't waste it. A tiny Glory warned me that she might not be hostile. A tiny Blackjack lay in a bathtub and whined about how she wanted a drink. A tiny Rampage just gave a shrug.

Fuck it. I closed the door softly, then knocked on it. "Hi. If you'd like to talk, miss alicorn, come on downstairs," I said loudly, turning around. I'd probably just invited another monster to kill me. Maybe she was another Zodiac? Or a monsterpony like Gorgon? I really didn't care at this point. If she tried to attack me, then I'd kill her... or something. The plan was still a little fuzzy. I hopped back onto the couch, propping my head up on one of the arms as I dug through my saddlebags for a Fancy Buck Cake and two Sparkle-colas. I hummed to myself, trying to avoid the urge to go back upstairs.

Then there was a hoofstep on the stairs. Then another and another. Purple eyes peeked around the corner. "Hey. If you're going to kill me, mind waiting till I'm done eating?" I muttered around a mouthful of gooey cherry filling. She just stared at me a moment before slowly walking the rest of the way down into the living room. "Want a soda?" I asked, lifting one. I'm fairly sure that, of all the things she thought I might have asked, that wasn't even on the list.

The purple alicorn seemed at a bit of a loss. "The Goddess... does not require a soda," she finally said in a low, quiet voice. I really was amazed I could hear it at all. There was something... unnatural about it, something...off. Something about it sounded familiar, too, Luna only knew how.

"Didn't ask if you required one. Just wanted to know if you wanted one."

The alicorn's horn glowed softly, and she lifted the drink to her lips. She looked suspicious and wary as she took a very small drink from the bottle. "You are... unusual. You are not afraid of us?" She'd somehow managed to say that while

drinking, without moving her lips. Putting that aside for the moment, I focused on what she'd said rather than how she'd said it. I suspected that this was not the reaction she expected. Good. And was it my imagination, or did I now detect a hint of a smile?

"Sorry. Call me jaded," I replied after swallowing, "but after you have a cybermonster pony screaming 'cunt' at you while hunting you clear across the Wasteland, it's sort of hard to raise the bar on that." I popped the last bit of the cake into my mouth, chewing briskly. I gulped it down and wiped the crumbs away. "Not that you're not interesting, of course."

"We are... the Goddess," she said, again without moving her lips. There was some confusion and hesitation in her statement, as though even the purple alicorn wasn't exactly sure. Personally, I would have thought that a Goddess would be much more... assertive?

"Well, when I start seeing double, I'll start calling you plural." I sat up and coughed, hacked, and spat a glob of phlegm into the cake wrapper. The alicorn went from looking suspicious to looking disgusted. I wiped my mouth with a hoof as I looked up at her. "Do you have a name, or will 'Goddess' suffice?"

Now, I know someponies might have fallen over themselves at the sight of somepony that looked like the Princesses and called themselves a Goddess, but I'd seen the real thing. I'd even been touched by Luna's feathers...well, secondhand. I could still remember the feeling of them on my lips, and so, looking at this Alicorn, I felt curiosity but certainly not reverence. I should have been more suspicious, I suppose.

She just looked so... sad.

Again, that long silence. It was almost as if she were considering options. "Lacunae."

"Lacunae. Let me guess, it's a name that's absolutely rife with meaning and mystery that's completely over my head?" I said with a grin, and Lacunae looked a bit more wary. "Well, my name is Blackjack, but you know that already. You've been watching me for some time." I looked at her from over the tops of my mirrored glasses. "In the chapel. And in the mansion."

"We were considering you for Unity and joining the Goddess," she replied softly. As with all of her speech, her lips did not move, and it looked like she hadn't altered her breathing, either. That was one of the less strange things going on, though, and I could wonder about it later.

Joining the Goddess? Was there a part of that which didn't sound creepy? I waved my hoof before me. "Pass. I've got way too much trouble on my hoof. I'm damaged goods."

"We agree." She hesitated, head cocked as if she were listening and not quite sure how to express it. "We have observed some positive traits. You are... unusually tenacious. However, you are also unpredictable. Unstable. Irrational and self-destructive. And whiny. Definitely whiny." There was a long pause, "We no longer wish for you to share in Unity."

"Huh," I grunted softly, not entirely surprised but still slightly hurt. Was I that whiny? "Well shucks," I said with a chuckle. "So if you're not interested in me for this Unawhastit, what are you doing here?"

"We... I... we... live here," she said. She took another hesitant sip, almost as if this wasn't something a Goddess was supposed to do. I supposed that, with the cottage being abandoned, this was a natural place for a big alicorn goddess thing to live. Either that, or Priest had omitted a really big part of his time here. "Am I dreaming?"

Okay, the questions were becoming more interesting. "I don't know. Are you?"

"I... we... I am always dreaming. We are dreaming each other's dreams. But my dreams are missing." She looked at the stars painted on the ceiling. "This city is full of nightmares. They scream in me. I do not want to be here, but we need me here."

"Nightmares?" I muttered, thinking back over the last four days. Ya think?

"They are hateful dreams. Spiteful. Full of malice. They make it hard to hear the Goddess. I wish I could hear us more clearly. I need her forgiveness. I need her confidence." She looked in the direction of the Chapel. "I can hear us most clearly in the house of faith. That is why I remain here, where there is less to fear." She looked at me. "Are you afraid?"

I sighed, looking at the strange creature. "Hun, I recently escaped from a rape factory. An emotionally scarred buck who half-wants to kill me is my best friend. We've got a pegasus with us who was booted from the Enclave but still thinks of herself as one of them, and we've got a Reaper who survived getting her head cut off and who may or may not be a psychopath. I've faced monsters, been really annoyed by two-hundred-year-old mysteries, and shot at. A lot. You're going to have to be a little more specific."

"Are you afraid for your soul?"

I blinked and groaned, burying my face in my hooves. Philosophy. Why did she have to ask me about philosophy? Still, I thought about it. "I'm afraid that I'll turn into something I hate. I'm afraid that I'll hurt ponies who don't deserve it. I'm afraid that one day I won't want to stop killing. So yeah. I guess I am." I sighed and then smiled. "Guess we've got that in common. But, I've got mysteries to solve, questions to answer, and bastards to kill."

"I..." then she paused, "May I tell her?" Then she fell silent and I frowned as I watched her closely. She drooped a little. "I... am looking for something as well, but it is difficult searching alone. We do not like the nightmares of the city. One can be ignored, but dozens spread the nightmare through us all. I do not want to search alone. May I accompany you?"

"You... what? Why? Lacunae, I get shot at almost daily. There's not a day seems go by when something isn't trying to kill me. I'm not exactly sure it would be safe." For either of us. For all I knew, this whole 'Goddess' bit was just a ploy by Sanguine to do... something. "I have no idea who, or what, you are or what your agenda is." She definitely seemed psychologically unstable and clearly was withholding secrets.

"Please?" I blinked hard. Had an alicorn... just used the 'magic word' to try and convince me? Did she... or they... really think that I was that trusting of a complete stranger who was somewhat nuts?

I just looked at her for a moment, then raised my hooves into the air and snorted. "Welcome aboard! You get the dishes Tuesdays and Thursdays. Just make sure you try to schedule your emotional breakdowns when they don't conflict with ours. One of us is bad enough, but when we all get going... whew." I rolled off the couch and then struggled to pull the couch away from the door.

Then a brighter glow enveloped the couch and easily pulled it away. Great, and she was stronger than me. It was probably because of her great big... ugh! I didn't need a case of horn envy right now! "Okay. I need to fill in my friends. I need to make sure Glory is okay. She almost got eaten last night, and she's been acting weird. I need to tell Rampage not to try and gut you. I should probably also ask about that whole foal murdering thing. And I need to let P-21 know that we've got another mare with us. He'll be thrilled."

As I slipped out that door, I heard her mumble softly, "Are you sure we want to do this?"

I know... I know... there wasn't much of this that wasn't branded 'really bad idea', but despite that, I had to admit that there was something about her that made me want to help. Okay, she wasn't a normal pony, but it felt so much like she was... lost. And I simply couldn't believe this 'Goddess' gave a twig about a bounty.

I'm damaged goods travelling with broken wares and trying to save the Wasteland. "Where does it say that everypony I associate with closely has to be scarred, betrayed, crazy, or something else?" I wondered aloud.

While I might have wanted to talk to Glory first, Rampage was the first I came across. She was lying on a stone with her hooves crossed, resting her chin on top of her hoofclaws and looking down at the town. "Hey," she said sullenly. "So, he showed you the clubhouse, huh? Do I still have my old room, or did he turn it into a den?"

"Actually, he gave me the clubhouse, so yeah. You get your old room back, Rampage," I said as I joined her on the rock. "So." I said as evenly as I could.

She didn't look back as she said in just as even a voice, "So."

"Did you fucking kill a foal, Rampage?" I asked softly as I looked at the town.

"Probably. That's what everypony tells me. My hoofmarks on the body," she replied, her pink eyes downcast.

"Then what was what you were doing with Thorn?" I asked softly, my magic pulling the heavy revolver from my bags. If I shot her in the eye fast enough and managed to get some rounds lodged in her brain...

"Being happy. Is that so hard to understand?" She said as she sat up. "I love kids. I mean, love em. I look at all this shit, and the one thing that gives me the slightest hope is that some foal might grow up and be able to do something about it. I come across some fucker who hurts a kid, and I eviscerate him or her. No regret. No hesitation. Because as fucked up as the Wasteland is, nothing makes it worse than what we do to each other."

"So what happened then?"

"I don't remember. It was a boring day. We didn't have any pilgrims. Just the usual ponies in town. I went to bed and woke up with the foal beside me, body beaten and neck crushed. I was so mad... so hurt... so... everything. A lot of the kids stuck up for me, but Priest couldn't. I couldn't either." She hung her head. "I know what I remember, but I also remember the sight of her lying there. I still see her, even with my eyes closed. Even with my eyes gouged out. Every second is frozen in my mind."

I could relate. I really could. “Till we figure this out. . . if I see you alone with a foal. . . I’m going to take you out.” Then I frowned, rolling my eyes as I looked up at that great vasty badness above. Ooooh, mistake! Falling up now! I clenched my eyes shut as I amended, “Well, make that ‘Shoot you over and over again till you knock it off.’ Understand?”

“Oh? And how are you going to going to do that?” she asked with a little smirk.

“Well, you were found in a balefire crater. . .” I said as I grinned at her.

“Yeah, but you don’t have a balefire megaspell,” she said with a snort, and then looked at me with a touch of uncertainty. “Do you?”

“Give me time,” I grinned, and she smiled back, maybe with a touch of unease. Hey, it wasn’t completely impossible! “So. . . on a totally unrelated note, have you ever heard of alicorns in the Wasteland?”

“Alicorns? Here?” She sat up. “I’ve heard they’re around other parts of Equestria, but Hoofington’s never had them before.” She looked at me suspiciously, then gasped. “Wait. . . there’s one here, isn’t there?” She suddenly grinned. “Did you make friends with it?” I blinked, flushing as her grin grew and she cackled. “Oh Sweet Celestia, Blackjack. Do you have a pet hellhound or something? Maybe keep a radscorpion in a shoe box? Only you could make friends with something that practically everypony in the Wasteland thinks is a monster.”

“I made friends with you, didn’t I?” Rampage looked at me with a slightly less snarky smile as I went on with all the smugness I could muster. “You know, it could be that I’m just using her. This could all be an elaborate ruse! I can do ruses you—” I started with a snort, then sneezed hard, blasting my hoof with streamers of snot. “Ehugh. . .”

Rampage smiled sardonically, “Right. You are clearly the puppet master. We are all your puppets.” She rose to her hooves, looking back at the cottage as she squinted up the hillside. “Well. I guess I should go meet this monster.”

“Don’t fight her, Rampage,” I warned sternly as I could manage, scraping the snot off my hoof on the rock. “She’s. . . strange.”

“She’s an alicorn. Isn’t that required?” Rampage asked. “It’s kinda like becoming a Reaper or Steel Ranger: you just have to be off just to make the cut.”

“I know her,” I said sharply. Then I sighed as I sat. “I just don’t know where I know her from. Something about her is familiar. It doesn’t make any sense; I just look at her and feel. . . something.”

“You’re hopeless,” Rampage said with a shake of her head. “Fine. I’ll play nice.” She swayed her glittery razor-wire-wrapped tail. “Oh... and chessmaster Blackjack? You have snot on your butt.”

I glanced back behind me, ears flattening as I glared at her. “It’s only because I’m plotting! Plotting the plots of... plotness!” I said as she walked towards the cottage. “Just you wait! Nopony’s gonna see this plot coming!”

Once I’d dealt with the boogers on my butt –honestly, I had a cold! Couldn’t they cut me a break?– I headed into town, where I heard the delightful sound of Charity getting murdered. Okay, technically it wasn’t delight, but could anypony blame me if I did feel just a bit pleased?

“You... you’re trying to take advantage of me!” Charity cried as she stood on a stack of crates. “I work... and I slave... and I try so hard to get caps for town... and you want thirty caps for a land mine?” She sat hard, bawling as twenty assorted foals and fillies watched on. “Why are you being so mean to me?”

“I’m not trying to take advantage of you!” P-21 sputtered, red in the face. “Twenty caps is too low! Even thirty is too low!” He protested as he raised his hooves. “Stop crying! I’m just trying for what’s fair! Twenty five caps. Twenty three?”

“You... you... you’re trying to rob me... you rob little ponies! How can you be so mean?” the unicorn bawled as she rubbed her eyes.

P-21 wavered and then slumped. “Fine. Twenty caps.”

And just like that, the tears stopped and she said happily, “Deal.” Hopping off the crates she trotted towards her bag muttering, “Stable ponies is so easy.”

“She’s not a pony,” P-21 muttered. “She’s some kind of bottle cap collecting monstrosity.”

“She shall own the Wasteland some day,” I agreed solemnly as I sat beside him. “So... what’d you buy?”

“Believe it or not, these fillies have dug up some decent stuff. I was just hoping to hang onto some more mines rather than sell them all,” he said as she returned with a huge stack of caps and set them on the crates. “Is that all my caps? All two thousand?”

“You don’t trust me?” She asked, her eyes going wide with hurt.

He smirked and narrowed his eyes. "Oh no. You're not getting me with the water works this time."

And then Charity sighed, a soft little heartbroken catch in her voice. "I knew I'd never get away with it. I mean, we try so hard to get ahead here. . . but I know all too well how tough things are." She turned and started to walk slowly back towards her store. "I'll get the rest of them. . ." It sounded like he'd demanded her prized teddy bear or something! Even I looked at him with disdain, and these were our caps!

He lowered his head and gave a grunt of defeat. "Nevermind," he muttered, putting the caps in his saddle bags.

"Come again!" She replied brightly as she and four other Crusaders pushed the cart loaded with landmines into the post office.

"You should have seen me the first time. She charged me for a bottle of water that she gave as a gift to Priest," I replied, looking at the boxes. "So what'd you buy?"

"Some ammunition, a magazine extender for your twelve gauge, some more dynamite for me, and some barding for you and Glory."

"What about you?" I asked as I nudged open the box and pulled out some light black leather armor. A little closer to 'raider' fashion than I liked. A pony could get shot wearing this if she wasn't careful.

"If I get hit at all, it's 'cause I got noticed. I'll just stay nice and quiet in the background while you three get shot up. That way it's my own damn fault if something happens to me."

I looked at the black leather barding. "Well, I suppose it'll do till we get to Megamart. I wonder if we can spray-paint 'good guys, don't shoot us' on it?"

He looked at me with a smirk. "Blackjack. That's Glory's barding."

"This?" I looked at it in shock. "P-21, she can't wear this!" It was. . . ugly. I could only hope it was some sort of disguise or something.

"It's what she asked for," he replied with a shrug. "She wanted something that looked like she could kick tail. Personally, I think it's going to take more than clothes for her to be able to do that. No, your barding is in the other box."

I put the black leather aside. Honestly, it looked more like it was for sex work in Stable 69 than something Glory should be wearing to stay alive. I levitated that box aside and opened up the metal crate beneath it.

Black and blue beauty greeted my eyes. This armor wasn't just reinforced security barding, it was actual combat police armor, like I'd seen on the back pages of the Ironshod Firearms catalogues. Magically treated black ceramic plates on a matte blue kevlar jacket. This was armor for my whole body and wouldn't leave my belly exposed. Blueblood couldn't. . . okay. Not thinking about it. Not thinking about guts spilling out all. . .

I smacked myself hard, much to the alarm of P-21. I took a deep breath, trying to will my heart to slow. "Sorry, just making sure this wasn't a dream." He looked skeptical as I pulled out the pieces of blue armor and saw that, to make the icing perfect, 'Aegis Security' had already been printed upon the plates. "Oh, I could kiss you!" I said as I hefted the armor.

"Yeah. Please don't," he said, raising his hoof to ward me away as I wiggled into the combat armor. "Does it fit?"

I blinked and then looked back at him, "You know what's weird. . . barding always fits. I have to wonder if there's some kind of 'one size fits all' spell made into these things." Cinching it up under my belly, I had to admit that it was a little heavy, but not as much as the reinforced security barding had been. It had a sling for a shotgun on the left side, and a loop for a baton that would hold my dragon claw on the right. It even had saddlebags with pockets for holding healing and restoration potions as well as chems.

As I redistributed my stuff, I told him about the Star House. He smiled. Then I told him about why Rampage hadn't been seen around town. He stopped smiling. And then I told him about Lacunae. He seemed more upset about her than about what Rampage had told me. "How do you know this Goddess thing isn't some kind of trick?"

"I gave her a chance to attack me and she didn't take it," I replied as I snapped the combat helmet into place. Thankfully, my glasses still covered my faintly glowing eyes. "I don't know. She's strange. I want to figure her out."

He sighed. "Does she seem like she has some psychological or emotional problem that you think you can help her with?"

I sat, tapping my hooves in front of me as I flushed. "Maybe. . ."

"Of course she does. And is she sad?"

I rubbed my nose as I awkwardly said, "A little. Maybe. Just a bit?"

"Blackjack, are you trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty whiny ponies

to wander the Wasteland?”

“Maybe,” I replied, and he sighed as he facehoofed. “What? It could work. Bad ponies could see us coming and go, ‘Oh Goddesses, no way I want to mess with them because then she’ll start crying, she’ll be suicidal, and then he’ll blow us all to the moon!’ I know I wouldn’t want to tangle with that.”

He tried to suppress his laugh, shaking his head, and then sighed, “Alright. Just... please keep on your hooves, and make sure this isn’t another Lancer or Caprice.” That certainly helped sober me up a bit as he passed me the twelve gauge ammo he’d picked up. Trust was good. Trust that gets eleven zebras executed, not good.

Speaking of zebras...

I really didn’t expect to see Sekashi kick Glory in the face when I encountered the pair. My eyes widened as I went for my dragon claw before a pink pony in my saddlebags bucked me upside my head and I noticed Sekashi wasn’t pressing her attack.

“You are rushing, Fallen Bird. Do not be in such a hurry to hit me that you fail to connect,” the zebra said as Glory picked herself up out of the yellow grass. Sekashi glanced at me, her smile widening before looking back at Glory. The gray pegasus hadn’t noticed me approaching while she was picking herself out of the grass. “Why do you wish for this, Fallen Bird? You are not a fighter like your friends.”

Glory shook herself hard. “I told you! I’m sick of being useless all the time.”

Glory? Useless?

“Back in the mansion, I survived only so long as Rampage was around. The second she wasn’t I got stuck in a stove!” she said as she started to shake. “I couldn’t even help Blackjack against Blueblood. He cut me without even looking back, and I just sat there as he gutted her! I nearly got her killed!” Glory shouted back.

“It is a poor fighter who forsakes their strength for a weakness, though I know very funny stories of fighters who do just so,” the zebra said with a wistful smile. “Perhaps I should write a tale of the Fallen Bird, who wished to fight like the dogs because she thought her wings too weak.” Her green eyes looked back at Glory. “Ah, but how would the story end?”

Glory panted and hung her head. “I don’t want to hear stories! I... I saw what

that... that... wh... wh... that slut was trying to pull. I knew it was Caprice and I didn't tell her! She does everything for me. She saved my life and I just stood there as she was dying in front of me on the road. Rampage got her to Scalpel, not me. P-21 killed Blueblood. Not me." She sat down hard, hanging her head as she started to cry. "I can't do anything."

"You caught me," I said softly as I walked up besides her, taking off the helmet. Damn thing was uncomfortable.

"Oh my! Look at the sun! I believe I owe the Crusaders a story about two friends helping one and other. Excellent story. Very funny. Remind me to tell you some time!" the zebra said as she turned and trotted away. "Such a pity I cannot hear what two friends say to one another!"

I walked to her and lifted the black, spiked barding from the bag. "So, I'm guessing this isn't some sort of disguise thing," I said as I sat down beside her. She turned her head away from me. "And I'm guessing that 'Fallen Glory' isn't so much about keeping your identity secret as trying to be all tough?"

"I have to be tougher, Blackjack. For you. I..." She flushed as she stood. "You do everything. You get shot, blown up, cut up, hunted and betrayed... and all I do is... nothing. I feel... I feel like I'm still trapped in that oven and just waiting for the monster to eat me. Like I can't live if somepony doesn't come by and save me!" she said as she started to shake. She lifted her hooves, watching them tremble. "I... I can't... I can't even... stop..."

I did what worked for me. I hugged her. I held her as she quaked in my limbs. She wanted to be stronger. She wanted to be better. "You help me, Glory. Whether it's with your beam guns or with just being good and loyal, you help me." I stroked her mane, and then looked into her eyes. Despite Priest's healing magic, a thin scar remained, running from her brow to her cheek. She'd nearly lost an eye to the strike.

She kissed me. It was probably the most awkward kiss in the history of pony kisses.

I was so shocked that I barely moved, and she pulled away, her budding hope crumbling in the face of my stupor.

"I'm sorry... I guess... I guess I can't even control myself," she muttered as she looked away.

"No! I'm... I... just... Didn't know you felt that way." I was certainly stunned by it; as awkward as the kiss had been, there was no mistaking the emotion that'd been behind it.

“And... do you feel the same?” she asked in a tiny, hopeful voice. And if I was honest, I’d crush her.

“I... don’t know how I feel, Glory.”

“I know you like mares. You were with her after all,” she said with a flush. “I could... do that...”

Oh Goddesses, Glory was actually trying to proposition me? “Caprice was sex. Mutual masturbation. She made me feel good, but nothing my own hoof couldn’t do for me. We were just using each other,” I said as I struggled to somehow diffuse this emotional dynamite factory before it all blew up and she was crying... or worse. “I don’t want to use you like that, Glory.”

And crush. She didn’t have to say a word. She lowered her head, dropped her gaze, her shoulders hunched and her front legs rubbed against each other. “I see... sorry.”

Urrrgh? Was that as annoying for everypony else when I did it? “No, Glory. You don’t have to apologize. For anything,” I said as I hugged her as platonically as I could. “It’s just... yeah. I have sex with mares. And bucks. It’s all fun. But... you’re different. You’re special, Glory. And every single pony I’ve... been with... was just sex. That’s all it’s ever been. If I were with you... if we were together... I’m afraid it’d be the same. Then you’d stop being my friend and then you’d leave. And I don’t want you to leave...”

“So...” She fidgeted. “What now?”

I sighed and chuckled. “I don’t have a clue. I’m not the smart pony, remember.” Be kind. “Right now, it’s something to think about. But what I’m more worried about is you feeling like you’re useless. You’re not useless, Glory. You’re the only pony in the Wasteland that has a clue how to deal with the raider disease. You keep me going when I’m doing everything short of falling on my face. Heck, even when I am falling on my face.”

“I guess so. Though I don’t know what good I am with the disease. I’d need a lab and months of work to come up with a treatment.” She looked at the black barding. “I’m just sick of seeing you get hurt protecting others when I can’t do anything to protect you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m Security. It’s part of the job,” I said, giving her the easiest-going grin I could.

She sighed and shook her head sadly. “Oh, Blackjack...” She was smiling, so why

did I feel like I'd said the wrong thing?

I told her about Rampage and Lacunae, and we were both grateful for the change in topic. Her caution mirrored P-21's, but she seemed far more interested in the Star House. "You say there are pictures there from the moon? From the actual moon?" In her excitement, she seemed to forget all about the awkward patch we'd stumbled upon.

"Well, it looked like they were from the moon, and from the newspapers she'd kept it seemed like it. Why? Does it matter?"

"Well, we thought that the Equestrian space program was a hoax, just a way to stir up public support during the war that got axed when it failed to produce weapons or a boost to morale like it was designed to. We didn't even know if Marigold existed or if the scandal was just a way for the program leaders to wash their hands of a wasted experiment. I mean, the launch center is real enough. I think there's a ghoulish village there called Rocket Town. You can see it from the Skyport. But I never thought in a million years that those rockets could actually fly once."

"Apparently they did, once," I said, glad to see that she hadn't put on the dreadful barding and happy that she'd cheered up a bit. "What do a bunch of ghouls want with rockets?"

"Oh, they're some sort of cult or something. Plan to fly to the 'great beyond' or to some far off promised land. Since most of the space center is radioactive, we never went there. But Orion's Herd is decent enough if you don't mind ghouls." From her shiver, it was clear there were some ghouls worth minding.

"Well, let's get you some barding that's actually protective and not something that makes you look like a raider," I said as we headed towards the post office. Harpica strolled along with the ghoulish foals in two rows behind her, and she gave us a very soft and polite greeting. Since arriving, the little ghouls had been quite polite and seemed too scared to wander off. A world that was more than four walls was an intimidating concept; I knew that firsthand.

Still, at least the Crusaders were friendly enough and interested both in them and me. A blue colt with a cutie mark of a pitcher of pouring water even played with my black and red streaked tail curiously.

Inside the post office, my eyes met Charity's and we narrowed our gazes in unison. I licked my lips. She chewed slowly on a candy cane sticking out the side of her mouth. I walked to the counter and set the barding on it. "I want to make an

exchange.”

She neither said a word nor took her eyes from mine nor blinked. She just swung the candy cane around to point the tip at a sign on the counter that read ‘all sales are final.’

“Look. I don’t like you. You don’t like me. I get that,” I said quietly as I pulled down my glasses a little to look her in the eye. “But see that pegasus back there? That really nice pegasus? I like her, and I want to keep her safe. That means dressing her in some barding that doesn’t make her look like a raider. So I want an exchange.”

She just chewed slowly on the end of her peppermint stick. “Your friend... she mute?”

“Huh...?”

“Mute. Can she talk?” Charity demanded.

“Yeah...”

“Feeble-minded then?” the little filly queried.

“No, but...”

“Fillyphobic?”

“Look...”

Charity chewed up the rest of the peppermint stick. “I’m just trying to figure out... if this is for her, why are you the one doing the talking?”

Glory blinked and then stepped up past me. “Hello. Um... I need better armor than this, she said as she pointed at the black barding.”

“Welcome to Charity’s, where we ain’t.” She said with a polite smile. “You need better barding than this?”

“Well, yes please,” Glory said in surprise. “Something light.”

Charity walked to a shelf behind the counter and pulled out something light blue. It had been patched up more than a few times, but it seemed tailored for pegasi. “How’s that?” A faded patch on the shoulder read ‘Equestrian Sky Guard.’

“I...” she took it and looked it over, then back at me, then at Charity. “It’s good. How much?” I braced myself.

“Eh, we’ll call it a swap. You need beam guns too, I hear?” My butt hit the ground about the same time as my jaw. “Beam pistols all right? Saddle-rigged?” Glory

smiled gratefully at the filly and nodded. The filly put two of the boxy weapons, minus mouth grips, on top of the barding. “Four hundred caps and I’ll even throw in some gem cartridges.” Glory dug into her saddle bags for the caps as I just gaped.

“Thank you! And thank you, Blackjack. Again. . . for everything.” She gave a little squeal. “Oh I can’t wait to rig these on my battle saddle.”

I just stared at her behind the counter. “Why?” It was all I could say just now.

The filly looked at me coolly. “She needed the deal. You and your friend didn’t. You were just after caps. So I was just after caps. That’s what Bottlecap taught me.” She said before thumping her hoof on the counter, “Now are you going to buy something, or am I going to charge you for loitering? Ten caps a minute, starting now!” I ran for my wealth!

I felt a little bit. . . itchy. Not in a mane sort of itchy so much as an it’s-been-a-good-day-and-no-pony’s-shot-at-me kinda itchy. I was starting to feel a little bit overdue for something bad to happen to me, but the skies were dry and most of the Crusaders and the few adults were getting ready for Roses’ funeral in the afternoon. So why was I feeling so jumpy at everything being. . . ordinary? Had I been so stressed for so long that I was starting to anticipate threats that weren’t there?

Then the sky wagon swooped over the town once, and before I knew it my revolver was out. It was the Enclave! They’d finally. . .

. . . sent a delivery wagon pulled by a ghoulish pegasus? ‘Absolutely Everything. Yes, I do deliveries!’ was painted on its side. I looked at my gun and at the sight of a lavender filly climbing out of the back of the wagon and found myself starting to shake. Deus was dead. Blueblood was dead. The Zodiacs hadn’t jumped at me in a while, and I had yet to find out what monster of the day Sanguine had waiting in the wings. Just breathe.

“I’ll go get Charity, Ditzzy!” the small lavender pony with the blond mane called out as three or four Crusaders rushed to the wagon to help unload boxes.

Slowly, I walked closer, looking at the ghoulish. Her mane might be almost gone and her wings so much bone, but that googly-eyed expression fit the poster in the post office almost perfectly. Noticing me, she pulled out a piece of chalk from her bags and lifted a slate that hung from a string around her neck.

She wrote on the slate and lifted it, ‘Blackjack?’

Slowly, I trotted closer. "That's me."

Rubbing it clean, she dug into her bags for a folded piece of paper and passed it to me. I looked at her and then floated the note in front of me.

Blackjack, I've made the arrangements with the person who can assist you with your decryption. She's very secretive, but has always been trustworthy in our dealings. However, she operates under some paranoid rules. Ditzzy will take you to her and then back to Chapel. You have to go alone and unarmed. When you reach the building, you'll have to go into a memory orb. Then you'll be taken to her. -Bottlecap.

I looked at the note and then at Ditzzy. She blinked her offset eyes at me, then gave me what I assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile. I sighed and then coughed. "Okay. So I'm with you, then?" I had to admit, even for a trusting fool like me, there were a lot of things that could be going on. But the fact was that if I was going to find out what EC-1101 was, and what Sanguine wanted it for, I'd have to trust them.

I gave the ghoulish pegasus a smile that she happily returned. "Okay. I'm going to tell my friends and drop off my stuff." I pointed up the hillside to the southeast. "There's a house up there where you can pick me up in a little bit." Ditzzy looked where I'd pointed and then nodded. I quickly trotted away to look for my friends.

I was pleasantly surprised to find all of them at the Star House. I was more surprised to find that nopony had killed each other. Lacunae sat by the stairs while Rampage cleaned out her old room and P-21 took Priest's. Glory was working on attaching her new beam pistols to her battle saddle. I had to admit, she looked a lot better in the Sky Guard barding than that black monstrosity P-21 had bought for her. Five ponies and only four bedrooms. Oh dear.

I stamped my hooves loudly on the floor, "Well. Good news, everypony..."

Rampage peeked out at me. "You're pregnant."

I blinked and then scowled at the smirking Reaper. "No."

"You're drunk?" P-21 asked as he walked out with a box of Priest's drawings balanced carefully on his back. "You seem pretty happy, but more coherent than I anticipated."

"No! I'm not drunk. I'm..."

"Oh, please tell me you're not taking Buck again. I don't know if Priest can heal the damage like Scalpel," Glory fretted.

I sat with a little scream of annoyance. “I am not pregnant, drunk, or high!” I took a deep breath. “I’m going on a little trip to get EC-1101 decoded. Alone.”

The three of them took it about as I expected.

“Trusting the alicorn is bad enough, but now you’re going someplace alone, unarmed, and unconscious? What if you’re being sent to Paradise? Deus might be dead, but Usury still has the caps to inspire all sorts of trouble,” P-21 said sharply as he pointed to the door.

“I trust Ditzzy Doo to get me safely there and back again. And if I show up armed and with all of you, then she won’t even show.” Still, the more I thought about it the more I didn’t like it. “But... maybe there’s something we can do.”

One minute.

That’s how long it took before my brain started screaming at me. The sky wagon lifted and in one minute and I was certain I was going to die. Every thought was crushed away by that one impulse that grew and swelled within me. And while I knew that I was going to be sucked into the clouds while being smashed into paint on the ground, all I could do was scramble for an orb and clutch it to my horn as my heart beat faster and faster. I fought to try and make the connection, even if it was just to unconscious oblivion if the orb was trapped.

I wanted to be with Mari pony and Big Macintosh. I wanted to be with the Marauders. I wanted to be with Twist and Vanity and Jetstream and Stonewing and even Doof if I had to. I wanted to jump, insane as it was. I’d be happy taking a spin inside Deus, Blueblood or Gorgon or even Sanguine –

oooOOOooo

I was lying in a bed. A hospital bed, from the beeping machinery and the feeling of tubes going in and out of my body. Blissful lethargy filled me. I could barely move my head as the sensation of floating filled every limb. Everything felt so... distant. I couldn’t tell who or what I was inside right now, just that I was sprawled on my side on the bed. I had the feeling that there were a lot of ponies standing outside my field of vision, but I couldn’t move to see them.

Then a maroon unicorn buck in a white lab coat stepped into view. “A pony truly is a thing of wonder. The arrangement of limbs. The paths of nerves. The circulation of our blood. Magic is in our very bodies and souls. It courses through us. It gave

me the ability to alter the universe. Gave you flight.” His magic reached out to dab a cloth at my host’s drooling lips.

“Sadly, for all our wonder, our flesh is limited and our souls finite. But this war. . . this darling war. . . has offered us an opportunity to expand and explore the very possibilities of life itself. And you are going to play a role in that. You should be honored,” he said as he adjusted his glasses. “You see, not only are we going to mend your flesh, we are going to enhance it. Empower it.” He patted his cheek softly, “We are going to make you. . . better.”

And with that he moved out of my field of sight, his hooves echoing across a tiled floor. The murmuring increased.

“I don’t like this at all,” a familiar mare’s voice said with an edge of tension as she approached the bed I lay upon. “I want to speak to him.”

“The subject is under heavy sedation for the procedure, Fluttershy. He shouldn’t be conscious. He shouldn’t even be alive with his spine severed,” another mare said as the pink-haired pegasus stepped in front of my host and lowered her soft blue eyes to meet mine.

Her lips curled slowly, and I felt his curl to match. “Don’t worry, soldier. We’re going to fix you right up. We’re going to make sure you never ever get hurt again.” I felt a rasp in my throat that might have been a question. I didn’t feel. . . good. What little of my body I could sense felt like it was crawling inside.

“We’ve got his consent in writing and recording,” the mare with the familiar voice said softly. And then a bright red unicorn mare with short white trimmed mane stepped into my vision. She wore magenta glasses with glittery plastic frames and a sure smile I didn’t like at all. “Dr. Trueblood’s got the other subject prepared for the megaspell.” A glittery red hoof came to rest on Fluttershy’s shoulder. “We really can’t wait any longer. We’re already committed.”

Fluttershy just looked tense. Her eyes were surrounded by wrinkles. I made another noise of confusion. Something about this was all wrong, and we both knew it.

The red mare continued softly, “They won’t use your megaspell on the battlefield, Fluttershy. But we can still put it to use to keep ponies safe. That’s what all this is about after all. Keeping ponies safe. And he will be safe, and he’ll be able to keep other ponies safe as well. He won’t even have to kill zebras any more. He’ll stop them with one look. Turn them back with another.”

Fluttershy looked at me a moment longer, her eyes full of both sadness and a terrible

kind of need. A need for... something. She wanted this, I realized, but she didn't want to admit it. Couldn't admit it. I think that my host realized it too as he breathed harder and faster, trying to say something... anything to stop this. But Fluttershy just backed away and let the nurses and doctors come and gently pull back his sheet and levitate him into the air. I saw jars full of a familiar and disgusting rainbow concoction dripping into a tube that disappeared into my limp hoof. Slowly I was levitated over into the middle of a circle of unicorns.

I wasn't alone. Something else floated there as well; something I first thought was some kind of chicken. Then I noticed the wings. The claws. The serpentine body. But before my eyes it was changing. Bubbling. Melting as if it were made of wax. "Careful," the medical buck called out. "You don't want to liquefy them too much. Remember the last four subjects."

And so was my host. I caught a glimpse of his hoof stretching like wax before my eyes.

I wanted to cry out, but all he could do was rasp as I felt his body return. They'd said they'd sedated him. They'd lied, or it wasn't nearly enough. And when sensation returned I felt the violation of the creature being pressed into his body. Flesh twisted as I felt it struggle and thrash for freedom inside him. And it was slow... so horribly slow. The creature felt like it was swimming inside him, as if his flesh were a net it tried to escape from. And worse, I had the distinct feeling of something happening inside my skull. My eyes crawled as I felt the sockets change.

"Excellent. He's blended nicely." I heard the medical buck say sharply. "Right. Purge the contaminants and let's see what comes out of the oven." The glow dimmed, and I felt something horrid being expelled from my orifices. "Good. Superfluous biological material removed. Everything going exactly as it should." The buck stomped his hooves eagerly. "Wonderful. The fusion megaspell is a success!"

I dropped to the floor in a pile of colorful ichor and fleshy goo and slowly turned my head towards the sound of the stomping. The maroon unicorn in the lab coat seemed quite enthused. Meanwhile, Garnet was escorting Fluttershy to the door. I rose to my shaky hooves... feeling a body that was no longer my own. I tried to talk around a serpentine tongue, tried to call out to Fluttershy. I imagined him begging her to turn him back.

Then, with one parting glance over her shoulder, Fluttershy left the room with Miss Redhooves.

A nurse stepped in front of him, "He seems aware, doctor Trueblood," she said as

she stared into my host's eyes. Then she jerked and gasped, crying out in pain as her limbs solidified before me.

"Excellent! Magical traits of the addition transferred intact!" The maroon pony in the lab coat said, actually dancing in glee.

Then my host reared up and smashed the petrified pony into rubble. Screams started as he began to charge through the megaspell chamber. I noticed that he was trying to struggle to the doctor, his bat-like wings fighting for purchase. But then spells filled his body with a lethargy. He collapsed as the numbness robbed his strength once more. A sack went over his head. Conjured ropes bound his limbs.

"You said he'd maintain his sapience, doctor!" The mare with the glittery hooves shouted as she returned. "Fluttershy almost saw that!"

The unicorn buck chuckled in delight, "Oh he did. I'm sure of it. He came right towards me, after all."

"You're sure?"

"Oh yes. Project Chimera is a complete success. We simply need more subjects to make the process more efficient. Explore combinations. Trace possibilities." The doctor chuckled from nearby. "I think we should classify this strain as 'Gorgon'."

The glittery-hooved mare spoke from right above me. "I hope you're right, Doctor. We're trying to procure more combat personnel for the prototypes. Luna wants war resources, and we're going to give them to her, though we'll have to keep billing this as a Ministry of Peace project to keep the others distracted."

"Ugh. Cloak and dagger intrigues I leave to you, Garnet. Are you going to forward our results to Emerald?"

"Of course, Doctor Trueblood. The MAS should be briefed about the possibilities of contaminant-accelerated megaspells, and we're already exploring possibilities with the other ministries."

"Are you sure that's wise? Shouldn't the Ministry of Peace maintain exclusivity?"

Garnet laughed brightly. "Oh, Doctor, then we wouldn't be able to get away with nearly as much!" I felt magic lift his body as the red pony said softly, "Lets make sure his memory is nice and clean and then put him in storage till we're ready to duplicate the process."

I felt a horn touch his forehead through the bag, and everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Coming to, I felt myself shaking as the memory left me. Gorgon. Project Chimera was Equestria's monster making program. And Fluttershy had known, had been involved. She had said to do better. That wasn't better. That was insane. I swallowed hard as I twitched there. After Deus' orb, and now Gorgons, I wasn't sure I'd be able to go into any more orbs for a while. I felt sick at the thought of it. It was like sticking my hoof in a fire.

So, where the heck was I now? I slowly opened my eyes and looked around. This was some kind of office, and a fancy one if you looked past the fallen ceiling tiles and rotting floor. Streamers of water trickled constantly from broken and cracked pipes overhead and washed over the mouldy carpeting in miniature rivers. The emergency lighting still flickered and twitched on and off. The big desk in the room... looked just like the Overmare's. And the open door leading from the office was a stable door... or at least a flimsy, half-sized replica of one. This couldn't be a stable, though; no stable had armored windows looking out at the Wasteland, as this office did.

I walked to the door. It looked like a stable, if you'd built one with rooms twice as large as normal. No stable I'd seen had hallways this roomy. I watched the rusty river trickling along the hall and cascading down some stairs. Judging by the cracks and holes in the wall, clearly this place wasn't built as tough as a stable either.

A ping sounded, and one of the replica stable doors down the hall slid open. Okay, once again, have I mentioned how much I really wish I had my E.F.S.? And my gun? And my barding? And my friends? I really hate being alone, especially in any place that looked remotely like a stable. Stables were not places for lone ponies.

The door opened into an elevator, its walls lined with posters. 'Stable-Tec, Voyage to the Future!' proclaimed one. 'Save yourself and your family. Sign up today!' read another. Looking at the pictures of ten-storey stables with swimming pools and internal gardens, I wondered why I'd never heard of a stable like that. 99 must have opted out of those features. And who knew, maybe it had. How many stables had been built? Perhaps stables one, two, and three had been paradises, but towards the end, they had to replace underground greenhouses with recycling equipment out of a simple need for expediency?

I stepped into the elevator, the doors slid closed behind me, and the car started descending. As long as I kept my eyes on the walls, I didn't feel the panic building... too much. Ten seconds later, the elevator slowed and the car doors opened. I stepped into a hall almost completely sealed with rubble. One door remained clear;

written on it in chipped white paint were the words 'Stable-Tec R&D.' The few other doors I could see were open and led to rooms that looked so damaged that they might collapse on me if I so much as sneezed in the general area. I really hoped that I wouldn't have to try them.

The door slid open in front of me, and I stepped onto a catwalk over a floor covered in worktables. I picked my way slowly around the edge to stairs down to the work floor. An entire wall was almost covered with glowing monitor screens. Looking up at the upper left, I saw a flickering label over a slowly rotating design. 'Stable one: completed.' Next to it was an even larger design. 'Stable two: completed.' And the next. And the next. Some of the monitors were dead. A few were marked as 'delayed' or 'redesigned', but the majority of them were complete.

I saw the sprawling layout of stable 89 with all its many storage areas and labs. It looked similar to 90 and 91. Then I frowned as I looked at stable 90. 'Complete?' This stable's not finished, Buttercup had written. A mistake, or had something else happened?

I smiled at the sight of 99, despite everything. I never realized how big 99 actually was. The four stories of habitation blocks around a central stair linking atrium to living quarters to utility storage to maintenance to reactor. It looked a bit like a tree, curiously enough. And it was 'complete', if 'completely fucked up.'

Over the workstations were more stable designs flickering and rotating silently on their screens. 'Rapture Hydrostable' resembled dozens of bubbles. Was it supposed to go underwater? 'Sea Star Hydrostable' looked more like some sort of floating island. 'Celestia I Astrostable' had rotating wheels like a wagon and long sweeping wings while the 'Luna I Astrostable' didn't appear much different from the big Stable Two. 'Big Macintosh Megastable' was positively huge, looking as if it'd been designed to hold thousands instead of hundreds. 'Scootaloo Aerostable' seemed more designed for cloud dwellers, while the 'Pinkie Pie Aerostable' hung from huge balloons! There were other designs that seemed even less concrete.

Along the opposite wall were monitors showing the evolution of the terminals and PipBucks. The first were room-sized monsters. Then desk sized, like many maneframes we'd run across. Then the 'Personal Information Processor: Alpha' appeared in the form of a PipBuck so large that it covered an entire pony. The next terminals were small enough to fit on a desk. Beta PipBucks covered most of a limb and still had a backpack.

After that, the terminals became more simplified and refined. I couldn't see a differ-

ence between a standard, hardened, and reinforced terminal. The differences in the PipBucks were far more obvious. The Gamma models were what I had on my hoof, from the slightly bulkier 2000 to the more compact 3000. There was a Delta model, too, that seemed even simpler and more flimsy than the rest. Terminals shrank to hoof sized 'contact nodes'. I wondered if eventually the two would merge. Well, would have merged, if things hadn't blown up.

There weren't any exits on the first floor, so I climbed back up to the catwalks. Most of the offices off the catwalk were locked and dark, but one was lit by the green glow of a terminal. I made my way to that door.

The office within was cluttered in an absentminded way. There were wadded-up designs piled high in the wastebasket, drawings taped to every available surface, and scale models dangling from the ceiling on fishing line. A foal-sized robotic pony stood silently in one corner, looking forlorn and abandoned.

There were pictures of things other than technology, too. Three fillies wearing blue and gold capes piled one atop the other, laughing at the camera. The trio, a bit older, proudly displaying their cutie marks. I was struck by how similar they looked. The three again, this time mature mares apparently enjoying a night out together. There were pictures of Applejack, and one of Big Macintosh, and a third of an elderly green pony.

The terminal had only one thing on its screen. 'Area of Inquiry?' I looked at it and the keys, then typed slowly. >EC-1101

The screen flickered once.

>Hello, Blackjack.

I was looking at the blinking cursor when a flicker and flash from behind me caused me to spin around, reflexively trying to ready a weapon that wasn't there. The light was coming from the robot, and as I watched it grew more and more concrete until a flickery image of a young Apple Bloom stood in front of me, identical to the filly in the picture save for the luminance that glowed around her. Looking at the strange, glowy earth pony I relaxed a bit, though not much.

"Um... hello?"

"Heard you got yerself a puzzle on yer hoof," the filly said as she trotted towards me. "Well, I never got a puzzle solving cutie mark, but most folk figured I was a clever pony."

"If you don't mind... what the heck are you?" I asked in shock. "Who are you?"

She gave a smile, “Well, that’s the million bit question, ain’t it? Maybe I’m a pony running things from a terminal somewhere, helping you out. Maybe I’m just a machine doing what I’m programmed to. Or maybe I’m Apple Bloom. You can call me Applebot. Then she looked at my blackened PipBuck. Her eyes widened in shock, “Landsakes! How’d you fry a 3000? They’re supposed to last forever!”

“Um. . . lightning?”

“Lightning?” The robot sounded skeptical. “You got it struck by lightning?” I nodded weakly. She rubbed her mouth as she looked at the blackened electronics, then she shrugged, “Well, that’d do it. I guess you’ll be needing a new one.”

“So. . . the data’s not lost?” I asked a little weakly as two mechanical...hands, if you could call the clusters of tools that, rose from the robot’s shoulders. The tools on the end of each finger began to deftly remove my PipBuck.

The little pony smirked, “Oh It’d take a lot more than that to kill your data. Ta do that, somethin’d have to destroy your PipBuck outright. And probably you, too. Nah, you just fried the interface, which I gotta admit is still pretty impressive.” She set the device on the table, then trotted over to a metal cabinet. “Now. . . 3000. . . . 3000. . . nope. Fresh out of 3000. Looks like you’re going to have to make do with a Delta model.”

“A Delta?” I asked as I watched her remove a sleek, polished silver PipBuck. I looked at it and then at my more bulky model. “Um. . . do you have anything a little bit heavier?” The little Apple Bloom cocked her brow at me. “Well, it’s just that I hit ponies with my PipBuck.”

“You hit ‘em?” She clicked her tongue, and said with a touch of playful sarcasm, “That ain’t no way to treat sensitive electronics.” She replaced the flimsy silver one and dug around a bit. “Ahah! Here we go.” She pulled out a matte black PipBuck that seemed marginally more bulky. . . but only barely. “Was designing this for the Shadowbolts, but it never made it into mass production.”

Setting it next to my old 3000, the robotic hands removed the covering as I watched. “So. . . how’s Stable 99 holding up?” Applebot asked curiously.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“Stable 99. I put a whole lot of new stuff in there. Was wondering if it worked out or not.”

“Ah. . . well. . . it’s still working. I mean, I hear Rivets complain all the time about leaking pipes, but the recyclers still work like a charm.”

“Well that’s good to hear. I was a little worried about the reproprocessors. I mean, I know they purifies and remixes the waste. I ate the sample chips myself. Still, there’s still something just. . . off. . . about that.”

“Yeah, especially when you have to reprocess a buck after being removed from the breeding population.”

The robot froze as she finished removing the casing. She looked back at me. “What did you say? You do what now?”

“Put dead ponies in the reproprocessors. . .” I blinked at her shocked and disgusted expression. “What? That’s what we’re supposed to do, right?”

“Uh, maybe if you like a high protein diet,” she said, still looking a little shaken. “Reproprocessors weren’t made for that, though. That’s why I installed an incinerator.” She gave a disgusted little shiver and then blinked, “And breeding what now?”

“Well. . . in Stable 99. . .” and I explained the whole breeding process as the little Apple Bloom’s mechanical armatures carefully removed a flat, glowing gem plate. It looked like a wafer of pure diamond with a magical glyph in the center. She placed it in the new PipBuck and deftly screwed it into place.

“You what?!” was Applebot’s response to my explanation.

“Well, that’s what we’re supposed to do! I mean, didn’t Stable-Tec set it up that way?” I said defensively.

The robot shook her head slowly, the magical hologram flickering slightly as it turned back to the PipBucks. Then there was a hiss and a click and a mare’s voice sounded from my new PipBuck.

“Hi. This is Scootaloo. . . and you know what? I’m sick of these recordings. I am just fucking sick of ‘em! I can’t. . . I don’t. . . Fuck!” the mare yelled. “How’d things get so messed up I had to do over a hundred of these?! Damn it. . . I’m just so sick of it all.” There was a teary sniff. “To hell with it. . .”

“Okay! Again. This is Scootaloo, VP of Stable-Tec. You’ve got yourself one heck of a stable. We made it as good as we could. You’ve probably noticed you don’t have any orchards or food warehouses, right? Well that’s because the machines in 99 recycle all your waste, purify it, mix it. . . ugh. . . you know what? Don’t think about it. Okay, just don’t. It’s gross no matter how you slice it. It just means that you won’t run out of food anytime soon. . .”

“So long,” she continued sharply, “As you keep the population stable. You should

have enough contraceptives to last at least two centuries. You also need to keep a one offspring per pony policy. Keep things stable, Overmare. There's other stuff here too, but you know what. . . I don't care anymore. I don't care. Do what you have to do, but keep things stable. Survive. . . and do better than we did.

"Apple Bloom! You two are doing the next ones! Got it? I need a fucking drink. 99. . . fuck. . . 99. . ."

The voice cut off. "Those're all the instructions given," Applebot said. "There were some additional plans, but the fact is that by 99 we left it largely up to the ponies to decide what they would do. I mean, the only restriction 101 had was that it was earth ponies only. Who knows what they cooked up?" She gave a soft sigh, "Poor Scootaloo. . . it wasn't fair to her, but she was the only one who could record those messages. I got tongue tied, and Sweetie Belle just bawled."

"But. . . how'd we go from that. . . to. . ." I just stared at the enormity of it. It hadn't been some messed-up Stable-Tec rule or by law. It was us. We'd created the nightmare P-21 and I'd escaped from. I swallowed hard and looked at the hologram-wrapped robot, "Are you really. . . Apple Bloom?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just a copy of her." She said as she finished and powered up the new black PipBuck. "Hard to say, really. But there's some truth to saying that you shouldn't use yourself as a test subject. Just ain't healthy," she said as the robot's hands slipped the device around my hoof. "There you go. Complete with a fully functional broadcaster and terminal interface." At my blank look, she rolled her eyes and then explained, "Basically lets you contact terminals through your PipBuck. . . if you have a signal source recorded."

She then looked down at my PipBuck. "So. . . EC-1101. It still exists."

I felt a shiver go down my spine. "EC-1101. What the hell is it?"

Applebot smiled sadly up at me. "The keys to the magical kingdom of Equestria, Blackjack."

Once upon a time, Equestria had been ruled by two princesses. The older ruled because, quite honestly, she was immortal and magical. There wasn't a civil war or a crisis of succession because the princesses couldn't die of old age. Celestia had a thousand years of experience, and the kingdom was familiar with her leadership. She wasn't a tyrant. She didn't have to be a tyrant. The status quo was so com-

fortable and predictable that Equestria simply accepted her rule. Beneath her was a hierarchy of lesser nobles tasked with administrating the smaller day to day local concerns and maintaining the order of things. Equestria had a thousand years of near social stasis.

Of course, the return of Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna disturbed all that. It wasn't big at first, but the presence of two princesses prompted a change in attitude across the kingdom. There were many reasons for Celestia to continue, but what if other possibilities were considered? New avenues of thought opened up simply because the societal fabric had altered its paradigm. Magic became Arcane Science. Nobles found their station questioned and challenged. Businesses arose. Trade with outsiders, both of goods and ideas, exploded. Life was new and good.

But then the war came, a war such as Equestria could not have known. And like so many things, ponies were not prepared for its novelty. The violence tore at Equestria, and fear and desperation ripped at its underpinnings. Some stresses pushed science and magic further than ever dreamed. Others tore ponies down. But through it all went the ironclad belief that, whether under Celestia or Luna, a princess would rule.

Shattered Hoof Ridge changed all that. Only Big Macintosh's sacrifice prevented Equestria from discovering the hard way just how integral the princesses were to the country's collective psyche. The death of a soldier was tragic, but the idea of losing one of the fundamental parts of the kingdom proved unbearable. It introduced an insidious question: what would Equestria do if the princesses were killed?

EC-1101.

"Equestrian Command 1101 isn't a computer file," Applebot explained softly as her mechanical hands withdrew into her shoulders. "It's a delayed-trigger megaspell designed to transfer control of the country's crucial systems from the princesses to another individual in the event of both of the princesses' deaths. It was supposed to use the terminal network; It would travel from terminal to terminal, node to node, seeking out the next designated target."

"So who were the targets?" I asked just before the realization hit me. "The ministry mares, of course."

"Yes. First Twilight Sparkle, then Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Rarity, and finally Pinkie Pie. The spell would locate them all and bestow upon them the authority to run the country and give them full control over the countless information, magic, and technological systems that ran Equestria. If it failed to do that, it would

seek out the heads of the armed services, the courts, the Office of Interministry Affairs, or the descendants of any of its targets. Unfortunately, it seems, the spell could not make contact with anypony.”

“So how did it end up in Stable 99?”

“Sheer size, unfortunately, and the fact that it wasn’t triggered till the fall of Canterlot, which took far longer to die than the rest of Equestria. Most nodes handle small packets of magical information. EC-1101 was not small. It was a highly complex behemoth of a spell, and unlike normal files, it had only a few networks it could move through swiftly. The balefire bombs shattered those networks. The last jump it made, I suspect, was from the Ministry of Morale’s hub in Manehattan just prior to, or during, the city’s destruction. Then the Stable-Tec link between Stable 99 and the rest of Equestria severed, and the spell remained trapped in Stable 99’s systems.

“So... why is Sanguine after it now? The ministry mares are all dead; everypony’s dead.” Gee, what a rosy thought that was, Blackjack.

“Correct, none of the ministry mares had offspring, and the likelihood of locating the descendants of the military or judicial branches is minuscule. The spell might recognize a ghoul, but I’m skeptical. Still, it is a key, and I think somepony with the right skills might be able to use it to force an override of something, maybe turn off a security system or break into a database. The fit would be rough, though, and it would probly work only two or three times before the spell got completely wrecked.”

An idea struck me. “Have you ever heard of something called Project Chimera?”

She looked thoughtful, rolling her eyes as she stared at the ceiling. “There! Found an index.” She nodded once. “Project Chimera. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command.” Her flickering eyes widened, “Holy smokes... Sealed by Royal Command?”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that Luna, personally, put her hoof down and killed that Project. A lot of the ponies involved probably went to jail, too.”

“Could EC-1101... well... open it up again?”

My mane crept on my neck as the little robot blinked, thought, and then nodded. “Prob’ly. If a princess locked it, somepony with a princess’ access privileges would have to unlock it.”

“How about Project Eternity?”

“Project Eternity. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command.”

“Project Redoubt?”

“Project Redoubt. O.I.A. Project. Sealed by Royal Command.” Then she blinked in shock. “Well now. Looks like Luna was cleaning house at the O.I.A. I wonder why.”

“Me too. . .” I frowned and rubbed my nose with my hoof. “Are there any other O.I.A. programs that were shut down by Royal Command?”

“I don’t. . . wait. . . I’ve got. . . Project Steelpony. . . . Project Partypooper. . . Project Starfall. Project Horizons.” Applebot paused, then the flickering robopony frowned in consideration. “You want something else that’s weird? They were all shut down on the same day, a month before the bombs fell.”

I heard the soft rustle of cards as I thought about those names. “O.I.A. Office of Interministry Affairs, right? Who were they?”

“Oh, them. Not much. They acted as liaisons between Stable-Tec and ministries other than the MWT.” she said with a dismissive little shrug, “A bunch of overworked ponies who were really busy managing the gaps between the ministries.”

“What do you mean by ‘the gaps between the ministries’?” I asked with a little frown.

“Because that’s what the O.I.A. did. Say there was somepony in the M.A.S. that had an idea they wanted to work out with the MoP. The O.I.A. would pass that idea to someone in the MoP. They’d set things up for the two ministries to work them out. Make bridges between the ministries and fill the gaps.

“Or say some inventor came up with a new talisman, but both the M.W.T. and the M.A.S. wanted dibs on it. The O.I.A. would work things out so that everypony had access without wasting time fighting and arguing. Some ponies liked to call it ‘Spike’s Ministry’, but I’m not sure if he was involved.”

“Hmmm. . .” I sighed, feeling the nasty thought. “Why would they make monsters, then?”

That seemed to surprise her, and I explained Gorgon’s memory orb. “That’s. . . very disturbing. But while I’ve no doubt the O.I.A. might set up something like that, it was probably originated at the Ministry of Peace. While most were diligent about helping Equestria, and even the enemy, there were some ponies there that were decidedly. . . creepy.”

I sighed, looking at the PipBuck with a little grunt. “Well, damn. As interesting as all this was, I have to admit, now that I know what it is, I still don’t know what to do with it.” I tapped the screen showing the file name with a hoof. “I mean, it doesn’t tell

me who Sanguine is working for or how to stop him.” I frowned at her. “Would he be able to use EC-1101 to make more monsterponies?”

“If that’s what Chimera was for, I suppose,” Applebot said thoughtfully.

“So much for just giving the damned thing up. Could I just destroy it?”

That made her pause. “I suppose. Sure. Not even your PipBuck spell matrix will survive something like a balefire blast,” Applebot replied, and I felt staggered. That’s what it would take? “But are you sure you want to? You don’t know what those other projects are or who you might be able to help.”

Great. Guilt trip me with that. “I just wish I could find some offspring of Applejack or Pinkie Pie and shove it in their lap.” And then what? I started fiddling with the new PipBuck, checking some of its features. Huh. The E.F.S. was blue instead of amber. That was at least twenty percent cooler.

“Yeah. Unless you’re some long lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle, it’s not much good to you,” she said, looking sympathetic. “If you want my advice, EC-1101 was en route somewhere when it got stuck in Stable 99. If you can get it to where it was going, you might fight some answers about what’s going on and who’s really after it.”

“So how do I do that?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Go back to whatever terminal you got EC-1101 from and see which terminal it was going to next. Go to that terminal and repeat the process till the routing is finished.”

“Go back. . . ?” I muttered weakly, my eyes widening. My mane was suddenly feeling very scratchy indeed.

Back to Stable 99.

I had to go back. I wasn’t exactly sure about Applebot’s suggestion of following the routing, but it was all I had at the moment. Above all that, though, was the fact that Stable 99 was a chapter I needed to close. I knew now that what they were doing was wrong, and I had the guns and friends to make sure it stopped for good. “Well, it’s a plan, at least.” I said, smiling.

“Good. I think that, whatever you do, you should track that—” and then there was a ping and a crackle as the illusion wrapping around Applebot flickered and the small robot slowly keeled over. With a clatter, it sparked and the illusion disappeared. Then automatic fire ripped through the windows of Apple Bloom’s office and I fell

onto my side. The robot gave a buzz and the light in its eyes went out.

“Gonna try and take me alive?” I shouted at the tops of my lungs as broken glass settled over me.

A rock flew through the shattered windows and bounced off the top of my head, making me curl up as it landed in front of me. An apple-shaped ‘rock’ with a bright red band around the middle. Reflexively, I threw it back through the window as I dove for cover under Apple Bloom’s desk. The grenade erupted into a sheet of flame that splashed over the desk and the ponies immediately outside. I grabbed Apple Bloom’s terminal and yanked it hard, snapping its cords.

Floating the terminal in front of me, I raced out of the burning office and onto the catwalks. One earth pony was scrambling, trying to extinguish her armor and bring her automatic pistol to bear on me at the same time. Another started taking shots that sparked and pinged off the terminal housing. I looked down and toggled S.A.T.S. with a thought. In that moment of accelerated time, my horn flashed thrice and her head transformed into gray, red, and white pulp. Sweet Goddesses, how I loved S.A.T.S.!

Now I had a gun and a terminal. I lifted the former and heaved the latter at the mare with a similar ten millimeter automatic. She dodged away as I raised the pistol, took aim, and carefully planted a quartet of bullets in her face and throat. There were still a lot more red bars on my cool blue E.F.S., though as I swept up her gun. I wished I had time to collect bullets.

“Aries! She’s up there!” shouted a colt from the far side of the lab. The catwalk was clear, and I raced for the door. Suddenly, a plume of flame sprayed up through the grate and swept towards me! Burning office behind me and plume of flame to the front, the only way to go was down. I leapt over the catwalk railing. My tail, a little too late to avoid the spray of flame, trailed smoke. I landed, my legs giving a resounding pop as something gave way. I rolled and slid across the grimy floor, ending up underneath a worktable. I heard a ping of a grenade bouncing off the top before rattling further away and then detonating with a fiery ‘whooph.’

Something walked with ominously slow and heavy steps. The rest were moving fast. One slid across the floor with a victorious look in her eyes. Our gazes met, and her jaws worked the trigger. My horn was faster and with a pop ejected the clip.

That didn’t stop the ten millimeter round still in the chamber from thumping meatily into my front leg, but nothing she could do prevented me from filling her with a half dozen rounds from both guns. Struggling to my feet, I snatched up her clip in my

teeth and kept my head low as I limped as fast as I could, hoping that the smoke filling the room would screen my movements.

A wall of flame sprayed across my path, cutting off the stair back to the catwalk. I backpedalled from the heat so quickly that I fell over. I looked at the source of the flame. The Steel Ranger power armor had been spray-painted a brilliant cherry red with a fireball on the flank. A heavy incinerator was mounted on one side of the armor and a grenade launcher protruded from the other. Shit! I was dealing with a flaming Deus!

And worse, I doubted these bullets were going to cut it. I hobbled my way forward as two other ponies ran around to cut me off and finish me. I screamed around the clip in my jaws as I strafed the pair. Then I body slammed into one, collapsing into a tangle of limbs. The other mare was so eager to finish me off that she sprayed bullets into her teammate. I hauled the corpse over my body as a meat shield, hissing in pain as two more holes opened in me. My head started to spin. . .

‘Be strong’, a little orange pony told me. I ejected the spent clip and slammed in the one in my mouth home, narrowing my eyes as I clutched the body over me like a macabre blanket. She had no such cover, and my bullets raked across her until she finally fell. I swallowed, fighting the urge to vomit. I could hear Aries walking closer and saw the remaining two red bars. Still, I needed healing desperately. Digging through their bodies, I found two cloudy gray potions and grimaced. They tasted like sour milk, and they didn’t do much for my injuries. The Med-X helped far more, letting me haul myself to my hooves.

“She’s getting up. Moving to your left,” the colt called out, and I reversed as grenades clattered in that direction, filling the air with more patches of crackling magenta fire. There was a hiss, and from a few feebly-glowing talismans sprayed cones of water. I doubted it would be enough to fight the kind of blaze that Aries was creating, but it washed out some of the smoke and made it easier for me to think. The colt was tracking me somehow. Not with an E.F.S.; I was pretty sure the power armor had something like that. This was something giving him the distance he needed.

I ran—okay, limped horribly with my leg threatening to make me fall flat on my face with one wrong step—in the direction of the door again. As I approached the stairs and the catwalk, I saw the blue unicorn colt with the pitcher cutie mark from Chapel looking down at a strange little device between his hooves. Then he calmly levitated a revolver and started blasting away at me. Falling on my face in the slippery pool of cold water was the only way I could keep from eating some more rounds of lead. I rolled over and pointed the pistol at his face, but he just smirked with certainty and

fired again.

Damn it! Sure, he was a colt, but he was shooting at me! Why couldn't I blow him away for that?!

I scrambled through the water as his bullet took off the tip of my ear. The Med-X wasn't enough to fully keep the edge off the pain as I staggered ahead of Aries and out of the blue colt's field of fire. I just needed a healing potion... and to stop bleeding... and for the world to stop spinning.

I limped along in a circuit. Aries had swapped to fragmentation grenades now, lobbing them with infuriating accuracy. My tail was both ragged and scorched now, and my butt was laced with superficial holes from chunks of shrapnel. The second I slowed down even just a little, I was toast! I wondered if they were toying with me for Gemini and Taurus...

Wait...my tail... I took cover behind an overturned workbench and ran my hooves and magic through my singed tail. Then I felt it: a small ball the size of a corn puff and almost as light was clipped to my tail. It had a small blinking light. A tracking device?

Good. I was so glad I wasn't going to have to yell at Ditzzy or Bottlecap.

Still, what good did it do me against that power armor? Eventually, I'd bleed out or burn up, even if I crushed the thing. What I needed was some way to disable Aries, like with one of P-21's spark grenades. Some way...

I looked at the rows and rows of stable monitors and the cables hanging behind them.

"Left! Forty feet! Now!" The colt yelled as Aries turned and fired another shot with the grenade launcher. To the right, I scrambled on top of the closest workbench and prayed. The grenade exploded, the monitors flickering wildly as the power cables were severed and the wires dropped into the churning water. There was a resounding pop and a smell of ozone. The power armor's weapons drooped as the crackle went on, and then everything went dark.

Slowly, I walked towards the stairs and looked up at the colt. Now his smile wasn't nearly so cocky. "Aries? Aries! She's... she coming!" In my mutant gaze, I could see him clearly as I walked through the darkness towards him and tossed the gun aside.

He gave a desperate giggle and hiccup as he levitated his revolver and pointed it at me. My horn shoved the barrel aside as he fired. He reaimed, and again I shoved

the barrel in the other direction. The bullet passed so close beside me I could feel it. I stared him right in the eyes as he pressed the hot tip of the gun to my forehead. "You won't kill me! I'm a kid. . . I'm just a colt! You won't! Please don't!" As he scrambled back, I saw his strange cutie mark was peeling away; a cutie mark decal. His flank was blank beneath it.

He pulled the trigger, but there was no recoil as my magic gripped the hammer before it could release and fire the round. Now he shook in terror as his levitated weapon jerked ineffectually. "You're right. You are just a colt. . ." I said low and soft, my grin spreading. "And I'm not an executioner."

Then I grabbed him in my bloody hooves and twisted, sitting atop the stairs and pulling him across my lap as my magic flung the weapon from his startled grasp. He wailed as I pinned his head with one hoof and then spanked his ass as hard as I could, grunting with each smack, "Do! Not! Shoot! The! Nice! Security! Pony!"

Then I shoved him away from me and limped towards the elevator, leaving him sniffing behind me. From the depths of the power armor came a mare's tentative, "Uh. . . hello?" as I limped into the door.

I made my way back up to the office I'd awoken in and found my way up to the roof. Ditzzy Doo waited nervously with Silver Bell as each of my friends, who technically hadn't come with me to the meeting, stood watch at a different corner of the building. Well, three were watching. Rampage spat loogies over the edge. As the doors slammed shut behind me, Rampage looked up and noted the new holes in me. Her face split into a grin. "So, run into any trouble?"

My smoldering look gave them their answer. Really, it was my own damn fault. I'd said 'Wait on the roof and keep an eye open for trouble', not 'stay ten feet behind me and keep quiet.' The Zodiacs had gotten in some other way, and my friends had been up here the whole time. I flopped onto my side, dug out an orb, and got ready for the flight back.

oooOOOooo

Jetstream. The memories that flowed from the orb weren't the same as I was used to. Somehow, they were concentrated and accelerated, coming in flashes and little insights.

Jetstream meeting Stonewing in summer flight camp. The pair learning to fly to-

gether, she with ease and he with difficulty. There is a race between them and some rivals, but a thunderstorm brews. A gust of wind blows all of them into a mountainside, with the exception of Jetstream. She flies faster than ever before. Stonewing, slowest flyer in all of Equestia, proves himself also the strongest as he carries three pegasi across the finish line on his back. She's gotten her windy cutie mark. He's gotten his granite wings.

The pair, older, seeing the Wonderbolts perform for the Summer Sun Celebration. A cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane talks about wanting to join the team. He can't take his eyes off her. Jetstream can't take her eyes off him.

They're sitting together in his home in a city of clouds, reading about the rescue attempt and the deaths of so many Wonderbolts together. He wonders about the mare. She just sighs and looks away.

They meet behind the weather factories. He tells her he's going to enlist. She tries to talk him out of it. They show up in basic training together. Stonewing lifts Big Macintosh on his back. He gets applause for the first time in his life. She smiles, so happy for him.

They fly in their first battle together. Griffin mercs can't resist the slower flyer, but their rifles can't drop him. She picks them off one by one with lightning passes. After the battle, she receives commendations from their Captain, Cupcake. She tries to give credit to Stonewing. He just shakes his head with a smile and limps away to the medic.

Dinner on a boardwalk with the Marauders. Doof challenges Stonewing to a garlic eating contest. They eat bulb after bulb. Doof goes red. Then green. Then he loses. Stonewing eats three more bulbs. Jetstream gives him a victory kiss anyway. They watch the fireworks over the bay, her head resting on his firm shoulder.

Another mission. She's hit and spirals down. Zebra ninja warriors swarm in. Stonewing lands among them like an avalanche. A bayonet catches him in the throat, ripping it open. His wonderful bass voice goes silent forever. He doesn't fall, standing over her till the rest of the Marauders extract them.

A dinner alone on a mountain top. She's going to do it. She's ready. She's going to tell him. She's going to let him. But there's an explosion in the village below, and he's on his feet, flying to help. She watches, realizing how alone she'd been before flying after him.

The bombing at Prance. She tries to get him alone. She tries to tell him how she

feels. He listens. He smiles. He shakes his head and kisses her forehead. He breaks her heart as gently as possible. She's grateful for the bomb.

An argument. She wants to leave. He wants to reenlist. She can't see the reason. He just shakes his head. She's had enough fighting. He's not done yet. She signs the papers to stay another year.

They watch the rocket rise on a pillar of fire. Stonewing grins like an eager colt. She smiles and can't help herself. She rests her head on his shoulder again, hoping he can't feel her tears.

Brimstone's Fall. She sees the sniper. She starts to open her mouth. The bullet strikes him in the neck and he falls like a brick wrapped in a dirty sheet. She flies to save him, to repay him, but the medics load him on to an evacuation wagon with a tag around his hoof.

An argument. Big Macintosh tells her to be strong. Tells her that it's alright. Tells her the war can't last forever. Tells her to remember Stonewing and all they'd done together. She cries out and strikes him. She hits him again and again as the rest of the squad looks on.

She sits alone on a cloud. Vanity teleports to her. She tells him what she needs. He tells her it's a mistake. She asks once more. He kisses her cheek softly, tells her he understands. Her eyes widen as he touches his horn to her brow and takes the tears away.

oooOOOooo

I awoke on the floor of the wagon, my gut and inner ears telling me that we were still flying. Fortunately, my brain had been through enough that, instead of screaming incoherently, I just lay there and groaned.

"Try to relax, Blackjack. We're almost back to Chapel," P-21 said quietly as he stroked my striped mane. "Guess we weren't much help after all."

"Eh. . . it was my plan. Not your fault," I replied with a groan.

"What's wrong with her?" the young filly asked as she looked down at me.

"Just. . . not good with wide open places," I groaned softly. "Too many memories, too. Pinkie Pie. Stonewing. Jetstream."

The little filly suddenly looked curious, "A memory of Pinkie Pie? What was it about?"

“Somepony tried to bomb a party she was at.” Talking helped a little. Took my mind off of... falling... hurk!

“Spew... ” muttered the disgusted filly. “I’m not cleaning that up!”

“Don’t worry about it, Silver Bell,” Rampage said as she tossed a dirty rag over the puddle. I tried to go back into Jetstream’s rapid-fire memories but it was useless now. My horn refused to make the connection.

Then I looked over at Rampage and saw she’d removed her steel barding once more. Lacunae had to carry it so the cart wouldn’t be overloaded. The striped pony had no problem looking out, but I supposed that was because if she fell she’d... ugh... My eyes drifted further down to her flank, and then I froze.

A cutie mark was a pony’s most innate self, an ultimate expression of who and what we were. That’d been as far as I’d gotten in the lecture before passing out from boredom, but I had the gist of it. Cutie marks mattered.

So what was the meaning of a cutie mark of a teddy bear having its rotting guts torn out by barbs of rusting metal sprouting from candy while it itself ripped at a distorted a zebra glyph of a skull while fleshy tendrils pulled and shredded at the normally smooth lines and black lightning struck and shattered wineglasses while in the background swirled a spiral like a whirlpool? Yes, it actually moved. As I watched, the barbs of rust melted into chains while the teddy bear pulled its guts back in and screaming pony faces bubbled to the surface.

Our eyes met, red on pink, and she gave a little smile and shrug. “Ha. Beat that for a cutie mark. Mine moves.”

I didn’t want to beat that. I’d rather die than beat that. “You win,” I replied softly.

I shut up for the rest of the flight. I wasn’t going to say one single word of complaint right now. There were worse things than flying.

Roses’ funeral was something of an aberration. Few ponies actually left bodies to be buried when they came to Chapel. The sentry beams turned all pilgrims into ash. Still, she’d left Thorn behind, and I’d asked Priest if he would allow it. I hadn’t expected anypony else to be here. To my surprise, the entire town attended. The Crusaders marched out en masse to support Thorn, and I suspected that for for them this was a service for their lost parents as well. The hoofful of adults remained in the back. Lacunae looked right at home in her black lace. After my fight in the

Stable-Tec R&D building, I limped as badly as P-21 as we walked out to the field.

Rampage was not in attendance. I could have asked his permission. She might have come.

Of course, this was the moment the clouds started to threaten rain. Well, my cold couldn't get much worse, could it?

Priest stepped next to the sheet wrapping Roses' body, bowing his head respectfully for a moment before speaking in his soft, clear voice. "We all have a journey in our lives. A path to walk, a road to take. Each of us walks that road in our own way and at our own pace. Sometimes alone, if we must; sometimes with others, if we are lucky."

The fillies and colts around Thorn nudged her gently, reminding her that she wasn't alone. She was a Crusader now.

"The road may be dark. It may be hard and painful. And all too frequently, it is cut short by another. We walk these roads as we are able, whether with vigor and excitement or a heavy load. But we all walk.

"Roses' road has come to an end like so many do in the Hoof. It was not a noble road, but while there was the blood of others upon it, there was also virtue. A love for a daughter and a wish to keep her protected and safe. So if some would speak ill of the dead, let them do so when the passed are not present."

I'll bring cake to your funeral. You mean I get one? Sweet. How many lives had I ended that had never gotten this opportunity? Had Air Duct and Vent received one? Where was the funeral for Scoodle? For those forty nameless foals? For Tumbleweed and eleven zebras? Where were the kind words for U-21? For Vanity? For Gorgon? For Deus?

I did not want to die alone and forgotten.

"Your road is at an end, Roses. Rest in the embrace of Celestia and Luna. Let the Goddesses receive you with their peace and mercy." We bowed our heads, and then six unicorns, myself included, reached out our magic as one and lowered her down into the earth. The assembled ponies shuffled by. Medley dropped in a poem or note. Priest set a drawing of Thorn upon the stained linen. Charity lay two bottlecaps beside her. Glory a feather. Me? Two of the little golden flowers.

The young earth ponies then took whatever spades they had and started to fill in the dirt. Harpica lay beside Thorn, holding her close under her dried and dessicated wing with an air of having done this many a times for a foal. Ditzzy Doo's leg held

Silver bell closely, the overcooked ghoul nuzzling the jagged scar on the filly's brow. As the dirt piled up, Thorn began to sob, "Momma! Momma!" Then a second later she wailed "Wampage! Wampage!"

I felt myself start to shake. I was already crying, but I had to hold it together. There was one last part. Glory had suggested it; P-21 had agreed. How could I not?

Slowly, I lifted the contrabass from its case and stood on my hind legs. You hold it like an earth pony. I rubbed my cheek on the cool wood and whispered softly, "Please don't let me mess up." Priest's sheet music floated before me. I levitated the bow to my hoof, pinched it behind my fetlock, and dragged it slowly across the strings.

As the contrabass's slow, sad notes rose over the sound of spades, it was joined by a violin. I looked at Charity in amazement, the filly giving me a grudging little nod as music rose from her glowing horn. I still didn't like her, but for this there were more important things than what I liked or disliked. Priest calmly added the notes of a deeper stringed instrument. I don't know what 'Adagio for strings' meant, but as the music rose and fell, rising and falling, I could only feel my own disgusting and diseased heart trying to lift with it. And it hurt. Oh how it hurt. It didn't matter if I cried; the rain was falling now. Higher. Higher. Just a little further, the instrument seemed to say. Higher!

Silence.

I hung my head as we played the last few chords, my heart starting to beat once more in my chest, I don't know what magic let me get through all that, but when the last note died, we were left with only with the hissing rain, a muddy pile of dirt, and a piece of wood marked simply 'Roses.'

Most ponies, being smarter than me, know to get out of the rain, and this time I was at least clever enough to follow them. In the post office was a mournful celebration as the Crusaders talked about fallen friends and lost family. There were tears, but there were just as many smiles. This was a funeral for far more than just Roses. It was a funeral for Scoodle, and for everypony who had died yet was remembered. It was for that nameless Dashite, for those infected farmers, for Hoss and Granny Smith and Macintosh and Mari pony and all the fallen Marauders.

I limped over to the lace-veiled Lacunae. "So... Goddess..."

“The Goddess isn’t here right now,” Lacunae replied in a low tone of near . . . scorn. I was astonished I could hear it over the din. “She could not bear to be here right now. She is ignoring me and distracting herself with inconsequential thoughts of the others.”

Looking at the alicorn, I frowned, not sure if I was upset at her or her Goddess. “I thought Goddesses were supposed to care.”

“They are. They’re not supposed to die, either, but they do. Excuse me,” she said as she rose and walked into the bathroom. There was a purple flash under the door, and when I peeked in she was gone.

Stepping out, I saw P-21 and Glory standing apart. The pair didn’t seem to associate with the Crusaders as well as I did. I looked at Charity, and she looked back at me. The truce would last a little longer. “Lacunae’s gone... somewhere.”

P-21 frowned at me and shook his head. “I don’t trust it. We don’t know what it can do!” Glory scowled at him, probably for his choice in pronouns.

“Well... um... you can add disappearing to the list. And wings. And unicorn magic.”

“Telepathy,” Glory added absently. At my uncomprehending stare she rolled her eyes. “She talks inside our heads, Blackjack. Ever notice how you can hear her no matter how noisy it is?” Um... yes. Yes, but it hadn’t occurred to me that that was because her words could skip straight past my ears and into my brain! But that was definitely good to know. So she could talk in my head. Though that did make me wonder what else she could do...

I drifted through the crowd a bit more, then bumped into Harpica. The dusty ghoul looked at me in worry. “Oh, Blackjack? Have you seen Thorn anywhere? I brought her inside but she’s disappeared, and the rain is getting worse. Oh, the Master will be so upset if I lose track of one,” she fretted, forgetting that her master was the one who had killed Thorn’s mother.

I sighed. “I’ll see if I can find her,” I said softly, fearing that I’d have to tear her from her mother’s muddy grave. Oh please . . . please don’t make me do that. I sighed, my mane itching from all the damp. I needed a bath. A hot bath. .

I stepped outside, coughing and spitting up more phlegm. I needed a few days recovery, and I wasn’t getting it. Even with the bullet holes healed, I could only hobble along. Pretty soon, I’d be as bad as P-21.

I slowly scanned the town, but my E.F.S. was bare. She might have been in one of the houses, but I’d have to go into each one. The cool blue colors of the Delta

PipBuck seemed to conspire with the rain to make this day as gloomy as possible. I looked towards Roses' grave and felt relieved and saddened that no pony was there. I sighed and coughed again, wanting to go inside. If Thorn was like me, she probably wanted to be alone.

Then a tiny pink pony inside my head smacked my brain hard and pointed out something on the road. A tiny rain soaked rag.

A horn puppet.

No. No no no. Thorn wasn't like me. She still had some pony to go to.

I ran to the puppet and saw the lavender filly running towards the bridge. I forgot about my cold and shivery body and ignored my aching legs as I started to run. I yelled out into the rain for her to stop. Had one of the Crusaders told her about the bridge, that she'd be with her mother on the other side?

There was another pony on the bridge. A pony that caught her in her limbs and held her as I ran to catch up. Rampage, missing her armor, just held her in her hooves as Thorn sobbed horribly into her shoulder. I stopped, lungs burning, legs feeling as if they were about to break. Her cutie mark seemed to still, the rest blending away into the image of the teddy bear. "Shh... shh... it's all right."

"Wampage..." Thorn sobbed as she hugged her close.

"Shh... Shh... It's okay..." she said as held her. I struggled to tell Thorn to step away. For all three of us to return together. Don't make me shoot her in front of you.

My eyes met Rampage's. I jumped into S.A.T.S., toggling three magic bullets. My useless, exhausted little horn let out an anaemic flicker and went dark.

Her teddy bear melted away. "You'll never hurt again."

The rain hissed as a crunchy pop filled the air.

"It's okay," Rampage said softly to the bloody mass, a bony equine skull grinning at me from her flank. "It's okay. You'll never hurt again..."

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk added: Dealer's Ante – Every time you kill an opponent in S.A.T.S., the spell immediately regenerates 20% AP.

20. Mercy

“Tough love, baby!”

It'd been raining for a while now. A cold rain. A hard rain. The kind of rain that makes you feel like somepony up there doesn't like you. My throat burned, my legs ached, and every breath I took sounded like rasping metal. I looked up into the rain, too tired to even cry. But not too tired for this; for what I had to do.

I started to dig.

“It doesn't hurt. . . It doesn't hurt anymore. . . It doesn't,” Rampage whispered to the crushed Thorn over and over again.

She was right. It didn't hurt. The shock rolling through me had mutated into something completely new: a fury so absolute and complete that I launched myself at the striped pony, not caring about my injuries or even that I'd no way to kill her. It'd taken a combat drug cocktail last time. This time, it was something even more potent: my absolute and complete failure to protect a filly I'd sworn to. Rampage had told me she was a monster. If it took a monster to kill her, then that is what I'd become.

“Murderer!” I screamed as I struck her, knocking the poor foal's body from that ghastly embrace. I screamed again, seizing her head in my hooves and slamming it against the metal railing again and again. I heard bones break and felt the spongy material within. Then I felt the head resolidify. No problem. I'd just do it harder and faster, again and again and again, till it worked!

Every bit of frustration, all my failures, built into a horrible frenzy within me. I was supposed to keep ponies safe! I was Security, damn it! Of course the first pony she'd go to was Rampage! And I'd been warned; I'd told her I'd stop her if she was alone around a filly. But nopony had thought to tell the Crusaders to keep Thorn away. How could we have explained it to her, anyway; she'd just lost her mother! She'd just watched her get put in the ground! How could I have been so stupid?

Just one! Just save one, Blackjack. Couldn't I even manage that?

Crack! Crack! Crack! Finally, Rampage heaved me away, her inequine strength sending me rolling across the cracked asphalt. The look in her eyes, the tone of her

voice, the way she stood. . . it was all. . . different. “Murderer? You monster. . . don’t you get it? This is the merciful thing to do,” she said calmly as she charged at me, her lips curled in a snide grin. Her cutie mark churned over and around the pony skull.

I wrapped my forelegs around the railing behind me, twisted, and planted a double rear kick to her face just like a certain little orange pony would. The kick would have knocked out most mares, the crunch of a broken snout ending the fight. Rampage was not most mares. “She was suffering. I gave her mercy,” she said quite matter-of-factly. Like I was an ignorant foal.

“You didn’t have to kill her to end that, Rampage!” I yelled as she came at me again, throwing her forelegs around my neck and starting to squeeze. Only the rain allowed me to slip my head free before she popped it off entirely. I ended up beneath her and gave a small buck to toss her up. As she dropped back down on me, I slammed my spine into her ribcage. Her breath whooshed out in a satisfying gust. I tossed her off my back; she landed, choking and gagging, on the cracked concrete. Adrenaline was carrying me only so far. I really needed some Buck and Stampede!

“It was the kind thing to do!” Rampage gasped, choking as her eyes stared out into the rain over the bridge. “So much pain. . . so much suffering. . . I had to do it. Fluttershy couldn’t end it! Celestia couldn’t. But I could take their pain away.” She glared at me in contempt, those glyphs twisting around the skull. “Can’t you understand? They were in pain. Even when we took the nightmares away, they still suffered. So I gave them mercy! Wouldn’t you do the same?”

Terminate Power: Y/N? A cold hand gripped my rotten heart. “No. . .” I said, but my denial skills had gotten rusty the last few days. “It’s not the same! They were crazy and trapped. I would have had to leave them there!” I tried to slam her to the ground again, shut her up for good! I didn’t want to think about it. Don’t think about it!

But when she hit the roadway with the sound of another bone breaking, she arched a brow and grinned in that haughty, condescending manner. “Oh? Oh ho ho ho ho. . . so. . . you have given out mercy as well. Killed a helpless foal to spare them the pain? Pulled the plug?” I felt numb and stumbled, and she shoved me away from her. “Oh, so that was it? I’ve done that too.”

“I had no choice!” I yelled, trying to convince through volume.

“I had no choice!” she mocked in return. “Isn’t that how it always goes?”

“No, you didn’t have to kill her!” I said desperately as we circled each other, my body

suddenly feeling very tired and weak. “There was nothing I could have done!”

“Nothing? Really?” Her voice lowered even more. “Didn’t stay with them? Didn’t help them? Didn’t find somepony who could? Didn’t devote yourself to doing everything possible to save them?” Her questions slammed into me harder than her hooves as I backed away, towards the flaking word “Mercy” on the asphalt.

I’d thought my choice was lose/lose. I knew some of the children were crazy, but had I gone from pod to pod to find out for sure? Could some of them have been saved? I’d thought the Collegiate and Society wouldn’t have helped, but had I asked them? Had I dragged Archibald and Splendid up there to find out for sure that there were no medics in the wasteland? Had I devoted my life to finding some way of saving those terrible innocents?

No. I’d pulled the plug, sung a little song, and then gone back to Megamart to collect some bottlecaps.

Rampage pounced, knocking me onto my back on the warning sign and lying atop me. “You’re no different from me. Not at all. Sanctimonious, cruel, and vile. This world is too painful, too corrupted, too hateful! Mercy is the only decent thing we can give them!” she said to me softly, contemptuously, as her hooves crushed down with terrible power. “But don’t worry, Blackjack. I know you’re in pain. I know you’re sick. I’ll give you mercy, too.”

“Rampage. . .” I gasped, my legs kicking and struggling against her, but I wasn’t even sure I was really fighting her anymore. Whoever this mare atop me was, she wasn’t the Reaper I’d known.

“You keep calling me Rampage. . .” she said softly as I gasped and choked, “That’s not my name.”

“Get off her, you cunt!” Glory screamed. The gray pegasus dove from above, and a stream of red beams burned smoking holes in the striped pony’s body. The holes closed before my eyes, but Glory had the bit of her battle saddle clenched and poured on the fire. Finally, one red beam from her boxy pistols hit in just the right way, and the immolation reaction flashed along the striped pony. Her hooves burned my throat as she collapsed into a pile of ash atop me.

Something hard and heavy landed on my chest. I coughed and hacked as I looked at an egg of pink quartz wrapped in golden wire and glowing with an eerie pink-tinged light. A strange glyph in the egg’s center, a twisting whirlpool that throbbed like a heart, glowed more brightly than the rest, and there were more lights within. I

shoved it off and rolled onto my side as Glory landed next to me. “Easy, Blackjack. Easy. She’s dead now. Breathe. She almost crushed your windpipe.” From the worry on her face, I suspected that she wasn’t sure about the ‘almost’ part.

“What the heck is this?” I asked softly as I held the egg aloft.

“I . . . I think it’s some kind of rejuvenation talisman . . . It looks like...” Glory trailed off, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

Suddenly, a pink cloud began to collect around the egg, forming worms of crimson that spread and curled into fresh veins and arteries. Tissue crawled over the surface and formed into a pinkish-red mass that began to beat. I watched as bones grew like weeds and muscle stretched to cover them. Finally, young pale skin covered in brilliant red stripes spread like moss over her frame.

The Rampage foal jerked, took a shallow breath, then another, then another. Her pink eyes opened and looked at me in utter misery. “I did it again, didn’t I?” As I looked down at her, I wasn’t sure I could answer. Slowly, the tiny foal curled up and wept. “I’m sorry,” she whispered over and over again, but to whom I couldn’t be sure. Her flank bore a dark mark, like a bruise.

“Sweet Celestia,” Glory breathed in amazement.

“Rampage?” I asked softly as the two striped sticks wrapped in barbed wire appeared on her flank.

“I did it again, didn’t I?” she said again as she sniffed. Then she looked at Thorn. A look of such pain crossed her young face that I couldn’t help myself. I hugged the striped foal as she sobbed into my shoulder. “Not again . . . why did it have to happen again?” I’d been repulsed by what she’d done, and hurt by what she’d said, but at this second, all I knew was that she needed my help. And maybe a hug would calm everypony down enough for somepony to explain what was going on . . .

Glory watched her closely. “What happened, Rampage?”

“I . . . went away. I was bummed . . . I like being by water, so I thought I’d come out here till the funeral was done. And then Thorn was running . . . and she . . . she was crying . . . and . . . I wanted to give her a hug but . . . but I was afraid . . . and . . . I went away. Till just now . . .” Glory listened closely with a little frown. “I guess I got disintegrated . . . that’s usually the only time I come out of it little like this.”

“So . . . you’re crazy,” I said with a little half smile. “That should have been obvious.”

“I guess.”

Glory rubbed her chin in thought. “How long do these blackouts last?”

“It’s not...” She sighed and smacked the sides of her head. “It’s like I’m there and then I’m somewhere else. And it’s... it’s a bad place.” She whispered as she trembled in my limbs.

“Then it’s not crazy,” Glory said with a small frown. Our eyes met and she gave a small apologetic smile. “Please remember, I’m drawing on one class of psychology and something I once read in a Canterlot Journal of Medicine, but in real psychological disorders, another personality doesn’t just completely take over. That’s not how it works.” Rampage looked shocked.

“Huh... I always figured... I mean... are you sure I’m not cracked?” she asked with a confused, worried little look.

“You just regenerated from some talisman in your chest,” Glory replied with a shake of her head. “I’m not sure of anything with you. But if it was something as simple as being crazy, then it would be consistent. Or you’re one hell of an actress... but if you wanted to kill us... heck... kill all of Chapel... you could have. So I don’t think that a part of your brain twigged.” She sighed and frowned. “This is something else.”

I saw others running up and took the opportunity to engage in another bout of rasping and coughing. I rubbed my bruised windpipe, hoping that maybe sometime soon the Wasteland would give at least my respiratory system a break.

“Blackjack!” P-21 shouted as he limped towards us. Sekashi, carrying a burlap sack, was hurrying up behind him. The zebra took one look at the three of us, sighed, and came straight to me. She dug into her bag and pulled out a Sparkle-Cola bottle filled with something that had the consistency of paint. I took a drink and felt the familiar sensation of a healing potion, though it tasted somewhat odd. Good, though! P-21 stopped so short at the sight of Thorn’s crumpled body that he tripped and fell on his face. “Wha... Thorn...” he looked at the tiny Rampage. “What the fuck is going on?”

I slowly rose, spitting and hacking phlegm as the zebra brew did its work. I was glad I could still swallow, even if it hurt. Finally, I rasped, “Somepony killed Thorn. Not Rampage.” My voice sounded worse than a ghoul’s!

“What?” he said flatly and pointed at her broken body with a hoof. “Rampage... what?” He looked at the shaking foal with a look he’d reserved for me and the mine boss and thoughts of returning to 99. “What!” he shouted, his eyes glaring from one to the next in outrage.

“Something took control of her,” I said firmly, the tiny Rampage looking at me as if she couldn’t believe it any more than P-21 did. “She killed Thorn. Said she was giving her a mercy. She did it. Not Rampage.” I looked at the slain foal, feeling empty and brittle again. “She tried to kill me next. Glory vaporized her. And then she regenerated into this.”

P-21 clenched his head between his hooves. “Are you telling me we’re travelling with a psychopath?” I gave a stiff nod, and his eyelid twitched as he threw his hooves in the air, “Oh, so her being crazy makes it all okay? That’s so much better!”

“I don’t think she’s crazy,” Glory replied. “Something else is behind this.”

He glared at her, narrowing his eyes. “You’re as bad as Blackjack.”

Glory didn’t back down, “I’m telling you that Rampage needs our help.”

“Thorn needed our help!” he yelled at her.

“You’re right!” I yelled at them both, feeling something tear in my throat and set off a coughing fit that silenced the argument. I gritted my teeth, trying to get the words out. “Thorn needed us, and I failed to protect her! Me! But we can’t help Thorn now,” I said as I staggered to my feet, coughing and hacking up snot. I nearly fell flat on my face, and was saved only by Glory propping me up. “It’s my fault Thorn is dead. Mine.” Be mad at me, P-21. Not Glory, not Rampage.”

“No, it’s not,” P-21 said darkly, looking at the striped foal. “If she can’t be killed, let’s dump her back in Blueblood’s well and blast it shut.”

“That’d be fair,” Rampage said softly. But the thought of burying anypony alive... even after what Rampage did... The cards shuffled again in my mind. I knew that at any second I was going to start having death ponies in my head and looking crazy.

“No. We’re not going to do that.” It would be like the clinic all over again. “Whatever killed Thorn was not Rampage. Understand, P-21?”

“I don’t care who did it, the blood is on her hooves! What do you think the Crusaders will do when they find out? She was one of them, Blackjack!”

“I don’t know, okay?” I rasped. “But you bury her alive, then bury me too! I’m just as guilty as she is! Or did you forget what I did at the clinic?”

He stared at me, his eyes widening. “It’s not the same...”

“I know it’s not, P-21! I know it’s not. But...” I stared at the shaking Rampage... Arlose... I wanted to scream. I felt like I was the one going crazy now. “Just... trust

me. Please,” I begged him as I slumped against Glory.

He just looked at me. “You can’t save everypony. . .” he said softly as I slid back to the ground.

“I know. But if I give up, then how can I save myself?” I asked as I hid my face in shame. He gave one last sigh.

“What do you need me to do, Blackjack?” I looked at him and gave him a grateful smile. . . at least, I hoped I was smiling.

“Tell Priest.” I couldn’t. I’d rather die than see his face when I confirmed that Arlost had been a murderer. He gave a stiff little nod, then limped away towards Chapel.

“You should have let him bury me,” Rampage muttered.

“Stop!” I croaked at her, then took a slow breath. “Just stop. I don’t know who or what you are, Rampage. I know what I saw and what you said. I don’t know if you’re crazy or not, but stop saying that we need to kill you. That won’t bring Thorn back.” I sighed as I looked the clouds, my gut clenching before I doubled up and hacked and coughed through my bruised throat. I spat out another wad, hoping that that stuff wasn’t blood.

Then I looked at her curiously. “So. . . why are you little?” The look she gave me could have curdled Sparkle-Cola. I swallowed and chuckled, “Okay. . . you don’t know. How long are you going to be like this?”

She gave a little shrug. “Days? Honestly, it’s been almost five years since I was disintegrated.”

Right. “Glory. . . can you take her back to the Star House, please?”

“Blackjack, you should come too.” But I just gave her the easiest smile I could, and she sighed. Of course Glory was more worried about me. After a look, though, she finally turned to Rampage. “Come on, kid.”

Rampage blinked and frowned at her. “I’m at least fifty years older than you.”

Glory smiled. “I can’t help it. You’re just. . . so cute!”

“I am not cute! I’m one of the top Reapers in all of Hoofington, and I’m a crazy, immortal death machine!” Rampage said with a little stomp of her hooves. “That is not cute. . .” She glanced back at Thorn with one last mournful look. “Not cute at all.”

I scooped at the mud, but it slid back into the hole. It was more bailing than digging now. My breath burned in my throat as I coughed and hacked and scrabbled. Working hard and accomplishing nothing. . . I had to do better. I had to be strong, and kind, and aware. . . but I wasn't. I was just a filly scraping at the mud.

"I need your bag. . ." I rasped softly.

"Come. Let us get you out of the rain." Sekashi said as she started to help me up.

"Didn't you hear me—" I started, and then sighed. Of course she hadn't. Because she hadn't lived a life of relative ease in a stable; she'd been trapped in a mine, going deaf while the rest of her people were worked almost to death and then gunned down around her. I took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. "I need your bag. And I need you to tell me a story."

Sekashi's eyes widened. I looked over at Thorn. Without hesitation, she bit the end of her burlap sack and dumped her belongings onto the bridge. She pawed through the strange herbs, stones, and bottles she carried. "What kind of story does a guardian need?" She deftly bit a bottle and tossed it up onto to her snout, extending it to me. I coughed as I took it, hoping it was some kind of medicine.

"A funny one," I said with a little smile. "But what I really need is a story about a pony who cannot die."

Sekashi blinked, then tried for a smile. "Ah. . . well, it just so happens that I do know such a story. Quite humorous, too. Orion's story. Once, he was a zebra, the same as you or I." She paused and chuckled. "Well, I suppose that he wasn't the same as you. He wandered the plains with his tribe. He was not the strongest hunter, nor the bravest, nor the most capable. He was, in fact, the weakest, the most cowardly, and the most inept. Truly, poor Orion would not last long. But still, he wanted mares, and respect, and to stand proud and tall amongst his people."

As Sekashi talked, I limped to the still form of Thorn and, as gently as I could, tried to slip her into the bag. Her dull eyes looked at nothing at all, not understanding what had happened to her. I prayed, as I brushed her eyes closed, that her last thought hadn't been of Rampage's betrayal. "I'm so sorry." I whispered to her ear. Sekashi's story halted, and she coughed in the rain before continuing.

"And so, as young bucks are wont to do, zebra or no, he made a foolish choice. One night, he called out to the stars, asking them to make him strong and brave

and terrible. And the stars heard and granted his wish, and gave him forbidden knowledge no zebra should know. He put his spirit within a rock and the rock within his chest.”

I sat up, looking at her as I pulled the drawstring tight with my magic. “His spirit?” There couldn’t be a coincidence between the story and what I’d just seen, could there?

She nodded. “Yes. All things have spirits. What you call a soul. It is the truest reflection of one’s self.” Funny... I recalled a particularly boring lecture about cutie marks. “Why would that make him... well... invincible?”

“There is a power to spirits. Our spirit is the truest reflection of self, the thing that makes us exist at all. And when we die, it is the piece of us that persists to eternity. But if we damage that spirit willfully and place it within another vessel, that vessel gains the resilience of the spirit.”

“And what happens to the pony that loses it?”

She gave a shrug. “Who can speak of such things? It is a dark subject, and I speak only happy, funny tales. When they die, their spirit may linger in its vessel, trapped for all time. But perhaps, some day, the spirit may be free and reunited with the rest. That is what I can hope.”

“So what happened to Orion?”

“Ah, poor silly Orion with the heart of stone found himself stronger than the most terrible monster of the savanna. With his spirit within the unbreakable heart, he knew no fear, and so nothing could stand before his spears and hooves. But his tribe questioned how Orion could have gone from so little to so much. They questioned if he had used the forbidden magic of the stars, and Orion grew angry. He was strong and terrible, how dare they question how! In a rage, Orion slew his tribe from the elders to the youngest foal. And so he was left alone.

“For years he wandered. All zebras fled from Orion the traitor, for the blood of the slain had marked him in stripes of crimson. No monster could slay him, even as he wished it, for they could not devour the stone heart. No spear could fell him. And so he cried out to the stars to take their gift back. But the stars do not undo what they have done. So finally, he jumped so high that he reached the stars and joined them, hunting for the most terrible monsters of the skies in the hopes that one may slay him.”

She finished her story as I rested my hoof on the bag. “How could somepony put

their... their soul into a rock? Why? It's like... like... defacing your own cutie mark!"

"Or erasing one's glyph," Sekashi agreed, looking on as a spasm of coughing rolled through me. "There are many stories of doing such things, though. Of silly zebras wishing for power, or knowledge, or long life. Pursuing their desire, they sever their spirit and burn it in fires of magic, or barter with beings too terrible to name, or simply secure it within a new shell. The powers gained, and the knowledge, and the life... however, are rarely worth the price one has paid. But there are always fools who do not heed the warnings of the stars."

"Warnings from the stars? Or warning about the stars?" I asked as I gently lifted the burlap sack and placed it across my shoulders. Too light and yet so very heavy... too young... she should have been given a chance at more life. A chance at happiness. Like those foals in the clinic.

"Yes," Sekashi said as she used a bit of string to tie together her bottles and belongings as well as she could. "I know that for ponies they are pretty lights in the sky, but just because something is pretty does not make it harmless. The stars are powerful, otherworldly, and fickle. A foolish zebra or pony who calls upon them dooms not only themselves but others as well."

"So zebras believe the stars are evil?" I asked, remembering those pictures and Mari pony's memory.

"Some may, but did I say evil? No. Dangerous. Perilous. Fickle. But they do not wish our destruction, for otherwise we would surely be destroyed." She gave a sad little smile. "It is far too easy to simply say that something is evil. To invite their attentions and to plead for their aid is folly, but they are not cruel and wicked," she said, her eyes lingering on Rampage before she looked up at the clouds, "There are stories of the stars giving guidance to those who need it. Stories of the stars granting succor and inspiration. It is when we demand of the stars that they grant our desires. Much to our pain, as your Nightmare Moon discovered."

"Nightmare Moon?" I asked as we talked, glad for the excuse to take my thoughts off what had happened minutes ago. "What does she have to do with stars?"

"Who do you think it was that gave her such power?" she asked as she kept her eyes on me. "The lesson of the stars is not that they are wicked things. How simple that would be! So many make that mistake. It is that they allow us to bring our true horrors to the forefront, and the pain may be left for generation upon generation. The stars did not make your princess into that monster. The monster was there to

begin with.”

“But. . . Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna were two different ponies!” I protested. There was no way that the cute, intelligent princess I’d seen could be a monster.

“Can you tell me the tale of how she became Nightmare Moon? The change from one to the other?” Sekashi asked. I opened and closed my mouth like an idiot. I knew the story of her banishment, but...

“I don’t know. . .”

“Nor do we, but many believe that she made a plea to the stars and that they answered her call. And though her sister and people forgave her easily, that which the stars touch, they change forever more.”

“That seems pretty severe,” I said softly. “What if I were touched by the stars?”

Sekashi laughed, “Oh, my dear Guardian, it would explain a great deal to me.” But despite her laugh, there was uneasiness in her eyes.

I’d only excavated a hoof deep. My throat throbbed with every swallow. My eyes burned as I tried to scoop out a little more muck. “I’m wondering. . .” the Dealer whispered as the rain hissed off the yellowed grass around me, “if there isn’t some symbolism to this?”

“Fuck you and your symbolism,” I muttered as I scooped out a double hoofful of sludge from the hole, the mud slathering my legs. “I have to do this.” I’d failed. . . it was my responsibility.

The dealer just leaned against the wooden headstone, cards passing back and forth between his hooves as he looked at me with a rheumy old eye. “You’re only a pony, Blackjack. No shame in that.”

“I have to be better. . .” I gasped.

“Well, then, maybe you should see if you can get Sanguine to fuse some Sand Dog into you, or get some mechanical limbs. Maybe put a talisman where your heart should be so you can kick yourself in the ass for all of eternity?” With each question, he showed me a card. Gorgon, Deus, and the snide and cruel Rampage. “Would that be better?”

“Fuck you,” I muttered as my legs gave out on the cold, wet ground.

“You’re going to need more than harsh language to be better, Blackjack. And since you won’t use what you’ve got. . . best get something that’s better than nothing.”

“And what have I got?” I rasped softly, looking at the burlap sack as blood slowly stained through the cloth. My voice cracked, then failed entirely.

“Blackjack, you idiot. . . ”

Side by side, we entered Chapel, and Sekashi looked at me with her easy smile and worried eyes. “Let me check on Majina. I fear. . . I just wish to check on her.” She tried to keep her eyes on mine, but they could not help but glance at my passenger.

“Stay with her. At least one of us should have the sense to get out of the rain,” I crackled, feeling cold and tired. It was how I imagined Scalpel and Bonesaw must feel. I wondered what it was like to be a mother; the thought was simply terrifying. I could barely take care of myself with my friends’ help. What would it be like to worry about a foal? To lose one?

I was walking slowly past the post office when Priest stepped quietly out into the rain. The water spraying off his shoulders seemed to glint around him like an aura. Our eyes met, and there were no words. I looked with eyes of guilt, he with silent recrimination. He’d warned; I’d failed. What needed to be said past that? He stepped past me, giving the sack a small nuzzle of farewell, and walked off towards his church.

The door to the post office opened, and three young ponies tumbled out. Medley, Adagio, and Allegro rolled into the rainy street. Little Sonata followed the four; she’d have been the perfect age to be a friend for Thorn. Allegro struggled to get free with his treasure: a bottle of Sparkle-Cola RAD. Adagio hugged his rear legs while Medley clambered up his back, her horn glowing as she struggled to pull the bottle from his lips before he could drink it all. “Give it back! It’s mine. . . ” she shrieked as she pummeled his head with her hooves.

“You said I’d get a drink, Alleg!” Adagio protested laconically, the blue colt tugging at his limbs.

“Geff off!” The rose-colored colt growled, and the chartreuse unicorn yanked the bottle of soda from his mouth and held it above them. “Hey!” He protested, stretching up to reach the glowing bottle.

“It’s mine now!” Medley declared, only to have Allegro grab her in a bear hug around

her chest. Unbalanced, the pile of foals tumbled over with a loud thump. The glow around the bottle faded, and it fell into Sonata's hooves. Three pairs of eyes met hers. The little purple earth pony smiled and then promptly spat into the bottle. A chorus of "Ew. . ." filled the air as the filly enjoyed her radish favored soda with a small smile of triumph.

"Hey, it's Security Pony!" Medley said as she pointed a hoof at me as she lay upside down upon the blue Adagio. They rolled to their feet, and suddenly I felt a pit opening inside me. "Did you find Thorn? Been looking everywhere for her."

"What's in the bag?" Allegro said with a grin of acquisitiveness, but he must have read something on my face. "Hey? What's wrong? You don't look so good." What could I say? How could I explain one of my friends had killed their newest member?

"Hey, Sonata! Did you win?" Charity said from the doorway. Then youngest of the four took a drink with a wide smile.

"She spit in the bottle," Adagio whined.

"Just like I told her. Good girl," Charity said before she yelled into the post office, "Sonata won! Pay up!" Then she glanced at me and her smile faded. She looked at me and the sack on my back. "What are you doing?"

"She's acting funny," Medley said suspiciously.

But Charity's eyes met mine. They flashed a moment like beam weapons before she said softly, "Thorn's dead, ain't she?" The four looked at her, then looked at me in worry. I couldn't speak, I could only nod. "She took the walk, huh?" Her gold eyes looked at the bag on my back and I knew that she was lying through her horn, but once again all I could do was nod.

The four didn't look shocked. They looked sad. Resigned. As if this wasn't the first time.

"I thought she was going to stay," Sonata said softly as she hugged the almost empty bottle. Medley put a hoof around her. "I really thought she wouldn't walk."

"It happens, Sonata. It happens," Medley said as she nuzzled her ear. This was how the Crusaders survived.

Adagio looked at his brother, wilting in the rain. "Wonder who told her about the bridge. Probably Pander or Crisp. . . I'll thump 'em if they did," the blue colt muttered dully, and that was how colts survived.

"Head inside. No point in being stuck in the rain," Charity said, stepping aside. When

they'd gone back indoors she looked at the bag again. "You going to take care of her?" All I could do was nod and her gaze dropped. "Good." The yellow filly turned back to the post office.

"Don't you want to know how?" I croaked, and then coughed. I was soaked through, exhausted, and just wanted to dry out.

She looked back at me with her sad gold eyes. "No," she said simply as she stepped back inside. She didn't need to know. Thorn had died, and I was taking care of her. That seemed to be enough. I'm sure a pony like her would eventually find out the details from Priest.

Alone, I walked to the grave where the trampled grass and muddy earth were the only indication of the ceremony that had taken place here barely an hour ago. I looked at the wooden post. 'Roses...' Gently, I laid Thorn on the grass. "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen," I said as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. "I bet you've heard that a lot, huh, you bony bastard?"

"You're talking to me?" he said from my left, where he was sitting and looking at the grave solemnly. I glared at him hatefully. He returned my gaze and had the audacity to look upset. "Yeah, it's an old theme. The road to hell and all that."

"Why can't I make it any better? Why can't I save even one foal who just lost her mother? Why do you take everything away?"

"I didn't kill her," the white horse said softly as he tugged the ragged cowpony hat further over his face.

"You know what I mean..." I said quietly as I looked at the brown muck before me. "Why do you have to make it so hard?"

"I don't, Blackjack. You do... because you care so damn much," he said softly, looking at me with a sad, avuncular smile, "and you know what caring means."

"Caring fucking hurts, no matter how you slice it," I whispered, and then I began to dig.

I don't know how long I worked on digging that hole. It could have been minutes; it felt like days. I rasped, coughed, and had conversations with my own fractured psyche. I just couldn't stop. I'd failed in all other regards; I would at least see her to rest or drop in the attempt.

And, sure enough, my aching legs finally gave out and sent me sprawling next to the sack, coughing and struggling just to breathe.

“Blackjack, you idiot,” P-21 said softly beside me. “Don’t you have the sense to get out of the rain?” he asked as he walked to the shallow hole and moved in to my left. The rain matting his navy mane, he started to dig alongside me.

Glory slipped in on my other side. Her lavender eyes met mine, and her wing gently wiped the rain from my eyes. She set down her packs and pulled out a blanket to drape over me before she moved to the hole as well.

Across from us stepped Rampage. She looked too small to help, but all the same she lay on her stomach to dig out the mess. Black hooves stepped in beside her, and she stared up at Priest in shock as he floated a shovel before him. Giving one long look at the tiny Rampage, he proceeded to dig as well. Then, to my amazement, the rain stopped. . . no. It hadn’t stopped raining. It had simply stopped falling on us. Standing a little ways apart, Lacunae watched us toil, her horn glowing. Sekashi walked up with more of her potions and medicine. And then, most miraculous of all, Charity arrived with a shovel and bucket.

Beside me, the old pale buck watched with a wistful look of longing. “See that? That’s how it should be.” Lacunae glanced in my direction as I muttered to myself.

“I should be doing it. . .”

He gave me with a look I was all too familiar with. “You are, Blackjack. You can’t do it all yourself, Blackjack. You don’t need to be better. . . smarter, maybe, but not better,” he said as he looked at me. “You just need your friends to carry some of your load.”

The six of us together made quick work of the hole, despite the mud and wet. Priest levitated Thorn down beside her mother as I watched. “Rest easy, Thorn. Roses. Be united forever in the everafter.”

“I. . . I never meant. . . I didn’t want this to happen again. Not again. . . not ever again,” Rampage blubbered as she looked down into the grave like she wanted to crawl into it as well.

Filling the grave was far easier than emptying it. Priest just closed his eyes as Charity collected her shovels. “I know, Arlost. But it did,” he replied evenly.

“Yeah. . .” she muttered softly, and gave him a wan half smile. “Blackjack’s going to help me figure out how to die. Pretty cool, huh?” He glanced at me and then at her. “Then. . . then I’ll get what I deserve. . . and I won’t ever do it again.”

“No pony deserves what you’re going through, Arlostee,” Priest replied softly. “I wish there was something I could do to help, but you’re still a threat to the Crusaders. You’ll still have to stay away.”

Rampage just nodded. “Can I see her before I go?”

His lips curled in a sad smile. “Of course.”

She gave a nod, and the foal-sized red-zebra-striped pony walked quietly out into the rain beyond Lacunae’s spell. Not towards the houses, but further into the graveyard.

“Where’s she going?” Glory asked as she watched.

“She’s visiting our daughter,” he replied quietly.

Their what? Glory covered her mouth in horror, and even P-21 looked shocked. “I was barely a buck, but. . .” he gave a little shrug, “Old enough for it to happen once, after a lot of scotch and persuasion. I’d never seen her so happy. Then. . . out of nowhere. . . she killed her. It drove her crazy, I think. She tried so many ways to kill herself, it scared the Crusaders. Finally, she went into the city. I lost count of the number of times she was vaporized by the defenses. I thought that would be that. Only she appeared two years later as the Reaper, Rampage.”

“Why doesn’t she just. . . bury herself or something?” P-21 muttered, now with a touch of shame and pity.

“Because it wouldn’t kill her. Someday. . . maybe in days, or years, or centuries, she’d escape. And when she did, who knows what kind of monster she’d be? The only punishment she feels is acceptable is to die,” Priest said firmly, “She has to ensure she’ll never hurt another.”

“So she gets off easily. . .” P-21 muttered.

“And be tormented eternally in the Hell,” Priest finished. P-21 blinked, and then glanced at me. I think he finally realized just how deeply what she’d done had hurt.

There was just one last thing to do. I dug in my bags and pulled out my dragon claw. My horn was so dead that I had to grip it in my teeth and scrape it against the wood. When I finished, I looked at the post. ‘Roses,’ and beneath it, my additions. ‘Mother. . . Thorn. . . Daughter.’

“I’m done,” I whispered through my ragged throat, slumping against Glory. “Time to get out of the rain.”

Unfortunately, my departure for Stable 99 was going to have to wait a little while. I was sick. . . sick sick sick sick. I'd almost prefer dying of radiation sickness to coughing, hacking, and generally feeling miserable. I know, Rampage was in an infinitely worse place than me, but she was simply dealing with a second childhood. . . or third. . . fourth... and at the moment there was nothing I could do as they put me upstairs in Marigold's old bed.

Sekashi stopped by to administer her healing draughts and brews. Apparently, a zebra who didn't know how to mix simple concoctions was merely a striped pony. I know they may have smelled foul, but they were far better than the boiled leaves Glory brewed up. I was also admittedly curious about zebra culture. Pretty much all I'd learned about them was that they were the enemy during the war.

To hear her speak of it, the zebras had once lived in tribes across a vast grassland. Most were nomadic (though legends and archaeological evidence indicated that this might not have always been the case), and, rather than set up large towns and cities, they simply established a few buildings for healing and protecting their wells. Unlike Equestria, which had tamed most of its wilderness, the zebra lands had been rife with monsters and threats. These were respected by the zebras, and zebra bucks and mares would test themselves against these threats. What they lacked in unicorn magic they made up for with rare and potent magical talismans.

Apparently, a long drought changed much of this way of life. With the savanna dying, zebras were forced to gather in villages and cities built around water sources, and, with the zebras no longer able to just move away from them, competition with the natural predators became acute. A decade or so later, the land's gem deposits were exhausted, and the dearth of the gems that were the foundations of the zebra's magical talismans threatened their survival. They found a twofold solution in Equestria. Equestria was industrializing, and many of the technologies it was beginning to develop held promise of replacing the need for talismans altogether. At the same time, though, Equestria had large supplies of gems, and, fortunately for the zebras, its burgeoning industry also meant burgeoning demands for energy, demands that the quickly-dwindling Equestrian coal supplies were unable to meet. Agreements were made: Equestria would supply the zebras with gems and give zebra industrialization a boost with the knowledge and technology for coal mining, and in return the zebras would send coal to Equestria.

The demand for mining and the desire for technology completely changed their nomadic way of life. The zebra lands were tamed and exploited for their resources, and the zebras began to develop their own technologies, both earth-pony-like and al-

chemically based, to supplement and enhance their traditional tools and talismans. The Caesar, the latest to occupy a position that was formerly just a sort of highly experienced diplomat in charge of settling the largest inter-tribal disputes, took up the increased power the sedentary lifestyle had given him and declared a bold new future, but it was not easy. The zebras, experiencing the same sort of technological growth as Equestria, also began to experience the same sorts of unsteady social changes. City dwelling was no longer just something in legends, done by only a few small tribes, or done to weather a drought; now it was the norm. Railroads snaked across the land, turning journeys that might once have been weeks of hard travel into a few days in a well-appointed coach. The increasingly unified zebra military, armed with new weapons and new magic, stopped simply keeping the beasts away and began to hunt them down. New thoughts shot through zebra culture like lightning, and among them was one that began to climb to a dangerous boil.

Most zebras had never been able to spare much thought for how things were elsewhere. They'd been too busy surviving, and it wasn't as if things in faraway lands would matter much to them. Those who did think about it, though, tended to be quietly resentful of Equestria. Equestria, chosen land of the living goddesses, where the monsters were tame and even the seasons were ordered for the ponies' comfort. Still, that resentment hadn't mattered much; Equestria didn't care much about the zebras, and the zebras couldn't do anything about the ponies.

The first wakeup call came when Nightmare Moon returned and delayed the dawn. That was when the resentment started to rise, but there was still nothing those bearing it could do. Then, years later, the trade agreements were signed, and, though they were very good for the zebras, they were even better for Equestria; the zebras were paying in coal ten times what the ponies were paying in gems. And those gems were even more valuable to the zebras now than before; the new industries might have reducing the relative utility of the old talismans, but at an even higher rate it was creating new uses for enchanted gems.

With all of this and more beneath the surface, it only took a small nick to start the process that would end with the world exploding. The hostage crisis was that nick, and the disaster proceeded from there.

The Caesar withheld the coal until fairer trade terms could be negotiated. In response, Equestria withheld its gem shipments. Pony power, transportation, and manufacturing were cut back, then cut back again. Zebra industry faltered as the gem supply dried up, and the campaign against the monsters of the land found itself expanding beyond the capabilities of its suddenly-reduced supplies; this only

further increased zebra reliance on coal-fueled technology, increasing the domestic demand for coal and decreasing the demand for foreign gems.

Peaceful diplomacy failed and Equestria, desperate as its ponies lost the infrastructure they'd come to rely on, began seizing coal shipments by force.

It was curious... almost cute... to hear about the first battles. Great care was taken to minimize casualties. Prisoners were exchanged immediately. Medical care offered. Meanwhile, Celestia constantly strove for some sort of armistice. But as the war progressed, the fighting grew worse. Weapons development, new combat spells, and dangerous new spell talismans pushed the destruction onward. Every pony and zebra involved seemed to agree that the fighting should stop, but none were able to let the other side fire the last shot. Zebra refugees and displaced ponies became increasingly common, and violence and resentment against them grew.

Then came the Littlehorn massacre.

I only knew it as a footnote in my history books: the attack on a school prompted Celestia's abdication and elevated Princess Luna to the throne. I hadn't known that it had been Luna's school. I didn't realize that the attack had employed a terrible new poison talisman. The Caesar denied that the school had ever been a target and said that the weapon had been lost and would never have been authorized. But the slaughter changed everything. No pony was interested in peace any more. The only drive was to win at any cost.

Of course, the burning of Hoofington came soon after, and the reconstruction soon after that. It was as if, once unified in a common direction, ponies raced to discover how much they could do. No pony had seen that the new horizon they were racing towards was a cliff-wait.

"Somepony did," I muttered, "Somepony knew." I remembered the museum and the Cakes. Somepony had known the day and the hour and had taken steps... but for what, I couldn't imagine.

"You gave me your damn cold," P-21 muttered as he visited me with his own runny nose.

"Bah. I gave you nothing. You stole it," I retorted as I lay in bed.

"Well, take it back, then!" he muttered, sneezing hard. "Ew..." he stuck his tongue

out at the snot on his hoof. “Ugh. . . I hate being sick.”

“Apparently, stable ponies catch it more easily. We’re lucky we’re in Chapel where there’s not a lot of Enervation. If we were in Flank, it could take days to get over.” I sipped from one of Sekashi’s bottles. “You should drink this. I think I’ve coughed up every color of the rainbow, but I feel better.”

“Pass. Those zebra drinks taste like mare ass,” he said as he stuck out his tongue.

I rolled my eyes, “Please. Do you even know what mare butt tastes like?”

He looked at me, “Well it depends on how clean she keeps herself back there.” I winced and he reached over and pretended to read the label on the back, “Oh look. Side effects may include nausea, loss of appetite, rainbow snot, and putting all four hooves in your mouth.” He took a drink and his eyes widened, his navy mane frizzing as he jerked. “Okay. . . tastes worse than—“

“I defer to your experience,” I said quickly.

He took another drink and then sighed, setting the bottle back on the nightstand. “I also want to apologize. I know you’re trying hard. . . harder than any of us. I just didn’t handle it well.”

“I’d be scared if any of us did,” I said as I leaned back in the bed, looking at the moon painted on the ceiling. “I’m sorry too. . . I want to save her. I do. And Thorn. And Roses. And Flank. Why is that so hard?”

“Because it’s better. It would have been easier to leave Roses and Thorn in that ruin or write off Flank. It’s what I would have done.” He sighed and shook his head. “You want to know what bothers me the most, though?” I cringed inwardly but nodded, “I really didn’t care that she was dead. It was wrong and all. . . completely messed up. . . but I was more angry that Rampage didn’t get punished for it.”

“She is,” I pointed out.

“Maybe. I’m not quite sold on the ‘not crazy mare still innocent of killing a foal somehow cause she feels really bad about it’ theory,” he said with a wave of his hoof. “And I still want to know what Lacunae’s angle is.”

“Maybe she just wants to help make the Wasteland better?”

“I don’t think she has a clue what she really wants. . . or this Goddess. I talked with Priest about it. Apparently there are acolytes all over the Wasteland selling this whole ‘Unity’ religion. An alicorn takes you away to become one with the Goddess. Catch is, no pony ever comes back,” he said as he rubbed his nose.

“Apparently I’m too damaged for Unity,” I said with a rueful smile. “And too whiny.”

He wasn’t smiling. “Blackjack, no pony is too damaged for Unity. They’ll take anypony. Murderers. Rapists. Raiders. Slaves. It doesn’t matter. I can’t really believe that they’d turn anypony away for being ‘too whiny’”

I frowned at that. “Maybe. I just don’t understand where the Goddess ends and Lacunae begins. She sounds like she’s a part of it, but... not. She said something about Hoofington being full of nightmares.” I caught his look and chuckled... then coughed, hacked, brought up something a decidedly ‘bugh’ color, and spat it into a rag before shaking my head. “Ew... anyway... not normal nightmares, scary dreams. It’s definitely an alicorny thing.”

“Well,” he said as he wiped his nose on his leg. “Just... don’t let this bite us in the tail. I mean... I know you want to help her, but she and her Goddess are one great big unknown. Okay?” I sighed and nodded, taking another sip of the tasty medicine. It was kinda like licorice. ... salty licorice? P-21 relaxed a bit. “So... last question. What are we going to do at Stable 99?”

“Take it over,” I replied calmly as I rubbed my bruised throat. “I mean it. If Mom won’t listen, I will shoot her till she does. I will feel very guilty about it afterwards, but I’m not going to let that place continue.” Then I took a deep breath. “After that, anyone who doesn’t like the new rules can have fun in the Wasteland.”

He looked at me with a sigh. “I notice that plan doesn’t have anything about punishing them for what they did.”

I closed my eyes, “Sorry. I’m not an executioner. I’d give you the Overmare if I could, but Deus took care of that.”

“Well, get back to Stable 99 and take over. I assume profit follows on step three.” He crossed his forelegs on the edge of my bed as he cocked his head. “And if it doesn’t go to plan?”

“Drink some Wild Pegasus, sing some dirty limericks, shoot a lot, and try not to die,” I said as I looked him in the eye. “But I’m not leaving there till it’s taken care of, P-21.”

“Good. That I can live with,” he said softly.

“I know you don’t believe it,” I said with a smile, “But most of Stable 99 are good ponies. We won’t have to kill them all.” Because if we did, then I was going to follow them. But I couldn’t believe Mom and the others would hold onto rules that weren’t even a part of the stable to begin with!

“You’re an optimist, Blackjack. Still, while I’m not sure about their goodness, I’m pretty sure they aren’t going out of their way to screw us. If they have a choice, then they’ll do what’s easier.” He gave my hip a nudge. “I’ll be honest. Fighting you. . . is hard.” I smiled at that. I needed to make cards. ‘Security: Don’t fight me, it’s hard.’ “And afterwards?”

“Put Mom in charge as the new Overmare and put them in contact with Bottlecap. There’s got to be valuable things to trade. Trade will save the Wasteland,” I said with a smile. “Then we get the routing to the next destination for EC-1101, and maybe make a little stop at Hippocratic Research and see if I can’t talk Sanguine into giving up on it.”

“Sounds. . . good,” he said, actually sounding impressed. Then he chuckled. “You know that something’s going to go wrong.”

“Yeah. Probably Sanguine,” I said, rolling my eyes. “The Zodiacs knew I was at Stable-Tec R&D. He will probably guess that I’ll head to Stable 99 to find the routing. He’s probably going to throw every raider, bandit, and slaver against me. Probably why DJ Pon3 said the area was so much more hostile now.” I brought up my PipBuck and tapped the screen. The sleek black display showed the navigation tool in soft, cool blue. I was amazed at how many places I’d reached in the last few weeks. “Ditzzy is flying back to New Appleloosa tomorrow. She can drop us off at Miramare. From there, it’s two days to Megamart and two more to Stable 99.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover. Any chance Ditzzy could fly us straight to Stable 99?”

“She’s not a taxi. 99 is way out of her way, and we used up most of our caps paying for EC-1101.” Most of that money went to Ditzzy for flying all the way out to Hoofington and back, a trip she usually risked only every other year or so. “We can’t keep her from her business just to save us some walking.”

He made a face. “All very well for you,” he said with a grimace. “All your legs work.”

“My knees are half shot too, after jumping off that catwalk,” I reminded him; I could have taken a Hydra, but after all the damage done to me by the drug, not to mention seeing the manufacturing process, I’d rather wait a bit instead. He looked a little unconvinced. “It’ll work out. And just think, in a few days, we’ll be able to set Stable 99 right once and for all!”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, that’s a point. Maybe, though, we could find one of those magic flying wagons of our own? That would make travel much easier.”

“I doubt that Glory would be up to flying us all around the Hoof,” I said, not sure if

a pegasus's lift was related to their size. Then again, Ditzzy wasn't the largest pony in Equestria, and her wings didn't even have feathers, so... so I didn't know how it worked. Well, nothing new there.

"Glory would fly through fire if you asked her to," P-21 pointed out.

I flushed a little. "It's not like that. She's... it just feels weird to lust after her. And I'm not going to exploit her crush on me. So we'll stick with the plan."

"Mmmm... maybe. I don't know, it just seems that, every time you have a plan, it ends in disaster and heartbreak," he said as he rose. "I should go make sure we have everything we need."

Leaving me in bed presented an interesting problem. On one hoof, I was tired, on the second, I felt too rotten to sleep, on the third, I wouldn't feel anything if I was asleep, but on the fourth, my dreams were full of the sound of crunching foals and Thorn singing 'hush now.' However, being stuck in bed felt suspiciously like waiting, and I'd finished my gun magazines and the hoof-to-hoof training manual. Then, in desperation, I'd even tried reading one of P-21's arcane science books. There simply wasn't any way to make arcane radiation gem reactors and spark generation as thrilling as reading about Fallen Caesar fighting techniques. And don't get me started on his books on locks!

I still had two more memory orbs that I hadn't viewed yet. Theoretically, I was safe as houses, provided no stealthed zebras or ghost unicorns attacked. I levitated the two from my bag. I still didn't want to view the bloodstained orb, so I lifted the third...then frowned and floated Cupcake's revolver into my bed. Slipping it under my pillow, I breathed out and touched the orb with my magic.

Nothing. Not that it was locked, or anything. It was just that I could feel Stonewing being merged with the cockatrice, sense the creature squirming inside me as I shifted and distorted. It made my hide crawl! I took several deep breaths, closed my eyes, and tried again to coax myself to make the connection.

Nothing...

I was sick. I was tired. My horn sucked. Always decent explanations, but somehow they didn't comfort me. How would I learn about the projects and see the Marauders if I couldn't even get my horn to make the connection?

I lay back in the bed, staring up at the moon. Had Marigold felt this way when she was being slandered and torn down by the system that had happily put her in harm's way? Exhausted, disconnected, and alone? I tried to make the connection again

and again before finally dropping the orbs back into my bag and turning over in bed. Just one more thing I couldn't do.

I sat alone on a mountain. It shifted and rumbled beneath me, but I could almost reach the clouds. If I could reach them, I could tear them aside and see the stars again!

"Don't look down," rasped the old voice with a chuckle. "Care for a game? Draw Poker? Hearts? Go Fish?"

"Very funny," I muttered.

"I try. We've got that in common."

I stretched and strained to reach the clouds. "Go away." Just a little bit farther. . .

"Hey. You're the one dreaming me. You wake up," he said with that purring of his cards. "So, what are you trying to do?"

"Get to the stars," I replied. "If I can reach them. . . maybe they can help me."

"Sekashi told you they were dangerous."

"Only to selfish ponies who try to use them to become super powerful and stuff," I said as I started to push the clouds aside. "I'm going to use them to help." I wobbled as the rocks beneath me shifted a little, but I kept my eyes turned upward. "Nothing bad's going to come of that."

"So thought Fluttershy," he rasped. "But you saw what came of trying to force a better pony."

"Well, making the Wasteland happy, then."

"And that's Pinkie Pie's thinking. You're just going from bad to worse now," he said as he shuffled the cards beneath me. "Come on down from there, Blackjack, before you hurt somepony."

"I can't! I've got to help." I said as I finally pushed the clouds aside. I could see the twinkling lights.

"Help who?" The Dealer asked from below me. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to turn into a monster if I don't," I said as I reached up and pinched a star between my hooves. It glowed like a memory orb, but hot and terrible.

“Oh? Then what are you now?” the dealer asked. I looked down to tell him to shut the fuck up and—

I stood on P-21’s corpse. And Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Bottlecap and Caprice lay further down the slope of corpses. Roses embraced the crushed body of her foal. Dozens of Crusaders lay still in their tattered cloaks, the filly patches fluttering softly in the breeze. Hundreds of ponies in Stable 99 barding. Thousands of ponies dressed as raiders. Enclave pegasi littered the slope like broken birds. At the edge of my sight loomed the blasted corpse of Deus, the pulped remains of Gorgon, and the smouldering body of Blueblood. And past them, the bodies continued further and further till they blended with the horizon.

“Told you not to look down,” The Dealer said, sitting on Rampage’s face.

The mass then shifted and the slope collapsed beneath me. I fell through the darkness, my friends’ bodies burying me in a crush of limbs, the star coolly looking on between my hooves.

I jerked awake, knocking the box of Vanity’s memory orbs across the sheets and sending them rolling across the wooden floor. I looked around, the images of the stars no longer quite so comforting. I sat up in bed, curling and pressing my head between my rear knees as my forelimbs hugged my head tight. “Please... don’t take that from me. Don’t take the stars,” I whispered to my poor crazy brain.

I finally calmed down enough to climb down off the bed and gather up the fallen memory orbs. One must have rolled under the bed, and I huffed softly as I laid down on my stomach and peeked under for the orb... wait? Orbs? Two memory orbs glimmered at me from under the bed. What, were they breeding now? Very carefully, I pulled the pair out. One was quite dusty. I put Vanity’s orb back in the case, looking at the newcomer; Marigold’s. I touched it to my horn. “Please... please please please...” I begged, trying to make my horn work.

A flicker, and world faded away.

oooOOOooo

This unicorn mare fit me like a sock. Even her glasses felt like my glasses. Her headache matched my own. All she needed was a runny nose and a scratchy throat and we’d be interchangeable.

I also knew this building. This was the Fluttershy Medical Center, and I even knew

this hallway. Even though it wasn't half lit and painted with a blood-lettered 'PLAY'

She stepped into Redheart's office; I at once noticed that the stacked up papers and files seemed even higher than when I'd visited. The tired mare behind the desk pushed her glasses back and gave a frayed smile at my host, "Thank you for coming, Marigold. I know this is terribly short notice."

"Well, you made it sound like it was life or death," Marigold said in a soft and thoughtful voice edged with some tension. "Why else ask me to come out here in the middle of the night?"

Redheart trotted around from behind the desk to put a hoof on Marigold's shoulder, "I know this has been. . . a difficult time for you."

"Difficult?" Marigold said in a soft, taut voice. "Spending three years of my life on a dream I've had for as long as I can remember, only to get pulled for a medical review two weeks before the launch? Yeah. I suppose that counts as difficult."

"It's been challenging for all of us, with the assassination attempt. Big Macintosh's funeral last week and all. . . well. . . yes. Difficult." She then pushed a file towards Marigold and she glanced down. 'Marigold: P:H medical authorization: denied.' And then atop it. 'Medical Waiver: Approved.' Her eyes went over those stamps once, and then twice. "So I'm glad to make things a little less difficult for you."

"Why. . . ?" Marigold asked in shock.

"Because we've reviewed the test results for your heart and found them. . . less severe than we anticipated. And because Fluttershy knows what it's like to have a dream. And because. . . we need your help." Marigold frowned as she walked to a cushion and took a seat across from the elderly mare. Redheart gave a small smile. "Fluttershy has a dire medical emergency involving a pregnant mare. Without your help, she may lose the foal."

"My help? But how can I help? I'm an astropony and an astronomer. I don't know anything about medicine."

"Fluttershy wishes to perform a procedure that will transfer the foal from the patient to you, making you a surrogate mother." Marigold's ears stood almost upright at this.

"You want me to do what? To. . . to have a baby?!"

"Yes," Redheart replied calmly. "Afterwards she'd be transferred to an MoP foal services caregiver. You wouldn't be expected to raise her." As Marigold balked, Redheart continued, "I know this is hard. Normally we wouldn't even attempt a

surrogacy spell like this without far more preparation and counseling, but when we reviewed your files, we found you to be an ideal candidate. And time is critical.”

Marigold looked at the file and then at Redheart. “And does this waiver disappear if I say no?” And from her tone, I knew that she’d walk if it did, even if it cost her her dream.

“No, Marigold. That was Fluttershy’s and my final decision. You don’t have to do this.” But from the look in the pale pony’s eyes, it was clear that she was desperate for Marigold to agree. “But we hope you will.”

Marigold reached up, rubbing her temples with her hooves. “You just. . . it’s going. . . ugh, don’t you realize it’s going to be pretty funny if all of a sudden I look pregnant?”

“The foal is currently the size of a chicken egg. It’ll be months before you start to show.”

“Not to mention suspicious that I was turned down and then got a waiver. Somepony’s going to raise a red flag.” She said as she chewed on her hooves nervously. “It might. . . maybe. . . foul up the mission. . .”

“Well then, you should say no.” Redheart replied in a no-nonsense tone. “I know you’re willing to face terrible risks. This is no less a risk; perhaps even more dangerous than going to the moon. But I can tell you that the mother needs this. Fluttershy needs it. And I think a great many ponies will need it too, even if they never realize it. This is your chance to save one pony.”

I’d do it, but then, I’m an idiot. Marigold sighed as she looked at Redheart. “I almost wish you’d blackmailed me. It’d be easier,” she said as she closed her eyes. “All right,” she finally agreed.

What came next were a number of papers signed in a flurry. Clearly, she wasn’t reading them all, just signing on the X’s. Then two unicorns gave her a number of injections, but I was relieved that none of them seemed to involve the horrible rainbow-colored sludge I’d seen with Gorgon’s memory. Now definitely woozy, she was led into a room decorated like a forest. There were actually living tree branches coming out of the walls! I wondered what kind of spell did that. A veil of leaves separated one half of the room from the other.

On the far side of that thin barrier, a mare sobbed inconsolably. “Shhhh. . . shhh. . . it’ll be all right...” Fluttershy said calmly over and over again.

The mare spoke in a voice thick with grief. “Y. . . y. . . you must t. . . think I’m t. . . terrible. . . I am terrible, Fluttershy. . .” she stammered around the tears.

“No. No, I don’t think that anymore. I think you’re sad, and hurting... and if I can help I will...” A blue eye peeked through the fall of leaves, “Oh. The doctor’s here. Are you absolutely sure?” Fluttershy said, and there was another sob. “Okay then. Just a little shot and we’ll get started.”

The mare’s thick voice said softly, “Fluttershy, can you take it all away? Please? I don’t... I can’t... there’s so much...”

A soft sigh. “Of course. You kept my secret. I’ll keep yours.” Be kind.

Then, a few minutes later, Fluttershy stepped through, gave Marigold one teary look, threw her forelegs around her, and hugged her with a teary sniff. “Thank you. Thank you so much.” Marigold relaxed and put her forelegs around Fluttershy, returning the gesture.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” Marigold said softly.

Fluttershy shook her head. “She couldn’t bear it if she did. And she has so much to do. So very much to do that she was willing to give up her baby.” She looked back at the leaves. “If the public found out, she’d be finished.” And if they found out about this, she’d be equally finished.

“But who...” Marigold started to say before she shook her head. “I guess it’s better if I don’t know.” Fluttershy gave a sad smile and nodded.

“Hopefully, when the war is over, she’ll be strong enough to remember and meet her again. And she’ll have the opportunity, thanks to you.” Fluttershy took her hooves. “I know a lot of ponies look up to you for going into space and all, but this makes you my hero.”

I don’t know about Marigold, but I felt damn good about that.

oooOOOooo

When I opened my eyes, I stared up at the ceiling, feeling conflicted. That was nothing new. Every single time I went into an orb, it felt like ‘Blackjack’ was getting a little more scrambled up with other ponies. Was I learning? Maturing? Or was I actually doing some kind of inherent harm to myself with these memories? Had Marigold selflessly become a surrogate, or had she feared that Fluttershy and Red-heart would rescind her waiver? And what of the mare that was behind the veil? Was she wrong to have wanted to end her pregnancy, not knowing that Fluttershy had an alternative? Who had she been? Important, obviously. A ministry mare? There was a scandalous thought. Or even one of the Princesses?! Or maybe I was thinking too grandiose, and she’d just been a mare that Fluttershy wanted to help.

I pulled my pillow over my face. “Ugh... why can’t anything be black and white!” I shouted into it. Everything had to be so... tangled. I sighed, then pulled the pillow away, looking at the moon overhead. Marigold had gotten her dream, but the scandal had destroyed her. The nameless mare had suffered terribly, but did that make it right? “Why am I the pony that gets stuck thinking about this?”

“Because you care,” Lacunae said softly beside me. I jumped so hard that I fell out of bed in a tangle of sheets. The alicorn cocked her head as she looked at me lying on the floor. “Are you alright?”

“I... wa... don’t do that!” I panted, feeling my heart thud. “I’ve had bad experiences coming out of memory orbs.” Which was probably why I had so much trouble getting into them.

“Forgive me,” she said politely. “I hope it was a pleasant memory.”

“It was... complicated.” Slowly I rose to my hooves. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting. Glory is attempting to cook. Her cooking is not going well, so I thought it best to check on you and get away from the smell.” She said as she looked at the memory orb. “So... is it worthwhile?”

“More questions,” I whined, but looked at the orb. “What do you mean?”

“I... we... we live within our memories, and the memories of each other. The Goddess directs and we act, but within her we flow from dream to dream and thought to thought. I can no longer remember which are my own and which are the dreams of the Goddess.”

I wondered if that was why I was having so much trouble entering the memory orbs. Was I becoming afraid of changing?

“Do you... or the Goddess... know anything about magic?” Lacunae actually smiled broadly, and my answer was in her smile. “Okay. Dumb question, I guess. But I’m wondering about something Sekashi told me about a zebra who put his soul in a rock. Is that possible? I always thought that a soul was... well... you.”

“It is, but there is dark and cold magic that can do such things. What you describe is a soul jar,” Lacunae said in her distant voice.

“But... I don’t understand... how does something like that work?” I walked to the door, opened it, and was greeted by the reek of burnt apples smothered in melted rubber. Gagging, I closed the door and rested my back against it. Okay... there was gross, and then there was that.

Lacunae seemed to be listening to something; her Goddess, I assumed. “Imagine if you were to take a gun. . . something special and inherent to you. . . and then you placed within it a piece of your soul. That gun would retain the resilience of your soul. Perhaps it would never jam or rust. It might always be oiled. Perhaps even more accurate than identical firearms. In extraordinary circumstances, perhaps it might fire an extra bullet or two before needing reloading. To you, it would simply be a weapon, but to anyone else it would be a weapon beyond any of its kind.”

“So what’s the catch? Because that sounds way too good to be true,” I said as I looked up at her, rubbing my runny nose with a hoof.

Lacunae smiled sadly, “The catch is that, so long as your soul is here, you can never pass into the hereafter. And there is a price paid for rending something eternal. Souls do not heal, and it would take an exceptional pony to rend their soul thus and not suffer horrifically for it.”

I closed my eyes, trying to get my brain to work right. What had Priest said earlier. . . about her healing like. . . “What if you had. . . I don’t know. . . like a healing talisman. A really powerful healing talisman. . .” like the kind that had stuffed my guts back into me in the clinic. . . “and you made it a soul jar? Could it keep you alive forever? Even if you were vaporized?”

Lacunae looked intrigued. “Perhaps. . .”

I imagined the pink egg I’d seen earlier. Just like the one I’d seen back in Fluttershy’s clinic, but with a tiny, ghostly Rampage stuffed inside. Indestructible, powered by the soul trapped within, remaking Rampage again and again. It didn’t explain what she’d done, any of her other abilities, or Glory’s theory that it wasn’t simple madness, but it did explain how she could get turned to ash and still reform.

“Is there any way to free a soul from a soul jar?”

“Ah. . .” her lips curled in a slight smile, “For that, you’d need a. . . very special book.”

“Don’t suppose you’d know where?”

“Canterlot, perhaps? In the Ministry of Image.” Something was off. Years of poker had taught me the little tells that something was awry. The hint of a smile. The tone. Everything. “We’ve been searching for one for a very long time.”

“Canterlot?” I huffed. “May as well be in the Core.”

“It may,” she replied softly. “We know of one book for certain, but there may be others. A copy was seized by the O.I.A., but whether it was turned over to the

Ministry of Image or not is unknown.” Then her eyes looked at my PipBuck, her smile widening. “But perhaps you possess a means to obtain it from the O.I.A. Hub, yes?”

I gave a snotty sniff, narrowing my eyes slightly. Maybe it was due to Caprice’s games, but I just wanted to know for sure who was pushing my buttons. “Funny. What kind of Goddess wouldn’t know?”

“WE DO NOT NEED TO DIVULGE EVERY—” I smiled.

“Gotcha,” I said with a little smirk. “Goddess. Right? Mind letting Lacunae back?”

“WE ARE THE INFINITE AND ALL-KNOWING GODDESS! WE DO NOT...” But the Goddess was now hissing her words in pain. “NOTHING CAN... WE... AR-RRRGH!” She clenched her head as she trembled. “THIS... IS... UNBEARABLE! HOW DOES SHE TOLERATE IT!?”

Right. Lacunae okay. Goddess, not okay. “You okay?”

I’m sure that somewhere, P-21 was grinding his teeth. Suddenly, she swayed and collapsed onto the bed. “That is... most disagreeable,” Lacunae said softly.

“So. I guess that the Goddess doesn’t like Hoofington.”

“Hoofington screams in my dreams. I have become used to it. I fear the Goddess had not,” suddenly her eyes widened. “And I fear she is very put out by your irreverence.”

“Yeah? Insecure gods don’t impress me,” I said as pulled out Cupcake’s memory orb. “I’ve seen Luna and Celestia. They didn’t act all-knowing. There was a hell of a lot they didn’t know. I don’t have time to waste on a Goddess that pretends to.”

Lacunae closed her eyes for a long moment, “Oh yes, very put out.”

“Are all Alicorns like that? Like you?” I asked as I put the orb away.

“No. Most are... extensions. We exist within her, and within her we act to carry out her will. But we remain ourselves. She can dictate our actions as she wishes. I am an aberration.”

“So you’re a mutant alicorn?” I asked with a little grin, but she smiled and nodded politely.

“I have been in Hoofington for many years. I am... resistant to the screams of the city. Few alicorns can survive in it for long. In some places, it is physically damaging,” she said with a little shudder. I wondered if she was referring to Enervation, or

if this was yet another horror of the Wasteland that I just hadn't encountered yet.

"I'm pretty sure she wants me to find a book for her."

"It is magic she lacks," Lacunae agreed.

I paused, frowning in thought. "Can it help Rampage?"

"I do not know," Lacunae replied softly. "We have only hints at its power."

"Right," I sighed, rubbing my muzzle. "Well. Good to know." Then I sniffed as the rubbery smell increased. There was a soft knock from the hall. I glanced at Lacunae, then opened the door.

"I made breakfast... er... lunch? Brunch," Glory said, trotting in with a tray balanced between her wings. She turned and presented something that looked like mashed Sugar Apple Bombs soaked in milk and wrapped in a fried egg...then burned to crunchy sticks of carbon. I lifted one, wrinkled my nose, and took a bite. Somehow, she'd managed to make it charred on the outside and gooey within. "I had to improvise on a lot of the ingredients."

I chewed thoughtfully for a few moments. "Not bad. Is that vinegar?" she smiled and nodded, "Huh, pretty good actually." Glory beamed; I'd probably just made her day as I slurped down the rest of the interior and then munched the crunchy shell. I levitated another at Lacunae, "Want one?"

The alicorn shied away as she asked politely, "Blackjack, by any chance are you part dragon?"

By morning I felt, if not better, at least decent. Between Priest's healing and Sekashi's tonics, I'd coughed up most of the sludge in my lungs, and my throat no longer sounded like a rusty tin can full of nails. While I had to admit that the smell was off, Glory's cooking really wasn't that bad. I thought that what she could do with the few ingredients rattling around in our packs was pretty creative; Rampage promptly told me that, if I suggested she try one, she would be aiming for me with her vomit this time.

I took stock of my armament, laying each weapon on the bed before me. The dragon claw for close in work, then Cupcake's .44 magnum revolver, after that the twelve gauge pump-action shotgun, and finally Taurus' rifle. The rest I'd traded, along with surplus ammo, for ammo for these. I'd kept Folly, of course. To be honest,

I didn't know who'd buy a gun with impossibly rare ammo. While the IF-33 would be tempting, I barely had enough ammo for a clip, and the 12 mm gun had been thrashed. With the exception of the incendiary bullets, I'd blown through most of the specialty ammo we'd picked up at Ironshod Firearms R&D. I hoped we'd come across some more, especially the explosive rounds.

The Aegis Security combat armor had pockets and holsters for most of these weapons. I had to admit, I felt better wiggling into my armor than I had in a while. While I missed my old security barding, the polymer and ceramic combat armor more than made up for it. Some spray paint and I was just Security again. Best of all, Charity had used a stencil and some white paint to mark the rearing filly on my rump. I secured the weapons, clips, and the handful of healing potions I'd acquired and made my way downstairs.

"Wow," Glory muttered, her eyes lighting up at the sight of me.

"No helmet?" P-21 asked with a little frown.

"It cuts off my vision and hearing too much, and it's uncomfortable as hell," I said as I saw that Rampage was now Charity-aged. Apparently, while Glory's own cuisine was too much for my friends, Rampage had gone out of her way to get every remotely edible bit of meat in our packs cooked up. Growing up, even with the assistance of a healing talisman, clearly used up the calories. I really preferred my Sugar Apple Bombs. Glory had 'assisted' her with some mixture of nausea, fascination, and disappointment that she wasn't allowed to indulge in any culinary experimentation.

He just looked at me like I was doing something stupid again. "What?" I asked levelly.

"Nothing. It's great armor," he said before going back to his Carrot Crisps, adding, in a mutter just loud enough for everypony to hear, "Boom. Headshot."

Yeah, like he had room to talk! He still wasn't using any barding, period! Still... maybe I should reconsider the headgear.

I looked at Lacunae, "What about you? Do you need armor?" Black mourner's lace hardly seemed like adequate protection to me.

She looked at me, or, rather, at my horn. "I will be fine."

"Are you sure? I mean, P-21 likes to be all sneaky, but you're a little too... big... for sneaking."

“I’m good, thank you,” she answered.

“Okay. Just saying. . . I’m pretty sure Celestia and Luna weren’t bulletproof, so no harm in wearing some.”

“Blackjack. I don’t need armor. I have magic,” she said with a small smile of irritation.

“Right. Of course you do. Because you’re part unicorn. You do magic. Excuse me. . .” I said as I stalked over to the kitchen, muttering sourly under my breath about big-horned alicorns and their magic. I could sing while blasting away ghouls. Could she do that?

Once everything was set, I gave the house a parting look and locked the front door, feeling slightly less secure in the knowledge that anypony with some skill and a bobby pin could open it. Oh well. Not much I could do about it now.

As a...pleasant surprise, Glory’s food didn’t taste much different on the trip back out and into a paper bag that Ditzzy kept in her wagon for just such occurrences. I found two boxes in the back, wedged myself between them, and did everything I could to avoid screaming, crying, wetting myself, or taking my mind off my striped friend. Filly Rampage looked oddly like Silver Bell’s striped sister as the two sat in the back. I kept my magic grip on the revolver. If I saw a skull appear on her butt, I was going straight into S.A.T.S.

Glory and Lacunae flew at our flanks; Ditzzy had stared at the alicorn with some nervousness, but of course she hadn’t said anything. I had to admit, the sight of the lace-draped alicorn was decidedly surreal. Then again, I was travelling with a pony with a soul thingy lodged within her and a hallucination that liked cards, on my way to. . . liberate. . . my stable. Reality was now a lot more subjective.

Then P-21 peeked out the back with a small frown. Why didn’t he freak out at the sky? “Blackjack. . .”

“Urgh. . .” I grunted in reply.

“What is that?” he asked as he peered through his binoculars.

I carefully moved to the back, looking at the clouds above and the ground way way below. “What is what?” I asked, and then frowned as I spotted a black speck behind us. “What is that?” I lifted Taurus’s rifle and sighted through the scope.

At first, I thought it was the Enclave. Maybe Dusk was coming to finish off Glory?

But there was something off about how it moved, and I couldn't see any mounted weapons. Its wings were as big as Lacunae's, and it was gaining on us... fast. Really fast!

"Behind us!" I shouted as the creature rolled faster than I could follow with the scope. "Ditzy! Get us on the ground," I yelled as it swept over us. I heard the buzz of Glory's beam weapons crackle as she shot at it.

My stomach rose in my throat as every terrifying nightmare I had about falling rose in my chest. Ditzy was getting us on the ground by the fastest means possible: straight down! As she dove, I saw the flash of beam guns and flickers of lightning from our airborne friends. After that, I was just holding tight as half of Ditzy's wares battered P-21 and myself. Rampage laughed in delight, and even Silver Bell appeared more thrilled and less scared by the drop.

Just before we hit, Ditzy flattened out, flying over the rubble strewn fields of Miramare. The wagon suddenly lurched to the side and the wagon cover ripped, four sets of brown claws tearing open the canopy. Something growled overhead, and I wasted no time thrusting Taurus' rifle upright and blasting away blindly. With a snarl, it released the wagon, and Ditzy was able to pull up over the main building. "Get ready to jump out!" I yelled.

The wagon came to a stop and the three of us spilled out. I could have kissed the ground... if we weren't facing some kind of clawed, winged, flying thing trying to kill us. It wasn't in sight, but I doubted that would last.

"Get the door open, quickly!" I said as I nodded at the door to the locker room. "We gotta get out of sight!" I looked over at the ghoulish pegasus. "Best get out of here. It'll be after us." And oh, how I hoped that was true and that this wasn't some sort of ridiculously aggressive predator with a taste for ghoulish flesh. "Thanks Ditzy! I owe you a new canopy."

She grinned and shrugged, then winked a cloudy eye at me and took off. I made sure to fire a few rounds at anything that might be a bat-winged thing. To my relief, I didn't see anything go after the damaged wagon.

Rampage looked at the duffle bag between my shoulders that held her spiked armor. "I hate being little. How am I supposed to kick tail like this?" She said as she gestured at herself.

"You'll find a way. I have no doubt about that," I assured her. Behind us, the door clicked open. "Quick, inside!" If we were fighting something that flew, the lower the

roof, the better. We disappeared inside just as the winged thing flashed over us. Whatever this thing was, it was fast. Really damn fast!

I'd just closed the door when an oozing brown stinger punched right through the heavy metal. "Ah!" I shouted as I reeled back, blasting at the appendage. It jerked free with a metallic squeal, leaving a hoof-sized hole.

A bright blue eye peeked through and then narrowed. "Peek a boo." a low feminine voice growled.

"Peek a this," I muttered as I fired the rifle, but the eye jerked away with a laugh. "Well, at least it's a happy monster."

"Great. So you won't be adopting it, then?" P-21 asked as he took a magic grenade and carefully positioned it at the base of the door so that anypony opening it would flick the stem off the weapon. We quickly moved further into the locker rooms. It wasn't trying to come in through the doors. Maybe it was going to enter through the second floor to flush us out?

"Well, you never know. It could have some horribly tragic sob story," I said as I rushed to the Marauders' lockers. Actually, given my track record with these kinds of things, it was probably likely. I selected Doof's locker and typed 'Momma.'

There were a stack of papers, a memory orb... of course there was a memory orb... and some large boxes of ammo. In the back was a... gun? It was a short tube about two feet long, with a mouth grip stock. Really, it resembled the biggest single-shot gun I'd ever seen before. A heart was carved in the stock with the words 'Twist + Doof', and somepony had painted 'Persuasion' on the barrel.

No time for reading, and certainly no time for a memory orb. I dumped them into my bag and then turned the gun over. It sure wasn't something I'd seen in any Ironshod Firearms catalogue. "What the heck is this?" I asked with a frown. "It's sure no Ironpony."

"What's what?" P-21 asked, and I showed it to him. "Oh! It's a grenade rifle."

"Great. Enjoy," I said as I pushed the tube into his hooves.

His eyes went round. "Blackjack! It's a gun."

"It's a grenade gun!" I countered. "You do grenades. So logically you should be fine with it."

His eyes went even rounder. "There's nothing logical about that!"

I sighed and slid him the ammo. “Look. I trust you. Trust yourself and ante up. This isn’t some gun you point and shoot, right?” He frowned in worry but nodded. “Gotta figure out angles and delays and stuff?” He nodded again and I tapped his forehead. “Then it is right up your alley, egghead.” He sure didn’t look happy about it, but he took the weapon and the grenades and slipped them into his saddlebags. And if I was wrong and he was feeling ‘shoot Blackjack’-y, at least it’d be quick.

Now there was just the question of how we would connect with Glory and Lacunae. Unless miss big purple horn had a magical location spell, and I wouldn’t put it past her if she did, we’d have to go out or they’d have to come in. If I were the flier, I wouldn’t want to be stuck inside, so I guessed she was somewhere on the roof waiting for us to come out the second story.

“We can get out through the crater,” I muttered. “But we need to tell Glory so they don’t come in and have us chasing each other in circles.”

He frowned, then dug through his bag and scribbled a word on a piece of garbage. ‘Reds’. “Hook it onto the hole on the door and let’s go.” He said as he carefully unhinged the gun and slid a grenade into it. I did as he asked. Unless the monster was standing right outside, the pair would see it when they checked the door.

“Why Reds?” Rampage asked.

“It’s the official term for measuring the intensity of magical spell radiation.” He explained as he looked back at us. “So unless that monster has cracked open a copy of Equestria Scientifica or a Big Book of Arcane Science— ACK!” I swept him up in my hooves and gave him a hug. “Leggo! I got a grenade! A whole lot of grenades! Blackjack!”

“I got a smart pony,” I said with a grin to Rampage.

In the main hall, I kept my eyes up. Vermin had gotten in: huge bloated mice that weren’t much more threatening than radroaches but still packed a wicked bite. I still wished the E.F.S. would give me a scale of bad guys-ness, but the bars were just red or blue. I had to watch for something a bit more substantial.

I hadn’t realized that something substantial was watching for us.

As we made for the stairs down to operations, I heard the low growl rumble through the halls. My mane did the pony pokey as we looked at all the open doors. Was it that bar by the barracks? The gift shop? Maybe somewhere above? Of course not.

I'd just turned the corner to go down the stairs into operations when a great leonine shape pounced up at me. Its mangy hide was covered in bald patches and sores, but that did little to detract from its crushing weight or sharp fangs and claws. . . and wings... and stinger?! What the fuck, Wasteland? This had to be one of Chimera's critters, right? How else do you stick a lion, bat, and scorpion together?

Knocked on my back, I had no choice but to keep rolling. If it pinned me, I'd be dead. Fortunately, it had to hop to the top of the stairs first, and so I found my footing and levitated the shotgun in my white magical grip just as it started a second pounce. S.A.T.S. lined up three blasts to its head. Three blasts stripped great bloody swaths away from its face and shoulders.

Didn't kill it. I hopped away, avoiding a strike by its stinger tail as I fired and moved away. Its claws scraped horribly on my barding, and I was very glad all I'd face was a bruise. . . for the moment.

"Another one!" P-21 shouted around the mouth grip of Persuasion as he pointed it towards the second floor. The weapon made a curious 'Thump' noise and sent the grenade up to the second floor, where another of these monsters was starting down after us. The explosion took off the creature's legs. Unfortunately, there were more behind it, and they were far more wary.

Rampage tugged at the drawstrings of my duffel bag where it had fallen. "Blackjack! Why'd you use knots? I need my gear!"

"A little busy!" I yelled as I kept jumping and moving as quickly as I can.

"Come on! I can't rampage like this! I need my ripper! Hoofclaws! Something!" I sent my dragon claw skittering across the floor towards her. "Thanks!" she said happily and started to saw through the knots.

"Rampage!" I yelled in exasperation. P-21 smirked – yes, he was actually smirking – as he fired another grenade to the top of the stairs.

She blinked, looked crosseyed down at the weapon in her jaws, and then rolled her eyes. She let out a fillyish squeal as she raced to the monster and hugged its back leg with all her hooves. Her head jerked back and forth as she sliced into the thick tendons behind its knee. It let out a roar as it staggered, and I was able to move away from it and reload with slugs.

The monster then swung its tail and speared Rampage through the side. She twisted, grabbing the scorpion stinger in her hooves and started to slice through that instead as blood foamed out around the dragon claw. She simply continued to

hold tight and slashed away at the stinger tail. The monster, seemingly confused by the squirming filly's refusal to die, cut to the chase and pulled her towards its maw.

Unfortunately for it, that meant taking its eyes off me. I pressed the barrel of the shotgun against its head and took off half its skull. As it spasmed and flopped, Rampage was thrown free. One last shot and it went still. "We're running some more."

"Always with the running," P-21 muttered as he limped down the stairs. Rampage wasn't walking much better as her mouth foamed, but the hole in her side was healing with pink light. Once we got downstairs, I slammed with door behind us.

I noticed Rampage was already intact, but still dripping white foam from her lips. "You okay?" Not the best question to ask her, but still.

"Poisoned," was all she rasped. I pulled out one of the antivenoms Glory'd made for Radscorpion stings and poured it down her throat. At once, she gagged and clutched her throat, falling over.

"Rampage?" I asked in alarm, dropping beside her. Had I somehow made it worse? "That... tastes... disgusting..." she coughed.

I rolled my eyes and licked the end of the bottle. Okay, so it was a little bitter. "Baby."

"I am not a baby. I'm older than both of you combined," she said as she pointed at me with a scowl, "You've just got a... a... a mutant tongue! That's what!"

"Hey, could we focus—" P-21 started to say as Rampage charged at me. I stuck out a hoof and pushed against her forehead; even small, she nearly shoved me off my feet.

"Oh yeah? Better check," I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

Rampage blinked, then tackled me with a roar. It wasn't nearly as effective as it would have been if she was her normal size. "Oh yeah! Really mutated! Just like those bruises!" She said as she swung her hooves at me.

"Awww, somepony needs her nap. She's all cranky!"

"Ladies!" P-21 shouted, making us both look at him. "Imminent mortal peril here! Chimera monsters hunting us down and you... you two are... uuugh!" He sat down, pulling his mane before he jabbed a hoof at both of us. "Do not make me put you in corners! Now, are we going, or do you two want to keep acting like two-year-old foals?"

We both stared at him a moment, then pointed at each other in unison and said in chorus, “She started it.”

Travelling through the operation center gave me a sense of Déjà vu. I’d fed Minty Fresh to a Raider trying to get info out of him. Glory... I was really glad that Glory wasn’t down here again.

P-21 had strung a wire across the bottom of the stairs and up overhead, then had me tie three frag grenade by their stems. Jerk the wire, grenades pop free... boy I was glad he was on our side.

“Hey,” Dealer muttered from a dark doorway. “Got a second?”

“Not right now,” I muttered.

P-21 looked at me, “Blackjack?”

Great. Now I was starting to act crazy. Crazier anyway. “Just... go away. I’m not crazy anymore and I don’t need you creeping me out. Okay? I’ve got monsters to deal with, and Rampage and Stable 99 and... you know what? This relationship just isn’t working out. It’s not you. It’s me. Okay. So just go away and stop bugging me.” I smiled as pleasantly to the old pale pony as I could, then saw the pair staring at me.

P-21 repeated himself in a far more unsettled tone, “Blackjack... who are you talking to?”

“No pony! Okay. I’m just... ah...” I sat down hard and blurted, “Sometimes I see this pale horse who has a real fetish for cards and he likes being all cryptic and mysterious and I think he’s some crazy part of my brain but I’m not crazy anymore so I don’t need to talk to him so he just needs to go away...” I took a deep breath, glaring at the old buck. “Right now!”

The old buck just nudged his hat back, looking at me with a bemused smile.

“Okay!” Rampage said brightly, grinning at P-21. “Suddenly my problems don’t seem quite so bad!”

“You killed Thorn,” he replied bluntly, taking away her grin as he sat next to me. “This been going on for a while?”

“Since Glory got branded,” I admitted. “I mean... I kinda had hints before then, but it was after she got branded that he started showing up for chats.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” He asked in a slightly hurt tone.

“Well. I mean. . . you were just getting over wanting to kill me. . . you are over that, right?” His eyebrows arched as he looked at me coolly. “Okay. . . mostly over that. Anyway, Glory was hurt, I felt completely useless. . . then we fought Deus and the Zodiacs and there were all the problems in Flank and. . . I just wanted to seem like I had it together. Okay? That I could tough it out.”

He just shook his head. “Blackjack, you’re an idiot. You sing while chopping up ghouls. You befriend any monster than seems the slightest bit depressed. You seem to make enemies with shocking regularity. And you think that seeing things that aren’t there is too much? I figured you were crazy when you stopped Daisy from bashing my head in, and nothing I’ve seen has changed that much.” He nudged my shoulder with his hoof. “You might be one twiggled mare, but you’re also a good pony and a good friend.”

Rampage looked from me to P-21, and then asked, “Um. . . are you two gonna kiss or what?”

The Dealer just smiled and chuckled softly, shaking his head. Immediately, we both went bright red. P-21 stammered and pointed at me, “Kiss? Her? She’s a mare!” Rampage broke into giggles as P-21 scowled, “I don’t even like her like that. . . really! I have grenades, you know!”

I just smiled and shook my head, then stepped past the Dealer into the room. The office had once been somepony’s living quarters, but clearly the Enclave had cleaned house before abandoning Miramare. There hadn’t been much in here to begin with. Just a terminal I hadn’t even bothered to try accessing. Locks were one thing, but I had no clue how to—

I might not, but. . . “P-21! I need you! Right now!” I shouted. Rampage’s giggles exploded into peals of laughter.

He stepped in with a look promising to find some way to murder a certain striped pony. “It’s not for sex or a joke,” I added quickly. I stepped to the terminal. “Can you access this?”

His scowl disappeared. “Maybe. Let me see.” He hobbled in front of it. “Ugh. . . huge password. It better not be mares setting up more sex dates.” Rampage walked in, rubbing tears of mirth from her cheeks. He started his magic as I tapped my left hoof on the top of the monitor. Then he hit a key and the terminal let out a beep. “Whoa. . . I’m in on the third try! That was lucky,” he said, pleased at the turn of

events.

Yeah... luck. I looked over his shoulder. "And... so much for luck. Most of the files were auto deleted. Looks like... just garbage here." Then he moved the cursor over one entry. "Wait, here's one."

To: Minty Fresh

From: Lighthooves

Nice job getting that confession. I knew that Dashite was just itching to tell us her true contempt for the Enclave. Morning Glory's whole family is no better, really. It's in their blood. Can you believe she'd accuse us of misconduct? Where is her loyalty? Her sense of duty? Her honor? Ah, well, as long as she has that surfacer terrorist assisting her, there's not much we can do. Since she's insisted we brand her, I suppose that's what we'll have to do. Such a pity. We were making some real progress investigating potential cures for the surface, but she's mucked up the whole operation. Now she's probably run off to Flank or Megamart. I suppose we'll have to hope Yellow River offers better fruit. Get ready to relocate.

I wanted to shoot somepony. Actually, I'd already wanted to shoot him, but this moved him back to the top of the list. But, oddly, despite my horn twitching with the need to put a hole in the screen, something held me back. "Something's wrong," I muttered. "Back out. All the way out." He frowned and did so. I looked at the screen and selected the first password option from the screen of gobbledygook. Then the second. Then the third.

'Exact match.' I repeated it two more times, and every time the third guess brought up the password, no matter how I put in the password. "That bastard," I muttered.

"I would like to buy a clue, please? Something in a size four," Rampage said as she peeked up between my legs.

"This is why Dusk tried to kill Glory. This wasn't for me. This was to put Dusk on Glory's trail." And if she'd been a little more lucky with her novasurge shots, she would have killed her right in front of us. I read the message again and tapped the screen. "Yellow River. That's for me."

"Yellow River? What's Yellow River?" P-21 asked in confusion.

"Well, if you ever seen me drink a whole lot of Sparkle-Cola all at once—" Rampage began with a little smirk.

"I don't know, but he wants me to go there. A trap. A set up? Something," I gritted

my teeth. I had to go. It was the only lead I had for helping Glory at the moment. "He's playing me." Like the Goddess.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Play along. Then I'll play rough and dirty when the time comes for it. Find something to hang him with. And if all that fails, feed him to a hungry raider. Alive," I muttered.

"Yeah, right. Like anypony would do that. . ." P-21 began, and then our eyes met. His grin slowly slid away as he muttered sheepishly, "Oh. Damn. Awkward." A loud explosion echoed through the operations hallway, followed immediately by a bestial roar of pain. "Saved by the monster," P-21 muttered. "Blackjack, if there's a way out, now's the time."

I agreed, giving the Dealer a cold glare. . . not that it mattered. He wasn't really there anyway; I just hated that somewhat disingenuous look of innocence he wore. We made our way to the storage utility that had been blown out. Both of us took a pill of Rad-X, and I held one out to Rampage. She just snorted and slid down into the hole in the concrete pipes in the floor. My PipBuck immediately began to spike, the readout showing a blue pony turning green and then yellow as the rads increased. I hoped this wasn't going to be a long tunnel, or the whole thing would be moot.

Thankfully, we were able to reach the open pipes at the base of the crater, and sure enough, there was Lacunae, waiting patiently. Was it just me, or did she look even. . . well. . . more alicorny? Her coat glistened and her horn seemed to shimmer with potency. Radiation did an alicorn good, apparently. "Good. You made it. I was about to come in after you. We must be quiet. Glory is nearby."

I took a look around and my jaw dropped. That was a fuckton of red bars! I passed P-21 some Rad-Away, then gulped down some myself (Not even getting to savor the sharp orangy flavor!) before the four of us crawled up out of the crater to where an armored vehicle lay on its side. Glory sipped on a packet as well, looking at me nervously. "Oh, good. You made it out," she said with clear relief. "We're surrounded by manticores."

"Mantawhats?" I muttered as we crouched in the hull. Everywhere I looked, there were more of the lion/bat/scorpion hybrids. "How do you know what they are?"

"Manticores are a constant threat in the Wasteland, though they're usually not so well organized." I'd thought for sure that they had to be something from Project

Chimera, but apparently some abominations the Wasteland just whipped up on its own. “I think that she’s controlling them somehow.”

“She who?” I asked as I looked through P-21’s binoculars.

Oh... she her. Now THIS had to be something from Chimera. The tawny pony prowled back and forth on the roof of the main building. Her legs ended in razor-sharp claws rather than hooves, and the wings on her back were leathery instead of feathery. The scorpion tail she possessed snapped and stabbed at the manticores that didn’t shy out of her way quickly enough, and with her lips parted I could see the fangs she possessed. As disturbing as she was, it wasn’t as bad as the flock of manticores lounging around the airbase. I couldn’t see how we were going to get a hundred feet without one of them spotting us.

And the radiation was still building up in us.

“Okay. We need to get the heck out of here.” I said as I looked at the twisted wreckage concealing us. Rampage was examining a heap of bones in some frayed and charred uniforms, while P-21 seemed to be checking his grenades and Glory took another Rad-X.

“Would you like to return to Chapel?” Lacunae asked casually.

“Well... yeah. That’d be great, but I don’t know how we’re going to get there without all of them piling on us.” I said and then frowned. “Are you telling me you can return all of us to Chapel? That’s miles away!”

She took a long, slow, luxurious breath as she looked at the glowing crater. “Right now? Most certainly.”

“Right.” Ten or fifteen more minutes here and it’d be moot. I trotted over to Rampage, who seemed to be staring down at the bones with a wistful look. “Come on, Rampage. We’re leaving.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” She said as she crawled through the gutted vehicle. For a moment, I almost joined her, but then I moved to look down at the same pile of bones. This far into the transport, the body was a little more intact. Nothing valuable, of course. Just rotten, scorched uniform, two tin ID tags hanging around her neck, the junk of two centuries ago. Slowly, I took a closer look at the name stamped in the tin.

‘Twist.’

I stared at another of Macintosh’s Marauders. Slowly, I bent down and nudged the

brittle bones. Her hooves had pinched something between them, bundling them in the rags of her uniform. With care, I liberated the objects from her rags.

The pictures were all partially burned, discolored, or waterstained. There were little mouthwritten notes on the bottoms, smeared but still barely legible. Twist on a playground next to a foal so alike that only Twist's glasses really set them apart. Weren't we alike back then, Apple Bloom?

Twist standing in a candy shop with a sign that read 'Peppermint' under two crossed candy canes. Too bad about my candy shop, huh?

Twist standing proudly amid a line of recruits with a buzzed mane, the youngest and smallest but looking eager to fight. Big Macintosh loomed beside her, giving her a brotherly glance. Look at my mane! It's so short!

An older and more mature Apple Bloom posing for a picture in front of a stable door marked with an immense number 2. Looking good, Apple Bloom. Looking really good.

Twist putting Big Macintosh in a hooflock as the rest of the Marauders cheer and laugh at the sight. Psalm smiling in reserved amusement, Stonewing grinning as Jetstream leans against him. Vanity shaking his head with a smile. Even Doof having a great time.

Then one of the Marauders all gathered together in Prance. Her grin around the peppermint stick goes from ear to ear. My family.

The next picture was of Twist and three red-marked zebras. As sad as she looked, they appeared... haggard, yet also proud. She's hoofbumping the leader. Last of the Proditors.

All but one of the Marauders standing in grim lines one one side of a casket, the ministry mares on the other. Applejack resting her head upon the corner of the coffin as Twilight Sparkle holds her shoulders. Applesnack's eyes looking at the orange mare past Celestia giving a eulogy. I had never seen such a look of repressed pain on a buck's face before. Twist just looks... lost.

One of her in the hospital, looking hurt, but Vanity, Echo, and Applesnack are with her. Three out of eight friends; her eyes show far more pain than joy.

She wasn't smiling in the last picture. Oh, her lips were curled at the edges, but there was no mirth in her eyes as she stood alone on a tank, sergeant stripes on her uniform. She had the eyes of a ghoul: flat and lifeless and eager to die.

And so she had.

There was one last picture that had fallen away, and I almost missed it. I recognized the young Apple Bloom as almost a spitting image of Applebot. I didn't know who the orange pegasus or the unicorn with the purple mane were. They seemed to be in the middle of a fight in a garden, surrounded by statues, as Twist looked on with a sad smile. The worst day of my life was when I got my cutie mark, and you didn't.

I pressed the pictures back between her hooves as I heard the others call out a warning and bent my nose to nuzzle her skull. I prayed that she'd finally found rest at last. With one regretful look back, I returned to the others. There was a brilliant flash of purple light, and the world disappeared.

Okay. I admit that I was a little frustrated. I had another monsterpony after me with a small army of flying monsters. I had no doubt, as lay there in the post office, sucking down my third Rad-Away, that she was probably already looking for us.

Worse. . . if she found out we were in Chapel. . .

"Why so gloomy?" Adagio asked lazily as the quartet collected around me. "If it's about Thorn, it happens. Sometimes a colt won't even stay an hour before they take the walk."

I gave a little smile to the blue colt. "Thanks, but it's not that. It's just that I need to travel way up north, but it's become a lot more complicated."

P-21 nodded, "Yeah." He said as he looked at a crude map Priest had drawn for us. "We'd have to travel all the way south to Flank, head into the hills to cross the river upstream of the dams, north through Society territory, past the Collegiate ponies in Hoofington U, past all the Enclave at the skyport OR sneak past Paradise, get past the Steel Rangers, and cross the river again near the coast way up north." It was going to take weeks. Lacunae wasn't familiar enough with anywhere up north to teleport to it, even if it was inside her range.

"So why don't you just take the boat?" Medley asked, giving us a look that questioned our intelligence. P-21 and I stared at each other; in all our time in Chapel, nopony had ever uttered the syllable 'boat' in our hearing.

"There's a boat?" P-21 asked sharply.

She rolled her eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'. 'Course there's a boat," the

chartreuse unicorn filly said. “The Seahorse goes up and down the river all the time. Her captain’s a bit off, you know, but she’s the only one brave enough to risk it.”

I looked at her skeptically, and then took out the Hoofington Edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. After flipping through a bit, I found an entry on the Hoofington River.

No visit to the Hoofington area is complete without spotting the Hoofington River. The largest river in all of Equestria in our times, the Hoofington river runs from far to the south all the way north to the sea. Its progress is only interrupted by the dams, south of the city, that continue to provide power to the region to this day!

Now, you might be tempted to stop and take a swim, or, if it’s a rare dry day, take a drink. Take my advice and don’t. Upstream contamination has made all of the water mildly radioactive and tainted. That’s lead radgators and river serpents of prodigious size and appetite to spawn. Even if none of that gets you, the river is choked with debris and its current is powerful. All the rain goes somewhere, ponies.

For those folks desperate to travel along the river course, there are always a few brave souls willing to make the trip for caps. The most successful ferry is the Seahorse, which is still operating even after years on the water. The passenger is recommended to bring plenty of caps for the trip. However, the captain is quite. . . erratic in his pricing.

Allegro nodded, “Yeah, the captain is one rough, tough, twigged pony, but they’re always good for getting us up and down the river. Doesn’t deal in slaves, and so as long as your caps are good, the captain’s usually fair. Crazy, but fair.”

I looked at P-21, beginning to see a pattern. He grunted sourly, looking at me. “Another unstable pony. Wonder if he’s as twigged as you are.”

“What?” I said defensively to the snickers of the four. Giving P-21 a slightly incensed look, I asked Allegro, “So, when does the boat stop by Chapel?”

“She’s here now,” the red colt said with a grin.

“Now? As in, right now right now?” P-21 asked as he and I looked at each other.

“Yup! She’s tied up under the bridge. Charity’s doing her trading now.” With one last look at each other, we turned and raced to the door.

I really didn’t know what I expected when I thought of the word ‘boat’. Could it carry five of us? Would it be safe? Fast? Would Sanguine anticipate us taking it? Would

we have the caps the captain wanted?

P-21 found the concrete steps that lead to a crumbling concrete slip underneath the bridge. Panting, we picked our way underneath and saw... the hunk of junk that looked as if it should be lying under the river instead of floating atop it. Okay, maybe that wasn't fair. What did I know about boats? I just didn't think that they should look so... rusty.

It was almost as long as the bridge overhead was wide; maybe seventy or eighty feet? The hull had been patched and painted so many times that it was hard for me to figure out what its original color was. It was made of wood with metal sheeting hammered over the top; I knew this because of all the places where the metal sheeting was no longer there. At the front of the boat was a small enclosed turret with two machine guns pointing out.

It looked as if there were seven or eight crew, and the biggest buck of all was sitting at a card table staring at Charity with his forehooves crossed. With his scruffy black beard, anchor cutie mark, and scarred hide, I guessed he was the captain. Charity stared back undaunted, as if trying to will him to part with his caps. "You'd better wait here," P-21 said. "I'll see if I can get us a ride."

"Great. Waiting," I muttered as I sat with a grumpy frown as he trotted down and started trying to break into the staring contest. He might as well have been talking to a wall for all the notice he got.

"Tell me about it," said a mare beside the river. "So boring just waiting for them. They've been at this for hours." The turquoise unicorn mare had a mane so filthy and chopped that I wasn't sure if it was blue, gray, or some mottled mix of the two. She had on a battered black cap complete with skull and crossbones, like from a story book. A leather eyepatch covered her left eye. She swirled an amber drink in a bottle. "Want some? It's rum... or grog... one of the two." She glared at the contents suspiciously. "Sneaky little drink..."

"Sure," I replied as I joined the inebriated mare, plopping down beside her and taking a swig. Rum (or grog, maybe), I discovered, was a bit sweeter than my preferred intoxicant. "That's not bad."

She offered her hoof. "Thrush."

"Blackjack." I bumped it with my own.

She eyed my security barding, leaning back and squinting as she fought to focus her gaze. "Security... Security... where have I heard that before?" She suddenly

pointed the bottle at me with a gasp, “You’re that... that... mare with the bounty, ain’t ‘cha?” I felt my mane start to prickle, but then she grinned. “Well, good for you. I always said that if you’re doin’ something good enough for somepony to pay to want you dead, then ya must be doing it well.”

“So, you’re not looking to collect?”

She took another pull off the bottle and then burped. “Who, me? Collect for Usury? HA! Fuck Usury! Fuck her right up her ass with an anchor! Bitch wanted me to transport slaves for her.” She scowled at me. “Do you know what kind of mess slaves make? I mean really? Smell lasts for... ev... er...” she made an annoyed face, “So I told her to go fuck herself, and everypony in Paradise, and I think Equestria too while I was at it.” I just grinned as she frowned and rubbed her chin, “I think I might have shot her too. Shot at her... one of the two.”

“Really?” I said with a chuckle.

“Well I was drunk at the time, and I don’t quite think she understood all the implications therein. She took it all personal-like. Put a ten thousand cap bounty on my noggin. I don’t think she realized most bounty hunters can’t swim,” the turquoise mare muttered as she upended the bottle into her wide open mouth. She swallowed, then blinked and stared into the bottle. “Gone... why is it always gone? A great tragedy strikes the wasteland once again.” She looked at me through the bottom, “Oooh, wavy.”

I smirked. I had been waiting for a special occasion to enjoy it. This would do. I floated out a bottle of Wild Pegasus that Glory had bought. “Security to the rescue,” I said with a little grin. I might not be able to save ponies who needed it, but I could at least get somepony drunk who’d appreciate it.

An hour later, I had a nice warm glow in my stomach that gave rise to a pleasant buzz spreading throughout my body. “So, what’s your story, Thrush?”

“Who? Me? Pffft. Story? I’m lucky if I got a limerick.” She cleared her throat. “There once was a pony named Thrush, her mane was like a dirty old brush. But her daddy was captain and when his luck was cashed in, on his boat she’d have a serious crush.” She said as she balanced the bottle of Wild Pegasus on the end of her horn. Since she had her horn stuck in the bottle, it wasn’t that impressive.

“No second verse?”

“Same as the first!” she said with gusto, and I laughed even though it made no sense to me at all. “I’ve been steering the Seahorse all around Equestria. My

daddy showed me all the neat little hidey holes and hazards to avoid. Normally I ply from Ironmare to Friendship City, but I tuck up river to see what the Eggheads or Crusaders have scavenged up every now and then. Damn skilled fillies and colts.” She sighed as she tilted her head left and right, making the bottle rock on her horn. “Most boats are lucky to last a year on the water. I’ve lasted three.” She looked at the dinged-up rustbucket with a look of love. “Saved my life, being captain. Having some control. . .”

Somehow, I doubted that there was nothing more to her than just five lives of verse. “So. . . wait? You’re the captain?” I asked in confusion, and then I gestured at the scruffy looking buck with the thick beard. “Then who’s he?”

“Him? Tarboots? He’s our quartermaster. He tells me where to go to make money and I go there. It’s not like I understand any of this business stuff. I just turn the wheel that points the Seahorse in the right direction and try not to get sunk. Hasn’t happened yet.” She let out a long, low belch, then smirked at me. “What? I’ve got biggest hat. That makes me captain.”

“I can’t argue with logic like that,” I said with a laugh.

“And you? How the heck does a mare go around with a big ‘Security’ on her barding, shooting up the countryside?”

I took a deep breath as I balanced the rum bottle on my horn. . . okay. . . stuck my horn in the rum bottle. Ta-daa! “Well damn, if you’re a limerick. . .” I coughed and cleared my throat. “Blackjack steps outside. She tries to do good and help. Poor Equestria.” Never underestimate the powers of inebriation for inspiration! “Anyway, now I’m trying to get way north. Going home actually.” I said as I stretched over and showed her my PipBuck’s navigation map. “See? Stable 99. Way up top there.”

“Oh. . . up there huh? Raider territory these days. Didn’t know there was a stable up there,” she said as she rubbed her nose. “Well, I can drop you off here at Boardwalk. Just a quick stroll to your stable, then.” She then looked at me skeptically. “Question is. . . can you follow the rules?”

“Probably. Depends on the rules,” I said cautiously.

“One. . . and this is a big one. . . listen to the motherfucking captain.” She lifted her hooves in frustration. “I cannot tell you how vital rule number one is. I tell you to shoot, you shoot. I tell you to shut up, shut up. I tell you to hide, then you hide. I tell you to swim for your life, then you swim for your life. ‘Cause otherwise somepony is gonna shoot you. Probably me.”

“Sometimes it feels like the day’s not started without somepony shooting Security,” I said with a resigned sigh.

“Price of virtue,” she said with a grin before continuing. “Two. Stay on the boat. You hop off for any reason and we gotta burn power to pick you up. Lots of places there isn’t anywhere to pull in. You got fliers?” I nodded and she looked curious. “Then they really have to stay in. If they take off, they’ll get thirty or forty feet before the city picks them off.”

“The city doesn’t shoot things in the river?” I asked curiously.

“Doesn’t have to.” She pointed a hoof at where the city wall met the river. A curtain of white rolled along it. “See all that rough water? It’s all busted up concrete and steel scrap. Besides, that close you’ve got ten minutes before the enervation sucks you dry.”

“So no flying. I’ll truss them up like a turkey myself if I have to,” I said with a nod, wondering just how one tied up an alicorn. Politely, I guessed. Tying up Glory... that lead into some downright disturbing neighborhoods of thought.

“Third, you pay for your own gas. That means spark batteries, gem cartridges, even raw gemstones. If you can’t swing that, then you get to point your horn into a flux converter and channel till it falls off. And trust me, it’ll feel like it if you do.”

“Right,” I said with a nod, watching as P-21 and the large gray Tarboots strolled up. “Hey, P-21.”

“Hey, Blackjack. I got us a deal with Captain Tarboots here and—“ He stared at me. What? Did I have something on my face?

The gray pony interrupted him. “Captain Thrush? Got a request for five passengers...” He broke off with a sigh. “Captain?” The Turquoise mare blinked at him and he coughed. “Captain... you have a bottle stuck on your horn again.”

She looked at him coolly and said with as much dignity as she could muster, “I knew that. I did. Ahem. One moment.” She rose to her hooves, her magic carefully unscrewing the bottle from her horn. “Excellent observation, Master Tarboots... BUT... I’m afraid you’ll have to tell this adorable little guy that I have already agreed to provide passage to this filly and her friends.” The scarred buck opened his mouth and she raised a hoof. “No no, Master Tarboots! This is an adventure!”

I looked at her with a wide grin that was mirrored by the Turquoise unicorn and bumped hooves against hers. “You bet. I’ll get every spark battery I can, even if I

have to tie Charity up in a sack to do it.” Okay, maybe I wouldn’t go that far. Maybe I’d pay for them and THEN tie her up in the sack.

The bucks stared on in shock as they looked from one of us to the other. “Sweet Celestia,” muttered the grizzled buck as P-21 set down on his rump with a groan.

“There’s two of them. There’s two...” the blue buck moaned in despair. “Celestia save us all...”

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk added: Ferocious Loyalty – When you drop below 50% HP, companions gain DT.

21. Waterfall

“I shall save you! Show yourselves, you curs! Ha! There you are, you mangy mutts.”

It actually seemed like the Wasteland, for once, was throwing me a carrot. Sure, we’d lost the whole morning going to Miramare only to have to teleport back to evade another monsterpony, but then we’d discovered an alternate route. One that might get us past without having to worry about flying death... or at least not worry so much. And I’d have somepony to get drunk with!

Of course, we’d need spark... magic-y... stuff... to make the boat run.

“Charity!” I cried as I stormed into the post office. The yellow filly didn’t bother looking up from the stack of boxes next to her.

“No time to deal with you now, Blackjack. I’ve got to double-check this stuff and make sure Tarboots didn’t swap me those mines for a few boxes of gravel,” she said sourly around a pen as she scribbled on a notepad.

I leapt over the counter in a clear violation of every rule of the Crusaders and seized Charity’s shoulders with my forehooves. “Charity, I need spark batteries and magic cartridges! Now! Or gemstones! I need them right now. Please!”

Her eyes lit up and rolled thoughtfully, and with a flip of her head she spat out her pen and sent it spinning through the air to land neatly behind her ear. “Well, adding in processing costs and the Getting On My Nerves Tax... I figger I could sell ‘em for...”

“And we’re broke,” I added. Paying Ditzzy and trading for what we’d needed had sapped most of our caps. I grinned as widely as I could and tried to ignore the feeling of sweat running down the back of my barding.

Her smile disappeared. “Get out,” she declared imperiously. She flicked the pen from behind her ear, caught it in her mouth, and resumed checking her list.

I fell to my knees. “Please, Charity! Please! Without the boat, we’ll have to walk, if we walk the monsterpony will find us, if she finds us then I’ll feel sorry for her before I kill her, and if I do that then I’ll feel guilty, and if I feel guilty then I’ll whine! Please don’t make me whine!” I begged as several Crusaders peeked over the counter to watch in amazement.

“I... you... what are ya...” she sputtered as I fell on my face and hugged her hoof.

“Please Charity! Please please pretty please pleasepleaseplease PLU. . . LEEEEZZZEEE!!!!”
I wailed as I kicked my back hooves.

“All right!” she yelled down at me, yanking her hoof free of my embrace as she blushed. “I can spare one!” My eyes grew large. “Erm. . . two?” Tears ran down my cheeks as my lip trembled. She let out a grunt of disgust. “Oh, just take the whole box, Blackjack!” She walked over to a shelf, pulled out a wooden crate, and tossed it to me, six glowing spark batteries rattling within. I just gave a whimper, the whine growing higher and higher.

A bottle of Wild Pegasus plopped on top of them.

Humming in glee and floating the box in front of me, I made my way back towards the bridge, the humming faltering not a bit when, a few seconds after I got out of the shop, Charity screamed after me, “It’s going on yer tab, Blackjack! You hear me? With interest!”

“Seahorse used to be an Equestrian Navy patrol boat,” Oilcan, the rust-coated mare engineer, explained as she trotted to a hatch in the stern deck, her horn glowing as she undid the dogs and secured a rag in her curly red mane. “Doubt there’s anything original on it besides the engine, though. I figger the last twenty years or so we’ve had to replace everything at least once.” She hopped nimbly up into the air and disappeared down through the hatch.

The rest of the crew was finishing up business with two caravaners from Flank who’d come to trade chems and boxed food for bullets and music recordings brought from Tenpony in Manehattan. Sore as I was at Caprice, I’d gotten some Sugar Apple Bombs and some more Buck (just in case I had to wrestle Rampage again) from them in exchange for a few rounds of hunting ammo. A dirty look from me proved quite effective at getting them to shave a bit off the bill.

“Come on in,” Oilcan said cheerfully. “Plenty o’ room for all.”

Glory stared into the hole with an audible gulp. I just gave her a friendly nudge on her hip and a smile that would hopefully convince her not to worry about it. P-21 jumped down happily; stable ponies had no problem with nice, tight, cramped spaces.

The engine itself was a block of polished brass inset with rubies and emeralds. It was connected by wires to a sapphire water talisman, twice the size of what we

saw in 99's utility room, that was hooked up to several large pipes. "This here's the engine. It converts the raw magical spark energy into power for the water talisman. That makes the water that jets out the back to move the boat."

"Is there supposed to be this much water in here?" P-21 asked, looking down at the inch or so of scummy water that was sloshing about our hooves. My PipBuck clicked slowly; there wasn't nearly enough radiation to worry me unless I had an engine bilge water slurpee.

The motherly mare grinned at him. "Well if you'd like ta grab a bucket and do something about it, I know we'd be much obliged." She reached into my box and pulled out a spark battery, flipping the heavy square container in her hooves. Inside the crystal hovered a red ball of magical energy that shed little waving lines of light. She opened a panel with her mouth and pulled out an empty container, then slid the fresh one into the receptacle. There was a sudden hum as the gems lit up. "Of course, for when we don't got spark batteries, we've got a flux converter." She gestured at a circle strung with a spider web of glistening crystal strands. "Ain't nearly as efficient."

"And if that doesn't work?" I asked.

"Well, then ya can get out and push. We've had to do that a few times."

P-21 looked at the grease-slathered boards of the exposed inner surface of the hull. "I'm just curious why it's made of wood."

"You know what happens when you take a nice metal boat out on the ocean? Pretty soon it's a rusty boat at the bottom of the ocean. Sure, lumber might be a bitch to find, but it's a damned sight easier to get and work than steel plate. We seal her up with tar and pitch as well as we can, paint her if we can get it, plate the hull if we can manage it, and she's the best damn boat in Equestria."

"With an interesting captain," P-21 observed dryly.

Oilcan chuckled. "Yeah, Thrush ain't what most folks expect, but her daddy was two buckets shy of a dry hold. Once, we were stuck on a beach off Manezibar with this tainted sea serpent watching us past the reef. So the captain, he somehow gets a whole flock of rock crabs to carry the boat on their backs to the far side of the island!" The rusty mare slapped P-21's back as she laughed. "Thrush ain't quite the measure of her daddy, but she's the best girl for the job," Oilcan said firmly as she smiled at P-21. "I had my reservations, but she's the mare who loves Seahorse the most. She was willing to let her daddy go to keep it."

The rest of the spark batteries went in a locker above the engine. “Seems to me going downstream wouldn’t require much power,” P-21 said.

“Shows you don’t know boats, boyo,” Oilcan replied. “Going downstream, you’ve got the water pushing you into rocks, beams, snags and worse. Half our power is spent maneuvering around obstacles and the other half fighting current. Just wait till you see the Towers. Any boat that tries to just go with the flow is in for a nasty surprise. The Hoofington River eats ponies. With all the rain about, there’s a lot of energy in all that water.”

Just another thing about this place I hated. I found myself scowling in the direction of the city. It seemed so wrong, like it was a trap trying to draw everypony in with lures of riches and food. I wondered how many ponies had come to Hoofington and ended up killed by raiders, poisoned by taint or radiation, or sucked dry by Elevation fields. The more I thought about it, the more disturbing it became. Even Lacunae’s Goddess seemed distressed by this place.

Hoofington: the city that kills. It’d killed ponies when the zebras burned it. Killed zebras as it made itself the target of the war. And now it killed everypony it lured in. I could almost hear the cards shuffling in my head.

“Hey, you okay, Blackjack? You’ve got a shooty look on your face,” P-21 asked, giving me a nudge. I had a ‘shooty’ look? I needed a mirror.

“Just. . . not a fan of Hoofington,” I replied sullenly.

Oilcan chuckled as she rubbed her nose with a dirty hoof. “Heh. Join the club. I used to live in Friendship City. Nice town. Maybe a touch crowded, but a good place to live,” she said as she checked some power cables. “One day, her daddy’s in port and so damn drunk that the town assigned him a guard so he wouldn’t blow something up on accident. He mentions that he needs an engineer. I’ve got a comfy life ahead of me, but he goes on about the riches, the adventure, the sights, the adventure, the rum, the adventure, the sex. . . oh yeah, did he mention adventure? Boyo talked me into bed and then onto his boat. Been a lot of places. But Hoofington’s always been the worst. Always has enough treasure to bring you here. Always has enough grief to make you wonder why you came in the first place. Bilgewater got eaten by a river serpent this trip. I doubt he’ll be the last. . . but the Seahorse’ll be back. I’m sure of that.”

“So why do you stay?” P-21 asked.

Oilcan sighed and smiled, reaching out to touch the engine. There was a lover’s

look in her eyes. “Back home, I had a pretty comfy life; wasn’t no Tenpony, but comfy. Out here... well... we ain’t found riches, the sights are all pretty damned ugly, the rum’s watered down, and the sex gets a little awkward on a little boat like this... but the adventure? He sure wasn’t lying about that. Long as the captain can steer her straight, I’ll keep her running. To Hoofington or Hell itself.”

Seahorse wasn’t exactly made for a luxury cruise. The five of us had one room to ourselves, and that had only four hammocks. We had to shift the footlockers into the middle of the space and throw some blankets atop them for Lacunae. We were allowed to be there or sitting on the narrow walk that ran along the sides of the boat between the rails and the superstructure. P-21 pointed out that, since I couldn’t fly, all my fancy new barding wouldn’t be much better than an anchor. Damn it, what was the point of having cool looking armor if I never got to wear it?

There was a hum in the back of the ship that grew louder and louder, then two streams of choppy water blasted out the rear of the boat just below water level. Tarboots and Oilcan untied the lines and jumped nimbly into the rear of the boat, and the swoosh of the water plumes increased. At the stern, on top of the superstructure at the highest point of the boat, was the wheelhouse; for windows, it had rusty slats of metal that Thrush peered through as she moved the Seahorse upstream of the bridge before slowly turning the boat around. Immediately, the whoosh died to a gurgle as the powerful current carried us downstream.

I admit that I am a complete and utter pansy when it comes to flight, but, if the whole ‘height’ thing was taken away, I liked the sensation of being carried along without having to walk around. “Keep your eyes open,” Captain Thrush called down to us as we sat on the walk, leaning on the metal rail.

I kept Taurus’ rifle handy as my eyes scanned the brown dirty water. “What am I looking for?”

“Till we get to the Fork, anything poking out of the river bottom or anypony with a missile. We might come across some hoppers after the Fallen Towers, but till then our biggest risk is running into something sharp and pointy,” she said calmly, making only the slightest adjustments to the boat’s heading and letting the current do the rest.

“Are ponies with missiles a common problem?” I called back, looking at the increasingly thick ruins lining the river and deliberately not looking at the enigmatic towers

on the other side of the boat. This close to the Core, I felt... odd. Lightheaded. I could only assume it was the enervation fields of the city nipping at my cells. Thrush was keeping the Seahorse in the middle of the river, but I felt the urge to ask her to move closer to the rubble-strewn western bank.

She grunted. "Reaper wannabes and raiders, mostly. They gather in small groups to prey on Riverside or Flotsam. Unless they've got something big, we generally don't worry too much about it." She gunned the engine and threaded the Seahorse around a spur of concrete just barely below the surface; I spotted it only as we slid past it close enough to spit.

Glory proved the most valuable pair of purple eyes. Standing in the bow just in front of the turret, she and the crew's lookout, a young green earth pony mare named Seabiscuit, spotted hazards lying just under the surface that I couldn't see even as we passed them and pointed them out with her wingtips so that Thrush could steer around them. As the river carried us along, the ruins became even larger and more elaborate and damaged. Blocks of apartment buildings had slid right into the water and filled it with deadly debris. Pipes blasted jets of yellowish-brown foamy, filmy water every few hundred feet as the land drained into the river.

A small camp of four ponies. Raiders, from the bloody bites on their limbs. I sighted them carefully, didn't see anything resembling a missile, and was about to fire when the Captain said, "Don't. Gunshots carry on the water." Reluctantly, I lowered the rifle.

"I thought you weren't an executioner," the dusty voice said softly.

"I'm not an executioner. They were raiders," I muttered to myself, glancing at the Dealer, who was looking at the raiders with pity. "They're dying from a disease already. It's going to kill them one way or another." I remembered the mare in Miramare who had gorged till her stomach burst. "It's not an execution if they're already going to die." I flushed in anger as I saw Glory look back at me. Great. Now everypony was going to know I was losing it.

"Oh... well, that's convenient," he said with an understanding little nod. "So long as you're granting mercy, it's okay. Funny... wasn't there another pony using the exact same logic just yesterday?"

"Shut up," I hissed softly.

"Of course, it wouldn't be the first time you've done it," he continued.

"Shut up!" I yelled at the pale bastard, levitating Cupcake's revolver and pressing it

to his forehead. “Why the fuck do you do this? I was feeling halfway good and then you. . . why are you trying to make me remember killing them all? Why can’t you let me be happy?” My magic tightened on the trigger; sure, it wouldn’t kill him, but I’d feel better.

“Blackjack?” Glory said in a fearful voice as the Dealer melted away.

The gun was pointed right between her shocked eyes.

My magic released the gun at once, and it bounced off the deck and landed in the river with a little splash. I stared into Glory’s fearful and hurt eyes and felt myself start to shake. I hadn’t had the shakes like this in a while. I thought that I was over it. I’d put it behind me. Matured. Moved on.

I am a fucking idiot.

I hadn’t put anything behind me. I’d thrown it in the closet and forgotten about it. I’d murdered forty foals. Executed them. I’d rationalized. I’d justified. But my mind wasn’t letting me let it go. “I’m sorry, Glory. I wasn’t talking to you. I was. . . I’m just. . . sorry.”

I saw the conflict in her eyes as I looked down into the water. Then she jumped over me and disappeared below decks.

“Well, that was interesting,” Thrush said from behind the wheel.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Didn’t ask if you did. You don’t have to explain to me. I talk to ghosts too, sometimes.”

Not quite what I was dealing with... at least I hoped not! “You do?”

“Sure. Dad asking me to shoot him,” she replied in a soft, casual voice that made me shiver, “Looking back, I probably should have, so it’s only fair he gets to haunt me from time to time, right?”

Sometimes all it takes is one second, one wrong action, one little mistake, and something precious is gone for good.

All except for the regrets.

P-21 had as much affinity for sea travel as I did for the air. He lay with his face in a bucket on the stern deck behind the wheelhouse. Really, I didn’t mind the rocking

at all. It gave me something to think about besides that my brain was playing nasty tricks on my mind and I'd almost shot Glory in the face. True, she'd shot me first, but we were way past that.

My ears flicked as I heard a distant sound, like a deep breath being drawn continuously. It made my mane begin to itch in apprehension as I looked first at the fire-gutted ruins across the river and then at the grim walls of the Core. "What is that?" I asked Thrush as I rose to my hooves.

"Fallen Towers," she replied in a soft, grim tone. "You ponies better get down inside and tie yourselves in. This is going to be a little rough!" Her horn glowed as she lifted a length of rope and started tying herself to the boat.

Somehow, I sensed a whole riverful of understatement in that as I rose as high as I could, looking for the source of that terrible sound. I heard the others getting below, but I couldn't go hide. I had to see just what we were facing. The captain yelled something at me about breaking the first rule as I staggered forward. Passing the gun turret, I saw Oilcan pulling out the guns. Our eyes met, and I saw the fear in them. This was something bad.

I rushed to the front of the boat and ran into Seabiscuit trying to go the opposite direction. The sea green mare balked and backed to the bow of the boat as the deck heaved. We were moving fast. . . really really fast. The wide river now seemed ominously narrow, as if all the rubble and junk had constricted into a foamy flume. The boat gave one more lurch, and the mare gave up trying to move back and instead began to frantically tie herself to rusty metal rings set in the deck. "Tie yourself down!" she yelled, but I wasn't really listening at that point.

My eyes stared out in front of me as I felt a sensation like taking a cold bath wash over me. Like everything else in Hoofington, I suspected that the massive Core towers rising to the rolling clouds were ridiculously overengineered. However, despite that, during the war's fiery end, one of the towers had broken off ten stories or so up and had fallen across the river. The heavy, armored face of the fallen tower acted as a dam of sorts, and the tower's fall had and shattered and knocked down a half dozen more buildings that were now also lying in the swirling fury of frothing water. The water poured over the jagged stumps of the fallen foundations like saliva over teeth. The river was hungry.

"How in hell are we supposed to get though that?" I shouted. Then I stared as the boat flew between a pair of street lights. We weren't going down a river any more. . . this was a street! The impromptu dam had driven the river out of its banks, and now

we were navigating racing currents running through the ruins of the shattered office buildings. Broken foundations and rusted streetlights flew past us as the water flew forwards faster and faster towards the source of that perpetual inhalation.

“Tie yourself down!” Seabiscuit screamed again as she grabbed a second length of rope, knotted it around my chest, and tied it to another ring. “Captain will get us through!” she yelled, the green mare staring back at Thrush with a look of frantic faith.

The Captain just stared grimly ahead.

Then I saw exactly where she was taking us. The tower had not fallen completely intact. A split had opened up inside it where the top third had snapped back like a peppermint candy stick and created a yawning chasm that the river was forced into. However, I didn't see a way through, only endless black. The Seahorse seemed to hang, suspended on that eerily smooth rolling tongue of water that poured down endlessly into the gullet of the fallen skyscraper.

And then, with a blast of cold wet mist, we plunged into the darkness. I gripped the rail with my hooves as we plummeted into the hollow interior of the skyscraper. Then, just as we'd fallen down, the water rose into a vertical wall again, and this time we were going up. The Seahorse rode the arching wall of water as it poured along the interior of the building like an enormous pipe. In my mutated sight, I could see the rusted steel beams stabbing at the Seahorse like spears. Something banged against the underside of the ship, and felt the entire vessel jump as we raced wildly down the interior of the building. Cracks in the wall sprayed cold, foul water in my face. I had no idea how Thrush, how anypony, could navigate this passage.

Then I spotted light ahead, and with it the sight of another wall of water churning sideways. How could a vertical wall of water move sideways? “Hang on,” Seabiscuit screamed in my ear. I wrapped my front hooves around the railing as we approached that surging sweep of fluid.

For a terrifying moment, I swore we flew. My stomach rose in my throat as we were ejected from a second split in the side of the tower and right at the face of a fallen apartment building. The water rose up and up, and we rose with it. Higher and higher the boat rose, and I stared down towards the stern. I wasn't sure if I was simply soaked through or if I wet myself at the sight.

Then our rise stopped, but Seabiscuit's did not. She continued going up and out, connected only by the rope tied to the ring. The rope went taut. Then, with a metallic 'ping', the metal snapped. Her teal eyes widened in horrified resignation as

she started to plunge back down towards the churning water as the boat hung in the air.

I screamed as I set my hooves and launched myself into the air, my legs flailing.

Save one. Just save one. . .

Her trailing rope smacked me in the face, and I gripped it with hooves, teeth, magic, whatever. My rope went taut as well, and the ring held as we swung back and crashed into the deck of the Seahorse. My teeth rattled as I hit the rail and hooked a rear leg around it; she tangled with the turret.

I wondered if we would hang like that forever. A small tilt in the wrong direction. . . backwards towards the surging torrent spraying from the tower... Then the boat fell. With horrifying, ponderous slowness, it tilted away from the crumbling apartment face as I was looking down at a swirling froth of brown water. There was nothing I could do but clutch that rail with every bit of strength I could.

Every inch of me was slammed with more force than I'd ever thought possible as the boat fell upside down. My breath blasted from my body in a bubbly scream as I felt like the rope was about to cut me in two! Then I was lifted from the water as the Seahorse reverse-capsized, coming to the surface dripping wet and pointing her nose downstream. I opened my eyes, looking for the sea green pony and staring at the rope trailing in the water. The rope burn had torn two raw strips of flesh from around my forehooves.

Just one. . . please, let me save just one...

I floated a Buck to my mouth and chewed down as the Seahorse raced towards a jagged stand of crushed buildings and debris. My heart thundered as I heaved with all my strength. I could barely breathe as I looped the rope around my forelegs, pulled, and looped again. I clenched my eyes shut, imagining the beams and concrete ripping her apart. It felt as if one of those jagged spurs had lodged straight through my chest as I pulled again and again.

And then a limp green form came over the rail and fell atop me. Water dribbled from her mouth as she lay there.

“One. . . just. . . one. . .” I whispered softly as I rolled upright and pressed down on her sides, trying to force the water out. Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Eleven zebra. Forty foals. Let me save just one!

She lay there, another corpse, my heart racing so fast that I collapsed beside her.

Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Zebras. Foals. Seabiscuit.

Then she coughed, gasped, retched, and vomited water. I shook as I fought to sit up, trying to do something helpful and managing just to blubber and hold her shoulders as Tarboots walked carefully along the heaving deck, rushing to help. She drew one shaking breath after another as I fell on my back, gasping for breath with the blood-soaked rope tight around my hooves.

Everything fell away as I smiled.

I saved one, you bony son of a bitch. . .

I saved one.

“Wake up, Fishie. Fishie?” my mom called over to my bed. “I know you’re awake, Go Fish. You’re smiling.”

“Am not! Sleepin’.” And I snored loudly to prove it.

She bumped me with her nose. “Security mares have to wake up and do our jobs, Fishie.”

“I dun wanna be Security, Momma. It’s no fun,” I muttered, looking up at my pink momma with her smart, indulgent smile and striped purple and red mane.

“Security’s the best job in the stable,” she said softly.

“Everypony says that ‘bout their job,” I said as I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

She just chuckled, “But ours really is. We get to save ponies.”

“Why do we gotta be so mean to the boys, Momma?” I asked as my eyes looked over at two bucks walking with their heads hanging, following two mares. They looked hurt and. . . something else. I didn’t know what shame was back then.

She smiled sadly as I got a green alfalfa smoothie from the cafeteria, munching on the sweet grassy sludge. “We don’t. But a lot of mares can be mean, so a lot of mares are mean to ponies they think it’s okay to hurt.”

“But why? They’re not in my classes or nothing. What do the colts do?” I asked as I ignored the spoon and straw and chowed down.

“They do something very important for the stable. They make babies.”

I imagined something like a factory where little fillies were assembled like dolls.
“They do?”

“Mhmm. One of them made you,” she said with a smile. “Not sure which one, but. . .”
She flushed slightly as she said that to herself more than me.

“But what did they do?” I asked with a little frown.

“Well in your grandma’s time, bucks and fillies shared all kinds of jobs. All except for one: the Overmare. Everypony got one baby to take over their jobs when they died, whether they were bucks or mares. Then, one day the Overmare had a baby colt. The males were happy because there were a lot more mares than bucks, anyway, and they thought the rules weren’t fair.”

I grumbled, “I don’t think the rules are fair either. Its stupid I gotta go to bed when I’m not even tired.”

“If you did, maybe you wouldn’t have problems waking up,” she said as she levitated a napkin to wipe my face clean. “Anyway, the Overmare said that the colt couldn’t be an Overmare because he wasn’t a mare. The bucks said the Overmare was breaking the rules because she couldn’t have another baby. Then her foal died in medical. The bucks said the Overmare had killed him to have another baby and demanded she be replaced, but there’s nothing in the rules for taking away an Overmare’s job.”

I gasped as I squirmed, trying to get away from her floating napkin. “And did she, Momma?”

She just smiled sadly and shrugged. “The bucks thought she did and they were angry. They took over the maintenance level and threatened to do something very bad if the Overmare didn’t step down. The bucks had a lot of mares wanting to help them before, but breaking the air purification talismans would have killed everypony. There was a nasty fight, and several important parts of the stable were damaged. Finally, most of the bucks were captured, and the Overmare said that from then on mares would run the stable and bucks would make babies.”

I munched my green smoothie, making a mess of my face again. “Huh. I wondered why I never see any colts in school. Well, except for this one. He’s always hiding near the door. Or he was.” I said as I tapped my hooves against the table. “I haven’t seen him since I took him back to medical.”

She gave me such a sad smile, “Try not to think about it, Fishie.”

Because once you started, you wouldn’t stop. Not till it drove you mad.

Security were friends with security. Thus, my friends were, by default, the children of security mares. Daisy limped to the corner of the schoolroom where we were being taught our core lessons and security training by the bored, burned-out banality of Miss Textbook. Marmalade looked at the crème-colored filly in concern, at the darkened red bruises on her face and the twitchy look in her eyes. There were bandages on her legs, side, and flank.

“Are you okay, Daisy?” I asked, looking at the bruises on her cheek and muzzle.

“Yeah. I got in a fight,” she said, sniffing as if it were no big deal. Daisy always got in fights. As security, she was supposed to fight; we all were. But I always wondered just who she was picking them with. “So, what’s teach going on about?” she asked, and the honey-colored Marmalade and I looked at each other in concern. Daisy never cared about what the teacher taught.

“The Ministry of Awesome and how it was just a bone thrown to Rainbow Dash, since she never actually did anything,” I said softly.

“Sorry I asked,” she yawned, and we relaxed.

Then Duct Tape walked by and the homely gray filly looked at the three of us. . . no, looked at Daisy. Daisy looked at her. “What are you looking at?” Duct Tape shook her head as she backed away. “I said, what the fuck are you looking at!” And as Duct Tape turned to run, Daisy charged her.

“No! Please! I’m sorry!” Duct Tape begged as Daisy ploughed into the smaller gray mare and proceeded to pummel her.

“You didn’t see anything! You understand?! Nothing, you gray pussy!” Daisy shrieked she kicked the other filly over and over again while Text Book just looked on with a mild expression of annoyance that her lecture had been interrupted.

“Daisy!” I shouted in alarm, and the honey unicorn jumped as I raced to shove myself between her and the fetal Duct Tape. Marmalade just followed, because that was what she did. She didn’t have the sense Celestia had given a roach. Still, I shoved my way between them and kicked Daisy’s face firmly with my forehooves. That seemed to snap her out of it enough to make her fall back. “Get Tape to medical, Marm!”

The yellow unicorn looked at me, then Daisy, then Duct Tape, and finally realized I was asking her to do something. She bit Duct Tape by her mane and dragged her

out the door. “What is wrong with you, Daisy?” I yelled as the rest of the class pretended to listen to the teacher. Because that was safer than listening and thinking.

The bandages had fallen away, and I stared at the cuts in Daisy’s sides and flank. They’d only been barely healed by the magical bandages. And unless she’d been hiding a horn her entire life, there was no way daisy could have made such regular cuts. “Who... how?!”

Now I was the one slammed to the ground. “No pony. It was an accident. I mean... a fight! That’s ALL it was!” she said as she shouted down at me.

Don’t think about it. Don’t ask. Don’t wonder. Crawl back into my desk and pretend like it never happened. Agree it was a fight, and don’t ask who. Agree it was an accident, and don’t imagine how. Do that and she might forget as well. And you’d be friends... friendish...

“Did your-“ was all I said. All I got out. She knew the question. I knew the answer as she tried to shove every ounce of her pain into me, and she had a whole lot of it to shove.

I opened my eyes, feeling the bobbing of the boat and hearing the sounds of ponies walking above deck. “You okay?” Glory asked as I stirred.

“I feel like I got hit by a boat,” I muttered, lying there and feeling my heart thunder. I felt bruised from horn to hoof.

“You did get hit by a boat,” the captain replied as she leaned on the rear hatch. “Didn’t I tell you to get below and strap in? The rest of your friends did. You? You ran right out to the worst place you could.” The captain did not look happy about me breaking the first rule.

“Seabiscuit? Is she okay?” I asked as I looked at the torn skin on my front legs. At least my PipBuck had saved me from some of the burns...but from the pain on my sides, I suspected I was missing hide there, too.

The captain’s look softened. “Yeah. So I won’t shoot you for breaking the first rule. Besides,” she added with a grin, “I have to admit, there’s no sight like going through Fallen Towers.” I had to agree; I’d be having nightmares about it for a while. I noticed that the captain was also showing raw rope burns and bruises. “Normally, I would have waited a few days for the water to subside. The water level was half again as high as it should have been for safe passage, but you folks are in a hurry.”

“Not in that much of a hurry,” I groaned, momentarily sitting up and regretting it. I fell back with a groan into Glory’s hooves. “Where are we? How long have I been out?”

“We’re in Riverside, just below the falls. That crash did more than just crush both of you; it also busted a seal on the bottom. We can patch it, but it’ll just take a while,” the captain said. “There’s not a lot to see here, but you can take a peek around town. It’s a Finders village, so it should be safe. . . ish.”

“Safeish. I like that word. Not quite safe, but in the neighborhood,” I muttered sarcastically. I slowly dragged myself to my hooves. “Well, get me my barding.”

“Blackjack!” Glory said. “You just woke up from passing out after having a ship fall on you, and from your pulse you’ve taken at least another Buck! Why don’t you just stay here and do something radical, like rest?”

I took a deep breath as I steadied myself, fighting to keep from hyperventilating. Nice and slow. Calm. “Well, Glory, there’s three reasons why I have to go. First, I need to get out there so that whatever eyes and ears Sanguine and DJ P0N3 have can see me so he doesn’t send that monster pony to Chapel. Second, I want to see if there’s anypony I can help. Third, and most important of all. . .” I took a moment, looking at her gravely. “I really. . . really. . . need to go to the bathroom and I’d rather not hang my fanny off the side of the boat.”

Glory took one look at me in shock as the Captain collapsed with laughter, then seized a pillow and beat me with it till I grabbed my bag and fled outside.

After a visit at the town latrine (a ditch that reeked so badly it almost had me reconsidering the boat), I found myself in Riverside. The town of two dozen inhabitants was built in a horseshoe-shaped strip of shops adjacent to the river. One floating dock made of old empty barrels stretched out to a post and the Seahorse. The roads north and south were barricaded, and the park in the middle of the village held planter boxes filled with vegetables and waxy green grass. Shops were selling pale sides of smoked fish and slabs of radigator meat, and at one outdoor butcher shop I saw two ponies cutting and chopping up an enormous frog.

Despite the town’s size, I got the impression that it’d once seen better days. There were apartments above the repurposed stores that now had busted windows and were boarded shut. One shop had only some scrap metal, electronics, and nine millimeter ammo. I couldn’t see any signs of families; there was a terrible sense that, at any moment, the last occupants would just fade away, leaving Riverside just

another ruin.

“What happened here?” I muttered as I looked at the ponies moving like ghosts around the almost empty shops.

“Same thing that’s happening everywhere, miss...,” an old unicorn mare said as she mended a fishing net. I had to question the sense of anypony who ate anything out of that river. Slowly, I walked to her, and started as I realized that she was blind. Her milky eyes stared out at me as her hooves skillfully felt out the tears and her horn mended them.

“Blackjack.”

“Fishy,” she replied.

Now that made me feel all kinds of strange and alarmed. “What? How did you know—“

“My name. It’s Fishy. Granny Fishy. Nice to meet you,” she said with a soft chuckle.

“Oh.” I sat down across from her. “What do you mean, the same thing happening everywhere?”

“Riverside used to be a nice village. We were smack in the middle of the west side ruins. There was plenty to pick out of the countryside. Food. Safety. But the ruins’ve been picked clean, mostly. There’s more and more raiders, bandits, and Reapers. Less folks bring in less food. So villages just dwindle away. Death picks off the ones who stay, and there’s fewer and fewer boats.”

“This lady bothering you, Mum?” a pink mare with a pair of fish on her flank asked as she trotted up.

“No, thank you, Perch,” Granny said as she waved a hoof at the mare, who took it between her own and guided it to her head so Granny could pat her. “She was polite enough to ask about the town.”

“It’s those damned dogs that are to blame,” Perch said with a stomp.

“Dogs?” I blinked.

“The Sand Dogs,” the elder unicorn answered. “They live underneath the western ruins.”

Perch, clearly having a lot more to say, stomped her hooves again. “And they’re a menace. They scavenge the ruins, but they don’t trade, and I know they’ve got

some decent salvage in their holes. They've got some weird cybernetics that make them too tough for most raiders and bandits, so we have to deal with them instead."

"Now, that's enough, Perch. Times are tough enough without making things harder for some folks who don't deserve it," Granny said firmly to the younger mare.

But the pink pony wasn't listening. "You want to help?" she said to me. "Go down to the Riverside station of the Sunset Line, shoot every one of them, and open up the tunnels for scavenging. That'll turn this place around, no sweat," she said as she lifted up one of Granny's nets and sulked towards the river.

The elder blind mare just sighed as she ran her hooves over the netting. "Please, do not mind her. She is just desperate to save the home she knows," Granny Fishy said as she tugged the nets with her horn and hooves. "I suspect you feel the same way."

"You do?" I gave a nervous little smile. "No offense, but you don't know where I'm from. Trust me, nopony would want to save that place."

"Oh? But isn't that where you're going? Or maybe it's where you've been. Who can say?" She said as she carefully tied a hole. "I suspect you have a long trail before you to reach your home."

My mane started to tingle as I regarded her. "What do you know?"

She chuckled at that wary question. "Know? My dear, I simply mend holes in nets," she replied with a toothless smile. "But I have a sense about you. The past and future reach through you. Messenger, harbinger, and judge. Life in one hoof. Death in the other. Which will you decide? Not even the stars can tell..." Okay, that just jumped the creepiness factor up by fifty at least!

P-21 and Glory trotted up, the two probably noticing my slightly uneasy look. "Blackjack? Who's this?" Glory asked politely.

"Granny Fishy," she said with a broad smile as she thrust her hoof out in the general direction of Glory. Glory took it in her own and gave it a shake. "Ahh... a pegasus. How interesting." How'd she get that from a hoofshake?

"Fallen Glory," Glory said softly as she glanced at me, then frowned at the old mare. "Did Blackjack... tell you?"

"No. I just get a sense of things." She said as she released Glory's hoof and returned to the net. "Like your name... Fallen. How far have you fallen, I wonder. Have you learned to hate? Have you learned to spite? Have you learned to crave vengeance?"

If not, how can you know how to forgive, Fallen Glory?"

"How. . . what did you tell her, Blackjack?" she asked, clearly startled.

"Nothing. I just met her." I said defensively.

P-21 looked at Granny mending the net, then looked at me. I cocked a brow. "What?" he said. "I don't want creepy mystical mutterings about my fate or destiny, thank you very much." He backed a few steps away from Granny. "Leave me out of it!"

"Oh, don't worry young buck. Your fate has come and gone. It only begs the question of what happens in the epilogue," the old mare said with a lazy wave of her hoof. For some reason, that seemed to bother him more than some cryptic remark.

Then Perch yelled across the square. "Granny! Stop with the fortune teller routine and get that last net patched up!" The blind mare chuckled, and I gave her a skeptical glance. Had all this just been a local messing with rubes?

"Ah well, fun is fun, but I'd best get back to work," she said with a chuckle. "Don't give an old blind mare's words too much thought." As we walked away, I looked back and saw her still wearing that lingering, old smile.

"Blackjack, are you sure about this?" P-21 asked as we moved through the ruins.

"It's one of my plans. Of course I'm not sure about it. But Perch said that if we could deal with the Sand Dogs, it'd open up the underground tunnels for salvaging again. And you know that there's always time for dealing with raiders and bandits. We've got at least three hours till Thrush patches up the boat, so why not do some good while we're here?"

"I have to wonder how your foes will view your good," Lacunae said from the rear. She'd shed the heavy black lace dress and veil once we were out of sight of town.

"Oh, don't get her started with moral relativism," P-21 groaned. "She'll be stuck all day!"

Moral whatism? "Look. It's simple. We're good. They're bad. That's all I need to know."

"Right. Till one of them starts crying," the blue buck muttered. "Why are four smart ponies being led around by an idiot?"

“Can’t be that smart, then,” I stuck my tongue out at him and looked at Rampage. She still wasn’t much bigger than a filly, but I wasn’t going to pick a fight with her with that chainsaw knife in her jaws. “Hey, Rampage. Are you smarter than me?”

She spat out the blade and balanced it atop her head as she said something in zebra to me. A toss of her red curls and she caught the blade again in her jaws with a grin. “I’ll take that as a yes,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

The plan was simple. I’d keep an eye open on my E.F.S. for red bars. Glory would scout them out. We’d annihilate them and save the day. My PipBuck navigation already had a toggle set on Riverside; how it knew, I’d never know. Once the Dogs were out of the tunnels, the Seahorse would hopefully be ready to continue downstream.

I just hoped we didn’t get lost amid these ruins. They were unlike anything I’d ever seen; the swampy remains of Flankfurt were nothing compared to the cracked and broken ten and twenty story buildings that loomed over us. Most bore the telltale black charring of firestorms, and the streets were littered with rubble, smashed and twisted wagons, and, of course, bones. Still, a century of scavenging had turned the ruins into rain-drenched shells. Perfect little lairs for predatory ponies.

And speaking of which, there were some red bars straight ahead...

I gestured to Glory, and she flitted from blasted-out window to blasted-out window, her gray hide and pale blue barding blending in with both sky and rocks. I had to keep track of her blue bar at times. She scouted the hostiles and returned. “About nine or ten, some in an old store right around the corner and the others in a coffee shop across the street. They’ve got a sniper on the third floor. I couldn’t tell if they’re raiders or bandits, but they’re all armed.”

“Red, it’s dead,” I muttered, glancing at my PipBuck. I imagined the cards shuffling in my mind, but I wasn’t even going to acknowledge the pale bastard. If they were armed and hostile, this wasn’t an execution. This was trouble and we were taking care of it.

“Okay, so I’m in front. Glory from above and tagging that sniper. Rampage mixing it up. P-21, keep your eyes open and use Persuasion if there’s a knot of them. And you. . .” I looked at Lacunae and suddenly felt a bit at a loss. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ll back you up,” she said with a faint smile. Right, that was less than specific or comforting.

“Okay. Don’t shoot me, please,” I asked with a half joking smile. I started towards the hostiles when P-21 cleared his throat. “What?” I asked, looking at him and his sardonic little smile. He stretched out a hoof and tapped the helmet sitting atop my saddlebags. “Oh! Right. Headshot. . . good thinking.” I levitated and strapped the helmet in place, flushing slightly. Okay! Now, were we ready?

We were.

I strolled down the street as clear as day with Taurus’ rifle floating ahead of me. Rampage moved like a ponified cat, unnervingly quiet without her clanging metal armor. Glory moved overhead like a silent guardian angel while Lacunae walked behind me. Where P-21 was, I had no idea. Laying mines? Readying grenades? I just knew he’d be there.

Through the scope, I saw a mare walking from the coffee shop towards the corner grocery store. I saw the spiked armor, the sawed off shotgun, and, most importantly, the half dozen hooves dangling off the sides of her barding. Most of all, I saw the eager grin that split her scarred face, yellowed eyes widening in glee at the sight of me.

Then I sent her brains out the back of her head with a clean shot through her left eye.

All hell broke loose. At once, three more ponies rushed out, but they had the sense to go for cover behind the piles of rubble. One opened up with an SMG, a 10mm zebra model if I knew my guns, and sprayed bullets down the street at me. Where the heck had raiders gotten enough bullets to waste them with an SMG? The pistols were a little more accurate, but my barding took the rounds with equanimity as I took aim with the rifle and blew the noggin off the mare with the SMG.

From overhead came the boom of a rifle round, and a resounding ‘PING’ glanced off the side of my helmet. Somewhere, I was sure, P-21 was thinking smug thoughts. Okay, enough badass stupidity. I had their attention now, so I made for my own cover behind a fallen wagon as my head throbbed. As nice as the rifle was, I just didn’t have the time or rate of fire for messy work. Good thing I had a shotgun!

Glory swept sideways, raking the sniper’s nest with her beam pistols. There was another loud boom from the sniper, but she deftly twisted clear of the shot, pirouetted, and resumed cooking the sniper with little beams of death.

I just waited as Rampage raced in towards the two raiders with the ten millimeter automatics. The sight of a charging little zebra-striped pony seemed to make them

hesitate in amusement. They realized their mistake too late as Rampage leapt over the rubble and wrapped her hooves around the mare's neck. Then the ripper roared as she sawed her head clean off in a fountain of blood that seemed to make the remaining raider stare in awe. No wonder Deus had been able to command these psychopaths.

Unfortunately, her awe made her a sitting duck for a round of buckshot to the head. Now, where were the rest. . .

From the inside of the store spilled the remainder of the raiders; they'd been taking their time getting their barding on and guns ready. Another unicorn came out, spraying Rampage and myself wildly, and this close in the shots were much more effective. I slipped into S.A.T.S. to plant two neat blasts in her head, then fired two more into the milling raiders behind her.

Rampage jumped right over the fallen unicorn and slid on a sheet of blood to saw and kick wildly at the limbs of the raiders as I fired off two more shots and then reloaded as fast as my horn could manage. Then, from the coffee shop behind me came the purr of a minigun motor. Instantly, my ass began to vibrate as the stream of shots started to chew through my barding. Raiders behind me. Raiders in front of me. Not good.

There was a soft thump, and a moment later the raider with the minigun was enveloped in a blast that tore off their head and all four limbs; what was left collapsed in a bloody heap that writhed for a few seconds. As two more came rushing to the door, P-21 emerged like a blue ghost, bit the stem off of a frag grenade, and tossed it through. A second explosion, and two more red bars vanished.

With Rampage already raising havoc inside, I charged in through the door and proceeded to paint the raiders with lead. One had heavy metal armor, but no helmet. S.A.T.S. allowed the buckshot to render his head into paste. When the gun was empty, I tossed it into my sling rather than waste time reloading, then grabbed the fallen unicorn's 10mm SMG. One raider was taking aim with a hunting rifle. In a second, I unloaded the twenty-five bullets left in the clip into him. His rifle shot still hurt like hell.

And then, like that, it was over. There was one red bar in the back of the grocery store, but I didn't see a target. Back room? Unconscious? I'd find out, I supposed. Lacunae walked calmly behind me, her hooves avoiding stepping in the blood. "Watch out. There's one more in the back." I looked at the carcasses put on display. Odd that so many of them were striped; they must have ambushed a zebra

tribe nearby. It explained all the 10mm ammo. The guts dangled like garlands over the shelves. I moved towards the rear door that I guessed led into the stockroom.

I paused and noticed a forlorn bottle of Sparkle-Cola sitting in the dead refrigerator. I floated it out, popped the top, pocketed the cap and took a drink, then continued to the door with the bottle floating on one side and the gun on the other. Carefully, I swung the door open, ready to pop S.A.T.S. and end the hostile.

This was a nursery. I saw the foals lying together inside some kind of pen next to a roll-up metal door. My mutant eyes picked out the shapes. . . one of them shaking and sobbing and rocking amid all the rest. “Hey. . . it’s okay. . .” I said softly as I put the gun away. She was clutching a little ball to her chest as she sniffled and hiccuped. “You’re safe now. . .”

Then she looked at me. She giggled, her scarred lips slashed all the way to her ears as she raised her ‘ball’ and bit off the stem. I just stood there as she threw it at me from the heap of dead fillies and colts. I couldn’t move. I could only think ‘PLAY’ as I watched the grenade arc towards me.

A shimmering whiteish-purple field appeared around the filly and the grenade. The explosive hit it and bounced back just before the fuse ran out. The room shook, part of the roll-up door blew out, and I just stood there, looking in a daze at the pulped pile of ponies. A voice whispered in my head. “I told you I’d have your back.”

The raiders had a surprising collection of firearms and explosives, something we helped ourselves to. Despite myself, I kept a pair of the ten millimeter SMGs and collected as many thirty-round clips as I could. Glory looted the sniper’s nest on the third floor and brought locked ammo containers down for P-21 and myself to open. Rampage was munching down in the raider’s stores; I really hoped she was keeping it to identifiable food and skirting cannibalism, but she was a growing girl. Literally; I thought she looked as if she’d added half an inch since we left Riverside. I made sure to grab some extra cans for later.

We heaped up the raiders in the middle of the street, and P-21 tossed in two incendiary grenades. With two soft ‘whomp’s, the raiders began to cook in the magical magenta flame.

The real surprise was Lacunae picking up the minigun with her magic and turning it over curiously. I was struck with how she handled it, ejecting the belt before detaching it from the slain raider’s battle saddle. She tested the motor, rotating the

barrels slowly as she maneuvered the massive weapon with shocking grace. She kept the weapon pointed towards the ground as she examined it closely; she knew guns. "Is there something you need?" she asked quietly as she noticed me watching her.

"I just didn't expect the Goddess to be into guns."

"More than a few who have joined the Goddess know about guns," she said calmly, but there was a strange scornful undertone in the telepathic voice. "The Goddess, of course, knows that guns are weak and worthless compared to raw magic. What are bombs and missiles to the energy of the cosmos itself?" She asked as she turned the weapon over again, pointing it down the street. I had no idea how you aimed a minigun.

"You disagree?"

"One of the few who can. The Goddess is quite disgusted with me for even handling such a weapon," she said calmly as her magic lifted the heavy ammo drum from the battle saddle and slid it underneath the weapon, connecting the belt once more. "There is a certain destructive elegance in it, however. They are tools of war crafted with care and skill." I noticed her magic had no difficulty at all handing the weapon and ammo. I doubted I'd even be able to carry it.

"So now you have a bigger horn and a bigger gun," I grunted softly.

A long regretful sigh drifted through my mind. "Perhaps, but you have friends, Blackjack."

"Are you saying that the Goddess doesn't have friends?" I asked, scratching my head. She slowly shook her head in a negative. I gave a confused smile. "Wait, I thought all you alicorns were connected, right?" She gave a single nod. "Why would the Goddess want friends if you're... well... all together?"

"Just because we're bonded doesn't mean we like each other," she said as she pointed the minigun down the street and narrowed her eyes. The motor whirred and a spear of fire and lead lanced out to chew through the rusted side of a wagon. Her eyes relaxed as the gun whirred down. "Sometimes, I think the Goddess desires friends more than anything else in the Wasteland. She simply can't admit it."

There's nothing that says 'Welcome, we have milk and cookies!' quite like a welcome mat that really did bear the words 'Welcome, we have milk and cookies!' So it

was somewhat understandable that, standing in front of the Riverside subway station, I felt a distinct sense of unease nibbling at my mane. I looked at the welcome mat sitting in front of the only unbarricaded door to the subway. "Well... should we knock?" I muttered as I stepped closer to the door.

BEEP! BEEP! BE-

I jumped back just as a cone of shrapnel blasted up from the covered landmine. "Right. No knocking. That might count as a doorbell though." Carefully, I gripped the door with my magic, imagining a canine Deus rushing out at me screaming 'cunt'. Nothing however.

"Maybe I should go first," P-21 said as he looked at the black doorway. Emergency lighting flickered in the depths. "And try not to touch anything," he said as he dug through his saddlebags and took out a pair of wire cutters. He knelt in the doorway, and there was a metallic snip as he cut a tripwire strung across it. He stepped cautiously through and past two rigged single shot shotguns. I snagged the box of twelve gauge shells as I followed close behind him.

The subway was a nightmare of tangled junk and debris with one path snaking back and forth through it. There were two mines half hidden on the edges of the trail, but P-21 walked with extraordinary cautiousness. I almost made him put on my barding; I might survive one mine, but he certainly wouldn't.

He froze at a dingy bucket. "Blackjack, could you please turn that to face me?" He said softly. I slowly rotated the mouth of the bucket to face us, swallowing at the mine within. Calmly, he stretched forward and tagged the disarm tab with his hoof. "Thank you." My respect for him rose even more.

"How did you know?" I asked.

He gave me a sardonic look. "I thought 'if I wanted to kill a mare stomping at the front of a row of ponies, what would I hide a mine inside so she'd kick the bucket?'"

Glory gave a nervous little laugh. The pair of us looked back at her and she blinked, "Oh, that wasn't a joke?" Yes Glory, it was a joke. It just wasn't very funny.

"Why don't I just trot ahead and set em all off? It's not like they can kill me," Rampage suggested with a cocky little cant of her head.

"Because if you miss one, then we get blown up anyway," P-21 replied as he continued his crawl. We reached the turnstile, and P-21 started to push through when he froze. "Glory. Can you fly over this and check the far side?" The little gray pegasus nimbly flew over the top and landed behind the gate.

“Don’t. . . push through that. There’s a gas tank and a grenade.” P-21 had me float his clippers to her, and she snipped the wire to the grenade. Only then did we move past. Thankfully, the space beyond the turnstile was clear of the heaps of debris, and we were able to spread out a little. There were bathrooms to the side with red hostiles.

I pushed through down to the round lounge and relaxed at the sound of skittering radroaches. I stomped them with my hooves, then blinked as I saw a Sparkle-Cola machine. Smiling, I trotted over and started to push the button to see if I could get out a few more sodas. “Blackjack!” P-21 warned, and I froze. I looked back at him, then at the machine. Slowly, I stepped back. It was finally starting to click that I shouldn’t touch anything in here.

Then I heard the metallic click of a first aid kit being unlatched near the door to the bathroom. I turned. As it creaked open, a round tin fell into her hooves.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

She stared at it in horror, frozen.

It exploded in her face.

Glory fell back, screaming as she writhed, her hooves shredded up to her elbows as she thrashed wildly in agony. I leapt atop her, pinning her, holding her tight as I levitated out a Med-X and jammed it into her leg. She stilled enough to go from screaming to sobbing. “I can’t see,” she said around bloody and torn lips. “Goddesses. . . I am sorry. . . I am so sorry. . .”

I stared down at her as I tried to tear my eyes away from her bloody sockets. Save this one, Blackjack. No matter what, save this one. I fought to shake off the urge to fall apart. I looked at the metal embedded in her face. Oh this was going to suck. . .

“Shut up,” I said as my magic proceeded to pick the bits of shrapnel out like tweezers. She grit her teeth, trying to strangle her screams as piece after bloody piece was removed. Then I poured Sekashi’s healing potions down her throat. And there was nothing for it. . . I took out a Hydra and injected the gray sludge into her as well. She immediately started gasping and wincing as her face began to knit back together thanks to the influence of both potions. Then she opened her bloody eyes and stared at me in shock. Sobbing, she curled up tight against me as she shook. Her face still looked red and raw, but not blind or dead.

“Shhh. . . it’s okay. You’re okay. . .” But she nearly hadn’t been. “Okay. . . so the rule is. . . don’t touch anything.”

“It might be too late,” P-21 muttered as he looked behind us. “They must have heard that.”

“Yeah, well they almost killed my friend. They’re about to hear a lot worse,” I muttered darkly.

We picked our way down. P-21 found a grenade box with a live grenade inside, a bottle of Sparkle Cola tied to a bomb inside a steel crate, and three grenades rigged to a tripwire. All that was before we even reached the stairs going down to the actual subway platform itself! Three more mines were on the steps, and he slowly crawled down to them. Then I glanced up and grabbed his rump hard with hooves and magic, pulling him back.

“Stop.” I said sharply as I looked directly above him. Three little amber lights were shining on the roof just above his head. If there’d been a beeping, who would have looked up?

And then I felt him shaking in my hooves. “G...g...get off...” he stammered. I looked exactly at what I’d grabbed and suddenly felt the noxious mix of shame, embarrassment, and general horror at what exactly I’d pulled in getting him back. It was as if he couldn’t move even once I’d moved away. I wanted to give him a hug as he trembled and gasped for air; I knew that was the one thing I couldn’t give him.

“I’m sorry, P-21... it was an accident...” I muttered.

“I know... just... I know,” he said before pressing his trembling lips together as he walked away from us. “Just, give me a second,” he said as he walked back towards the bathrooms.

“Blackjack,” Rampage said in a tone mixing impressed with scandal.

“It was an accident!” I sputtered as I blushed furiously. “I hadn’t meant to grab... that... with my magic. He was about to get blown up!” I stood and started towards the bathroom. “I got to go apologize...”

“You...” Rampage said firmly as she stepped in my path, “need to disarm those mines while somepony with a lot less history, a lot more annoyance, and a lot more regeneration talks to him. Okay?” I stared at her in shock as she turned away, looking at the teddy bear on her flank as she disappeared down towards the bathroom. I frowned and snuck to the door as well. I wasn’t going to allow a repeat of Thorn. I’d bury her alive if I had to.

“Go away, Rampage,” he said in that short-breathed voice. “I’m not in the mood to talk about it, especially with you.”

“No surprise,” she replied.

“So then why are you staying?” He demanded crossly. “Why is it every mare around me thinks she can tell me what to do now! This isn’t 99!”

“No, it isn’t. And I’m not making you talk. I’m not your friend. You can keep silent and not feel guilty. Lie to my face. Beat the snot out of me, if it’ll make you feel better. All I’m going to do is sit here.” There was a soft thump, “And listen in case you do or until you’re ready to go... or Blackjack blows us all up with a well-timed sneeze.”

“I’m not going to talk about it.”

No response from Rampage.

“Go away, damn it. There’s nothing to talk about,” he said in an trembling voice. I pressed my back against the wall, my ears twitching as I dreaded what he might say. Then his breathing caught and he said, “I can’t believe she grabbed me like that. . . .”

“Well, Blackjack doesn’t do anything if it’s not spectacularly. Even groping the last buck in the Wastelands who’d want it,” Rampage said dryly, and despite myself I felt my cheeks burn.

“It’s stupid. It was an accident. I know that!” his thin voice cracked again, “I thought I was over this. . . .”

“Yeah. Funny how it’s never over till it’s over,” she said. “So, is it because she grabbed you or because she grabbed you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said in a brittle voice I’d never heard before. I was so used to him being calm and stoic. And then there was a horrible hitch in his throat, and then a sob reached my ear.

“Took you back, didn’t it?” Rampage said in a calm, mature voice so terribly different from her normal impudent tone or the snide tone after killing Thorn. “It was an accident, P-21. She saw the mines overhead and just acted. It’s what she does. And I know she feels horrible for it.”

“I know. . . . I just. . . . she killed him. . . . and she used me. . . . and. . . . I know she’s a good pony and didn’t mean it but. . . .” he broke off in a shaking sob.

“So. It’s because she grabbed you,” she murmured softly.

“I know it was an accident. . . . I just. . . . I sometimes wish she’s left me outside

99. That she hadn't tried to find me in Miramare. I feel so glad to be alive till... something... anything... reminds of me that place and it feels like I'm back there!" He sniffed terribly as I clenched my eyes shut. "And worse of all... the second she did, I was ready to... to..." he choked like he was being strangled.

"Perform?" Rampage softly offered and he sobbed again like a colt. I sat there helplessly, crying too as I listened to him right around the corner. A good pony... that's what he'd called me. He was the good one. Even Rampage, barring the murderer within her. They were all good ponies.

I was the one so cowardly I had to eavesdrop.

"I couldn't help it. She touched me like that, and it was like she was next on my breeding queue. Everything I've felt and thought and... wanted... was just gone. She touched me like that, and I was back there again," he gave a hysterical half cry, half laugh, "You want to know what I thought? What I really thought? I hope she likes it. That's what I thought! Not get your horn off me, not how dare you, not why did you do that, not even pretend like it's not a big deal..."

"You've been conditioned to think that way. It's not your fault. Blackjack is heading back there now to deal with the ponies responsible, right? You need to not blame yourself. This was a stupid accident. She didn't mean to do it. You didn't mean to react as you did. Neither of you is to blame." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to contact Dr. Helpinghoof in Manehattan. He's a lot more reliable than those Ministry of Peace hacks. I probably wouldn't have been able to stay in the Guard if he hadn't-

"Rampage. What are you talking about?" P-21 asked softly.

There was only silence, then she stammered, "I... I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about! I don't know... any of that. But I can tell you Helpinghoof's clinic's terminal number. His receptionist is Carrot Cake. He tries to sing Sweetie Belle. I... I don't know why I can or how I can... So why the hell did I just say it?" Now it sounded like Rampage was the pony falling apart, but it also seemed to be pulling him back together as well. She let out a shaky little sniff. "Do you think maybe Blackjack's assembling the deadliest therapy group in the wastelands?"

"Goddess, I hope not. Blackjack the therapist... we're really doomed." Then he paused. "You know, I haven't heard anything explode in a while. You don't suppose she's listening to us right now, do you?"

"Come on. Even Blackjack wouldn't be that dumb." I grimaced, rose to my hooves, and tried to sneak away as I blushed shamefully. I needed to find a hole and bury

myself till I sprouted some new brains. They grew like mushrooms, right? Keep them in the dark and feed them shit? Maybe smarts grew the same way. Unfortunately, I was so occupied by thoughts of fungal brains that I kicked an empty Sparkle Cola bottle.

“Blackjack!” the two shouted indignantly as I ran, but afterwards. . . there was laughter too.

Maybe there was also some hope.

“Okay. What kind of sick creature traps a baby carriage?” Glory asked loudly, blatantly deflecting every trace of awkwardness off of my screwup on the stairs. The baby carriage trap had been extremely effective, using a baby’s cry. Only a reflexive telekinetic shove by me had pushed it down into the gap between the platform before it exploded. A second later, and only Rampage would be walking out of here.

“Smart ones. It almost got all of us,” P-21 muttered as we looked around the subway platform. “And we also know that that Perch was right; these sand dogs are sitting right on top of a treasure trove of salvage to be able to set up traps like this.”

“So where are they? They have to know we’re here,” I muttered. This subway station was clearly a home. . . or den. . . of some sort. There were beds set up in the subway trains. A table with some recently opened cans of food on it. A radio playing DJ P0N3, of all things. Were they out scavenging? Raiding? Lying in wait? I walked over to a table and looked at busted open energy cartridges. There was also a small smattering of ruby flakes.

My eyes scanned the room, but my E.F.S. came up blank. I trotted to a door marked ‘maintenance access’ on the far side of the room. There was a blue bar inside. “Hello? Is anypony there?” Then I remembered that we weren’t looking for ponies.

The maintenance space was filled with electronics and strange mechanical devices. The opening door brushed against strange metallic limbs hanging from racks over workbenches that rattled against one another. I looked at the tools set neatly in order. On one workbench sat empty Sparkle Cola bottles that held a small stash of emeralds, rubies, and even some diamonds. One corner had a bed and filthy blanket covering it. I had to admit, I was tempted to take everything that wasn’t nailed down.

For some reason, somepony had taken a small plush Rarity unicorn toy and had

turned it into a pincushion. It didn't look like there was much of a need for needles in a workshop like this. There was a little sign above it: 'No whining.'

The wall by the bed was covered by papers. A lot of them appeared to be old plans and designs. 'The Victory Plaza Rail Station. Shadowbolt Tower. Tunnel 456. Luna hydro spark generator system. Tokamare Reactor Facility.' All of them were stamped 'Ministry of Wartime Technology: CLASSIFIED', 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences: TOP SECRET', or 'Ministry of Morale: FOREVER!'

Here and there were photographs of a trio of dogs. One showed them dressed in army fatigues similar to that of Macintosh's Marauders and armed with energy weapons and a lot of explosives. They were grinning while behind them smoked numerous craters. Another one showed the three standing in the middle of a half-buried ruin, bizarre and disturbing spirals carved in the walls and doors. A third, this one grainy and black and white, showed a valley that possessed a stark kind of beauty to it. There were a few more here and there of individual diamond dogs, and I was surprised by the sight of the dogs in some sort of eating contest with Twist while Vanity looked on in disgust. The picture next to it had Twist sprawled out in defeat.

The other interesting thing were the newspapers. "Ministry of Arcane Sciences declares Pleasant Valley Relocation act. Diamond Dogs to be moved to appointed land outside Appleloosa.'

Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle Invoked eminent domain to appropriate the Pleasant Valley mine works and has started eviction processes for the current inhabitants, beings known collectively as 'Diamond Dogs.' Although the natives protested the relocation extensively, Princess Luna granted the royal decree and dispatched members of the newly reformed Equestrian Army to maintain peace in Pleasant Valley and surrounding communities like Olneigh.

Twilight Sparkle said she sympathizes with the Diamond Dogs, but that the needs of Equestria must take priority. Pleasant Valley is being designated a critical M.A.S. research facility for the testing and implementing of radical and potentially hazardous spells as well as a high risk storage area for any potential by-products of the waste. She assures the Diamond Dogs that a new community for the Diamond Dogs will be found elsewhere in Equestria.

Another article caught my eye: 'Trail of Broken Diamonds.'

Military units supervised the relocation of the Diamond dogs from Pleasant Valley this week to a temporary holding camp near Appleloosa. Units from the 1st regi-

ment were deployed from Hoofington and the 99th from Fillydelphia to ensure that the Diamond Dog removal went smoothly. Despite their apparent submission, several Diamond Dogs made a futile and savage attack on the ministry mare Twilight Sparkle. Their attack was foiled by a handful of troopers lead by Big Macintosh of Ponyville, who quickly came to the rescue of Miss Sparkle and were able to subdue the attackers without casualties.

Some critics have dubbed the relocation the 'Trail of Broken Diamonds', citing the unprecedented move to force non-ponies from their homes. Legal experts have pointed out that Diamond Dogs, being non-citizens of Equestria, are not protected under law. Ministry Mare Rarity was quoted saying, 'Oh don't worry about those things. They're not like ponies, or even zebras. As long as there are some gems for them to dig up they'll be perfectly fine. Well, except for the breath, and the fleas, and their nails, oh and don't get me started on their manners!' Critics of the plan have pointed out the region set aside lacks sufficient clean food and water for the Diamond Dog population and speculate they will try to return to their homes in Pleasant Valley.

I looked at the picture of a very relieved and slightly mussed Twilight Sparkle shaking the hoof of a slightly flustered Big Macintosh. Behind them were two rows of canine creatures walking away and carrying bags and sacks or pulling wagons. Pegasi flew overhead with their guns trained on the canine creatures. Off to the side, Applesnack, Doof, and Twist were pinning three canines while Vanity tied them up.

'Hoofington - Goldenblood to welcome Diamond Dog workers for Reconstruction' and beneath it, 'Goldenblood unfit for position?' I saw one of the three from the second photograph shaking the hoof of a pale, sickly looking unicorn. The canine, his vest ripped and patched, hardly looked happy about the deal. To be honest, neither did the unicorn.

Goldenblood, once famous for his stirring 'Hoofington Rises' speech prior to his collapse on the ruins of city hall, has arranged for several of the strange Diamond Dog beings to be permitted to aid in reconstruction efforts. 'The reconstruction effort has stalled due notably to the fact that ponies are absolutely lousy with digging. Diamond Dogs possess a capability to dig that far exceed what we can accomplish with sweat and magic alone. Employing Diamond Dogs is the difference between having Hoofington completed in three years or thirty.'

A Hoofington native, Goldenblood has received increased criticism for diverting substantial resources to the reconstruction effort and has drawn the ire of aristocrats across Equestria for proposed taxes to pay for the war. His recent comments about

ending the war at any cost has drawn many to question his commitment to serving Princess Luna at the kingdom. Others question his physical soundness after his injuries—

I heard the faintest sniff from beneath the bed, breaking me away from the article. Who hides under a bed? I knew who. “Come on out,” I said as softly as possible. “I won’t hurt you.”

It took about a minute before she emerged. I’d seen the Sand Dogs in Maripony’s memory and in the pictures, but I had to admit that there was something distinctly creepy about the strange upright build of the being. Its arms hung down almost to its knees when fully upright, but nearly reached the ground as it slouched forward before me. A wet black nose sniffed constantly as she. . . unless Diamond Dog colts were in the habit of wearing dirty dresses. . . kept her eyes low. I was shaken by how thin she looked; but then, she hadn’t had a stable feeding her three recycled square meals a day.

“Hungry?” That got her looking at me, at least for three seconds. I fished around in my bag and came up with some cans of Cram. Personally, I wasn’t convinced it was meat, but I wasn’t going to eat radmeat to find out. However she recognized the can at once. I tried pulling on the tab, but it snapped off and I was left staring at it stupidly. “Damn. . .”

“I can open it, pony,” she said, holding out her hand; her other forelimb ended in a stub just below the wrist. I looked at her sheared-off stump, then nodded and floated the can to her. She sat on the bed and braced it between her knees, her remaining claws ripping the lid off the square can as easily as tearing tinfoil. She wasted no time bringing it to her lips and chowing down as quickly as she could. I feared she might choke, but she finally ate the last bit of salty pink meat and licked the inside clean. She still looked wary, “Are you going to make us leave?”

Was I? An hour ago, sure. Why not? Help Riverside out by clearing out raiders and Sand Dogs. Now? “No. No I’m not.” For some reason, that made her shake as she backed away from me on the bed with a whimper.

“Please don’t kill me,” she whimpered softly.

“What? I’m. . .” And that was as far as I got as a powerful hydraulic limb closed around my throat and lifted me from my hooves. I looked around at noth—the magical cloak hiding him crackled away before my eyes. I stared at another...canine, though this pale gray creature seemed more machine than flesh. The green eyes were quite sharp, though, as they glared at me like a balefire blast.

“Go away, pony. This is our home now! You leave or die.” From the malice in his eyes, it was fairly clear he definitely preferred the later. Metal teeth gleamed from within old graying gums as an acrid reek made my eyes roll. He wore a faded and frayed collar studded with pale rhinestones and there was a weathered dog tag that read ‘Rover.’

My first instinct was to try and blow his face off with magic bullets, but I took in how much metal he had on his skull. My magic had lousy armor penetration, and I could tell he could pop my head like a can of Cram if I didn’t kill him. “I don’t want to fight you.”

For some reason, the statement just seemed to piss him off more, “Oh, then you want us to leave? Or you wish us to dig? Or fight? Or experiment on us? Or you just wish to whine at us?” He snarled as I dangled from his grip. “Why not ponies just leave us alone?”

“I will! I didn’t know. I’ll take my friends and go. I don’t want to kill you,” I replied, and I really didn’t want to die. Somehow, he looked sour about that, but given how hungry he looked, I was glad he wasn’t adding pony to the menu.

He carried me out into the subway platform where more dogs were appearing from holes in the tracks, ceiling, and, for some, thin air. A few clearly had some sort of cloaking talisman built into their cybernetics. P-21 and Rampage were both pinned down physically, and Glory, who’d flown up to a vent in the ceiling, was kept pinned by small arms fire. Lacunae remained standing calmly behind her magic barrier with the minigun focused on the three largest and most heavily augmented dogs, driving them back with bursts of fire that sparked and rattled off their metal limbs.

“Fight’s over! We’re leaving!” I shouted.

“Not yet! I almost got them exactly where I want them.” Rampage yelled as she squirmed beneath one who sat firmly upon her.

“Fight’s done, Rampage,” I said as I glanced back at Rover. He looked decidedly sour, but set me down. Slowly the combatants released each other and I got a better look at these Sand Dogs.

This was just like Riverside. There might have only been two or three dozen at the most, and, even if the people were far stranger, there was no missing the signs of hunger, the flat sides or thin limbs. Even their augments didn’t seem to be working with as much power as they could. I saw one sand dog taking the ruby flakes from the table and brush them into a little port on their limb; instantly, the lights on the

arm glowed brighter.

I glanced over at P-21 as he was released, then looked up at Rover. “You know, there was a raider camp we took out an hour ago not far from here. They had food,” I commented lightly, and instantly saw the excited looks and heard the sniffing. Rover glanced down at me with a disgruntled little sniff, but then the old dog gave a wave of his augmented hand. About half the camp went running the way we’d come down, sniffing our trail. “Can we talk?”

“Always talking. Why can’t ponies just leave?” he grumbled as he started back towards the maintenance room.

“Because I want to help you,” I replied. I heard P-21’s groan from all the way from across the platform. “What happened to you?”

“What happened?” He froze and straightened, turning and looking down at me. His eyes seemed to glow. “What happened?” He growled softly and then turned with a snarl, flinging his arms wide. “Pony happened! Pony take home! Pony take gems! Pony take lives! Pony take world! Pony take everything! Pony tell us do this! Pony tell us go there! Pony tell Dogs shut up! And always Pony is whining about stupid Pony war!” he said as he slammed his mechanical claws into the platform. “Why is pony always whining about Pony? Piggy not whine. Cow not whine. Chicken and Dogs not whine. Only Pony is always whining about Pony!”

Okay. Somebody had issues with whining ponies. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you mad. Please. . . I just want to know how I can help you.”

“Please. . . hrmph. . .” he said with a little snort as he looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Only one pony say please and mean it, but he just use dogs too.”

“You mean Goldenblood?”

He gave a hiss, “He comes to us in desert. . . dry sandy ground. No gems; only rocks. Tunnels cave in all the time. Not home. He ask us to come to city. Dig tunnels. Pay in gems. Say city home to all that help build. We come. We dig for ponies and he pay in gems. Digging is hard and dangerous. Dogs get hurt, and Pony magic not work well on Dogs. Pony use dogs to make machine parts for Dog and Pony. But city tunnels not home either. Dogs want dogs’ home. Gold Pony say he try and help.”

“And did he?”

“He talk to Pretty Pony Princess, He try to tell us not go home. Home not home anymore. Gems gone. Nothing left. But it is home, do ponies not understand?”

Home! And we wish to return. So Gold say maybe if Dogs fight zebras, we go home. And we fight, but there are many many zebra. Then, one day, not many dogs left. We ask, can we go home now?"

He made the strangest little snuffling noise. "Golden take me home. Valley... gone. Big Pony building instead. Tunnels full of poison! Ponies poisoned our home! Our home! Dogs not poison pony home! Dogs not make Pony kill for Dogs. I go back, try to tell, but others return home anyway. Poison home is still home. Ponies call them stupid. Ponies try and make us leave." The snuffling noise increased, and I realized the old dog was trying to cry, but had lost the ability.

"Dogs know, okay Pony? It is our home! Dogs know we die there, but it is Dogs' home! Let Dogs die in our home. But Gold ask we come back to Hoofington. He say please. He say sorry. He means both. Some come in tunnels dogs dug. And we stay. Bombs fall, many Pony die, many dogs die too." He let out a growl, "But even after bombs, Pony is always telling dogs to go. Always. Always always always."

And I had too, I had to admit, feeling sick to my stomach. The moment Perch told me there were things in these tunnels with something that could help Riverside I'd taken a tangent away from saving 99, like an idiot. They'd been right to fill the entrance with mines. They'd mined aid containers and soda machines and things ponies would go after first. Even the baby basket had had a pony doll inside it.

"Pony now knows. Pony should leave," Rover said as he took the young dog's hand and returned to the maintenance room. I sat down hard and looked over at my friends and the dogs who remained to watch us.

Slowly, I stood and trotted back towards the still-open door. As I knocked, I heard Rampage say to P-21, "Told ya. Five bits... pay up."

"May I come in?" I asked as I saw Rover trying to wire together a child-sized mechanical hand. He growled faintly as he glared at the metal. Well, it wasn't a no... so I stepped inside and watched as he worked the tools with familiar skill. He opened up a tiny port and shook in a few crushed emeralds. The lights on the hand immediately lit up, the claws twitching.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I didn't understand."

He took the hand and attached it to a brace; the young dog took it and attached the device to her stump. She gave a yelp, and then the hand twitched as magic animated the metal. She stretched up and gave the old dog's scarred cheek a lick before backing away.

I fished out another can of Cram for her; Rampage didn't need all of it. Her mechanical claws tore open the can as easily as her natural ones did. She looked up at me warily. "Thank you, Pony," she said, drawing another sharp look from Rover. Then as an afterthought she added, "I'm Fifi."

I gave her a smile. Kids were kids, after all. Unless they were Zodiac colts, but still. My kindness didn't seem to sit well with Rover, who looked at me like he wasn't sure if he should thank me or not. "What do you want, Pony? You tell us where find food. We let you go. Why you stay, pony?"

"I want to help you," I said with a smile. "It's sort of my thing."

"We do not want pony help," he said, pointing a finger at me. "Pony help always hurt dogs. Always."

"Please... you need food and you need gemstones, don't you?" I thought back to Bottlecap and smiled. "You can trade! Trade for food with Riverside... and I know a pony who runs a gem mine."

"Pony does not listen," he growled as he rose and faced me. "Pony help always hurt dogs. We try trade. Ponies cheat us. Ponies steal from us. Ponies attack is. Dog can not trust pony!" He said as he looked down at me with a strange look. "Who is pony who come here and think she make everything all right?"

"I'm... Security. I just want to make everypony... everyone safer," I said lamely. Who was I to think I could just trot down here and overcome two centuries of pain and mistrust? I was such an idiot. 'My friend has a gem mine.' Oh, really? Ever heard the phrase 'too good to be true'? And I had no idea if Dusty Trails would help, or Perch would be willing to play fair.

He just looked at me with a scowl, his green eyes hard and suspicious. Then Fifi tapped the half empty Cram can against his metal arm. "Eat."

"Dog not eat Pony food," he replied sourly.

She beat the can against his arm again. "Go play, Fifi." She frowned, narrowing her eyes and banging the can several times against his arm several more times. Finally, he gave a resigned sigh, lifted the can, and let the slimy pink mass remaining plop into his mouth. He chewed, looking at me thoughtfully. "Pony thinks she can get other Pony to listen?"

"I... I can try," that was the most I could promise.

Rover scratched his white, tattered ear in a little cloud of dander. "I did not think

Pony help Fifi. I not think Security on radio real pony. Or she help dogs.” He pointed his mechanical claw at me. “We will bring. . . things. . . to trade. If village Ponies are good and fair, we will trade for food. If not...” and he just sighed. If not, then they’d slowly run out of food and gems to power their limbs. And then they’d die.

“I’ll try and convince them. I will.” I’ll do better. I couldn’t change the past, but I could at least try and do better now and in the future.

I had to admit, we were spoiled by the Miramare teleport. I’d thought that Lacunae could simply teleport us all across Hoofington at will. She firmly corrected that notion. She could teleport herself across Hoofington if she had to, with potentially one passenger. Without soaking up gobs of radiation, however, she’d only be able to teleport the five of us a few hundred feet. That was enough for us to get outside, but it left my head spinning and feeling as though I’d just gotten struck by lightning again.

Lacunae donned her black lace dress before we returned; a large purple unicorn caused far less commotion than an alicorn. She wrapped her minigun in a burlap sack as she floated it casually beside her, the weight seemingly easily within her range of handling. If I tried carrying that weapon, my horn’d burn out after five minutes!

Back in Riverside, I approached the dozen or so ponies about the Sand Dogs coming to trade. The tone was immensely skeptical. Perch outright suggested ambushing them just to thin out their numbers.

“Listen to yourself!” Glory suddenly shouted, the half-healed cuts on her face giving her a somewhat ghastly expression. “Aren’t you supposed to be ponies? Because all I’m hearing is a lot of bandit talk! Kill first! Take now! How is anything supposed to get better if ponies just kill and steal and take? It’s got to stop!”

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed, and it shut up Perch enough that the villagers seemed open enough to give it a try. The only thing they had to lose was everything.

I tried giving Thrush a hand with repairs. However, there are certain ponies who should never be given anything like a hammer or nails, and I am just such a pony. After nearly braining Oilcan with the hammer and spilling my nails into the bilge

water that'd collected from the leaks, it was generally agreed by everypony that I should go wait in town for them to finish. Glory and P-21 proved far more capable at heating up the clumps of tar that were being used to plug the gaps. I almost burned the boat down!

I think I've mentioned a few times that I hate waiting. Especially in a small town where there was literally almost nothing to do. I walked the perimeter of the food court four times, the Dealer just standing there watching me. He wasn't talking to me. I wasn't talking to him. In fact, if I could, I'd ignore him for the rest of my life. He'd almost made me shoot Glory. I still hadn't answered for that.

Something that bugged me, though was the door he stood next too; it was just a simple metal door set between a Fantastic Hoofware and Radio Stable. The symbol on it was small and seemed faded even before two centuries of exposure. Glaring at him once, I took a closer look. It was seven familiar symbols; a moon, a starburst, three apples, three balloons, three diamonds, three butterflies, and a cloud and lightning bolt. The moon sat in the center, surrounded by a ring. The six other symbols were arranged around it, and two more gray lines weaved in and out of them, seeming to tie them all together.

At the bottom, written in small letters: Office of Interministry Affairs, Riverside Branch.

This was the OIA? This looked like a janitor's access! I tried the door and grimaced as I found it locked. Well... time to see if I'd learned anything from P-21's lessons. Carefully, I knelt down and started to tease the lock with a bobby pin. Two snaps later, I was wondering if I was doing this right, when suddenly there was a faint click. I glanced up at the dealer, who simply shrugged.

Inside were stairs going down and lit by flickering emergency lighting. I tried the light switch, but there was nothing. Instead, I picked my way down into a workspace that was rather tight even to a pony who'd worked in a stable. Papers were piled high on standard issue desks amidst a few dead, dust-covered terminals. A few apathetic posters hung on the wall. 'OIA: we bridge the gaps.' And 'How can we help today?' The only one that caught my attention at all was one that read 'Do better'. There weren't any pictures of the ministry mares; in fact, the pony who did decorate the walls was Princess Luna. Her expressions varied from stern to mischievous to knowing.

I flipped through some of the papers at random. A memo from the MWT to the MoM about Spritebot interference with radio reception in Riverside. A MoI letter asking if a particular brand of magic insecticide talismans were being accredited to the MAS

or the MWT? Was the MoP inspecting all Stable-Tec stables to make sure they were accessible to handicapped ponies? Clarification from the MoM asking if the Macintosh Memorial was going to be set up in Ponyville or Canterlot. A petition for the immediate inspection of the Yellow River Detainment Facility for health violations. Damn, if only it said where that was!

As I read on, I got two impressions... one, the OIA was really boring. Really, really boring. In fact, my vision started to blur trying to keep interested in all this pointless paperwork. Really, why would anypony care about whether Mr. Horse was a Hoofington native or if the Mol preserved any zebra artifacts excavated during the reconstruction or why Twilight Sparkle had missed an appointment in Hoofington's MAS hub? Who cared? But, apparently, that was the OIA's job. And that led me to another thought...

The OIA was everywhere. They were connected to everything in Equestria. Even outside Equestria. There were memos from Little Wing Imports asking about delayed permits for zebra wares, contract agreements being negotiated with griffins to supplement pegasi forces during Winter Wrap Up, buffalo mineral access requests... was there anything the OIA didn't get stuck in the middle of? And yet, while all the focus was on the ministries, there was barely anything on the OIA itself. No pony seemed to be asking questions about its offices or practices. In fact I saw one letter that read, 'How does one join the OIA' and it had been circled and a note written, 'MoM?'

I didn't understand how a bunch of egghead pencil pushers could be doing so much unnoticed. How could Project Chimera be legal without the Mol exposing it or the MoM arresting Dr. Creepypony? Or had it been as Applebot claimed, that the ministries themselves were behind the project and the OIA facilitated? Maybe that was why they'd been shut down so abruptly; they knew too much.

I nosed into a small hallway, past two bathrooms (the yellow aid boxes within held healing potions that had melted through their bottles) and saw a smaller office with something interesting: a dead pony. In the dry air, she'd mummified almost as much as Vanity had. The black flakes clinging to the wall next to her desk and the small 9mm pistol told me this was probably a suicide.

Her terminal still hummed softly. I tapped the keys, and after a few flickers the screen came to life.

O.I.A. EMERGENCY CODE EC-1101 ACTIVE! PLEASE AWAIT FURTHER CONTACT FROM EC-1101 FOR SUCCESSION PROTOCOLS!

The terminal was stuck on that message. On a note beside it the cherry red mare had written ‘Luna is dead. Equestria is dead. Sorry, director.’ I thought of the pictures out in the main work room. Apparently, having no Ministry Mare, the OIA had latched onto the Princess herself for inspiration. Looking down, I noticed something by the dead unicorn’s horn: a memory orb. However, instead of being clear, this one was a definite warm yellow gold. There was a letter half-stained with blood.

‘I know you’re depressed, Cherry Soda. I know these are tough times. The OIA has a mission to fulfill and duties to be performed. Have faith in the Princess. Cooperate with Horse however you can. Hopefully, this will show you even I err. The password is—’ and of course the rest of the letter was blackened in blood! I screamed with frustraion and stomped my hooves, lifting the letter with a scowl.

Then I paused, looking at it. I walked to the bathroom and turned on the sink, listening to the rads slowly add up as I carefully wetted the bloodstained section and rinsed away some of the blackened fluid. I squinted, but I could barely make out the rest of the sentence. ‘... what your buckfriend refused to give you.’

Okay, now I was cursing and stomping my hooves again. I lifted the orb and squinted, thinking. Anal sex? Muffins? Diamonds? Head? Damn it! An answer? A foal? What?

I took a deep breath. Okay. Think about bucks and mares as something outside stable 99. What was something a buck gave a mare? Semen! Damn it, Blackjack! I tried to concentrate. Bucks and mares were different back then. They didn’t just schedule a time to do it; they certainly weren’t forced to do it. They had relationships. And those relationships eventually became like... like Mr. and Mrs. Cake. And to do that you had a wedding. But before you had a wedding you had to receive a proposal—“

oooOOOooo

Oh boy, somepony put this poor bastard out of his misery! The buck I was in lay on his side, and from the pain and lethargy in his body he couldn’t be long for this world. His insides bubbled with every breath, and he ached from horn to hoof. There was something that felt like a numb horn pointing in his side.

“You’ve looked better, Goldenblood,” a familiar, wonderful, intelligent voice said calmly from the doorway. My host looked slowly over at the majestic sight of Princess Luna standing in the doorway, and his lips curled in a reactive smile.

“Your majesty. My apologies for not rising but I’m afraid I’m a bit indisposed,” he said

with soft, wry humor.

“That’s alright. I’ve only been ruler for three days and I’ve had enough bowing, scraping, and ‘your majesties’ to last me a lifetime,” she said as she trotted before him and levitated a pillow, sitting neatly upon it. “I was told you gave quite a speech. ‘Hoofington Rises’? Very catchy, particularly when you keep giving it even when you were bleeding out of half your orifices.” She reached over and brushed his mane from his eyes. “Does it hurt?”

“Not at all. I suspect the zebra’s poisons burned away all the nerve endings. Painkillers take care of the rest,” he lied boldly, and from the sympathy in her eyes it was clear she didn’t believe him. But they could both pretend and not think about it. “So, to what do I owe the honor?”

“I wanted to talk about. . . Littlehorn.”

I felt Goldenblood deflate a little, collapsing against the mattress. “Forgive me, your majesty. It’s not something I can discuss.”

“You were the only survivor, Goldenblood. What happened? What really happened, besides what was in your report? I know you left something out. I can feel it,”

“It’s all there in my memory, your majesty. Every bit of horror. Every monstrous moment,” he took a breath like a bubbling kettle before he hocked up a wad of pink and spat it in the basin. It smoked.

“I know.” But there was still something left out. Something unsaid.

“So, what’s really bothering you, your majesty?”

She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. “I’m in charge of the country and a war that is consuming half the world, and everything is a mess. A complete mess.”

“So why tell me?”

“You were right, ten years ago. You were right about what we should have done. Had we just done things differently,” she shook her head and then looked at him with a firm gaze. “I know the mistakes Celestia made, but what I’m not sure is how to fix them. We’re drowning in disorganization and chaos. The entire government was utterly formed around Celestia, and everypony around me seems torn between treating me like my sister with a coat dye job or flinging their hooves into the air and crying doom.”

He closed his eyes, and I could just barely hear him humming something softly under his breath. Then he looked at her. “You aren’t Celestia.” She gave him a

wry smile, “Celestia was such an effective monarch because for a thousand years the government formed around her. Everypony could anticipate her wishes, tell her what she needed to hear, do what she needed done. You are not Celestia. The moment the bureaucrats, nobles and people realize that, this country is lost.”

“You seem to know a lot about politics, Goldenblood,” she observed. “Most of the books I’ve read about the subject start and end with Celestia. And the so-called experts just seem to want me to grant them better favors than Celestia did!”

“I spent a great deal of time in Roam growing up, and I read far more than is healthy. The zebras have a far more robust political system for selecting their Caesar,” he said with a groan as he paused and coughed that wet, retching noise.

She looked down at him and then asked softly, “What do you think I should do, Goldenblood?”

He paused and coughed up another burning gob. What was inside him? “What you need is to remake Equestria.”

She just looked at him with a dry smile, “Oh? Is that all?”

“Equestria is still in shock. Between Littlehorn and Hoofington, the entire country is in paralysis. When it wears off it will be too late to act. If you announce a reformation... reorganization... restructuring... something, it will give ponies hope in change. Confidence in audacity. Refuge in the knowledge that you are going to act. And the more different it is in appearance from Celestia’s government, the better.”

“I see. So anarchy it is then.”

“Of course not. And if you wanted anarchy, you wouldn’t have accepted the job.” He stared at her, and I felt the urge to blink, even though they weren’t my eyes. Luna closed her own with a small frown.

“I will rule. Celestia gave Equestria more than a thousand years of peace and prosperity. I will do no less.”

“Not good enough,” he replied, closing his eyes and tugging the blanket over him. He peeked out at Luna’s slapped expression.

“What?” She stammered.

“If you’re trying to run Equestria to soothe your ego and prove you’re another Celestia, then you’re going to fail, and fail miserably.” Luna’s eyes fell as her confidence melted, “And you know it too. No pony wants their lives hanging on a princess trying to one up a legacy that’s impossible to copy.” He broke into another fit of coughing.

“No one’s ever said that to me before,” Luna muttered, still looking a little shocked.

“Well, I’m dying, so I have certain liberties,” he replied, splitting up another noxious, bloody gob. He took a slow and deep breath. “For the right ruler, ponies will give anything and everything they can. They will fight to the death, sacrifice their lives, and walk into fire. We’re ponies. It’s our nature. So here is my proposal: beg an armistice and prepare to pay out the nose for peace, and abdicate as well. See what government the ponies come up with, and wash your hooves of it. Otherwise, decide why anypony should bow to a Princess that doesn’t even know why she should rule save she’s a princess.”

Luna glared at him coldly, but I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. “Our people have suffered for ten years in this war. Now it’s my chance to make things better. To make those ten years count for something! To make it all mean something. And I will do so even if it means my life! ‘Princess’ may be my title, but I am not going to forfeit my responsibilities and obligations to my people. And I will make things better! I will give the ponies of Equestria the future they deserve, at any cost!”

At any cost? Could she imagine the cost? Could he? He closed his eyes and then gave a resigned sigh. “What you need is a reorganization of form more than substance. You want to stay in charge, but you need a break in Celestia’s status quo. You’ll have to do something she never did before. You’ll have to share power, or at least make the appearance of sharing.”

“Share power? But how? Celestia. . .”

“The roles and obligations of government remain the same. Under Celestia, they were executed almost automatically. A thousand years of political stagnation will do that. Instead, you’re organizing them into bureaucracies or groups; a different form with the same function.” He paused as he closed his eyes again, and for a moment I wondered if he’d just died or something with how still he lay there. “You’re going to need help. Ponies you can respect and who respect you. Ponies with skill.”

“Well I respect you,” she said, and he looked at her and I felt his heart beat faster. “But why? Aren’t I supposed to rule directly?”

“Not even Celestia ruled directly. She ruled through inference and tradition. If she’d had to make every decision like you’re trying to do, she’d have been crushed. The government that she formed was largely automatic. What you need are bureaus or ministries who can act while you rule. They’ll screen a lot of the day to day activity. But you’ll need a figurehead for them to solidify around. Somepony that can rally the people faith and deflect their criticisms. A pony with enough ability to be effective,

but selfless enough to lack ambition. And that will not be easy to find.”

But Luna was smiling as she stared at the door. “Oh, I don’t know, Golden.” He turned his head to look at a familiar yellow pegasus with sweeping pink hair. “Hello, Fluttershy,” Luna said with a calm smile as Fluttershy gaped in stunned silence.

“H- h- h- h-“ and she finished in a squeak, her one visible blue eye peeking adorably from a gap in her pink mane.

“Fluttershy’s been nursing me along,” Goldenblood said with a fond smile at Fluttershy; one she returned as she drew up her forehooves, hiding her mouth behind them as she hovered. Her eyes darted from one to the other as she blushed terribly.

“Y... yes... I volunteer at the hospital whenever I have time,” she said with a shy smile, “I... I know I can’t do much, but I want to help out however I can.”

Luna just gazed at her with a glowing smile. “Do you think ponies would rally behind that, Golden?” Fluttershy blinked as she looked from one to the other in confusion.

I had to agree, it did seem perfect. So why wasn’t Goldenblood smiling? He spoke softly, in a near dead rasp, “I suppose they would, your majesty.”

“Thank you, Goldenblood. You’ve given me a lot to think about. In fact, you may have saved Equestria,” she said and she reached down and touched his side. A wash of magic poured through him and he gave a spasm. It felt as if a cooling wave passed through his wet, poisoned lungs. Suddenly he was able to take a deeper breath with only the barest hint of that wet rattle. When the light faded, even Luna looked like that spell had taken quite a bit out of her. “And get well soon, Goldenblood. I’m going to need you with this reformation more than ever.”

She walked to the door and Fluttershy hovered to the side. Luna gave her that clever, intelligent gaze, “Fluttershy, is Twilight Sparkle still in Ponyville? I need to speak with her about an important matter.”

“I... I think so. We were meeting there this weekend,” the yellow pegasi said as she rubbed the back of her head with a hoof.

“Thank you, Fluttershy. I’ll see you soon. I think that we’ll be seeing much more of each other in the near future. It’s time for the Elements of Harmony to save Equestria once again.” And with one last passing look back at Goldenblood, she walked from the hospital room.

“What was that about?” Fluttershy said in confusion before she smiled down at Goldenblood. She landed and brushed his gold mane from his face and then started,

“Why. . . why are you crying?”

“Nothing. She simply said I was useful,” he rasped softly as he sat up in the bed.

“Well, let me get you cleaned up and check your burns,” Fluttershy said brightly.

“Fluttershy?” he closed his eyes but I could feel the few slow tears inching over his face.

“Yes, Golden?”

“I’m so sorry. . . ”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of that, I felt as though I were flying through the air, a hiss filling my ears. Still, I couldn’t help but remember something watcher told me: I know ponies whose fuck-ups killed millions.

I’d just seen such a fuck-up. Goldenblood had given advice to Luna that she then took and applied to form the ministries. And Goldenblood had been horn deep in it, apparently. And. . .

I blinked as I stared out at the river before me, the water flashing past my dangling hooves as I hung off the bow of the Seahorse, my back hooves tied to the rail. I screamed, waving my hooves wildly as we flashed across the storm gray waters.

“Okay! She’s awake now!” Glory yelled back, waving her hooves.

“Get me off this thing!” I begged.

“I will never ever ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don’t know where I am. Ever. Okay?” I muttered for the tenth time as Glory and Rampage laid atop me, pinning my to the rear deck above the captain’s wheel. Rampage was definitely getting heavy.

Glory thumped her hooves on my head. “You better not. We were ready to go five minutes after you left, but suddenly we couldn’t find you anywhere. Lacunae finally magicked up a spell to find you. Then you were out when we really could have used you clearing out Hoofington Bridge. So. . . what do you say again?”

“I will never ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don’t know where I am. Ever.” I replied with a grumble. Apparently, while I had been in la-la land, the Seahorse had had to pass under a bridge that a slew of Reaper washouts

had managed to take over since the boat passed upriver; unfortunately, they'd had a missile launcher. I'd missed out on the fun of teleporting up and wiping most of them out. On the plus side, though, we'd added to my store of ammunition and odd weapons for resale.

Glory finally decided that enough was enough and climbed off me. I shoved Rampage off as I looked around with bruised pride. Actually...what pride? I'd been an idiot trying to get into the orb alone in the first place! I knew it; this was just my friends letting me know how much I'd scared them.

"Still, I wish you could have seen it. Luna and Goldenblood coming up with the idea for changing the government and Luna laying the foundations of the Ministries. I mean, I didn't get a lot of the political gobbledygook... but it was still amazing to see."

"Well, I figured the ministries just... happened," Rampage said as she scratched herself. "Like one day Luna asked Twilight Sparkle and her friends 'hey, wanna help me run Equestria and blow up the world? It'll be great fun!'"

Lacunae looked over with an unfathomable look.

"Well, things have to get started somewhere, don't they?" I said with a sigh as I looked at the golden orb. "Luna needed to rule, and Goldenblood told her what she needed to do to get everypony to follow her. And it worked... until the war and everything got out of hand." So why had he told Fluttershy he was sorry? Why had he seemed more keen on getting Luna to surrender and abdicate than to actually follow his ideas? And why had he given her advice at all only to seem to regret it later?

"I think all those ponies were just crazy," I said with a little nod as I put the orb in my saddlebags. Maybe it'd come in useful later, or maybe Lacunae would want to see it. She hadn't said a word when I offered it to her.

I hopped up into the wheelhouse and sat next to Thrush, who was staring ahead intently. "So, where are we, Captain?"

"We're coming up on the Fork," she said as she slowed the boat. "Dangerous spot here. We'll let the current take us in for now."

"What makes it dangerous?"

She gave me a sardonic look, "Oh, lots of things. Hoppers. Leeches. Snags. Ever see a river serpent?"

“Captain, I grew up in a stable. I hadn’t even seen clouds till three weeks ago,” I reminded her as I looked ahead. We were off the northern tip of the Core, and the river had widened to the point that it more resembled a big lake to me. There were buildings rising out of the water; streetlamps, signs, and countless smashed boats littered the water like so many toys in a bathtub. We passed by a large barge bleeding rusty rainbows from a mountain of barrels stacked on its deck. Past that, a large skywagon made a bridge between two apartment buildings standing like tall, lonely islands.

“What caused this?” P-21 asked, covering his nose with a hoof. The water reeked of iron and worse. “Balefile bombs?”

“Landslide,” the captain said simply, pointing a hoof between the buildings to the north. “Used to be a bluff overlooking the river. In the attacks, the entire slope gave way. Blocked half the river. There used to be a lot of water traffic, too; all those boats and barges just floated about and got snagged up in the flooded ruins. There’s a community, Flotsam, out here, but I think we’ll avoid it tonight unless we have to.” She looked at the scummy buildings rising around us.

“Why’s that?” I asked curiously.

“One, because I really don’t want my boat stolen in the night. Two, because I don’t want a security pony to ride out and try to save the poor fishers. And three, because they have explosives in the water and I don’t want to get blown up if you get a shooty look.” Again with the shooty look. I needed to see this look.

“Fair enough,” I admitted, curious about Flotsam and also curious about what had happened in Riverside.

Thrush separated watches, putting one of my friends with one of her crew.

We found a building with an intact roof and carefully pulled through a fallen wall. Oilcan got out a bucket and put in a few pieces of wood, and Thrush ignited it with a spell. It must be so nice to not be a one trick unicorn. In the fire she stuck a length of metal that she propped up against the bulkhead near the middle of the boat. “What’s that for?”

“Leeches. Don’t shoot if you see one. Just give it a few stabs till it goes back in the water. If you see something that looks like a big frog, shoot that if you have to, and if you see two really big eyes and a mouth the size of the boat, do everypony a favor and keep quiet so we can die peacefully in our sleep.” She said with a wink. “You watch the front of the boat. I’ll watch the back.”

She levitated an egg timer, cranked it for two hours and settled back against the frame as the rest went below and closed the hatches. Thrush and I wrapped ourselves in blankets as a veritable cloud of insects seemed to rise from the water and seek out every uncovered inch of pony flesh. The smoke from the fire in the bucket seemed to help keep them away a little bit, but I was smacking my hide raw with magic trying to swat them all. Thrush didn't seem that bothered with them.

"So, Thrush. Why'd you say you killed your dad?" I asked as I looked at the dark walls of our shelter, glad my eyes could peer through the shadows.

"Boy. You sure know how to slide into a conversation topic, don't you?" Thrush said after a moment. "We were in the Cervine Isles trying to find a new water jet talisman for the Seahorse. We snuck into a pirate camp."

"Pirates?" I glanced at her hat with a little smirk.

"Raiders on water, only not as nice. Pirates like to keep mares around for proper raping. Draw it out over a few weeks before killing you. Anywho, we got the talisman, but there were a whole slew of slaves as well. I wanted to free them. But twelve ponies sneaking through the jungle makes a lot more noise than two, and they came after us. Dad got injured and told me to take it, get the hell out of there, and make sure everypony knew he died a big damned hero. I took the talisman and abandoned him. Heard the shots, and then him screaming. Got back to the Seahorse. Sailed away." She pulled out my bottle of whiskey. . . hey! I checked my saddlebags, and sure enough, it was gone! I gave her a sharp look, but from the distant stare on her face I couldn't exactly blame her.

"So, some regrets, I take it?"

"Every damn day," she replied with a mirthless smile. "What gets me most, though is that I play it over and over, and no matter how I try and look at it, it was my choice that killed him. If we'd just left them locked up he'd still be drinking and wenching all across the ocean." She passed me the bottle and I took a pull, smacking at the biting bugs with a hoof.

"How about you?" she asked as she stoked the fire in the bucket. "Regrets?"

"A few. One big one. Broke into a sealed off section in the Fluttershy Medical Center. There were a bunch of colts and fillies kept in some kind of stasis. They'd been trapped like that for centuries, dying of diseases and injuries that couldn't be treated. They'd gotten control of the maintenance robots and killed the nurses. Skinned them. Killed whoever entered that part of the hospital. We severed their

connection to the robots. Then I had to choose whether to pull the plug or leave them locked up and trapped like that.”

“You pulled the plug, didn’t you?” she said with a smile. I nodded and she sighed. “Yeah. That’s what I figured. Because that’s the hard choice. Leave em locked up, tell yourself somepony else will take care of it; maybe they do but maybe they don’t. The fact is, sometimes there is no right choice. You’re damned either way. The whole world is like that. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

I listened to rain falling on the gurgling water outside. “So what do you do?”

She gave a dry laugh, “Say ‘fuck it’ and go on living either way. Cause part of living is being damned, and the only way to get out of it is to stop living.”

I thought about Priest and the Crusaders, Bottlecap and Dusty Trails, and even Caprice in her sick way. Yeah, each of them had screwed up somehow, but they kept going on. Was goodness just a illusion? Virtue just the best we could muddle through?

Virtue. What was my virtue? Why did a not-smart pony like myself have to think about these things? I just wanted to be better than the Wasteland around me. I wanted to leave ponies better for my helping them. I seemed to just leave them dead.

No. I’d helped in Riverside, hadn’t I? And Chapel, though by accident. I’d keep helping if I could. I’d find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go and turn Hoofington around in the process. I could do it. I had to.

If I couldn’t, then I’d be really and truly damned.

I was staring out at the front of the boat when I noticed it: a strange black mark in my mutant night vision, like a blob of night creeping along the edge of the boat toward me. Somehow, I couldn’t move or think as that shapeless mass undulated closer and closer to my hooves. It was like a black, shiny, pony-sized thing crawling towards me for succor. The mass of darkness was a thing from my nightmares, and I stared as the pointed, tapered end of it lifted and opened. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of hooked teeth glistened as it oozed its saliva from the tip. I stared, wondering if my brain had truly snapped for good.

Then the glowing tip of the iron floated past my head and pressed into that maw with a sizzle and a iron reek. The blob hissed and writhed as it fell back into the

river with a soft splash.

“Huh. Usually leeches are bigger than that,” she said in my ear before returning her iron bar to the fire bucket.

Leeches. It went on my mental list of things to hate about Hoofington. Then it was underlined, circled, and had stars put around it.

The atrium of 99 was the heart of social life in the stable. Ponies came into the open space to discuss their jobs and the few recreational activities various ponies organized. The stable picnic allowed a few dozen mares to gather, spread out blankets on the metal floor, eat some recycled chips, and pretend that we were all on the surface rather than think about our current situation.

I didn't like Daisy's mom. No pony did. She was by far the largest mare in the stable and in charge of the second shift, which put her right behind mom on the pecking order. She could be nice, but without warning she could shift straight into vicious little comments that could become painful beatings or kickings with the slightest provocation.

So, it helped a great deal that I am such an idiot when I trotted right up to her and told the biggest, meanest, mare in the stable, “Petunia, I'm placing you under arrest for beating up Daisy. Please come with me to Security for processing.” Mom, sitting right beside her, went very still.

“What the fuck is this, Gin Rummy? You put your brat up to this as a joke?” Petunia said as she chewed slowly on a gray fungal chip. A chip named ‘Go Fish’, no doubt.

“Go Fish, what are you doing?” She muttered in horror.

“Being security,” I said firmly, pointing a hoof at Petunia. She beats up Daisy! She cuts her too!”

“Fish, go back to our quarters please,” mom said firmly as she rose and escorted me from the atrium. When we were out of sight she whirled on me, “Go Fish! How could you say such things?”

“Cause she does, Momma!” I insisted, stomping my hoof as I looked up at her. “Daisy comes to school all bruised and cut up! Petunia's the only one who can be doing it. Daisy can't cut up her own flanks, can she?”

Mom looked at me steadily, closed her eyes, and sighed as she shook her head.

Without another word she led me up to Daisy's apartment and opened the door. Daisy looked up in shock, wiping tears from her eyes. Mom looked at her, "Daisy, Go Fish made a very important accusation just now..." Daisy stared at me in horror as mother asked slowly, "Does your mother hurt you in any way? Kick you? Cut you?"

And Daisy just bowed her head, "No ma'am. I get in accidents a lot. And fights."

"I see." My mother said in resignation. "And you know to report it if she does?" A slow lethargic nod.

"Daisy! Tell her! Tell her what she does to you!" But Daisy just gave me a chilling look. I'd gone from her friend to something else entirely. Something past what Duct Tape was... this was all going very horribly wrong. "Let me save you. That's what security ponies do."

"That's enough, Go Fish. Let's go. You'll have to write an apology to Petunia..."

I woke to the creaking rock of the boat and the sound of P-21 breathing nearby... and somepony else. I glanced up at the sight of Lacunae with her horn touching mine, my eyes going wide. "You have interesting dreams, Blackjack..."

"You can read my mind?" I thought at her, trying not to think of a slew of expletives to add to that.

"Like this, yes."

"And why are you reading my mind?"

"You have interesting dreams," she repeated with a tone of amusement. "And this way we will not wake the others."

I am not okay with this... I thought back at her, "Have you done this with the others?"

"Wouldn't you? I desired to see if you meant me any harm." And what about the other way around? She followed up with a simple, "I'm sorry you can't trust me yet..."

Considered what she'd just done, that statement was more than a little ironic. "Yeah, well, the telepathy thing is... freaky." And sneaky. "But you know we don't want to hurt you, right?"

"Your blue friend does. He wants to hurt all of us. And he wants to help all of us. I

cannot imagine a more conflicted male.” I sighed. P-21 still wasn’t over everything that I’d done to him. When I hurt a pony, I left scars. Deep ones. Just like Daisy. “What happened to your friend in the stable?”

“There is this one door with a faulty electric motor. She lead her mom in there... brought the door down on her head. Said it was an accident. I never went near that door again; I never knew if she was inside, waiting to crush my head like a grape.” She took her mom’s position and that was that.

“Do me a favor... all of us a favor... stay out of our heads.” I thought at her as I looked up at her.

“Of course. Good night,” she said as she pulled her horn away from mine with a parting, “Sleep tight.”

Yeah... sleep... that wasn’t happening...

In the morning, I found Glory shaking, holding one of the cold metal rods as if it were a magic wand to protect her. P-21 was as far from the water as he could get, and Rampage was roasting a chunk of leech over the coals in the fire before laying in. “What? It’s good!” she protested as she chowed down on the rubbery flesh. Another day and she’d be at her adult weight.

The Seahorse crept out into the flow, the morning glow barely starting to illuminate the clouds to the east. Everything was coated in a sickly sheen of black mold and rotten fungus; not true growth, but the only slime that could spread in Hoofington’s enervation fields and tainted waters.

Now that we were moving, I turned on the radio, hoping to hear more of the Stable Dweller and things around Hoofington. About an hour after I turned it on, the familiar voice of DJ P0N3 addressed the Hoofington region. “And to all my listeners out east, I’m afraid there are some ugly times. A veritable army of raiders has popped up in the north. They’ve hit every caravan and village from Toll to Megamart. These raiders aren’t the normal, half-starved psychopaths you’re used to, either. They’re healthy. They’re organized. And they’re eating everypony they can get their hooves on.

“So, who is responding to this menace? Well, not the Reapers. No, they got their hooves full trying to harasses river traffic and seeing who is the most badass pony in Equestria. And it’s not the Steel Rangers, oh no. They don’t interfere with locals,

and they're busy stockpiling every bullet and missile they can get their hooves on. Aaaaand it's not the Volunteer Corps, either; come on, Enclave, if you really want to help, do you have to be so incompetent? I'm not saying you're not trying, but is this the best you can do?

"Unless one of these three powers wants to pony up, things are going to get pretty brutal pretty fast. Otherwise, we'll just have to cross our hooves and hope that Security can do something about it. Because once they strip Hoofington, it's just a hop, skip and jump to Manehattan. So move your little rump if you can Security. Folks need you more than ever."

Thrush looked at me with a curious smile. "Well... you've got an interesting time ahead of you."

My mane itched like mad from all the humidity off the river, and I scowled as I looked out at the slimy buildings and bobbing ruined boats and barges. "Where the heck are they all coming from? I cleared out Withers and Pony Joe's."

"West side's always been lousy with raiders. East side of the river, there's too many ponies with really big guns for them to build up past small groups, but on the western half ponies are exposed and fair game. The Reapers don't keep their numbers down unless they get annoying; heck, half the bandits and raiders in the Hoof seem to want to join up with the Reapers." Thrush slowed and gave a barge covered in giant frogs a wide berth. "My guess is an entire village ran out of food and went raider. Not sure who it could be, though. There's a lot of little squatter villages between here and there."

"In other news, more tragedy in the Hoof as I've confirmed that the village of Riverside has gone silent. There's no activity in the community at all. No bodies, either. Whether the raiders got that far south or something else happened is unclear, but the entire town's been hit. Hopefully survivors make it to safety and are able to tell us what the heck happened.

"And I really wish I could end there, Hoofites, but if you're in the south, keep your eyes open for stripes. There's been reports of zebra sniper teams working all along the Luna Space Center and Black Pony Mountain targeting ghouls, Society farms, and even taking a few shots at the Skyport. Please note this seems to be only a small group of a tribe, and don't take it as an excuse to butcher every zebra from Glyphmark to Roam, people!"

"And while normally I would nip down for some cheese and wine at the news of Paradise getting its just rewards, I'm afraid I can't. Looks like Red Eye's put his

hooves down and has taken control of the slave market directly. So expect your local slavers to be really interested in grabbing you, your loved ones, and anypony else they can, because Red Eye wants them all. No word on what happened to Usury, but it's to my (grudging) regret to report that Redbeard was impaled on his own radio tower. Red Eye: it's called 'temperance'; look it up. I'd tell you to look up 'restraint', too, but then you'd get all hung up on the collars and chains...

"And that the news from around Hoofington. I know things are always tough, but you always hang in there. If ponies don't help each other; who will?"

I sat down hard. Riverside gone? What had happened? Had Rover decided that ponies couldn't be traded with and murdered the survivors? Had Riverside gone and invaded en masse after we'd cleared out the traps, before Rover could replace them? Or were there other raiders we'd missed that'd wiped them both out? I thought of Fifi and Granny Fishy. What had become of them? Damn it, why did this keep happening?!

Still, Paradise taken over by Red Eye? I doubted that the bounty on my head still existed. I really would be glad to stop running across Zodiacs and desperate ponies.

"We need to put in at Flotsam for an hour," Thrush announced with a sigh, more to her crew than to us. "Anchors owes me a barrel of tar and at least a case of spark batteries." She looked at us, "I'm invoking rule one. You go wandering around Flotsam and I'm leaving you here. This isn't like Riverside. Half the ponies here will shoot you in the back and claim they found you in the river. The other half will shoot them in the back. So just wait here. Tarboots and I will be back straight away."

I blinked. Why was everypony looking at me? "What?"

Skimming along the water, we approached what looked like just another logjam of wrecked barges and ships, except that these looked even more mangled and twisted. It wasn't until we got closer that it became clear that these weren't an accidental mashing. Two barges had been welded together into one immense platform, and dozens of cargo containers had been converted into rusty shacks. Four large cranes trailed in the water, and there were countless nets and smaller cables dangling in the water.

As we pulled close, one of the nearest cranes lifted a massive metal claw spraying water and mud and dumped the entire mass onto an open deck. The claw moved away, and a half dozen ponies began to pick through the sludge for anything of

value. It sure didn't seem like a very good deal, but I saw them going immediately for pink healing boxes, ammo crates, and any remotely valuable pieces of scrap.

What a life.

We pulled up, and immediately a dozen ponies looked at us with blatant speculation and sharp calculating stares. I just stood on the roof of the wheelhouse and looked back with Taurus' rifle beside me, giving them my own baleful stare. Eventually, the group mostly dispersed, but there were always eyes on the boat.

"Five minutes. No exploring," Thrush warned me as she and Tarboots hopped off and trotted towards the largest crane.

"Everypony acts like I can't control myself," I muttered as I walked along the rail, looking out at the filthy, muddy ponies. Not just filthy. Half the ponies I looked at were deformed, a bent horn here or a twisted hoof there. Some had grotesque tumors sprouting from their hide.

"What happened to all of them?" Glory asked softly.

"Taint," Oilcan replied simply. "It's in the water. There's nothing to eat but things that live in the water. They absorb the taint, and it gets transferred to anypony that eats them."

All of us glanced at Rampage. She blinked, "What? I just got disintegrated. If taint can still mess with me after that, then find me a great big barrel of the stuff and we'll see if I can die from it."

She had a point. I supposed if she got too mutated, she'd just walk towards Hoofington and come back fine.

Then there was a sound of yelling and screaming. A colt had apparently found a sealed gun case and had pulled it free of the mass. A larger scraggy mare was taking issue with his find, and lifted her hooves to beat on him as he hugged it for dear life. "Okay... not exploring..." I started to say as I rose. "Just going to kick some ass!"

"You can't!" Seabiscuit said as she grabbed my hoof.

Oilcan added gravely, "You'd just make yourself free game, and us too." I gritted my teeth in frustration.

Then there was a jerk that made the whole boat rock and I blinked as I looked around for the source.

Rampage was gone.

She landed like a candy-cane-striped meteor on the back of the mare, knocking her flat on the deck besides the terrified colt. “Aggravated assault on a minor!” She yelled as she cupped the back of the mare’s head in her hooves and slammed her face into the neck. “Premeditated foal abuse!” She slammed again. “Resisting arrest!” And a third smash that finally made the mare spasm, her face covered in blood as Rampage stood and snarled at the crowd, “Who feels like being an accessory?!”

Apparently they all did. Rusty spars of steel, hooked poles, jagged blades, and baseball bats materialized in the crowd around her. I stared as I watched her cutie mark swirl into that strange zebra glyph as she rose on her backhooves. They surged en masse, but with a hop she jumped clear over the leading edge. Then she was a one pony wrecking machine, her hooves seeking the joints, ribs, and necks of her enemies. I’d seen this kind of fighting before, in static pictures of fighting techniques.

These moves were the light side of Fallen Caesar technique, fighting with restraint rather than to kill. And she could kill with a tilt of her hooves from flat to point. Just that, and her hooves would be going through her enemies rather than bruising ribs or spraining joints... Her red stripes seemed particularly brilliant as she moved through them like an avalanche. Ponies on the cranes were rushing out now with high powered rifles. But any fight that was left found itself sprawled out across the deck.

Just like that, anypony who had a problem with Rampage left rather than face her glare. The colt had released the fallen gun case and now shook the fallen mare, “Momma! Momma!”

I saw the skull forming like it was rising from the depths.... Saw that smile on her lips....

Fuck. No.

One shot fired, passing under her ear; the hollowpoint tearing off half her face as it exited. Floating the rifle, I advanced as she fell, keeping the barrel on her. When she regenerated, I fired again. And again. And again. The entire village stared in shock as I repeatedly blew her brains out.

“Will somepony get this kid and his mom out of here?” I shouted, and then fired as she started to rise. I did not want her to get her hooves under her make me deal

with a murderous pony using Fallen Caesar style on me!

Some got their wits together enough to drag both kid and mother out of sight. Some other scumbag snagged the gun case. I hoped it was loaded with armed grenades. Finally, we were alone in the center of a large area of nopony wanting to look at the crazy mares. Rampage just lay there, and I watched as the skull seemed to dissolve into a swirl.

“Thanks,” she muttered as she sat up and looked at the red and gray smears across the rusty deck. “Woah... what’d I do?”

“Rampaged.” And thank goodness without her armor. “Do you remember?”

“I... some cunt hit a kid and... I think I was going to... ah... arrest her?” she blinked at me, owlishly before she nodded, “Yeah, I think that was it. Then it all got fuzzier and fuzzier.”

“Freeze! Don’t fucking move!” Two unicorns ponies shouted as they pointed rifles at both of us. “Nopony disrupts salvage operations in Flotsam.”

Rampage just took one look at them and then leaned forward to press her forehead against the barrel of the gun. “What, you think your gun can drop me when hers couldn’t? Go on. Try. And then, when you run out of bullets, I’ll fuck you with the butt of your own rifle.”

Okay, that was a little more disturbing than I’d anticipated. I put on my best cocky as fuck grin. “Look. Fight’s done. See to your injured, be glad they’re not corpses, and let’s forget all about this little disruption?”

The two looked at Rampage and then at each other. The striped earth pony kissed at the one pressing her rifle to her head. Finally the pair backed away. “Just... get the fuck out of Flotsam.” They finished lamely as they backed away.

Gladly. We trotted back towards the Seahorse. I’d seen all I wanted to of this place. Then I paused as I saw a pony sorting junk. My eyes were drawn to a slim black case the length of my fetlock next to a heap of bent sporks, cracked Ministry of Awesome coffee mugs, and battered plates. The buck pretended I was invisible as I pulled it out with my magic. “Where’d you get this?”

He looked at me finally, then at the case. He lifted a hoof, and I stared at the tentacles that wiggled at the end of his limb. “Ministry of Awesome skycarriage last year. Good salvage. You like it?” he asked with a hungry grin.

“Ten caps,” I said, trying not to shudder as his tongue slipped out. It looked like a

gray pipe.

He seemed to struggle for something to haggle over. Charity would have owned him, “Is very. . . ah. . . black. And shiny. Fifty caps.”

I looked at him flatly, “Ten and I’ll throw in two cans of Cram.”

His eyes lit up. “Done.”

We got back on the boat and I touched the sleek black case. There was a soft click and it opened in my hooves. Inside gleamed the massive magical shell and a folded up note. ‘Rainbow Dash, you seen anything like this before? That nut job Trottenhiemer whipped it up. Does it have anything to do with the work he did for you?’ I carefully slipped the silver bullet into my packs.

Ten minutes later, Thrush returned. She looked at Oilcan. “So, did she?”

“Leave the boat? Sure.” Oilcan said with a smile. Tarboots started to grin. “But not to explore or help anypony. Her friend decided to administer a little law enforcement and she jumped out to haul her back in. . .” then Oilcan looked at me with a disturbed little smile. “After shooting her in the head. . . repeatedly.” “It takes a lot to get my attention,” Rampage replied.

The pair looked at each other. “Huh. Well, I bet she’d leave to help somepony. You bet she’d explore. Oilcan said she’d wander off being bored. Damn. . . I guess none of us win.”

“Wait! You bet I’d leave the boat anyway after telling me not to?” I said sharply, feeling slightly hurt.

“Course we did,” she said as Tarboots passed the box to Oilcan. Her lips split in a grin. “You don’t think I’d stay put if somepony told me not to, do you?” I wanted to cry; I’d tried to be good and stay put. I had! Was I really that predictable?”

From the smirks, yes. Yes I was.

We were leaving Flotsam and the Fork behind, heading north. I admit, I was glad to be putting some distance between me and the Core. The east side of the city was full of industrial ruins rather than residential. A number of huge rusting tanks and containers rose from the crumbling buildings like fungus. Like the west side, most of the factories bore black char marks from the intense flames. ‘BOOM Inc’

rose over the largest container, spelled out on smokestacks that looked like sticks of dynamite.

I could only imagine THAT fire when the city went up.

The river was carrying us north towards a gap between two hills connected by a concrete arch. “Okay, if we can make it past Zenith Bridge, we should be okay,” Thrush said as she looked up at the structure.

“And there’s a problem with that, isn’t there?” I asked as I looked through the binoculars. Both sides of the bridge had been fortified with trailers, slabs of concrete, and sandbags. On one side was a black pony skull on a red flag; on the other side’s flag was a half-apple with an inlay of three magical sparks ringed by gears, held by crescent-shaped wings, and overlaid by a sword of war with a mouth-brace hilt.

“The Reapers and the Steel Rangers both contest the bridge, and neither side is so short on ammo that they won’t take shots as us down here. It can get kinda hairy at times, since both sides have missiles.” She sighed, “Usually we pass by at night, but that’s eight hours from now.”

“So...” I rubbed my chin. “Just speaking hypothetically here... if something exploded on the Reaper side... they’d be more inclined to shoot at Rangers than us, right?”

Thrush nodded with a smile, “Yeah, we’ve done that before... but we don’t have any missiles.” She looked again and scowled, “Shit. They’ve spotted us. Probably waiting for us to get in range now.”

They were looking at us and each other. Maybe that meant they wouldn’t be looking up.

I looked at Glory. Thrush looked at Glory. She gave a nervous little smile, “What? Why are you both smiling at me like that?”

Five minutes later the Seahorse barreled past the bridge as gatling guns hummed, missiles exploded, and grenades popped in rapid fire succession. And to think, all of that was due to one grenade dropped by one pegasus. Only one missile streaked down at us, but we powered past it as it blasted a pillar of foamy water behind us. Two minutes later, we were clear and the Reapers and Rangers were still busying themselves with pounding away at each other.

Glory fluttered to the deck, looking back. “Oh, I hope no pony gets hurt.” Given that they were both using missiles, I wasn’t counting on it.

“Look at it this way: they can stop firing any time they like,” Thrush said with a grin as we powered down the river to the north. From the rattling of guns and the boom of missiles, that wasn’t going to be any time soon.

Toll was the last bridge crossing the river. Much lower than the Zenith span, it had a section that rotated in the middle to allow ships to pass on either side. That center span held the village nestled right on top of the powerful drives that moved the bridge. Fortunately it was open, and the Seahorse just powered past with a wave at the scowling ponies whom I was sure did not like getting cheated out of a payment. The bridge past the turnstile to the west showed recent battle, though, and some of the craters were still smoking.

With the last obstacle out of our way, we powered down the last mile of river and into. . .

The sea. . .

I’d never seen the sea before. Never imagined it. Never could imagine it, not even from the little gray pictures in books I was too bored to pay attention to. A great leaden sheet of rolling water stretching as far as the eye could see. Half of it was obscured by a port to the east, but my eyes stared out further and further till my gaze reached the horizon. Far off, I could see strips of blue.

Suddenly, I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to ask Thrush to continue on out into that great open emptiness and get away from the nightmare that was Hoofington. I wanted to leave it all behind, for good.

Cards shuffled in my mind, and I let out a long sigh as I looked to the west at the large hills over the sea. I couldn’t go, no matter how much I wanted it. And it didn’t matter if I wanted to go somewhere else. Thrush’s father had been lost to pirates. The Wasteland was more than just Equestria. It was the entire world. There was no getting away from it.

“What’s that?” P-21 asked as he pointed to the east towards the largest damn ship I could have ever imagined. It was tied up to a pier but listed to the side somewhat. It had turrets mounting the biggest damn guns I could ever imagine. They looked longer than the Seahorse!

“Her Majesty’s Ship Celestia. They called it a battleship; guess what it was for?” Thrush said with a snort.

“It’s enormous!” P-21 gushed.

“The HMS Luna was bigger,” Thrush said as she pointed at a darker patch in the middle of the harbor above a rusting tower of metal. “Took a direct hit from a Balefire bomb and still took almost a century to completely sink. The Celestia’s now the local headquarters of the Steel Rangers.”

“What is their story? I get that they have power armor, but why are they in Hoofington?” I asked with a small frown.

“Well, back in the last years of the war, Applejack designed magic power armor. Soldiers that were trained in its use became an elite group. When Equestria went boom, they buried themselves in bunkers and stables and waited it out. About thirty or forty years ago, they crawled out of their base in Manehattan and started to spread. They’ve got some sort of edict to collect and protect the MWT technology, and since ponies aren’t MWT tech, we can go fuck ourselves.

“Twenty years or so ago, they came down to Hoofington. I guess Elder Crunchy Carrots took one look at the Celestia and orgasmed. If they could get the guns to work, they could take over the city. If they could get the damn thing seaworthy... hell... I don’t think any place within twenty miles of the sea would be beyond their control.”

“Could they?” I couldn’t imagine those enormous guns firing. How big were the actual shells? If it could fire for miles, even the Hoofington defenses might not be enough. They could batter down the wall and the city would be theirs. Except for the Enervation... but what if their suits blocked it? Oooooohhh... my mane didn’t like that idea at all!

“No idea. I think Crunchy Carrots just wants it working to make it work. Star Paladin Steel Rain, though... he’s definitely of the opinion that technology’s meant to be used.” She sighed and shrugged. “They’re mostly bottled up in the Ironmare base. I don’t have much dealings with them, since the Seahorse’s engine’s probably pretty high on their list of ‘Tech to Confiscate.’ I don’t plan on finding out just how high anytime soon.”

The Seahorse turned away from the Celestia towards the west side of the bay, where the land rose in high gray and brown hills. I looked back at the gray waves and the crashed and piled boats that had been jumbled together or half sunk in the harbor.

From the depths of the sunken HMS Luna, I could see the telltale rainbow glow of magical radiation. Even the sea, as vast and wide as it appeared, hadn't escaped the war. Nothing had.

"I'll drop you off at the Boardwalk. Unless you've had a sudden outbreak of sanity and want to come with us to Friendship City?" Thrush grinned widely. "Oh. it's a great place. There's this bar run by the fattest mare you could imagine, but her swill will get you messed up faster than you can spit. Pretty sure she cuts it with antifreeze."

I knew she didn't want us to split up. We were a lot alike, but she had her boat and her crew. I had my... whatever it was. Quest? Mission? Brain Damage? "Ooooh, tempting. I normally never pass up liqueur that makes me blind, but I've got a long overdue appointment back home." Ahead, we were approaching something like a carnival set on some long wooden piers. A huge Ferris wheel bearing the rusted face of Pinkie Pie grinned out at the harbor with an impudent little wink while a wooden roller coaster leaned perilously out over the water.

Thrush carefully maneuvered the Seahorse to a rotten stair at the end of pier. It was rickety, but we were able to climb up to the top. My PipBuck pinged softly. 'Boardwalk' appeared in my vision.

"Take care of yourself, Security. I look forward to having another adventure with you in the future," she said with a grin and a little wave.

"You too, Captain Thrush. Don't get sunk," I replied then frowned, "Or shot. Strangled. Raped. Disemboweled..."

"I'll stay safe," she replied with a laugh. The talisman at the rear of the boat hummed and hissed, and on twin jets of water the Seahorse pulled away and set out towards the open sea.

I sighed softly, watching her go.

"You wanted to stay?" Lacunae said softly.

"Of course. I mean, she has a life that's exciting and not filled with one messed up nightmare after the next." I checked my rifle and swept it across the Boardwalk. Nothing in view, nothing on my E.F.S. Had I actually gotten lucky twice in two days? I really wanted to get back and play a game with Rivets and Merriweather if this kept up. All their chits would belong to me.

Goddesses, had I once actually thought little favors on paper were the most important things in the Wasteland?

Carefully, we made our way down the pier and into the amusement park. The massive wheel creaked softly in the wind as we passed beneath it. There was an army of raiders operating somewhere around here. Maybe some of them were around Boardwalk?

They were. Only they were dead. Really really dead. Somepony had tied three of them to a rail and then eaten them... alive, apparently, from all the blood spatter and how the wire used to tie them had nearly cut their hooves off in their struggles. Congratulations. There were ponies in the wasteland more fucked up than even raiders. I just hoped we didn't run into them between here and 99.

The path home had an interesting sense of déjà vu behind it. Despite the fact we'd run in an entirely different direction, I still kept looking for the farm with flooded fields or the ruin where we first met Watcher. I was also keeping an eye on my E.F.S. for raiders. We kept coming across signs of them: a bloody Brahmin skull hammered into a tree. A pony stretched over a stump before being eaten. I didn't check that closely, but I couldn't imagine that had been the only thing done to her. The broken soda bottles near her hindquarters were evidence of that.

In once clearing, we encountered two bucks completely torn to pieces, the remains thrown like garland over the dead trees and thorny bushes. Even their skulls had been pulverized. The only thing not destroyed were their genitals. The specificness of that carnage made my mane crawl. I didn't like it. These psychopaths were way too close to my home, but I needed to check and make sure it was safe before hunting these fuckers down.

Then I spotted it. The mine door was still intact; even Deus hadn't blown it off its hinges, apparently. I picked my way towards it, looking down. The remains of raiders lay in heaps outside the... No. Not raiders. Brahmin. I looked towards the door, a dread settling upon me.

I couldn't hear the voices of my friends as I stepped through. The short dark tunnel downwards was filled with a sweet stench of carrion. Down and down I moved, faster and faster, ignoring the shouts of my friends as I raced to the bottom. If the door was open, if the raiders had gotten inside... but no. I gave a sigh of relief as I saw that door was closed and secure. Perhaps the raiders had tried but failed. I smiled as I rested my head against the metal surface.

Lifting my PipBuck, I activated the Overmare's override for the door. There was a

mechanical groan, then a hum. Finally, I could see mom... Midnight... sleep in my own bed... play a game with Rivets.

I was home.

A blast of hot, dank air hit me... I'd been outside for so long that the dankness made me gag. I heard shouts from behind me, but I didn't care. I toggled in my mom's tag and was astonished to see that she was in the atrium. Right through those doors... I walked to them and squeezed through the gap before the door finished opening.

"Hey everypony! Guess who's..." I stared at the severed head of a mare... rotting lavender hide hanging in slats, striped purple and red mane spattered with dark bits of gore. It was speared on a shorn-off pipe with her PipBuck locked around it and the sign 'Traitor,' written beneath it. Splayed torsos were nailed to the wall, guts and entrails dangled from the overhead rails like streamers. The black-brown stain of blood covered every wall, and from the halls off the stable came a low mad giggling.

A hiss crackled over the speaker, and I heard the Overmare's voice. "Welcome home, Blackjack. We missed you." Her mocking giggle rose higher and higher as I began to scream.

The raider army was Stable 99.

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk added: Light Trot – You are agile, lucky and always careful; or maybe you just mastered the art of self levitation. Either way you never set off landmines or floor based traps.

22. Damned

“You’ve got to get into the spirit of things! After all, this is your home!”

“Not anymore.”

Death.

I’ve seen a lot of it. I’ve seen old death in fields of bones where soldiers were left to decay or dried-up bodies stuffed in closets for centuries to mummify or rot. New death in the ponies I’ve shot, cut, smashed, or crushed. Casual death, as casual as blowing the head off a raider because she’s a raider. Merciful death in a mare killing herself to escape the agony of dying in a wall. Sudden death in a door crushing a stablemate. Slow death in scavengers dying around Flank. Meaningless death in a mother getting run through for being mistaken for a long-dead mare. And cruel death in a comforting hug that transformed into a deadly embrace.

Through it all, I’ve tried to find a line. I’ve worked to keep to a standard. Struggled up the slippery slope. I’d only kill the bad ponies. I wouldn’t kill the helpless ones. I’d do better. I’d be kind. Be strong. I’d hang in beside my friends. I wouldn’t allow myself to become an executioner.

Now I’d returned home. It wasn’t a perfect home. In fact, it was a pretty monstrous one. We’d done horrible things here. All of us. Everyone was complicit. But I took solace in the hope that all it would take was an outsider’s view, a fresh perspective, and the mares of Stable 99 would realize their mistake. They would go out and become a part of the world again. They’d work to make it better.

Instead, they’d made it lunch.

The disease Glory had discovered, that the Enclave were developing, that I’d encountered face to face in Tumbleweed and farmers, had found its way to Stable 99. The Overmare, who I’d assumed dead and gone, had clearly become one of its first victims. Her laughing cackle rose higher and higher over the intercom as she pranced in front of the armored window, her pale legs covered in bites and sores as her bloody red lips curled in glee.

My home had become a nightmare. Stable 99 had a population of five hundred ponies. With one germ, a third of the known population of Hoofington had transformed into a mass of psychopathic killers. Worse, these were physically healthy, armed, organized, and relatively trained psychopaths. And they’d been hitting cara-

vans and villages, no doubt bolstering the stable's armory with whatever they could take.

Since I'd stepped out into the Wasteland, I'd struggled to find my virtue. Was it justice? Courage? Perseverance? Idiocy? I'd struggled against the Wasteland so hard that it had become personified in a hallucination that seemed determined to test me and push me towards misery. Perhaps the Dealer wasn't trying to break me, though. Perhaps he'd been spending all this time trying to get me to accept the truth:

My virtue is Death.

And right now? If the Wasteland needed an executioner... then I'd be a fucking executioner.

There were no words I could say. No songs I could sing. No refuge from the sight of my mother's decapitated head spiked in the middle of the atrium as giggling, laughing ponies I'd known my whole life spilled from the hallways leading to the large vaulted chamber. They wore security barding stained black and rust brown from coagulated blood and decorated with spikes and spurs of scrap metal, chopped off hooves, hooks, chains, and other vicious implements and trophies. No escape was offered from the metallic stench and sweet reek of slowly drying blood and putrefying flesh.

I had two ten millimeter submachineguns, each holding thirty rounds of twelve gram ammunition per clip with a firing speed of ten rounds per second. Both came out of my saddlebags as the raiders charged towards me, shrieking in delight. The first I saw was Dewdrop. Morning shift, nice and calm and professional pony. Her lips were now smeared with blood as a strip of pony meat dangled out the corner of her mouth. In three seconds, I sent sixty rounds at her and the deluge of ponies behind her.

Not one dropped.

Of course not one dropped. My aim was shit, and these weren't ponies that had been emaciated and weakened by exposure to the wasteland. These were healthy and robust ponies wearing body armor. They had access to Med-X, Buck, and other controlled substances kept in reserve for an incident. I ejected the clips and slammed fresh ones home, then slipped into the calm of S.A.T.S. I could see every inch of Dewdrops face, those purple irises surrounded by sick, piss-yellow sclera

and pinprick pupils. And in that magical, decelerated sight, I could watch in perfect detail.

Six rounds coated her faceplate in webs of cracks and chips.

Six more shattered the plate into jagged and broken polymer chunks.

Six more transformed the face of a mare who could balance three stacked food wafers on her nose into strawberry jelly.

Six more, and I watched as the pulverized remains tumbled from her neck and bounced across my hooves, her body crumpling like a broken toy.

Goodbye, Dewdrop.

“Blackjack, come back,” Lacunae’s voice whispered urgently in my mind as time returned and I focused the remaining rounds on Shuffle and Primer. Their shotgun blasts slammed into my armor as I raced to the side, flinging away the smoking clips as two more lifted from my bags and slammed home. More shots beat my plating, shoving me around. I ignored the pain, ignored my friends, and let the rage sweep me along with its own terrible poetry.

Pony, Pony, rage resound

In the stable underground,

What immortal horn or hoof

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Primer staggered as the stream of bullets crushed and snapped her forelimbs, but still she came on. Shuffle raced around behind me, blasting at my combat armor. I felt my bones groan in protest as I rose on my hindhooves to meet Primer. Then we met, and I grappled with the mare who’d taught me firearms, her head turning to bring her automatic pistol in line with my face, blue and yellow eyes wide with glee and thrill as the hot, reeking barrel pressed against my cheek.

Two SMGs pressed their smoking hot barrels against her ribcage, and without blinking I sent the remainder of the clips into her chest cavity. She folded against me, her jaw trying to work the automatic to take me with her. I dropped the exhausted SMGs and seized her weapon as life left the pony who taught me to never waste ammunition.

In what fallen city or land

Did your spirit break so grand?

How much pain did you endure

To protect and life secure?

I whirled as Shuffle reloaded her shotgun, the yellow unicorn mare fumbling with her ammo; madness hadn't robbed her of that. She was always better on the dance floor than on the firing range. Her screaming laughter speckled the inside of her visor with pink globs as I charged in. She ratcheted a round as my magic scooped up Dewdrop's helmet and flung the bloody-maroon contents across her visor. She shrieked, firing wildly and blindly as she scrabbled to lift her helmet's face shield with her hooves. She managed to get it up.

She stared down the barrel of my gun as I stamped it against her eye and sent the bullet to obliterate a lifetime of amazing dance moves. Primer would have been so proud.

And what friends and what love

Could lift your heart up above?

And when your tears began to fall,

What dread sorrow held you in thrall?

My friends were fighting behind me, screaming and shouting my name like distant ghosts beckoning me. More ponies were coming. Friends. Acquaintances. Rivals. Ponies I barely knew or recognized save that we'd once shared a meal at the cafeteria or I'd taken a report on a complaint or saw them in the hallways from time to time. S.A.T.S. recharged, and I slipped into it to put three automatic rounds into the mare that worked the Cafeteria on evening shift and always managed to slip in a little more sugar than rations allowed. She staggered and twitched, her eyes widening in an expression of lucid wonder before I blew out her throat in an arterial spray.

More ponies were coming now. They came with mad giggles and jeering cries. Their familiar faces stretched into caricatures of the ponies I'd known. They tittered madly through bloody grimaces as they advanced on me from both sides. I felt the distant wet sensation of blood on the inside of my armor; I ignored it. Like I ignored the screams of my friends, the frantic whispering in my mind, or the shuffle of cards within my soul. There were five hundred ponies that needed killing.

What the shotgun? What the flame?

In what torment birth your shame?

That the rifle? What dread eye

Guides your bullets as they fly?

My friends fought in a knot behind me. Rampage rampaged in armor still slightly too large for her frame but still a spiked wrecking ball. She was as strong as ten ponies, but she had ten blasting her and ten more shoving back against her armored sides. Lacunae swept the minigun like a magic wand, its tip sending out a line of sparkling death that made the pack surge back and forth in a sick unison while her shimmering shield deflected their shots. Only the occasional explosion announced P-21's presence as blasts and bursts sent knots of them reeling. But they had potions protected from enervation by the stable's shielding, and I watched bloody holes close as they drank and rallied.

Glory flew from balcony to balcony, trying to draw fire up into the air of the atrium as she circled and darted from one side to the other and blasted magical light at everypony who tried to use the higher platforms to fire down at us. I wondered if it was easier for her, not knowing that she'd just killed Text Book, the worst teacher in Equestria and the only one that I'd ever known. The one who'd who tried to teach a little filly about a war, ministries, and the mares who ran them.

I felt a stab in my rear left leg and looked down at a filly just old enough to have her cutie mark. She was jabbing a carving knife through a gap in the plates. I looked in her wild diseased eyes, wondering what her name was. What was her job in 99? Who was her mother; was she on evening shift? What did she like? What did she dream of?

Then I realized that none of that mattered; I brought the dragon claw across her unarmored throat like it was water. She looked down in confusion at her own blood splattering across her forelegs, then she looked at me as her gaze unfocused, the knife slipping from her slack mouth. Yes. That's your blood, sweetie. And then her eyes half closed as she curled up for an endless nap.

When your guns and pistols roar

And promise doom and death in store

Do you smile, your work to see?

Do you kill, to be set free?

I was failing. Falling. There were too many in the room, all armed... all armored... all family. They rolled in front of me in a wave, their own S.A.T.S. guided shots cutting into me like knives as I struggled onwards. My shotgun roared, the barrel

now glowing a cherry red. Angles, one of the structural engineers, slammed into me wearing cobbled-together armor from her workshop. The spikes plucked at the holes in my armor as she bit at my throat. I'd cheated off her math homework for years; she'd known. She never hid it. Shoving her back, I plunged my dragon claw into her eye and kept pushing till the back of the socket gave way and the curved tip pushed deep inside her skull.

Thanks for the answers, Angles. . . With each mare I killed, I killed a little more of myself.

Pony, Pony, rage resound

In the stable underground,

What immortal horn or hoof

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

P-21 slammed into me. I wished I'd made him get some barding too. His sides gleamed with blood from bites, cuts, and kicks, yet he was still on his hooves. Goddesses, he was tough. He'd endured a lifetime of this. He fired Persuasion low, the grenade skipping between my hooves to bounce between the ponies in front of me. The blast knocked a near perfect circle up and out. Some died. Many screamed. But far far more laughed hysterically at the slaughter.

He pulled out a purple bottle and held it up to me. I stared at it dumbly before I realized it was a healing potion taken off one of the fallen. 'Is there a plan?' his eyes begged me. Even with all his hate, even with all his pain, he hadn't wanted this. Not this.

But there wasn't a plan. There was nothing at all but blood and death and giggling madness and the mindless fire we returned to it. Simply shoot, and shoot, and shoot...

And then he was grabbed, his tail yanked as his hooves skittered on the bloody floor, and he was pulled into that mass of raiders, of mares who had used him in the worst possible way. Rampage struggled on three limbs as more and more raiders piled onto her. Lacunae's shield disappeared in a flash as her minigun went from weapon to bludgeon before she teleported away.

And then I was falling as half the stable disappeared in red, my legs folding beneath me as an odd numbness spread through my left side and the world sounded like I'd dunked my head under the water in the tub. I wanted to keep shooting. I did. But my magic didn't seem to know what to do with triggers or the like.

Glory descended, screaming through her tears as she landed atop me, her gray wings spread wide as if to shield me from the world as her beam guns flickered weakly, failing from overuse. I could only lie there, the stable spinning around me as blood poured down my neck. Fly away, Glory. . . . Fly away. . . . Go back to Chapel. . . please. . .

And then Rivets and Midnight came out of the crowd, and they were screaming and firing and dragging me away to join mom. I was so tired. The wasteland wanted to know when it'd broken me?

Consider me broken.

“So. Is this it?” Watcher asked me as I lay on a filthy mattress, listening to the rain patter on the roof as I sat in a heap of my own excrement, vomit, blood, and worthlessness. A terminal flickered on the desk with a simple message: >Terminate Power: Y/N? The Dealer calmly, quietly, looked on with tears in his eyes as he slowly shuffled the cards between his hooves. “Are you done?” asked the little bug robot.

“What else is there?” I asked as I lay alone in that room. “I’ve failed.”

“You think you’re the first?” Asked the robot. “You think you’re the worst?”

“No,” I muttered softly. “It’s not a fucking contest, Watcher. I’m tired. I’m tired of evil, fucked-up shit. I’m tired of a world of evil, fucked-up shit where no matter how hard I push there’s something worse to push back. I kill Deus and get a new Project Chimera monster. I try and help the Sand Dogs and wipe out Riverside. Every step forward I take comes with three steps back.”

“You don’t live for the evil, fucked-up shit, Blackjack. You live for the good parts. You live for the parts that matter,” Watcher told me as he hovered overhead. “Only an idiot lives for the misery.”

I closed my eyes, feeling the cold, reeking vomit under my cheek as I curled up a little tighter. “And what if there aren’t any more good parts, Watcher?” I whispered softly.

“Then. . . you fight like hell to make some,” Watcher replied. “You fight till you’re out of bullets. You fight till your limbs are broken. You fight for your friends. You push and bite and you don’t give up till things are right again. Are things right, Blackjack? Are you happy with how things are right now? Is this it?”

I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t do anything but look at the Dealer

as sad tears ran down his cheek and he slowly rose, his worn cards fluttering around his hooves. "I'll be outside when you're ready," he rasped quietly as he walked to the door and stepped out into the rain.

"Damn it, Blackjack!" Watcher shouted at me as I slowly lifted myself to my hooves. "We need you! P-21 needs you! Rampage needs you! I need you, damn it!" His tinny voice crackled as he fluttered in my face. I felt the chunks of foulness oozing southward. "Fight! We can't do this without you!"

"I can't fight anymore. All I do is get ponies killed. The list just gets longer and longer," I said quietly as I walked towards the door. "Time to pay the price. . ." A pain grew, sharper and sharper as if something were being bored into my skull.

"Damnit, Blackjack! I won't let you die!" Watcher screamed with Glory's voice. "I'll save you. . . somehow. . . just like you saved me. I can't lose you, Blackjack. You're all I have left." I clenched my eyes shut as the pain grew and grew and it was all I knew. My whole world was pain.

"Got it!" I heard Midnight's shaky, triumphant cry as something was pulled from the side of my head. There was a ping as a glowing, bloody bullet was tossed into an empty tin can next to my writhing body.

"Give her another dose of Med-X," Glory instructed. "I'd even use Hydra if we had some. . ." she said as I squirmed against the ponies holding me down. "And get those healing potions inside her!"

"Hurry up," Rivets rasped as she pinned me down. I didn't feel the prick, but I did feel the numbing relief as the pain was taken away. A metal funnel was lifted to my lips and forced between my clenched teeth. The slightly bitter tang of healing potion dripped down my throat. I swallowed reflexively. More of the pain went as I drank along, injuries going away as the healing magic spread through my body.

Finally, I relaxed. The whole side of my head hurt, but it felt like my body was coming back together again. "What. . ." I muttered weakly, looking up at the gray earth pony, the black unicorn, and Glory. "What happened. . . why'd my head hurt?"

"Are you asking about charging into a stable of raiders, or the part where you got shot in the head?" Glory asked with a mixture of new relief and old irritation. "Didn't you hear P-21 warning us to slow down? That something wasn't right?"

"I think. . . vaguely. . . but I wanted to make sure the stable was closed. Then

everything went sort of. . . fuzzy on me.” I blinked as I sat up, wincing as I touched the side of my head. “I got shot? But I was wearing a helmet!”

“Which is why you still have a head,” Midnight said as she floated my helmet to me. Actually, I’d gotten shot in the head multiple times, judging by the dings and scrapes. One round, however, had punched through the armor and straight into my head. I glanced at the bloody round in the can. .308 armor piercing round. What I’d use, if I hadn’t been in over my horn killing. . . killing. . .

Oh Goddesses. . . my heart started to pound faster and faster as I realized what I’d done. Dewdrop. Shuffle. That filly with the knife. I’d killed them. . . I started to fall apart in front of everypony. No! I couldn’t do that now. They couldn’t take it now! I needed to hold it together, as tightly as Glory hugged my hoof in her own.

Her question saved me from a complete meltdown “What happened here?”

Rivets looked at Midnight and then at me before, then the repair mare spoke slowly. “Well, you had us evacuate down here to the maintenance levels, and for a while there were shots and bangs. Some of the invaders tried to get downstairs, but we used pipes, horns, and hooves to fight them off. Then everything got real quiet, and we waited for somepony to come and get us.” Because mares in Stable 99 did what they were told. I’d told them to hide.

Midnight looked at me with a solemn little smile. “There was shouting and fighting, and soon there was shooting. The Overmare had been. . . attacked. . . and she said that you and your mother were traitors. That you had let the raiders inside. But I’d heard the transmission on your PipBuck. I knew she’d been sending and receiving transmissions from outside. She called me a traitor too and said I was going to be arrested.”

Rivets nodded gravely. “So, I figured we’d just sit tight till we figured out what to do. Some ponies went topside, but most of us were trying to figure out how to get answers from the Overmare.”

“Why didn’t you just arrest her?” Glory asked with a little frown.

“There’s no system in place for it. No precedent,” I explained, then realized that that wasn’t completely true.

“Well. . .” she said softly, but I knew her well enough to know she was thinking ‘that was stupid.’

“The last time somepony tried overthrowing the Overmare, the stable was almost

lost,” I added, glad for the mental distraction. “It’s a really big deal here.” That mollified her a little. “So what happened?”

“Well, at first the Overmare just sent snippy little messages that we were all traitors and in rebellion and stuff. . . but then she started to get creepy. She spent one whole day just giggling into the intercom. At first, we were sure that somepony up there would realize she’d cracked a seal and lock her up. . . only they were getting creepy too. She said that if we didn’t want to starve, we’d have to go up and be punished. We’d have to. . . eat. . . dead ponies. At that point, we improvised what weapons we could,” Rivets said, gesturing to a nozzle attached to a steam cleaning pack used to scrub the reactor.

I thought about that. I could see an infected Overmare demanding we eat the dead. Worse, I could see ponies doing it, too. She was the Overmare, and some ponies would probably slit their own throats if she asked them to. Or slit others’.

“Poor Marmalade. . . she’d come down here, too. She told us that the Overmare had ordered a ‘victory meal of the dead.’ It was disgusting. . . but it was an order. Anypony who didn’t eat the meat. . . became the meat.” And Stable 99 mares were used to following orders, “Then she got sick. She kept giggling and biting herself. She tried to eat her own legs.” Rivets shuddered as she drew in an uncertain, halting breath. “I had to put her down. . . never imaged doing something like that.”

Glory could sympathize.

The gray pegasus rubbed her nose with a wing. . . . Something that both my old friends found fascinating. “It looks like the disease causes increased aggression and an insatiable urge to eat protein. Like likes like, so anypony who doesn’t eat becomes part of the menu. Thus the disease gets spread. Once the cannibalism occurs once, there’s an urge to expand the infected. Pretty fascinating social vector,” she muttered. I tried not to scowl. She was the only thing holding me together right now. I didn’t want to think about P-21 being up there. . .

Assuming he was still alive at all, which I was, because I’d lose my mind otherwise. “So, what have you been doing?” I asked.

“We’ve been living off all the old stored food that was shoved down here after the incident, trying to figure out what to do next.” Midnight looked at Rivets with uncertainty. “We were so glad to hear shooting; they’ll sometimes bring ponies in from the outside, torture them, or let them join. I think the Overmare just likes having us down here, slowly starving. She keeps trying to bait us with food, but we’re not desperate enough to come out yet.”

“How many ponies are down here?” I asked as I sat up and finally took stock of our surroundings. We were in Ventilation Maintenance Three, the processors humming their unending purr as they moved and purified the air of the stable around us. I looked at the table I lay on, now smeared with my blood, and at the precious playing cards now scattered across the floor. I looked out with my strange mutant eyes and saw, through the flickering lights, dozens of scared eyes staring back at me. Slowly, I rolled off the table, trying not to step on the fallen cards.

The hall beyond was filled with ponies. Dozens and dozens.

“Three hundred and fifty. . . Three hundred eighty?” Midnight asked as she looked at Rivets for confirmation.

More than half the stable? Much more than half! I felt struck by lightning. . . okay, actually I felt shot in the head, but I pretended it was lightning! Maybe that lead would do my brains some good! Unfortunately, healing potions hadn’t magically made the hole in my head completely heal, and I found myself staggering to the side, fighting for balance. “I need a plan. Right now. Something that doesn’t involve the two of us fighting off fifty raiders apiece.”

“We have one. . . sort of,” Rivets said as she walked over to a big, inactive arcane machine and popped it open. “You remember the incident, Blackjack?”

“I have brain damage, so you’ll probably have to be specific,” I said as I stepped next to her and looked at a talisman shaped like a pinwheel around a gemstone. Ugh. . . why’d my head hurt so damn much. . . oh yeah. . . brain damage.

“I’ve known that for a while,” Rivets smirked. “Most folks don’t know that, when the incident occurred, the stallions sabotaged one of the air purification systems. My great grandfather was involved in it. He left notes, just in case.” She reached her head into a saddlebag and pulled out a very old book stuffed with added pages, then dropped it on the floor and hoofed it open. “Normally, the talisman converts carbon dioxide and any contaminants into oxygen.” She reached out and tapped the book with a hoof. “According to this, this talisman. . . doesn’t.”

“So what does it convert it into?” I asked as I leaned in towards the sickly green gemstone.

“Chlorine,” she said simply, and I heard Glory gasp. I looked at it more closely.

“Chlorine, huh? And what’s that do?” I asked as I reached out to tap the glyph with my hoof.

“Blackjack! It’s a very poisonous gas!” Glory blurted. My hoof froze inches from the

green stone. Of course it is. Slowly, I pulled my head away from it. Glory gaped at Rivets. “How did he even do that? I’ve never heard of sabotaging an air purification talisman to do that.”

“He doesn’t go into detail, but apparently, you go far enough back, and my family worked for one of the ministries doing all kinds of sneaky, hush-hush stuff. I’ve got recipes for napalm, homemade explosives, thermite. . .” at my ‘remember-Blackjack-isn’t-a-smart-pony’ look, she amended, “Stuff that burns good, stuff that goes boom, and stuff that burns through just about anything.” Rivets chuckled as I flipped through the book. Lots of arcane sciency formula thingies that were way over my head.

“Unfortunately,” she said with a sigh, “chlorine is a heavy gas, so we’d have to close off all lower return venting feeds while the talisman is active. That requires a command from the Overmare’s terminal and confirmation from the head of security and a maintenance supervisor.” She patted her hoof against the brass machinery as if consoling that it that this wasn’t its fault. “So that’s where that plan hits a snag. Right now, if I turned it on, we’d just gas ourselves first and they’d have plenty of time to clear the upper levels.”

“The alternative is somepony sneaking through to the armory. They’ve got so many weapons up there that, if we could capture some and blow the rest, maybe we might have a shot. That’d probably be suicidal, though. They’re watching every inch of Security.”

“Not if we found Lacunae,” I said, looking at Glory with a wide grin. “Listen, Lacunae can read memories, right?”

“She can?” Glory’s eyes went wide. Crap, I hadn’t filled her in on that.

“She told me she can,” I amended quickly. “If we find her, then she can read my mind and whisk us straight into the armory! Then she can teleport the guns back down here. If we’re really lucky, we could have all their weapon stores down here before they know it. We can take back the stable without gassing anypony!”

“But where is she?”

“She teleported away, but I bet she’s somewhere close. I don’t think she’d leave unless she knew we were dead. The Goddess still wants me for something. Maybe in the tunnel, or right outside, where she could watch but still get away if attacked,” I said thoughtfully. “Then we just need to find P-21 and Rampage.” With any luck, Rampage would have taken over the Raiders through sheer personality. I always wondered how exactly Deus cowed the others into obeying him. Maybe they’d been

infected but not completely gone.

“Blackjack... P-21...” Glory began softly.

“He’s alive. All right?” I said sharply, frowning at her. “I can’t believe he’s dead. He’s too clever and tenacious to die. So until I see his corpse, he’s alive.” He had to be alive. I owed him the Overmare’s head for all he’d done. Then I blinked. “What about the males?”

Rivets looked at me in confusion and said in scorn, “What about em?” My eyes must have flared like the pits of the damned, because she instantly balked, raising her hooves as she stammered, “They’re... I think they’re okay! Maybe! When everything was going crazy I heard Gauze telling Crutches that they’d barricaded the door with their bunks. They’re still using water in Medical, so I suppose they’re drinking out of the toilets or something.” Midnight at least had the decency to look a little upset at that.

“Right,” I said, feeling better. “Okay. So the plan is... find Lacunae... get guns... take back stable... let P-21 turn the Overmare into a piñata for the males... and then have a party before getting to work making 99 a part of the Wasteland. In a good way.”

Glory raised a wing. “Um... yeah. Question... how are you going to get out of here to find Lacunae?”

Yeah... this part. This was going to be messy. “We’re going to need Marmalade.”

Raiders are not stupid. They might be brain damaged, over-aggressive monsters, but then so am I. The sight of a yellow mare in filthy security barding, her mane coated in gore and grease, stepping from the hatch with unsteady steps and giggling incessantly, gave them all pause. A unicorn horn dangled from around her neck, a contrast to the orange jars on her flank. The welders goggles she wore were odd, but then most raiders seemed to have a sensitivity to light. She laughed, looked at them and their guns, and laughed some more before shuddering and biting her legs hard enough to draw blood. “Hey...” she giggled... “Got anything to eat?”

As Glory said, like likes like, and the raiders stepped out from around their barricade to approach with their own eager and enthusiastic grins. “Are they fucking dead in there, Marm? Finally fucking dead?” the closer one asked as she looked at the cutie mark of a mare she knew. She was Angelheart, one of the meekest mares I’d ever

known... actually, she'd been a little annoying before. Now she had decided to screw bits of pointy metal into her forehoof.

"Nooooo..." the yellow mare giggled, "They're finally pissing themselves in the deepest holes since their hero is dead in the head..." She rocked back and forth. "I think they're just about ready to join us..." A look of relief passed between the two.

"About time. Once you eat... it all get so much easier... it's not sick... not sick at all!" She laughed in glee.

"Yeah. It is." And out came my dragon's claw across her throat. Her eyes went wide, enough of the ghost of the kind mare I'd known left to look shocked before she fell limp. The other scrambled for her shotgun, but my horn flicked on the safety as she pointed it at my head. Her mouth worked the trigger frantically, but Pastels was an artist, and for all her desire to kill me, she had no clue about the little button she had to press to disable the safety. My hooves snapped up and spun the gun in her mouth, breaking loose two of her teeth as it was knocked free. She fell back, giggling louder and louder as I raised my goggles and stared into her eyes. It seemed to draw some sanity back into her.

"Is... is... is... it over...?" she asked me between hysterical little hiccups, her yellowed eyes looking into my glowing ones in desperation. "It... it doesn't get... easy... say it's over..."

"Yeah. It is." I said softly as I lifted the dragon claw to her throat. "It's over, Pastels."

"Good..." she stammered, "Good... good..." and her words transformed into a gurgle of red flowing down her chest before she went still.

Being an executioner was easy...

I lowered Pastels to the floor, looking in the direction of the stairs to the living quarters. Surely she'd have more than two guards... but really, what was the point? The raiders knew there was nowhere for the rest of the stable to go, and time was on their side. As ponies got hungry and desperate, they'd start coming out. And then the raiders would get to start having fun.

I carefully applied more blood to my disguise, trying to obscure the dried strips of hide wonderglued over my cards. I painted a bit more on Marmalade's Pipbuck too; the black delta model had been far too conspicuous, so Midnight had put Marmalade's on me and copied over all the files except EC-1101. The dye at least looked right. I was careful to keep the blood away from my mouth, of course. Finally, I lowered the goggles back into place and made my way towards the stairs.

Moving up, I quickly saw why they hadn't bothered with more guards. They'd trapped the living quarters with landmines and rigged tripwires to single shot shotguns. They actually had plates of food left out like bait for animals. I pocketed the green food chips as I stepped neatly over the tripwires and disarmed the mines. It'd make the eventual attack easier. I made my way up towards the cafeteria... and the screaming. The screaming, rising and falling, growing muddled, then clearer, then muddled again.

When I came across the second barricade, I had the dubious comfort of seeing the two guards looking with an expression of overfed gluttony. They started to stir at my approach, then Carrot Sticks just belched and sank back down with a groan. "Hey..." she looked at me with her pinprick gaze. "Hurry up and get some..." Her horn glowed as she waved a bloody bone at me.

"Oh... yeah. Looks tasty!" I said with as much enthusiasm as I could fake.

"She is! Real tender!" the orange mare said in delight, belching again before she peeled away a few more strips with a delightful groan. A fresh scream echoed from the Cafeteria. "Course it'd be nice if the entrée would shut up..."

I swallowed as I walked around the corner and felt my legs wobble at the sight of a foal trotting out with a dark hunk of organ in her mouth, dripping blood down her face as she chewed in delight. "Her liver's back!" squealed a voice from inside.

No... sweet Celestia and Luna no...

Rampage lay on her back, chains holding her to a table as Mince and Chopper cut away regenerating hunks of flesh almost as fast as they reappeared. The chains holding her to the table were being grown around, trapping her in this nightmare. Suddenly, as terrible as it was, P-21's worst fate was nothing compared to Rampage's. They could eat her forever... hauled around wherever the raiders roamed as an eternal source of meat.

Goddess, I almost wanted to use Folly then and there on her.

"Marmalade? Is that you?" Asked a deep, low voice from behind me. Slowly, I peeked back over my shoulder and up. Way up. Most of my life, Daisy terrified me because she was always half a hair from beating somepony within an inch of her life. Now, Daisy terrified me because she looked half a hair from eating somepony. Her yellowed eyes watered, the pupils contracted to near points as she scowled at me, "Where have you been and what's with the goggles?"

I worked my mouth once, and her scowl appeared. Not fair; normally I got five

seconds before she scowled and beat someone to a pulp. "I was hiding. . . sorry." I muttered lamely, my usually witty replies lost in the sight of her discolored skin. She didn't have any bites; I suspected that that was because she always had someone else on hand to bite. "And the light hurts my eyes."

She just looked at me for the longest moment, as if trying to peer into my soul, and then shrugged. "Yeah. Me too," she said before she stepped past me and everypony got out of her way. Her barding had been augmented by battered and hammered plates sharpened into spikes. She slammed aside anypony too slow to get out of her way. "Lunch time," she grinned.

Rampage lifted her head, looking at Daisy with mad pink eyes. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill all of you." She vowed in agony. Daisy put one hoof on her head, lowered her mouth to Rampage's throat, and bit a hole right through her windpipe. As the hole started to close, she grabbed something purple and pinkish red and pulled hard. There was a rip and a wheezing scream as Daisy's head jerked back and forth till Rampage's tongue flopped free.

If I'd actually had Folly with me, I would have used it there and there.

Daisy chewed indolently as she looked down at me with that familiar, contemptuous smirk. "Aww, hungry Marm?" She looked over at Mince. "Give her the heart. Should be nice and tasty."

The... fuck....

Suddenly, all eyes were on me as Mince's horn glowed and she cut and tugged the beating organ free. Like likes like, and I knew without a doubt that any hesitation or excuse would have them tearing me apart. Mince tossed the pumping organ at me, and I caught it in my hooves. It was still beating slightly. I grimaced, praying that I could somehow do this horrific deed. Heartless, tongueless, and with her chest splayed open, Rampage just stared at me as her body regenerated the mortal wounds.

Goddesses. . .

I bit down as hard as I could, trying to imagine it like some sort of giant grotesque tomato. My first impression: disgust. Not at the taste, actually; it just tasted like blood, and I'd tasted plenty of my own during numerous fights. Disgust at the act. The impression that immediately followed? Hearts were tough to eat! I swallowed the first leathery bite and immediately had to follow it with a second to keep from gagging. I tried to chew through the strong cardiac muscle. A third bite. Fourth.

Fifth. By the sixth, the heart was half gone, and I feared that no matter how tough my stomach might be, I was going to puke from disgust.

“Full. . .” I muttered, half playing the role and half in shock myself. At least it’d stopped beating. . . if what I’d eaten wasn’t convincing enough, so be it.

“You’re such a wuss. . .” the huge mare snorted, sounding like the mare I’d known all my life. “Just like that blue buck the Overmare was so keen on getting in her office. Just trotted after her like a good little fuckstick.” Daisy snorted and scooped the remains of the tough organ meat into her mouth, chewing it like bubblegum as her attention left me and returned to Rampage. Like that, the spell broke and everypony went back to waiting for the next course to regenerate.

P-21. . . I had to help him. . . I had to. . . I. . . was gonna throw up.

I staggered from the cafeteria, passed into the stable door chamber, and was glad to see it was empty. I stepped into the little monitoring alcove and promptly puked like my life and soul depended on it. Funny, but it seemed harder to bring up than it had been to choke down, and I had tears pooling inside the goggles. My throat burned, shame coiled up inside me. The first time I’d used a raider disguise in 99, I’d only pretended to be one. Now I was getting my first taste.

I had to stop this. Even if it killed me, I couldn’t let this continue. The Overmare had everything she needed to make an unstoppable psychotic army. She could force feed infected flesh to prisoners, and with Rampage they’d always have a source of fresh meat. Maybe they’d eat themselves to death, like that one raider in the Miramare pens, but I doubted it. I couldn’t chance it. If the Overmare infected the entire stable, even Megamart’s turrets and Gun wouldn’t stop them. And with all the weapons in Megamart. . .

Sweet Luna defend my stupid ass, this had to stop!

Then I heard a soft hiss behind me. I turned, my mouth still dripping bile and chunks of cardiac muscle. Lacunae stepped out of the secret passage connecting the stable door room to the Overmare’s desk. She must have plucked it out of my head from when I’d escaped 99; at this point I really didn’t mind. Glowing arrows hovered around her. I grinned, wiping my bloody mouth.

Then she shot me.

Why do all my friends shoot me?

“Lac!” I croaked as two of the magic projectiles punched deep into my chest. Ugh,

first shot in the head and then in the chest? Could this day get any worse. “Lacunaae. . .” I gasped as I slumped next to my regurgitated meal.

Instantly her remaining arrows disappeared as her purple eyes widened in shock. “What. . . you. . . ah. . . oh my. . . this is awkward,” she said with flustered tone to her mentally projected words as she levitated me to my hooves and pulled me inside the passage. The bodies of four more raiders were piled there. She stared in shock at my flanks. “How did you change your cutie mark? And. . . what were you doing. . . ?” She looked though the open door at the pile of regurgitated heart.

“I skinned Marmalade’s cutie mark and glued it over my own, and I had to eat Ramage’s heart to prove I was one of them,” I groaned. “Do you have a healing potion?” I said as I touched the bleeding holes her magic had left in me. Looks like I wasn’t the only pony in the Wasteland who could make magic projectiles appear.

“You. . . what?” I’d never seen an alicorn look sick before. “How. . . could you?”

“To find you,” I groaned. “Healing potion. . . yes? No? Lacunaae?”

But she seemed to be arguing with herself, the mutterings inside my skull increasing, “No, we did NOT see this coming. . . ugh. . . yes. . . fine. . .” She sighed softly and floated a healing potion to my mouth. “The Goddess wants you to understand that she was simply testing you. You passed.” She paused, then added, “And. . . she’d just like to note. . . this is not typical heroic behavior.”

“Welcome to the Wasteland,” I muttered as the magic soothed the really nasty pain in my chest. I’d almost preferred the mini. . . nevermind. Unfortunately, the four raiders she’d taken had been armed only with simple melee implements. Hopefully that meant that the Overmare lacked the weapons to arm all her raiders well. That or she didn’t trust them enough to let them go around armed all the time. “Look. . . you said you can teleport yourself a couple times, right?” Lacunaae blinked and then nodded. I told her the plan.

“The Goddess is not a. . . a courier service!” she blurted in that indignant voice within my mind. Then there was the sound of a long sigh. “If it is what must be done, I will do it. . . .”

Suddenly, she jerked her head upright. “Certainly not! Clearly this mare is incapable of. . . .”

“Look at what she’s accomplished!” The Goddess said to. . . herself? Was that Lacunaae? It felt. . . off.

“She’s mad! We’re wasting our time with her and her stable. . . .”

I had no time for this.

I rose to my hind legs, ripped off the goggles, and stared right into her purple eyes. “Goddess, right?” I hissed, blood and bile bubbling on my lips as I grinned. “Look. . . you want something in Hoofington, right? Well, right now I want to save my friends and my home. You help me do THAT, and I will get whatever it is you want. Because right now, I really do not need this shit. I have to save my friends. I have to save my family.” One wasn’t going to be enough this time.

She stared back, and I heard countless whispered mutters and pleas. Vaguely, I could make out a mare saying, ‘please. . . Trixie. . .’

Then there was an overwhelming sigh that silenced all the other voices.

Finally Lacunae shuddered. “Fine. The Goddess will allow you to help your friends, but the Goddess will hold you to your promise. Tell this one what you need done.” I was so relieved that I slumped down, shaking. If I’d made a deal with the devil, it’d be worth it if it meant that I’d save 99 from the Overmare.

She touched her horn to mine, and I closed my eyes, doing all I could to remember the armory, the Overmare’s office, and Ventilation Maintenance Three. Then I dug up every memory I could of the male’s quarters off medical. I’d only seen it once, and that had been long ago. I prayed it would be enough for her to get in and check on the males. Get them out. I wasn’t sure how many trips she could handle. I could hear that vast whispering inside her head; it felt like we were being watched by ghosts.

Finally, she pulled away. “I think I have enough to make it. I dearly hope they have some appropriate ammunition,” she said as she lifted her minigun with a sigh. “What will you do now?”

“Get P-21 back. Once he’s safe. . . I’ll see if we can use the gas.” Rivets had downloaded her supervisor’s code into Marmalade’s Pipbuck, and Midnight had transferred the Overmare’s code in from my delta model. All that left was for me to free P-21 and have him get the security code. Locks I could handle now; terminals I’d still leave to him. “If we can end this without any uninfected ponies getting killed, then we should.” Funny, the Dealer was missing a doozy of a chance to make me feel like a murderer. Then again, maybe I didn’t need him to; I was already feeling like a monster today.

“I’ll get started, then,” she told me. “Where will I find you and P-21?” I was so thankful that she didn’t ask ‘what if he’s dead?’ or ‘what if he’s had a full three-course infected

meal?’

“Here, or outside the stable door,” I said as I looked at my PipBuck’s chronometer. “Please, get the males out if they’re alive. I really... really... don’t want to gas them,” I begged her, knowing there’d be no forgiveness for that.

“I will. I’ll get them first, then the guns,” Lacunae promised.

“And thank the Goddess for me... for letting you do this,” I added. Lacunae looked surprised, then oddly amused before she shook her head with a smile and disappeared with a flash.

I sighed and pulled my dragon claw from the stained barding. Did the raider disease kill a pony’s sense of smell? Slowly, I made my way up the stairs to the Overmare’s office. I struggled to hear through the flooring overhead. I knew the sound of slapping flanks. She was damn loud. I hit the switch and winced at the hiss of pistons lifting the floor up. I hit the switch again after a few feet and wiggled through, trying not to grunt any louder than she was.

“Ride the pony!” she giggled in juvenile glee from the bedroom adjacent to her office. I mouthed the words, blushing horribly. Okay; yes, she was a psychotic little brat that had sold out my stable, abused my friend, and killed my mother... but really? Ride the pony? I checked my E.F.S.... Three red bars... and only one of them moving around and making the noises. Either she was really into voyeurism, or... slowly, I trotted to the door and opened it a crack.

You know, when she said ‘ride the pony’, I’d assumed that she was the one getting ridden...

Maybe it was the sight of my friend, gagged with a bridle, chained to a bed, and being sodomized by the current greatest incarnation of evil I’d ever encountered in the Wasteland, but something about the scene brought out my inner Deus. I kicked open the door, snapped out the dragon claw, screamed “Cuuuunt!”, and charged the bed.

Then I saw the glowing horn, and then the straight razor pressed against his throat as he whimpered and she didn’t even stop thrusting. “I knew you’d be back. He told me you’d be back. And he was right, and here you are.” She gave an extra hard shove, and he cried out into the gag as blood and tears flowed in equal measure. Overhead, two turrets dropped down, their guns swiveling towards me. “I should thank you for bringing my favorite buck back to me. He’s always been my favorite trick pony.”

I felt a pit open up inside me. This was my fault. I'd been in such a reckless hurry that he'd gotten taken. "You're sick. . ." I hissed, wondering if three S.A.T.S.-assisted bullets could take her head off before she could slit his throat. From the lines she'd carved in his neck already, I could tell she'd been playing at it. Target her horn? Maybe, but if I missed. . . .

"I am the Overmare. It is my duty to maintain the security and stability of this stable. Anything I have to do to blow off steam is perfectly acceptable! I can do anything I want. Anything!" She hissed, eyes narrowing as the razor drew another line of red in his throat. "And then you had to make everything difficult. You brought them here. Betrayed me. Just like your mother. Yes. . ."

She was mad. . . just plain stark crazy. Whether it had been the disease or not, I had no idea. "You stupid little brat. . . do you have the slightest clue what the world outside is like? I've seen ponies fused with machinery and monsters, faced two-century-old ghouls who can't get over their crushes, still have a serious hankering for some drugs, and had a boat dropped on me."

"You don't get it. I can do anything. No pony will ever hurt me again." She said with certainty.

"You mean Deus. . ." I muttered, looking at her. "I killed him."

She hissed back, "I mean my mother!" And she shoved so hard he screamed.

"Your mother. . ." but then that made it clear... where she'd gotten a 'toy' like the one she now wore? "Your own mother. . ."

"Every night," she hissed at me. "Every night. Because she was Overmare. She could do whatever she wanted. But not to anypony. Just me." She giggled brokenly as she shuddered. "I tried telling your mother. I did. . . but she said there was nothing she could do. Nothing! Nothing!" she yelled, her eyes wide and mad. "So I did it myself. I waited till she was drunk. . . I stole the razor from the dresser... one cut. . . and then I was Overmare." She gave a sickly affectionate look at the bound buck. "You brought back the only buck who listened. My favorite trick pony. I can ride him like she rode me. . ."

I sighed as I looked at her. "I'm sorry. . . I'm sorry mother couldn't save you. That's what Security is supposed to do. She should have done something." Damn it, mom, why didn't you? "But none of that makes what you did all right."

"The stable's dying. I saw the reports. A year at the most. But now we're strong, the door is open, and we got guns. We've found the strength of meat and the strength

of pain. We'll take over the surface. Everything will be mine. And nothing will ever hurt me again." She giggled as she thrust with wild vigor. "Now I get everything!"

"Right. Including this." Enough was enough. I entered S.A.T.S.: Horn, head, horn, head.

In an accelerated flash, the four bolts pulses of concentrated magic struck her like a barrage of stars, and she shrieked as she fell one way and her horn spiraled away the other. P-21 gave one last scream as she was forced out of him, immediately curling up on the bed. I raced for the bed as the turrets began to pepper me with bullets. I tossed the filthy sheet up and over one turret, blinding it, and targeted the second as my horn sliced into the cable of the blinded one. With a shower of sparks, the cables parted and the turret lost power just as the sheet shredded.

"P-21, are you o. . ." No. He was not okay. He was so far from okay that I doubted he could find it on a map. His blank eyes stared off into space as he tried to curl into a ball as much as the chains would let him. First Rampage, now this. My shame redoubled on itself as I focused upward and fired three more shots. My magic was notoriously poor with armor, but I must have hit something vital; the second turret sparked and went dead. I fished out a bobby pin and wiggled it into the lock. "Hold on. I'm going to get you out of here. . . just hold on. . ."

Then I was rolling away as the Overmare tackled me, knocking me off the bed and sending us both rolling across the floor. Half her horn was missing, and it sparkled as she tried to work magic with the stub. One bloody socket dripped down in my face as she sat on top of me and slammed her hooves into my face and throat in a frenzy of kicks. Between getting shot in the head once, shot in the chest twice, and shot in the back multiple times, this was starting to look like a bad day.

"I'll fuck all of you. . . every one of you! I'm the Overmare! It's my right!" She screeched as her voice rose higher and higher with wilder laughter, "You'll never fuck me again! Never!"

Then a chain flipped over her head and pulled tight against her throat as two blue hooves went taught. The chain dug in tight, the hoofcuffs keeping the it from slipping free as her mottled skin went from dirty white to a horrible blue. Then purple. Her dark tongue rolled out as her horn sparked desperately for something to shoot him with. Finally, she gave one last shudder and went limp.

He collapsed, shaking, sobbing, still entangled with her body. I sat up and carefully undid the bridle as he stared with eyes empty of everything except pain and humiliation. "I'm not your trick pony. . . I'm not... I'm not. . ." he whispered.

“P-21...” I said softly as I crawled to my hooves.

“I’m not... I’m not a trick pony...” he shook more.

“She’s dead now,” I murmured softly. “She’s dead... let her go...”

He sniffed as he looked at me like a lost colt, the shaking increasing more and more. He’d pulled so tight the chain had creased her throat, and I carefully pulled it off and unlocked it from his hooves. He looked at the raw, bloody marks and shook even more before he hugged himself to a stop. I hugged him, desperately praying it was what he needed right now and not something that’d make things even worse. He pressed his face against my chest, bawling brokenly as I held him, crying like he’d never wept before.

I looked at the Overmare. Pain... passed down one generation on to the next. I might hate what she’d done, but I hadn’t worn her shoes. If my mother had been an overbearing monster, would I have killed her to escape, only to become a monster myself? Like Daisy passing on the pain she endured for her mother’s sadistic amusement? How far back did it go? Where had the sin been bestowed that would be passed to the daughter? Daisy. The Overmare. Had I just gotten lucky that my mother was affectionate? Was that the exception rather than the rule?

No. I couldn’t believe that. There were hundreds in the stable, I couldn’t believe that abuse was somehow normal and right while being loving and caring was aberrant. If pain was the norm, it wouldn’t be hidden and shameful. It wouldn’t drive a pony mad with power and control and the need to humiliate others before others did so to her. She’d betrayed the stable, but I wondered if perhaps she’d simply seen it as hurting us before we turned upon her, or the stable itself broke down and slew her.

How was it that the Wasteland could hurt ponies, even in the stable? Was it something in the land, or in us?

Finally, he croaked in a raw voice. “I need a shower. I need to get her off me...”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered in his ear.

His unfocused eyes found mine, and for a moment I was afraid I’d see disgust and scorn in them. Instead, there was only confusion. “For what?”

“I... didn’t listen. I ran in... this is my fault.”

To my horror, he smiled, like I’d made a joke or something. “No. It’s my fault. I let her use me as her trick pony again. I should have blown us both up... but... I... I couldn’t... I couldn’t fight her.” He gave a hard gasp, as if fighting to keep something

down inside him. “I had a grenade, and I . . . she told me to put it down. . . and I did! I couldn’t do anything but let her. . . I let her. . .” he was falling apart again, and I held him tight.

“No!” And I kicked myself as he flinched. I quickly softened my tone. “Blame me, P-21. Blame her for doing it, or me for being stupid, or her mother, or anypony. . . but not yourself. Understand?” I said sharply. I could handle him hating me. I couldn’t handle him hating himself.

“I need to wash. . . please. . . tell me we can get out of here. I want to go back to Chapel. Or Megamart. Flank. Anywhere. Just not here,” he said with a shaky breath.

“Not yet. Not yet. I’ve got a plan.” He blinked at me in confusion and I faked my best grin, “It’s a good plan. One of my best.”

He looked at me for a long minute, then hiccuped, then gave a crooked smile, “Oh. . . so. . . we’re doomed, then?” He might have been sarcastic, but there was a terrible hope in his voice too.

I felt a little relief. “Smartass. . .” I said as I trotted to the Overmare’s terminal. “Can you get into the system and download the head security mare’s password into this PipBuck?” I asked as he limped after me, moving much more slowly and tenderly than before. He nodded, and with a few taps he was in.

“She didn’t change her old password,” P-21 said in an eerily detached voice. He wasn’t out of the woods yet. “Gin Rummy’s primary security password is. . . Black-jack,” he said with a glance at me. I sniffed. . . great. Couldn’t have guessed that, could I?

I raised the overmare’s desk in time to see a purple flash. Lacunae staggered, looking quite mortal as her black lace dress was spotted with sweat. I didn’t know alicorns did ‘sweaty’, but Lacunae certainly appeared to have exerted herself quite a bit. “The males are safe. The weapons are moved. Is the gas ready?”

“Almost. . . will you be able to take both of us?” I asked Lacunae as I poked around some of the other files.

“Perhaps one at a time,” she said as she looked at P-21. “I’ll take him to the other males. He needs medical attention.” From the look in her eyes, it was clear she wanted to do far more for him than that. “Unity would give him peace.”

I suddenly felt prickles run up my mane. “Would it take away the pain?”

“No. But we would help him bear it,” she said softly in my mind, “As we help bear mine.” And with that, she and P-21 flashed away. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed like alicorns had a real love for melodrama.

Then the Overmare’s door hissed open, and Daisy walked calmly in with her bloody lips wide. “So, she dead yet?” Given her black-faced corpse lay at my hooves, it might have proven a silly question, except that the two raiders behind her started to giggle in glee and ran back into the stable crying out the news. “Good job, Blackjack,” Daisy said as she narrowed her yellow eyes.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. “You knew I was going after her. . . .”

“Knew? I watched.” She nodded to the large round window set in the wall of the office.

“How’d you know it was me?” I replied.

“Um, yeah. Marmalade wouldn’t have lasted two weeks alone. If she were alive, she’d have come back or died trying,” she said as she trotted towards me. “But you. . . . Blackjack. . . . the second I saw you there in the café, I knew you’d be the only one able to glue a dead mare’s cutie mark over your own and eat a heart to save your friend from the Overmare. You’ll move heaven and earth if you have to. You always have.”

“So you wanted the Overmare dead,” I replied.

“I wanted her dead years ago,” she replied with a glare at the corpse that was oddly tinged with regret. “I thought, a few years back, that we understood each other. We could be something. But she was already too pissed off. . . . too hurt and crazy. I saw her offing her mom coming for months. I’d have killed her sooner if I’d thought your mom would actually take over the stable.”

“Then why not do it yourself?” I asked, wondering if Lacunae was going to be coming back. I really didn’t want to fight Daisy with just my claw.

“It’s funny. Once we started eating the meat, everything crystallized. I mean, we followed orders before, but once we ate it was almost instinctive. If I killed her, they’d have turned on me before I could get them under control. But you killed her, I’m in charge now.” She grinned widely, “I have plans for this place. We’ve been rotting under here. The Overmare just took whatever she saw. Me, I actually talked to the merchants before we ate them. We’re going to force the meat into everypony’s throat down there, and when they take the flesh, they’ll be with us. Then we’ll take Megamart. Then the Reapers. We beat them, we’ll have fear and respect. . . . and,

hell, maybe we'll feed them the flesh too. With that delicious little striped pony, we might have food for dozens, even hundreds of us. And I bet other villages will be glad to pay us in meat to not to eat them.”

My nightmare realized. “Right. So I suppose this is where you tell me to eat the meat for real and join you or die?”

Daisy snorted and shook her head. “What, do I look stupid? No, you're just going to die.”

She drew a gun, one that definitely hadn't been on the armory inventory. The silver-plated IF-33 Applebuck had belonged to mom, as it had to every Head of Security in the stable going back to the door being sealed. Their names had been scratched on the handle. The damn gun even had its own name: Vigilance. The irony that I was about to be shot by mom's own pistol was not lost on me.

The gun came up as we both entered S.A.T.S. together. With eerie smoothness, we acted almost as one. But while she was trying to blow my head off, I had a different thought in mind. My magic reached out and neatly depressed the clip eject as she fired the round still in the chamber. It nearly took my head off; I could see it passing by me in the slowed down time. The bullet buzzed softly past my ear. I took the hefty clip and promptly smacked her across the face with it twice.

Do it, Daisy... do it.

She drew a second clip with her hooves, and I jammed the first clip back into gun. She dropped the second clip to rack the slide, and I ejected it and hit her with two floating clips. Her yellow eyes blazed with familiar fury as she drew a third clip to load into the gun, but I jammed one back in. Then she screamed in rage and threw the weapon aside. My smile grew as I floated the gun to me and racked a round into the chamber with my magic. S.A.T.S. ran out.

“I fucking hate unicorns...” she spat, then snapped out her baton with a jerk of her head and charged me, keeping her head low. There were rules to fighting. Earth ponies had to get in close and dirty, break a unicorn's concentration so she couldn't use her magic. Unicorns had to stay away or risk getting crunched.

The Overmare's office was NOT conducive to the latter. I popped back into S.A.T.S. with enough charge for one shot. I lined it up, executed the spell, and sent a bullet straight into her leg. I wasn't going to risk a headshot that might not do more than piss her off, but at least I could slow her down a little. She still slammed into me like a train, but I'd been hit by boats before and kept my concentration on the gun.

Rule two: to disable a unicorn, take out her horn. I brought Marmalade's Pip-Buck up over my glowing horn as the baton fell with the creepy certainty of S.A.T.S. and cracked loudly against the casing. She swung again and again, smashing my forelegs and beating against the PipBuck casing as my horn pressed Vigilance right up against her gut. Rule three: a unicorn doesn't have to move to hit you with a levitated weapon. She threw herself aside and off me just in the nick of time as the gun fired into the ceiling. I rocked forward on to my hooves as Daisy came back around for another charge, and I took another shot at her legs. Then she was on me, all swinging and biting and kicking as she tried to take me out before I could pistol stamp her again.

Instead, I cheated, dropped into S.A.T.S., and blew two more magic bullets into her face. The helmet she wore deflected some of the force, but the energy nearly flayed her features, sending blood pouring into her eyes. I curled up and rolled out from under her, bringing Vigilance around and putting two more solid rounds in her left flank. I heard sounds of more shooting from below. Either Lacunae hadn't been able to come back for me or else the raiders had made a push now that the Overmare was dead.

I was battered and bruised, but I had the gun. And she had. . . a rejuvenation potion, Hydra, Buck, and Stampede? Not fair! She chowed down, and I watched my hard work healing away before my eyes. Next time she came at me, I'd be unicorn paste, and we both knew it.

So I ran. I jumped down into the passageway beneath the Overmare's desk even as she slammed her hooves down where I'd just been. I ran, flinging what weapons I had left behind me as I shot out the two flickering lights illuminating the hallway. "Blackjack!" She yelled as she raced after me.

"No! It's 'Cunnnnnntttt'!" I screamed back as I fired down the hallway at the charging mare, aiming for her legs, doing all I could to slow her down even as she regenerated the damage.

Then the mines I'd tossed started beeping. She screamed as three tremendous bangs filled the tunnel and she went down hard. Carefully, I approached as she trembled from drugs, madness, and injuries. "I'm glad you came back, Blackjack," she wheezed as she slowly pushed herself to her legs again. "I'm glad. If there's anypony that could end this, it was you." I could hear the grind of bone as her limbs knit together. Her lower body looked flayed as the magic potions kept her alive, and I hesitated.

What the hell would it take to finish her? “I want to help you, Daisy. . .” I stammered. “You don’t know how to help me. You didn’t then,” she gasped as she looked at me with her crazed raider eyes. I met her gaze with my mutated stare. I wondered which of us was more the monster after all this time? “I mean. . . telling on my mom? Do you know what she did to me? I disappeared for a week and you didn’t wonder why?”

“I thought you were avoiding me,” I muttered lamely.

“I was in medical, you jackass!” she yelled as she started to advance again. “She beat me senseless, had them heal me, and beat me again! Because you had to try and arrest my mom. What did you think would happen?”

“I wanted to save you!” I countered, raising the gun but struggling to shoot. “I still do.” I just didn’t know how.

“That makes two of us,” she replied as she gained enough fury to charge once more, despite the two rounds I put in her chest. She ducked and whirled, hitting me with a double rear kick that sent me flying back into the railing of the stable door. The impact sent a disturbing tingle through my rear legs and knocked the wind out of me. As I lifted my head, I caught sight of two hooves, and then my head was snapped back so hard I was certain she’d busted my neck. I collapsed underneath the railing, struggling to keep my wits as I backed into the atrium.

I’d happily trade my horn for some med-X, an ice pack, and a bottle of whiskey. “How. . . how was I supposed to save you?”

“Kill mom. Kill me. Either way, it’d end. But you couldn’t, and your mother wouldn’t, so you didn’t.” she replied. “It’s as simple as that, Blackjack.” She kicked me clear across the atrium floor, and my journey was stopped only by hitting the stake in the center of the room. She stood over me, looking disappointed. “Sometimes, the only way to save a pony is to kill the pony.”

And Daisy was about to save me.

Then a white and red striped cannonball flew across the atrium and slammed into Daisy. The mare rocked but didn’t fall. Rampage, though, had her hooves around Daisy’s throat. “Eat my fucking liver, will you? Eat some floor!” She flipped over backwards and slammed Daisy’s face into the ground. I stared as I saw dangling lengths of chain sticking out of her body, wondering if we were going to have to disintegrate her again to get them out.

Daisy rolled to her feet as the shooting and shouting increased and Rivets and

Midnight pressed into the atrium along with dozens of other ponies. They might not know how to use guns, but they had the basics of point, shoot, reload. Rivets dumped a tin can of scrap metal into the nozzle of her steam cleaning pack, and with a great woosh and clattering bang she blasted a chunk of raiders with shrapnel and scalding vapor. Their weapons sparked off her welding helmet and thick protective barding.

“Hey, meat wagon, get out of the way!” she yelled. Rampage stepped away from Daisy with a sharp grin.

“You don’t fucking get it, do you?” Rampage sneered up at the larger pony. An emerald beam of light flashed from the balcony, the energy burning away Daisy’s barding and cooking the meat beneath it.

“We’re her friends,” Glory said. The small gray pegasus had been forced to mount Leo’s old gun to fire over her shoulder to accommodate its size and weight.

There was a purple flash behind Daisy, and Lacunae appeared inside her sphere, the minigun motor already purring at speed above her. “That means. . .”

P-21 knelt beside me, forcing a stable rejuvenation potion to my lips as he glared at Daisy. “She doesn’t have to fight alone!” He gave me a shaky little smile as he looked down at me. “Right?”

“Right. . .” I slowly crawled back to my hooves as the rest of the raiders rallied around Daisy. The giggling mass was armed, armored, drugged, and crazed. Even with them outnumbered by me and my friends, it was a daunting task. But for the survival of the stable, it’d be finished.

The final battle for Stable 99 was on.

The atrium roared and thundered as both sides tore into the other with reckless abandon. The raiders, with their diseased aggression, fearlessly took hit after hit for the pleasure of hearing the screams of the stable dwellers. But three weeks of fear and deprivation had eaten away at the stable ponies’ fear and doubt, and there wasn’t a single pony here who wasn’t ready to fight and die for their stable.

The close quarters and deadly weaponry swiftly took their toll, but when one of the stable ponies fell, their fellow ponies would drag them to safety and administer healing while the others fought on. If one ran out of bullets, another would spare a clip. The raiders fought as individuals. Brutally, but alone. Even Daisy, snatching weapons from whatever raider she came across, might as well have been by herself for all the help she gave to the rest.

Ponies, decent and civilized ponies, would win the day for once. For once, the Wasteland would lose.

Perhaps she saw the inevitable, but, her disfigured barding covered in gore and her lips foaming from the drugs pumping through her system, Daisy leapt forward in a final charge. She had the strength and frenzy to kill plenty of ponies before she was finally dropped.

We weren't going to give her that chance. From the balcony above, a stream of emerald light flashed down across her frame. Lacunae's finger of flaming metal washed across Daisy and every raider that joined her in that final charge. With a deft toss, P-21's fragmentation grenade bounced under her and exploded directly behind her, shredding her legs. But just as momentum threatened to carry her into our lines, Rampage charged forward into the fire and reared up, shoving with every bit of strength in her frame. Daisy reared on bloody legs as gunfire bit and cut into her before finally they crashed to the side.

The giggling rose to hysterical levels as something broke within the raiders, and they milled, fighting each other more than us. I slumped as the adrenaline receded left me weak and shaky. I approached where Daisy had fallen, her body broken and riddled with holes and her blood pooling beneath her. "So... is it... over?" she gasped softly, sucking in short, shallow breaths as she looked up with her jaundiced eyes.

I lay down next to her, pushing off the goggles and nodding.

"G... good..." she panted softly with a smile. "You... Saved... me... Black..." Her eyes twitched as she took one last hiccupping breath and then slowly relaxed, her pupils expanding in some final semblance of sanity. Of peace.

"Take care, Daisy," I murmured softly, my magic closing her eyes. "Goodbye." Sometimes, to save a pony...

We'd won. Victory was supposed to bring certain feelings. Joy. Elation. Celebration. Certainly, everypony in the stable felt this to some degree, but a third of the stable was dead. There was no celebration for that, and I was so exhausted that it was all I could do to shrug out of the rancid security barding, take another healing potion, tell Rivets and Midnight to dump the bodies outside, and crawl to my room... my room.

It was just as messy as I'd left it, with coveralls all over the floor, stale food chips lying in bowls on the bed, crumbs everywhere. There was a definite stale pong in the air I'd never noticed before. Slowly, I crawled onto the mattress with a groan. There was so much to do. I needed to check on P-21. Rampage. Glory. Even make sure Lacunae was all right. I had to find out who'd lived and died. I had to talk to Rivets and Midnight about the males and how they couldn't be used that way anymore. Contact Megamart.

Instead, I fell flat on my face asleep.

Somepony was touching me. It wasn't a painful touch, but it was decidedly unusual. There was a very faint chemical smell, too. "If you're planning on gassing me, could you please do it quickly?" I mumbled. "I'm way too tired and sore to draw this out."

There was a familiar eep, and I glanced back at a blushing Glory as she pinched a rag between her hooves. A small metal flask of turpentine rested beside her. "I... I was... ah... Just... uncovering your cutie mark." She said as she pointed at the exposed cards on my left flank.

"Oh..." I replied lightly. "Well... carry on..." I smiled as I closed my eyes with a wry smile.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked me in her soft, timid voice.

"Mhmmm?" I asked as she teased Marmalade's hide off my rump.

"I'm sorry about your friend," she said quietly.

"Me too... though Daisy wasn't a friend, exactly." I sighed softly. "She was the first pony I'd failed to save. Her mom was beating her. I tried to get her arrested. It didn't work; I'm pretty sure I'm to blame for making her so... hurt."

"Why?" Glory asked softly. "You're not to blame for everything that goes wrong in the Wasteland, or even your own stable. You tried to help. That has to count for something."

"Good intentions don't excuse bad results," I said with a sigh. "Do you think we could have helped them? The infected?"

Glory started to say something as she nudged the glued flap of hide aside, then sighed. "No. It's not like you can just wave a magic wand and have a cure. There

once was magic that might have been able to help, but today... no. A cure would take months, maybe years of research.”

“But Lighthooves created that damn thing...” I winced as she pulled the flap free and tossed it into the trash.

“No. I seriously doubt he did. I don’t know where he found this disease, but even the Enclave can’t create something like this from scratch. So even if he altered the contagion, he might not have a cure himself. I’m guessing they increased its progression... it sounds like most raiders take months to break down, but this does it in less than a week.”

I sighed as I felt the turpentine evaporating on my butt, feeling a niggling sensation. “You know... the flesh eating parts aside... I wonder if Lighthooves was after something else. The infected ponies were all loyal to the Overmare and Daisy. What if Lighthooves wants the disease to create unconditional loyalty?” It would explain why he would want to accelerate the infection rate and find a strain that would work on pegasi.

“Maybe... but why? Most of us are already loyal,” she said a touch defensively.

“But would you kill... say... helpless surface ponies? Or other pegasi if given the order to?” She looked particularly troubled by that. “Maybe the Enclave is after a disease that ensures loyalty. The aggression is just a bonus.”

“That’s... a terrifying thought. It would mean that Lighthooves plans on asking Pegasi to do things that are grossly illegal or immoral. That’s treasonous,” she said nervously, then shook herself. “This is all speculation, though. We don’t actually know why he’s developing it.”

I groaned. “Why can’t a smart pony think about this?”

“Smart ponies are,” she assured me with a pat on the shoulder. Then there was a moment’s hesitation. “Blackjack... on the boat... why’d you point that gun at me?”

I sighed, “Cause I’m crazy...”

“Blackjack.”

“No, really. I’m crazy, Glory.” I sat up with a groan, looking back at her. “For the last week or two I’ve been seeing a pony. This pale buck. He comes and goes, but he’s always talking to me... taunting me. He builds me up when I’m falling apart and tears me down when things are going good.” I looked around the room, half expecting him to be there. “I can’t understand it, other than me being crazy.”

“A hallucination you have conversations with?” she said with a frown. “When did they start?”

“Mmm... Brimstone’s Fall?” Then I frowned. “Well, actually, I didn’t start having conversations with him until Miramare.” Oh, great. Now all my paranoia alarms were going off! “You don’t think Lighthooves did something to me, do you? Put the Dealer into my head to drive me crazy?” I had an Enclave mind control device in my brain, I was sure of it! “Glory! I need you to do brain surgery on me, quick!” I said, seizing her shoulders in my hooves.

She looked at me flatly and smacked my face with her hoof. “You do not need any more holes in your head, Blackjack.” Okay, maybe she had a point there. The gray pegasus sighed softly and rubbed my cheek. “So, this Dealer didn’t make you try and shoot me?”

“No. I... I don’t know. I mean... if it’s not some Enclave plot...” now I was feeling confused and anxious.

“It could also be the taint,” Glory said softly. “Maybe that’s how it’s getting to you.” Oh, yeah... that. I’d kinda locked that fact up in the back of my head. Glory stroked my filthy mane. “I just wanted to know... if I’d done something... anything...” She chewed on her lower lip in worry, her lavender eyes looking up at me in worry.

I blinked and flushed, “No. Glory, you’ve been... wonderful. You saved my life in that fight. You save me more than I deserve...” And I knew that look in her cute little face. That was a kissing look. She was giving me a kissing look. My knees felt weak, my tummy fluttery, and my nethers were giving me some definite signs of approval. I liked her kissing look...

And why did I suddenly not mind nearly as much as I had in Chapel?

I had to admit, she might not be very good at kissing, but she felt very... very... nice. It was different from just a kiss, though; I’d kissed plenty of mares and a couple of bucks, and only once did I do it beyond foreplay. Only once did it mean something special. As our lips met, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

“Blackjack,” Glory purred softly once our lips parted, her eyes closed.

“Yeah?” I murmured, my head spinning. I’d never kissed like that before.

“You need a shower,” Glory said softly. “And clean your room.”

When she'd told me I needed a shower, I hadn't anticipated company. The showers weren't exactly the sort of place two mares could get frisky; you never knew when a filly might stroll in. Somehow, though, we had the entire bathroom to ourselves for once. Hot water, glorious and wondrous hot water, cascaded down on both of us as Glory calmly washed the grease and gunk from my mane and scrubbed the yellow stain out of my hide. Soap, simple soap, was a luxury I'd never appreciated before as she scrubbed every inch. I'd never been washed like this before. I doubted that Glory had, either.

And then, when her washings went to my back quarter. . . then, suddenly, I couldn't care less about hot water or soap or anything else at all. After everything I'd been through, this simple contact and bliss sent my hooves tingling and my eyes rolling in absolute joy. It was as if I were finally getting a reward for doing something good.

The only thing better was getting to return the favor. . .

"So. . . where'd you learn that?" I asked with a grin. I couldn't stop grinning. If I were faced with Deus, Blueblood, Manticore Pony, Sanguine, and the entirety of the Zodiacs, I'd have laughed at the lot of them. I'd just. . . I don't know. It wasn't just sex, but something a thousand times better.

Glory flushed as she helped me clean my room, as she'd insisted. It was a little surreal. There were a thousand things I should be doing, first and foremost checking on P-21. But he was still helping the males recover and dealing with his own pain. He needed time and space; I could at least give him that. Rampage had told me she'd deal with the chains stuck in her body. . . that was all she'd comment on. So now I was cleaning my room, and I couldn't help but giggle every third step. Had I ever been this happy?

Probably not.

"Around," Glory said evasively as she blushed, looking at me from under her purple bangs. At my arched brow, she went more rosy, "Honestly. . . P-21 and Rampage."

That surprised me. "Really?"

"Well, P-21 was a little more clinical about what mares do together." I watched her squirm delightfully, "Rampage. . . well. . . she's really been around. I thought my coat would turn pink when she tried demonstrating Zebra tantric sex positions." That made my brow arch, and she starting going from pink to red. "Well, she did!"

I decided teasing was not called for just now as I heaped up all my dirty clothes in a canvas sack while Glory made the bed. “So... have you always been interested in mares, or am I just really lucky?”

“Both?” Glory offered as she tapped her hooves together. “Dusk is... very much... and I didn’t want to be like her, so I just didn’t have intimate relationships. I just figured I had too much studying and other work to do to worry about it. You finally got me to act on it.”

“You have terrible taste. I’m probably the last mare you should have done that with. I can introduce you to Midnight, though,” I said with a crooked little smile.

“Don’t do that,” she told me softly. Huh? I’d done something? “Don’t tear yourself down like that... even if you’re joking. I’m glad I was finally able to do that with you. I don’t want to do it with anypony else.” Great, now I was pretty sure I was blushing.

I tossed the bags full of dirty laundry by the door, looking at the shockingly clean room. “Wow... if mom knew it’d take three weeks in the Wasteland to get me to clean my room, she’d have thrown me out of the stable years ago.” Mom... suddenly, all the happy feeling started to slide away as I sat on the floor beside the bed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Glory asked as she reached out to stroke my cheek. I couldn’t help it, I closed my eyes and leaned into her caress even as I felt tears run down my face.

“I don’t know. I just... I don’t know how to feel right now. I’m sad she’s gone, I’m mad she was killed... I don’t feel much satisfaction from killing the Overmare or Daisy. It’s just... I don’t know.” I finished lamely. “I was so excited to think I’d finally get to see her again. Tell her everything I’ve learned. Showed her that... that I really was the security mare she wanted me to be. But I can’t. There’s so much that we’ll never get to talk about now.” I sighed as I sat up a little more and hugged Glory closer to me. “I don’t know if she knew that I loved her before I left. Now I never will.”

“She knew,” Glory replied with a smile. “You’re not exactly the best at hiding your emotions.”

I feigned indignance. “I’ll have you know I’m one sneaky, lying pony when I want to be.”

Her wing stroked my horn... oh, sweet Celestia, she could do that all night and day if she wanted to! “But when you don’t want to be, you’re pretty obvious, Blackjack.”

I have to admit, things were looking up. I had an honest to goodness marefriend and an inkling why Midnight never said yes to me. The males were free...well, sort of. Breeding rotations were suspended, and as soon as Rivets and I could get something concrete down, they'd be abolished. The males, starved to the point they could barely walk, were being treated by the very medical staff that'd tormented them their whole lives. They flinched when I tried talking to them, and for the most part just ate their algae slushies and tried to recover as well as they could.

That left P-21.

"Hey," I said as I found him in Medical calming three colts who were still not convinced the mares weren't going to kill them all. He flinched at my voice and looked back at me with wary eyes. He was trying to coax them into eating real food, but they weren't convinced his apples and carrots weren't some bizarre poisons from outside.

"Hey," he replied. "You look good," he said with a ghost of a smile. "So, did Glory finally pounce you?" I flushed but smiled back.

"Yeah. She told me you helped with that?" I asked, glaring at the medical ponies with my shooty look. At least, I hoped it was my shooty look; I really needed to remember to try it out in a mirror. It worked, though, and they found something important to do away from us.

"I just gave her a nudge in the right direction. Rampage gave her the mare on mare dissertation," he replied calmly.

"And how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Sore... but... fine," he said matter of factly, looking at me with that stoic little smile. I reached out a hoof to brush his mane out of his eyes and he jerked away. Our eyes met and he looked away, "Maybe not one hundred percent fine..."

"You'll talk to me if you need it?" I asked, and he nodded. That was the best I could hope for. I looked at the apple core. "Introducing them to wasteland cuisine?"

"Just trying to get them off recycled food," he said with a sigh. "I know we grew up on the stuff, but eating food recycled from waste is just... gross. I don't care what kind of magical filtration you're using." I stuck my tongue out as well. I would never again stray from my two century old delicacies. Then his voice dropped as he spoke the question we were all dreading, "Also, what if... what if some infected bodies

got in there?”

I shivered at the thought. “I told Rivets and Midnight they had to be dragged outside. She assured me the system can handle a body put into it, but I don’t know.” I sighed, rubbing my temples with my hooves. Reality was pissing on my good day; at least that was a sign that this wasn’t all a great dream. “If they don’t have the recycled food, then what are we supposed to feed three hundred ponies? They’ve eaten all the stores already.”

“I know,” P-21 said with a sigh. He looked around medical. “I just. . . I don’t think the threat is real to them. Raiders. . . diseases. . . all everypony can think about is not thinking about it. Going back to the status quo.” He sat down beside me, “P-4 and U-9 were asking me when they were supposed to go back to their breeding queue. They just. . . can’t understand they don’t have to do it anymore.” The frustration showed clear on his face. “And U-13 is trying to convince the other colts that a breeding queue is preferable. He actually liked it.” He looked so upset that I thought he might cry... or blow somepony up.

“He’s been conditioned to. It’s not his fault.” But I knew there were mares who had been cheated of their reproductive chance and were not happy about it. I looked at the medical ponies on the far side of the room watching us with poorly concealed resentment. “I don’t know. . . they’re glad the killing’s stopped, but it’s almost like they hate us for staying here.”

He frowned at them. “I’d be happy to introduce them to Persuasion.”

“Don’t do that. . .” Because a lot of the mares had guns now, guns out of Security and guns from the raiders’ stores. And they weren’t giving them up.

“It isn’t how it’s supposed to be, is it, Blackjack?” He asked me softly as he looked at the colts walking back into their dingy quarters. “We won. It’s supposed to be better. Right?”

“It just feels wrong,” I admitted.

“It feels like Flank.”

“So, program routing log for EC-1101?” Midnight asked as she handled the Delta PipBuck with some admiration. She’d marveled as the broadcaster made contact with the mainframe without needing a single connection. “This is amazing.” She scrolled through the options as she looked at the cool blue screen. “You can actu-

ally access terminals at range with this. Fully Stealthbuck compatible. Huge radio sensitivity. A major step over the 3000 model.”

I sat back, fiddling with Marmalade’s PipBuck as Midnight worked. Clearly, the last few weeks had been tough on her, but now it really showed in her puffy eyes and ragged look. “Fully what compatible?”

She looked at me with an annoyed frown. “Stealthbuck. One shot invisibility spells you can trigger with your PipBuck,” she explained as she searched for the routing data, then looked at my stunned look. “What? It’s in the PipBuck maintenance guide, page 141. I mean, I’ve never seen one before, but they were supposed to make you undetectable.”

Invisibility spells? I thought of Brimstone, Flank, Blueblood Manor, even the Sand Dog’s lair. Fuck you, Hoofington. Why couldn’t you send a couple of those my way, huh?! I scrolled through my inventory system, looking at the myriad of different kinds of ammo, the guns I’d salvaged, the brass casings I hauled around, and dozens of associated crap I hoped to turn into bottle caps in the future. And there, right near the bottom of the list. . . StealthBuck x2. I grit my teeth to not scream.

Have I mentioned I am not a smart pony? Not. . . at. . . all. . . I wondered if I had some kind of magic ‘you win’ device hidden somewhere in my bags that I just didn’t know about yet.

I heard the shuffling of cards in my mind as she accessed the data.

“So. Where was this program trying to go, Midnight?”

“Shut up a second and I’ll tell you,” she snapped, then frowned. “Sorry. Tired. . .” She looked at the terminal, “I can tell you where it’s been. . . every ministry hub in Canterlot, Stable-Tec HQ in Fillydelphia, someplace called Maripony, Tenpony Tower and the MoM hub in Manehattan, Helpinghoof Clinic, half of the MASEBS network, Stables 1 through 7, 9, 14 and 15, 18, 24, 29, 45, 60, 73, 78, and 99. And it’s next destination was. . . MASEBS broadcast tower 14.”

My navigation tool brought up an icon almost due southeast.

I looked at a list on the terminal.

Twilight Sparkle> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.

Applejack> Stable 2. Blocked by Stable 2 Special Protocols. Denied.

Rainbow Dash> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.

Fluttershy> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.

Rarity> MoP Hub, Canterlot. Deceased. Denied.

Pinkie Pie> MoM Hub, Manehattan. Deceased. Denied.

General Stonehide> Canterlot Command Center. Deceased. Denied.

General Borealis> Location unknown. Search timeout. Pending.

General Shimmerstar> (Hoofington Command Center). Primary check in progress. Pending.

Chief Justice Fairheart> (Fluttershy Medical Center). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.

Director of O.I.A. Horse> (Robronco HQ, Hoofington). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.

Descendant protocol> N/A. Error. Error.

Now I frowned. It had found Applejack's location, so why had it moved on? What were "Stable 2 Special Protocols"? And why was General Borealis's "Search timeout" marked "Pending" while the others were "Denied"? ...I really didn't know anything about programs, did I?

She smiled a crooked, tired little smile, "So, now that you have the data... when are you leaving?"

I simply looked at her in shock. We'd saved them from a mad Overmare just yesterday, and today they were trying to shove us right out the door? Disappointment welled up inside me as a shiver went up my mane. "Why? Do you want us to go?"

The black unicorn signed and rubbed her temples. "I don't know..." she said as she looked tiredly at me. "I just want things back to normal where all I had to worry about was PipBucks."

"Join the club," I said with a little grin, but she didn't return it. "I'm sure with a little time you'll get used to the Wasteland. I know you and Rivets will love all the scrap and parts in Megamart. And there's a church dedicated to the Goddesses in Chapel. Even Flank wouldn't be a bad place to visit as long as—"

"Blackjack, don't you get it?" she cried out as she whirled on me. "I don't want to see Megamart, Chapel, Flank, or whatever. I want to shut the door and get back to fixing PipBucks. If you want to go... go. But I don't want to know that that world exists! I want to close the door and never let it open again." She looked at me a moment before her ears drooped and she collapsed, sniffing. "I'm sorry. I just... So many friends are gone. I think I'm going to see Pirouette in the cafeteria, but she's gone. And I think about Sparkler... eating... and... I just want to forget. I don't want to think about it, Blackjack. None of us do."

I stared at her, feeling numb. The Dealer shuffled his cards as he looked at me gravely. I said quietly, "Midnight, this is my home."

She looked back at me and faked a smile, “Yeah, Blackjack. But... I’m not sure you belong here any more... I’m sorry.” And she dropped my PipBuck and rushed out before she could even remove Marmalade’s.

“Don’t start,” I said sharply to the Dealer. “They just need time. A few weeks and they’ll be able to deal with the Wasteland. And you. That’s all.”

The Dealer just looked at me like my mother, the cards sliding past each other. He just looked at me with that patient, sad look. “Just let me know when you’re ready...”

P-21 was right: it was turning into Flank all over again. My friends all found themselves increasingly isolated. Lacunae walked like a purple ghost through the halls, scattering the stable ponies in her path. Even with wings hidden and minigun put away, they avoided her like death itself. Rampage found herself consumed by boredom as she tried to engage stable ponies and found them shying away. Even Glory was forced to spend more time with me than with ponies she wanted to heal; was a pegasus really so aberrant? Most tragic of all, P-21 found himself shunned by the males he’d hoped to save. He was P-21, and so he was dead to them.

It wasn’t that the ponies were entirely ungrateful. There were dozens of small parties and impromptu celebrations between surviving friends. The slain were mourned and the Overmare cursed...but we weren’t a part of it. I’d hear the laughter and the talk, but it all died the second I walked through the door. Then everypony would look awkward until we left again. They didn’t know how to deal with us; it was like they were waiting for the moment when we’d turn on them. Even Midnight was avoiding me.

Rivets became the de facto Overmare. I tried to spend every minute I could convincing her to send ponies to Megamart, trade for things the stable needed. I even echoed Bottlecap’s little ‘trade will save the Wasteland’ speech, but the gray earth mare just muttered and gave a halfhearted ‘we’ll see’.

I looked at my friend, sitting there behind her desk, looking drawn and spent. “Rivets? You can’t keep Stable 99 bottled up anymore. The systems are falling apart.”

She rubbed her bloodshot eyes. “Ugh, you sound just like an Overmare.” She slapped her hooves down on the desk. “Do you think I don’t know this stable, Blackjack? I know every pipe! Every wire! Every talisman! Everything!! I don’t care what the data says; we can keep this stable going for two more centuries if we have to!”

“But the—” I began, but then she laughed. It made my mane crawl to hear that coming from the cool mare. She rocked back and grinned at me.

“The stable. Is. Fine! Sure, things have been breaking down since the incident—the first one—but we’ve been fixing them. Every Overmare since then has been sure that tomorrow we’d all die,” she said, her eyes narrowing and her teeth grinding, “But I know what this stable can do, what we can do. So don’t you come in here telling me my job. I’ll fix Stable 99 without having to set hoof out in that... that great... open.... hrrrugh!” She shuddered violently. Apparently, I wasn’t the only pony who went all oogly from that wide... empty... urrrg...

I took a deep breath, trying to get her to understand, “Rivets. It doesn’t have to be this way. I know you don’t like the outside, but—”

“No. We’ve lived this way for over a century, safe and secure!” she shouted. Then she took a deep breath and settled back in her chair. “Sorry,” she began, her voice softer. “I guess you’re still just trying to help, but you’ve got to understand that you’ve already done everything we need. The ponies here don’t want to things to change, and neither do I. We don’t want to trade, we don’t want to explore, we don’t want to set hoof outside at all. We want to shut the door and go back to the way things are supposed to run. You were a good security mare, and you have done a lot for us...but if you keep trying to cause trouble, I’m going to have to ask you and your...friends to leave. Understand?”

I tried to think of some new argument to try, but my mind came up blank. After a few moments of thought, I just gave a resigned nod.

“Good,” she said, rising. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to meet with some other maintenance ponies about keeping the stable running.”

I found myself alone in the atrium. Alone in the largest community gathering space in the stable. Ponies entering would take one look at me and then promptly continue to someplace else. I found myself reading Rivets’s book. ‘Duck and Cover: an Equestrian Patriot’s guide to survival.’ Really, it was more a guide to blowing stuff up. The copy had been highly annotated. ‘Napalm: add a cup of cinnamon oil per five gallons to the mix. Zebras can’t stand the smell.’ ‘See if you can mix a little magnesium with the C-4. Boom and flash trumps boom.’

A photograph showed a unicorn mare and an earth pony buck sitting in front of a crater, grinning at the camera. There were remains of what appeared to be dragons

littering the rim. A little note was written at the bottom. 'What else did you expect from the Ministry of Awesome?'

I smiled as I flipped through, looking for other little notes. There was a drawing of a building with arrows pointed at the base. 'Set charges here.' Another of a bridge over a river, and the comment, 'They'll never see us coming.' There were diagrams of zebra factories, towns, water works, and bases; all with notes of what to sabotage or blow up.

A little photo in the back displayed a dozen mares and three bucks posing together. 'Ministry of Awesome, Ground Pounders. We bring awesome to earth.' I blinked at the picture and the one lone pegasus in it. Jetstream sat with a sad half smile surrounded by grinning unicorns and earth ponies.

'Saw Rainbow Dash talking with the Director today. Didn't seem happy. Too much peace talk. Too much ending the war rather than winning it. Goldenblood seems certain we're going to win, but I can't tell if he was blowing smoke up Dash's butt or really believes it. Sometimes it feels like the war is going to go on forever.'

One picture showed what I thought was a distant sunrise, but the spherical shape was wrong. . . and it was in front of the mountains rather than behind them. 'Trottenhiemer's megaspell goes boom. We're out of a job.'

The last black and white picture in the back showed the mare and buck sitting outside the entrance to Stable 99. A young, crying unicorn was cradled in the unicorn mare's hooves. The note on the back read, 'End of the world time. We'll be back. Card Trick's now playing security, and I'm fixing machines instead of breaking them. Card Trick took the kid when her mom's pass was denied. Said she couldn't reach Stable 90 in time. No one says no to Trick.'

I smiled as I pulled out Vigilance. Card Trick. Tarot. Little Poker. Full House. 52 Pick-up. Straight Flush. Aces. Royal Flush. Bridge. Hearts. Gin Rummy. Go Fish.

Go Fish. I felt an odd little chill run through me. I hugged the pistol to my chest, feeling a connection to a mare I'd never imagined and a mother I'd never appreciated till it was too late.

Only two days later, the only ponies who wanted to spend any time with me at all were my friends. Every eye looked at us with fear and suspicion. Sometimes, I'd see a knot of ponies and wonder if maybe they were going to try and force us to

leave. We were reminders of the outside world, alien and dangerous.

I was healed up. Glory had gotten her AER-14 to work. Rampage had extracted the chains with the assist of a winch; the less I knew about the details, the better. And Lacunae kept looking at me expectantly. . . I just knew the Goddess was waiting to call a favor due. P-21 didn't even try and talk to the males anymore. He was sleeping on my couch. Eventually, Lacunae excused herself; she'd wait on the surface. I suspected she needed a good dose of Enervation to put some distance between herself and the Goddess.

The third day after the attack, I woke to find a petition taped to my door. 'Request for Blackjack and company to depart the stable.' I counted a hundred names before I gave up. Midnight was right there on the first page.

I curled up with Glory on my bed, the papers tossed aside as I nuzzled her neck. "We'll go tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I know what it's like to want a home," Glory said softly. She knew far better than I did. I held her a little more snugly now, knowing what she'd lost.

Mom was dead. My old friends were dead or had decided I reminded them of things they wanted to forget. My new friends were unwelcome. It was time to go.

My mother and I were one of the few mother/daughter pairs given the luxury of our own rooms. I rarely went into her quarters; it simply felt wrong. But in the morning, we'd be going to MASEBS #14, and I'd never have this chance again. Someday, the stable would replace both of us; how, I didn't know. . . honestly, I didn't really care anymore. They'd made their feelings clear. All I could do was respect their wishes. Given how everypony was acting, when I told my friends that we'd need to go to the tower to find out more about EC-1101, they were all more or less glad to be leaving. It was a destination in the direction of 'away from 99.'

Even after weeks, the room still smelled like her: a curious mix of powder, gun oil, and lavender soap. There wasn't much special; everything in the stable was mass produced. You'd try and put a unique stamp on things, though; in its own way, my mess was my attempt to personalize the impersonal. At least, that was a good enough excuse for me to not clean my room. Mom had decorated hers with pictures and drawings. I knew mom sketched, but I never realized how well she could draw. I wondered if her baton and cuff cutie mark was like mine, a talent she'd defaulted

to because she wasn't allowed to be the artist she wished to be.

I wished she could have heard me play. . .

I saw a drawing of herself and Petunia as fillies; Daisy's mother had a hard and aggressive look about her, just like Daisy at that age. Another self portrait of her in her security barding with a strange mare I could only assume was my grandmother. More older mares. Some dignified. Some lonely. A few with smartass expressions. So that was where I got it. The oldest showed the mare from the Ministry of Awesome pictures, her hooves holding the young unicorn filly. 'Never had a kid of my own. Mother wandered off north. Hope she finds what she needs there.' Then I saw a picture of me as a foal with a Joker card stuck on my horn. I smiled as I turned it over. 'My Lucky Girl.'

I felt tears running down my cheek as I folded the pictures. I was lucky... luckier than I deserved. I just wish I'd appreciated it when it could have meant something.

It was late, and my friends were sleeping. My internal clock told me I needed to be doing a patrol just now, and odds were that I was the only security mare left in the stable. I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping, and, odd as it was, I wanted to do one last sweep of the place. Tomorrow, I'd have Midnight swap Marmalade's PipBuck for my own, and we'd be off, this time forever. We'd saved Stable 99 as much as it wanted to be saved.

Just like Flank.

I trotted along the maintenance levels, hearing a few late celebrations in distant living quarters I knew better than to try and attend. The laughter and giggles tugged at me, though, and I still wished I could share in the festivities.

I made my way down to the humming halls of the maintenance and utility levels instead. My hooves were so familiar with the path that I could let my mind wander as I walked along. I passed the storeroom where I'd found P-21 stealing supplies. I found the nook under the generators where I'd hid him so long ago. I went all the way down to Ventilation Maintenance Three. It hadn't been cleaned up; my blood was still dried on the table, and cards were still scattered about.

My magic gathered them all up, one after another, stacking them in my hooves with practiced ease. Then I slipped them into the worn cardboard box with the familiar scribble on it. It was something often done by young in the stable to claim some

trinket or toy. 'Property of Tarot.'

Tarot?

Then there came a muffled crump and a resounding pop and hiss from somewhere else in the labyrinthine maintenance level. No alarms though. No alerts on the radio channels. I slipped the cards into my pack and quickly rushed in the direction of the hiss. A foul reek of decay filled my nostrils as black foul water crept along the floor. 'Biowaste recycling tanks #2' was on the door.

Inside, there were two enormous metal tanks as high as me, four times as wide, and almost as long as the room. Numerous pipes marked with faded labels ran to and from each tank. From a burst seal sprayed the noxious gray water. I gagged from the stench.

"I knew that seal wouldn't hold!" a young mare shouted from around a monkey wrench clenched in her jaws as she entered from behind me. She raced past and climbed a stair to reach the spray. Her brown utility barding quickly took on a dark stain from the water. "Close the number four valve!" She yelled as she tried to tighten the bolts around the spraying connector.

I looked around cluelessly till I saw her waving a hoof in the direction of some big wheels on the wall. One had a number 4 on the pipe above it. The wheel glowed as my magic turned it. The spray increased and the young mare shrieked, "Close the valve, not open it!" I yelled my apologies and reversed direction. What, it wasn't like the damn thing was labeled!

With the valve closed, the spray slowed to a trickle. "I knew the system was over-pressurized. I knew there was too much methane, but do they listen to me? Noooo. . ." she said as she wiped the gunk from her face.

"What happened?" I asked, my body adjusting to the sweet and sour reek enough to avoid gagging.

"What usually happens when somepony tries to eat ten times more than they should. It ran out of space to put stuff. Damn thing built up too much methane and burst a seal. Just like I told them it would," she said as she tugged and yanked on the wrench. "Of course, it's not like the morning crew can deal with it? Oh no, best leave it to the new girl. That way, when the systems fucked in the ass, everypony will know who to blame!"

I couldn't help myself, "What's your name?"

She shook her head firmly, flinging away some of the muck. "Scotch Tape."

I blinked and then grinned, “You’re Duct Tape’s kid?” Now that I looked at her with that in mind, I could see that she was indeed the filly from back before. . . everything. It hadn’t actually been that long, but she looked older now and much more confident; it seemed like she really had gotten the hang of it.

“You knew my mom?” She seemed both impressed and a little nervous about that.

I rubbed my nose and regretted it. Fortunately, the stench seemed to have paralyzed my sense of smell... mostly. “Yeah. I can kind of say that; if it wasn’t for her, I’d have never gotten the chance to leave.”

She gave me a crooked sort of smile. Underneath the filthy overalls she was... a lot like her mom. Not beautiful or pretty, but cute with her light blue mane. “Yeah. I can only imagine how awesome that would be.” Oddly, I was both touched and inspired by her attitude. It was the first I’d come across that didn’t treat the outside with suspicion.

“What can I do to help?” I asked as I looked at the maze of pipes and arcane machinery.

“Going to have to vent the excess pressure,” she said as she looked at the massive metal tank and wiped the foul film off her mouth. “Okay... you want to explode, or do you want to puke?”

“What the hell kind of choice is that?” I asked, wondering if I should run and get Rivets. “Not explode.”

“Open the valve marked ‘purge’ and say goodbye to your lunch,” she said grimly as she pointed at a large, open-ended pipe at the base of the tank. She hopped down to one side, and I stood on the other. Together, we struggled, and then there was a pop and a hiss and black foamy water began to spray out. The reek was so intense that I doubled over and gagged, puking into the sludge spraying out around our hooves.

“Yeah! Nothing like biowaste and digestion talismans!” She said as the flow continued for several minutes. Then she rapidly wrenched shut the valve. The flow cut off, the knee-deep fluid dropping as it spread out in a nasty tide of goo.

The mare slogged through and turned on the vents to full blast. “Okay. Now we probably won’t blow up. Probably. Lots of methane coming from these digestion vats, though, and best not stand in it too long.” She gave me an insolent grin. “Though when this smell hits the living quarters, you know morning shift will finally be down here to do their damned jobs and not leave it up to the new girl.”

“You got a hell of a way to get help,” I said, spitting out a chunk. She gave me a friendly grin back; the first I’d received in days.

“Serves em right for dumping me down here while they have fun upstairs, and being bottom of the pile means they can’t bust me any lower!”

Dark lumps appeared on the floor. The sludge slowly receded and my mane began to itch. Badly. “What is that?” I asked as I lifted one lump with my hooves... and stared at a broken half of a skull.

Oh no... no no no... Rivets... what have you done?

The lumps were the bones of ponies. Dozens and dozens of recently killed ponies.

The mare looked at what I held with a shiver of disgust. “Yeah, I guess they thought the recyclers would be up to it. I guess the old gray mare was a little pissed with that Security what’s her name told her to dump them outside. It’s been blowing seals and filters for days though. Sending a body through is no big deal but dozens? Forget about it.”

For the last three days, Stable 99 had been gorging themselves on disease-infested food. My legs went weak as I slumped against the wall of the tank. “Have you been eating the food above?”

“Me? No time. Rivets dumped evening and night shift on me. I haven’t even seen my bed since the liberation happened,” she said sourly. “Been eating old boxed shit. Why?” She saw my face, and concern bloomed in her eyes.

It made sense. Like likes like. None of my friends or I fit in. This mare wasn’t infected. We were being driven off and isolated. I gave her a tired smile. “Listen. You want to do the stable a favor? My friends and I are going to be heading out soon. Really soon. There’s a place called Megamart that’s got tons of stuff the stable needs, and Rivets will need a maintenance mare to get it. Want to come along? It’ll get you out of clean up?”

She looked at me skeptically. “Are you serious? Outside? Like, Outside outside?”

“I’m serious,” I said with complete sincerity. “Get anything you need and meet me at the stable door. You have ten minutes. Don’t eat anything. Nothing. Do you hear me?” She stared in shock, then nodded.

One hundred raiders had devastated a corner of Hoofington. What would almost four times their number do?

I'd almost reached the stairs up to the next level when a gray blur slammed into me. My muck-slicked hide sent me sliding several feet to hit the wall, fortunately not very hard. I looked up to see Rivets glaring down at me in the dim light. The other maintenance ponies behind her gripped wrenches and hammers... and they were looking at me like I was the leak.

"So... you not only think you know this stable better than me, now you think you can do my fucking job?" she hissed softly. "Or maybe... you're down here trying to make work for me. Is that it? Trying to force us all outside?"

I struggled to my hooves, the muck making standing a disgusting challenge. "Rivets! You... you put the raiders in the recycling! I said—"

"I'm sorry? When did you become the Overmare, again?" I stared at her in shock as she snarled. "We've put ponies in there for years. Nothing happens."

My eyes widened with horror, "Rivets. You've exposed everypony here to the disease."

"There is no disease!" she shouted. "This is just you trying to drag us out of our home and into the Wasteland! To starve. To die!" She spat in my face. "That's what I think of your disease. I've made sure everypony's well fed and safe, and none of us are sick. We're fine."

No. You aren't. You aren't, and you're getting worse by the minute... "Rivets, I've seen the raiders outside... you need..." what? At this point, what could I do? What could anypony do?

"Need... what?" She suddenly broke into peels of giggles. "Trade? You think we want to fucking trade? We have everything we want right here. We don't need to trade with the outside. We don't need anything from them. And we don't need you."

I felt a chill wash through me from horn to hoof. "Rivets..." But what could I say? She'd placed her faith completely and utterly in her work and the stable's systems.

"Get out. You've broken enough things here. Now get out before you kill us all," she snarled as she walked past, laughing that mad giggle that rose higher and higher.

I stopped only long enough to shower the majority of the gunk off myself before I returned to my quarters. "Everypony get your stuff together. We need to get going, now." I said softly. P-21 met my eyes. "That thing we were afraid of? It happened."

Horror blossomed on his face. “It’s infected?”

“The whole food supply. They’ve been exposed to it for days. Three square meals a day.” Anguish bloomed on his face as he pressed it to the floor as he grit his teeth in pain.

“We failed. . .” he muttered. “We failed. . . we failed. . .”

“That doesn’t matter anymore.” In a few more days the rest of the stable would turn on us. “We’re leaving. I met one mare who probably isn’t infected. The only mare who acts. . . normal.”

“But. . . we can’t just leave them like this,” Glory said in shock. “They’ll leave the stable and. . .”

“I know, Glory.” They might not be as deadly without the Overmare or Daisy leading them, but they’d learn, and fast. I’d been talking about guns at Megamart; I knew Rivets would eventually get the same idea. “We’re going to sabotage the stable door. The Overmare once disabled it. We can disable it for good.”

The others stared at me in horror. Glory said in a near whisper, “Blackjack. . . it’ll be like Stable 90.” Eventually, they’d stop eating the chips and start eating meat. . . each other.

“It’s the only way to protect the Wasteland from the stable,” I said softly, appreciating the irony. Here I’d thought we’d have to do the opposite. “Get your things. We’re going. . . I doubt they’ll stop us.”

We got our things and made our way up to the door. I was glad to see Scotch Tape had taken my warning so seriously she hadn’t changed out of her stained coveralls. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Rivets isn’t even answering her intercom.”

Yeah, something. “Everyone through. I’ll disable the controls and jump through before it closes.” I turned to P-21. “Grenade?” What, how else did they expect me to disable something? I opened the door, and together they stepped through. They’d meet Lacunae somewhere outside, I hoped. Then I hit it a second time and ran to the entrance as the door once again started to close.

The Dealer stood beside me as he looked at me with sad eyes, “You don’t have to do this, Blackjack.”

Yes. I did.

My glowing eyes met Glory’s. I smiled. Her eyes went wide as I levitated the Delta PipBuck and threw it through the closing door along with my bags. The rest looked

on in shock as Glory screamed my name. Then the door closed in my face, the Dealer fading away with a sad sigh. I set the grenade and blew the controls.

It wasn't enough.

I wasn't sure if Rivets would be able to repair the damaged controls or not. I didn't know if, centuries from now, somepony might open the stable and be infected with the raider disease. And I knew there were dozens of foals who didn't deserve the slow and painful death of the murder, starvation, and horror that was to come. No-pony here deserved what they were about to get.

Except me.

There was only one way to save Stable 99. That way came with a price I had to pay. I made my way up the secret passage to the Overmare's quarters and carefully locked the door. Then I accessed her terminal, still logged in from the days before.

Ventilation Control.

>Activate All Air Talismans

Warning: Compromised Air Purification Talisman Detected!!! Do you wish to proceed? Y/N

>Y

Security head concur with password:

>Blackjack.

Maintenance head concur with password:

>Endurance.

All Air Talismans Activated.

The vents began to blow, and within seconds I smelled it. It was a strange scent. . . like pineapple and pepper. . . and at once my eyes started to water. I heard yelling from the atrium below as I stepped in front of the window and looked out at the greenish yellow haze that started to fill the room. Ponies started racing about. Their screams built higher and higher as they realized the very air of the stable was becoming toxic. Being the highest room, I supposed I would be the last one to die.

Fitting. I knew exactly what Buttercup had felt as she stood there watching her stable die over a hoofful of weeks. This would be over in minutes.

I saw two foals and a filly stagger and fall prone as tears ran down my face. Males who'd experienced just a few brief gasps of freedom now lay where they fell, scratching and clawing at their eyes as they gasped at the poisoned air. Rivets staggered out of the cafeteria and looked up at me, the betrayal etched in her rugged face...

fresh bite marks on her forelegs. There was no forgiveness for this. No atonement. Midnight staggered out onto the atrium balcony, her eyes all ready starting to yellow as they stared at me in rage, even as she slumped against the metal rail, fighting to breathe as the poison gas built. No pony would ever set foot in Stable 99 again.

A minute more, and it'd be over. My eyes watered and my lungs burned...

Suddenly, there was a purple flash behind me, and I heard the Goddess' voice as clear as day. "We had a deal, Blackjack."

"No... no no no NO!" I screamed as she wrapped her hooves around me. I blasted her purple hide with magic bullets.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" Midnight screamed as I was stolen away in a purple flash. The word echoed endlessly in my mind.

The only death I couldn't give was to the only pony who deserved it.

Myself.

Footnote: Level up

Perk added: Intensive Training – Your recent experiences in have granted you a +1 to your endurance.

Quest Perk added: The Power of Friendship: When fighting alongside your companions, you receive an additional +5 DT and +10% damage inflicted.

23. Walkabout

“When all the truth does is make your heart ache, sometimes a lie is easier to take.”

The sea rolled back and forth in front of me, slowly breathing its hushed breath on the rocks far below. The cliff rose in an almost sheer face up to the chiseled edge on which I sat. I looked out at the waves slowly marching to their deaths against the bottom of the cliff. Once, there'd been a rail along the clifftop path, but now there was nothing but rusting lengths of pipe and dead grass. I closed my eyes, listening to the softly breathing water. I pressed the cool metal barrel beneath my chin. Was this how Mini felt before she died? I took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

I was over. This was done.

I pulled the trigger.

I was dropped on the cold, wet grass, coughing and gagging with foam on my lips as my body struggled for breath. Maybe, for once, I would catch a break, and the chlorine I'd inhaled would finish me off for good. My eyes burned and my hide itched terribly as rain pattered down. I felt a potion bottle pressed against my mouth and clenched my jaws, fighting, coughing and snorting until the healing draught had been emptied mostly onto my face.

“Help me!” Glory gasped as I writhed. Each breath felt like it was my last... if only... but my body jerked to take another sharp, shallow inhalation. My hooves scraped against my chest, as if I were trying to tear open my body and toss away my burning lungs. My eyes stared wide, the chemicals burning the glowing surfaces as I squirmed, rear legs kicking up clods as they spasmed and tried to get me away from the pony I didn't deserve.

P-21 sat apart, eyes closed, head bowed as he shook with silent tears. He glanced at me, pain etched in his blue gaze. Pain and anger... good. Be angry at me, P-21. Take it out on me, I mentally begged, but he came over and tried to hold me down.

Rampage's own haunted look was masked by her frustration as I kicked her soundly in the face. With a sickening crunch, her nose shattered. A moment later, it crunched back in place. She grabbed my rear legs and forced them still.

Scotch Tape merely stared in shock as she looked from me to the tunnel entrance in horror. Congratulations, welcome to your first taste of the Wasteland. She pushed back her goggles, her green eyes widening as the young olive mare muttered in shock. “They’re. . . they’re dead? Everypony? She killed everypony?!”

“They were infected,” Glory sobbed as she pulled out another purple potion, fighting to get it down my throat. “She had no choice.”

Lacunae stepped next to me. “Of course she didn’t. Necessity is the mother of atrocity,” she said as she knelt and used her magic to force my thrashing body to still. “Shhh. . . hush now,” she murred as she touched her glowing horn to mine. There was a flash, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

A memory. . . Just like a memory orb. I supposed it made sense. Unicorn magic extracted memories, and the alicorn could read minds, so I guessed she could swap memories. ‘We live in each other’s dreams’, she’d told me. I wondered if this was Lacunae’s memory, or the Goddess, or somepony else? From what I’d heard, it could be from any one of hundreds, possibly thousands of ponies.

You’re a murderer, Blackjack.

So. . . first things first. Body? Mare. Unicorn. A little older than me, I suspected. The place? A long boring-ass hallway. It looked familiar. Really familiar. I caught a glance at a nameplate beside a door. ‘Colonel Cupcake.’ So this was Miramare, not yet all blown up. It was late at night, but this didn’t have the feel of a patrol. No. . . from the way she moved, it was more of a pensive wandering. Huh. . . I could relate.

Now if she’d only pass by something shiny so I could get a good look at her.

You’re a fucking murderer, Blackjack.

“She lied to me, Vanity,” a male buck with a deep voice said softly somewhere nearby. The voice was thick with the sound of tears. Slowly, the mare drifted closer to a closed door, standing in the spill of light underneath it. “She’s been lying to me since we first met.” From outside, I could hear the dull boom of thunder and the soft hiss of rain on the roof.

I heard Vanity’s patient sigh. “I know this is hard for you, but take a deep breath and think about it a little.”

“What’s there to think about?” he said with a sniff. “It’s over. I trusted her, trusted her with my life, with my heart, and she lied to me. It’s like. . . it’s as if my sisters lied

to me. I just didn't think it could happen."

"How'd you find out?" Vanity asked softly.

"I had some suspicions after running into her at Maripony. It just seemed awfully convenient. Wonderful, but convenient." He gave a deep sigh. "And then there were the things that she knew that nopony should know. I knew something was up. Then, we were mugged and it all came out. After that, she confessed." He sobbed softly. "She was using me. . . ."

"I know it's hard, but you should forgive her," Vanity said calmly, reasonably.

There's no forgiveness for what you did.

Shut up, brain. I'm trying to listen to other ponies' problems.

"Listen to what you just told me. You knew, she confessed. Do you think she still cares about you?"

"You don't understand! She lied to me!"

"So you're too good to lie to?" Vanity said with a chuckle. It wasn't returned. "She had reasons to lie, and, unlike with most ponies, hers were actually valid. Think of her job. She had to lie to you. To everypony. How else could she keep doing what she has to?"

"I understand all that. Still, it hurts."

"If you expected to go through your whole life never getting hurt by somepony you love, then this is long overdue," Vanity replied firmly. "Yes, she hurt you, but she didn't mean to hurt you. You have to ask yourself: is it worth losing all the good times over this one mistake?"

Killing my stable wasn't a mistake. It was an atrocity. I should have done better. . . .

The mare turned away, and the hallway seemed to smear in my vision, and... I found myself in a kneeling buck in a well-lit office decorated in purple and gold. Ooohkay; apparently I'd switched to a different memory. There were numerous books stacked up in heaps on the tables, the desk, and the floor. A purple scale hung from the side of the desk's terminal on a braided length of purple hair. A figurine of Fluttershy and another of Rainbow Dash sat beside it.

My host was connecting some kind of device to a series of wires, working with great urgency, when I heard a mare calling out from outside the room. "Goldenblood! I'd like a word with you in my office, please." My host suddenly gasped, pushed

the panel back against the wall, and levitated the screws back in place. The door opened, and my host dove under the large oak desk, curling up as tight as he could.

I heard the familiar wheezing rasp, the dry coughs. “Yes, Twilight?”

“What is Project Chimera?” My host saw her lift a folder from the bookcase behind the desk, floating it towards the middle of the office. Fortunately, there was a mirror in the corner of the office, and I could see Goldenblood facing Twilight Sparkle. Both looked... tired. Old. Angry. The scars on Goldenblood’s hide had healed, somewhat, but his metallic eyes had lost none of their conviction. Twilight looked liked she’d aged a lot recently. Her eyes had developed wrinkles in the corners, and her mane was growing fainter and grayer in certain streaks.

He didn’t answer right away, locking eyes with her before giving a dismissive wave of his hoof. “A defunct and failed branch of research, Twilight. A stab in the dark between the MoP and the MAS,” Goldenblood rasped softly, but with resolute conviction.

“Failed? I read the reports. The fusion megaspell worked! It worked!” She waved the folder like she was going to strike him with it. “Why am I only finding out about this now? Why did I have to find out from Dr. Trueblood and not from you? Why did you keep this from me?” There was a hurt tone in her voice.

“Dr. Trueblood is an intellectual opportunist who takes far too much glee in debasing and deforming ponies, and I’ll see him transferred to Yellow River for this. He can spend the rest of his career cleaning out bedpans and dealing with zebra hoofrot.”

“Goldenblood,” Twilight began when he turned away from her.

“It was a mistake, Twilight!” he said sharply, then hunched his shoulders as he started to gasp and wheeze for breath. Still, he struggled to continue. “We fused ponies with cockatrices... ponies with diamond dogs... ponies with manticores and griffins and baby dragons. Baby dragons, Twilight!” he said, turning and pacing, his head still hanging low. “Every fusion was a mistake. It doesn’t matter the powers the test subjects gained; every time, something fundamental was lost.”

“But that just means the research was a failure, Goldenblood. You just missed out on that missing element. If you’d brought this to me sooner—” she began, but he cut her off with hacking. To my horror, I saw blood on his lips. Had his body still not healed from its injuries after all this time? “Golden!” She started to rush to her terminal, and my host clenched his teeth as he drew as far back under the desk as possible.

"I'm fine.... Twilight." He gasped. "Fine... just... let me catch my breath..." He sat as she slowly approached him again, my host relaxing slightly. "Twilight... we're not going to win this war by turning into monsters. I tried to explain that to Trueblood. He couldn't care less. I don't know what he's told you about Chimera, but it was a mistake. It has nothing more to offer Equestria."

I have nothing to offer but death.

Not true. I saved one. By one. By one.

A point one percent success rate doesn't excuse a ninety-nine point nine percent fatality rate.

Great, my mind was using math to damn me.

"Nothing. Goldenblood... think about it! If we can alter the megaspell, perfect the mutagenic element, we could do more than just fuse ponies with non-ponies. We could create alicorns!" She said, her eyes lighting to the possibilities. "Imagine dozens, or hundreds of princesses fighting on our side!"

"No!" He shouted and struck her hard across the face with a hoof. He looked just as shocked as she at what he'd just done. "I... I'm sorry..."

Twilight rubbed where he'd hit her, looking confused and angry, but still concerned as he coughed and retched, his lips spattered pink with bright specks. Twilight looked at him for a long moment before her face hardened and she said gravely, "It's my duty to pursue any and all research to win this war, Golden. This should have been brought to me from the start. I'm going to launch a full review of Project Chimera. If it's a dead end, like you said, then we'll put it to rest for good." Goldenblood crumpled a little before her, gasping for air as he wheezed. "I want access to every file. Every book. Every sample. Every test subject."

He closed his eyes. "It's all at Hippocratic Research, Ministry Mare." His whisper barely reached my host's ear. "But remember, nothing good comes from making monsters, Twilight."

"I won't, Goldenblood," she replied, sounding tired. "I'm trying to find something... some spell, some... something that will put everything right again and help us win this war. I know you're trying to do the same. We just have to work together. Right?"

Goldenblood was coughing too much to answer, but from the haunted look he gave her, I suspected that he hardly agreed. "Come on, let's get you to the nurse's station. And I need some ice on this bruise."

The door had been closed for several minutes before the buck relaxed. “Chimera, huh? Bet Pinkie would be mighty curious about that,” he said to himself as he returned to installing the device on the wires.

Suddenly, the memory bled away. . . reforming in pain as he was being dragged by a telekinetic glow along a catwalk over immense vats, screaming along with dozens of other ponies. Alarms rang in an anemic attempt to give warning as he weakly scabbled for something to hold onto.

“No! No! I don’t want this! Mommy! Mommy!” he sobbed brokenly. He hooked a limb on a bar, but the force pulling on every inch of his body grew and grew. There was a snap, a grinding noise as pain exploded along his aching, burned hide. Then the telekinesis released him, and he drew a shuddering breath. . . seconds before the force redoubled and tore him screaming from the catwalk and into the churning, bubbling vat of rainbow and blue below.

The sensation that followed was nothing less than what I imagined it’d be like to be shoved through Stable 99’s recycler. What emerged was not what went in.

We live in each other’s dreams and memories...

The world smeared and congealed back into a hilltop in a flash of purple light; in the distance was a city of black towers wreathed in baleful green light. Now I was in. . . yes. This was an alicorn. I felt. . . strong. Healthy. Powerful. I wasn’t sure if I was actually hearing it, but a vast whispering host filled my mind, at the moment drowned out by a grand proclamation. “Red Eye has yet to even touch Hoofington, my children. Now is an excellent chance to save more of these poor ponies!”

We slowly advanced, my host, two greens, and three blues, each one alike save for the color; who knew they came in different shades? I felt myself sliding like oil from among the perspectives of the group as we approached the swampy morass of Flank. Then I became aware of a sound. . . yet not a sound. A noise within my host’s head was the only way I could think of to describe it. The noise increased. With it came the pain.

Screams.

The city was screaming inside me. With every second, I felt myself jerked more and more erratically from one alicorn to the next. It was as if the screams were pulling something fundamental from my host, and the more that overpowering voice rose, the louder the cries became. Hundreds of screams crying in agony. Thousands. Millions. The jerking became a blur, and I was certain that at any moment I would

be torn to pieces.

A purple flash, and once more I was on that hilltop overlooking the distant city. The whispers were silent, the Goddess silent. Then a mare's voice in my host's mind said, "They're gone."

The Goddess snorted. "That's ridiculous. Impossible!" But I could hear the quaver of uncertainty and fear. "They can't be... gone... not even death truly separates us." The whispers rose and fell.

"They've been torn..." another mare said, and then a different mare finished, "... from Unity."

Now that great chorus began to quail in fear. "Silence," the Goddess commanded. There was a long quiet moment, and then the Goddess asked, "Do you know?"

For several minutes there was naught inside the purple alicorn but stillness. Then a strange, oddly familiar voice said solemnly, "This magic... it's cold. Like Rarity's Black Book." Another long and drawn out silence. "It must be some kind of necromantic effect. Something we never imagined. And it's saturated Hoofington."

"If a necromantic spell were that powerful..." one mare began. "...Hoofington would be sterile for miles," another finished.

"Not if we are... as distant a possibility as it is... just particularly vulnerable to it," the calm voice pointed out, setting off a riot of argument and fear. I wondered if the Goddess was in control of that whispering, panicked mass of thought or if she fought against it for control of herself.

"We are vulnerable to nothing! We bathe in taint and glow in radiation! And do not forget, we have experienced necromancy. We scoff at it! It cannot truly harm us."

"It just did." The calm familiar voice said. "We need..."

"I will decide what needs be done!" The Goddess proclaimed as the whispering rose and fell. Then there was a pause. "But what is your idea?"

A long sigh. "We must try and send another mare into Hoofington to learn what is causing this and how we can stop it."

"Didn't you just see what happened? We all felt it; every one of us. It would be torture. Neigh, suicide!" The Goddess' voice oozed in disdain.

And, barely "heard" over that whispering chorus, a mare said meekly, "I'll go."

Again, silence. “You’ll go? You?” The Goddess seemed incredulous. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“To get what I deserve,” she murmured softly.

“This is a waste of time. Better to send more of our children to try to obtain the Black Book before Red Eye becomes too much of a difficulty,” the Goddess declared imperiously.

“We agree that finding the book. . .” the first of the paired mares said as the other finished, “. . . is more likely to be successful.” The whisperings rose and fell, a consensus seeming to settle around leaving Hoofington alone.

Finally, that lone, calm voice said softly, “What’s one, if she’s willing to endure it? We will have to block her connection partially. . . mute her experiences. . . but she may find the answers we need. I’ll help her.”

“You will do no such thing. I know what you are capable of! Do not forget that I am the Goddess!” The Goddess roared across the collective, silencing it. Finally, though, the Goddess asked, “You are certain you want to do this? You will be isolated and alone. I know. . . we all know. . . how terrible that is.”

The meek whisper rose above the chorus. “If it’s what you need, I will do it for you.” The murmuring rose and fell again in consideration. “I know Hoofington.”

The Goddess seemed to consider that. “You do, don’t you? Very well. You, give her what she needs. Block the rest. I don’t want to feel that sensation again, do you understand?”

“Of course.” The muttering whispers seemed to go away, and that mare asked softly, “Are you sure about this?”

“It’s what I deserve.” And with that, everything swirled and smeared away again.

oooOOOooo

It figured. I had to be the only pony in the world who could be trapped in a stable filling with poisonous gas and live. Was my luck really that bad? Couldn’t whatever malicious and depraved being that was in charge of the universe just let me die? Apparently not. I was lying on a soggy mattress that smelled of old water and faint rot. My lungs sounded just a little better than Goldenblood’s and felt a little worse.

I wasn’t sure where this was. Big building, from the hiss of rain and the splashes echoing in the distance. There were peeling and split ministry posters; I barely made out Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy, but whatever encouraging message they offered

had returned to pulp ages ago. My eyes traced along the ceiling tiles overhead, as if there was some answer or meaning in the cracks and crevices.

Murderer.

Midnight's last word echoed in my mind over and over again with perfect clarity. I know that some ponies might say it was Rivets's fault. They'd be wrong. If I'd been stronger... better... I would have forced them to march every corpse outside and purge the recycling systems. But I hadn't, and in doing so I'd allowed Rivets to commit an act that doomed 99. That wasn't what made me a murderer, though. The ponies of 99 were doomed; nothing I could have done would have changed that. But when it was my hoof activating the gas, I'd damned myself. It's tragic for hundreds to die. It's murder when it was my actions that caused their death.

Necessity is the mother of atrocity. I remembered the buck being ripped into a vat of... not thinking about it... and transforming into an alicorn mare. But I also remembered his burns. The heat... the damage all around him. Faced with such a choice of letting him die, or saving him by forcing him to change, what was the more virtuous choice? Or was the Goddess, like me, damned simply by being there? Act, and you transform ponies into monsters. Don't, and you're a murderer for standing by when you could have acted.

But that wasn't what really damned me.

"I'm sorry, Glory," I murmured softly.

There was a shift beside me, and a cool rag dabbed at my brow. "Hey. You made it. I was worried there for a bit." Her fond tone wasn't what I'd been expecting. "If you ever pull a stunt like that again..."

A stunt? I... "What are you talking about, Glory?" I asked warily.

"Lacunae filled us in while you were out. How you... how you had to do what you did in the stable." She sighed softly as she wrapped her hooves around me, resting her head on my chest. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack. For a while there I thought... I thought that you'd tried to... to do something. Something horrible." She pressed her face against my chest.

My mouth was dry as I held her atop me, staring at the water stained tiles overhead. "What... what did she tell you?"

"That you'd worked out her teleporting you out, but that you activated the poisoned talisman early. That Rivets and the others tried to stop you and Lacunae got injured," she said quietly. "I'm so sorry you had to do that. I know you thought we'd argue,

but. . . I wish I could have been there with you when you had to do it.” She let out a great sigh as she lay atop me. I felt as if I were falling. “Don’t ever do that again. I couldn’t take it. Not if you did that.”

She’d lied. Lacunae, or the Goddess, had lied to save my tail.

Quiet tears streaked my face as I stroked the soft hair and delicate feathers of a mare I’d never deserved. “Yeah. I had to do it. I had to.”

Murderer. Liar. Monster.

“Why the hell do I need to learn all this stuff again?” I heard a young mare grouse grumpily from the next room. “I mean. . . who cares if a ghoul is a zombie or not? They sound disgusting!”

“Some of them may be, but a few are still ponies inside. We’ve met some pegasi ghouls that were quite kind and sweet,” Glory pointed out.

“Besides, Blackjack, Glory, and I learned all of this the hard way. Trust me; you’ll deal with far fewer bullet holes if you read up,” P-21 said in his calm, soft voice. “But if you want to learn the hard way, we can have Rampage teach you though the buck to the head system.”

Once I’d pulled myself together enough to get to my hooves under me, I walked like my body was made of thin glass. Every step I took, I felt I was going to break or something. I kept hearing the word, seeing the still bodies of the foals. I could smell the chlorine reek in my nostrils. Sweet Celestia, please let me hold it together. I faked the most sincere smile possible. “Yeah, worked wonders on me. . .” I said as I walked out slowly into the room with the others.

Rampage was going over the Hoofington edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide with Scotch Tape, giving pointers. “Go for the eyes, Tape. Go for the eyes.” The young olive mare looked at me with an expression that mixed gratitude with fear and added touch of hate. She quickly looked back at the book as if her life depended on it. With a little bit of luck, she’d do a thousand times better than P-21 and I did coming out.

Said stallion was lying on some rags in the corner. I walked slowly over, and he looked up with bloodshot eyes. “Hey,” I said as I sat beside him. He shied away. I guess I couldn’t blame him.

“Hey. . .” he murmured as he closed his eyes. “So. There was a plan?” he asked softly.

I looked over at the inscrutable features of Lacunae gazing out at the rainy night. “Yeah. Something like that.” I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. I couldn’t tell if he cared or not. He seemed empty and brittle, like one good shove or wrong word would snap him for good, and I’d lose another friend. I didn’t deserve to have him, either; I didn’t deserve any of them.

“I saw you. . . did they. . .” He drew a shaking breath. “So. . . was it fast?” His soft voice still varied, and I saw Scotch Tape looking over with her wide green eyes, shifting nervously.

Rampage swatted her head. “Hey. Spikey death dealer giving you pointers. You should listen to them, or I’ll give you points instead.” Scotch quickly flushed and looked away as she nervously chewed on the end of her dusky blue tail.

“It was over quick,” I lied. Sure, minutes were better than spending your last few days eating each other, but minutes of agony. . . I’d done that to foals. . . my hooves started to shake. I felt bile rising in my throat. I had to fake it, had to pretend like it didn’t affect me. I wanted to sob right there. Instead, I grimaced. “I just had the luck to get just enough to mess me up. My chest still feels like my lungs were scrubbed out with a brush, and my eyes hurt.”

I killed my stable. . . and I was complaining about my eyes?

“Blackjack. . . how are you doing? Really?” He asked softly as his eyes met mine, and I felt my grin strain even more.

“I’m fine. . . just fine. . . I had to do it. . . I had to. . .” Keep repeating that. Keep on repeating it till you believe it.

For some reason, that seemed to disappoint him even more. He turned towards me a little and stretched out a hoof. . . paused. . . and then drew it back with a shameful look. “Because. . . Because I just had a stable full of ponies I honestly didn’t care that much for die, and I’m barely holding it together. Just. . . they’re gone. And they were pretty shitty to me, and I still feel bad they’re gone.”

I couldn’t meet his eyes anymore. I pretended to find batting an empty can fascinating to keep from shaking. “It doesn’t matter. . . I had to do it. . .” Had to. Had to.

“Blackjack.” He put his hoof on the can. “They were your friends. Your family. Your mother—”

“Don’t!” I yelled, and promptly all eyes were on me... except P-21’s. He flinched away, clenching his eyes shut. Glory started towards me, but I gave her a look. I couldn’t handle this. I was about to explode... it was all I could do to control my breathing. “Don’t... talk about her. Them. Any of it. Please.” I could smell it in my mane. Feel it on my skin. I heard that shout echoing endlessly inside me. “It’s over. It’s done. I can’t... do this now... please,” I begged.

Scotch Tape looked at me in shock as her own tears began to fall. Rampage took one look at her and declared boldly, “Hey! Scotchy wotchy! Don’t you think you should give Blackjack her PipBuck back? Not that that the classic version isn’t peachy keen, but she really needs the über black one back.”

Scotch Tape blinked up at her incredulously as sorrow and shock vied with her request. “Are you serious? Do you know how hard it is to remove one of these?” she asked as she held up her own PipBuck. “If it were held on with nuts and bolts, sure! Let me get my wrench. But short of taking off her leg, these things don’t come off without the proper tools.”

Which, I gathered, was part of the point of Rampage asking. The striped pony grabbed Scotch’s PipBuck and started to tug. “Come on... it’s gotta come off somehow...” she said, and the young mare fought for her life, swatting her armor in futility. “I know... I can chew it off!”

“Ack! Get me out of here! Everypony outside is crazy!” She wailed as Rampage started to slobber over the screen.

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. I cried too... but I think the laugh covered it up.

Thank you Rampage.

The building we were in had been some kind of publishing house. Copies of ‘Hoofington Weekly’ newspapers lay in soggy stacks, heaps, and, more frequently, barely-recognizable lumps. I really had no clue what kind of salvage might be available, but we split into pairs to look around the three story building. We badly needed ammo, and, as much as I hated to admit it, needed salvage for caps. We wouldn’t get far if we were broke. Glory and P-21 took the second floor, and Rampage and Scotch started off to check the first. I began heading towards the basement with Lacunae, but halfway down the stairs I realized what had just happened. I took the stairs up two at a time, ignoring my body’s protests, and half ran, half skidded down a hallway. I spotted Rampage and Scotch through a doorway as I passed and managed

to catch myself on it, panting and wheezing. The two looked up in alarm.

"Rampage," I began, "could I talk... to you alone?"

Scotch gave a questioning look at me, then another at Rampage. The Reaper nudged her towards the door as she headed out. I motioned Rampage into the far corner.

"Rampage," I asked quietly, meeting her pink eyes with my own and then looking back at Scotch, who was now talking with Lacunae. "Is she going to be okay with you?" One sneer. One half-lidded look, and I'd be putting a bullet in her head. Then I'd be swapping her with P-21 while she popped the bullet out of her noggin.

She blinked at me, then smiled slightly sadly. "No... I think she's a little too old for that." Okay... tiny bit reassuring, more than just a little creepy. "I'll keep her safe. I promise. I won't... slip... again." She'd better not. I was already suicidal. I didn't know how I'd take another Thorn. Would I freak out? Try and kill Rampage by putting her through the printers? Cry? Just break? Or would I feel nothing at all? That last possibility scared me more than all the others. I nodded at her, then went back into the hall, tried to smile at the odd look Scotch was giving me, and headed back towards the basement with Lacunae.

Our hooves clopped softly as we moved together, me in front and she behind. My glowing eyes pierced the darkness, but aside from radroaches, this place was dead... ooh, bad thought. I kept waiting, hoping, for something to jump out at me. I needed something to distract me from how similar these tunnels were to Stable 99. Needed something to drown out the word echoing in my mind.

And Lacunae wasn't saying anything about what she'd done. About what I'd done. I was glad she couldn't read my mind at this moment, as I was fairly screaming with questions about what she'd said. About saving me. But the alicorn remained stoic and silent, illuminating her way with a little spark of light.

I got to apply my lockpicking skills, at least; despite everything, I had to admit that I was getting better at the delicate process of tricking open locks. Security Mare: lockbreaker. Somewhere, the Goddesses must be laughing at the irony. I opened one locked metal door and was greeted by a storeroom. "Oh, look! Turpentine and Wonderglue!" I said with infinitely more enthusiasm than was warranted. "Scrap metal. Always useful. Sensor modules. Even a spark battery." And in the back was a yellow medical box. The healing potions inside were the consistency of tar, but I took the Med-X and Mint-als.

“Truly a cornucopia of caps,” Lacunae agreed softly with just a hint of sarcasm.

“Hey. It’ll tide us over till we find some nice high quality guns to sell,” I said as I lifted a metal box lid and swept four measly bottle caps into one of my pockets. Storeroom stripped, I glanced back at her. “The thing you put me in? Was that Unity?”

Lacunae didn’t look at me, her thoughts sighing softly. “It is. . . like Unity. It is as close to Unity as you can know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I took a lead pipe and casually squashed a hungry radroach that wandered too near.

She sighed again as she plucked a goblet of radroach meat from the corpse with her horn and deposited it with a into a plastic jar kept for Rampage’s high protein diet. Somehow, I doubted a goddess liked crawling through tunnels for scrap and harvesting bug flesh. “What you experienced was an outsider looking at Unity. You remained you. Your memories, your experiences, your point of view. . . they were all intact.” At my ‘I’m an idiot, remember?’ look, she elaborated, “At any point, did you not feel like yourself?”

I wish. “No; it was like a memory orb.”

“Exactly. There was a wall between you and the memories you viewed. You did not become the original person experiencing the memory. You didn’t know what they thought. You can infer, you can sympathize, but you remain apart from them. In Unity, there is no such separation,” she said quietly.

We walked past some hulking turbine-engine-things; amazingly, they still had power. Most of the indicator lights were red, though. ‘Lockout,’ one read. “So, you’re you and not you at the same time?” She smiled, looking a little surprised.

“In Unity. . . you are yourself, but you are also countless others. It is like being in a great dark room, and not knowing where you begin and the others end. I am me, but I might also be a pedicurist, or a soldier, or a librarian. And who I was originally is lost. I have some semblance of independence and personality, but I’ve no idea if this body was originally mine. If this brain held my original memories or housed my soul. And at any moment, the me who is me can be replaced by the Goddess.”

“Why is that?” I asked as I remembered that imperial voice. “Who is she? What makes her so special?”

“She is. . . the Goddess. She is the glue that binds us together. She is. . . difficult to describe,” she said softly with a sigh. “She is attempting to ignore me. I’m separated from the others, though not yet severed.”

“But why?”

Lacunae looked right into my eyes and asked me softly, “Would you like to experience somepony gassing a stable? Feel her guilt? Know her horrors and shame?” I felt myself start to shake, my eyes wide as I looked back at her. I broke my gaze to the floor as Lacunae went on. “There is much pain in Unity, but it is dispersed. Separated. Tolerable. In me, it is concentrated. The Goddess hurts enough with what she has become. She does not wish to include the pain I witness to her own burden.”

I hadn’t thought of that. What would it be like to know, to have experienced, the suffering of hundreds, maybe thousands, of individuals over centuries? To never be able to be apart from it? It would drive a pony crazy. “And then there’s the Hoofington problem,” I added as I found some dusty ammo containers. Why would there be ammo containers in a publishing house?

“What. . .” she started. “What do you know about it?”

“The screams. That jerking. How you lost five ponies from Unity.” I poured the bullets into my saddlebags and turned to face her. “It was something I saw while I was away. The screams.”

“Yes. . . the screams.” She shivered. “I. . . that is what I am here to discover. What magic. . . what power. . . can affect us so. Alone, the screams are. . . manageable. They rise and fall constantly, but do not overwhelm.”

“But put two of you together and you bounce back and forth like radroaches in a shoebox,” I said, and she looked impressed once again. “So that’s why you’re here alone. That’s what the Goddess wants. But why?”

“Because in Unity, there is comfort and safety. We have no promise of an everafter, but in Unity we endure. Kill one of us and it matters little. Some of us have been slain and then returned to slay our attacker in a new body, having learned their tricks. Few ponies can maintain the level of creativity and ruthlessness to keep ahead of us.” She looked away with a momentary scowl. “That one little mare and her friends, however. . .” Somehow, I didn’t think she meant to mutter that into my mind.

I couldn’t help but smile, wondering who she was referring to. Still, stay on topic. “So, when those others were lost. . . it must have been pretty terrifying.”

“When you are as we are. . . something fearful is intolerable. Therefore, we must either ignore it or hunt it down and destroy it at all costs. I am a rare exception; I was sent to learn about this threat.” By ‘you’.

“The screams...they hurt you, don't they? Even alone?” She just closed her eyes with a small smile and shrugged elegantly. As much as I found the Goddess a twit, Lacunae was perfect for our group. “You said you deserved it. . .” Now there was shock on her face. Apparently, she hadn't known exactly what I'd experienced in that dream state. “Why?”

She walked a little ways past me and then stopped. “I did something terrible. I don't remember what, or why, but I remember the shame. The horror. I know what you went through when you closed that door on your friends. And I know. . . how much it would hurt your friends if they realized just what you tried to do.

“I had friends once, I think.” She closed her eyes, tilting her head back. “Dear friends. But I lost them somehow, one after the next. Eventually, we were all alone. And one by one, we were consumed. Just as you are being consumed.”

I sat down. “I don't know how to go on. EC-1101 seems so. . . so stupid now, Lacunae. I killed my stable. How do I live with that?” I looked up at her, tears streaking my cheeks. “How am I supposed to live with that? How do I tell Glory that. . . as much as I care for her. . . I wish I'd died along with my stable?” Lie to her? Go through the motions of being interested in a life I couldn't care less about?

“I don't know, Blackjack. I have no choice but to live and endure. It's my punishment. It's what I deserve. But you. . . I can't weigh your sins against your virtue.” She approached and nudged my shoulder with a motherly sort of smile. “Come. There're no answers found in a smelly basement.” With her minigun floating above her, she proceeded down the hallway.

An hour later, we'd come across a few more storage rooms, and my bags were filled to overflowing with assorted crap I'd gathered in the hopes that it could be put to some sort of use. We were on our way back up towards the first floor, not having any good way to carry more stuff even if we could find it. “So, deep and profound questions of identity aside, what were you doing in Chapel?” I asked as I stepped over the radroach carcass. “How long had you been there?”

“Chapel is a hollow, a refuge; the screams of the city are muted somewhat. I hadn't been there long, though; a few months at the most.”

“And nopony commented on the giant unicorn in black?” I asked with a slight tease. “I mean, not to be rude, but you do stand out.”

“One advantage to being a giant unicorn is that few bother you with why you are a giant unicorn,” she replied with a calm smile. “Priest suspected something, I’m sure, but I think he was more interested in preventing me from trying to enter the city. The Crusaders gave me a wide enough berth. That delightful filly Charity made the most delicious daisy sandwiches I’d ever eaten, though. Where she found the flowers I can’t imagine, but they were worth every cap.”

I couldn’t imagine Charity making me a daisy sandwich. In fact, I couldn’t imagine a daisy sandwich without getting some disturbing visuals. “Yeah, and she probably charged you a horn and a hoof for ‘em,” I muttered sourly, then blinked. “Wait. If you don’t have to eat. . . ?”

“Why would I buy food from her?” She finished, looking at me in surprise. “Why, because they’re quite tasty.” Her lips curled with elegant delight.

On a whim, I peeked into an office near the stairs. Wallsafe? Unopened? I felt the most curious nibble at my spine, like that locked door had insulted my mother by being locked! Well, we’d see about that! “Hold up a sec,” I said as I nipped inside and floated out a bobby pin. “Okay. How are we going to do this? The easy way or the hard way?”

Lacunae stood behind me. “What’s the hard way?” she asked in an amused tone of thought.

“I cry and have to get P-21 to open it for me. It’s ugly. Trust me,” I assured her.

It wasn’t the worst lock I’d run across, though I had to press my ear to the side of the door to hear the faint tap of the pins, screwing up my face, and I went through two pins before the third one opened it.

Inside, there were some gold bits, a nine millimeter automatic pistol, two magazines of nine millimeter ammo, and a folder with a note taped to the front that read: ‘We can’t print this! Image would kill us!’ Okay, MAS, MWT, even MoM, I could understand, but what would the Ministry of Image do? Write a bad review?

The Armor of Image By Ace Buckley

We all know the picture of the ministries as the pillars of modern Equestria. Bold, strong, and working for the betterment of all ponies everywhere! We know that image because of the tireless efforts of the Ministry of Image and its ministry mare, Rarity. Its duties are to protect, inspire, and brighten our dull lives with fabulosity.

So why is the Ministry of Image creating magical armor?

Yes, that's exactly what I thought when a confidential source informed me that Rarity was conducting experimental spell and material research on creating armor. This is normally the stuff I expect to come from the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the Ministry of Arcane Science. . . heck, even Awesome would be up to it. But Image? It's like a Ministry of Peace weapons program!

Image has downplayed inquiries that Rarity was simply exploring the possibility of creating low grade armor for equestrian citizens. If that's the case, they're certainly pursuing the research with a decidedly low horn. According to documents obtained from the MoM at Hightower Jail and Shattered Hoof Penitentiary, several 'undesirable elements' were transferred to Image custody and unknown destinations courtesy of everypony's favorite spooks at the O.I.A..

But, thanks to an exclusive inside source, I can now tell you that these prisoners were used to explore radical and dangerous new techniques of magic. The victims of the experiments were so traumatized that they simply wasted away. Others were driven mad, and we have confirmation that some were sent to Happyhorn Gardens. Unfortunately, Ministry Mare Fluttershy was not willing to comment on these patients, citing confidentiality. However, she said she would discuss the matter personally with Rarity. Will the details be shared with this reporter? Don't hold your breath!

So, what is the status of Image's armor research project? Will Ministry Mare Rarity come forward to disclose just what she's up to? Will she explain to the families of these prisoners why she subjected them to such dangerous magics? Will she disclose her findings to the MAS and independent review? Or will she simply deflect them with a laugh and a wave of her hoof and find something new to distract us with? Inquiring ponies want to know.

Okay. That was definitely more interesting than I had expected.

Suddenly, there was a loud hum, and the lights overhead flickered to life. A radio tuned to a long dead station poured out a sea of static, and the office terminal flashed, crackled, and then died in a puff of acrid purple smoke. "I didn't do it!" I said to Lacunae. Then a portion of the wall retracted, and a four-wheeled robot rolled into the hallway. "Get down!" I shouted as the sentry robot's visor bar turned a brilliant crimson.

'Unauthorized presence detected. Initiating removal protocols. Surrender immediately and be disintegrated!' The sentry bot declared, and I knew that there was a robotics programmer two centuries ago needing a swift buck to the head. Of course,

by the word 'removal', Taurus's rifle was coming out, and I'd slammed home armor piercing rounds by 'be'. Then the robot's missile pod flipped out of its shoulder, Lacunae's glittering shield flashing up just in time to take the blast. The shimmering magic wall dropped, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four rounds through its head.

Of course, it didn't keep it's brain there, so the effect was a little bit spoilt. Lacunae's minigun bullets simply dinged and sparked off it's armored hide, and after a moment she put the weapon aside, her horn flashing as three glowing arrows manifested next to her and streaked into its chest. With a crackle and pop, the sentry went still.

"I dislike these machines," she declared calmly as she opened a side panel and pulled out the robot's 5mm ammunition belts.

"Oh, why don't you push yourself? Be peeved. Mildly annoyed. Disguntled?" I said with a chuckle, my brain running on bullet time rather than 'think about what you did and are doing to your friends' time. The missile launcher came off in one big piece, and I held it in my hooves. "Hey! Try using this!"

She looked at the weapon coolly. "Don't be ridiculous. I could never use that." I stared at her in shock. "It's loud, noisy, and smelly."

"Right. How silly of me!" There was no way I'd manage it. My magical strength wasn't nearly enough to fire it accurately, and when using missiles I sure as heck wanted to be accurate. We made our way up the stairs and towards the sounds of continuing gunshots and explosions. Scotch Tape's PipBuck tag flashed in my vision, leading the way.

We entered the room filled with printing machines. Whoever had turned on the power hadn't anticipated turning on the security, because turrets were lightning up and more sentries were activating from their hidden nooks. A missile streaked across the room, exploding in time to send a white and red mass arching overhead, splatting wetly into the wall above us and then falling limply. Rampage opened her eyes as her blown off limbs started to regenerate. Scotch yipped as she scrambled along the edge of the room to join us.

"Did you push something?" I asked sternly.

The olive mare blanched and pointed her hoof at Rampage. "She told me to!"

"It was a shiny red button. How could we not push it?" Rampage groaned as she stood on her restored legs. "Round two, you metal motherfucker!" She cried in glee, charging at the sentry bot that strafed our corner of the room with its minigun.

“Well, I guess I can excuse a shiny red button,” I said as I looked at the robots rolling around. “Can you shoot?”

“Shoot? Shoot what?” I rolled my eyes at her response. That answered that question.

“Right,” I shoved her down and grabbed her PipBuck. “Okay. Pray I remember how Mom did this,” I said as I pulled out a connection lead and plugged it into her PipBuck. “Okay... security operations... deputize. Confirmation, Marmalade.”

Her eyes widened. “Woah. I can see a little target in my vision.” Good. That meant it worked.

“Yeah. You should have a target, Eyes Forward Sparkle, and S.A.T.S.” I said as I lifted out the automatic and pushed it into her mouth. “The little X is where your gun is pointed. Pull the trigger with your tongue. Push this catch to eject the spent magazine. Put in a fresh one and load a round into the chamber with your hoof. Shoot at the smaller robots and, whatever you do, don’t shoot me.”

“O—“ she said around the gun, pulling the trigger with her tongue as she tried to speak. She dropped it in shock, and I fell back with my armor stinging from the impact. I glared at her as she flushed. “—kay...” she finished lamely.

“Welcome to the group,” I muttered as I stood and pulled out the shotgun, loading slugs. More robots were orienting on our position as one of the massive printers started to spark and smoke. I supposed trying to run after two centuries of no maintenance was a little risky. “Lacunae. Go to the second floor and get Glory and P-21 down here and out.” There were more sentries and Protectapony robots making their way towards the disturbance in the print room.

Lacunae nodded once and flashed away from view. Then it was fight time. Rampage was the target, drawing most of their attention. I played flanker, running around behind the sentries to fire point blank into the gaps between the different parts of their chassis. I just prayed Scotch Tape lived through this fight.

Then the room exploded. Okay, no, the missile exploded. Apparently, I was more target than I anticipated and found myself on a ballistic journey across the room. I landed in a numb heap, my combat armor smoking as the Workhorse sentry oriented towards me. I couldn’t help but smile as its gatling gun started to spin. I could get away, maybe. I might be able to blast it. I just felt so tired. So heavy. So slow.

Then the sentry jerked, and I blinked as the red bar disappeared.

Scotch tape ducked down from behind it with wrench in her jaws and a spark bat-

tery between her hooves. She stared at me, trying to shout something around the wrench to the effect of “wha re oo doeng? Ooove!”

Okay, when a fresh-out-of-the-stable filly almost half my age is telling me to move, then I know I need to get my ass in gear. I scrambled to my hooves and snatched up my gun. Even though she couldn't die, Rampage could still lose and we could still bite it. I had to get my head in the game, or I'd be burying my friends instead of them burying me.

We were moving again, trying not to let the robots get a decent bead on us as I did my best to take out the sentries engaged with Rampage. Even she was regenerating slower and moving with increasing disorientation. If she gave out, how long could I withstand their fire?

“Scotch. I need you to get me something.” I said with a grimace. I was going to need a bigger gun. No, not Folly. That was like. . . an anti-building gun. I told her what to do as I watched Rampage go down again. Two sentries began to turn towards me, and I ran as missiles streaked after me, cooking my tail as Rampage struggled to rise again.

I took cover behind one of the groaning, chattering printing presses and reloaded, my ears ringing and nose bleeding from the overpressure of the explosions. I panted through my mouth to keep my ears from popping as I backed away from the next sentry rolling around the corner towards me. I really missed those spark rounds.

Then Scotch Tape backed out of the hallway with the missile launcher I'd removed in tow. “Good job!” I yelled as I stuck my shotgun in its sling and raced to her. The heavy weapon shimmered as my magic strained to lift and orient the reinforced tube. “Cross your hooves,” I yelled as I jumped into S.A.T.S. and put almost the spell's whole charge into the shot.

The missile streaked towards two of the sentries, striking soundly in the middle. My magic failed and the backblast sent the missile launcher back down the hall behind me. Still, with an explosion of metal, the sentries were blasted into pieces. That just left three more. “Go get it!” I called out, bringing out the shotgun again.

“What am I, your dog?” She yelled at me crossly.

“Yes! Now fetch!” I laughed, feeling. . . good? Excited? Not like a corpse waiting to die? One of them. Glory and P-21 came out onto the catwalks overhead, and precision green beams joined strafing minigun rounds and grenade blasts. Rampage ripped off the head of one robot and crawled inside as it wheeled about helplessly.

Finally, Scotch Tape dragged the missile launcher back and loaded it, and I tried for a shot at the last sentry, which was sending one missile after another at the catwalks.

I entered S.A.T.S., took my target, and breathed out as the hovering weapon fired. This time, I managed to keep the missile launcher from flying back as the explosive projectile blasted the remaining sentry bot. I sunk to my haunches, laughing, hugging the hot metal tube to my chest. Missile launchers. Loud, noisy, smelly, and fun!

But as I sat there, the smoke hazing the air, I felt like I was looking out of the Overmare's window once more. My throbbing ears could hear the distant screams choked silent in gagging, gasping agony. I pressed my face to the warm green metal. Murderer. I felt the tears running down my cheeks. Foal killer. I grit my teeth, hovering somewhere between tears and laughter. I could smell the chlorine. I could hear the screams.

Scotch Tape sat next to me, staring in shock as I hugged the tube, unable to stand. I sobbed as I did all I could just to curl the ends of my lips up. "I'm sorry, Scotch Tape. I'm so sorry I killed our home."

She looked at me, seeing the real me. Not the laughing idiot or even the fake hero, but the murderer. I hated the pity in her eyes, even if it was what I desperately needed. "Yeah. Me too," she said quietly before she rose. "Hey! Don't mess with that! Let me see if there's something good in there!" She yelled as Rampage proceeded to smash the robotic remains.

We survive in the Wasteland through doing. Action. If we think, we drown. We grasp for meaning in vain. Why was I alive? EC-1101? No. Helping a Wasteland determined to sink and die in poison and hate? Not if I were honest with myself. Glory? Goddesses, let it be for Glory. Please.

MASEBS Broadcast Tower 14 was only an hour or two east of the Hoofington Weekly building we'd left in our wake. To the northeast, I could barely make out the sliver of gray ocean, while to the south I could see the round building of the Hoofington Arena. Beyond that was the Core. Scotch Tape stared up at the huge white metal spire rising endlessly towards the clouds overhead. Lights glowed dimly on a broadcast dish-festooned ring platform high, high above the ground but not even at the midpoint of the tower. The outside was distracting her from what we'd

left behind.

“How high does it go?” The young mare asked Glory, who seemed amused with her fascination.

“Higher than the clouds. No pony knows what they were for originally, but we use them today to grow our food. Thunderhead has the distinction of being one of the most advanced agricultural centers in the Enclave. We’re one of the few that managed a surplus harvest every year for the past fifty years.” She didn’t try to hide the pride swelling her chest. “No other pegasus community has managed that.”

“Thunderhead? What’s that?” Scotch asked as she craned her neck back.

“Well. . . it’s my. . . it’s where I’m from originally.” She deflated almost instantly; there was no covering the hurt. She took a deep breath and fell into a vaguely pedantic tone. “Before the bombs fell, Thunderhead was a support settlement for the forces working out of Shadowbolt Tower. When the war ended, we became one of the primary Enclave bases in the east; at first, this was just due to our possession of the tower, but, as the new order settled in, it quickly became clear that Thunderhead was preserving and building on the innovative, productive spirit that Hoofington was famous for. Today, Thunderhead enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the Enclave, and its people are forward-thinking technologically, scientifically, and socially. It’s even the first Enclave settlement to begin sending aid down to the surface.”

Scotch Tape looked at the ruins to the south. “So, where exactly are they sending this aid?”

Glory flushed and glanced at me. I arched a brow. Did she really want me to come to her rescue on this? I half-agreed with the filly. The little gray pegasus sighed. “Well, here, but there’s a lot of work to do and there’s been a lot of resistance. But we’re trying to do better.”

When they’re not developing biological weapons.

“Why didn’t you come down sooner?” Scotch asked as she walked beside Glory, her utility harness jingling with the tools she’d had on her when she’d fled. None of them were for removing PipBucks, unfortunately.

Glory sighed again. “We wanted to, but for years the surface was too radioactive. Then there wasn’t any pony down here to help. Then for a while, the ponies that were down here were savage, mindless monsters. And of course there’s always fear of biological contamination.”

Biological contamination. I cocked my head, trying to think about this some. “Glory . . . Lighthooves was trying to infect a pegasus with the raider plague. Why would he do that? Why not just spray it over every pony village down on the surface and wipe us all out?” Glory blinked at me and then shrugged. “We’ve been thinking about the cannibalism and the mindless loyalty the disease fosters . . .” I continued, “but what if . . . what if all he’s after is a spectacle? A contagion that would be an excuse for pegasi to never ever come back to the surface again? Who cares how it works if it’s something they’ve never seen before and scares the feathers off them?”

“If there was a real contagion like the ones they talk about on the Science Network . . .” Glory chewed on the end of her wing as she thought about it for a moment. “Something verified by outside sources as a deadly threat . . . you’re right. I don’t think we’d ever come down here again.” She shivered, “And the lightning rods would keep anypony down here from making it to the clouds. It’d permanently sever any hope of fixing things between pegasi and the surface.”

“Especially if Thunderhead is responsible for finding a cure,” P-21 added. “Seems like a perfect way to keep the status quo.”

I didn’t answer. Thinking of Lighthooves made me feel . . . nothing. I wanted to stop him, but it was an abstract and distant desire. It was the same as how EC-1101 had gone from a burning curiosity to a dull interest. Everything inside me had been snuffed out by chlorine gas and strangled screams. I tripped over a rock and nearly sprawled on my face. Damn, I couldn’t even walk anymore.

“You should turn on your radio,” Rampage said as her tail swished behind Scotch Tape and swatted her rump, making the young mare jump; thankfully, it hadn’t hit hard enough to rip her barding. “Now that you’re on the outside, you need to hear DJ Pon3. He’s a big fan of Blackjack.”

“He’s a fan of Security,” I muttered, not wanting to listen in on what he might say. “No surprise, since he’s the one who made her, Goddesses know why.”

“Security?” Scotch Tape asked, then flicked the radio on. I was thankful to hear Sweetie Belle’s melodious voice rise from her speaker. The olive mare looked shocked. I remembered how I’d felt the first time I’d heard music that wasn’t stable sanctioned and glorifying the Overmare.

I gestured to the word on my armor. “DJ Pon3 found out that I was helping ponies out here and started calling me the Security Mare.” She looked at me skeptically, and I shrugged. “Don’t look at me. It’s not like I asked him to.”

“That hasn’t stopped her from taking advantage of it when she can,” P-21 said with a little smirk. But I didn’t mirror it. Once, I’d been both annoyed and secretly proud of being Security; it’d somehow made me stand out above the rest of the Wasteland, corny as it was. But it’d been a lie. I wasn’t better than the scum out there. I was worse. Maybe this Red Eye might have killed as many ponies as I; any pony nasty enough to take over Paradise sounded like a piece of work.

“Stop it, Blackjack,” P-21 muttered beside me. I looked at him in surprise. “You’re thinking about it? Aren’t you? Kicking yourself isn’t going to solve anything.”

“No. I’m fine. I had to do it. I know that.” I gave him a broad smile.

“It’s okay to be sad, Blackjack.”

I wasn’t sad, though. I felt. . . hollow. Empty. Brittle. I was going to the tower from inertia; I didn’t want to go. It was just the only destination any of us had. It was pretending like everything was okay. “I’m good, P-21. I’m just fine.” Maybe I didn’t want anything, but I knew what I didn’t want. I didn’t want my friends hurt. I didn’t want them to worry. I didn’t want EC-1101 in Sanguine’s hooves. I didn’t want to keep walking like this. I just had to keep up the lie. Go through the motions. Hope.

Eventually, the music came to an end, and the robust buck came on, “Well, hello there, children! It’s your MC of the Wasteland, DJ Pon3! Time for some news.” I relaxed a little as he went on about the troubles around Manehattan and with Red Eye and other difficulties. My ears strained for some word about the Stable Dweller; I needed to believe there was somepony out there who could fix things in the Wasteland without murdering innocent ponies. Unfortunately, it looked like he didn’t have anything to say about her at the moment.

After a mention of things happening around Stalliongrad, he then said the words that I’d been dreading. “It’s time for some news for our friends out east. Some of you might notice that things are a little quieter than usual out there around the Core. Yeah, I can hear you from here, kiddies: ‘But DJ, weren’t you telling us to hammer up the windows, barricade the doors, and turn off all the lights ‘cause a bajillion raiders were coming to eat us?’

“Yup. I did. I admit it. But. . .” he gave a low chuckle of anticipation. “Turns out that somepony out there must have been listening up, because she went right where they were thickest and all of a sudden it’s quiet. Dozens of raiders simply gone. No shots. No bodies. Just quiet. Now that’s some pretty good work. Now we can just hope the Reapers and Rangers get the clue and knock off their latest pissing match over the Zenith bridge before Security heads in that direction.

“In other news around the Core, what do folks make of these ‘Volunteer Corps?’ Now, we all know that, somewhere up above, the pegasi are making clouds right and left so thick that even I can’t see through it, but now out of the blue a whole slew of them are around the Hoof offering to help. Well, that’s awfully nice, but when you ask em to take care of some raiders or maybe something really crazy like let the sun through, they’re just hemming and hawing. Look. I’m glad you’re back, but if you’re going to help, then make like Security and help. Don’t just show up with a skywagon full of excuses why you can’t do what we really need.

“So lets hear it for Security, for fighting the good fight and taking it right to the heart of the matter. Here is a mare that’ll do whatever it takes to make the Wasteland a better place. This is DJ P0N3, bringing you the truth. . . no matter how bad it hurts.”

Speaking of hurt, it really stings when you walk right into a tree! I fell hard on my rump, clutching my horn in my hooves as I hissed ‘Ow. . .’ over and over again. I tried not to think about what I’d just heard. I looked back at the others who’d watched me just smack my dumb face into a dumb tree. “Woopsie. Looks like listening and walking at the same time is too much for me. Think we can turn off Pon3?” I asked, grinning as wide as I could, keeping my eyes closed so I wouldn’t have to see their faces.

Doing what had to be done. That sounded so simple. It should be easy. Blame Rivets and Stable 99 obstinacy, calmly and coolly accept that their death was inevitable and that I’d prevented more harm than if I had simply sealed them up.

So why couldn’t I do it?

I wanted the Dealer here. I wanted some kind of cryptic bullshit to confuse me. I needed something inscrutable to make me not face the simple truth. I had to smile. I had to keep it together. Everypony needed me to hold it together.

Sweet Celestia, why couldn’t I stop the screaming?

I have a special talent with ambushes: I walk into them with surprising regularity. This one, I was simply staying on point, keeping my back to all my friends, when the bullet slammed into my left shoulder. Oh, hello. Red bars. I grinned and laughed as my friends took cover, feeling the dull thump against my barding as the three or so raiders fired at us from the cover of a covered wagon. Out came the rifle and I peered down the scope, not even registering who or what I was shooting at.

Red, it's dead. S.A.T.S., three shots to the head. Engage... Boom... boom... Then I was being knocked do the ground by P-21. I just looked up at him as he shouted down, "Blackjack! What do you think you're doing?"

"Daddy!" I heard a filly wail as Glory took wing and flew to where the poor scavenger ponies curled up, their varmint hunting rifle discarded. Hastily, Glory worked to treat the massive damage I'd done to my target's head.

I just looked up at him, his staring eyes wide with fear and confusion as I murmured softly, "Red, it's dead. Red, it's dead."

"She's losing it," P-21 said quietly from the campfire. The buck I'd shot wasn't doing well at all. Healing potions could do a lot, but not much for a brain that had taken a bullet through the middle. I lay apart from the others, staring into the darkness. Just a little family scavenging unit scared to death of being trapped in raider territory, and who'd shot first without the benefit of an E.F.S. to let them know I wasn't hostile.

"She's been under incredible strain. She's coping as well as she can," Glory said. I could feel her eyes on my back.

"No. She isn't, and you know that better than any of us, Glory. You've seen her push herself to the point of physical collapse." I'd tried so hard to be strong. And I was trying to keep it together. I was. I was trying to be happy. I was trying to live for them.

Glory didn't say anything. I knew she didn't have to. "She's going crazy, isn't she?" Scotch Tape summed it up excellently. The gray pegasus gave a soft sob.

"I'm going to check on him. Give him some more med-X," Glory said thickly as she rose and walked back into the cargo wagon that had become a makeshift hospice.

"What are we going to do?" P-21 said quietly. You're going to do better. Whatever you do, you'll do better than I have. I'm a murderer. A killer. This proves it.

"What would you do if there was no Blackjack?" Rampage asked.

"I don't know," P-21 said quietly. "I just don't know. Goddesses, I need her. Her and her stupid quest... it kept us going. Now that she's falling apart, I don't know. Try to find a life in Megamart or Chapel... or something." I should tell him that he'd be fine without me. That he was too smart to let the Wasteland hold him down. Without me, he'd do something amazing.

“And me?” Scotch Tape asked. I’d saved her life and killed everypony she knew. And now she was travelling with her killers. She was a good pony, for now. I didn’t imagine her mother beat her and tormented her.

“Well, fortunately, there’s always a job opening slaughtering wannabe Reapers while picking fights with the Steel Rangers across the river. It’s a living,” Rampage said quietly. Lacunae said nothing. I supposed she would do... something. Return to Chapel? Continue searching on her own?

And Glory... who had lost everything... what would she do? Where could a Dashite go in this world? Would she continue her search to clear her name? Take on Lighthooves by herself? Or try to find a quiet part of the Wasteland to live in?

Till slavers took her. Till poison choked her. Till monsters ate her. Till the Dealer took one more pony. And one more. And one more. Because that was what the Wasteland did. ‘It’s not getting any better,’ Rampage had said. ‘It’s getting worse. The poison spreads a little more day by day. And one day, if I don’t die, I think I’ll be the last pony left in the world.’ You’re right to be afraid, Rampage, because you are. And there wasn’t anything I could do. The Wasteland always won.

From the trailer rose an anguished wail. It joined perfectly with the screams in my head, echoing that word over and over again.

And one more.

I couldn’t stay here. I couldn’t do this. I had to leave... but I couldn’t. So I did the next best thing. I floated an orb from my pocket and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Pony... male... earth. I felt big and heavy. Uniform. Gun. Peppermint cologne? That was unexpected. He stepped in front of the mirror. Doof still had all the charm of a cinderblock. He turned this way and smiled. That way and grinned. It somehow managed to resemble a leer. Slowly he collapsed on his rump, pressing his hooves to his head. “This just ain’t gonna work, Momma. I know you say I gotta be brave and all... show her how I feel... but it just ain’t gonna work.”

“Doofus, you idjit!” A crabby mare snapped from the other room. “You like this mare, don’tcha?”

“Yeah, Momma. More than anything.”

“And yer saying she’s hurtin bad right now?”

"We all are, Momma." He said as he tried to slick back his black mane. "With Big Mac gone. . . it just hurts us all."

"Then she needs ya, don't she? Ya need to be there and tell her how you feel and let her know ya like her," his momma said in a vinegary voice. She stepped into view, bony and sour-looking, but she still smiled. "There you go. Look just like your Daddy." Somehow, that didn't seem to reassure the gaunt pink mare. "Now, you go and do your best, you got it, Doofus?"

"Yes Momma," he said with a nod of his head. "I promise I won't screw up again, Momma."

She sighed and patted his chest with a hoof. "Just do your best," she said as she stretched up to nuzzle his cheek. "How'd I birth such a great big lump?" He chuckled and nuzzled her back fondly before stepping back. "You have a nice night, Doofus." I had to admit, I'd never heard that particular word said with such fondness before.

He ducked out and trotted to a bus that took him back to Miramare. It seemed particularly subdued. I supposed they must have buried Big Mac recently. He stepped off the bus and started to trot towards the main building, passing by a half dozen mares who struggled to unload their sky wagon. They saw Doof and immediately nudged each other.

"Hey! I betcha you can't unload all these crates in five minutes," one said loudly to her friend.

"Aw. . . nopony could do that," her friend protested, and then added, "Not even Doofus."

His ears stood straight up. "What you ladies talkin bout? I can get them unloaded, lickety split."

I mentally groaned as he immediately climbed into the back, bit the canvas rope at the end of the wooden crate, and pulled it off and on to his broad shoulders. I had to admit, these crates were damned heavy, but Doof was one strong pony. He talked between crates, "See ladies. . . this is why. . . mares like you. . . need bucks like me. . . around!" The mares just grinned at each other as he sweated profusely, doing their work for them.

One nudged the other, "Hey, Doofus. We heard Twist talking about you."

He dropped the crate, his head snapping to her immediately. "Oh no. . ." Really, Brass? What'd she say?" The crate banged solidly on his hoof, but he completely ignored it.

Brass, the coppery red mare, gave a smirk as she looked at her friend and then at the big, dumb buck. “Well she was saying how she was looking for one particular buck. Big. Strong. Brave.” I could feel his idiotic grin.

“Well I’m big, strong, and brave,” he said, missing sweaty and smelly as well. Damn but he worked up a sweat!

“But she was saying what she really needs is a big, tough stallion who will just take charge and give it to her between the flanks good and hard.” While her friend might have liked this talk, the others were quickly frowning at her blatant manipulation.

“Really? But momma said I should be nice to her.”

“Tch. . . and what’s that got you? I’m telling you, she wants it. You just have to buck up and give it to her.”

“Doofus,” one of the others began, but the nasty mare’s friend cut her off with a glare.

“Well, I got to go, ladies,” he said as he trotted towards the building.

“That was nasty, Brass.” One admonished as he trotted away.

“What? Not my fault he’s a fucking idiot. Twist will kick his ass good and proper. It’ll be a great laugh.” I didn’t know if what she said registered or not, but he didn’t take his eyes off the Miramare building.

The Marauders had their own shared quarters. I was astonished to see the Doof had once roomed with Big Macintosh. How had they both fit in there? He walked up to another room. Twist and Jetstream. He knocked with his hoof. A few seconds later, Twist opened the door; I knew that look. Her pink eyes were puffy and bloodshot, her nose wet and red. . . and her breath reeked of peppermint schnapps. “Doof? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you. I. . . ah. . . wanted to help. . .”

She wrinkled her nose but stepped back and let him in. Her quarters were neat and tidy. “Don’t know how you’re going to do that. Jetstream’s cracking, I think. Vanity’s been talking with her all day about Big Macintosh.”

“We all knew it could happen, Twist. You could die. Or me,” he said sourly as he sat beside her little table where she’d been having some bread and cheese. He took the knife and cut off a huge hunk, munching noisily. “Mmm. . . tasty!” I wanted to facehoof.

“It wasn’t just you or me, Doof. It was Big Macintosh. He was. . . he was like a big brother or daddy I never had. Like, as long as he was there, we were going to be okay. Even after Stonewing.” She sniffed as she rubbed her eyes. “Godesses, I’m a mess. I feel like my shop’s burned up again. I dunno if we’re gonna be able to stay together. Not as the Marauders, I mean.”

“We could become Doof’s Destroyers,” he suggested, and I could tell he was serious. Twist, however, broke into sharp, tense laughter.

“Oh that’s a good one,” she snorted. “Might as well be rename us Twist’s Terminators or Psalm’s Slaughterers.” She sighed, shaking her head and rubbing her temples. Then she turned away and flicked her tail as she walked to the fridge. Oh. . . I knew that smell. And if I was smelling it. . . oh jeeze. I could already feel the effect it was having on Doof’s nethers. This was not a good time for a mare and a buck to be alone together with one of them stupid and the other drunk and both of them hurting! Not at all!

“Well. . . I could take care of you,” he said dumbly as he raised a hoof to brush the candy canes on her flank.

“Doof, get off!” She said crossly as she scowled back at him, getting out the bottle of peppermint flavored liquor and took a pull off it. Then she pointed a hoof at him. “How many damn times do I have to tell you ‘I am not interested’?”

“But. . .”

“Not. Interested. I don’t care what you smell. That’s hormones. And even with them, I still don’t want anything to do with you. Not unless that’s a huge Doof costume and inside you’re a crème filly with a red mane who talks in drawl and wants me to be her friend again.”

I had to admit, I echoed Doof mentally. “Huh?”

She looked at him with inebriated scorn. “I’m gay. Fillyfooler. Marelicker. Take whatever damn label you like. And the only mare I’ve ever been interested in stopped being interested in me when I got my cutie mark and she didn’t. You ain’t her. So just get out.” She turned her back on the poor, confused, dumb buck whose brain told him one thing while his cock told him something else. And maybe, maybe it would have ended there. He’d take a cold shower, she’d sober up and cool off. And that would be that.

Then he grinned slowly. “Oh. . . I get it.” No Doof! Don’t do this. She was a lying cunt. She was messing with you. Stop!

But he didn't.

Perhaps Twist might have kicked his ass. She certainly seemed capable. Like she'd usually be capable. But she was drunk and tired. It wasn't good. It wasn't fun. It didn't feel nice. And eventually, she simply stopped crying and fighting and everything but enduring. And when it finished and she just lay there, Doof stood over her, seeming to be waiting for something. For her to tell him that it was what she'd wanted... that he'd hit her spot... something.

"What the fuck did you do?" A male said from the doorway. Applesnack was not a happy pony at the best of times. And now? Now the green stallion looked like one immense raw bundle of nerves. Right now, he was looking for any excuse to take a pony apart.

Right now, Doof was exactly what he needed.

Somewhere in the beating, everything smeared as the memory shifted. Doof found himself sitting in a concrete cell. He'd saved some newspaper clippings. 'Macintosh Marauder convicted of sexual assault.' Screamed one headline. 'I knew he was always dangerous'" started another clipping beside a picture of Brass and her friend. He'd scribbled 'cunt' beside both their heads. "Marauders disbanded. Hoofington's legendary squad disgraced." The last was a little letter. 'Please don't write me any more, Doofus,' was all it said. There was no signature, but the paper was warped and smeared with tears.

Then the guards came, and the nurse with them. They looked at him like he was scum. Perhaps he was. Perhaps he wasn't. They gave him a shot; I felt the Med-X take effect quickly as he was walked down the concrete hall. They stood him over a padded frame and strapped him down. "Whut are yew doin?" he slurred numbly as they finished scrubbing him with harsh-smelling alcohol.

"We're experimenting on how to make a better, stronger pony," a mare said softly. The black earth pony looked down at him in contempt. "As you might understand, it's better to experiment on a worthless piece of scum like you before we give the Steelpony treatment to real soldiers."

"I ain't scum," he muttered thickly as unicorn mares with scalpels floating over them approached. He jerked his legs against the strong restraints. "Let me go... you can't do this, you cunts!"

"I assure you... we can," she replied softly. The Med-X might be a painkiller, but it did nothing for the sensation of his hide being cut open.

“You cunts!” he shouted as he jerked again.

“We are. . .”

“Cunts!”

“And you deserve it.”

“Cuuuuuunnnnnntttts!”

The memory smeared once more. The pain, that rolling pain though every fiber of his being, was barely held off as the needle was stabbed into this throat. The painkiller went straight to his brain, and he shuddered in relief. The floating needle pulled out, and a ghoul rasped, “Ah, a thing of wonder is a joy forever.”

“So, I just got to get to this stable and get the Overcunt to give you this EC-1101 and you’ll tell me how ta make that drug so I don’t hurt no more?” Deus asked thickly as he rose on his hydraulically augmented limbs and looked down at the ghoul.

Sanguine. I don’t know what I’d expected. I’d seen a few ghouls in the wasteland, but never one like this. Wisps of pink gas danced around his lips and leaked out of cracks in his charred hide. His crackled mouth split in a grin. “That’s it. You go in there and get me that program, and all your ouchies will be gone for good.”

“And why do you want it?”

“Why? My. Do you think you can understand?” he asked, chuckling brightly. His business suit looked like it’d just come off the rack of a store. I had to admit, the sight of that abomination in that freshly pressed suit was more unnerving than if he’d been dressed like a raider. He trotted to a window that looked out at the blasted landscape. “Isn’t it beautiful? Poisoned. Sick. Broken. This is the purest expression of Equestria! The culmination of all our sins! But it is also an opportunity.”

Deus had an E.F.S., and I watched the target line up perfectly with the back of Sanguine’s head. “You talk too much,” he muttered.

“Apologies. It’s an occupational hazard for visionaries like myself,” Sanguine said with a disarming little chuckle. “Let’s simply say that, with that program, I will be able to create and explore new evolutionary paths otherwise unrealized. We tasted a sip of it during the heyday of Chimera. Just a sip of the possibilities. Twilight Sparkle succeeded, despite all odds, and the alicorns are just one possible path. I want to use the Wasteland as my canvas and explore the myriad possibilities of pony evolution!”

“It will also,” he added, turning back to Deus and trotting to him with a freaky little

dance, “discharge a certain obligation I hold to a very important pony. A pony whose dreams far exceed mine. Now that it’s been found and the Overmare is opening the door, all you have to do is get it.”

From the next room came a soft chime. “Ugh. . . now, if you’ll excuse me, go ahead and bully some of those raiders into helping you, and let me get to work.” And with that, he trotted to the door. Perhaps he underestimated the huge gray pony, or perhaps the unicorn was simply too mad to care. Deus, however, lingered at the door, his augmented ears picking up every word.

“Hello, good sir! And how are you on this most splendid of days, director?”

The mechanical voice reminded me of Watcher. “Progress?”

“I’ve just sent an errand buck to get the program.”

“And the biological sample?”

“Safe and sound. We put it in her hooves, and we get everything we want. I get Project Chimera. You get everything else. She gets to play at being queen of the Wasteland. Everything according to plan.”

“No.”

“No?” now Sanguine sounded perplexed. “No? Nix? Null and void?”

“We must stop him.”

“Him?” Then a pause. “Him?! Sir, with all due respect, he was stopped two centuries ago. I saw it. He died with the princesses, Project Horizons died with him, and we are all the better for it.”

“He lives. I know it. Find him, Sanguine. He’s here. I can feel it. I can feel him!”

“Of course. Of course,” Sanguine rasped in mollifying tones. “I’ll get right on top of that, director.”

Deus turned from the door, muttering softly, “Project Horizons, huh? Interesting. . .”

oooOOOooo

I awoke in the rain. No pony talked. No pony smiled. They sat apart from me, together. Occasionally, one would glance in my direction, but I couldn’t imagine what they expected. Was I to say something? Do something? Be something? I knew what they wanted; they wanted me to lead. To stand up, grin, point them in a direction and move out. Because we were friends. Because they trusted me, even after all I’d done. All I’d done to them.

I didn't deserve them. I didn't deserve to draw another breath.

I slowly rose to my hooves. "Blackjack?" Glory said in worry as she rushed to my side.

Slowly, I started walking. "Let's go," I rasped softly as I walked towards the tower.

"Blackjack... it..." but then she met my eyes and realized it didn't matter if it had been an accident or not. "He's... okay. He's going to pull through."

I felt nothing at all. No relief. No joy. Nothing. I smiled. "That's good. Really. I'm glad."

"Blackjack?" she asked as she touched my cheek. I pulled away, looked away. I may as well have slapped her.

"Listen. He's hurt really badly," I said. "You should take him to Megamart. Make sure he pulls through. Take Scotch Tape, too... it'll be safer there." I looked at Lacunae. "You can go with her and teleport both of them back when he's safe and sound." That would take at least several hours. Maybe more. "Then you meet up with the rest of us."

"Blackjack. Are you sure?" Glory asked. "You're really scaring me, Blackjack. Please..."

"I'm sure," I replied quietly, sincerely. "Get him and his family to safety." Keep me from adding one more to my count. Goddesses, how much blood was on my hooves?

She rushed to me and hugged me as tightly as she could, shaking. I tried to return the gesture. To get some feeling... some compassion... in the embrace. "I love you. I'll see you soon."

My words caught in my throat. I swallowed hard and murmured, "I know. I love you too." And I did. I did. Glory turned away, going to the wounded scavenger's family. She gave me one last look, worry etched in her face. I smiled as hard as I could. She returned it with a slight lifting of the corners of her mouth. Then, as they left, I murmured softly, "Goodbye."

Rampage, P-21, and I didn't say a word as we approached the massive armored base of the tower. I couldn't imagine what it was for; broadcasting, I supposed. The door to MASEBS #14 looked like it could have had a balefire bomb detonate while taped to it and only just have its paint a bit scuffed. The door was locked and

sealed, of course, but, after taking care of the lock on a panel beside the door with a pair of bobby pins and spending several minutes glaring at the terminal ensconced within, P-21 found the password. With a groan and a slight hiss and hum, the yard-thick slab began sliding down into the ground. Goddess, how'd I luck into having a smart pony like him? We slipped through the door, walked down a short corridor that I suspected was just to get us past the armor plating, and found ourselves in a spartan, metal-walled antechamber. The lights were still almost all on and the place was reasonably clean. "See what you can find," I said to P-21. The blue buck looked at me skeptically, then nodded and started off through one of the doors with his usual diligence.

"Watch out for him," I said to Rampage as I opened another door, found some stairs, and slowly began climbing them, looking for... I didn't really know. A command center. Maneframe. Something I could plug the delta PipBuck into, I supposed. I made my way up; it seemed a natural direction. I passed by rooms filled with machinery still running even after two centuries. I wondered if it drew power from the city or some other source.

Then I heard a familiar buck's voice. "...know ghouls might not be the most comfortable ponies to be around, but you can say the same thing about half the ponies in the Wasteland. So if you see a ghoul sitting there all by their lonesome, pop over and just say hello. Give them a smile. It might be the only thing that keeps them from losing what little equinity they have left." I frowned; right now DJ Pon3 was the last pony I wanted to listen to.

I approached the voice and stepped through a door into a room marked 'MASEBS Relay Station: Authorized unicorns only'. Within were a dozen dusty monitors and speakers. Two unicorn skeletons lay curled up on a mattress surrounded by empty tin cans and Sparkle-Cola bottles. Most of the monitors showed pictures of the Wasteland. To my shame, I saw Glory making her way towards Megamart with the scavenger's family. I reached out and touched her image on the display.

There was one picture that was off, though. A small gray unicorn mare with a glowing horn was talking into a microphone, which was odd enough. What really confused me was how her mouth movements matched the buck's voice coming out of the speakers set in the roof. I put my forehooves on the control panel to lean in and watch her lips moving.

"DJ Pon3 is a mare?" I asked, staring in shock.

Suddenly, she stopped talking and looked around. Her eyes looked towards a mon-

itor. “Oh boy! Looks like we’ve got some technical difficulties, my little ponies. I’d send my assistant for a certain repair pony, but then it’d never get fixed! Enjoy some Sapphire Shores in the meantime!”

She trotted towards the camera and began to work some controls. Then she blinked and smiled up at me. “Heck of a time to break into the radio biz,” she said in that buck’s voice. She blinked and made a face, her horn glowing for a moment. Then she said in a softer, feminine voice, “Sorry about that.”

“DJ Pon3 is a mare?” I repeated dumbly.

“Yup. Fortunately, you hit the ‘transmit studio’ button instead of the ‘transmit all’ button. Otherwise, I’d have some explaining to do,” she said with a sheepish grin. “My name is Homage.” Then her eyes widened as she stared at me. “You’re her? Aren’t you? MASEBS #14! Yes, you are her! You’re Security!”

I nodded again as I sat in front of the screens, looking up at her with a small frown. “Yeah. I guess. . .”

“I’ve got to say, I never actually thought I’d get a chance to meet you. I mean, Hoofington’s a long long way from Manehattan. You’re clear past Ponyville and Canterlot,” she said as she brushed her blue bangs back behind her ear. “I’d like to tell you, you’re doing an incredible job out there. The Heroine of the Hoof.”

“Stop. . .” I muttered as I felt myself start to shake.

“What’s that?”

“Please. . . stop all that Hero Security crap. I’m not a hero.”

She smiled, “I didn’t know you were modest too. I’ve heard from dozens of ponies how you’re cleaning up the Hoof. Sure sounds like a hero to me.”

“I’m not a fucking hero!” I yelled as I covered my head with my hooves, my whole body shaking. Her eyes went wide. “Heroes save ponies. That’s what Security is supposed to do. Save ponies.” I sobbed as I looked up her. “Heroes don’t murder whole stables of hundreds of ponies! Heroes don’t walk around praying somepony blows their brains out! I’m not a hero, Homage! I’m one of the bad ponies!”

Homage just stared at me in shock and slowly gave me a sad smile. “Tell me about it?”

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. What I was supposed to say. I just found myself talking, starting with how I’d heard about the attacks around my old stable and how I was returning home anyway. I then went on about how I’d discovered my

stable had been infected by the raider contagion and how we'd fought like hell to free it from the Overmare. I explained how I'd told them to toss the bodies outside, but had never checked up on them actually doing it. How I'd discovered the entire food supply had been contaminated, how the entire stable was infected.

"And then. . . then. . . I activated a poison gas talisman in the ventilation system," I sobbed as I shook, feeling that emptiness ripped apart by pain as I hung my head back. "In a few minutes, I killed four hundred ponies, Homage. Four hundred! I killed everypony I knew in the stable. I. . . I killed foals. I killed bucks who'd finally gotten their freedom. I killed them all. I know there were probably some uninfected in there too. I killed them. I killed them before they became monsters."

Hanging my head, I bawled before her. "I wish I'd died in there with them. That would at least have been fair. I'm a murderer, Homage. I can still hear their screams. I can hear them calling me a murderer. I can smell it and feel it and all I want is for it to end. For me to get the punishment I deserve." I drew a slow, trembling breath and dared to look up.

She had her hooves folded under her chin, tears streaking her cheeks. "I forgot just how rough it was around Hoofington. . ." she said quietly. "But I know this, Blackjack. You are a hero. To so many."

She tapped her controls and one of the monitors changed to a caravan crawling past Pony Joe's. Another brought up the Fluttershy Medical Center, where ponies were limping into the emergency entrance for care. The up came Stockyard, the Brahmin eating their meals unmolested by the mutated dragonlings. Brimstone's Fall showed me a lone railcar loaded with boxes of gems and other goods being pulled along the tracks towards the city; nopony had a whip. Another monitor flashed to life, and I saw Blueblood Manor with a wagon being pulled by Harpica outside the front entrance while the Crusaders brought out boxes of salvage from the ruined estate. Flank was back open for business, now more secure. And another of Riverside, where a caravan of merchants was trading with the fishers and the Sand Dogs at the same time. A blurry, heavily-zoomed-in Seahorse cruising along the coast with a barely distinct sea green mare in the bow. The last was of Chapel, where they'd cleared and leveled a plot of ground for some new buildings. I saw the distant black form of Priest talking to some pilgrims. . . and then watched as they started away. . . not towards the bridge, but back out into the Wasteland. There was Sekashi, telling her not always so funny stories to the ghoulish foals.

We do not always see the good we do.

“You’ve touched so many, Blackjack, in the things you’ve done. I know you don’t feel like it, but every time you keep fighting the good fight, you’re making Hoofington a little better. And if Hoofington can get better, I really think there’s hope for the Wasteland as a whole,” Homage said as she scrubbed her eyes.

I didn’t know what to say. “I’m glad I helped. I am. But... how am I supposed to go on? Am I supposed to get over it? Am I supposed to forget about it? I can hear them. I feel like I’m still choking on the chlorine, Homage. How am I supposed to live?” I begged her softly.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “That’s something everypony has to decide for herself. It’s as vital to us as our virtue, our friendships, and our loved ones. You need to find that special something inside you. You need to know it’s there so that you can move forward.” Homage said softly. “If you find it, come and talk to me. I’ll keep the hero talk toned down till you change your mind. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to tell folks about Stable 99. I think it’s important that they know just what their safety and security cost you.”

“Please. There’s nothing good to remember about 99,” I lied. I had plenty of good memories. Waking up and working with Mom. Card games with Rivets. Hitting on Midnight. Even if there was plenty of shit mixed in, there were gems, too. “But if you want... please, don’t call me a hero. It wasn’t heroic. It was murder...”

Homage just gazed at me like she’d heard this before. “I’ll just tell the truth folks need to hear and nothing more,” she said solemnly.

“Thanks.” I started to turn away, then paused. “You like music, don’t you?” Her eyes brightened at once; I supposed it was a stupid question. I pulled out the delta Pipbuck. “I’ve got some music here. I don’t know if it’s your thing... it’s no Sweetie Belle. Just some that I’ve picked up here and there. Some music by a pony named Octavia...”

“What?” Homage burst in glee. I started from her sudden enthusiasm. “You have something by Octavia? I thought the MoM and MoI banned her for that charity concert! All her recordings were destroyed!”

“Well, I found some... um... with her.” And Homage’s smile turned more sympathetic. “She ended up in Flank, but she still had a ton of records with her. I have them in Chapel and downloaded others from her terminal.”

“Thank you, Blackjack. I know you don’t like being told this, but you’re my hero for sending this to me,” she said, and I went red once again.

“Well. . . yeah. And some music from some weird ponies in Flank, in a club called Mixers. And. . . um. . . some that I played.” I added lamely as the PipBuck broadcaster made a connection with the computers. “It’s horrible, though. Just horrible.”

“You play?” she grinned at me.

“Horrible!”

“What instrument?”

“...A contrabass. Or so I was told...” I muttered as I tapped my forehooves together awkwardly.

“Just like Octavia?” Could she grin any wider?

“Did I mention I was horrible at it?” I said as I flushed. . . and. . . funny. I felt. . . better. Oddly more alive. Hurt and hollow, but. . . better. “Anyway. . . I’ll just send it all to you. I know you like music. Maybe some of your listeners will too.”

She shook her head. “You’re incredible. Someday, when all this is over, the three of us need to get together and share stories. I think it’ll be the finest interview in the history of DJ Pon3.” Me, her, and...Glory? It didn’t really matter at the moment.

“We’ll see,” I said as I watched the PipBuck upload the music files. I could only hope that Homage would know how to retrieve them.

“Thanks, Blackjack,” she said with clear sincerity. “Look, I need to get back on the air. Folks get anxious if I’m away for too long, and there’s stuff happening in the west. I hope you find what you need to find, Blackjack. And I hope you think about what I told you. You might not feel like it now, but you are a hero.” She gave one last smile of comfort, then left to return to her microphone.

“What kind of hero wants to kill herself?” I muttered softly to myself as I sat back.

“One that really fits Hoofington,” the Dealer murmured softly. I looked at him shuffling his cards.

“I thought you were gone for good. You’ve missed some real opportunities to fuck with my head,” I said sharply as I rose to my hooves.

He looked at me with a thin smile. “Well, there’s not much point to kicking a mare who’s beating herself down already. Where’s the fun in that?” he asked softly, then looked at his cards. “Don’t kill yourself. . . you know it’s wrong.”

“Of course I do,” I said softly as I looked down at the delta’s cool blue screen. The good feelings were going fast. I was already starting to smell chlorine. “I know I’m

loved. I know I helped people. I just feel like it doesn't matter. The ponies I saved today are just going to die tomorrow."

"Everypony dies. You've seen what happens when they don't. Don't tell me that's preferable," the Dealer said as he showed me three cards depicting Rampage, Blueblood, and Deus.

"I'm not talking about eventually. I'm talking about dying bad. We're just barely holding on, and every day a little bit more just falls away. Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me there's hope in this poisoned land." He sighed and stopped shuffling the cards, just holding them between his hooves. I sat down beside him. "I need to know what I'm living for. I need to know that. . . that there's something better possible. That it's not going to keep getting worse and worse." I sighed and leaned back, tapping my head against the metal wall. I was sick of being the universe's chew toy.

"I know, Blackjack. It's a question I ask myself too," he said with a small, old smile.

"Of course you do. Cause you're my crazy," I said as I looked down at the sleek black PipBuck. "So how am I supposed to find out where this EC thing is supposed to go next?" Was I supposed to thump it? Shake it?

"You're asking me?" he chuckled, and the PipBuck blinked. 'Equestria Military Command Hub: Hoofington. Ironmare Station.' The display showed the navigation further east and was even kind enough to copy it on to Marmalade's PipBuck.

I held up the black device with my magic. "It can calculate the value of Radroach meat, tell me if somepony plans to kill me or not, and can download the data I need and move it around for convenience even if I don't have a clue how to look for the data. Is there anything it doesn't do?"

"Tell you the secret of happiness, apparently." He replied dryly, shaking his head. "So. . . are you going to kill yourself still?"

"Probably," I muttered as I looked at him. "I can't live with what I've done. I know it wasn't my fault. I know that. But every second I'm not doing something, it's tearing me apart. Homage was right. I need to find something to live for. Something that matters. Or I need to kill myself before I become a complete monster." He just stared at me, and I smiled mirthlessly. "I can feel it happening, Dealer. It happened in the stable. I fought to kill until I almost died killing everypony around me. What if I pulled that in Megamart? Or Chapel? I can't let that happen. I can't let gassing my stable ever be okay. I just can't."

He put his hoof in mine. "You remind me of how things used to be, Blackjack. I hope

you find what you need. The Wasteland needs you. Your friends need you. I need you.” And with that, my crazy hallucination went away.

I found a pencil and some scrap paper in my packs. ‘Went for a walk. Might not be back. Meet you in Megamart if I am. Sorry. BJ.’ Then I fished out the stealthbuck, and, after some fiddling, activated its magic. I headed down till I heard him searching. I looked at him with a parting smile. I slipped the note under my delta PipBuck and set it down in the doorway for P-21 to discover. Then I headed out the door. Feeling better than I had in ages, I started north.

Towards the sea.

I wasn’t really paying attention to how long I wandered. An hour? Two? Three? Night arrived, my eyes transforming everything into amber hues. Due north, the land became rocky, and here and there were thin gray trees with a few sick leaves clinging to them. I could hear the steady, repetitive but constantly unique sound of the waves growing louder and louder with each passing moment.

And then the land ended.

Before me was a great wedge of stone thrusting out into that great endless plane of churning water. Cold wind snapped at me, the clouds overhead spitting occasional cold blasts of water that mixed with the salty tang in the air. Step by step, I walked along a narrow trail that wound towards that point, passing by desiccated picnic tables and rusted fire pits. Marmalade’s PipBuck chimed softly. ‘Star Point’ appeared on the navigation tool. Finally, I came to the end. The tip of the great stone triangle. Surrounded by all that openness, I felt that old familiar sensation swallow me. The rusted remains of guardrails ran around the edges of that great wedge of stone. The long grass rattled softly in the wind.

At least I had company.

One lone skeleton lay there in the center of the rock, protected by a slight divot. A few rags and a decayed dufflebag anchored the unicorn’s remains. “Hey,” I said softly to the bones as I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the familiar panic rolling back and forth within me giving way to a resignation that, bad as it felt, was tolerable.

I opened my eyes again and looked out at that cold, vast emptiness. A hard mountain loomed to the west. The harbor ruins stretched to the east. Behind me was 99 and all my bloody sins. Ahead of me, nothing but stark emptiness. I felt as if I were

alone on the moon.

“I hope you don’t mind some company,” I murmured softly as I drew Vigilance. I was over. This was done. I pressed the gun to the underside of my jaw and clenched my eyes. If there was something, anything to keep me alive, now would be the time for it.

I pulled the trigger.

The weapon clicked softly as the cool metal ring kissed the underside of my jaw. Slowly, I moved the gun back into my field of view and stared down at it. At the safety. I slowly shook as I looked at that little tab above the trigger. Salty tears mixed with the ocean spray as I curled up beside those bones. I looked at those eye sockets and the salt-crusting glasses that lay atop them. They seemed to stare at me, asking me why I was doing this.

Had this mare come out here to die when the bombs fell? Choosing where she would finally meet her end? Had she died weeping? In pain? Or had she wanted to live? To stay with the ponies that loved her? To stay in a world that was dying and falling apart?

What sense was there living in a world that only got worse? In a world without princesses? Where the only reward for doing good was misery and everything worthwhile became tarnished? I flicked off the safety. Four hundred murders. Forty colts and fillies. Scoodle. If the penalty for murder was death, then I wished I could die four hundred and forty one times to pay the price in full.

Bowing my head, I put the barrel in my mouth. Felt the cool silver plate. Tasted the salt on the barrel.

The skull of the pony broke free and bumped against my leg. I looked down at it and the still-faintly-blue horn touching my knee. “How do I go on living?” I whispered.

Then I saw that the seam on the bag had split. A few ratty clothes. A foal’s rattle. A battered recorder. I carefully pulled it out; the machine was trashed, but I connected my PipBuck to it. There were only two fragments recoverable. I played the last.

There was lots of yelling, shouting, shoving, and scared cries. “Mommy, I’m scared. Where are we going?”

“We’re going to a stable, sweetie. Remember? Just like I told you,” she said softly,

“I don’t want to go to a stable! I want to go home. Why can’t we go home, mommy?”

“Shhh. Shhh. We have to go. It’s the only safe place left.”

“Stable pass?” Asked a mare.

“Here. For me and my daughter.”

“Woah woah woah! This pass is for stable 90! Not 99. You can’t just swap these things.”

“Please, there’s no way we can reach stable 90 in time!”

“That’s not my fault. Get back!”

There were sounds of a scuffle, and another mare asked in a more authoritative voice, “What’s going on here?”

“Please. Our passes are for 90, not 99, but. . . please take her!”

“The rules are clear, Trick.” The mare gave a sob.

“Hrmp. Fuck the rules. My pass says I get to bring a kid if I want. Well, I don’t have one,” her harsh tone softened. “I’ll take her.”

“You will? Oh thank you. Thank you! Honey, you need to go with this nice pony, okay?”

“No! Mommy! I want to stay with you!” the filly wailed. “I want to go home. Why can’t we go home?”

“Listen! Please. Please!” her mother begged frantically, the filly sniffing. “You have to go with her. This is your home now. You need to live. You have to grow up. To be a big girl. You’re going to do great things. And you’re going to have kids. And they’ll going to do great things too. But to do that you have to live.”

“No, Mommy, no. . .”

“Always remember how proud I am of you. How glad I am to see you go becoming such a good girl. You kept me going. You kept me strong. And now you have to go and help other ponies, too. Please. Promise me you’ll keep going. Promise me you’ll live.”

A sob, a sniffle, and then the filly said, “I promise, Mommy. I promise.”

“That’s my big girl. My good girl. You have stars in your eyes. Don’t ever forget that.”

“We’ve got to seal the stable, ma’am.” The mare said softly. “There’s a whole mob coming.”

“Thank you.” A sniff and a nuzzle. “I love you. I love you.”

“I love you, Mommy,” the little filly blubbered. “I love you!”

“Come on, honey. Let’s get inside. I’ll show you a trick. It’s my super special talent.”

“Goodbye. . .” the mother whispered. There was a metallic grind of the door rolling into place.

I wept as I looked down at her bones. She’d given her daughter away to save her. How many parents had made that same sacrifice? Who had something they loved so much that it was more important than their own life?

What was I living for? What would I be willing to die for? Glory? I cared for her, maybe even loved her a little. Revenge? No, as much as I might hate Sanguine for what he did, I didn’t have some burning vendetta in my heart. Was it virtue? Friendship? Were either of those enough?

Would I be here if they were?

I pressed the gun to the side of my head, leaning back this time. I clenched my eyes shut, my magic increasing on the trigger. Then I opened my eyes for one last look at the poor, sick world before I left it.

Stars.

The hole in the cloud was no bigger than my hoof, and only a dozen or so stars twinkled softly in the night.

Only a fool would demand power of the stars.

“Please. . .” I said as I stared up at that gap in the heavens, at those tiny winking jewels in the sky as tears ran down my face. “Please. . . help me. I need something. Anything. Anything that can make me bear this.” My gun trembled as I begged the heavens for something to stop this. To give me a reason to go on, a reason that I could live with. Something that could made the murder of hundreds bearable.

My horn brightened.

“Blackjack?” Asked a tiny metallic voice behind me. “What are you doing?”

Slowly, ever so slowly I turned to look at the bobbing spritebot. “Watcher?” I whispered, my voice cracking.

Those robotic eyes just stayed focused on me as I sniffed and said, “I’m afraid I fucked up again.”

The tiny machine bobbed closer. “I’d disagree with that. Why don’t you put the gun down and tell me about it?” Slowly, I lowered the weapon and told the robot

everything that'd happened from the gas station to now. I told him everything, my lies and fears and how much I hated myself for wanting to die when so many others wanted to live but didn't. This poor mare had lost everything to save her daughter. Why couldn't I find a reason to live in this dying, poisoned world?

"Wow. Blackjack. Just... wow." The robot said in its tinny voice. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine anything that would make that easier."

"Yeah." I said as I faced the robot. "You told me the way to survive Scoodle's death was to fight every second to make things better. But I haven't made things better. I've just raised my death count by a factor of ten." I closed my eyes. "You told me you knew ponies whose fuck-ups killed millions. Do you think those ponies could live with those deaths?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"How do you survive, Watcher?" I asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you watch the Wasteland. You try and get ponies to do good things. You've seen failure time and time again. You've seen the Wasteland decaying. What keeps you going?" I asked softly.

He fluttered before me. "Hope," he replied after a minute. "Hope that someday my mistakes can be forgiven and hope that Equestria can heal."

I looked out at that endless dark water. "I don't see how anypony can have hope anymore."

The spritebot just bobbed there for a second. Then he said quietly, "Would you like me to show you?"

"What?" I asked as I looked at the bot sharply.

"You're literally only a few minutes from me. If you promised not to tell another soul... and I showed you what gives me hope day after day... do you think you could live?"

I just stared at him and then gave a shrug. "Maybe."

"Then stay there and don't move." And with a crackle, the bug robot resumed its normal behavior and flew back into the gray woods.

Don't move? I looked around the flat slab of rock. The rainy woods. The black waters. The gray ruins and the looming dark mountains.

One minute. Two. I sighed, and then saw something glint through the tear in the bag. The frame was corroded and flaked from the salt, but the glass had preserved the drawing within. The unicorn mare with the streaks in her mane looked down at the small filly in her embrace, holding her still for the artist. I looked at the two streaks of color in her shaggy mane, rather like a skunk and not like her mother at all. Even after two centuries, there was a bright light in the filly's eyes. I supposed that that could have been artist's fancy though.

Then I stared hard at the mother. I'd see her before, but where?

And then I was flying through the air, screaming like crazy as the dark waves flashed beneath me. Razor-sharp talons tightened against me as we flew higher and higher, powerful wings blasting me with a gale. I looked at the massive reptilian head, the scaly purple hide, and the lashing tail as we lifted clear up into the clouds. All the while, I screamed like crazy. This was NOT how I wanted to die.

"Relax, Blackjack," the dragon growled in its deep voice. "I told you I was coming to get you, didn't I?" He said as he flew higher, up through the tops of the clouds, and higher still towards a cave near the top of the suddenly much closer mountain.

"Watcher?"

He grinned down at me.

I took a deep breath and yelled at the top of my lungs, "Couldn't you have mentioned you're a frigging dragon?!"

Heights like this were no good. No good at all. I was glad the flight was mercifully brief and that I hadn't the opportunity to soil my armor before I was deposited inside the cave. The large purple and green dragon immediately started to check the cave. "Wait here," he growled as I stood next to a massive pile of gems. If that treasure wasn't what he was so worried about, then I didn't worry about idly kicking a few errant diamonds back towards the heap. On one spot of floor was a black charred patch that reeked of burnt flesh. I gave it a wide berth.

He returned with a relieved look on his face, walking to the pile of gems and flopping down on it as he pressed a hand to his chest. "Whew. I don't think I've left my cave in... forever. It looks like the Enclave didn't have time to sneak in and try something." He looked at the burnt patch on the floor. "They're a little bit sore with me, at the moment."

The sheer absurdity of the situation snapped me out of my funk enough for me to smile and approach, extending a hoof. “Hi. I’m Blackjack. And you are?”

“Spike,” he replied as he rolled on to his side, reaching down and shaking my hoof with remarkable care. “Though most ponies, and I can count the exceptions on two hands, only know me as the Watcher.”

“Well, thanks,” I said as I looked at the massive dragon and sat down hard. “You know, I really was not expecting this,” I said as I gestured with my forehooves. “I figured you were some ghoul sitting in a shack or bunker somewhere.”

“Ponies aren’t the only ones concerned with the future of Equestria. Griffins. Zebras. Even dragons have a stake in seeing it put back to normal.”

“I’m still a little fuzzy as to why? Your name rings a bell...”

He sighed with a sad little smile. “No surprise. Rarity always kept me on a low profile. With so many dragons helping the zebras, well... it got awkward.” He sat up a little. “You’re looking at Twilight Sparkle’s number one special assistant.”

I stared at him and gave my head a hard shake. “Twilight Sparkle... had a dragon... as an assistant?!”

“Well I was just a baby at the time,” he replied with a modest smile. “This was a long time ago. Before the ministries. The war. Everything. Back when it was just the seven of us in Ponyville and my biggest problems were diamond dogs kidnapping Rarity.” He looked wistfully away. “Sometimes, I can close my eyes and almost smell Twilight’s daffodil and daisy sandwich.”

That stabbed at me. “As if that will ever happen again,” I muttered, my gaze dropping.

That claw reached down to tilt my face up. “It will. You asked me what it was that gives me hope every day. Hope to try and help ponies in the wasteland. To help them to do better?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. Please... please let this be what I need.

He slowly stood once more and started towards the back of the cave. “Why don’t you come with me? You need to see something.”

“What?” I asked as I followed.

“The thing that may someday save Equestria.”

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk added: Weapon Handling – Either your horn's gotten tough enough to handle the kick or you've broken in that battle saddle. Weapon strength requirements are two less for you.

Quest Perk added: Star touched – The stars are watching out for you: others suffer a 10% penalty to crit chance and a 25% penalty to crit damage against you.

24. Hell of a Night

“It’s the horrifying story of the messy inconsiderate ghost, who irritated everypony within a hundred miles! OoooooOOOwwwOOOoo...”

I had to admit, I had no idea what to expect. Something here gave Watcher the ability to go on day after day, year after year. The strength to face a future that seemed determined to get bleaker and darker till everything was lost. I needed that strength. Virtues. Friendships. Even love wasn’t enough. I needed a reason to live.

Or else I was already dead.

Spike stretched his arms and wings far overhead as we walked. “I don’t think I’ve ever left like that before. You mares must be rubbing off on me,” he said with a rueful chuckle.

I couldn’t help but smile nervously. He was a huge, scaly, fire breathing carnivore. “You seem like you’re in a good mood.”

He blinked, then looked at me with the smallest of smiles. “You know... I am. Between you and her and everything, I feel better than I have in decades.”

“Her? Oh! That mare you were talking about. How’d that go?”

He snorted, glaring at the burned patch. “Aside from the Enclave making asses of themselves, just fine,” he said with a low, worrying growl. “They’re up to something, though.” Tell me about it.

I looked around the cave. Now that I was a bit less nervous, I could appreciate how... unexpected it was. The huge pile of gems I’d been next to was only one of several, but that wasn’t surprising in a dragon’s cave. What was surprising were the high shelves packed with books that covered most of the walls. We also passed a dragon-sized circular bed which, aside from its size, shape, and being built into the floor, was a perfectly ordinary bed with pillows and blankets. An ordinary-looking terminal stood on a pedestal next to the bed. I looked up and saw a rough, stalactite-strewn ceiling: exactly what you’d expect in a cave. I thought of asking Watcher if all dragon caves were actually like this, but decided that there were more important things to worry about at the moment. “So... you have something to show me?”

“I do,” he replied in a softer voice, stopping in front of a passage leading deeper into the mountain. “But I need something from you first. Something very important: a

promise. You have to keep this from your friends. From everypony you can.”

“After what I pulled tonight, I’m not sure I still have any friends.” I muttered, ears drooping. Then I met his green gaze, sighed, and straightened. “I promise. I’ll do everything I can to keep your secrets, Watcher.” He looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to gauge the sincerity of my words, then nodded.

We wound our way further into the cave, as Watcher (or should I call him Spike?) talked in his slow, deep, rumbling voice. “When the ministries were formed, Twilight Sparkle devoted herself to helping Princess Luna win the war. None of us thought that it would be easy, but I think there was a conceit that, now that we were involved, it’d all be wrapped up soon. But the bigger the ministries got, the less and less Twilight saw of her friends.

“Did you know that, for years, Twilight lived almost completely alone in Canterlot?” he asked, looking back at me, and I shook my head dumbly. “She had me, of course, but her entire life was studying and thinking and learning new magic. Then Princess Celestia sent her to Ponyville; she met her friends there and stopped the rise of Nightmare Moon. Together, they could do anything. But once they dove into the ministries, they were slowly pulled apart.

“It wasn’t like there was some plot to keep them isolated. The war was just so big that, honestly, there was no way for us to be together like we used to. And Twilight, she regressed to how she lived in Canterlot, except that she was desperate for those moments when she could be with her friends. For times where they could pretend like everything was okay. Most folks thought she was happy being in charge of an entire ministry dedicated to arcane sciences.”

He let out a great sigh. “Deep down, I think she hated it more than anypony.”

“I don’t understand how it happened, though. I mean, why didn’t they just quit if they were so unhappy?”

He stopped and looked down at me again. “How it happened is a bit more complicated. But as for why she didn’t just quit. . . Why don’t you quit being Security?”

I arched a brow and gave a little smile. “Spike, I was going to blow my brains out fifteen minutes ago.”

“That was suicide. I mean, why don’t you quit?” he asked, pointing at the word ‘Security’ on my barding with his huge claw. “Take that armor off. Go back to Chapel. Let everypony know you’re done with wandering the Wasteland and helping out Hoofington. Why don’t you do that? Seems a bit saner than killing yourself.”

The thought hadn't entered my mind, and I sat down hard. Why hadn't I thought of that? Just give up the job without giving up life? But the thought of what my friends would say... what DJ Pon3 or Priest or Bottlecap would think...

I swallowed hard at the unpleasant thoughts, and he nodded. "Exactly. It's easy to die. Not so easy to quit. Once they were the Ministry Mares, they couldn't stop. They wanted to. I don't think even Rainbow Dash liked what they'd become. But they couldn't... not without completely humiliating themselves and letting down Princess Luna." He looked away with a wistful gaze. "There was a time, about five years after the MAS formed, that I thought she was going to do it. Step down... hand the Ministry over to Mosaic and Gestalt. Just walk away to the life she wanted."

"So what happened?"

"Shattered Hoof Ridge. The assassination attempt on Celestia, I think, broke something in her. After that she became... consumed. Her friends grew further and further apart, especially her and Pinkie Pie. But even I wasn't around like I should have been."

"Then, one day, she showed me this..." he said as we reached the end of the tunnel. The chamber beyond was huge, large enough for Spike to rise to his full height. I'd never seen so many maneframes. The six walls of the chamber formed a hexagon lined with gems and arcane machinery. In the center of the room, though, rose a large, elegant stalagmite of technology that made the walls seem like only a step above bare rock. It seemed to breathe silently, as if it were asleep. My eyes were drawn higher and higher up that spire until I was looking out at a black patch of faint stars.

Then I promptly fell back with a limp thud. Spike blinked in surprise. "Sorry..." I muttered lamely. "I'm not good with heights..." I rose to my hooves and gave myself a good shake. "What is that?"

"This is a Crusader super maneframe," he said quietly, as if it could hear him. "It's one of the single greatest arcane machines ever invented, capable of handling both technological data of staggering complexity and employing precision magical effects." He looked up at it. "She designed it herself, completely secret from the rest of the ministries and even her own people."

I couldn't believe that. There was no way one pony, or even one pony and a dragon, could build something like this or keep it secret. The materials and technology... then I looked at him again. "The O.I.A. did this, didn't they?"

He looked shocked. Even a little impressed. “You know about them, huh?” He looked at the supercomputer with a grudging glare and sighed. “Yes. She commissioned it from the O.I.A. Goldenblood got the machines, the equipment, from somewhere. Everything completely off the books. A hundred ponies lived in this cave for two years straight constructing it. Then he had their memories erased.”

“I don’t understand. Why the big secret? What is it?” I asked, looking at the sleeping machine as if expecting it to wake up and talk to me. Was this what EC-1101 was for?

“This machine is designed to cast a spell, the single greatest and most powerful spell of all time. A megaspell specifically crafted to affect, potentially, all of Equestria.” I looked at the device in awe. “It has the ability to purge the Wasteland of taint, neutralize radioactive contamination, and restore life to the land. It’s called Gardens of Equestria.”

I fell over again. “Oh, is that all?” My head reeled at the possibilities. I could imagine the Dealer dropping his dusty cards in shock at this!

He nodded as he gazed at the machinery. “It taps into a source of power greater than even Princess Celestia and Luna: The Elements of Harmony.” He walked along beside me as he pointed at jeweled necklaces sitting on crystalline pedestals surrounding the central machine. “Honesty. Kindness. Laughter. Generosity. Loyalty.” He paused for a moment, his green eyes lingering on the last, which was a strange crown thingy instead of a necklace. “Magic.”

“So... let’s get this show on the road! How do we fire it up?” I asked as I looked at the machine. Maybe there was a button that needed pushing? A bright red one? I reached towards a likely-looking gem but caught Spike’s look. Right, no touchie.

“We can’t,” he said softly. “It won’t work without the Elements of Harmony.”

“But...I thought you said that those were the Elements of Harmony?” I said, waving a confused hoof at the necklaces and crown thingy. He looked like he was trying to decide whether to smile or not.

“They are, but...” he began after a moment, “I suppose you could say that they are dormant. The physical forms of the Elements of Harmony aren’t enough; for their power to be used, they have to be wielded by ponies who embody the Elements. The Ministry Mares were the bearers, once...but that was a long, long time ago.”

There was a pause as we both thought. The only sound was the beeping of the active maneframe wall.

“So...” I said, “You’re looking for ponies that fit the bill?”

He nodded solemnly. “For two centuries. Every now and then, I might find one... but then they die, or they lose themselves to the Wasteland, or just never meet any others. I try to encourage the Elements and foster them wherever I can...” Like when he saw P-21 and I helping each other outside the stable. “But I haven’t been able to find enough yet.”

I thought of my friends. Glory... was she still loyal after what I’d pulled? Or was her virtue something else? I doubted Rampage’s laughter would fit. P-21? Lacunae? Would this even work with an alicorn? “I’m sorry, Spike. I really wish I could be one of those six ponies, but I don’t think I’m your mare.” To be honest, I’d be terrified of any megaspell that included me as a component.

He reached down and patted my head; okay, I tried to appreciate the intent, even if it did just remind my body that I was standing next to a dragon. “It’s alright. The fact is that, even after all this time, I doubt I’ve come across more than a dozen ponies that were possibilities. Think of how hard it must be to find honesty in a place like this. Or generosity, when ponies kill each other for what was effectively litter two centuries ago?” He looked at the majestic machine with a sigh, reaching out to touch it lovingly with his claws. “But so long as there are ponies, I still have hope that, someday, I might find the six needed and give Equestria a chance to be reborn.”

It was a long shot. I knew it. So did he. But as I sat there looking at the machine, I gave a little frown. My eyes were drawn to the necklace with the diamond-shaped jewel, and I had a niggling thought. What about Bottlecap? Maybe... though I feared that her trading in weapons might disqualify her. While she was generous, in her own way, she had caused harm as well. Caprice... yeah, right.

I did know one pony, though... one infuriating... obnoxious... ruthless little pony who had no scruples against trading for every cap she could get her dirty hooves on... but who also went above and beyond in making sure that everypony had what they needed. A pony who somehow found a way to make a daisy sandwich, gave me a box of spark batteries, and sold Glory the barding she’d need so she wouldn’t look like a raider. I groaned, pressing my hooves to my temples, hoping I wouldn’t regret it.

“Is there an age limit on this thing?” I asked with a rueful smile.

As we walked back to the main chamber, I felt something settling inside me: a dream of a green Equestria. I knew that Gardens wouldn't magically make everything perfect; there was still the Enclave and the mysterious Projects to deal with...and the raiders, and the slavers, and the bandits, and the Remnant, and Goddesses-knew-what-else, but an Equestria where the land could grow uncontaminated food and the rivers lacked irradiated water. . . maybe it could even disrupt the Enervation that sickened countless ponies! The idea. . . the sheer possibility. . . was intoxicating.

Sure, the odds were slim. But I'd beaten Gorgon and Deus and had a boat dropped on me. I could take those odds! I looked over at a display case, minuscule compared to the bookshelves that surrounded it, smiling fondly at the set of six figurines inside it. Together, they just looked. . . whole. Happy. Compared to those six figurines, every memory I'd had of the friends was stained with gray.

I told him about Charity, and my hunch that her virtue might be generosity. The dragon rubbed his spines, a little skeptical but willing to consider the possibility. It was the best I could do.

"It's hard to believe that all of this was done secretly," I marveled, but noticed Spike seemed a little put out by the comment.

"You'd have to know Goldenblood. Then you wouldn't be surprised at all," he muttered darkly, plucking up a ruby. His green eyes narrowed as he squeezed it, crushed it into powder, and tossed the clawful into his mouth.

"Did you know Goldenblood?" I asked, and he nodded with a dour look. I felt curiosity nibbling at my mane. "I see the ministries everywhere I look, but the OIA's been nearly impossible to nail down."

"It was designed that way. Again. You'd have to know Goldenblood." He licked the rest of the red powder off his fingers, then blinked and looked at my wide grin. He sighed. "Everypony knows about Celestia, Luna, and the Ministry Mares, but nopony knows about Goldenblood because he was always two steps away from everything. He was smart. Not like Twilight Sparkle smart... but he knew things that I couldn't imagine anypony knowing. He could read zebra and speak dragon. He probably knew most of the most influential ponies in Equestria. But above all, he knew politics. And he was the one who knew that what he was doing was wrong and did it anyway."

"I don't understand. Why was forming the ministries wrong? Didn't your friends agree? Princess Luna didn't force them into it, did she?" I asked, remembering that beautiful, if faintly flirty figure.

"If you mean 'were spears involved', no," Spike muttered, then sighed. "I was there when Luna met with my friends, and so was he." The purple dragon snorted softly. "She explained how Twilight and the others were ponies she respected, ponies who had saved Equestria in the past and now were needed to help protect Equestria again. How something had to be done to restore confidence after Littlehorn. Then Goldenblood tried to talk us all out of it," he said sourly.

"He what?" I blinked, stupefied.

Spike stretched his arm to the terminal and with shocking deftness accessed a file. "Twilight somehow got her horn on this recording." The terminal crackled for a moment, then Twilight Sparkle's voice came out loud and clear.

"I don't know how we're supposed to help, your majesty. This war seems too big for us. For any one pony to be able to affect."

I knew the rasping gasp that came next. "I know it's intimidating to consider, Twilight."

"We're not afraid," snapped a mare, and my eyes were drawn to the figurine of the cyan pegasus.

"You should be, Rainbow Dash," Goldenblood said grimly. "We're not asking you to risk your lives in a fight, or to go on a quest for some treasure. What we are asking you to do is to assume responsibility. You will be given the power not just to act but to direct others to act on your behalf. To work under your direction. To make your vision a reality. This is not the same as working on your own or with your friends. If you fail, the consequences fall not just on your heads, but on thousands. . . perhaps millions. . . of lives."

"Can you accept that responsibility, Twilight? Or you, Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Fluttershy? Rarity? What about you Pinkie Pie?" He said in a grave voice. "If not, then make your apologies right now, and go."

"Goldenblood. This was your idea!" Princess Luna protested.

Then there was another wheezing gasp, coughing and wet. It sounded like he was drowning. "Your majesty. I know you wish to rule, and to see this war to victory. I beg you to reconsider. We have an opportunity to create a new future for Equestria. A new society. No good can come from perpetuating this conflict. Sue for peace. Let the ponies of Equestria find another path. Live a life away from power."

Luna sighed. "I can't. Goldenblood, you know I can't. They took Littlehorn from me. Please. Help me make this new government a reality."

A long pause. A soft, resigned sigh. “As you wish, your majesty.”

The recording ended, and Spike turned back to me. “After that, he worked with Twilight and Luna to get everything organized. He talked extensively with each of my friends, working out what powers and ideas they wanted and codifying those into laws. He worked with Rarity on the image that was needed to shore up the ministries. He worked with generals, aristocrats, and bureaucrats to get them to go along.” He gave a snort. “Finally, he had a heart attack. Nearly died. Fluttershy personally nursed him back to health.” He rolled his eyes and gave a soft sigh. “It was funny at the time.”

A pony so fixated on something that their heart stopped? Where had I heard that before? Oh, yeah, my own stupid butt nearly dying in the ruins of Flankfurt! “He almost died creating them? But. . . I thought he was against the ministries?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I know. I know. With one breath, he told us not to do it, but then he put every effort into making the ministries a success. That’s the kind of pony he was. For a time there, I really hated him.” His low growl made me glad I didn’t have any yellow on me.

“You did? Why?”

“Because, before he and Luna showed up, I had a good life with my friends. Oh, there was the war, and Celestia’s missions, but they didn’t feel much different from the adventures we’d had before,” he said sourly. “But you know what he told me? He asked me if I hated him. I told him. . . I was a little cranky at the time, so I won’t repeat the language, but I called him every last name in the book. And he told me that no matter how much I hated him, I was right to, and he’d always hate himself more.” Wow.

“So where did the O.I.A. come in?”

“Right from the start, it was pretty clear that there were going to be conflicts. I mean, my friends might have liked each other, but they still fought. You can’t imagine how Rarity and Applejack could carry on. Pinkie Pie wanting giant balloon fortresses floating off the towers of Canterlot with Rarity saying that they were tacky. . . things like that. Even Twilight could be awfully stubborn if she put her mind to it. So, Goldenblood stepped in and help work things out. There were still fights and arguments, but the O.I.A. kept things running smoothly.”

Spike sighed again and shook his head. “I remember that day so well. All my friends sharing ideas. Talking about ways they could help, what they wanted to do. I

remember Fluttershy crying when she was told that she'd be able to help thousands of hurt ponies all at once. And all the while, Goldenblood was taking notes and watching and making suggestions."

The massive dragon climbed out of bed and walked over to one of the shelves. "Sometimes, I think that if there hadn't been an O.I.A. or a Goldenblood, the ministries wouldn't have worked out. Or my friends would have quit. Something." He reached up to a shelf too high for me to see the contents of, and brought down an intricately carved wooden box. "Here. Maybe this will help you understand what I mean." He opened it to reveal dozens of memory orbs in labeled, velvet-lined niches. He picked out one and then carefully set it on the floor next to me.

"I need to check on things anyway. I get... anxious... if I stop paying attention to things going on for too long," he said as he returned to the bed and started typing at the terminal. I looked at the offered orb and gave a half smile. Well, it'd be rude not to, right?

I tapped the orb against my horn. "Come on... probably nothing gruesome in this... come on... come on..." Finally, I felt the tickling connection as my reluctant horn reached out and made contact. The world swirled away around me.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Mare... wings... pegasus. The place looked like some kind of mansion... no, if I had to describe this place, I'd say 'palace'. Red and orange mane obscured the right side of my vision. She walked with her head hung, tail dragging, and let out a soft sigh. Still, this body felt good. Healthy. Fit. And for some inexplicable reason, I felt twenty percent cooler just watching this memory.

"So. Ministry of Awesome?" rasped that horrible, wet and rusty voice behind her. Every feather (and wasn't that a freaky sensation) ruffled as she froze in place then glanced behind her at the scarred pony with the golden eyes.

"Oh, hey Golden," she said, turning and giving the most insincere grin I'd ever felt... and I was an expert. "I just thought I'd slip out. Stretch my wings. Take some air." Through the doorway behind Goldenblood, I could see a room with a large table. Twilight Sparkle was talking, gesturing to some diagrams on chalkboards.

"Of course. I imagine a member of the Skyguard doesn't have many opportunities for flying about and getting some air," he said in that whispery, rusty voice. He approached, and I felt her take a few more steps back. Goddesses, he'd be so much less freaky if he'd just blink. "What's the matter, Rainbow Dash?"

She looked at the table and all her friends behind him. “Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s great. Just great! Why would you think anything’s wrong?” she stammered.

“I’ve made an art of furtively skulking out back ways and exiting unnoticed my whole life. It’s rarely done because a pony is feeling particularly bubbly about their circumstances.” He kept up that staring gaze, his scarred face sympathetic. “So, what’s bothering you?”

Rainbow Dash looked at him for a long minute, then sighed. “It’s nothing. I just... I’m useless.”

“I can see why you think so,” he replied, and she blinked and frowned.

“Gee, thanks,” she said sarcastically, then faltered, “Or, wait... was that a cut? Ugh... can you smile or twitch your tail or something when you’re messing with me?”

He turned and walked towards a pair of double doors. His horn glowed, pulling them open. “So, Ministry of Awesome. Where your job is to be Awesome? Make awesome? Sell only Awesome of the highest quality?” he asked with a ghost of a smile.

“It was all I could come up with,” she replied with a grumble. “It’s easy for Twilight. ‘Ministry of Magic’... or ‘Arcane Sciences’... whatever. Magic’s always been her thing. Makes sense for her to coordinate it. Or Fluttershy wanting to run hospitals and stuff. Gee, who saw that one coming?” she said crossly as she rolled her eyes.

“But you’re a flier...” Goldenblood rasped softly.

“But I’m a flier...” then she blinked and narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t do that...” He just smiled a little more broadly as Rainbow Dash walked to the rail and looked out at the night. Canterlot was aglow with lights. Far to the west was the golden glow of Manehattan. She sighed and closed her eyes, “But the only thing I’m really good at is flying. So... what, am I supposed to have a ministry that regulates flying? Holds air shows? That’ll really help Equestria.”

“You do have other strengths besides flying. Your loyalty goes without saying. You’re brave, if reckless. Tenacious. Beautiful.” Okay, I felt her blush something fierce, but then he said, “But I know you feel inferior to your friends.”

She snorted, “Yeah, right! What do I have to feel inferior about?” He smiled softly at her, and she muttered, “Right. Don’t answer that...” She took a deep breath. “Look, I’ll be fine. I’ll figure something out. Somehow.” She huffed as she folded her

hooves on the marble rail of the balcony. “It’d just a lot easier if I were... well... more like Twilight.”

“Why, because she’s smart and you’re not?” Rainbow Dash looked at him, her ears drooping. But he simply put a hoof on her shoulder, “You are not stupid. Perhaps you’re not like Twilight or the others, but you are cunning and creative. I’ve seen you fly.” Rainbow looked at him more directly now. “What you really need is a challenge.”

“Well yeah. That’s part of the reason I joined the Skyguard! But this isn’t a race I have to win or something. I can’t just fly out there and beat up all the zebras with my own hooves...” then she paused and rubbed her chin, adding, “Maybe.”

“We’re in a contest now. War is a team sport, with deadly and desperate odds. Win, and you live. Lose, and you might die,” he said quietly, then smiled slowly. “But there’s more than one way to win this contest. Say... if you cheat?”

“Cheat?” Rainbow Dash blinked. “How the hay do you cheat at war? I didn’t know there was a rulebook.”

“Most ponies might think that wars are won on the battlefields, and there’s no doubt that battles are critical. But what if an army arrives to the battle hungry because their food supplies were blown up? Or lacking weapons because the shipment was delayed? Or late because their base lost power?” He asked with that steady little smile. “Do you think that might change the battle?”

“Well... sure! That makes sense.” She cocked her head at him. “So... don’t we do that?”

He gave a tiny shrug. “Our military is all about winning the battle. They aren’t creative or cunning enough to risk going behind enemy lines and fighting dirty. Sabotage. Infiltration. Spying. These are tools the army just isn’t flexible enough to use efficiently.” He was good. So good that I couldn’t tell if he was playing her up to create that ministry or actually trying to help her.

Rainbow Dash sat hard, running a hoof through her mane. “And you’re saying the Ministry of Awesome could do all that?”

“It could do far more, but that would be a start.” Rainbow Dash’s eyes went wide as she stared at him. Why did he look so... so sad? “Princess Luna will need a mare who can get special projects done. Tricky projects. Secret projects that nopony can know about if we’re going to win this war,” he rasped. His golden eyes now stared out at the distant city as his breathing became harsher, punctuated with soft coughs. “As you might know, the best kind of cheating is the kind you do when nopony knows

you're cheating.”

Rainbow Dash stared hard and pointed a hoof at him. “You mean I shouldn't tell anypony what I'm doing with my ministry?”

“Does anypony expect you to do a lot with it? Did any of your friends really act all that surprised when you suggested the ‘Ministry of Awesome?’ If somepony thinks less of you, they'll underestimate you. They'll make mistakes, and they'll give you the freedom you need to act.”

“Woah.” Rainbow Dash blinked, her eyes going wide. “You are scary good, you know that, Goldie?”

“Good at everything except breathing,” he said with a self-deprecating smile. Together, they started back towards the conference room. But I thought about what he'd just said. I wondered if all of his deflections weren't just ways to make others underestimate him.

I imagined a chill when I realized I didn't know Goldenblood at all. Was he a bastard manipulating everypony around him for his own ends? Was he truly trying to save Equestria? Was he a good pony or a villain? What had he been thinking when he had ponies turned into monsters with Project Chimera, or made half machine with Project Steelpony? And the other projects: Eternity, Redoubt, Partypoooper, Starfall, and Horizons. All created by Goldenblood on some level, all sealed by EC-1101.

oooOOOooo

I came out of it alone. I could only figure that Spike was checking on Gardens, or organizing his books, or... whatever it was reclusive dragons did when they weren't helping Wasteland ponies in a never-ending search for six virtues. I carefully levitated the orb to the case and slipped it back into the empty nook, closing the lid. There were probably days worth of memories here, but, as much as I might have liked to go through all of them, I had to get back to my friends. Then I'd have to hug their hooves and beg them to forgive me. Tears would likely have to be employed.

...

You know, I really am not good with waiting. . .

I started down a little side tunnel, one a bit too small for a dragon unless he really wanted to squeeze. Plenty of room for me, of course. Gardens of Equestria had been a monumental feat of engineering and secrecy. Virtually a miniature stable had been built during its construction and development, though of course, not a true

stable. Double bunk beds lay in dusty rows, and I suspected that the workers had slept in shifts.

The normal priority of scavenging went: weapons, armor, medical, food and drink, and something to sleep in. Since I was about as abnormal a mare as you could get, the first place I hit was the kitchen, where I was rewarded with not one but two boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs and some Fancy Buck Cakes. Cherry! And to complete the miracle of the Wasteland, there was a six-pack of Buckweiser in the fridge. I had to admit, I wasn't precisely the greatest aficionado of fermented hops and barley, but after the last few days I honestly didn't give a shit. I savored one bottle as I poked around further.

Then I took the liberty of checking the toilet facilities and found myself a porcelain basin of heaven. My insides melted. My knees were weak. I might have been marginally aroused. Ah... hot water. Was there any surer sign of civilization than the ability to pour unending amounts of steamy fluid over one's body?

The spritebot found me lying back in the tub with a bottle floating above me as I hummed a song of inebriation to myself. Two empty bottles joined me on a sea voyage as the little robot looked down at me. "Oh, that's where you went. I was worried." Then a pause. "Are you drunk?"

"No. That is incorrect. I am drinking. More accurately, I am approaching the state of being that is drunk." I scowled at the half empty bottle. "A journey that is taking me somewhat longer than I anticipated. It'd only take me a quarter bottle of whiskey to get this buzzed." I raised the bottle to the bot. "I drink to your good health, good sir dragon."

There was no answer for a bit, and then he simply replied, "Blackjack, you are so random."

After a soak, which did a marvel on my attitude, I stopped and considered myself in a mirror by the sinks.

Ugh... the last three weeks had done a number on me. I was definitely skinnier than I had been. The shiny scar on my chest was my most obvious souvenir of combat, but it was joined by a satellite of injuries all around it. Between the chemical burns and the shower, I was almost a mottled pink instead of white. And my mane needed a grooming badly. I chuckled ruefully. Going from suicidal to wanting a haircut: that was progress, right?

“So, going through for supplies?” Spike asked.

“Yeah. Hope you don’t mind,” I said as I tugged open the box of cereal. “I know that this is all your stuff. . .”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not using any of it. Honestly, I forgot that those smaller tunnels were down there.” I personally wondered how Spike had managed not to go stark raving mad all alone. I supposed having guests like me and his mysterious marefriend did him a lot of good.

“So, tell me about your friend,” I asked around a mouthful of Sugar Apple Bombs, wonderful powdery dust all over my muzzle as I floated the box on my left and the beer on my right. I found an arms locker and did a little happy dance at the sight of the ammo containers. It was almost like my birthday!

“Who? Oh! You mean LittlePip and her friends?”

“Yeah,” I said as I looked in one ammo box and gave a little squeal of delight. Despair, my poor shotgun, because somepony had included explosive rounds in this arms locker! I had missed the little orange shells of boom. “What’s she like?”

“Well. . . ah. . . it’s kind of hard to describe her. She’s. . . kinda like you, actually.” That made my ears perk. “Minus the drinking. . .” he added. I snorted. If she couldn’t handle a little Wild Pegasus... “She struggles every day to make the Wasteland a better place, no matter what.” ...okay, I could excuse sobriety for that.

“She’s like me? Poor dear,” I said with a smile, cleaning out his supply of shotgun shells but leaving the other ammo. Maybe someday this LittlePip or some other pony might need some. I also found a second pump action and a sweet muzzle choke that would help reduce the spread of my buckshot. “And her friends?” I asked as I pulled the two guns apart and started pick out the better parts.

“Well, there’s Velvet Remedy. She’s the closest thing to a real pacifist I’ve ever seen in the Wasteland. Thank goodness she’s got her friends to keep her safe. Then there’s Calamity, a Dashite with a real beef against raiders. I like him, but he’s definitely got a past he’s trying to leave behind. Steelhooves, a Steel Ranger from Manehattan, is their heavy weapons pony. Not really sure about him, but he’s much better than the rest of the Rangers,” Spike said with an annoyed snort.

I cocked my head and looked up at the little machine. “You have a problem with the Steel Rangers?”

“Anypony who puts more importance on a suit of power armor or a gatling gun than on a pony needing help isn’t much of a pony in my book. Plus there’s the fact

that they feel they've got a mandate to possess any and all technology they deem advanced enough." He noticed my 'I am not getting the problem' look and sighed. "What's the most advanced technology in all of Equestria?"

Oh... shit. "You think... they'd try and take it or something?"

"More like try something and get it damaged when I stop them," he replied, and I could just imagine a toothy draconic grin.

I thought about that; I really didn't know very much about the Steel Rangers. Then again, there was so much that I didn't know very much about.

"So, is that all of her friends?"

"Her close ones, the ones who travel with her, yes."

I inspected the shotgun parts in silence for a few moments, but then a thought struck me.

"Do you know the Stable Dweller too?" I said with a small grin.

There was a pause, "Um... yeah."

"What's she like?" I asked as I carefully added the mod. I didn't want my gun blowing up later because I'd screwed the thing on wrong.

"Well... ah... Blackjack? You mean you don't know who she is?"

"Well, no. It's not like she gets out east a lot," I said with a small huff of annoyance. "I like to imagine her as some big, tough, take-no-shit kind of mare. Sorta like... did you know Big Macintosh? You knew Applejack, so you must have..." I said as I wandered into a small medical bay. Oooh... spare Buck, magical bandages... and dusty but still beautifully lustrous purple healing potions that would really heal! Goddesses, I hated Enervation. "That. That's what I imagine she's like. Big and tough and strong and doesn't let anything cross her. She probably dual wields miniguns with missile launchers strapped to them." I brightened as I grinned. "She's probably got some kind of power armor too. Like magical super heavy plate that blasts lightning from her horn. And flies!" There was a prolonged silence from the little machine. "Spike?" I frowned. From somewhere deep inside the mountain, I thought I heard laughter echoing down the halls.

Well, Spike must have seen something really funny on his monitors, because for the moment I was left alone. Hopefully he'd share the joke. Then, in the corner of the

barracks, I saw a small door I'd nearly missed. Well, couldn't pass up the broom closet, now could I? But this lead to a small office and side room rather than more storage.

The room was quite full but very neat. Somehow, it felt like my mom's room, and I felt like a trespasser inside. Books lined the walls in alphabetized neatness, and there were diagrams and designs of the supercomputer I'd seen earlier. Two beds. Two desks. Two terminals. A safe.

The terminals took one look at my feeble hacking skills and virtually spat in my face in contempt. I had better luck with the safe, though. Inside were a lot of papers, a bag of bits, and a recording device. I played back the recording.

"Is that everyone, Goldenblood?" Twilight Sparkle asked softly.

"Almost," he replied. "I've modified their memories. They'll remember working on Stable 93, when a gas leak knocked them all out and the Stable had to be evacuated." He gave a horrid raspy little chuckle. "Close enough to the truth for your ends, I think."

"I'll never know how you arranged this with Stable-Tec... or managed to keep it a secret. It's incredible, Goldenblood." And then there was a soft sound of a kiss.

"Twilight. No." Oh, wasn't that an awkward silence!

"I... I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me," Twilight stammered.

"You're happy because you finally made something that will save Equestria if the worst happens. I hope it does." Hope it works, or hope that the worst happens?

Now it was Twilight's turn to sound skeptical. "You sound like you've already given up on winning the war."

"Well, pessimists are always pleasantly surprised," he replied faintly. "But if you really believed this would end well, you wouldn't have bothered to create Gardens."

"Somehow, the zebras got their hooves on megaspells. I can't imagine it. Our most critical and highly guarded secret, and they've got them now. It's now just a matter of time before they're weaponized." Twilight muttered softly.

"Yes. But that's something for Morale to uncover," he replied, and got a long low hiss of disgust. "Something wrong?"

"Morale... Pinkie. I don't know what's wrong with her. What's gotten into her? The spying? The drugs? The arrests? How did she turn into this?" Twilight muttered

softly.

There was a momentary pause and then he said quietly, “You, of all your friends, should understand.”

“What?” There was a little shock and anger, but curiosity as well.

“You know what it’s like to be in a room filled with hundreds and feel utterly alone. You’re brilliant, Twilight, but you know that there are few who really and truly care for you. You’re respected, certainly, but feared as well. You know how sensitive and perceptive Pinkie Pie is. Do you really think there’s a single pony around her that likes being with her?”

“Well... I mean... the parties... and drugs... and...” there was a long, drawn out sigh.

“You’re feared for your accomplishments. Pinkie Pie is feared for her threat. With a single, proofless accusation, she could make almost anypony disappear. The MoP is modifying memories with ever-increasing regularity. How could Pinkie Pie ever be happy knowing she’s surrounded by ponies who fear her? Who hate her?”

“But... she shouldn’t be hated!”

“Of course she shouldn’t be. And you shouldn’t be feared. Big Macintosh shouldn’t have died. Littlehorn shouldn’t have happened. This whole war shouldn’t have been fought. The mistakes, obvious, one after the next, shouldn’t have happened. But they did.”

“We can still save Equestria,” Twilight Sparkle said with conviction. “If all else fails, my friends and I will use the Elements and save the kingdom.”

“I have no doubt.” There was a clinking of glasses and then a sound of them being filled. I looked at an empty bottle of wine and two stained glasses, one broken on the floor. “A toast... to our efforts to save Equestria. One way or another, she’ll be returned to what she should be.”

A sound of drinking, then a sigh. “Well, I guess there’s nothing left but to erase your memories now as well, Goldenblood.”

“Ah, yes. I’m afraid we’re going to hit a snag there,” Goldenblood said softly. “I’m sorry Twilight...”

“Golden? What are you talking... about...” and then there was a soft thud.

“You are brilliant, Twilight. But sadly you’re not sneaky enough. You won’t be able

to keep this secret forever. I will,” he said softly. “If your method fails, mine will succeed.”

A few minutes later, a much younger sounding Spike asked, “Twilight? Golden? Is everything okay?”

“Just fine, Spike. I’m afraid she’s exhausted, though. I removed the memories of this place just like she planned. I’ll take her back to the MAS hub in Hoofington to recover.” Another pause. “You know what you have to do?”

“Yeah. I just don’t like it. Keeping secrets, I mean.”

“You have to keep it from everypony, Spike. Even Twilight. I’m sure she’ll feel upset. . . like she’s wasted two years of her life and accomplished nothing.”

“But why do we have to?”

“If Princess Luna finds out what we did here, it would be a sign that we think she’ll fail. Planning for disaster means you believe disaster will occur. I’d be exiled, or imprisoned, or imprisoned in exile. Twilight might face even worse. I don’t want that to happen, and I know you don’t either. Besides, if the Zebras found out that Gardens was here, then it would be immediately targeted.”

“Right. I’ll just tell everyone that I’m ready for a lair of my own. I’m finally flying now. . . pretty soon, I won’t even be able to fit in the Ponyville library anymore.” He let out a long sigh. “I just wish that you and Twilight had agreed to wipe your memories instead of hers.”

“Yes. But I can keep secrets better than she.”

“I don’t like keeping them from her,” Spike grumbled.

“I know what you mean. Neither do I.” A long rusty rattling sigh sounded. “I’m drowning in secrets, Spike. One day, all these secrets are going to kill me.”

I sat back, looking at the recording in horror as the playback ended. I took a slow, thoughtful sip of my beer. Twilight had sacrificed two years of her life to make Gardens, and she hadn’t even known about it. “How could he?”

“Yeah. That’s the kind of bastard he was,” the spritebot said behind me, making me jump to my hooves and whirl to face him. “One moment he was talking with her about Pinkie Pie, and the next he was drugging her and wiping her memory of the greatest accomplishment in history.”

“What happened to her?” I asked quietly.

“She became obsessed with winning the war. She got her hooves on another O.I.A. dirty secret and renewed its research. Everything became focused around that. All the rest of us just fell away.”

“Why did it sound like you were working with Goldenblood if you were Twilight’s assistant?” I asked, hoping this wasn’t going to be a sore point.

“It’s complicated,” he said. When wasn’t it? “I worked with Goldenblood on and off over the years. Said I wanted to do my part and all that, but really, I was just spying, trying to find something to use against him.”

“I take it that it didn’t work out like you expected?” I said with a sympathetic smile. I trotted my way back out to the lair as Spike went on.

“Goldenblood wasn’t what I expected. You saw the memory and heard that recording. I thought he was a villain who took my friends away. I thought he liked the war.” Spike sighed. He did that a lot, but I supposed that he had plenty of reasons to. “Did you know that, throughout the whole war, the O.I.A. kept back channels with the Zebras trying to negotiate peace? Or that he ran constant interference to protect non-ponies too? He’d work for hours, sometimes days on end before he’d collapse. Then he’d crawl back and work some more. He kept saying that he was trying to save Equestria. Not win the war. Not even end the war. It was always to save Equestria.”

I thought about that as I joined him in the main chamber again. The spritebot chirped and flew up to a hole near the ceiling. I had to admit, I still didn’t know what Goldenblood was either; if anything, I was even more confused now. Sinister Manipulator? Misunderstood genius? A pony who saw the writing on the wall because he’d written it himself? How had what he’d wanted been any different than what Twilight had? Or myself?

“The more I hear about Goldenblood, the less I like it.” I said; I saw Spike’s smirk and added, with my own smile, “Not him, so much. But it feels like he was the one who set up the big things.” My magic levitated some square gems and placed them on end. “Luna comes to him for advice and he sets up the ministries. He talks your friends into becoming the Ministry Mares. He works in the O.I.A. behind the scenes. The war gets worse and worse and he starts doing the Projects like Chimera and Steelpony. Then. . .” I knocked one gem and it fell against the next, which fell against the next, and then whole pile was tumbling over.

“Yeah. Now you know how I feel about Goldenblood.”

“So what happened to him in the end? Wasn’t he removed from being director?”

“Suspended. Luna found out something she didn’t like. I don’t know what, but it caused a major shakeup. Still, I don’t think even Luna realized just how much power he had at that point. I know that Horse might have been in charge, but the entire O.I.A. still went through Goldenblood and Hoofington. No pony wanted to touch him. He knew too many secrets. Had too much leverage. Then, finally, he was arrested for treason.”

“Treason?” I gasped.

He nodded gravely. “No pony knew the details. It didn’t matter, though. The next day, the bombs fell. Canterlot was consumed by the Pink Cloud. Goldenblood probably died in his cell.” He flicked away a diamond with an expression of ‘good riddance’. I frowned up at him. This wasn’t quite what I expected. This wasn’t anger. There was something else to this.

“Spike, why are you really upset with Goldenblood?” He gave me a sharp look, and I was reminded that I was on the wrong side of Spike on the food chain to press questions. “Please. Tell me. I think that Goldenblood might have done something in Hoofington. Something that’s not over.”

Spike looked at me for a long moment, then let out another sigh. “Dragons aren’t exactly real big on family. Twilight raised me, and I loved her like a mother. She tried to teach me right from wrong. I grew up surrounded by mares, and don’t get me wrong- they were my dearest friends too. There was just one little thing missing.”

I thought of my own upbringing. Funny. Three weeks ago, I never would have thought of it. “No father?”

“Yeah. Not a lot of guys in Ponyville were real keen on hanging out with a baby dragon. Oh, there were Big Macintosh and Angel Bunny. Snips and Snails. But yeah. Not a lot of guys.” He sat up and put his elbows on his knees, cupping his chin in his claws. “You know how I said I originally cozied up with the O.I.A. to find some dirt on Goldenblood?” I nodded, and he sighed. “Well, over time, it sort of changed. I’d never really spent a lot of time around a guy like him. I told you how scary smart he was? Well, that didn’t wow me much. Twilight was smarter. But he was also... strong. Determined. Focused. As much as I resented how he created the ministries, he was also the closest thing I ever had to a father.”

“He told me once that a stallion had to devote himself to an idea and, whatever that idea was, it would shape him for the rest of his life. Like a virtue, it would define you.

Build you into the person you are. It didn't matter if that idea was good or bad, so long as a guy stuck to it at all costs." The dragon looked back towards the depths of the cavern. "Sometimes, when I get lonely, or frustrated, or just tired of this. . . I think of that. I think of what it means to be a guy. That I have to remain true to this. And even though I hate him a bit. . . at the same time, I can't hate him completely. I've tried, but I just can't do it."

He sighed and shook his head. "The last thing he ever said to me, the night before he was arrested, was how proud he was that I protected the secret. That I kept the vigil. He was proud of me. I don't know if he was just lying to me or if he meant it, but I still feel it inside."

"Well. You should be proud," I said. "I think that, through it all, you've tried your best to stay true to Twilight and what she tried to do here." I immediately brightened as I pointed a hoof at him. "In fact, why can't you be the Element of Loyalty? I'm sure you'd make a great Rainbow Dash!"

He blinked and waved his hands at me. "Oh, no! There's no way I'm going to try impersonating her again! It didn't end well the first time and it won't end well now," he said firmly, but then chuckled. "But thanks for the thought."

"No problem. So. . ." I looked at the mouth of the cave. "I guess I should get back to my friends. I'm going to have to kiss Glory's hooves bigtime when I see her. And there'll probably be some groveling involved. Tears." I sighed, looking around the cave. "I don't suppose I could hang out here for a few years, could I? Just as an option?"

"Go find your friends, Blackjack. I know they're worried sick," he said with a sigh. "I'd fly you, but after leaving once, I'm positive the Enclave is on high alert for me to leave again. I won't be able to go out for a good long while."

Oh. Great. That just left me on the top of a really high mountain. Fortunately, the inebriation was making me feel a little less ooggly about the prospect than usual. He must have seen my face, because he chuckled. "Don't worry. There's a path. I've got a few connections with ponies across the Wasteland to bring me food and fresh gems in exchange for info. Just hug the side of the mountain."

"Sure. Right. Sounds like a blast." I trotted up to him. "Thanks, Spike. For everything. For showing me something better."

"You're a good pony, Blackjack," he said as he stroked my mane with a clawtip. "I know you don't feel it, or see it, or believe it, but you are." I hugged his claw tightly,

being careful not to cut myself. I'd only had mom for a family, but now I had an inkling of what it meant to have a big brother, too.

'A trail down' was something of an exaggeration. At times, the trail was simply a ledge with a cliff rising on one side and a void plunging down the other. Only my inebriation kept my stomach from completely unloading as I picked my way down. I came to a gap in the trail and peeked down. Aw, buck me, was that a river down there? All the way down there?

From this high, I could see forever. Well, no, not forever, but it sure seemed like it. It felt like I was close enough to the cloud ceiling to reach up and touch it...which, actually, was pretty much the case. Grays and sickly green and browns stained the landscape below like the hide of a rotting corpse.

Yet instead of the usual depression creeping in, I remembered that it could be better. Because of Twilight Sparkle. And Spike. LittlePip and the mysterious Stable Dweller.

For the first time in a while, I felt glad to be out here. I just wished I could have had a better look at the stars. Even though the cave was above the Enclave's cloud ceiling, there was a higher layer of thin cloud that not only blocked the moon and the dimmer stars but spread the moonlight out and made even the brighter stars difficult to pick out. Still... the rainbow halo the clouds gave the moon had been one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. If I could've stayed up there forever...

But I still had my friends to meet up with... copious apologies to make... a brain that was slowly breaking down... possibly a really big bounty on my head... old plots that were still doing plot stuff... Enclave plagues... I cast one last look at the path behind me running up into the cloud ceiling, took another long pull off my bottle of Buckweiser, and tried to set my mind firmly ahead.

"First... just got to do this." I muttered as I looked at the gap. I could imagine a little pony singing in my head that all I needed was a hop, skip and jump. "Right... so... a hop..." Really, it was more of a step. "...a skip..." A second step. "And a..." Don't look down! So of course I looked down, my eyes widening as I plunged to my death!

Or not. My forehooves landed on the far side of the gap. I heard an orange pony groan softly in the back of my mind. Okay, more voices in my head, but, on the other hoof, still a head to have voices in. Not plunging to my death. But now what?

Missiles make everything easier.

The rocket streaked from above, and my legs kicked me across the gap as it exploded behind me. The blast knocked me horn over heels and smacked me into the ledge on the far side. I lay there, upside down, as two suits of black Enclave power armor landed on my ledge while a third remained hovering above us. “Damn it, Boomer! Can’t question her if she’s blown to pieces,” yelled the leader through her helmet.

“Right. Saves us all the yappin’,” muttered the buck beside her.

“Till command asks why we used up a missile!”

I chuckled as I fell over, then pushed myself upright and sat there against the stone. I looked right at the mare who had more fiddly bits on her armor; I took her as the one in charge. “You’re coming with us. We got questions bout that dragon in thair.” I slowly rose to my hooves, laughing.

“Uh. . . why is she laughing?” the buck beside her asked. “Is she. . . drunk, Twister?”

I levitated out my last bottle of Buckweiser and popped the cap with my magic, tucking it in my pocket as I stared right at the pair. “Yup.” I said as I took a swig off the bottle and pulled out my shotgun. “I think I’m just about there.” The three stiffened, but then I started to eject the shells one after the next and put them in my saddlebags.

“Right,” the lead mare said as she watched me unload the weapon. “You drop your guns and come along peacefully and there won’t be no trouble. Just want ta ask ya a few questions.”

“Oh. . . I don’t really think so.” I said as I stared at them and started loading the orange-banded shells. “You want to know what’s really funny, though. If you’d pulled this. . . mmm. . . an hour ago. . . I probably would have gone along without a fuss.” A normal, smart pony would probably have shot me right now. But I had my shootiest look going, staring at the trio like I was the one who’d ambushed them.

“Yer twigged,” the mare muttered, and I laughed even more.

“Oooh, just a bit.” I said with a grin.

“There’s three of us and one of you! And yer not in power armor! And ye’v only got a shotgun! Stand down, mare. I won’t be askin’ a second time.”

“Maybe if you’ve got six more waiting, I’d be worried,” I said as I racked a round into the chamber. “But right now, I got my gun, my beer, a fire in my belly, and a grin on

my face and there's not a mother fucking pony in the Wasteland who can stop me!"

"Right," she drawled, unimpressed. "Sunset." The hovering mare's gatling energy rifles started to spin.

But it was already too late for them.

I leapt straight at Twister as I slipped into S.A.T.S. for one special attack and one standard, and as time resumed the beer bottle was flung end over end to smash across Sunset's visor and coat it in sudsy froth. She reared back, her shots going high and blasting a crater field into the wall behind me as my second attack sent an explosive shell straight into the leader's face. Her beam rifles flashed over me as smoking rock rained down on all of us. With a final leap, I slid between the pair and fired a third shot; but what I'd intended to be a gut shot on the leader simply blasted her scorpion tail.

Oh. By the way, did I mention this was taking place on a ledge?

My hooves scrabbled on the gravel as my rear end slipped over the edge. Boomer stabbed his tail at me wildly, the sharpened spike sparking off the stone. I stretched out my left hoof, gritting my teeth as the spike smashed hard into the reinforced casing of Marmalade's PipBuck. The powered armor lifted me right into the air and nearly jerked my leg out of its socket. I blasted the end of his articulated tail, bouncing once and rolling to my feet.

"Look out," the leader mare said, blood in her eyes as red beams of magic tried to turn me into barbecued pony as I charged at Boomer. Sunset, her visor cleared, strafed me with rapid-fire disintegration bolts; I'd have to deal with that lickety split.

You know. I was discovering a new fondness for missiles.

I shoved hard against Boomer as I snapped out my dragon claw. There was no doubt the articulated black armor was tough stuff. With the exception of the visors and the extremities, I didn't really have much that would chew through it without a lot of sustained fire. However, there was one particular part of that armor that was just covered with reinforced rubber and waste collection systems. Tough stuff. . .

My claw was tougher.

I slid in close, using him as cover from the leader, then jabbed the claw hard against his nethers. "You'll be the third male I've gelded if you don't shoot the flier with a missile right now!"

Boomer froze. "Ah. . . ah. . ." I wiggled the tip. "Aw, shit. . . Ah'm sorry, Sunset!"

“What?” the hovering mare asked blankly before he sent a rocket right up into her chest. The missile exploded and sent her arching over the gap to land with a crash on the far side.

“Boomer, you idjit!” The leader shouted in rage, and there was a blast and her red beam struck my dragon claw squarely. In a flash, the weapon was reduced to sizzling chunks of bone. “Take her down or ah’ll shoot your jewels m’self!”

“Ah’m tryin’!” he shouted as he shoved me away, but I’d swapped back to my shotgun and was blasting at his wing guards and weapons now. The leader had taken to the air; her weapons were far more accurate at range than my shotgun.

But not much more than my rifle.

In S.A.T.S. I targeted her head. Two rounds would probably do it. Be kind... Except... if I killed her, it would probably make even more trouble for Spike. They already had questions for him. I cancelled the two shots and placed one on each of her beam rifles instead. Luck was with me; the armor piercing rounds I’d loaded in the print shop tore right through the delicate magical weapon components.

Boomer was turning to face me as he loaded another missile, but once more I was running. My barding smoked from the beam impacts, but at least I wasn’t smoking as I jumped on top of him and put two rounds straight through one of his wing guards and into the feathered appendage.

That was when the leader swooped in and tackled me. In a second, we were over a very long drop as my legs wrapped around her. “Gotcha!” She laughed. I had to admit, she had very pretty lilac eyes.

Then I pressed the shotgun against her head.

“Ya’ll can’t be that crazy!” she shouted as her eyes went wide. “Ya’ll die too!”

Yes, and the thought of plummeting hundreds or thousands of feet to a very squishy end sent a very familiar fear screaming in my head. However, at this exact moment, the alcohol and the high I rode took that fear, tied it up, tossed it in the back closet of my mind, and beat it into submission with rubber hoses. “Me? I’ve had cyberponies blast me with artillery! I’ve been shot in the back by zebra snipers and taken an armor piercing round through my skull! I’ve had my face attacked by almost every single pony I call a close and personal friend! I’ve had boats dropped on me! Don’t you tell me what will and won’t kill me!” I shouted in her face as I grinned from ear to ear. “You hear me?”

“Yer fucking loco!”

I jammed the gun hard into her temple. “Do you fucking hear me!?” I roared even louder, wondering if I could use her like a parachute.

She must have seen it in my eyes. “Yes!” she yelled.

“Then fly your ass east, right now!” I said, and then glanced back at all the nothing underneath me. You know, for being beaten with hoses, that fear was still mighty loud. “And get me on your back, damnit!” Please!

What took Spike all of two minutes took Twister almost an hour. For the longest time, all she’d give me was her name and a string of numbers, followed by a colorful collection of expletives about my sexual habits, breeding, health, and weight. She only once touched on the subject of my mother, which resulted in the connection of my shotgun butt against her skull and a short fall before she regained enough consciousness to fly.

After several dozen assorted questions, I got around to asking, “So messing with the V.C. isn’t bad enough, and now Thunderhead’s sending ponies to spy on dragons?”

“I ain’t no Dunderhead!” she swore, then cursed herself as we flew low. I might even survive a fall from this low; I’d break every bone in my body, but I might survive.

“You’re not from Thunderhead?” I said in surprise.

“Do I look like I’m one o’ them fancy prancin’ cloudhumpers?” she replied crossly. Honestly, if they weren’t ghouls or Glory... “Thunderheaders are half a feather above surface scum in my book.”

Really? Wasn’t this interesting... “Well, so glad to meet a better class of Enclave. So where are you from?”

“Won’t mean nothing to ya,” she drawled as she glared back at me.

“No harm in telling me, then,” I countered as we approached Star Point.

“Neighvarro,” she replied after several seconds. “You mind telling me what you and the dragon were yapping about?”

I thought about it and then shrugged. “He was helping me out with a problem.”

“Problem?”

“Yeah. I got a lot of ponies killed. Hit me hard. He was helping me get through it. He’s nice like that. You really should leave him alone.”

“Nice?” she snorted, “That dragon torched one of us for trying to take a fugitive into custody. Don’t you tell me how nice he is.”

I laughed, “Wait, you tried to take something from a dragon’s lair?” Even I wasn’t that stupid.

She glanced back at me, her lavender ears reddening. “Well, yeah!”

“Right. Good, call. Be glad only one of you got toasted. He probably could have killed all of you.” I pointed out, and she clearly didn’t like it.

“Ain’t nothing you’d understand,” she muttered.

“Maybe not. But I was in security in my stable. So I’m sorry. I know how bad it hurts to lose your own.” And I could still hear that word and smell that smell as if I were still there. I wondered if I always would. Then I adopted a lighter tone, “Still, I got to admit that I am just burning up with curiosity about your problem with Thunderhead. Because they’ve really got my hate too, and it seems damned stupid for us to fight each other.”

“Yer a surfer. I ain’t allowed to talk to ya bout nothing,” she muttered stubbornly. “Got to keep our own safe and sound.”

“Believe it or not, I understand that better than you know. Security, remember?” I said as she finally touched down on the rock. I slipped off her. “Thunderhead operative Lighthooves created a plague that infected my stable. Turned them all into raiders. I had to put them down myself,” I said softly as I found Vigilance amid the rocks and lifted it.

“You. . . what?” Her eyes widened in shock. “Yer lying!”

I stared right into her eyes. “Tell me I’m lying again.” And as I stared into her eyes, I thought of Midnight’s scream. I thought of limp foals lying on the atrium floor. I thought of that horrible smell. But, as much as it hurt, I didn’t feel that hollowness inside. She looked away quickly and I took a slow breath, opening a Sparkle-Cola and taking a sip. “Anyway, you should probably get going.” I said as I unslung Taurus’ rifle.

“Why? So you can shoot me in the back?” she asked in alarm, her eyes narrowing.

“No. Because I’m seeing red bars. Lots and lots of red bars.” I said with a swallow as I lifted the rifle and looked through the scope. Through the darkness and spitting rain I picked out a leonine form and stinger tail amid the stunted and dead trees. “Manticores.”

“Manticores?” She said in alarm as she shielded her eyes from the rain. “Damned Hoofintun sky piss. . .” she spotted them without the scope, backing away in alarm a little, “What are critters like that doing out here?”

“Following me, I bet,” I muttered. No sign of the monsterpony that controlled them. “Well, take care. Have a good one. You held up your end of the bargain.” I swept the rifle back and forth, looking for a skull to perforate.

“You’re just going to stay here and die alone?” she goggled at me.

“Well, you could stay and I’ll have company. Your armor is trashed and those manticores can fly. It’s me they want. Not you.” I muttered as I glanced back at her.

But she was looking at me funny. Like she wasn’t sure if I were crazy, something else, or both. “Can you buy me time?”

“Possibly? For what?”

“Let me get some scrap metal, and my armor will make repairs. I’ll need a few minutes, though,” she said as she opened up a panel on her forehoof similar to a PipBuck.

Well, any stable in a storm. . . “Right. I’ll try and leave some for you.”

She snorted and smirked. “You better.”

I ran towards the woods, hovering the rifle to my left and the shotgun to my right. Sure, it looked bad ass, but I doubt anypony would be impressed with my aim. I found a nice picnic bench, rested the hunting rifle on some boxes of junk, and took sight. Two manticores roared and broke free from the group, bouncing across the uneven ground as the claws scraped off the stone. S.A.T.S. let me line one of them up perfectly. One, two, three rounds in its skull, and the leonine monster staggered and fell to the side, unmoving.

One down, a lot to go. I swapped targets and guns, my focus lining up a shot from the hip. The explosive slug fired, but lacking a hard surface refused to detonate, just slammed the monster back and stopped it in its tracks. I wasted four more before the beast went down.

And the rest were coming. As quickly as I could, I swapped the explosive rounds for buckshot and loaded a magazine of hollowpoints into the rifle. I started backing up, firing with the rifle till they were close enough for a pounce and then swapping to the shotgun. There was no finesse in this, no elegance. Simply firing and moving as quickly as I could and not letting the giant felines pounce. If I’d had a wide open

area I'd have been fine.

My butt hit a rock at the exact moment one pounced. I blasted twice with the shotgun. . . and the third time I heard the sickening sound of it firing on an empty chamber. Its forelegs sunk two heavy claws into my shoulders and it opened its mouth wide to chomp my head off. My eyes went wide as I stared into its wide mouth.

Three magical bullets exploded right down its throat. The monster vomited hot blood over me, and then slumped against me. My horn throbbed with the sudden release of magic. Unfortunately, I was still pinned by the heavy body as I struggled to shake the claws out of my barding. Two more were racing at me. How many rounds were in the rifle? Two?

I brought out Vigilance and opened fire. The heavy twelve millimeter rounds bit deep into the massive monsters, enough to hold them at bay for a few precious seconds as I struggled to free myself. The second I ran out. . .

Even with Vigilance's expanded magazine, it went through ten rounds far too quickly. The less injured of the two pounced.

Shit. I wasn't going to have a chance to grovel before Glory. . .

Find out what the other Projects were or where EC-1101 was going...

Have a chance to find the other elements...

Have really great make up sex with Glory. . .

"Fuck that!" I screamed in furious defiance as I smacked the manticore across its face with Vigilance while thrashing my way free of the corpse. It didn't have to kill the monster, just distract it. A few more seconds.

I pushed myself free, shoving the body aside as I tried to summon a few more magic bullets. They weren't nearly as effective as the first volley, but they still blasted holes in the manticore's hide. Finally, the combination of pistol rounds and magic bullets dropped the beast in a heap.

Unfortunately, there was one more and I had three unloaded weapons and a horn that was shot and three seconds between now and the moment the remaining manticore tore my head off. It leapt at me, claws extended and spittle spraying in a glistening arc as the beast prepared to rend my flesh.

Then crimson beams flashed past me, the light striking it and transforming it into a glowing gray statue that exploded in a cloud of ash. Stepping onto the rock above me, Twister shouted in glee, "Yeehawww! Bring it, you flyin' pussies!"

With her momentarily drawing their attention, I reloaded Vigilance and my shotgun. She played the crimson beams at range while I moved in for close and messy work. The remaining manticores scattered and disappeared back into the woods. My strength gave out as the adrenaline faded. “Well, thanks for the assist there.”

“T’weren’t nuthin’,” she replied, and my mane crawled at the tone in her voice. “Couldn’t let an intelligence asset get killed.” The hum of two charged beam rifles purred behind me.

I let out a long, low sigh. “Why is nothing ever easy?” I said as I lifted Vigilance, turning it over before me. “I help Flank... turns out they were looking to sell me out. I try and help my stable... then I have to kill my stable. I spare you and your friends, and you want to shoot me in the back.”

“You don’t understand, you idjit. When you made me fly down here you exposed me to sky knows what. My own team might shoot me on sight rather than let me expose ‘em to whatever crawling plagues and diseases are down here. And the Dunderheads would just hang me for a spy. I want to get back, I’ll need something that’ll put me through decon rather than put a bullet through my brain. I got to take you back with me.” I knew that desperate tone. I’d shared it myself on more than one occasion.

“You won’t get contaminated so long as you don’t eat contaminated ponies or food,” I said matter-of-factly as I stood and holstered my weapons. “The Volunteer Corps seems to operate just fine.” When they’re not sending their own ponies on suicide missions to give peace offerings to raiders.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously as I started walking away.

“Going to meet my friends,” I replied.

“You idjit! I’ll blast you!” She blustered, and I turned to face her.

“Mhmmm,” I replied blandly. “And I’m sure they’ll be willing to decon-whatever you when you come back with a bottle of ashes.” That made her mouth work soundlessly before her lilac eyes narrowed.

“Well, if I’m fucked either way...” she began.

“You can be stupid and try to kill me for some petty revenge,” I said, staring into her eyes and making her balk. “Or you can come with me, and I’ll introduce you to some ponies who might be able to help you.”

“I... you...” she licked her lips, looking around as if some other option might mag-

ically appear. Finally she stomped her hooves hard. “Tarnation, this ain’t fuckin’ fair!”

I blinked at her and grinned, spreading my forehooves wide as I laughed, “Welcome to Hoofington!”

I had to admit, I felt a little bit guilty about Twister’s predicament, but it was her Enclave’s stupid rules and paranoia that had grounded her here. It’d taken about five minutes of weeping, hoofstomps, and shooting manticore corpses before she finally realized that, either way, she was fucked. She could try and go back and get shot for her troubles, stay with me, or kill me and be stuck down here alone and really fucked. I took the time to harvest manticore venom sacs. They were the only part that seemed to have some value.

Once more I was riding her through the air, keeping an eye out for more of the flying beasts. She alternated between cursing and flying silently. We managed to reach Pony Joe’s before she finally put down for a breather.

I swept the inside, but it was still clear and clean. “So. Mind if I ask you something?” “Shut up. I’m busy bein’ pissed right now,” she drawled.

“Yeah, I know. But you can be pissed and educational,” I replied softly, stifling a yawn. “You’re not a Thunderhead pegasus... I got that. So... why are you so pissed off at them?”

She looked at the café sullenly before she shrugged, “They think they’re so special... like prancing artistoponies or some shit. Ain’t a pegasus outside Thunderhead that don’t hate them something fierce.” That surprised me. From the way Glory made it sound, the rest of the Enclave should be thankful.

“Look. Enclave is a whole passel of towns trying to do our best to survive. We do what we got to do to protect our own. Always have. Always will,” she said, and added without bitterness, “Even if we gotta cut off one of our own to do it.” I guess idiotic levels of loyalty weren’t just a Glory thing. “But it ain’t easy. You probably don’t realize it, but clouds ain’t exactly the best place ta grow crops. One mistake in management or just an unlucky equipment breakdown, and a town can face some hardship pretty quick. But we pull together and help our own.”

“And Dunderheads don’t help no pony at t’all,” she said grimly.

“I don’t really follow.”

She sighed. “When the bombs fell, what we had is what we got. You ever try and get a gun ta work without fail for two centuries? Ain’t happenin’. And gems don’t grow in the sky. But Thunderhead had something none o’ the rest of us did: Shadowbolt Tower.” At my blank look, she sighed, “Dirt ponies don’t know nuthin. . .”

“Back durin the war, Hoofintun was the biggest target in all o’ Equestria. More so then even Canterlot, it seemed. There was something here that really twigged them zebra off. So when Rainbow Dash founded the Shadowbolts, their primary base was here. Shadowbolt Tower. Fuckin’ city was building like crazy, and they took the Awesome hub and just kept building higher and higher. Said they were going to build clear to the moon.”

“That. . . sounds about right,” I muttered, remembering ‘Hoofington Rises’.

“Yeah, well, when the bombs fell, the Tower stood. It was so damn high that the top levels weren’t irradiated. It had all sorts of magical fabrication equipment. Arms stores. Weapons. A fuckin’ treasure trove. But that wasn’t the most important part. Shadowbolt Tower had something nowhere else in the clouds did.”

I thought for a moment, and then caught her staring at my horn. “Unicorns? Of course! Unicorns.” After all, Minty Fresh had been working with them.

“Mhmmm.” She nodded slowly. “The tower’s arcane science and technical staff pretty much all made it to the top of the tower before they died from the radiation. And they’ve been helping Thunderhead ever since. A fertilization talisman burns out? A unicorn can fix it. Need new beam weapons? A unicorn can make it. Clouddamned hornheads keep Thunderhead sitting pretty.”

“But. . . they’re still a member of the Enclave, right?”

“Technically,” she said with such disgust that I doubted it was more than a formality. “To listen to them, they’re the most important member. But the thing is, they don’t just help the rest of us. Heck no. They’ll trade talismans for favors. Extra food for favors. Technical assistance for favors. All them favors add up to a right comfy lifestyle for them and a downright shitty deal for the rest of us.”

“So why doesn’t the Enclave do something about them?”

“Tried.” She huffed softly. “Nearly went to war to take the Tower. Don’t know the details at t’all. . . it was my grandma’s time. Finally, there was an agreement made. Thunderhead disarmed, agreed it wouldn’t have firepower greater than them vertibuck contraptions. No raptors or nothing, and they’d provide parts and technical

assistance, and Thunderhead got to keep its unicorns and a no fly zone from the rest of the Enclave. They're the most independent group of featherbrains in the clouds and don't give a shit about the rest of their own kind."

I recalled just how angry Glory got at the idea of disloyalty. If she felt that way as a Thunderhead pegasus, I could start to imagine just how furious the rest of the Enclave was. "So wait. If Thunderhead disarmed, why not just take it anyway?"

"There's this little thing called honor. Look it up," she said dryly. "But besides the treaty, I don't know. Times are damned strained right now though. Hell, half of us were watching the dragon and the other half were watching the Dunderheads. Now they're pulling this Volunteer crap, violating some of our most basic rules and laws. All 'cause they can." She tapped her hooves on the tabletop. "It ain't gonna end well."

I had to agree with that. "Any chance your folks will come for you?" She looked at me in confusion. "I mean, are they really just going to leave you here?"

She definitely didn't like thinking of this. "If it was anywhere else, I'd probably be tracked down, extracted, questioned, and hopefully put in decon. And you'd be questioned," she added, reminding me we weren't exactly on happy-happy terms. "Unfortunately, I'm a Neighvarro pony in the no-fly zone and now everything's political. If the Dunderheads got their hooves on me..." she suddenly blinked. "Oh, horseapples."

"What?" I blinked and rose to my hooves. "Can they track you?"

"I gotta get this off me. I got to get out of here right now! They're probably on their way!" Twister shouted as she started to disconnect the seals of her armor.

"Can't you just deactivate whatever they track you with?" I asked, wondering how the hay anypony was supposed to get in and out of that getup.

"Maybe. The transponder's there," she said as she reached back and opened a panel on her flank. "I honestly didn't expect to ever find somepony with such skills though. Where'd you learn Enclave power armor maintenance?" she asked as I moved to her side. She blinked as I loaded a round into the shotgun.

The blast of buckshot knocked her right off her hooves with a shower of magical sparks, sending her rolling across the aisle. "I didn't." I confessed as she lay there groaning. "You okay?"

"Dirt ponies... suck..." she groaned.

“Yeah. Did it work?” I asked as I looked at the smoking arcane devices. It sure smelled disabled.

“You almost took off my leg, you idjit.” She groaned as she stood and looked back at the wreckage. “Yeah, but we got to move. Thunderhead probably already sent a team the second we left that point. Can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner. All this damn dirt’s making me stupid,” she said as she started for the door.

“What will they do?” I asked, and she gave me a scared look back. “They wouldn’t kill you, would they?”

“Dunno. Every Enclave pony ‘recovered’ by Thunderhead ain’t right afterwards. I don’t wanna find out,” she replied nervously as she looked around. Something knocked faintly against the roof; it wasn’t much of a noise, but we were both jittery and my mane was itching like crazy.

“Quick, out the back!” I shouted, and we rushed to the back door. I nearly tripped in astonishment; one of the bulbous, armored Vertibucks has hanging directly overhead; it must have bumped the building while coming in. Any second now, pegasus soldiers would come spilling out the rear hatch. If they didn’t decide to just use the autocannons.

I sprinted for the trees, jumped the ditch running along the side of the donut shop, and ran into the dead woods as Twister glided almost even with the ground in front of me. We put a few dozen more trees between us and them. Twister paused and canted her head. “They’re broadcasting for me to come out. Says they’re here to extract me.” She spat to the side. “In a pig’s eye.”

“Does your armor have an Eyes Forward Sparkle?” I asked, looking up.

“Yup.” Great. So an errant glance in our direction would give us away. Now we really had to get moving! “Leastways it does when the visor’s not all shot up,” she added, looking at me sharply.

“You were trying to arrest me,” I countered.

“You were dealing with that dragon,” she snorted.

I rolled my eyes as I ducked under a branch. “It was just a friendly visit. ‘Hi. How are you. Nice gems you have here.’ That’s all,” I said with a smile.

She looked at me sharply, “Oh, yeah. Just bein’ neighborly with yer local dragon?”

“What, I should be a jerk to something that can eat me?” I countered. “I might be stupid, but I’m not that dumb.” Then a red beam lanced down so close to the front

of my nose that I nearly went crosseyed looking at it. “Not smart enough to shut up and keep running, though!” I shouted as I pulled out Taurus’ rifle and hit S.A.T.S. Three rounds to the head. . . and I bucked my dumb ass brain for forgetting I had hollowpoints loaded. The rounds shattered off the armor.

Her crimson beams were definitely more effective as the Thunderhead Enclave peeled off out of her line of fire, their armor smoking and crackling from the damage. I loaded the rifle for more armor piercing rounds. “Damn, they’re on us now.” She glanced at me. “Only chance for you is to get out of here.”

“Not happening.”

She arched a brow skeptically. “Uh. . . you don’t owe me anything. Quit being so damn stubborn and git! I’ll fly circles around these buzzards.” Before they shoot you out of the sky, I added for her.

“I got you into the mess. If I had just shot you in the head, none of this would have happened,” I said as I tried to track one of the red bars from behind us. More red bars ahead of us. Damn, did a second Vertibuck arrive? Then I glanced over and saw her incredulous look. “Well, you’d be dead and all, but still.”

“Yer one twigged mare,” she chuckled as she strafed the sky.

Then I frowned. Knot of Enclave behind us. . . but. . . I raised the scope in time to see a raggedy pelt, leonine fangs, and a scorpion tail through the trees. “New plan! Back to Pony Joes!”

“Plan? How you figger that’s a plan?” She asked in bafflement. “That’s not a plan! It’s a direction!”

I fired the rifle, aiming for the manticore’s flank. It let out a roar that was echoed by the rest of its kin. Meanwhile, I was running straight for the Thunderhead Enclave behind us. “See? Plan!” I laughed as the beasts closed in.

The whole pride (Or flock. . . whatever!) of manticores was fast on our heels. Twister stared at me in wild eyed amazement. “You’re plum loco is what you are!” The Thunderhead Enclave seemed to share the sentiment as they stared at us racing past. Then the snarling, stinging beasts were upon them. The animals seemed to take particular aggravation with the Vertibuck, latching on with their claws and scratching at the armor in an attempt to get at the pegasi within.

With both enemies more interested in shooting at each other, we raced south towards Megamart.

“That was insane. Absolutely crazy,” Twister said as we trotted towards the overpass between us and Megamart.

My treacherous body was already giving me a doozy of a headache; oh, alcohol, why must you hurt me so? “It worked, didn’t it?” I asked with a shrug.

“You could of got us shot. Or ate. Or shot while getting ate!” she pointed out crossly.

I smiled and shrugged. “Yeah. But I didn’t. Things just sort of work out. . . or they don’t.” And I do my best to live with the mistakes. . . . The really big and terrible mistakes. My whole body shuddered with the force of my yawn. “Sweet Celestia, I’m tired. I need a few hours sleep or a few more bottles of Buckweiser.”

“Is this life on the ground?” she asked as she looked at the stunted and gnarled trees.

“This your first time down here?” I asked her.

She looked a little sheepish and nodded.

I sighed and gave a wistful little smile, “Pretty much. The Wasteland breeds trouble like radroaches. And Hoofington breeds them like bloatsprites on a dead pony. Thing is. . . I’ve also come across things so beautiful they almost hurt. Like the sound of a church full of children singing. Or seeing slaves freed from bondage. That really struck me. Or finding a pony’s personal treasure two hundred years after they died.” I saw her looking at me oddly and smiled a little. “I know, it sounds a little bit corny, but if the Wasteland was nothing but pain and suffering, eventually you’d get numb to it all. It has just enough good to be worth fighting for.”

And to really make you feel the horrible parts.

I yawned again and put on DJ Pon3. Pretty soon, I’d be sleepwalking at this rate. There was a crackle, and suddenly an old buck cackled around us, making my whole body shiver. “She’s getting awfully big, Mari. Who’s a big pony? Yes she is! Yes she is!”

What the hay? I looked at the PipBuck screen; in my stupor I’d loaded the other audio note from the recorder I’d found on Star Point.

“Unca Hoss! Hat Unca Hoss! Hat! Pleeeeeze!” a filly squealed.

The old buck chuckled softly. “Here you go, Tarot.”

“Now be careful. That hat’s as old as your uncle Hoss.”

There was an old chuckle, “An’ nearly as tough, too. Don’t worry none, Mari.” There was a squeal of joy that faded a little as a filly sang, ‘I gots a haa-aat!’ The old buck asked quietly, “How are you holding together?”

“Day by day, like everypony, I imagine,” Marigold said softly. “I keep waking in the middle of the night thinking that we missed the signal and we’re going to die. I feel as if, any second, something terrible will happen. Everypony is telling us to get into the city. That the spell shields will keep the bombs out. . . but I can’t leave Star House. Tarot loves it there.”

“Spell shields?”

“Horse installed them. One of his first ‘projects’ as the new director.” She snorted scornfully, “I hope they work, but Horse’s grandstanding isn’t doing anypony any good.”

“Mmmm. . . well, give an idjit some power and watch him turn into a mule.” Old Hoss grumbled. “You still working on your book?”

“Yes, I picked up this recorder. Army surplus, not pretty, but as least I don’t have to worry about Tarot accidentally breaking it when she plays ‘Star Rangers’. She loves that show. . .” there was a pause and a little sniff and a sob. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“This stupid war’s getting in the way of living,” Hoss muttered.

Fortunately, Tarot hadn’t seemed to notice as she shrieked “Oh noes, it’s a horn eating monster. Eeeee! Momma! It’s eating my horn!” A pause. “Momma. . . it’s eating my horn.”

“Oh? Oh! Ahem. . .” Marigold cleared her throat. “Evil horn eating monster! Star Ranger Mommy will stop you!” Tarot giggled in glee as Marigold made zapping noises. “Are you okay, Miss Junior Star Ranger?”

“Yes, Star Ranger Mommy!” she said with a giggle. “Common Star Ranger Hat! Let’s explore for cookies!” With a wooshing noise Tarot ran off.

“Landsakes. In my day it was Ponies versus Buffalo. I was always the buffalo. . .” He mused.

“She probably did that just for me. All this fighting. . . it’s even getting to Tarot a little bit. She doesn’t know why I’m upset, but she knows I am.”

“You should see a physician, Marigold,” Old Hoss said softly. “Yer way too young ta

be driving yerself crazy like this.” He chuckled and added, “Of course, once ya get to my age everything turns out ta be a case of ‘old.’”

Marigold laughed softly, mirthlessly. “I can’t. You’ve heard the stories of how they’re handling cases of War Fatigue. Memory wipes. Drugs. Other spells. I can’t risk anything happening to Tarot. She’s everything to me now.” There was a soft sigh. “Funny, considering she’s not mine.”

“You’re her momma. You clean up after her, see she gets fed, and worry about her night and day. If that ain’t a momma, dunno what is.” He hesitated, hemming a little before he asked softly, “Has her first momma. . . .”

“No. I don’t know who she is, and if Fluttershy did what she said she did, I doubt her real momma knows she even is a mother.” Marigold let out a sad sigh. “She’ll never know what a wonderful child she gave up.”

“Yer a peach, Marigold. . . .”

“Sometimes though. . . I wonder. . . .”

“You can’t have regrets, Mari.”

“No, not regrets. I just wonder. . . what would have happened if her mother had kept her? Would I have gone into space again? Would the rocket program have kept going? Would things be different?” Marigold sighed softly. “I didn’t anticipate being a mother. Just being pregnant was scary enough. I thought that. . . I’d have her and that would be that. I never imagined just how much she means to me.”

“Heh. Like I used to tell Missus Hoss back in the cave pony days, we love ‘em so much so we don’t put them on a spit and eat ‘em!”

They shared a laugh. Then there was a shrill beeping. “Oh no. . . .” she murmured. “My stable pass is active. But 90 is all the way past Flankfurt! It will take us hours to get there by hoof!”

“Now relax, Marigold. It’s probably just a drill,” he said comfortingly. “They’ve been testing the system all month.” But neither of them talked as the pass continued to go off, an annoying little beep that went on and on while Tarot played.

But it wasn’t a drill. From the direction of the city came the long low wail of a siren. It rose and fell, echoing out over the countryside in a faint, ghostly call. It was a herald of doom as the pass beeped continuously. “Momma... I don’t like this, Momma...” Tarot whimpered in the voice of a child who still had faith in their mother to do anything. Minute after minute crawled by, the dread deepening.

Then we heard it. From the recording came the sound of an explosion that shook the house to its foundations. Tarot shrieked as things crashed in the background. Then a terrible silence fell. Hoss muttered breathlessly, "Miramare. They hit Miramare."

"Come on, sweetie. We have to go to the stable now... Maybe... maybe the Sunset Highway is still intact..." But there was another explosion. Then another. Another.

"Mommy. What are those lights?" Tarot said in worry. "They're scary!"

"Come here, Tarot. It'll be okay."

Old Hoss rumbled and coughed in his throat. "You have to head for the stable up on the hill. It ain't the one ya were assigned, but a pass is a pass."

"Come with us?"

"Aw, now, no sense in that, Marigold. You know it. I'm just an old buck who's stuck around to the end of things. You get that filly where she'll be safe."

"Unca Hoss! Your hat!" Tarot said in alarm.

"Keep it, hun. I don't need it anymore."

"Nuhuh! It's your hat, Unca Hoss. Your head'll get cold. No Star Ranger wants a cold!" Tarot said with a sniff. "Please, Unca Hoss. I'll wear it when I get back."

Suddenly all three of them began to cry out as if in pain, but all I could hear was a terrible silence. Then there was a distant crack and a great wind that gusted through the leaves of the trees around the farm. Distant cries and wails sounded through the night, growing and falling and building as the survivors ran through that horrible time.

Old Hoss murmured softly, "Princesses... Hoofington... what... happened...? What was that... screaming...?"

"A bomb inside the shield. They must have smuggled one inside... oh sweet Celestia..."

"You go, Marigold. Hurry. Just follow all those ponies. You see to your little one."

"Thank you."

"No regrets, Marigold. You just do better than those idjits that caused this mess."

"Goodbye," Marigold whispered. "Come on Tarot. Stay close honey. We need to get to our new home in the stable."

“Bye Unca Hoss! I’ll see you soon.”

“Luna protect us, I hope not, sweetie,” Hoss said quietly, and faintly I heard the old Buck murmur, “Guess I’ll see you soon, Smith.”

The recording turned to static before it cut out completely.

That was what it sounded like when worlds ended. One second, you’re playing Star Rangers with your foal, visiting a friend. Then you’re giving your child away to a complete stranger in the knowledge that she’d die otherwise.

I felt shivery all over. What were the odds that the bombs would drop on that day, when they were visiting the farm? If they’d been in Star house, they would have gone to the doomed Stable 90. What were the chances they’d run across Card Trick, who’d take her in as her own? What was the chance that I’d have found this recording when I was so desperate to pull the trigger?

How could I have been that much of a fucking idiot?

I’d never kill myself now. I might want to, but I’d never be able to throw away a life that was the product of those extraordinary circumstances. The odds were nothing less than miraculous. And I’d almost thrown it all away. I might have thrown away my friends in that moment of horrible weakness.

Thank you, Marigold. Hoss. Fluttershy.

“I can’t believe that’s what it was like,” Twister drawled, looking down at my PipBuck in astonishment. “I mean, we hear ‘bout the Emergency Broadcast and the Great Recall in school. . . but hearing those bombs go off. . . they talked about a scream. What was that?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, looking at the lavender Enclave pony. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Hoofington must have been packed when the bombs went off, if folks thought magic shields would keep em safe,” she mused aloud. “But it looks like the only thing that worked was closing the sky.”

“Yeah. War’s over now, though. You can open it back up again,” I muttered as more fat drops of rain started to fall.

Her ears drooped a little. “Not an option, sorry to say. We need every bit of cloud we can get for food. Sorry.” She looked out at the dreary landscape. “I never thought it’d look like this, though.”

I looked at her; this was how pegasi became Dashites. I could see the guilt on her

face; she might have thought it necessary, but she didn't think of it as right.

"Can I ask you a question?" She looked back at me coolly but curiously. "Why didn't you just fly off and leave me back at Star Point?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. "I've been out of basic for two years now," she said. "You know how much action I've seen? Zero. We fly around, do our formations, shoot target practice and play the occasional war game. And we're told it's all for our people." She took a deep breath. "Fact is that was the first fight that felt like the good fight." She kicked a muddy clod. "Like I said. Dirt's making me stupid."

Then the Enclave found us.

Fortunately, the bars were amber as one landed in front and the other behind. "Twister! We found you!" called out a mare. I looked at the scorched armor of the mare with the gatling beam rifles and the male I'd nearly cut.

"You. . ." Twister's eyes widened in shock. "You came after me?"

"Well, o'course! Couldn't leave you in the hooves of this surfacer terrorist," the buck growled, his missile launcher pointed right at me. Oh sure, he was brave now that I didn't have a razor sharp claw to his genitals. "Want me to blast her? Make sure she cooperates."

"No Boomer. She got me away from the Dunderheads," Twister muttered numbly, then shook her head hard. "But what are you three doing? We're all contaminated now!" Twister pointed out with a glare.

Sunset shrugged, a weird sight to see in power armor. "Eh. We'll say we were lookin' ta kick some Dunderhead tail. Get two weeks detention."

Boomer nodded. "Can't toss ya in a cell if we back you up, right?"

"You two idjits. . . ugh. . . I'm gonna be stuck with paperwork for a month for this. . ." She looked at me. "You're sure I'd have to eat. . . you know. . . to get sick?"

"Ask your own medics," I replied with a shrug. "But you should be fine."

"What's she talkin' 'bout?" Boomer asked, keeping that missile on me.

"Nothin', Boomer. Nothin'." She looked at me then smiled. "Well. You take care o' yerself, Blackjack. Got to say this has been a hell of a night."

From the slightly less dark and gloomy east, I could tell it was nearly morning. "Yeah. For me as well."

Megamart's guards took one look at me and opened the gate, not bothering me for caps as I stepped through. Either I was so damn scary-looking they didn't want to, or they took pity on a mare who'd been through a rough night. I didn't care. I had to find my friends now and apologize. Grovel for forgiveness.

Inside, business was oddly quiet. The vendors were moving into their booths, but their eyes slowly followed me nervously. Were my glowing eyes freaking everypony out that badly? I tried to remember where I'd left my glasses. Star Point? They were probably in the ocean by now. Where were Bottlecap and Keystone? I'd expected them coming as soon as I showed up. I headed over to the clinic where the old doctor lay back on his own operating table, snoring loudly.

"Hey. Hey Bonesaw." I nudged him hard.

He jerked upright, banged his horn against the light that dangled over the table. "Gallstones..." he swore, clenching his eyes shut as he hissed. "Clinic is open when I am! Go away."

"Bonesaw. It's me. Security?" I asked with an awkward smile.

He cracked open an eye, then the gap toothed old unicorn gasped. "You! You're here. You can't be here! They're here for you!"

I immediately focused my EFS. No red bars, yet.

"Who is? Enclave? Zodiac? Usury? Killer zebra death commandoes?" I asked as my eyes swept through the crowds.

"No... them!" He said as he pointed a hoof.

From down the aisle approached three ponies in traditional raider attire... No. That was backwards. Every raider I'd ever seen had been trying to copy this look. The confident swagger in the three mares. Tough eyed, tough hided, wearing spikes and chains. Their leather barding had the unmistakable muted hues of being ponyhide. And their weapons were top notch and well cared for. These were ponies who were ready, willing, able, and eager to kick tail and get kicked. Not out of madness, but sheer confidence.

These were Reapers.

It made sense; they couldn't all be monsterponies like Deus. He'd been a special project, connected to Sanguine through the need for his super painkiller. But I had the clear impression that these three ponies still knew a lot about fighting.

And I was about to get a first hand lesson in it.

I glanced up at Gun. The weapon was already turned towards me, as if anticipating I'd fire a shot. "I need a weapon," I said tensely, not taking my eyes off the three mares. Two of them were earth ponies; one swung a weighted chain lazily in her jaws. The second grinned around the handle of a fire axe, one without even a spot of rust upon it. But the unicorn's weapon put them all to shame. The mallet had to be nearly as long as her body, with a huge reinforced head of steel, and she floated it without the slightest bit of strain.

A scalpel floated into my line of vision.

"Thanks," I said as my magic gripped the tiny blade. I slowly trotted down the aisle towards the three.

"You're Security, right?" the unicorn asked. I was hoping she'd be fiddling with that hammer, or scornful of the tiny blade. She wasn't. I could tell they took me seriously. No taunts. No insults. They were just as serious about kicking my ass clear to Flank.

"Yeah," I said as I wondered if my magic bullets would register as gunshots to Gun.

"You're coming with us," the unicorn said as they started to spread out. This was a far cry from what I was used to: no charging in for the first hit or quick kill.

Great. "I don't think so. I just want to find my friends, beg their forgiveness, and sleep for six or seven hours." I kept looking at Chain and Axe; the earth ponies were moving more and more to flank me as I backed away. Hammermare just stayed right in front of me. "Is this about that stupid bounty? Deus is dead, Usury's gone. . . give it up!"

"Piss on my horn. . . she told us you were stupid, but I didn't expect it was this bad." Hammermare said as she turned the head of the mallet around in her magical grip. "We do this three ways. You let Cuffs lock you up nice and neat, we beat you unconscious and lock you up anyway, or we kill you. Those are your options."

"Right. . ." Well I knew this was coming. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and selected my attacks. I charged forward as my magic stabbed the scalpel right at her face. She raised a hoof, the blade drawing blood as stabbed into her forelimb. I lunged to tackle her, raising my hooves to knock that massive hammer out of the way.

Funny. I really hadn't expected her horn to be that strong. The floating haft of the hammer didn't budge an inch; instead, I was halted in place gripping it and staring stupidly down at her. She grinned even wider and the hammer shoved me away, then swung in an upward arc with an ominous hum of magic.

My only saving grace was that I got the PipBuck raised in time to prevent my face

from getting crushed. That didn't prevent the blow from knocking me clear off my hooves and bouncing me on the concrete floor once before sliding away. I shook my head, wondering if my leg or head were busted. That blow nearly took off my horn!

Then Cuffs swung her chain around my rear leg, and like that she was racing back towards Hammermare and I was being dragged along behind her. The glowing hammer lifted, the hum growing as a talisman in the head built up energy. I did the only thing I could and rolled to the side, the taut chain cutting underneath Hammermare's hooves and knocking her down atop me. We rolled as we were dragged along, kicking and biting before she finally fell away.

Cuffs didn't stop, though, as the chain-draped mare raced towards the end of the aisle. She snapped around the corner, swinging hard and I wailed as I was slammed hard into a stack of scrapped generators. Then she was off again, dragging me back towards the other two. Hammermare raised the powered mallet for another blow, and Fire Axe likewise readied the sharpened spike on the end. "Enough of this!" I shouted as I curled up and sent three magic bullets right at Cuffs' rump. One caught her square in the flank, and she staggered enough that I was able to hook my forehooves on a heap of scrap. With a jerk, the chain around my rear leg went taut and Cuffs fell to the ground. I did not like that pop in my rear knee nor the pain that radiated from it, though.

I pulled myself to my hooves, watching Hammermare charge. I shook off the chain before it could be yanked again. The bullet spell hadn't triggered Gun, but seeing how tough these three were, I wasn't sure it'd be enough to drop them. What I needed was a decent weapon!

Fortunately, Fire Axe had one.

My horn flashed, trying to twist it out of the Reaper's mouth. To my shock, she grit her teeth and fought me.

And that hesitation gave Hammermare the opening she needed. The mallet slammed into my side, and I felt several ribs snap as I once more slid all the way to Bonesaw's clinic. I opened my mouth and gasped, then coughed a mouthful of blood over the floor. The old buck stared as he backed away, not getting involved in this fight. I couldn't blame him.

But, he did have medical supplies.

"Bill me," was all I choked out before yanking open his cabinet, grabbing an ampule of gray sludge, and injecting it into my side. At once, I felt the disgusting regenerative

potion at work as the Hydra mended my ribs and did. . . whatever other damage it was doing. I chowed down a Buck and injected a Med-X for good measure before slugging down his freshest healing potions. I rose to my hooves and faced the three. My eyes felt like they were glowing like the fires of hell. "Okay! You three are between me and my friends and I am fucking sick of it!" The sensation of my knee being pulled into place made my stomach churn.

Hammermare looked a little surprised that I still had some fight in me, while Cuffs and Fire Axe backed away a few steps. I charged at the unicorn, who readied herself, hammer held parallel to the ground before her like the first time. I leapt and hooked my forehooves around the handle. As before, it didn't budge.

Which let me swing my rear legs up and smash both my rear hooves into her face with almost as much force as her mallet. She reared and fell back as I flipped in the air and grabbed the mallet from her faltering magical grip with my own magic. She had just enough presence of mind to lift her hooves and catch the hammer on them rather than her chest, but from the crack, I knew I wasn't the only pony who'd need Hydra after this fight.

Fire Axe and Cuffs didn't abandon Hammermare, though. The red earth pony swung the axe with swift and sure cuts that had me dancing back as I countered with massive blows of the heavy hammer. I wasn't quite as strong as Hammermare, but at least I was holding my own. Or at least I thought I was when Cuff's chain whipped around my throat and went taut. The chain yanked me back, making me rear up as I struggled to defend myself against Fire Axe.

The heavy metal axe head slammed against my gut and blasted the breath from me. Levitating the hammer, I swung wildly behind me. There was a dull thump as I connected with something, and the chain relaxed enough for me to suck a gasp of air. Fire Axe charged in while she still had the opportunity, but I slammed my forehooves hard against her face, knocking her to the floor.

"Hey Security! What's soaking wet and clueless?" A mare called out above me. I looked up in time to get a bucket of water, bucket included dumped on my head. "Your face!" she snickered, then hit me so hard that I was knocked bouncing across the floor again.

I pulled the bucket off and looked up at a yellow pegasus with sweeping golden hair and a decidedly bitchy grin on her face. Arcane devices on each of her hooves sparkled with energy similar to Hammermare's super sledgehammer. "What the fuck..."

She laughed as her blue eyes looked down at me. “Aww... do you want me to kiss it and make it all better?” Her wings snapped and she slammed the sparkling power shoes against my face with another blast of magical energy. I brought up S.A.T.S. and tried to blast her with magical bullets, but two missed and the remaining two didn’t do enough to take her out completely. Oh Goddesses, did my horn ache right now.

Butterflies with razorblade wings... that was a new cutie mark.

Then she was smashing her hooves against me again and again as more Reapers showed up. “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” She shrieked with glee. “Don’t you just love me?”

“Psychoshy!” snapped a familiar voice from the end of the aisle. I groaned as I sat back up again. Rampage slowly approached with a solemn look on her face. “That’s enough.”

“She’s weak! She’s useless!” the yellow pegasus said in disgust as she landed beside my friend. “We should just take back her head.”

“She’s fine. You just caught her at a bad time,” Rampage said softly as she knelt and looked me in the eye with a sad smile. “Hey, Blackjack. Everyone’s okay. Nervous, but okay. I’m really glad you made it back all right.”

I lay back, my head spinning after Psychoshy’s beating. “Rampage, what’s going on?”

She sighed softly. “Bad news. We’re at war, and you’ve been drafted,” she said as she looked down at me. “Welcome to the Reapers, Blackjack.”

Footnote: Level up

New perk added: Terrifying presence – When you’ve got that shooty look going, you can make lesser enemies run in terror and balk greater opponents.

25. Competition

"I was gonna say 'In all of Equestria,' but that might be gilding the lily."

"Psychoshy, Security." Rampage said as she gestured from the hovering yellow pegasus to me and then back again. "Security, Psychoshy. If you're going to kill each other, do it in the arena where we can all watch the show." She stepped between me and the pegasus, dragging her hoofclaws over the concrete. "Understand?" she asked in a lower, more menacing tone.

"Sure. She's not worth my time anyway," the mare said as she flicked her mane dismissively. "Her blue buck is much more interesting! See you later, Wahhhpage." With a snotty little giggle, she flew off through the store.

"Wow. I can't think of a single pony who's gone from 'complete stranger' to 'pony I need to kick the crap out of' faster than her," I groaned as I lifted myself to my hooves. Then I shuddered; my heart was beating. . . wrong. It hurt like it never had before, and its usual steady, paired beats had been replaced by what felt like some complicated, energetic dance. "I. . . I just need a second here. . ." I groaned again as I lowered myself back to the ground, rolled over onto my back, and listened to the irregular thudding in my ears.

"Why is it I keep meeting you when you're half dead?" Rampage asked, rolling her eyes. She grabbed the collar of my barding in her teeth and started dragging me back to Bonesaw. Hammermare was sitting on a couch, her forelegs twisting as the bent limbs were tugged back into place by his healing potions and Hydra. She didn't look all that pissed at me. Quite the contrary, actually.

"Hey, Mallet," Rampage said around my collar.

"Rampage," she said respectfully, flushing a little.

"You owe me some caps," Bonesaw said sourly as Rampage dumped me on the operating table.

My striped friend gave him a level look, and he muttered under his breath as his horn glowed and he started trying to fix the damage the chems and taint had been doing to me. "Don't worry, you old goat. You'll get paid." The old buck's grumbling died down a bit, though he still didn't look happy. Rampage popped a Mint-al into her mouth, chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then spoke. "So. . . what happened?"

“Long story short, went to go kill myself, ran into somepony who talked some sense into me, walked back here,” I said with a half smile.

“And we couldn’t have talked some sense into you? Glory was hysterical when we told her.” I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. She sighed. “You’re an idiot, Blackjack. Don’t do that to your friends. Okay?”

“Yeah. I won’t. I think I worked all that out of me.” She smiled, looking relieved. I looked around, “Where are Glory and the others?”

“Glory’s on the roof with Lacunae. Scotch and P-21 are in the office. I made damn sure that the ponies watching them aren’t stupid.” She looked over a few aisles to where Psychoshy was fluttering over a small crowd that seemed quite excited to meet the pretty pegasus psychopath. “Psychoshy wanted them taken as hostages. Since that’d get a lot of ponies killed, I told her you’d be fine coming with us to the Arena to meet Big Daddy Reaper.”

My heartbeat was stabilizing even as the ache in my chest grew. That Hydra had been a bad idea. Knit ribs didn’t help when the rest of me felt like it was falling apart. Rampage arched a brow. “Are you fine with coming with us? Because I really don’t want to call Cuffs over here.”

To be honest, this was so far out of left field that I didn’t know how exactly I felt about it. “Some explanation would help. What’s going on?”

Rampage sighed. “You remember when you killed Gorgon? Well, he was one of us. Gorgon the Stonegaze. Not really all that popular. One of Sanguine’s ponies. He left three months ago to help with production at Brimstone’s Fall. Then, two weeks ago, we find out from DJ Pon3 that the mine’s been liberated. A few questions later and we found out it was liberated by a mare who killed Gorgon all by herself. So Big Daddy sent me to find you.”

“Why me? I’m not interested in joining the Reapers.”

“Yeah. I figured as much, but you have to understand that the Reapers survive by being the biggest, baddest gang in the Hoof. If there’s a pony strong enough to kill our own, we want them as a Reaper. If they won’t join, then we come down on them hard. We just can’t let powerful ponies get away to start rival operations.” The striped pony rubbed her nose. “I figured out pretty quickly, though, that you weren’t all that big a threat of becoming a rival. If you’d stayed in Flank, maybe you might have been, in time. But that didn’t work out.”

I groaned and closed my eyes. “I still don’t follow. You’re not here to kill me, so...”

Rampage sighed again, this time in annoyance. "Great. Well, it's about history, and I'm not much of a history teacher. You can ask Big Daddy to explain it."

"Come on. At least give me the abbreviated version?" I asked, then winced as something inside me squirmed. Oh, I really hoped that it was supposed to do that.

Rampage rolled her eyes. "A while back, there was a group of six ponies that tried to clean up Hoofington. They went from one end of the city to the other, and, believe it or not, Hoofington was even worse back then. Big Daddy was one of them: the biggest, toughest, meanest pony ever to wander the Wasteland... if you listen to his version."

I winced as I felt... something... inside me move in response to Bonesaw's magic. "You're done," he said as he nudged me off the table. "Next!"

I slipped off, feeling... 'better' wasn't quite accurate. 'Intact' worked. My insides felt like a bowl of giant leeches. I did not want to imagine what they looked like. Maybe they were like rotten loops of guts with... ugh, stupid brain. "What happened to them?"

"They split up. Not really sure why," Rampage said, giving me a significant look. Probably because one of them ran off to do something foolish like killing themselves. "After that, Awesome crowned himself King Awesome of Hoofington, Crunchy Carrots went back to Manehattan and came back with a whole slew of Steel Rangers, Keeper went his own way to set up the trade routes around the city, and the Professor established the Eggheads over at the university." She rubbed her chin. "There was a sixth, but I dunno what happened to her. "

Six friends? Why'd that make my mane all twitchy? Right; that didn't matter now. I'd stalled long enough. Unless the Reapers or somepony were going to ambush me... I had to do this. "Where's Glory again?" I said as I stood...well, lurched to my hooves. Goddesses, I was tired. It'd been a hell of a night. Rampage walked towards a metal staircase that lead up to the roof and nodded her head at it.

"Word of advice: she still loves you," Rampage said softly, then added, "Oh, and word of warning: if Psychoshy or anypony else finds out I've been giving relationship advice, I'll have to kick a lot of ass. Including yours."

"Thanks." I paused, fighting the urge to yawn as I looked at her. "You're not mad at me?"

She smiled and shook her head. "I know what it's like to find life unbearable. I'm just glad you found a way to bear it." She patted my shoulder. "But if you ever do that

to your friends again, I'll consider it a form of suicide and squeeze you in half." She gave a grin and a wink. "So just keep that in mind next time you plan on leaving a note behind."

"Right," I said with a little nod before making my way up the stairs. Funny, but after riding a dragon and a pegasus, the drop to the floor of Megamart. . . was still enough to make my insides squirm. Wasn't I supposed to eventually get used to things like this? I clambered through the hatch to the roof and the rain. A number of metal crates had been converted into shelters for the vendors who worked below.

Lacunae and Glory were with two more Reapers. I couldn't say they were the best guards, as both mares were locked in a hoofwrestling contest, but at least neither Glory nor Lacunae seemed to be threatened by the two. Glory lay curled up as tightly as when I'd seen her trapped in that stove. What an unbearable shit I am. I didn't deserve her, and she didn't deserve this.

I approached quietly, the two guards barely acknowledging my presence as I walked slowly towards the little gray pegasus. Lacunae's dark purple eyes followed me though the Hoofington drizzle, her magic deflecting the cold spray from both of them. "You broke her heart, Blackjack," was all she whispered in my head as I sat down beside Glory. I reached out and ran my hoof gently along that splendid amethyst mane and down to the graceful curves of her wings.

"Yeah," I murmured softly. "Cause I'm an idiot." Looking back, I couldn't believe what I'd nearly done. To myself, my friends. . . her.

She stirred and opened one bloodshot, puffy lavender eye. "Blackjack?" She whispered, looking at me. Fear and hope mixed in one terrible note.

I took a slow breath. This wasn't going to be pretty. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she whispered as she slowly rose. I clearly was not the only pony who had been up all night. "Sorry?" Her body trembled and her lip quivered, then she hung her head. Purple mane hid her face. "You. . . I. . . you come back and. . ." She lifted her head again and glared at me. "Blackjack, you. . . you. . ." I sighed as she flapped her wings hard enough to lift herself off her hooves and then brought both of her forelegs down on my head with a cry of "Idiot!"

Lacunae rose, and the two guards broke off their match to watch the show. The alicorn in the lacy funeral dress looked coldly down at both of them. "Um. . . we're supposed to. . . watch?" Then they flinched and trotted off for the stairs, Lacunae accompanying them, as Glory pummeled every inch of my body she could reach.

“You... you fiend! You monster! You creep! You filly seducer! You... you... bad pony!” Glory said as she thumped me over and over again. The magic had left with the alicorn, and the Hoofington drizzle poured down on both of us. “How could you do that to us? How! I’ll... Ohhhh! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” She chanted over and over again as she kicked at me. I put up only a halfhearted defense.

“Ow! Glory! Let me explain!” I begged as she gave me a particularly good clop upside my head.

“I don’t want your explanations! I’m going to beat every last little drop of stupid out of you so you never ever do that again!” she cried and sobbed. “I... we met with P-21... and he was crying... crying! And you! You were gone, and I was... I had nothing left, Blackjack. No family. No home! No Blackjack! Nothing! Do you understand? Nothing!”

“I... didn’t...” I said weakly, not having the slightest clue what to say. What could I say?

Then she collapsed atop me, sobbing as she held me tight in her hooves. “I thought I’d lost you... I thought you were dead...” She whispered as she shook. I held her, marveling at the softness of her wings, the silkiness of her mane. She was a gem in the Wasteland.

“You did lose me. I lost me,” I said softly as I nuzzled her ear. “I couldn’t handle it. If Lacunae hadn’t covered for me, I think I would have lost my mind completely.” She sniffled as she looked up at me with her hurting purple eyes; my magic brushed her mane from them. “I killed my stable... I know I had to... I know it wasn’t my fault... but I was the one who pushed the button that gassed foals... my friends... my home. I couldn’t handle it... it killed me. But Lacunae took me away before I died.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me? Talk to me?” She asked softly. “I would have helped you. We all would have.”

“I didn’t want help. I was stupid and cowardly. I wanted to escape. I can still smell the gas. Right now, holding you, I can smell that chlorine. I can hear Midnight calling me a murderer.” I closed my eyes, a part of me trapped in 99 forever. “I couldn’t live with it. I couldn’t handle it. I ran to either find something to keep me going... or... or end it.”

Glory trembled as she looked away. “And... I wasn’t enough.”

“No.” I turned her face back towards mine as I repeated softly, “No. Glory, you weren’t ‘not enough’. You were too much. Too much good and wonderful that I

didn't deserve. That I still don't deserve," I said as I closed my eyes. "I wanted... needed... to punish myself. I couldn't do that with you with me. I was falling apart and dead inside." I sighed as I stroked her wet mane. "I should have turned to my friends. Not away from them..."

She sniffed as she looked at me, then she finally gave me a small smile, "Idiot..." she said softly, reaching up and tapping the side of my head. "I... don't know if we can be like we were, Blackjack. I just don't know. I... you make me happy. But you hurt me, too. I'm going to need some time."

"Take as long as you need," I said as she slowly pulled away, looking down at me with an expression equal parts affection and wariness. I slowly rose to my hooves, the cool drizzle welcome for once on my battered flesh. "What do you think about these Reapers?"

"I expected psychopaths," Glory said, gathering herself and readily accepting the change in subject. We started back towards the hatch downstairs. "But, aside from that unpleasant yellow mare, they seem much more... together. Horribly aggressive and violent, but... considering what we've encountered in the Wasteland so far..." She gave a little shake. "Fortunately, Rampage seems pretty well respected by them."

"Eating a minigun and living will do that," I replied as I pulled open the hatch and started down. "So. To avoid another massive fight, we're going to go with them and—" but then my hoof slipped on the wet metal and I rolled and banged the last dozen feet or so to the ground. Glory flew down as I lay there groaning. "Gravity... sucks." Then I glanced at my forehooves and stared at the slick black oil on them. I looked back at the steps.

"Gravity doesn't suck. You do," Psychoshy snickered as she walked past us, snapping her tail at me.

"Are you kidding me..." I muttered, staring at her as she walked out of sight. "I fight off a swarm of manticores and Enclave and I now have to put up with adolescent jerk ass school pranks!?"

"Or you could... you know... shoot her," Glory said as she helped me to my feet.

"Tempting, but, Gun aside, I think I should talk to Big Daddy first before killing Reapers."

She smirked. "I didn't say kill. Just shoot her a few times. She pulls a stupid prank? Shoot her. She acts mean? Shoot her. Think of it as a spanking with bullets."

Our eyes met, my lips twitched, and then we were both laughing as we walked to Bottlecap's office. We might not be lovers anymore, but at least I knew I still had her as a friend.

"So. . ." she said, "tell me about these Enclave you mentioned?"

". . . so then they flew out again, back west," I finished as we reached the door to the manager's office. I was dead on my hooves, but I needed to talk to P-21. And then Lacunae... and Scotch. . . ugh. Suicide would have been easier. . .

I stomped hard on that thought. Never again.

Glory, for her part, found Twister's paranoia more amusing than ominous. "A touch overdramatic. We'd have just extradited her back to Neighvarro with a slap on the hoof for violating the no-fly zone." Hm. Glory might still have faith in the treaty, but after Miramare and Lighthooves, I'd stay on the skeptical side of things.

I passed by Cuffs, Mallet, and Smokey, the mare who'd wielded the fire axe just half an hour ago. To my surprise, there was no animosity. Mallet asked about a rematch, and Cuffs asked Glory if she needed some quality chain to keep me from getting away. I flushed as Glory looked at me in consideration of her offer.

Then Smokey looked over at something. "Look out. It's Psycho," the red mare muttered, and all of them watched sullenly as Psychoshy slammed her hooves against a nearby merchant's counter, apparently haggling to get the price to zero.

"You don't like her either?" Glory asked in surprise.

Mallet snickered. "Of course not. She's a complete cunt."

"And one of Sanguine's suck ups," added Cuffs. The turquoise mare looked a little nervous.

At my questioning gaze, Mallet sighed. "Most Reapers work up from our gangs. We work to be the best of the best before trying to join the Reapers. Sanguine, though, he finds ponies and gives them powers. Gorgon. Deus. Anypony associated with that ghoul is fucked up. Everypony knows he's a horned undead leech." Psychoshy trotted away from the shaking vendor with a ransom of little treasures. "Psychoshy's that ghoul's favorite trick pony. We hate her. And she knows it."

Trick pony. . . if it was anything like what P-21. . . that had to be like getting fucked by a jerky stick! Okay. . . there was a mental image I wanted burned from my

mind. “And Rampage?” I asked curiously, though honestly I was more interested in banishing the image of. . . stop it, you stupid brain!

Mallet gave a wary sort of smile. “She’s cool. . . weird. . . super weird. . . but cool.”

“Anypony who can survive decapitation automatically gets points with us,” Smokey agreed. “Even if she’s. . . weird.” So surviving decapitation wasn’t the weird point. Welcome to the Wasteland, where the surreal was cool and the psychological weird.

“Oh, I’m not so bad once you get to know me,” Rampage said softly in just the precise tone to make even the three Reapers’ manes stand on edge, not to mention mine and Glory’s. She put her hooves around Mallet and Smokey’s necks, pulling them into a headlock that had both strong mares struggling. “Now, why don’t you three help me get our wagon ready?”

“Sure, Rampage. We’re on it,” Cuffs said quickly as the other two gagged for a few seconds more before they were released and ran for the door.

“Kids today.” Rampage sighed, and shook her head as she trotted after them.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Glory asked me, watching them go in concern. “I mean, we might be able to sneak away.”

“I don’t want to leave Rampage,” I said softly, dropping my gaze. “I snuck out on my friends once. I’m not going to do it again.” I caught Glory’s smile. I might not be the smartest pony, but I could be taught. A little. Slowly.

The stench of fecal water hit my nostrils like a hammer as I pushed open the door to Bottlecap’s office. A filly inside gave a garbled war cry accompanied by a furious splashing, and I poked my head inside to see Scotch tape gripping some kind of crankcase in her jaws as her forehooves turned the pedals at a furious rate, making a cable disappearing into the toilet spin and thrash filthy water. Behind her stood P-21, looking a little lost, as he gripped a plunger in his mouth. The yellow merchant mare watched anxiously from behind both.

Bottlecap spotted me first and at once smiled with a small look of concern as we walked in. She leaned towards me. “I thought a little job might keep them distracted for a bit...” She looked apprehensively at Scotch Tape as the young mare cranked the levers like mad. “I didn’t expect her to be quite so devoted to. . . fixing my clog.”

I caught the change. The turn of a blue ear. The slight widening of his eye followed

by a slow sag of his body. His teeth tightening on the handle of the plunger. Eyes that refused to look away from Scotch Tape at work. He was pissed too, and hurt, and I knew that, unlike Glory, he wouldn't do the sensible thing and beat the stupid out of me. Oh no. He was going to bottle it all up and be a complete snit till it finally exploded.

Well, not if this security mare had anything to say about it! I trotted right up next to him, smiling as I watched Scotch Tape at work. Then I turned my head and licked him from jaw to ear in one long wet slurp. His blue eyes shot wide, the plunger falling from his shocked mouth as he jumped away. "Damn it, Blackjack!" He scrubbed at my lick with a hoof as he looked at me in shock and embarrassment. "Fine! You're back! Glad you're not dead."

"Hey, P-21," I said as I looked at him sitting his rump down with a sore wince. Bottlecap nudged Glory out the door and followed her, shutting it behind them, and Scotch Tape seemed completely fixated on consulting a magazine on plumbing and repairs. I sat before P-21. "So... you miss me?" I said, giving him a small smile, hoping he'd get the clue that this was when he got to beat the everloving snot out of me.

But he didn't. I'd hurt him again. Wronged him. "No. I didn't," he replied with sincerity before reaching into his bags to pull out my delta PipBuck and throw it in my face. "Don't leave your junk with me next time, Blackjack." And with that he trotted from the room.

I took a deep breath. What had I expected? I'd run out on my friends. It wasn't like I could just come back and everything would be wonderful again. Face it, I'd gotten lucky with Rampage and Glory.

Suddenly, there was a gurgle of water and a flush accompanied by Scotch letting out a whoop of glee. "Hah! Never met a clogged toilet that could stop me for long!" She grinned back at the office, then pushed her goggles back, blinking. "Awww, man. Victory of a lifetime and nopony gets to see it?" Then she looked at me. "Oh, you're back. Guess you didn't kill yourself, huh?" Well, neither anger nor tears...

"Probably. I might be a ghost though." She immediately blanched under her grime. "Kidding! I'm kidding. There aren't ghosts in the Wasteland... I think." Were there? I'd have to check the survival guide. "So... why are you fixing a toilet?"

"Cause everypony was going crazy with you gone." More guilt? Yes, please! "Glory wanted to fly off and find you. Rampage wanted everypony to wait here. P-21..." but she just shrugged and shook her head. "So, that Bottlecap mare mentioned that

she had a nasty clog and she'd pay to have it fixed.”

“Yeah, but how do you know how to fix toilets?”

“Ugh, cause I've been doing it my whole life?” she said with a huff as she coiled up the cable on her stained utility harness. “Maintenance mares generally gave me all the muck jobs, and that includes toilets.” She looked at me oddly and asked, “Weren't you practicing shooting and fighting when you were little?”

“Well. . .” I hadn't really thought about it. Wrestling, practicing with batons, training with BB guns, firearms training. . . and of course lots of bullshit indoctrination lessons about how we had to serve the Overmare without failure or question. “I guess I was.” I watched as she pulled out a rag and wiped her face. “And how are you doing?”

She gave me a wary look I knew well. Then she sighed as she looked away from me and shrugged. “In 99, I was forced to fix pipes and unclog toilets. Out here, I'm fixing pipes and unclogging toilets, and getting shot at by killer robots. . . using guns. . . under that big freaky open sky thing.” She shivered and then shook her head. “I dunno how I'm doing. Just. . . bit by bit, I guess.”

“You don't have to come with us if you don't want to. I'm sure, after fixing this, Bottlecap can help you find a job.” Megamart had to be safer than following me around. I was just one long string of disasters.

She looked worried as she looked back to her tools, making sure they ended up in the right pockets. “Thanks, but. . . you and P-21. . . you're the most normal ponies I know now.” And didn't that make me cringe a little inside. “I'll just stick along.”

“All right. . . but make sure you wash?” I wrinkled my nose.

She snorted in scorn. “You spend a few weeks on the surface and get so soft you can't even handle the smell of honest work. Sad, Blackjack. Really sad.” She said as she passed by me.

“I. . . you smell of poo water! That's not soft!” I yelled after her. “I've had boats dropped on me. You can't survive that if you're soft! Hey!” The door closed behind her and I pouted a little. “I'm not soft. . .”

An hour later, we were more or less ready to leave. The Reapers had a large covered wagon rigged up and a harness for four. A shield of corrugated metal sheets

extended around the front of the wagon to provide some cover. Three 'normal' Reapers were on the roof watching for trouble, leaving the rest of us to crawl inside.

Glory took one look at the confines of the trailer and swallowed. "I'll scout from above."

"Aww, don't want to be inside the tight, narrow, crushing wagon?" Psychoshy snickered, then said with false concern, "Oh, does it feel like it's getting smaller... and smaller... and smaller?" she said with a grin that widened with each 'smaller'.

Glory looked back at her flatly as she hovered. "How is it nopony's killed you yet? Really?"

Psychoshy grinned as she flew closer. "Think you'll be the one to pull it off, Dashite?"

"I'm not a Dashite," Glory replied, her purple eyes narrowing. Psychoshy snorted as she turned towards the wagon. "And neither are you..." Glory suddenly yipped as the tip of Psychoshy's tail snapped the end of her muzzle.

"Hey, Psy," Rampage said with a small smile. "Your turn?" The simple question made the pegasus hiss through her clenched teeth before she glared at Glory.

"Don't pretend like you can ever know me, turkey." Psychoshy's angry gaze promised a murder, and Glory swallowed hard as she backed away a little. Smirking, the yellow pegasus swooped into the trailer.

"She's such a ray of sunshine, isn't she? Put me through a wood chipper when I first joined the Reapers," Rampage said as she trotted to the back of the cargo wagon.

"She put you through a wood chipper?" Scotch Tape gawked at Rampage skeptically, then glanced at me for confirmation. I smiled and shrugged.

"Mhmmm. Industrial strength." She rubbed her chin and then glanced at Scotch Tape. "Oh, it wasn't so bad. Just a burst of pain and then coming back together. I think reforming on the far side was the most infuriating day of poor Psychoshy's life."

"Why?" Scotch asked in confusion.

"Cause she said she'd go through it too, so long as I went first," Rampage said with a decidedly unhealthy grin, "and I can't wait to see how well she handles it."

Okay. This opened up whole new vistas of the fucked-upness that was Reaper life, and I really didn't want to see more of them. I glanced at P-21 but saw him not paying attention to us. Certainly not to me. I needed to talk him out of this. Find some way to make amends. I needed to... oh, look. There were mattresses inside

the trailer. I'd... just... lie down... and talk to... P-21...

I walked through the yellow-green haze, lungs burning, eyes watering, as the shouts and screams echoed through the metal halls. Every breath burned inside my lungs, but, though froth dripped down my chin, I didn't fall. My eyes watered, fighting to open. To see where I was going. I had to stop this. The screams and cries echoed and built as I pushed my way along the halls. It was more by feel than anything that I found my way through security.

The Overmare stood at the window, gazing out at the thickening poison with a smug grin on her face. My horn flashed once. Twice. Three times. The world crawled as if it were in S.A.T.S. as her skull exploded. Black and red mane flew in all directions, two glowing eyes turning into luminescent pulp. I struggled to her desk, my hooves working the controls. Slowly, magically, the gas began to clear.

The Overmare's office was actually the atrium, and I was surrounded by dozens and dozens of friends, coworkers, and mere acquaintances. They looked at me, stomping their applause as they smiled. As they grinned. As they giggled. As they closed in. I'd saved them! I'd saved them! They fell on me, teeth biting. Rending. Tearing.

I stared up at the round window, looking at the Overmare with her black and red mane, her glowing eyes. I saw the cold contempt on her hard face as her horn glowed. The gas began to slowly hiss into the room.

I watched as the yellow gas filled the atrium below. The foals and mares milled about, screaming in pain, fear, and confusion. 'Murderer' echoed through the stable; never diminishing, never ending. The gas grew thicker and thicker. The door opened and admitted the security pony. Her horn flashed. Once. Twice. Thrice. My skull exploded.

I walked through the yellow haze...

"You're a masochist. Do you enjoy this?" the Dealer asked softly as we sat together at one of the atrium tables, the air clear and the stable empty. Quiet. Still. Nothing lived here, because I'd killed them all.

"You tell me. You're my crazy," I said quietly as I rested my chin on my crossed hooves. The Dealer looked younger and healthier, the pale buck looking at me with mature eyes. Where had I seen them before?

"I think that you have a confused self-centeredness with a need to martyr yourself," the Dealer said calmly as he dealt me five cards. Celestia. Luna. Twilight Sparkle. Goldenblood. Myself. "You think that, if you can just die in some appropriately gruesome fashion, particularly if there's lots of pain and suffering beforehand, that somehow you'll save the Wasteland." He said 'save' with a vague smile and a wave of his hoof.

"Makes sense," I replied, discarding Goldenblood. "Security is supposed to save ponies," I said firmly, and he smiled as he dealt me a Fluttershy. "I think I got a straight. Or is this a flush?"

"Yes." He replied, and I laughed. "But does it beat mine?" He showed his hand: P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch Tape. Then he reached over, took the card of me grinning like an idiot, and added it to his five. "I think this is a winning set."

I frowned at them. "I don't deserve them."

"I. I... I... I..." He gave a great sigh. "You must be the most self-centered pony in all the Wasteland, you know that? Not everything is about you, Blackjack." He lifted the card between his hooves, the picture changing before me. Blackjack grinning like a fool. Blackjack crying. Blackjack looking broken and hollow. Blackjack looking shooty. "Why do you always assume that you're the beginning and end of everything that matters?"

"I don't know. I've always been that way," I said softly, looking at the spinning card. Blackjack the foal, crying for attention. Blackjack the filly, getting her friend Daisy beaten by doing what she thought was right. Blackjack the security mare, breaking the rules to cross the Overmare. Blackjack, invisible and sneaking off rather than admitting to her friends that she wanted to die.

"Do you really think everything is okay, Blackjack?" the Dealer asked.

I slammed my hooves on the table. "I know it's not okay. I should be fixing things right now. I need to apologize to P-21. I have to find out if Rampage is really okay after I ate her heart. Or Lacunae. I need to know how Scotch Tape really feels about what I did!"

"I. I, I, I again," the Dealer rasped softly as he shook his head. He didn't take his eyes off me. "Didn't I just tell you? It's not about you. Not your needs. Not your wants."

He lifted Glory's card. "What about her? What does she need? What does she

want?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Before 99 I could have answered that. Now... “I don’t know...”

“Oh... and here I thought you loved her.”

“Shut your mouth!” I shouted, rising to my hooves as I pointed at him. “I...” and the rest of my objection died in my throat. Was he right? Was I really that self-centered?

He just looked at me for a moment, then lifted P-21. “And what about him, hmmm? What is he feeling? What does he want?”

“He’s pretty angry at me. He probably wants to shoot my ass,” I muttered.

“I... me... my... It’s not all about you, Blackjack,” he said softly as he collected the cards. “Is that your virtue? Selfishness?”

“I don’t know,” I said as I looked down at my clasped hooves. “I don’t know anything anymore.” Everything had been broken in 99. I’d broken. I used to think my life had been divided into before leaving the stable and after leaving it. Now I knew better. It was divided into before killing 99 and after killing 99.

“My suggestion? You’d better find out,” he said quietly as the gas started to hiss. “Otherwise, you’ll really wish you’d stayed in here.” He turned, walking through the swirling poison vapors as the screams began once more.

“Wait!” I shouted after him as the thick rolls of burning yellow gas rolled between us. I struggled after him, tripping over pony corpses as the wailing increased. I tripped upon a still body and fell to my face. Then another mare fell upon me. And another. And another. And another...

A particularly jarring bump brought me to consciousness and my eyes opened to look into P-21’s face. His gaze lingered in the past, lined in hurt and betrayal. He lay on the mattress next to me. I stretched out a hoof towards him. His distant eyes focused on mine, and for one foolish moment I was certain he’d accept it. Then his eyes hardened, and with a grunt he turned away from me. I held my hoof out, hoping that somehow he’d look back at me. He didn’t.

You’re the most self-centered pony in the Wasteland, Blackjack. I did what I wanted. I got what I needed.

All it cost me was a friendship.

A few hours later, I woke again, this time to the sound of yelling. Not screams, but cheering. It was like being back in Brimstone's Fall, walking to that train cart. Thankfully, my dreams were fading away. They'd kept drifting among Boneyard, the hospital, and 99. Screw suicide, I just wanted a bullet for my subconscious.

"What's going on?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, a little groggy but no longer exhausted. The wagon was empty and I staggered out, not sure if I should be fumbling for my guns or not. . . shit, where were my guns? I had my combat armor, but no weapons. A strange yellow light was filling the air and I blinked at the sudden brilliance. Despite myself, I gazed up at clear blue skies. The sight of it made me land firmly on my rump.

Only then did I note the holes in the sky.

What I'd taken for sky was in fact the inside of a large arcing dome that had been enchanted to look like a sky. The large oval space could have easily fit a thousand times the number of ponies that were now inhabiting just one end of it. The field of grass in the middle was carefully fenced off, and I realized that here was another powerful lure for ponies: the promise of steady meals, even if they were only grass. The cushions that once held the rumps of thousands of ponies had been torn up, and platforms and structures had been built along the terraces. Tents and shacks of all sorts were oddly spaced apart from each other. All of them flew flags with strange markings: crossed guns, an axe in a Brahmin skull, some kind of paw print.

The wagon had been parked with some others at one end of the arena. On the far side was a huge scoreboard covering in flickering neon lights that boldly declared "Hoofington Sports Arena" and, beneath that, "Home of the Hoofington Reapers." A cartoon mascot of a skeletal pony wielding a scythe made me imagine shuffling cards.

A large stage had been built up in the opposite end zone, and atop it was a massive caged dome netted in barbed wire. Beside it were smaller rings fenced in and surrounded by seats. Curiously, I saw that the track that ran the perimeter of the field was still clear of debris. While Hoofball might not be played here, they still had a variety of competitions. As I walked towards the end with the scoreboard, I passed by clumps of bandits and gangers hoof wrestling, sparing, drinking, and practicing. I had to admit, the amount of muscle I saw made my horn twitch nervously. These ponies were buff and denoted their allegiance with scarves, tattoos, brands, and other markings.

“Boy, can you sleep,” Mallet said, the caramel-coated unicorn floating her hammer overhead. How she managed that weight for that long baffled me, but the buff unicorn handled the weapon with familiar ease. “Rampage went to go tell Big Daddy that you’d arrived. Your friends are being given a box seat for your stay.”

“As long as nopony tries something like taking them hostage,” I warned, looking at the knots of ponies in their little camps. “Where are my guns?”

“Safe with Rampage. No one carries firearms in here. It tends to prevent things from becoming messy,” she said with a grin as she twirled her supersledge. “Melee weapons are exempt, of course.”

Great. And my favorite melee weapon was lying in so many pieces of burnt bone on a mountainside somewhere. I looked sourly at the various ponies warily watching us. “Are all these ponies Reapers?”

“Mostly just the ones in ponyhide,” she said with a wicked grin, gesturing to her barding.

Ah, yes; that. Now that I could actually focus on it, I couldn’t help but feel more than a little creeped out. “Yeah. . . about that; you all really wear ponyhide?”

“Oh, most of us who aren’t the top ten. They’re tough enough to wear whatever they like.” She grinned at me almost teasingly. “And there are some cryponies who just wear normal barding.”

“When did this become a good idea?” I asked, looking at her clothes in disgust. “It seems kinda... morbid.”

She rolled her eyes. Clearly, I was falling rapidly into ‘crypony’ territory. “It’s simple. If you challenge us or try to join and fail miserably, then everypony who sees us wearing you will know the price of weakness,” she said with a smile and a shrug. “Every pony you see in my barding was somepony I had to kill to become a Reaper.”

“Okay. I guess that makes sense... in a grisly kind of way,” I admitted, still feeling a little squeamish. “So, who are all the rest of these ponies?”

“Most of these are thugs, gangers, and tribals,” she said as we trotted towards the scoreboard and the pens. “There’re really only sixty or so Reapers, which still makes us one of the biggest and toughest gangs around. Those are the Flash Fillies out of Progress,” she said, gesturing to two mares with white collars and power shoes. “Over there,” she said, looking at the bonfire burning in the next little encampment, “are the Burner Boys. Nasty rivalry with the Fillies on account Burners are all assholes. There’s the Flotsam Four... the Pecos, or what’s left of them now that

Dusty's taken over..." She gestured to a half dozen or so forlorn looking ponies. They glanced at me and immediately ran into their shack.

"Looks like they remember me," I said as I looked at Mallet ruefully.

"Sounds like you got a good reputation, then," she said with a smirk. "Most of these are aspirants. . . what we call wannabes. Supposedly, the toughest of the tough of their respective tribes and gangs." She snorted in disdain. "Only a few will ever be tough enough to join the Reapers. The rest are just paying tribute to Big Daddy and hangers on."

"Why's that? I asked as I passed by a dozen pegasi and earth ponies around a banner of a yellow satellite dish on a black field. All of them wore the Dashite brand, even the earth ponies. I wondered if Psychoshy was originally from them.

"Because nopony wants to get on Big Daddy's bad side. Even the Society sends ponies with stuff they think he wants, and the Society hates the Reapers. Not much love lost the other way, either," Mallet said as we headed up the stairs towards a sign that read 'Box Seating A-H.' 'Top Ten Only' was painted beneath it.

"Top ten?" I asked as we passed the sign.

"The top ten greatest Reapers in all of Hoofington. Best of the best. Deus was one. So was Gorgon. You killed both, so there's a lot of contestants eager to fill the gaps in the roster. Oh. . . and that means fighting you."

"To the death?" I guessed, pressing my lips together. She arched her brow, then gave a shrug.

"Not as often as most ponies think," she replied. I must have looked surprised, as the mare gave a chuckle and explained, "Fights to the death mean we lose a good fighter either way. Normally it's just fights to the surrender. . . though Luna help you if you give up too quick. And accidents happen." She grinned at me. "I'm pushing for Gorgon's spot. Not sure who I'll have to challenge for it, though."

"What about me?" I asked, hesitating to look at two mares sparring against each other with lengths of pipe. Their stance was definitely too narrow, and they were going to break a tooth if they weren't careful.

"That depends on you and Big Daddy. Kill a Reaper and he might let you walk. Kill a top ten? Never happen. Kill two? Never happen twice," she said with a chuckle.

Upstairs, we entered a wide hall that was marginally less choked with debris than the stands below. There were a number of faded posters in broken frames showing the

various teams that'd played at the Arena: the Cloudsdale Skykickers, the Canterlot Cavailleurs, the Fillydelphia Fillies, and the Appleloosa Pioneers were just a few of the teams that were intact. The best preserved seemed to be to the Manehattan Maulers, which had been converted into a shrine of hatred. Epithets were written on the wall, floor, and even ceiling for ten feet, but the poster itself was untouched. Directly opposite it was a shrine to the Hoofington Reapers, with chipped plastic trophies filled with bottlecaps, magazines, and pictures of the team. Was it my imagination, or did they look particularly unpleasant?

"I don't get it. Most of the other posters are torn up a little. Why not them?" I nodded to the Maulers.

She looked at me like it was obvious, and then adopted the 'stable-ponies-don't-know-nothin' expression. "They were the Reapers' greatest rivals two hundred years ago."

Now I was more confused than ever. Wouldn't that make the poster more likely to get scribbled on? She looked at the poster of the eighteen ponies in green and white, "You don't dishonor your greatest rival. You respect them, and look forward to the day when you can kick their ass." She smirked at me. "You have no idea how hard Big Daddy's tried to find some Manehattan Ponies willing to form a hoofball team. I think he could die happy if he could play them himself."

We reached a door marked 'Manager,' and she knocked once before stepping aside. I glanced at the caramel mare and then at the door. I took a deep breath, feeling like I was about to step into the security office for a major chewing out. My horn glowed and opened the door.

Inside, there was a threadbare couch in front of a projector pointed at a blank stretch of wall. There was a bar in one corner with a gnarled old buck mixing drinks behind it. Newspaper sports pages showing the old team were plastered to the wall. I noticed that the Manehattan Maulers seemed to have a lot more wins than the home team. Oddly, one spot on the wall was completely devoid of papers.

Standing in front of the window was the largest buck I'd ever laid eyes on, and I'd seen some pretty big ponies. He had to be a hoof higher than Big Macintosh and even more muscled than Deus. His jet black hide was oiled, gleaming in the synthetic sunlight coming through the window, and his fiery red mane was styled in a fierce narrow fan of hair running down his neck. He wore lengths of spiked chain around his neck and forelimbs as he stared out at his domain.

"Okay. Just nip this in the bud and move on." I gave a glance at the old buck mixing

some sort of drink, but, unless he had a gun behind the counter, I didn't think he'd be a problem. I really hoped he didn't run for help. The old buck arched a white brow as he looked at me, his dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. I took a deep breath, put on my shootiest look, and marched right up to the huge buck. "Hey! Big Daddy!"

He turned, looking at me with a scowl as if questioning who was this mare who dared speak to him in such a tone. "What?"

I pressed forward and thumped my hoof against his chest. Hopefully I could just bowl him over and convince him that I wanted no part in his war. "Look, you. I'm not a Reaper and I've got better things to do than beat the crap out of ponies." His scowl darkened into a glare. I thumped his chest a second time. "I don't care if I killed Deus and Gorgon. I had to do it, and I needed help anyway. So give the position to somepony who wants to fight in your stupid war. It's none of Security's business." And some last words in time with more beats against his chest... "So leave me out of it!"

He stared right back into my eyes, his gaze narrowing. I wondered if he could break me with his stare alone. "What are you talking about?"

"I... you... um..." I took a half step back and thumped his chest again halfheartedly before giving a sheepish grin. "Ah... hi! You're not Big Daddy, are you?" I felt myself bending under that glare as I smiled and stroked a hoof over his oiled chest. "Heh... heh... shiny..."

The old buck behind the bar cackled as he trotted out with three drinks on a tray balanced on his head. "Oh, don't you worry none, Brutus. Big Daddy's got some business with this filly," he said in a gruff yet definitely snarky tone as he grinned at me. "I'm Big Daddy, little missy. Pleasure to meet you. Rutabaga smoothie?" Big Daddy offered as he set the tray down on an end table besides the couch.

Brutus leaned over, wrapped his lips around the edge of one glass, and downed the contents in a single gulp before setting it down. "So you'll talk to her?"

"Oh, I'll talk to her, Brutus. Don't you worry about that. And if she don't get the message, then I'll talk to her so she does," the old grayish-white pony said as he pinched a glass between his hooves and slurped up the goopy contents through a large plastic straw.

The huge black buck simply nodded once, his scowl softening before he glared at me and snorted. Then he marched for the exit. When he'd left, the old buck chuckled, "Hope you forgive Brutus his manners. He's having issues with a mare

who don't understand that no means 'stop-crawling-in-my-bed.' I swear, sometimes I feel more like a schoolmarm than the head of a gang."

I stared at him. "You're Big Daddy?" He wasn't particularly big... fit, certainly. He was covered by stringy, wiry muscles that stood out in stark relief against his scarred hide. A raggedy white beard dangled under his chin. He bobbed his head once. I pointed a hoof at him. "You're... Big Daddy..."

"At your service," he said with an amused grin.

"But you're... old..." I finished lamely.

He blinked and suddenly swayed, "Oh my goodness... you're right... oh... there goes my knees. Oh... my back... it ain't what it used to be..." he moaned as he suddenly tottered and began to stagger towards me. "Help me... get me my walker... oh, I'm goin' the way of old Mr. Abernathy..." He whined as he stretched two staggering hooves towards me. Despite myself I reached out to help steady the swaying buck.

My offered hoof was seized in a grip of steel and suddenly I knew exactly why that one spot on the far wall was free of papers. With a resounding thud I slammed into the wall and landed in a heap on my stomach. Little Glories flew around my head as the buck leapt atop me and in one swift grab seized me with his rear hooves, grabbed my left foreleg, and twisted it behind my back. I had no idea how he managed to hold on; the one thing I was definitely sure of was that that leg wasn't designed to bend that way!

"Who's your daddy?" He cried out. I couldn't even see him for a magic bullet spell!

There was nothing I could do but howl out, "I don't know! I think we retired him when I was nine or ten!"

"Wrong answer!" he shouted, twisting my leg even more. "I'm your daddy! Say it!"

It felt like my leg was about to come off. "You're my daddy!" I wailed.

"And your daddy is a young, healthy, handsome son of a mare, ain't he?" He demanded.

"Yes, he is!" I cried out. "And strong! Tough too!"

And with that he let go of my leg. "Wow. You figured that out pretty quick." He got off me and trotted back to his drink.

"How'd you do that?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, my shoulder throbbing terribly.

It felt like he'd almost popped the joint out of its socket.

He took a long, slow drink of his pulped vegetables, then grinned again. "Pony I once knew said that a good hoofloss was all simply applied leverage. Me, I love applying. . . leverage." He nodded to my drink, and, not wanting to be thrown a second time, I levitated it to my mouth and took a sip of the glue-like beverage. To my surprise and relief, I found it quite palatable. A bit like wallpaper paste, really. He nodded in approval, pointing a hoof at me. "That particular recipe I got from a zebra witchdoctor outside Trottingham. Three days worth of fiber in one glass. Keeps the pipes rust free and flowing easy."

"Mmm! I hope you'll share," I replied as I finished the glass. There was this pulpy tangy goop at the bottom that was pretty bitter but still not bad.

"So. If I recall your little outburst with poor Brutus correctly, you'd like to opt out of the Reapers. Might I ask why?" he said as he trotted over to the couch and took a seat. Then he grinned at me and patted the seat next to him.

With a bit of trepidation, I sat on the other end of the couch. "Well. . . it's not really my thing. I don't want to be a Reaper. I want to help ponies, not beat the everloving snot out of them." Okay, I could make an exception for Psychoshy, but really, who couldn't?

"Then help ponies and don't beat the everlovin' snot out of 'em," he replied. "Ain't no hairs off my tail what you do with yourself."

Um, once more Blackjack had landed in not-a-clue land. "Aren't Reapers always about beating snot and other assorted violence?"

"Heh." He grinned. "Ohh yeah. There's always a good fight or two with the Reapers. But that ain't the point. No siree. If you think that's what the Reapers are for, you need the bigger picture." He reached into the end table and pulled out a cigar and bit off the tip, then deftly ignited the end with a brass lighter. With the smoking stick hanging out the side of his mouth, he blew a smoke ring in the air above him. "Twenty. . . thirty or so years back, I and some ponies I knew tried to clean up Hoofington. Oh, it was a mess. Dozens of little tribes butchering the fuck out of each other. There was one lot that actually thought Hoofington was Princess Celestia's resting place and sacrificed ponies by throwing them into range of the defense beams.

"But the six of us, we made a go of it. One by one, we beat the snot out of all of them. Tried to teach them some common decency. Some Equinity. And every tribe

had some warlord or champion that always thought they was the baddest badass in all the Wasteland. Till I showed em different.” He gave a throaty chuckle, then looked at me and turned so I could see the horseshoe cutie mark he wore. “You might say fighting’s always been my super special talent.”

I nodded like it all made perfect sense. . . “Still not getting it.”

“Well, after. . . Goddesses, was it really five years?” He rubbed his chin, then sighed. “Yup. . . after five years, guess how much things had improved? I’ll give you a hint.” He took a long pull on the cigar and blew another ring, staring up at the circle before continuing, “Zip. Zilch. Nada. Not a bit. See, we kill the badass tribal champion? Three months later, they’d be replaced by a new champion that was usually bloodier and nastier than the first. Hell, we could wipe out an entire tribe, and they’d be replaced inside a year. We went through tons of ammunition, piles of healing potions, crates of grenades, pallets of missiles, gallons of flamer fuel. . . and in the end, the Hoof was even worse for all our attempts to do better.

“See, we simply thought that if we killed the bad, whatever was left over had to be good. Well, turns out that what was left over turned bad pretty quick. Or they’d be killed by something bad that we missed. Finally, after five years, we were sick of it. Sick of each other. We’d stopped trying to do anything worthwhile, fixated on our own plans on how to fix the Hoof.”

He pointed at the pictures on the wall with the cigar perfectly balanced on the end of his hoof. “Me, I took one look at the Hoofington Reapers. . . at the team. . . and realized that the only real way to calm the Wasteland down and make the tribes behave and play nice was to have a gang so over the top badass that all the other gangs would knock the shit off or risk pissing us off. When being a Reaper became prestigious. . . then the other gangs calmed down even more. We siphoned off their biggest and baddest champions for ourselves; sure, there was lots of fighting involved, but it was more structured. Less ‘rape, pillage, and burn’ and more ‘let’s prove we’re better than them at the arena.’ If a tribe produced a psychopath, we’d kill ‘em one way or another. And if they had a pony that had half a brain and could play along, they did all right.”

I had to admit, I was a bit taken aback by that. Still, I found the whole thing a little bit off. “So if I say yes, what do I get?”

He flipped the cigar into the air and caught it between his grinning teeth, rolling it to the corner of his mouth. “Plenty. For starters, there won’t be a gang or thug in the Hoof that’d dare cross you. You could trot one end to the other, and no pony will

give you grief. You'll also find all sorts of ponies are generous to a Reaper. You'll have room and board here, maybe not as cushy as at Elysium, but comfortable. And you'll have backup from the biggest and toughest fighters in all the Hoof."

"And the catch?" I asked. He considered me for a moment and rolled the cigar to the other corner of his mouth. He stroked his chin as he regarded me through those glasses.

"The catch is you back up your fellow Reapers. That means stomping anypony that crosses us or threatens us. That includes the Steel Rangers, Society, or anypony that does us wrong. It also means proving yourself in the ring every few months. Show that you're tough enough to take on a challenge or four. I heard how you handled Mallet when she was sent to retrieve you. She's good, and you took her and her friends. As far as I'm concerned, that shows you got the guts to shine in the Reapers."

I thought about it. I really didn't owe the Steel Rangers anything. In fact, I didn't know much about them or their plots, period. But I also didn't need to screw them arbitrarily. "And if I say no?"

He let out a long low sigh. "Well, then you go your way, and I hope you come to your senses and change your mind. But the fact is, Security, you've become a bit too high profile around here. It was cute when you were doing Finder errands and the like, but after dealing with those psychopaths in that stable? Somepony is going to want you to sign up with them. And if it's not the Reapers, then I won't need a hundred thousand caps to get every ganger, thug, and killer on your tail. Hell, I'd consider it good season training. But I'd hate to think of the waste of time and life it'd be when we got a scrap brewing with the Steel Rangers."

I frowned at him. "Why are you two fighting?"

"Oh there doesn't have to be much reason, but, you see, we had a ceasefire going since raiders were hitting us, Megamart, and Toll. An agreement in good faith." He snorted two smoke rings from his nostrils. "Then, a few days back, they launched a surprise attack on the Zenith Bridge. Fired a grenade right at our barricade. We responded, and then they had the balls to claim we broke the agreement."

Oh... dear... "This was four days ago?" He nodded once.

About the time we were passing under the Zenith Bridge on the Seahorse. Shit...

"I see. Well, then, I'll have to think about your offer," I said as I rose to my hooves again. "One thing though... Sanguine."

He snorted, "What about him?"

"He works for you?"

"Sanguine works for nopony but himself. He keeps my fighters healthy and makes some of them even tougher," Big Daddy said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Got some old world magic from before the bombs."

"And he creates monsters," I added.

Big Daddy grinned from ear to ear around the cigar. He set it in an ashtray and pushed down his glasses so I could see his glowing amber eyes. "Oh, we're all monsters here in the Reapers, Security. Best to stay with your own."

We'd gathered in Rampage's quarters, which were a little more cluttered than I expected. A dozen Mint-al tins lay stacked neatly on the desk along with a few candy canes. A bookcase held police procedurals and training manuals. Another corner had three strange wooden masks and a weird curved stone statue that looked like moulded rock. She also had a lot of knives displayed on a wall, from rusty metal carvers to heavy mechanical rippers and even elegant single-edged swords. Rampage herself had shrugged out of her armor and lay on the extravagant king-sized bed. Glory was trying to fix a snack in the little corner kitchenette, but I supposed that I'd be the only one with an appetite for it.

"It's not much, but it's home," she said with a thin smile as I looked around. "You could have Gorgon's room, but you'd have to deal with having Psychoshy as a neighbor."

"I'm not sure I'll be taking him up on that offer," I replied.

Rampage sat up, brushing back her red mane. "Are you sure about that? I mean, really sure? 'Cause I'd reconsider if I were you."

"I heard Big Daddy say his piece," I replied as I walked to the window and looked down at the practice rings.

"Let me ask you something, Blackjack," she said as she rolled off the bed and trotted in front of me. "We went a long way from Flank to 99. Did you notice us getting attacked by the Blinkerton Boys, the Choppers, or the Halfheart Gang?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked in confusion.

"Right. You never even heard of them. That's because I was with you, Blackjack.

They didn't mess with you because they didn't want to mess with me. The Halfheart gang had us in their scopes all over Riverside and could have dropped all of us without a problem. They saw me. They left us alone." She said as she tapped my chest lightly. "If Big Daddy sends word that you're free game, it's going to be a whole lot tougher getting around. Even me being with you won't be protection anymore."

I hadn't realized it, but it'd been true. We'd trotted across half of Hoofington, and, with the exception of raiders, we'd never crossed another soul. That was a lot of wide open territory for gangs to stake out. "Why not? If you're a Reaper. . ."

"Big Daddy's call for a stomp down trumps me being a Reaper. Hell, they'll try their best to kill me too." She closed her eyes for a moment. "And I'll be expected to join them."

I felt a cool tingle run through me. "And would you?" Rampage looked at me, then sighed and shrugged.

"Don't know. Ask me when they do. I like you Blackjack. . . you got me out of that nightmare in 99. I really. . . really. . . thought I was screwed." She gave a little shudder. "But I don't know if I'm willing or able to throw this away. Being a Reaper is all I have. They're the closest thing to a family I know."

"They're not the only thing you have," Lacunae said softly in our minds. P-21 gave a snort of sorts, then a sigh, glancing at me and then staring out the window at the simulated sky outside. I really needed a chance to talk with him about my mistakes.

"Maybe there's something we can do to put us in good standing with Big Daddy but not become a full Reaper?" Glory said as she dumped various foods and drinks into a blender. I'd told her about his smoothie, and she'd been keen to see what she could make blend.

Rampage considered that. "Maybe. He only calls for stomps on ponies that cross the Reapers."

"What if we stop this fight with the Steel Rangers?" I asked.

The striped pony looked intrigued. "Why do you want to? If Reapers are fighting Rangers, then Big Daddy probably won't be able to call a stomp."

"Because it's our fault." I explained how Glory's grenade had kicked off the conflict. The gray pegasus looked horrified at the news.

"I did this?" She asked as she fluttered in place, gesturing to herself in shock.

Rampage snorted. "Believe me, this fight's been brewing for years. It was going to

happen, and now it'll keep going until somepony wins. If we back the Reapers, then Big Daddy will owe us big time." I noted her use of 'we' and 'us'. That made me smile.

"And if we help the Rangers?" P-21 asked.

"I don't know," Rampage said, though she didn't look all that enthusiastic at the idea. "Probably, they'd give us some of their guns and bullets. I can't think of more than that."

Lacunae rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Which power would be best to back in Hoofington?"

"Well, there's the Reapers and the Steel Rangers. You've got the Society down south. Finders are all over the place. And the Eggheads in the college," Rampage said.

"The Society ponies are all aristocrats?" Lacunae queried.

"Yeah. They're based out of the Elysium resort, a special spa that was made to cater to the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the rest of the really elite. They control the food and a lot of the money. Lots of politicking now that King Awesome is getting on in years," Rampage said with a sniff.

"And the Eggheads are interested in learning and technology," I said, remembering Archie at the clinic. "Can't the factions get along? Splendid was able to work with Archie."

Glory coughed. "Um. . . Blackjack, I'm not sure you remember, but when we left you looked like you wanted to shoot both of them on general principle. I don't think they actually wanted to work together." She poured some pickled eggs and Sparkle-Cola into the blender.

I didn't like the Society ponies for using slaves, but I didn't know enough to really decide. The Eggheads sounded good, but, when I thought how hopeless Archie had been, I wondered if they could actually do anything.

"There's also the Enclave to consider," Glory added.

I rounded on her. "What?! There's no way I could assist the Enclave, Glory. Lighthooves-"

"Is one rogue operative. The Enclave is the strongest power in Equestria. Perhaps some elements are... misguided, but the rest are still good and might be capable of helping us. If we assisted the Volunteer Corps, perhaps we might be able to

persuade them to investigate Lighthooves closely and make him pay for his disease.” Glory looked at the blender, apparently satisfied, and hit the ‘on’ switch.

“Do we have to pick a side?” Scotch Tape asked. “I mean, can’t we just tell them all ‘sorry, not interested’?” The young olive mare had a point.

“I don’t think so,” Rampage said, shaking her head. “Big Daddy wasn’t wrong. When we stopped all the raiders in 99, I think all the powers realized that Security’s a big deal. We might stall them for a while, but eventually they’ll start assuming we’re not with them.”

I looked at all my friends and then at P-21. He sat quietly beside the window, looking pained. I supposed his knee was hurting him more than usual. “What do you think?”

He looked at me, eyes narrowing, and said in a low voice, “Do whatever you want, Blackjack. You always do.” I felt like he’d slapped me as he rose and limped to the door.

“What was that about?” Scotch Tape asked in confusion. “Are all males so cranky?”

I didn’t know how to explain to her how I’d betrayed our friendship. Glory poured the blender’s contents into some glasses and came to my rescue. “Who wants to try some?” she asked brightly, the glasses balanced on her outstretched wings.

I wished I could have tried it. I could have done with a nice frothy smoothie. I trotted to the door. “I need to find P-21.”

“Oh... well, Rampage? Lacunae?” She said, looking to each. Both quickly broke eye contact. She then gave a smile at the curious, if slightly skeptical, Scotch Tape.

“Oh, come on. It can’t be that bad. I’ve had poo water in my mouth,” Scotch said with a snort at the other two as I stepped out. There was a loud gulp and then, a second later, a thud.

“Great. You killed her,” Rampage said crossly. I glanced back at the green mare curled up in a fetal position, eyes staring straight ahead.

“Momma... is that you?” she whispered in a daze.

“I didn’t think it was that bad!” Glory said in a rush, shaking the shivering earth pony.

I closed the door, catching Lacunae’s thought asking, “Glory, do you ever actually taste your own cooking?”

I looked all over for P-21, but if he didn't want to be found then I wasn't going to find him without a PipBuck tag. Still, that didn't stop me from looking. From the skyboxes down to the rings, I searched high and low for him. Everypony I passed gave me a look like they were sizing me up for a fight, coupled with expressions that varied from fearful to respectful. I couldn't care less. I had to fix my relationship with P-21 as soon as I . . .

Sanguine.

The seared ghoul looked quite ironic in a business suit that appeared freshly pressed and laundered. It wasn't even scuffed up or frayed. His eyes swirled with a bizarre pink light I'd only seen on a few glowing ghouls. Pink tendrils of vapor leaked out of holes in his ribs and around his lips. He hummed to himself as he trotted right past me. Then he slowed and stopped. "Well well well. . ." He turned his head to look back at me. "It's you."

I wanted to drop into S.A.T.S. and plant four magic rounds in his head, but I wanted answers too. "Yeah. I'm like a brass bit. I just keep popping up," I replied as I turned to face him. A number of ponies were noting our conversation; I wondered just how many would come to the ghoul's defense if I shot him. "So, what brings you here? Looking for this?" I asked as I shook my PipBuck at him.

"Actually, I was checking on some clients, what with the upcoming war and all. But if you'd give that to me, I could repay you in some augmentation to make you the terror of the Wasteland."

"Augmentation? Like what you did to Stonewing?" I asked, and I was overjoyed to see the cooked unicorn ghoul floored in shock.

"How do you know about that?"

"I know all about Project Chimera. Equestria's little monster making program," I said softly, my eyes narrowing. "U-21 mentioned it in Flank before he died. Let me guess, you told him that if he got EC-1101, you'd give him powers too?" Again, surprise. "I suppose it'd be an easy offer to give a buck tormented and abused all his life. Easy power."

"Oh yes. He was quite keen to be crossed with a dragon. As if we would replicate that little monstrosity," he said with a small shudder. "But he's dead, you're here, and you have a PipBuck I want very badly. So let's deal."

"Deal? You think I'd deal with you?" I scoffed. "You've made my life a living hell for nearly a month."

“And I’ll happily leave you be once I have that file,” he answered with a grin as if it’d all been some sort of poorly-implemented joke. “To be honest, I’d have tried to buy it from you earlier, but Deus was so determined to get it himself.”

“He was in agony,” I replied, my eyes narrowing.

Sanguine just smiled and polished his hoof on his vest. “Well, the desperate are so much more tractable. That’s why we thought of the bounty. Then Usury kindly doubled it after your bold declaration. I can’t believe nopony was able to bring you down.”

“Not for a lack of trying,” I grumbled.

“Sanggie!” Cried a voice from above.

“Speaking of the desperate...” Sanguine muttered, then smiled widely as Psychoshy swooped down into an embrace. To my disgust, the yellow pegasus kissed the ghoul with a positively nauseating amount of tongue. “Fluttershy, so nice to see you again. How are you, my dear?”

“Sanggie, you promised you’d make me better. I’m supposed to be better,” the yellow pegasus said with a pout.

I gaped at her. “Fluttershy? I thought your name was Psychoshy.”

The yellow pegasus gave me an indignant glare. “A horrible nickname perpetuated against the kindest and most wonderful mare in Equestria.” She released Sanguine and frowned as she looked back at him and whined, “We’re going to be in a fight, Sanggie. I need to be better for it. You promised.”

“In a bit, Butterflanks. This mare has the PipBuck I need,” he said. Psychoshy looked at it sharply and then glared at me.

“You have it? A weak loser like you?” I couldn’t help myself, I held it in her face and gave the device a little shake. She snapped, “Give it to me right now!”

I snorted, “As if...”

She narrowed her eyes. “I challenge!” Suddenly the ponies looking on began to talk to each other in excitement. Somepony instantly started to call out bets. The odds, I noticed, were not in my favor.

“Excuse me? You’re going to have to explain this Reaper stuff to me,” I said dully. Fortunately Mallet appeared from the milling throng, looking flatly at the yellow pegasus.

“What’s the challenge?” The caramel mare asked Psychoshy.

“I want that PipBuck,” she said imperiously.

Mallet turned to me. “Do you accept her challenge?”

“Wait? Challenge?” I looked at Mallet and sat, thumping my chest with both hooves.

“Sta-ble po-nee. I don’t know this Reaper stuff!”

“Any Reaper can challenge another pony in the arena,” Mallet explained. “She wants that PipBuck. You can decline and give it to her, or you can accept her challenge and name terms of your own.”

“You mean a Reaper can just... take whatever she wants?” That seemed ridiculously unfair.

“No, but she can challenge for it. A pony doesn’t have to accept,” Mallet said calmly.

I could have just handed it over. It didn’t have EC-1101, and I needed to find P-21. Still, I had to admit I was aching to thump her ass and this might be a shortcut to getting all the answers I needed. “I accept,” I replied. “And if I win, I want answers from him.”

“You can’t challenge for something of his. He’s not fighting!” Psychoshy objected crossly.

Sanguine though, smiled. “I accept. If you are victorious, I’ll answer all your questions.”

Mallet said calmly, “A property challenge is to submission. First to yield or be knocked out loses.” She looked up to where Psychoshy tittered in glee, dancing in the air as she hovered. “I’ll set up the match.”

In the crowd I saw the Dealer watching me with a grim, stern expression. I could hear the cards purring in my ears.

Word had gotten around at the speed of Dash, and soon it seemed that everypony had clustered around the great steel wire dome. I watched as Big Daddy trotted down next to Brutus to take a special seat overlooking the action. This seemed to be the only thing that made the gangs, with their scarves and strange markings, blend together. Apparently, challenges required us to enter in only our hides. The walls of the dome were festooned with just about every melee and thrown weapon imaginable. Some, like a chainsaw, were padlocked. Also padlocked were marked

medical boxes. If we fought well, the audience might throw us a key. If not, we'd be left with the most basic and flimsiest weapons.

"Blackjack, what do you think you're doing?" Glory asked as my friends got a special seat with the Hammerdown Gang next to Mallet and Cuffs.

"Getting some answers I've wanted for a long time," I said as a pony wearing a scuffed PipBuck from Stable 89 removed Marmalade's PipBuck from my hoof with her strange tools. I wouldn't have the advantage of S.A.T.S. in the cage. It would just be me and her and I was okay with that. I looked around but there was no sight of a little blue pony. "Where's P-21?"

"You were looking for him. Didn't you find him?" Glory asked in concern. No, I'd gotten sidetracked... but soon as this fight was done I could have both my answers and my friend. Then we could decide how we'd end this war.

The day illusion swapped to one of night; it was spoiled only by the wan light peeking through the holes in the dome. A dozen spotlights illuminated the cage and the gaunt unicorn buck standing within from all angles. A top hat perched on his lanky black mane, and long elaborate robes draped over his thin frame as a crystal tipped staff hovered beside him. He brought the tip down with a crackle of thunder, and instantly the crowd fell silent. The crystal began to glow as his lips curled.

"Listen, all!" He proclaimed as he stood on his rear legs, waving his forehooves overhead. "This is the truth of it. Fighting leads to killing, and killing gets to warring. And that was damn near the death of us all. But look as us now! Busted up, and everyone scared of the taint and radiation. But we've learned— Hoofington learned. Now, when tough ponies get to fighting, it happens here! And it finishes here! Two ponies enter; one pony leaves."

"Um... he knows this isn't to the death, right?" I muttered with a gulp as the crowd cheered in approval and repeated the line over and over again.

Rampage gave me a mirthless smile. "It's always to the death Blackjack. Especially when it isn't. Now hush. It's bad luck to interrupt Dealgood."

The pony swished the staff through the air. "Right now, I've got two ponies, two mares with a gut full of hate and avarice." His voice dropped to a lover's whisper, magnified by the spell as he purred, "Fillies and Gentlecolts... Boys and girls... Dyin' time's here!"

He pointed the glowing crystal at me, and a spotlight stabbed down to illuminate me through the mesh door. "From the depths of the stable and into the hard rain she's

walked. She's meted out bloody justice with every step that she's taken. She's the hard law of the land, the bloody kick of retribution. She's. . . the Security Mare!"

I opened the door and stepped in only to be greeted by angry mutters and jeers. "Woohoo! Kick her ass, Blackjack!" Called Scotch Tape, pumping her hoof in the air.

"Um... yeah. Yay," Glory added sheepishly, her eyes full of worry.

"Don't die," Lacunae suggested from the back of my mind. Wonderfully helpful advice there!

"And over here, we have your favorite of the Hoofington Reapers. She's the loveliest in all of Equestria. The softest, gentlest, and nicest way a pony could die! You know her! You love her! She's. . . Psychoshy!" He called out grandly as he looked to the top of the dome.

She flew in from the top of the dome, swooping along the perimeter to the howls of adoration. Ponies with keys waved them at her, screaming for her to splash them with my blood. She landed next to Dealgood and screamed, "You're going to love me!" Her roar, magnified a thousand times by Dealgood's crystal, echoed through the stadium.

Okay. . . I could admit it. I was fucked.

We trotted in front of Dealgood. "Fight's simple. Get to the weapons. Use them however you can. This is a challenge to submission. Fight as long and hard as you can till your bones break if you must. Tap three times and you're done. Get knocked out and you're done. Die. . . and you're done." He said with a greasy grin at me. "Other than that, don't worry about the rules. There are none."

"I'm going to break you for being so mean to Sanguine," Psychoshy hissed softly at me.

"Won't be the first time," I countered as we trotted to opposite sides of the dome. A rope was looped around our necks. If I tried to grab a weapon with my magic or she lunged for one, we'd be choked. I looked longingly at a shotgun chained just a few feet from me with a bright red padlock on it. Looking around, the ponies waving the red keys sure didn't look all that interested in tossing them to me. I saw an old, ratty, sharpened shovel to my left.

Then I felt hooves on my tail. "Hey. . ." I started, but then looked back at P-21. His blue eyes were. . . strange. Bloodshot. Tired. Haunted. He held my tail for only a few seconds, and then released it. Looking at me, he swished his own tail. What was he trying to tell me?

“Good luck, Blackjack,” he said softly. “I hope you get the answers you’re looking for.” With that, he turned and started back into the crowd.

I turned my back to the fight. Suddenly, the meaninglessness of this fight hit me right between the eyes. I’d forfeit, let him have the PipBuck. I needed-

Then the crowd roared as four hooves smashed me against the door with such force I wondered if she’d snapped my back. I shoved back purely on reflex. “Glory! Help P-21!” I tried to yell out over the crowd as I turned to face Psychoshy. I just had to stomp my hoof three times and they’d have the stupid PipBuck. Once. Twice... but before I could smack my hoof a third time the yellow and gold pegasus whirled through the air and smashed my face with her rear legs.

“Oh, no giving up now,” she taunted.

“I need to help my friend! Take the stupid thing.” I said as I stomped my hoof again twice, but once again she slammed into me.

“The only way you’re leaving here is if you beat me,” she said as she grinned down at me from above.

My horn flared and seized the rope dangling about her neck in one fury-empowered yank to bring her down, face to face. “It. Is. ON!” If I had to break her head to see to my friend, then that’s what I’d do! Psychoshy brought her hoof up and kicked me upside the head again. My focus faltered just a little bit, and she was able to shove the rope off from around her neck. I wasted no time, grabbing the sharpened shovel and stabbing the jagged edge at her face.

No matter how bitchy and obnoxious she was, she was also fast. Faster than me and my shovel. My stabs and swings had her dodging about, but she excelled at dodging. Worse, more than once she’d swoop in and clip me with a hoof.

“White Key! White Key for Psychoshy! We looove you!” Screamed the Flash Fillies, tossing a key into the air. The yellow pegasus swooped away to catch it before it fell and kissed the mare who’d thrown the key. I wonder if the mare knew where that mouth had been. I looked around for another weapon. Something faster. Rusty knives. A rake. A carpenter’s hammer. What I really wanted was the shotgun.

Dealgood trotted atop the cage, announcing in his amplified voice, “Oh, surprise surprise. The Fillies have flung their key into the ring. Well, they’ve always had a warm and electric spot for the beautiful, lovely, kindly mare.” I snorted. In a radpig’s eye.

I stomped my hoof three times, but no pony was paying attention. I nearly screamed

in frustration. They wouldn't let me quit till they had a good fight! Then I noticed a tan key being held out towards me. Dealgood caught that, of course. "Oh ho ho ho! It looks like the Pecos out of Brimstone's Fall have decided to throw Security a bone." Psychoshy had gotten a power hoof from the Fillies. I saw a tan medical kit and raced over, jamming the key in the lock. I popped it open, hoping for something. . . anything. . . that could end this fight early!

What I got was an earthenware jug.

"Well now. Looks like the drinks are on the Pecos. Unless I miss my guess, that's some of Dusty Trails' own grade A moonshine!" Dealgood chuckled, "Personally, I'd rather have the power hoof, but beggars can't be choosers."

Psychoshy's hoof crackled with energy as she gave me that grin I knew and loved. There was only one thing to do with a bottle of alcohol. I pulled the stopper and lifted the bottle to my lips. It was like drinking pure fire. Suddenly, my aches and pains didn't feel like much at all and now I was grinning too. I thrust the jug overhead and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Yeeeeeehawwww!"

They wanted a fucking fight. It would be a fucking fight! Psychoshy charged straight at me, her hoof crackling with arcane energies that'd probably blast my face off. I squatted, dropped the bottle into my forehooves, and then threw the heavy jar right into her face with all my strength. Her eyes went wide as the jagged bits of pottery slashed at her hide and the burning alcohol splashed in her eyes. I reared up and brought my hooves down just as she slammed into me, hitting her so hard she bounced.

She sprawled out on her back before me. "Don't you get 'tween me and my friend!" I bellowed as I reared again to finish the fight. Then she drew back both her legs and smashed both of them right up into my reproductive organs. Moonshine or no, I felt that!

"Ooooh. . . and Security gets a hoofjob from her loveliness herself. Doesn't look like she enjoyed it much." Dealgood laughed from overhead.

I forced myself to my hooves, focusing on standing. I lifted the shovel to block her glowing forehoof, but the weapon shattered under the impact. Slowly I limped backwards. My horn snatched up a rake. Shattered. A hubcap. Shattered. Every weapon I grabbed was busted by that crackling power hoof. I tried to fire a magic bullet at her, but without S.A.T.S. every time my horn flashed she'd dodge aside.

"Awww, fuck it." I shouted and then lunged forward with no weapon at all, catching

Psychoshy by surprise. There were rules to fighting, but right now I was chucking them all out the window! I tackled her instead, and though I wasn't as hefty as an earth pony, I was heavier than her! We rolled in the dirt with me punching, biting, and kicking every inch of her I could. "You wanna fight dirty? Let's fight!"

Close in, her power hoof wasn't as effective. I was too dumb to guess why and too pissed to care. I bit hard on her ear, chewing like it was Rampage's heart. With a great heave she threw me off and took to the air again, looking hurt and pissed... and worried. I spat a chunk of her ear... or maybe it was my tooth... to the side as I grinned up at her.

"Pink key! Pink key for Psychoshy!" yelled some ponies that looked familiar. I thought I might have seen them around Flank. Psychoshy flew over to the appropriately labeled box and opened it. A restoration potion and some needles lay there. Ah, why couldn't I have had that key? I charged across the arena, but she gulped down the potion and jabbed the chem into her leg.

"Is that Stampede from the Halfheart gang? Why I think it is!" Dealgood crowed in glee. "Let's get ready to looooooove!" I stared in horror as Psychoshy's pupils shrank to pinpricks.

"LOVE!" She screamed as she slammed her power fist at me with a crackle. "LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! LOVE!" With each cry she battered at me with no thought or care for defense. I ate one hit, and after that it was all I could do to avoid another. The crowd was chanting along with her, and each time the word was uttered it seemed to push Psychoshy harder and faster. Even with the moonshine, I was definitely feeling run down.

Then I ducked as she swung her hoof into a metal post, and with sparks and a crackle the power hoof finally died. A united 'awww' of disappointment rose from the Flash Fillies. I turned and gave her face an Applejack applebuck, crushing her nose and knocking her back enough to get some space. I needed something and nopony was offering to help me. I looked at my friends, but they had no key to give me. Nothing to help me. Psychoshy was still under the effects of Stampede; any second she'd be all over me again like fleas in my tail.

P-21... swishing his tail... touching my tail... I lifted my tail and stared at the tiny brass bobby pin.

Of course he'd cheat to help me. I pulled the pin out and jammed it into a dark blue box, much to the outrage of the crowd. I had only seconds to do it, and I doubted I'd have a chance to force the lock. With a click, the container opened and I saw a

rejuvenation potion and a tin of Mint-als. Scooping up both with my magic, I jumped aside in time to avoid the hoof that dented the armored healing kit. What did I have to lose? I chowed down on both.

As the healing washed through me, I realized I'd committed a major faux pas. Clearly, using a bobby pin was a violation of the spirit of the game and there were a half dozen offering their keys to Psychoshy now. She was in such a Stampede-induced frenzy that she missed them, but that wouldn't last. I needed something to get them back on my side.

And Big Daddy was watching. Suddenly, I realized that it didn't matter how much I stomped, he was going to keep this fight going. I didn't just have to win. I had to win like a Reaper. Like one of the top ten. And that meant I'd have to put on a show.

"Psychoshy! You're under arrest for being a spoiled brat, a complete bitch, and for getting on my nerves! I'm taking you down." I yelled as I pointed my hoof at her. I had to time it perfectly, but, fortunately, it felt like I was as close to S.A.T.S. as I could be without taking Flash. I smashed her face with my hoof each time she charged. "You have the right to remain silent! Use it!"

That got a chuckle out of some of the crowd. I grinned at them like I was having the time of my life. "Anything you say can and will be used against you to kick your ass!" I was still getting beat on, but there was less and less howling for my blood by the second. "You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you don't have one, you can speak to my hoof!"

Now there were laughs as she was the uninteresting savage and I was the show. They weren't chanting 'love' now. "Shut up!" She screamed at me, but I laughed as I backed away. I wanted to get the hay out of there. I wanted a nice cold Sparkle-Cola bottle between my legs; the healing magic had done little for that particular pain. I wanted to find P-21. But to do that, I had to put on a show.

"Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you, or do I have to beat your ass till you do?" I asked at the top of my lungs.

She darted forward again, but not to kick as I'd anticipated. She bit down on the end of a rope. A rope still around my neck. Oh shit. . .

I started to lift it away just as Psychoshy pulled it taut. It crushed down on my throat, and I gagged as she lifted me up into the air. My hooves scrabbled as she lifted me to a hook set in the roof; maybe put there for this very reason, and wrapped the rope in place. "Looks like we're going to need another sheriff!" Psychoshy called

out, and then she began to beat me as I strangled. “You give up? You give up? Huh, Security? Tap out!” But there was nothing to tap, and I wasn’t sure they’d stop even if there was. It’s always to the death, even when it isn’t.

I looked up at that hook as my vision went red, my heart thundering like I’d just taken a dose of Buck. My throat spasmed as my lungs tried to suck in air. “Tap! Tap!” Psychoshy said in glee as she kicked my dangling body.

I looked up at the hook, trying to concentrate and focus. My magic bullet was shit on metal targets, but what else could I do? No unicorn was strong enough to levitate themselves! Tears ran down my cheeks as my eyes bulged. The first magic bullet went wide, and Dealgood jumped aside as he was narrowly missed. The second just dispersed off the metal. I tried to push everything out of my mind, focus on that hook and my spell. The one spell my little horn could manage. . .

The bolt flashed from my horn and struck the metal. It creaked, and then snapped free with a resounding ping. I plummeted to the ground like a sack of potatoes and stretched out my hoof to tap it once, twice, thrice.

In a flash, Lacunae teleported above me and pointed her glowing horn right at Psychoshy. “This fight is over!” she roared telepathically in all our minds. Rampage kicked open the door and Glory swooped in, pulling the knot out enough that Rampage could slice it with her hoofclaws. No pony seemed keen on arguing with a giant purple unicorn who could shout in their heads.

My lungs didn’t seem to work right. Glory held my muzzle carefully and took a deep breath. Then she blew into my lungs. I felt my chest inflate and gasped, coughing and hacking.

“Hrmmph! Loser.” Psychoshy fluttered a little unevenly, the Stampede wearing off, to meet the adoration of her fans. I just focused on the adoration of breathing.

Dry hoofstomps drew my attention as Sanguine approached, my PipBuck hovering beside him. “Well, that was an incredibly amusing fight. Still, I have what I want, and with this some very important ponies will be quite happy.”

“You’re Trueblood, aren’t you?” The well dressed pony gave a wide bow as his cracked lips spread in a grin. “That’s how you know about Project Chimera.” He looked impressed.

“Of course,” he replied softly. “I was involved in Project Chimera from the beginning. Goldenblood’s gift to Fluttershy. A project to take her mind off her broken heart. We’d make ponies too tough to kill, adaptable to any environment. It was quite a joy.

Truly. Gorgon was the first stable specimen. But, with time, we made others.”

Then he let out an irritated hiss. “Unfortunately, two years after the assassination attempt, Goldenblood started having... reservations. He cancelled the project, sealed its findings, and put the specimens in suspended animation. I was transferred to projects making insecticide talismans. Me. The master of biological arcane research... killing bugs.” He bristled at the indignity before calming and continuing. “Fortunately, Twilight Sparkle proved infinitely more open to the possibilities of transforming ponies into alicorns.” His eyes turned to Lacunae, his glowing pink eyes swirling with speculation. “I’d love a biological sample.” Clearly, he wasn’t mistaking her for anything but what she was.

“Over your dead body,” Lacunae replied coldly.

“Been there. Done that,” he answered with a chuckle. “Ah well, with EC-1101, I can make a whole lot of ponies happy... especially myself!”

Now I had my turn. “What are you talking about? I don’t have EC-1101.”

He froze. “What?” All his smug amusement melted away.

“My PipBuck was destroyed when it got struck by lightning,” I rasped softly. His eyes immediately widened and a look of absolute horror washed over his face.

“No. That’s not possible!” He stammered. “If it were, Horizons would have-“ But then he shut up. His eyes glared at me balefully and a long thin plume of pink mist curled out his muzzle like a tongue. “Oh... sneaky. I didn’t think heroes were allowed to lie.”

“I’m not a hero,” I groaned as I rubbed my throat. Rampage handed me my gear and I dug out some watery healing potions from 99. In a few more days, they’d be worthless. “Project Horizons would... what?” I asked as I drank three in rapid succession, healing most of my battered body. I’d definitely keep the bruises around my throat, though.

“Never mind. It must be on some other PipBuck.” His eyes immediately latched on to Scotch Tape’s.

Oh no, no psychoghouls on her! “You’re right.” I said as I dug in my bags for the delta PipBuck. “It’s right here.” I activated it and brought up the file. To my shock, immense relief bloomed in his face. “Why? What is Project Horizons?”

“Something dead and gone, along with its creator. That’s all you need to know about Horizons,” he said with dire solemnity. Then he lifted Marmlade’s PipBuck

with a little half smile. “Well, I’ll see if there’s anything else interesting on here, Blackjack. Maybe find something else to convince you to hand it over. One way or another.”

“Not a chance,” I rasped, then coughed. I was going have a hell of a bruise.

“Pity. Well then, it was very nice meeting you,” he said politely. “I look forward to when we can do it again.” And, with Marmalade’s PipBuck floating beside him, he trotted to where Psychoshy was recovering.

“Why didn’t you tap out sooner?” Glory asked me as she rubbed my throat. “You didn’t have to win her stupid fight.”

“She tried, but sometimes Dealgood’s got lousy vision,” Rampage said with a glare at the gaunt buck and the two floozies that flanked him. “My bet is Big Daddy kept the fight going.”

“You’d surely win that bet, Arloste,” Big Daddy said with a chuckle. “I wanted to see for myself just what Security was made of. Good stuff.”

I glared at him hard, but he wasn’t ashamed of what he’d done. I could see it clearly now. If Psychoshy hadn’t challenged me, somepony else would have. It would have been just as deadly, too. He caught my look and pointed a hoof at me. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. I needed to know you had the sand, and you did. Even picking a lock mid fight. Ballsy. Then that show you put on for the crowd? Genius.”

I couldn’t tell if I was drunk or not; the Mint-als seemed to be counteracting the effects of the potent moonshine. I sure was pissed, though. “I needed to find my friend. Something’s wrong with him.”

“That little blue guy? Didn’t see him,” Big Daddy said with a shrug as he trotted over to congratulate Psychoshy.

“Where is P-21?” Glory asked in concern. “I saw him at the start of the fight, but now he’s gone. He should be here.”

“We have to find him,” I muttered, rubbing my aching throat. “Glory can search the stands from above. Lacunae and Scotch can look around the tunnels. Rampage, talk to anypony you can. I’m going to the skyboxes to get my gun.” I’d be damned if I trotted around here without a firearm any more.

Once I’d gotten my weapons, I was still sorting out the conflicting sensations of ine-

briation and being Mint-al'd. With the Mint-als, things seemed sharper and clearer, but the alcohol was making my brain feel like it was running in tar. All I knew was that something was wrong with P-21. The way he'd wished me good luck with that look in his eye. . . something had happened.

Then I saw the little piece of paper sticking out of the barrel of my shotgun. Slowly, I lifted it, my focus making the paper tremble in front of me as my eyes took in the words.

Can't handle it any more. I'm sorry. Good luck.

Dread floored me as I stared at the paper. "You're the stupidest, most selfish pony in the history of Equestria, Blackjack." I muttered. I'd assumed that he'd been upset with me. That I'd been the reason he'd looked so hurt and haunted. That I was the cause of his distress, and if I just fixed it then he'd be happy with me. "You idiot. You fucking idiot!" I cursed as my mind raced. Panic must have been cooking off most of the alcohol from my brain as I raced into the hall. If he was leaving us. . . well, then I probably wouldn't find him. But if he was doing what I'd done. . . I looked back and forth along the hallway. He'd want someplace to do it alone.

Goddesses, please, no. Luna, Celestia, somepony. . . help me!

This was what he'd felt. This was what I'd put him through. I'd thought that what I'd done was terrible, cruel, mean, and wrong. I was right. But I hadn't known. . . really and truly known. . . what it was like till I read that horrible piece of paper. I deserved this.

He didn't.

It was like a little pink pony was kicking my head to get me to look down at the door at the end of the hall. There were two skyboxes not being used. . . that were empty. I raced to the one with Deus's name on it, but it was still locked tight. I hurried down and tried the door to Gorgon's room.

It opened easily.

Gorgon's room was a disaster area. It more resembled a den than a room, with the walls smashed and kicked. There were dozens of empty syringes laying about and a few filled with rainbow sludge. My PipBuck was clicking softly from the background radiation in the room. The bed was more of a nest than a mattress. The only sign of sanity was a small collection of pictures and a little statue.

But no sign of P-21.

I almost left then and there to tell my friends what had happened when that pink pony bashed my brain with a super sledge and my eyes saw the door. The bathroom. I scrambled across the room, knocking over a drum of radioactive goo. I couldn't care less. All that mattered was that I find P-21 in time. That was all that mattered. All that mattered.

He'd used a wire.

It was wrapped several times around his neck and an exposed pipe in the ceiling. He'd stepped off the sink. His face was the color of Lacunae's hide as he dangled there limply. My scream died in my throat as I got underneath him and heaved. Take a breath! Breathe! Nothing. I stared up at the pipe and the wire. My horn flashed as I fired bullet after bullet into the pipe. Finally, it snapped, and he fell upon me like a doll.

The wire had cut so deeply into his hide that it'd disappeared from sight. My eyes dripped as I pulled it free from around his neck. "P-21..." I whispered as I looked at his glazed eyes. "P-21!" I pressed my lips to his, blowing in his mouth as Glory had into mine minutes ago. His chest rose. "Damn it, P-21! You can't do this! You were out! You were free!" I breathed again. I thumped his chest, like he was just asleep and all I had to do was wake him up.

He lay there... so very still...

"Damn it, P-21! You have to live! You have to! You can't let this place kill you! Can't let me kill you! Damn it!" I sobbed and tried breathing for him again. Again. Again. "P-21! Please! Don't leave me. Don't leave us. I'm sorry. Please," I begged his slack face. "Call me an idiot! Call me stupid! Hate me! Shoot me! Just don't die!" I begged as my raspy voice burred in my half healed throat. I clutched him, holding him, weeping utterly alone.

"I couldn't save you..."

The whisper was so faint that I didn't know if I'd heard it or imagined it. Maybe I'd finally lost my mind. Then I felt him move faintly in my hooves. There were no words. I just wept like I never had before; like I cried for all of 99 as I just held him. "I couldn't save them... I'm sorry... I couldn't save you..." he whispered.

I hated him. I loved him. The entire spectrum of emotions crashed through me in a storm. I wanted to kill him and yet he was the most precious thing in the Wasteland at the moment. His face was returning to its blue complexion as his throat bled from those lacerations encircling it. I settled on holding him as we wept together. Now I

knew. Now I knew what I'd actually done.

When we'd both stabilized a bit, we sat on the remains of Gorgon's shredded mattress. He couldn't look me in the eyes, so I just looked at his hooves. "I couldn't do anything. When we went back to 99, and we found the males were still alive, I was sure that, given the chance, they'd be like me. They'd want to be free. To live their own lives. To be happy. To be ponies. People.

"They didn't. They... they were more comfortable with the abuse that was familiar to them than the possibility of being on their own. It didn't matter how I cried or argued or begged... they were just waiting for us to leave. Even the new P-20 and U-20..." He hunched over a little and sobbed, "They hated me for being the P-21 who got to live. For cheating. For daring to want to live." He glanced at me, tears running from his bright and haunted eyes. "They told me that I should have died when it was my time."

It would be easy to ask how they could feel that way, but after so much conditioning and trauma... "The mares were the same," I said softly. "They wanted safe and predictable more than freedom. The thought of change was too much for them. The only ponies interested were young ponies like Scotch Tape."

He sniffed and nodded. "There was one colt who I thought would leave with us... but the older ones cowed him... told him it wasn't his place to leave." He gave a terrible noise, half laugh and half sob, "I always thought it was the mares keeping us down. They didn't have to. We did it to ourselves. We did it."

I hugged him, and though he stiffened, he didn't push me away this time.

"But worst of all was when I made you kill Stable 99," he whispered, shaking in my hooves.

"What?" That was my call...

"I knew there was a chance the food supply was contaminated. I guessed it'd been contaminated since the first round of raiders... but I was more concerned about the bucks than about making sure that the stable was safe and secure." He drew a shaking breath. "You'd just lost your mother and found Glory. And, as you've said, you're not the smart pony. I am. I should have done something. Done more. It's my fault Stable 99 was contaminated."

"No! It's my..." when was I going to learn? Everything didn't begin and end with me.

He looked at me, and I realized that he felt every bit as much guilt as I had. How had I missed it? Why didn't I realize how deeply he'd blamed himself?

What kind of friend was I?

"When you told us we were leaving, I knew you were going to do something about the stable. You had to. I thought, when we were all out, that we'd talk about it. Glory would object. I'd back you up. I was already thinking about how I could collapse the tunnel. Then you threw the PipBuck through." He shook even more as he sniffed.

"When we told Lacunae what you'd done, she disappeared and then came back with you a minute later... and you were gasping and dying." He clenched his eyes closed, "I knew you'd tried to kill yourself. I knew that Lacunae was covering for you. But... I hoped... somehow..." He pressed his face to my chin as we wept. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you. I wanted to save you... like you saved Scotch and so many others. But I couldn't... and when I read your note... when I read it..."

He fell apart again, and I did too a little bit. Now I knew exactly how he felt. I just held him till he quieted. "I wasn't able to help you... and I was so angry at myself for failing... again and again... and angry at you for not caring... I couldn't stand it. I couldn't do anything. It hurt so much inside that I'd done that to you and everything I did just made it feel worse."

"Shh..." I said softly. "If you'll forgive me for leaving... I'll forgive you for the same."

He didn't say a word. He just gave the tiniest of nods against me.

I wouldn't tell anypony about this. It was his secret and his shame and his pain to share or keep hidden away, but I would be here for him. I walked a hard road, but I was a fool to think only I felt pain along that trail.

After we'd put most of our tears behind us, he was cognisant enough to realize that I had rainbow goop splattered across my legs. "Blackjack! You need to wash that stuff off!" He said in alarm as I tried to get to my hooves, failed, and staggered against the bed. My head ached and throbbed and I just sat there feeling... drained. A plug had been pulled, and suddenly everything inside my head had been sucked away down the toilet.

"Huh?" I muttered dully as I looked at the tingly smears on my hide. He pulled out a scrap of bedsheet and began to wipe it off; cleaning where it'd transferred on to him as well. I couldn't seem to move or think. Some very distant part of me agreed with

him that it was bad, but all I did was sit there like a lump.

“What’s the matter, Blackjack?” He rasped painfully as he stared into my eyes. I swore I could see little stars in the corners of my vision.

“Just... not feeling good.” I muttered as I rose to my hooves, successfully this time... but where was I supposed to go? I couldn’t go anywhere or do anything. I couldn’t help my friends or myself or anypony. Couldn’t do anything. Useless.

“What is this stuff?” P-21 asked as he shoved me away from the puddle of sludge.

“Sanguine made it... made Gorgon...” I muttered stupidly. Because I was stupid. Idiot. Fool. It was like my brain had suddenly transformed into the same rainbow sludge that was spattered over the floor. P-21 was trying to push me even further from it but I sat down hard and then slowly walked to the little table.

One picture showed Big Macintosh, Applesnack, Jetstream and Maripony together at a hoofball game, the huge red buck looking odd out of uniform and the blue mousy mare bedecked with every bit of Reapers paraphernalia she could bear as she peered through her glasses. She had her nose in a copy of ‘Hoofball for Dummies’ and was smiling shyly for the camera. Another of Stonewing with his left wing around a furiously blushing black unicorn mare and his right around a happy looking Jetstream. Twist, Psalm, and Jetstream all on a beach at the Boardwalk while Doof, Applesnack, and Stonewing looked on appreciatively. A ‘Mare’s Life’ article on Jetstream.

There were medals, too. I didn’t know if they were his or not. I lifted one that was a disk framed with two laurel leaves around the edges, a winged thunderbolt down the middle. There was a faded paper beneath it that read ‘Commendation of Valor for defense of a wounded comrade at Black Pony Mountain.’ A purple heart and matching ribbon with a pair of wings. That had to be when he’d saved Jetstream and lost his voice.

There was only one image of Rainbow Dash.

That was the statuette. It rested on a yellow envelope. Gently, I lifted it in my magic. “It’s just like Spike’s,” I said softly, catching P-21’s confused expression out of the corner of my eye. I looked at the tiny words on the base. ‘Be Awesome’.

“You’re just like her,” P-21 rasped softly. No. Nopony was like Rainbow Dash, but it was nice gesture. It felt as though a little blue pegasus was gathering up all the gloomy clouds of stupid and clearing them from my mind. In ten seconds flat, I felt better.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile. “Stonewing was always a fan of Rainbow Dash. She got him to sign up. He worshipped her. But he missed how much Jetstream loved him.”

“Did he?” P-21 asked as he gestured at the pictures. “She’s in almost all of these.”

I looked at the envelope resting on the table. ‘To ta ponee tha kiled me’ I looked at P-21 and then slid out the letter inside. The writing was sloppy and in block print, but I could barely make it out.

der kiler

thank yu for killing me. i am sorrie you kiled me. i kno it was hard. i kno i am monsher now. i am not monsher realy but i look liek won. i sorrie. i hope i not hurt yu. i not smart ponee. i had acci- axi- i got shot in my hed and turned into monsher. if you kiled me thank yu. if not stop reding plese.

i wat to say i am sorrie. i am sorrie jetstrem. i kno you liek me. i liek yu too. i just want yu safe and hapy. i am sorry big mak- macen- big m. i didnt men to get shot in my hed and make you sad. i am sorrie i not ther to stop yu from geting shot. i kno geting shot is no fun. espe- expe- specshully wen you get kiled. i was turned into a monsher and so i couldnt help yu. i am sorrie evriepony for geting shot and turned into a monsher.

so plese dont be sad for kiling me. you did gud. i am hapy now. i am with jetstrem and big m and all my friends now. i dont hurt anymore. and i wont hurt anymore ponees like a monsher. i am not a monsher. i just look liek won.

i am not a monsher but thank yu for kiling me. plese tak care of ranbow dash. she is awsum.

gudbye. stonwing.

My tears smeared the ‘gudbye’. Funny. Seconds ago I felt certain that I’d used up all my tears and now here were a few more. Someday I’d pay Sanguine back. When I did, I’d be sure to give a little bit from Stonewing as well. I slipped the statuette into my pouch. “Come on. Lets get back to our friends. Let them know we’re okay.” I paused as I looked at him. “Are you okay?”

He opened his mouth once, then closed it again. Slowly he took a breath. “I... I don’t know. I think I am... just a little bit. I still can’t stop thinking about it though. I still remember them telling me that I should have died. Asking when they’d be put back into the breeding queue.”

“I still smell chlorine,” I said softly and watched him shudder. I nudged his shoulder. “You can always talk to me about it. No more running away. No more notes.”

He nodded. “Yeah. No more notes.”

The world was full of pain, but we didn’t have to suffer alone.

Side by side, we made our way back to Glory and the others. The gray pegasus took one look at the cuts in his neck and the bruises around mine and gave a soft ‘eep’ of comprehension. Our eyes met and I smiled and shook my head. She swallowed, nodded slowly, and used my bandages on his throat. I didn’t know if there was any healing magic left in them, but at least his injuries would be less likely to get infected.

In fact... I frowned as I looked at that fine field of green grass. At the numerous scars that decorated the Reapers. Everypony healthy. Food growing. Something felt... off. Not wrong, exactly, though.

This place felt like Chapel.

That made me wonder something. As Glory wrapped the bandages around P-21’s throat, I trotted up to Lacunae and Scotch Tape. After letting them know that P-21 was okay, I quietly asked Lacunae, “Is this area... um? Different? Special?” She stared at me in shock, and I glanced around before asking even more quietly, “Are there no screams here?”

That made her take a step back. “But... how could you know?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just that this place is a lot like Chapel, isn’t it? And it doesn’t have the same kind of Enervation, does it?” If it had, the constant fighting and injuries would be slowly wearing them away. That also explained why the Reapers were so much better off here than gangs abroad. It was like ponies in a stable: living away from the Enervation, they became fit and healthy.

“If the screams are quiet here, and everypony is healthy...” I frowned and thumped the side of my head as if trying to shake loose the idea. “Perhaps they’re connected... somehow?”

Scotch Tape sat on her rump and dug out the Hoofington Edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. “Okay... where did I miss the part about screams? I found Enervation under ‘E’, but there wasn’t nothing about screams.”

“It’s something I hear in my mind. The wailing and screaming of countless ponies.

Here it is almost... quiet." Now Lacunae seemed to be pondering the relationship as well.

Scotch tape just huffed, crossed her forelegs, and sat down. "I wanna go back to 99. I don't care if it's full of poison and cannibal ponies. Screaming ghosts is where I draw the line."

"They're not ghosts," I said, then frowned and looked at Lacunae. "Are they?" Lacunae simply gave a slow shrug. Of all the time for a shrug, now was not it.

"I'm going to pass on your offer, for now," I told Big Daddy as we met down on the field. I had to admit the act of simply eating grass... not something recycled or cooked or packaged... was definitely weird. Still, it was food... boring bland green food. Gimme Sugar Apple Bombs any day! The PipBuck technician that had removed Marmalade's PipBuck had put the delta PipBuck back on my left hoof where it belonged.

Big Daddy chewed thoughtfully as he looked at me over the top of his glasses, his eyes glowing. "Well, can't say I'm happy to hear that. I liked how you well you handled Sanguine and Psychoshy."

"Not sure we were watching the same fight. She beat me," I argued.

"You were distracted. In a fair and focused fight, you'd have beaten her. Heck, with enough training you might beat me... when I'm all old and crotchety," he added as an afterthought.

"I've got a mystery I'm trying to unravel. Something bad that happened in Hoofington two hundred years ago. Murders. Conspiracy. Secret projects." I groaned softly as I sat down, looking at the fake sky. Knowing it was a roof stopped my stomach from flopping around. "Why does a not smart pony like me have to be the one to figure all this convoluted stuff out?" I sighed and looked at him. "Have you ever heard of the O.I.A., Goldenblood, EC-1101, or Project Horizons?"

He twirled his beard around his hoof. "Would you stay, join the Reapers, and help us stomp the Rangers if I did?"

I smirked at him. "Maybe. I told you, though: Rangers didn't attack you. It was us."

He snorted, "Same difference. Rangers want a fight and we're gonna give it to 'em. I look forward to breaking as many of Carrot's toys as I can till she cries for mercy."

“So no chance for peace?” I asked with a soft frown.

He sighed, looking at me skeptically. “Do you really want it? Steel Rangers aren’t any better than Reapers. In fact, some of them are every bit as bad as Sanguine.” He took a bite and chewed as he stared at me with his own unnatural gaze.

“I want to keep ponies from dying. Too many die for no reason.” I said as I plucked a clump of grass with my horn and looked at it, seeing still foals on a stable floor. I looked at him again. “So... have you ever heard of them?”

He sat back as I chewed, gazing at me before he took a deep breath and sighed. “Only the O.I.A. and then only a little bit here and there. Compared to the Ministries, they seemed like nobodies. Paper pushing bureaucrats. But I can tell they matter to you.” He looked in the direction of the Core. “Thirty-five years ago, we came here from Manehattan. Hoofington was just a dot on a pre-war map back then. We didn’t even have access to the broadcast towers here. But when I saw those black towers with the green glow, I knew... I just knew... this was a bad place. Something wrong happened here. Something that could kill us, even today.”

I shivered, then asked another question to cover up my discomfort. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Is it about my age? I think I can make the goalposts from here,” he said dryly.

“No. Your eyes...” He looked surprised, then chuckled.

“Oh there’s a whole lot of speculation. Lots of ponies think that they’re a product of too much mutation. That I can see in the dark... or that I know the flaws of my enemies... there are some ponies who think that I can even kill with my stare.” He locked gazes with me a moment. I matched him stare for stare. His eyes slowly narrowed. Mine matched his. Then I broke first with a snort, and he chuckled.

He rubbed his glowing eyes. “Truth is, they’re the product of a zebra curse. Back when we were bashing every two bit warlord and champion around the Hoof, we came across an old zebra. Now, most zebras hate the Hoof with a passion that’s nigh on religious. But this nutter, he was looking for something. He’d gotten himself captured by a starving tribe and almost ended up on the menu. I happened to free him.

“He fed me some crock about the Hoof being surrounded by evil spirits and that they were drawn here by a great and terrible wrong. Figured he was talking about the Core. Then he blew some glowing sand in my eyes and said it would give me the sight of the sun. The old kook took off after that.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t

know exactly what he did... being I don't have a horn on my noggin... but ever since then, I've been able to look at ponies and see them for who they really are. It's how I know Sanguine's a crooked snake who's going to kill me some day. And it's how I know the Reapers will be good in Brutus' hooves when he does."

"You know he's planning on killing you?" I asked in shock. He looked back, clearly disappointed.

"I look like my mind's going, girl? I could tell he was no good the moment he showed up here with Deus and Gorgon. He's made of hooks and needles, cutting away pieces of everypony around him. I didn't need magic eyes to tell that. But if he doesn't kill me, old age will. Cause I am old." he said, thumping my chest with a hoof, making me flinch. "And I'm getting older. And I'd rather die from a knife in my back than from some stupid organ of mine failing."

I looked at him, pity welling up for the old buck. It had to be hard to get old in the Wasteland.

Then he reached out and smacked me upside the head sharp enough to knock me over. The world spun as I clutched my throbbing skull. "What was that for?" I asked. My brain wasn't quite over the hangover feelings from the fight earlier.

"Looking at me all sad like," he said sharply. "Ain't avoiding the fact. Just don't like being reminded of it."

"So... what do you see when you look at me?" I asked with a touch of trepidation.

He stared at me for a long while. My mane began to crawl as I swallowed. I'd just about asked him to forget it when he said softly, "Blood and stars."

Oh... of course...

"Blood of the innocent. Blood of the guilty. Fresh blood. Cold blood. Old blood. You're standing in a river of the stuff. It's flowing through you. Gives you strength. It's also tearing you away and drowning you. And for all the blood that's soaking you through and through... it's nothing compared to all the bloodshed you're going to prevent." He sighed and shrugged, "I also see stars above you... stars beneath you... stars within you. You're made of stars. Bloody stars."

"Is there some sort of rule that old ponies are supposed to give cryptic prophecies to fuck with the minds of the young?" I asked sharply. Then I was practicing my flying skills as his hooftoss sent me sailing towards the goalposts. At least I didn't hit the horizontal bar before landing in a heap. He trotted over and helped me up.

“Sorry about that. Principle. And nope. I just call ‘em like I see ‘em. But there’s one thing that cheers me up about seeing all that,” he said with a grin.

“Really? What’s that?” I asked dryly.

“I ain’t you,” he said with a chuckle.

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk Added: Nerves of Steel – You now regenerate AP as if you were Rainbow Dash: 20% faster.

Quest Perk Added: Magic Penetration – Your magic bullet spell ignores 15 DT of armor.

26. Descent

“Curses are artificial, fake magic. It’s conjured with potions and incantations, all smoke and mirrors meant to scare. But curses have no real power; they’re just an old pony tale.”

In the early morning, before the sky outside was switched on for the day (the illusory night apparently being used for matches rather than actual night), I lay in Rampage’s room. The striped mare was snoring heartily, but what had actually woken me was the disturbing sensation of my heart fluttering in my chest. To make matters worse, my head was throbbing with the promises of a migraine.

I lay there on the mattress while the rest of my friends slept around me, my amber eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. The cracked plaster slowly crumbled away, a black mould crawling along the edge, wet, pulpy, and glistening and growing before my eyes. It grew only because I looked at it, but if I looked away it would consume us all. My heart beat faster and faster. Something was inside that rot and fungus. Something was moving. Something was looking back at me. An inexplicable reek of ammonia reached my nostrils.

Suddenly, Scotch Tape jerked to her hooves next to me, snapping my gaze off that horrible patch of wall. The young olive mare muttered softly, “Damn it. Not again. . .” and trotted into Rampage’s bathroom with blankets still wrapped around herself.

I looked back at the wall, at the small cracks in the discolored plaster. All was normal. All was as it should be.

Thump thump. . . thump thump. . . thump thump thump. . . thump thump. . .

“You know, it would have been nice if Big Daddy could have thrown me a bone and let us cross the Zenith Bridge,” I muttered as I spread the map of Hoofington in the back of the Wasteland Survival Guide out against the row of bleacher seats in front of me.

Earlier in the morning, I’d gone to see the Reaper’s medic and swapped our salvage for some more little purple potions. Doctor Contusion, who, in her ponyhide armor covered in cutie marks with a disturbing medical motif, looked if anything more unnerving than the other Reapers, had also confirmed my guess about the low level

of Enervation around the arena.

After that, I'd tried to get a new melee weapon, but, for all the bloody panoply of deadly implements I'd been shown, I hadn't seen any that really appealed to me. I just didn't have the horn for giant hammers or swords made from wagon fenders, and I felt wary about using rippers and chainsaws. I wouldn't grow back my head if I accidentally sliced it off.

"Even if he did," P-21 said, "the Steel Rangers aren't letting anypony cross. And, according to DJ Pon3's latest report," he continued, pointing at the other crossing north of the Forks, "Toll's been closed since the fighting started. Unless you have another Seahorse around here, I don't see how we're going to get to the far side."

"Can't she just fly over, blink back, and teleport us all across?" Scotch Tape asked, pointing at Lacunae.

The alicorn sighed. "Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to teleport a pony such a distance?" The young mare gave her a dry look, and the purple pony huffed softly. "The energy needed is the product of the square of the amount of mass to be transported, the square of the distance to be covered, Fireflash's constant, and the inverse of the amount of radiation I've absorbed."

I just stared at her for a minute, then said softly, "Lacunae, pretend for a minute that I don't know anything about alicorns, mathematics, teleportation, or arcane science. Can you teleport us all across the river?"

"I could, but only one at a time; that would take all day, and I would be exhausted after each. That would leave us woefully exposed."

"You teleported the bucks to safety in 99," Scotch Tape pointed out. "And the guns."

"That was a distance of no more than fifty feet, and afterwards I was so exhausted I could do no magic for almost two whole days." I looked around, glad to see that no pony was asking why a Goddess would have such limitations. "To teleport across the river, I would need to find a significant landmark and memorize it in detail. It is unlikely that I'd find one near the water on the far side."

"Could you just fly us across?" I asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. But some of you are heavy, and it is almost certain that the Steel Rangers would try to shoot us down. Alone, I could handle that, but if I have to focus on carrying somepony else at the same time..." That didn't sound like a risk we wanted to take.

“So, we can’t cross on a bridge. Can’t fly over and probably can’t swim across. Can’t teleport all of us without taking a really long time...” I sighed and rubbed my chin. Couldn’t go over. Couldn’t go across. Couldn’t cheat with alicorny magics. That left... “Can we go under the river?”

“Under? Are you crazy?” Rampage said as she jumped to her hooves. I smiled softly at her, crossed my forehooves calmly in front of me, and arched a brow in a perfect expression of reasonability. Rampage groaned, pressing her face to her forehooves. “Of course you are...”

P-21 muttered, “Welcome to my world.” I smiled at him and felt warmth when he smiled back.

“What’s wrong with under?” Glory asked with a small gulp of nervousness.

“The tunnels of Hoofington,” Scotch Tape read aloud from the Guide as she lay on her belly on an old cushion, her rear legs waving idly in the air, “are particularly deadly. Today they are the home to desperate raiders, feral ghouls, and packs of savage beasts called cyberdogs. Perhaps even more dangerous are the automated defense systems, including magical ward screens and patrolling robots, and pockets of intense radiation and enervation. Extreme care should be employed, and visits should be brief.”

“Over a thousand miles of tunnels, subways, and other pieces of underground infrastructure were constructed in Hoofington, and much of it remains intact and unflooded thanks to still active pumps and ventilation systems. Care should be taken to stick to sewage maintenance tunnels and blue line subway tunnels. Enter into green industrial tunnels only in dire circumstances. Red tunnels should be avoided at all costs. These security tunnels were restricted during the war and contain potent defensive systems. Remember: Red and you’re dead.”

“Ooooh pictures!” She lifted the book up in her mouth, showing us a robotic sand dogesque monster that appeared more machine than meat. I sure hoped that that was artistic license and not an accurate depiction.

“More than a thousand miles?” Glory gasped. “Where did they put them all? The Core is only five miles across at the most! How in Equestria did they dig out that much that fast?”

But I remembered Big Macintosh’s memory of the city during reconstruction. “Tunnels on top of tunnels on top of tunnels,” I said as I rose to my hooves and started pacing, “They dug tunnels to bring building materials under the river. And they

buried all the power lines and the like after zebras started attacking with dragons; it was safer. They probably connected all the bases to the city by tunnels too.”

Hoofington was a fortress, but it was more than just the Core. The core was like a great big fat bullseye, a challenge to the zebras. But, in reality, the entire valley was a fortress, a death trap for the zebras to attack over and over again. ‘Here is our technology. Here is the city you tried to raze. Come and get us.’ I had to wonder how many thousands of zebras had died besieging and assaulting the city. Tens of thousands? Hundreds? Millions?

I’d seen the bones in Nopony’s Land. That was just one small hill along the western edge of the city. How many were in the badlands south of Flank? Or east, toward the zebra lands? The zebras had come to Hoofington over and over again to die. The city wasn’t a fortress. It was a killing machine.

“So, is there a tunnel from here to the east side of the river?” P-21 asked as he looked over the filly’s shoulder at the guide. We all looked at Rampage, who gave a shrug.

Suddenly, I smiled. “We might not know, but we know somebody who does.”

“Ponies know nothing. Why do ponies always stick noses where not belong?” Rover grumbled as he picked through the wall of his workshop. We’d been walking all morning to hoof it from the Arena to Riverside. On a map, the two locations were fairly close. In reality, we’d had to snake our way through the rubble-strewn streets and more than once pick our way through fallen buildings. The Halfheart gang was also making our lives difficult now that word was out that Security had turned down Big Daddy’s offer. We’d been dealing with snipers all morning; it’d gotten to the point where Lacunae shed her dress and, together with Glory, swept out the snipers nests in the windows of the crumbling apartment buildings.

By the time we reached Sunset Station, I was carrying Scotch Tape to give her feet a rest. P-21 was slowing us down too, but he simply set his lips together and tried to keep up the pace. The Sand Dogs had nearly attacked us a second time before they caught sight of Lacunae. She was a figure both pony and dog tended to remember, particularly with her minigun hovering ominously over her head. The alicorn had developed a habit of occasionally revving the motor when one of the bionic canines got too close.

“We have to get to the east side of the river. Are there tunnels that will get us there?”

I asked. Fifi and Scotch Tape stood nearby, seeming to find each other fascinating but both a little too nervous to talk to each other. All the Sand Dogs were doing far better with gems powering their mechanical parts. Food came in through Riverside and salvage from the tunnels left. A lot of that equipment was being traded with Brimstone's Fall and Chapel. Trade was saving the Wasteland.

"Yes yes yes, pony," Rover grumbled sourly as he walked over to a pile of papers and pawed through them, muttering. "Tunnels is very dangerous for ponies. Yes. Many dangerous things in the deeps. Ponies should not go in tunnels. Tunnels is Dogs' home." He dug through pile after pile while I looked at strange arcane plans and blueprints on his wall.

Luna dam power generator assembly #4. Fort Pony Annex. Samophlange housing. "Why do you keep these?" I asked, trying to figure out what the Tokomare was supposed to be. Or a section 44 emergency release valve. Or why anyone would want to hang on to diagrams of them.

As Rover continued to dig through the old boxes, I noticed a dusty memory orb sitting in a stained coffee cup marked 'Aegis Security'. Curious, I shook out the slowly swirling orb. I glanced over at Rover, wondering what good a memory orb would do a Sand Dog. "Excuse me," I asked, lifting up the orb. "Do you mind if I look at this?"

He snorted in dismissal. "Is pony garbage. Dog uses as nightlight for Fifi. Pony can do with it as Pony wishes."

Leaving him to dig through his papers, I smiled to myself and tapped the orb against my horn. Sometimes, physical contact seemed to be the only way to help the connection along. I felt the shock of connection, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Okay, not liking this memory. Correction: not liking this body! Something was very wrong here. My legs ached, my back was sore, my hips felt all tottery, and my vision was a mess of blurs. But, despite all that, I could smell the most amazing collection of scents... I wasn't exactly sure what they all were, but I could smell them. I could also hear voices talking quite clearly. With a groan, my host rose and trotted... well... walked, at least, down a cloudy hall.

"...glad that you're all right, Applejack. An accident like that... it's terrifying that something like that can strike right out of the blue," a buck said in conciliatory tones. The smell of mare, apples, bed linen and buck filled my nose.

“Well, we’re not completely convinced that it was an accident, Horse.” Applesnack’s low, serious voice perked my curiosity. “Elevators don’t generally fall on their own.”

“I . . . I hadn’t thought of that. I hope that the Ministry of Morale is taking a hard look at that possibility,” Horse said in concerned tones. “Well, in light of that, maybe. . .” He trailed off, and silence fell for a moment.

“What is it, Horse? I can tell ya got some idea stuck in yer noggin,” Applejack said in tired tones. My host rose up, and I smelled her scent of mare, a bed occupied for far too long, and healing bandages. Something reached out to rub my host’s ears. . . wait? What kind of ears were those? They felt. . . furry.

“There’s been a lot of concern about high profile ponies being at risk from zebra assassins. We’ve been exploring some possibilities. Running a few experiments. We’ve found ways to place an organic brain inside a mechanical robotic body.”

“I heard about that,” Applejack said sourly. “I can honestly say that that’s one o’ the most ghoulish things I’ve ever heard.”

“Unconventional, perhaps.” Horse admitted, sounding like he wasn’t too happy with the practice either. “We only use convicted ponies from High Tower, and only after removing most of their memories and personality. The brain, preserved in gel, just acts as a processor.”

“Cut to the chase, Horse. What does all this have to do with Applejack?” Applesnack demanded.

Horse cleared his throat and said delicately, “Well, you see. . . we’ve also been developing a canine model. In fact, it’s almost ready for production, given that there’s far more canine brain samples available. We’re just looking for a subject for our production prototype.” An awkward silence ensued.

Finally, Applejack muttered, “Horse. If I could get outta this bed, I’d buck your head clean off your shoulders! I know what you’re thinking!” Applejack swore and groaned. My host whined, licking her leg and tasting lotion.

“Well, I’m not under doctor’s orders to stay in bed...” Applesnack growled.

Horse spoke quickly. “Please, listen to me. I know you love her, but face facts. Winona is old. She’s an exceptional dog: intelligent, loyal, and well trained. Better that a lot of ponies, honestly. And,” he continued in a calmer tone, “as you said, you think somepony is trying to kill you. . . and I agree. Let me give Winona a fresh new body. Onyx and Glass are both sure they can preserve both her mind and her personality. And she’ll be able to keep your foals and grandfoals just as safe as you.”

“Yeah, as if that’ll happen any time soon,” Applejack said in a slightly sharp mutter. Applesnack coughed awkwardly. The mare stroked my host’s ears and rubbed between her aching shoulders. Despite her words, I could tell from her tone that she was... pensive.

“Just consider my offer. We’ll be moving on to the security and combat prototypes one way or another. I just wanted to give you a chance. I know Winona would want to keep you safe.” There was another moment of silence. “Well...I hope you feel better soon.”

“Yeah. You too, Mr. Horse,” Applejack muttered in worry. Her ears swiveled as Horse trotted away; a moment later, the door closed.

My host gave a worried whine in the back of her throat and nudged Applejack’s hoof with her muzzle.

“I can’t believe he’d propose something like that while you’re still recovering,” Applesnack muttered darkly.

“I didn’t stop being the ministry mare just because I fell down an elevator shaft,” Applejack replied. “He means well. Horse is the only one of the lot of em that didn’t look like he was glad I’m laid up. Heck, even Braeburn seemed glad I’d be out for a while.” There was a sigh. “Can ya help Winnie up?”

Applesnack, smelling faintly of sweat and musk and anger, trotted behind Winona and boosted her onto the bed. My canine host gave a happy bark and wiggled up next to the orange mare. Applejack sighed softly, running her hoof through my host’s fur. “You’re a good girl, Winona. Yes you are. You’ve always been my good little helper.”

There was silence as Applejack just stroked my the old body. “What do you think?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know. I usually leave all this technology stuff to you, Applejack,” the buck said softly. “I just know that, if we’re right, I don’t want you at risk again. And Horse was right. . . she is getting old.”

Applejack gave a soft sigh and sniff. “T’aint fair. Angel Bunny don’t seem any older at t’all.”

“Yeah, but who knows what chemicals and potions that little monster’s taken?”

“Don’t let Fluttershy hear you say that,” Applejack said with another sniff. “You’re a good girl, Winnie. A good girl, ya hear?”

My host lifted her muzzle and licked away salty tears. . .

oooOOOooo

“Sand Dogs dig. Sand Dogs help make,” Rover muttered as he pulled out an old wooden box filled with still more rolls of paper. “Dogs make things that matter.”

“You helped make them?” I asked, curious. The Sand Dogs didn’t strike me as the most engineering-inclined people. Then again, they had bionic parts, so who was I to judge?

“Ponies have horns,” he muttered. “Dogs have thumbs.” He wagged the appendage at me for a moment with a grin before pulling out another piece of paper. “Thumbs is better, pony. Ponies think of things to make, but Dogs make them. Heavy, sweaty, dangerous work, but we did it.”

I supposed that was true. “Goldenblood really wanted to help you, didn’t he?”

Rover growled but then sighed. “Golden Pony want impossible. Want things as they was. Want home as once was. Dogs home and pony home. He try to make Dog town new home, but pony city is not dog home. Dogs have only one home.”

“Why is that? Isn’t home wherever you live?” I asked. He snorted in distaste, muttering to himself for a bit as he pulled out a few more papers and then finally seemed to settle on one.

“Home is home. Dogs have one home. That home is gone. Golden Pony say he fix home if could. Get rid of poison. Make apologies. But he not. Over time, he forgot about us till very end. Even Golden pony used Dogs.” He growled faintly in a tone of finality, “Ponies is not nice.”

I felt a bit stung at that. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said, looking down at my hooves.

He pointed a finger at me. “Pony is using Dogs now too. Pony wants information from Dogs, tunnels only Dogs know.” He snorted, a gob of snot dripping from his old gray muzzle for a moment before he wiped it off on the ragged sleeve of his jacket. “But,” he conceded, “Pony is at least nicer about it than most Ponies.” He shook out one more paper and grinned. “Ah. . . Yes. This will get Ponies across city. Yes. Yes.” He spread out the wrinkled, faded map. “Green line to Factory. Through Factory. Into blue line. Out at big Pony school. Safest path.”

“Factory?” I blinked at that, shocked. “Down here?” Then again, if there was power, why not? I wondered if, if those factories still worked, it might be possible to use

them to make things to help the Wasteland.

Rover nodded absently as he traced a claw along a route on a paper and tapped a square. “Mmm. Many old factories underground. Make gun. Bomb. Magic. Robot. Many many things. Most quiet. Some broken.” He marked the route in chalk and then folded the paper up. “Do not stay long. Radiation and Enervation is strong down below, Pony.”

“Thanks, Rover,” I said as I slipped the map into my saddlebags. He looked particularly grouchy about helping me. “If I may ask, do you know what happened in Riverside? DJ P0N3 said the village disappeared and then reappeared?”

“Hrmph. Day after Pony come, Dogs go to village with scrap and salvage. Village not trust Dogs, Dogs not trust Ponies. Almost shoot. Then flying monsters come. Half cat, half bat, half scorpion. Dogs dig tunnels and ponies follow.” He twisted his lips as he crossed his arms, waving a warning finger at me. “Fifi ask we save them, so Pony not thank Dog for it!” he grumbled, refusing to meet my smile.

That was a more literal example of ‘trade saving the Wasteland’ than I had expected, but it was no less welcome for that. “Well, I’ll have to thank her, then,” I replied. “I owe you, Rover. I hope that someday I can find a way to get you back to your home.” All it would take was finding six ponies that could be friends. How hard could that be? He gave a soft sigh as he waved me away.

As I left, I heard Rover muttered softly to himself, “Just like Golden Pony.”

Rover’s entrance to the industrial line was near the tracks where the Crusaders had found me. Since I didn’t relish the thought of crawling through more of Riverside’s ruins getting, we were talking an alternative route under the town. This way, we’d hopefully avoid the Halfheart gang’s hit and run potshots.

Water dripped, trickled, and splashed through countless cracks in the walls and ceiling of the train tunnel. Rusted train cars hunkered on their decaying rails, the bones of countless ponies within. In more than a few places, blackened and wet skeletons half hung through warped window frames, terrifying testaments of the occupants’ last moments. Scotch Tape hung close to me, shying away from the remains. More lay along the sides of the tunnels, and when a bone snapped underhoof, the filly jumped nervously. I was more concerned about the steady, low clicking on my Pip-Buck.

“What happened to them all?” Scotch tape asked as she peeked at bones frozen in postures that made it look like they were still trying to pry open doors of the train car.

“When the balefire bombs exploded, one of them must have breached the train tunnel. The tunnel acted like a chimney, carrying the flames along and burning up everything in its path. Afterwards, I think ponies tried to take shelter in here. . . and the radiation finished them off,” Glory said solemnly. “The Enervation kept the remains from rotting further.”

“Have I mentioned today how much I love this place?” P-21 said as he clambered over some collapsed ceiling.

“Could be worse,” Rampage said with a chuckle.

“I know it could be worse. I expect it to get worse,” P-21 said as he looked ahead at the striped pony. “In fact, things are so pleasant right now that it’s starting to make me feel paranoid.” The seepage splashed along our hooves as we picked our way along the rusted tracks.

To be honest, I was getting a little paranoid as well. We’d been moving along the tracks for nearly half an hour, and there was no way to keep half a dozen ponies quiet. We should have been drawing all kinds of trouble, but my EFS remained clear.

We reached the end of the Luna Line at Museum Station and picked our way up the muddy concrete stairs. This was a cold and heavy rain with fat drops that slammed into us with almost painful impacts. Standing at the subway entrance across from the museum, I looked down at my friends. Everypony was cold and wet. “Let’s get out of the rain for an hour. The loading dock door is open.”

The last time I was here, I was a bit too drunk to remember exactly how trashed we’d left the building. After two battles, mine and whatever had happened two centuries ago, the museum was definitely looking a bit worse for wear. Somepony’d gone through and tossed the place for anything of value. Maybe it had been the survivors from the ponies who’d attacked me; I supposed it was payment enough for what I’d done to them.

The lights were even more shot than I’d remembered. They flickered and flashed sporadically, and speakers slurred incoherent words and phrases like a mob of drunken ghosts. The bodies had been left and were desiccating rather than rotting. Enervation. I supposed that, in time, they’d get so dry that they’d disintegrate

rather than rot, leaving only bones and ligaments behind. “Well, at least it’s out of the rain,” Glory said with an attempt at a bright smile.

“Yeah. And a nine point one on the creepometer,” Scotch Tape added. Suddenly, she jumped and pulled out her wrench, gripping it in her jaws as she pointed a hoof through the door to the mineral display. “Ehd Arrs! Ehd arrs!”

I looked, saw the red marks, and heard the telltale scuttle. “Just radroaches. Calm down.” Then there was a long, low rumble of thunder and my mane crawled as the lights went dark, then slowly flickered back to life again. The building didn’t seem to know which ambient music to play, and so two melodies slurred together. “Everypony stay close. Just in case.”

Somepony had absconded with not just the dragon skeleton’s remaining claws but with its fangs as well! “Well that’s not fair,” I muttered.

“That’s right. Only Blackjack has a right to cool and deadly weapons in the Wasteland. Celestia forbid somepony else take them for their own survival,” P-21 said sarcastically as I poked through the bones for even so much as a pinkie toe claw.

“Really? How did she get that right?” Glory asked politely as she looked at the bones. She caught our shocked looks, and her ears folded back a little. “I mean, it’s quite convenient for her.”

I smiled, then blinked. “Well. . . there might just be a cool and deadly weapon here for me after all!” I said as I wrapped my tail around P-21’s neck and tugged him after me. “This way, Snarky Mc Snarkerson!”

I let him go and trotted to the sword case I’d been forced to leave earlier. “So, master lockpicker. . . ready for a challenge? Think you can get this open?” I asked as I tapped the sword case. The blade still sat on its crushed blue velvet. He looked at the weapon in surprise, then narrowed his eyes at the compact lock.

“Let’s find out.” He took out his screwdriver and pins.

I turned to the others. “In the meantime, let’s see if there’s anything here that was missed. Lacunae, can you watch his back?” The purple alicorn gave an elegant bow of her head, but looked at the sword with an odd expression of unease. Okay, well best put my best hoof forward. “Okay. Scotch Tape, with me,” I said as I looked at the filly with a small smile. She looked back, a little curious and slightly wary. I turned to Glory and Rampage, “Can you two sweep upstairs?”

The gray pegasus nodded. “Sure.”

Splitting up in a creepy building might have been a recipe for disaster, but it'd save time. As Rampage and Glory headed upstairs, I went into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit. Vigilance floated ahead of me, the twelve millimeter pistol sweeping across anything that looked remotely threatening. Long clear cases stretched in neat rows up and down the long room. The sight of a poster of Twilight Sparkle wearing a mining helmet and holding a rock in her hoof over a caption reading 'Rocks are cool!' struck me as incredibly... dorky. Okay, she created Gardens of Equestria, but there was no doubt that she was an egghead through and through.

Most of the cases had been ignored. The mineral samples within were just rocks, and one thing the wasteland had plenty of was rocks. The only display that had been touched was a large display of 'magic gems' that glittered in their armored case. I could tell it was armored because it looked like somepony had tried using dynamite to blast it open and still the case was quite intact. I couldn't even smell the char.

"So... how are you doing?" I asked errantly as I used a magic bullet to turn a skittering radroach to goo. The filly jumped; I wasn't sure if it was from the shot or the question.

She spat her nine millimeter automatic into a leg pocket that served as a holster. "I'm fine," she said with a hard look around her. "Just... don't like this place."

"It's a lot different from the stable, isn't it?" I frowned too as I looked at the room with its flickering lights. She gave me a 'no duh' look. "There's a place near here. It's called Chapel. There's a bunch of ponies your age who live there; they're called the Crusaders. They've lost their families. I'm sure they'd be glad to have you. You know more about machines and the like than any of them."

She didn't answer right away. She stared at a pile of rubbish with a hard look. Then, after a few seconds, she glanced at me. "I'm fine."

"Scotch." I trotted next to her and put a hoof across her shoulder. "You're not fine. None of us are. A pony that's fine would probably run screaming from the room at first sight of what we've dealt with."

She sighed, her olive body drooping a little. "Mom died a month ago. I remember her telling me that she'd help me go over the terminal technician manual when she got home. I was having problems with passing that class." She looked right at me with her dark blue-green eyes behind goggles. "She told me that if I just toughed it out, it'd all make sense. I just had to be tough."

“Then I was being told by Rivets that I’d be taking Mom’s place. I didn’t even have a chance to say... to say anything before she was recycled. In the morning, I had a mother. In the evening... I...” her voice caught and she drew a shaky little breath. “I didn’t.” She sniffed and rubbed her nose, pointing her hoof at me. “Then everypony went crazy and... and then you showed up. And then... then... one morning I woke up with a clogged digester to fix. And in the evening... everypony I knew was dead.” She glared up at me, her lips pressed together tightly. “And you killed them.”

“Scotch, I had to. If I hadn’t...”

“... we’d all have become crazy raiders too.” the filly said as she closed her eyes and nodded, “I know. I know. But... now I don’t have mom... or home... or anything. All I have are you and your friends. You’re the last bit of Stable 99 I have. And you left too. And...” her voice trembled again as she clenched her teeth together, “and I am... I don’t want to lose anypony else. I’m going to be tough. I’m...” she pressed her face to my chest and she gave a soft little sob. “I’m not crying,” she said softly amid the tears.

“I know, Scotch.” I said softly as I put a hoof across her shoulders, sitting with her. “I’m sorry.”

We were all broken. We were all hurting. All of us were playing this game for stakes we didn’t understand. Was this why P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch followed me? Because I pointed in a direction, and any direction, even hell itself, was better than sitting around and slowly falling apart? Big Daddy had once tried to save Hoofington. Goldenblood had wanted to save Equestria. This was what I was trying to save, just five ponies. I looked across the room at the rows and rows of rocks. Had there really been a time when they mattered more than ending a pointless war?

Why was that display broken open?

As I stared across the room, I spotted the only display that had been successfully breached. The explosion hadn’t just destroyed the armored glass, it had blasted out a chunk of the wall. That had taken a lot more than just dynamite! Scotch Tape seemed to sense my attention was elsewhere, and she lifted her goggles, wiped her eyes, and looked at the blasted display as well. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know...” I said softly, but my heart was thudding and my mane felt like it was trying to stand on end. “Keep your gun out,” I whispered as I walked slowly towards the case. Debris and mud fanned out in front of the display. Broken stars

crunched underhoof as I looked at the plaque, which had broken off. I levitated the brass plaque, turning the heavy plate over.

‘Rocks from the sky. Meteorites and meteor fragments recovered from the Hoofington area, Everfree forest, and across Equestria.’ A glob of wet mud slowly crawled down the front as the spot right between my shoulder blades tingled.

Wait? Wet mud?

I whirled in time to see the rifle barrel pointing out of empty space from the above end of the display cases behind me. The rifle fired with utter silence. Only plain, dumb luck had the plaque between my face and the rifle. The impact of the bullet with the plaque didn’t make the slightest sound as it indented right in front of my eyes, almost knocking it from my magic’s grip.

I slipped into S.A.T.S., but to my frustration, nothing was targetable by the system. Even the gun was shrouded enough to lower my hit chance to zero. I dropped out of the spell and fired at the faint blur around the barrel as I sprinted towards the shooter. His bullets smashed silently against the plaque, the tiles around me, and my combat barding as I fired back. My gun, to my horror, was just as silent. In fact, I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Scotch Tape was equally silent as she fired wildly behind me as evidenced by one shot zinging my rump. Fortunately, the low caliber weapon didn’t penetrate. The shimmer leapt into the air and disappeared. I had only a second to guess, and vigilance was dry. Sense and reason said to reload and wait for whatever spell was on me to expire. Be awesome, suggested a little blue pegasus in my mind. Screw sense and reason. I leapt and slid on my side under the display cases and finished reloading Vigilance as I emerged on the far side. From thin air that barrel appeared, but now it had to swing down towards me. Vigilance came up as the shooter’s motion opened the cloak enough to see their face.

Lancer’s face.

His rifle pointed at my horn as he stood on his back legs in that freaky zebra stance. My glowing pistol illuminated the calm, certain expression on his face. Eleven zebras, you striped bastard! It felt like we’d hit S.A.T.S. as we pointed our guns at each other. That moment stretched on as our eyes locked together, our gazes warring with as if trying to break the other through sheer will before firing.

Scotch Tape was under no such spell. The filly had all the marksmanship of me on moonshine while blindfolded, but the rounds striking the cloak made that barrel

twitch ever so slightly off my face. My horn flared, knocking back the bolt of his weapon and ejecting the round. As fast as lightning, he caught the bullet in his teeth and spit it back into the rifle breach. His hoof slammed the bolt home as the rifle moved back towards my face. He was fast. Damned fast. Fast as when he'd shot us at Brimstone's Fall.

This time, I was twenty percent faster.

I leapt at him as the silent rifle flashed right by my ear. If it hadn't been magically silenced, I'dve likely have been permanently deafened in that ear; as it was, the heat of the shot burned my cheek as I tackled him like a hoofball player. He flipped and twisted in my grip like an eel, and as we landed in a heap on the floor between the cases he twisted out of my grip. Refusing to let him get away, my mouth seized the invisible fabric of his cloak and locked down. Vigilance came around, the pistol flashing in eerie silence as I fired right in front of my face.

Then the cloak shredded as he jumped free once more. The blue gemstone brooch holding the cloak crackled and died. The tattered remains hung around his striped form as he slung the rifle around his shoulders and jumped back from me, tail coiling around the trigger. Suddenly, sound returned in a rush of Scotch Tape shrieking, Rampage bellowing, Glory zapping, Lacunae's minigun purring, and P-21 yelling "Blackjack, you idiot! Where are you?"

"In here!" I yelled as I kept Lancer moving for the door out into the atrium.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape yelled as he disappeared around the corner. She pointed at some blocks of gray explosive I'd seen stacked in a party cake in a memory. More ominous, though, was an...egg shaped? pulsating, multicolored glowing something strapped to the pile. I didn't know what it did, but I assumed it was probably really, really bad.

"Can you disarm it?" I asked. She gave me a look that put my question on par with 'can you levitate it with your earth pony powers?' "Right! Let's get out of here!" I shouted as we raced into the atrium and absolute chaos.

"Proditor!" snarled one mare at Rampage as she launched a flying hoofhick that actually dented Rampage's heavy steel barding.

"Spurius!" The red-striped pony yelled back, and atop the information counter the two engaged in the most graceful and terrifying display of hoof to hoof combat I'd ever seen. If it hadn't been so obvious that they were trying to crush each other under hoof, I'd have thought they were dancing. The scariest damn bit of dancing

I'd ever seen.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to enjoy the sight, as a zebra overhead using the balcony for cover opened fire on Scotch Tape and me while her comrade kept sniping at the weaving and beaming Glory. I shielded Scotch as we raced across to where P-21 was loading another grenade into Persuasion.

"We need to get out of here! There's a bomb in there!" I said as I pointed back at the rocks exhibit. His eyes got round before he fired the grenade towards the two on the second floor. To my shock and amazement, one of the zebras shot the projectile as it dropped towards their cover, making it detonate uncomfortably close to Glory. That was just not fair!

Unfortunately, all of us getting out the one exit would be particularly difficult given that Lacunae was blocking it with her spell shield and minigun. The two zebras pressing were so fast that, by the time the gun started firing, they were already out of the line of fire. She couldn't strafe without risk to us all, so was having to use her magic arrows to keep the zebra hoof fighters off her. If her magic was anything like mine, though, I doubted that she had an unlimited supply. Worse, her shield was protecting her from the snipers, but the zebra hooves seemed quite capable of passing through it.

"Unfortunately, they don't seem keen on letting us out first," P-21 said dryly. Then he blinked and reached into his pouch, drawing out a weapon that made my heart quiver. The sword was a thing of beauty. Deadly art. As my magic lifted it, I immediately wanted to try it out on those zebra hoof to hoof specialists. Hell, I wanted to go back to the Arena and give Psychoshy a rematch! "Blackjack?" P-21 said as he looked at me in worry.

"Nothing. Just a sweet sword," I grinned. "You go ahead and take care of the bomb. I'll take care of the rest."

P-21 stuck his head out and nearly got it blasted for his trouble by the sniper on the balcony. I looked at him and shielded him with my body and barding. "On three. One, two, three!" And together we charged back across the atrium. The zebra rounds were enchanted to electrocute, and when one hit me I nearly fell on my face as my muscles jerked for a few seconds. We reached the stairs, and I used them for some cover while P-21 disappeared into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit.

I charged my way up the stairs, readying my sword. The balcony ran in an L, and all I had to do was get around the bend and I'd have a clear shot around their cover.

Then everything went silent.

I dropped to my face and saw a hole blown in the wall ahead of me. Without looking behind me, I rolled to the left. A second hole appeared. I rolled back to the right. A third hole appeared. I jumped to my hooves. A fourth hole appeared right against the second. Awww, yeah, a little blue pony crowed in my head as I looked over my shoulder with a grin at Lancer. The zebra stared at me as he hung out of a door behind me, left eyelid twitching a little in shock. Then I entered S.A.T.S. and my horn unloaded a rapid fire barrage of magic bullets right in his face.

Unfortunately, he was one tough, quick zebra. His face and chest bleeding, he disappeared back around the corner. I charged after him, bellowing silently... it was the thought that counted, damn it!

Then I froze in the doorway, sweeping the security office before me with my mutated gaze. There was a large terminal over a bank of monitors. I took two steps forward in that silence. There was a light on the floor right in front of me. A light on a small tin. I put a hoof on the disarm button and took another cautious step.

Then he shot the mine.

The fragmentation mine lifted me off my hooves and dropped me in a heap. My PipBuck gave me all kinds of warnings about how my chest was crippled. Really, given the staggering amount of pain I was in, I found the little crying pony icon rather redundant. I fell to my side and managed to sneak out a slightly enervated healing potion before I blacked out completely. I couldn't fall now. I had to press on! I had to find Lancer and cut his striped ass!

Then he shoved me over onto my back and pushed the sniper rifle underneath my chin. Goddesses, zebras standing on their hind legs was a freaky sight! He had his hoof nudged against the trigger as he looked down at me in an expression of extreme frustration. Then he tapped a small bat-shaped talisman on the side of the gun.

"How'd you manage to not set off the mine?" he asked softly.

"I'm a light step," I muttered, trying to pull my focus together enough to cut his head off.

He looked just a little impressed. "You must be part zebra." The impressed look vanished. "Did you remove the bones of the stars?" He asked softly as blood dripped down his face and chest. S.A.T.S. was recharging, and even then, as fast as S.A.T.S. was, he might blow my head off before the first shot and certainly before the second.

And if my horn glowed to seize the sword... I needed an opening.

"The rocks? You're here for rocks?" I groaned and pointed to one of the shuttered windows, "Go outside. Plenty of rocks. Enjoy!"

He crushed the barrel against my throat, making my breath rasp. Okay, I had enough chest trauma at the moment that I was raspy already. "Where are they? Where are the bones of the stars?"

I coughed, glancing at the door and getting another shove with his gun. "Why do you care. Sekashi said-"

But the name had a galvanizing effect on the buck as his eyes bugged out and he spat out something forcefully in zebra. I didn't have a clue what he actually said, but I bet it was dirty. "She is dead! They must all be dead!" I bet that's what you told your boss, bastard.

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling. "She is dead. She told me before she died that the stars are not all evil."

"She was correct. The stars have power for any pony who dares." He chuckled darkly, obviously relieved to hear of her passing. "Clearly, they work though you. You guided me to my target. And you are here now when we discovered that the bones once lay here."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said as I glared up at him. "We came here to get out of the rain. That's all."

His eyes narrowed, "I don't believe in coincidences. Or loose ends. . ."

I saw the shadow and smirked, "Do you believe in Glory?"

An emerald beam struck Lancer in the chest. He fell back, and I pushed the barrel of his gun aside as it fired and blasted a hole six inches from my neck. Instantly, the world was reduced to a single ringing 'squee' as my left ear exploded in pain. I flopped in rather unawesome fashion as my magic struggled to grab the sword. Bleeding and burning, Lancer hooked the rifle sling in his hoof, threw the gun over his head, and raced out with Glory blasting at his fleeing backside. One shot struck the terminal, which sparked and sent the monitors flickering.

"Please don't need a Hydra... please don't need a Hydra..." Glory chanted as she rolled me onto my back and quickly pulled open my armored vest. "It doesn't look like anything penetrated too deep," she said in relief. "Just some broken ribs and contusions..." Thank goodness for Security's armor. And she started to pass

me some piss weak healing potions, carefully working towards stronger and fresher potions. My ear thankfully recovered with enough application of magic. Oh sweet Celestia, did I love healing potions.

Suddenly, the speakers of the terminal cracked, and a mare said in a panic, “. . . any Hoofington Guard units, this is Security Chief Cloverleaf at the Hoofington Museum. We’re under attack!” On the monitor, I saw an image of ponies with SMGs and black security armor similar to my own sweeping through the museum. I cringed at the sight of mothers and young gunned down without hesitation. “They overrode the lockdown! They’re using machineguns! They’re killing everypony!” Behind her voice came the rising crackle of automatic fire chattering away. “Please! Send help immediately! This is Security Chief Clover—“

The closed door behind her clicked open, and a unicorn wearing unmarked black armor appeared in the doorway. Without hesitation, she raised a glowing zebra ten millimeter SMG and put a burst into the mare’s back. She trotted over the corpse and she put a hoof to a little device clipped to her ear. “U-2 to Team leader. Security is pacified. I don’t think she got a signal out. No sir. It looks like the jamming worked.” There was a muffled explosion that shook the cameras. “We’re collecting them now, sir. Yes, sir. Five minutes to extraction. Yes sir.”

“Help,” gurgled Cloverleaf, still barely alive after all.

“Sure.” The unicorn in the black armor looked down and pointed her SMG. There was a brief burst. “There. You’re helped. All of you were dead anyway.” She turned and ran for the door. “Come on, ponies. We’ve got half an hour till showtime! Move it!”

“Show time?” Glory muttered in horror as she stared at the monitor. “They knew. They knew that the bombs were going to fall! How could they know and not tell anypony? How could anypony do that?” I felt a cold horror inside too, but it was mitigated by two hundred years of radioactive barbarism and a half dozen zebra troopers.

“I don’t know,” I groaned as I rose to my hooves. “But I know it doesn’t matter now. These zebra must have been after the same rocks, but they’re two centuries too late.” I lifted the sword and looked in the direction Lancer had fled. “I’m going to find that sneaky bastard and cut him apart alphabetically.” Then I glanced at her. The recording had rattled her terribly. I wondered if it was her emphasis on loyalty or the sheer monstrosity of what they’d done. “What would I start with?”

She blinked and then looked at me and swallowed. “Depends on how specific you

way to get. You could start with ‘abdomen’ or ‘amygdala’.”

“Amygdala? That’s that dangly thing in your throat, right?” I asked her with a grin as I closed my slightly perforated armor up.

“No, that’s the uvula. The Amygdala’s found. . .” she stopped herself when she saw my look and flushed. “Right. Joking. Catching on.”

“Cause you’re a smart pony,” I said as I tapped her head. I stepped to the door he’d disappeared through and stopped short. Wow, that was a lot of mines. Ah well, have horn, will disarm! I smacked the tab on the first mine with my magic and stepped forward to pick it up. Then, without warning the mine exploded in my face! As I fell back, the the redundant pony display once again flashed to life and told me my forelegs were severely crippled.

I screamed as I sat, feeling the blood drip down my limbs. “He tampered with the mines! That bastard!” I shouted as I brought out Vigilance and blasted at the mines and anypony that dared poke their head down that hall. Maybe he’d wired them so that they’d detonate when “disarmed”; wouldn’t that be a sneaky trick?

“Well, I always wondered why anypony would make a landmine you could disarm just by pressing the button on top. . .” she remarked as she dug out a fresh healing potion and dribbled it right on my bleeding forelegs to help focus their healing power where needed. I sighed in relief and satisfaction as one mine, then the next, then the next, detonated and filled the hallway with the reek of cordite. What was the point of having a brand new razor sharp sword if you didn’t have a striped bastard to try it out on?

“Blackjack!” P-21 bellowed from the museum atrium. I let my breath hiss out through my teeth. I really wanted some zebra to test this sword on. Particularly a zebra who was a murderer and had shot me in the back. Twice. I almost started back down the hall after him when I saw Glory’s worried look and grunted. Fine. . . hopefully P-21’d handled the bomb and. . .

Oh. . . hello. Another bomb sat right under the terminal. I looked at that sickly-glowing egg, heard my pipbuck clicking, and knew that where there were two, there were definitely more.

I ran back to the security office door and looked out. My friends were by the front door, shielded by Lacunae and her bursts of suppressive fire at the balcony snipers. Rampage’s armor looked like it was a dented can of Cram, and she was still fighting brutally against one of the zebra melee specialists. The other one was smeared

across the information desk. I had no idea what language they were speaking, but boy did that zebra look pissed!

Now if only Lancer would make an appearance.

I ran down and stepped carefully through the shield, my whole body tingling as it passed through the magical barrier. Lacunae's dress was almost shredded, and her purple hide showed a number of significant injuries. Still, she stood with poise and focus as she fired her weapon in controlled bursts. I doubted she had much ammo left, though.

"Tell me you disarmed them!" I shouted as I looked at the zebra attackers.

"Them?" He yelled back over the gunfire, his eyes wide. "I couldn't! They're wired to a remote detonator!" My mane did not like this one bit. The zebras weren't withdrawing, but Lancer was nowhere to be seen. And there were a lot of really bad explosives in this place.

What were the odds Lancer'd sacrifice his own zebras to cover his escape?

"Lacunae! Get us outside. Now!" I shouted.

Her purple eyes widened as she looked down at me. "The shield will drop when I cast the spell, and Rampage will need to be closer." That meant ending her dancing, twisting duel with her striped opponent.

"I got it. Glory. Scotch. P-21. Keep the snipers' heads down," I said as I stepped out the shield, feeling every hair in my mane tingle from the magical charge. I had no time for flashy hoof to hoof combat at the moment. "Sorry Rampage!" I yelled as the bubble dropped and Lacunae's horn began to glow. Immediately, the zebras rose to fire but ducked out of sight again as our fire sprayed the balcony.

"Eta?" She glanced at me as I racked the shotgun and blasted at her striped attacker. Rampage caught more than a little friendly fire, but her opponent dropped in a bloody, striped heap. Okay... so not the most honorable thing to do but—

"Futuere!" she snarled as she planted her forehooves and swept her rear hooves in an arc that knocked my legs out from under me. I flipped in the air as she halted and blasted me into the air with a double hoof rear kick. Suddenly, I was getting a much better view of the roof before I came back down in Glory's grasp. Only my armor had kept me from getting disemboweled by Rampage's hoofclaws.

Glory beat her wings furiously to keep me aloft as I coughed and hacked, "Get us... outside..."

With an electric crackle and a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared out in the rain next to the subway stairs. I slipped from Glory's hooves just as a very pissed off Rampage yelled something in zebra and actually somersaulted it the air to bring her hooves down in a fearsome blow. I dove to the side, rolling across the broken asphalt. I really did not need this right now; Lancer could be setting up an attack, or worse, getting away. I really wanted to check off another enemy off my list.

Unfortunately, Rampage had entered a spinning, kicking, thrashing frenzy against us. "You will not harm her!" she swore in an oddly accented voice. P-21 was raked by her tail; when was I going to force him to wear some barding? Sneakiness be damned!

She launched herself, rolling in a ball and bringing her razor spines down at my face. I rolled completely on my back, all four hooves and every bit of magic I had in my horn pushing against her. The tips of her blades nearly perforated me from pelvis to sternum as I shoved her back into the air. I could only watch in amazement as she unrolled, twisted in midair, and landed on all four hooves. "Fuck me. . ." I muttered.

She reared above me and brought her forehooves down in a crushing blow. I lifted my sword horizontally, catching her hoofclaws as she glared down at me with murder in her eyes. I didn't have Mallet's magical strength and had to press my forehooves to the flat side of the single-edged blade. She was stronger and heavier, and her head tilted down to point that helmet saber right at my throat.

"Rampage," I rasped as Glory and Lacunae alike blasted at her thick armor. P-21 and Scotch Tape watched helplessly as my legs slowly bent under her weight. "Sorry about this. . ."

"Eta?" She blinked as I levitated the gun to her chin and stared into her eyes.

"Sweet Celestia!" P-21 swore as Rampage's body went completely rigid, a cascade of blood, brain, and bone splattering onto my face as she fell. Scotch Tape screamed in horror as she backed away. Glory landed and started to approach when I gave her a warning look. I hoped Rampage would be back, but I didn't want to take risks. I wiped a leg across my face and pointed Vigilance steadily at Rampage as pink light shone. Even Lacunae seemed at a loss as I waited for her brains to regenerate.

She opened her pink eyes and glared at me as I held the gun less than half an inch from her left eye. "Are you in control?" I asked softly over the hissing rain.

"You had no right to interfere!" She spat, muttering something in zebra.

I heard the crash and roar of the bombs going off, felt the pressure blast against us,

and saw the scintillating light of the fireball flood through the parking lot. Firelight from the burning ruins bathed us both, but I didn't blink. Neither did she. Not even with chunks of the building raining down around us. Lacunae blocked the largest pieces with her shield as Rampage and I kept our gazes locked. "Getting us away from that gave me the right."

"You think that because I can heal that I am eager to get shot? You think that because I volunteer to fight against my own, that you can just gun us both down!" She said as she hissed in rage. "You ponies. . . I gave my oath of loyalty! I swore my allegiance to my home! And you shoot me!" She spat in my face. I didn't blink or wipe it away as I kept the gun steady.

This wasn't Rampage. I wondered what cutie mark was under the armor. Thorns? Tentacles? Something else? "What is your name?" I asked as I moved the gun off her eye a little.

Confusion entered her eyes as she started to look at us. "Shujaa," she said as she straightened a little. "Did you miss the red stripes? Are you colorblind?" She looked at my barding in suspicion. "You are not with the army."

"No, I'm not. I'm sorry," I said as my mane prickled. "Shujaa. . . do you know where you are?"

She blinked and looked at the blasted remains of the museum. Then she looked to the east to the green glow around the black towers. "Hoofington, of course. Near Miramare, I think. Were we overrun? Where are my friends?" Confusion and distrust were etched on her face. "Where is Twist?"

"Shujaa. What is the last thing you remember?" I asked softly.

She scowled at me, "I owe you no answers!" I racked a fresh round into Vigilance's chamber without blinking. I wasn't going to take another chance with a pony capable of smashing any of us to goo. She pressed her lips together, then said slowly, "We were scouting a zebra encampment south of Brimstone's fall. . . checking to see if they were going to strike east towards Ponyville. We were. . . ambushed. Wounded. Twist. . ." she blinked in shock. She froze as she stared into my eyes. "Is this a dream?"

"I don't know," I replied softly. "What about Twist?"

"No!" She said sharply as she backed away. She looked around in a panic. "Twist! Where is. . . she. . . Twist!" She screamed in shock and started to babble in zebra talk. I didn't know if she was going to attack, cry, or run.

I sighed as I lined up the gun, jumped to S.A.T.S. and shot her with three hollow points.

“Blackjack!” Glory said in horror as I waited for Rampage’s brains to regenerate. “You don’t do therapy with bullets!” she said sharply as she jumped between me and Rampage.

“You do when you’re dealing with a regenerating mare who thinks she’s a crazy zebra,” I replied, watching carefully as I loaded a fresh magazine into the pistol.

But it didn’t seem to be necessary; Rampage rose and groaned, clutching her head. “Oh, dear Luna, stop the hammering,” she muttered as she blinked up at me in confusion. “Where’d the zebras go? How did we get outside. . .” then she looked at the flames leaping out of the gutted remains of the museum and gave a half smile, “And did I do that?”

I sighed and holstered Vigilance. “Nope. A zebra named Lancer did.”

She gave a sour frown and rubbed her temples. “Good. I’d hate to think I caused that and missed it.” She hissed softly and muttered, “Why does my head hurt so bad?”

I glanced at the others; their looks ranged from horrified to concerned to shocked to disapproving. “You were out again. I had to shoot you.” I flushed, “Repeatedly.”

Her eyes shot wide, “Is Scotch Tape alright?” She immediately looked around, but sighed and slumped a little in relief as she saw the confused young mare.

“Rampage, does the name Shujaa mean anything to you?” Rampage shook her head in confusion. “What about Twist?”

“Twist?” Rampage frowned. “I think. . .” she began, narrowing her eyes as she thought. I watched her eyes as she errantly pulled out a pack of Mint-als and licked one up. Then she sighed. “Sorry. It sounds familiar, but I’m not sure who that is.”

“Right,” I said as I scanned the night with my EFS. No red bars. Nothing.

So why did I feel even worse?

As much as I wanted to go straight to the Green Line, we had to take a little detour to Chapel first. I was blasted and battered and we were all wet and tired and it was late afternoon. To be honest, I wanted to go to Star house and sleep in an actual bed.

My mood was as lousy as the weather. I kept glancing back towards the burning museum, expecting a silent bullet to come out of nowhere.

The Remnant had wanted those space rocks (Glory had had to explain the concept of 'shooting stars' to me... twice) for some reason. I could scream in frustration. Why did I have to get hit by every single mystery of the Hoof? The Remnant. Thunderhead. Sanguine. EC-1101. Goldenblood... fucking Goldenblood alone, who seemed like he'd set all this up two centuries ago just to fuck with me!

"Why does the not smart pony have to figure all this out?" I muttered as we walked through the rain towards Chapel. But I knew the answer: as stupid as I was I was also tenacious enough to keep plodding along.

When we reached the grassy slope leading down to the town, I was stunned at the sight of the place. The tiny village was expanding in a big way. There were two wagons loaded up with scavenged lumber, metal sheeting, and other building supplies. While the Crusaders were everywhere, there were at least a dozen more fully grown ponies as well. As we approached, a bony shape appeared from the sky, and Harpica landed before us.

"Careful, ma'ams and sir. There's mines buried around the town now," the ghoulish pegasus rasped.

"Gya... ya... ya...!" Scotch Tape stammered as she waved a hoof at the ghoulish. "It's a... a..."

"Ghoulish. Not a zombie," Glory finished firmly. I supposed I couldn't blame the olive filly. After all, I didn't have a clue what ghoulish were till I met Harpica and Ditzzy Doo. And Silver Spoon...

Harpica led us around the edge of the minefield to the road. An impromptu tower had been erected with a machinegun mounted on a pivot. It took at least three crusaders in oversized combat helmets to crew the weapon, but it would lay down an effective field of fire... so long as their position wasn't hit by a missile.

"You've been busy," I commented to the ghoulish pegasus mare. Scotch Tape looked ready to climb on top of Rampage at the sight of ghoulish foals chatting politely with the more rough and tumble Crusaders.

Harpica nodded. "Indeed. It would seem that Blueblood Manor held items of significant value to the Society. They've been most generous in exchange for simple trinkets." She then looked at me and added, "However, the salvagers have not disturbed Master Vanity." I smiled, relieved at that.

“Welcome back,” Priest said as he trotted up the road towards us. “You and your friends are always welcome in Chapel,” he said. . . to P-21? I think the blue pony was more surprised than I was.

“Even me?” Rampage asked in worry, looking cute as she fidgeted in her spiked armor. Priest looked at her solemnly for a long moment before he sighed and slowly shook his head. “Right. Sorry. Should have known better.” She dropped her eyes, “I’ll just go wait up at the Star House.”

“I’ll be there soon, Rampage,” I promised. She just gave a sad half smile before she trotted back the way she came. I looked at Priest, “She’s gotten better.”

He looked calmly back at me. “Are you willing to take responsibility if she kills another foal?” I winced at that; I wasn’t. Heck, now I knew that she also had a zebra inside her who took poorly to getting shot. Well. . . honestly, most sane folks did that. He smiled that sad little smile of his before he stepped up to me and pressed his horn to my shoulder. The glow of magic heralded the delicious sensation of healing. I wanted that spell. . . why couldn’t my horn manage to do more than go bang? Was that too much to ask?

“Are you going straight up to the house as well?” Glory asked as she waited in line for her own healing. We were all battered up; of course only Lacunae looked decent. After all, her horn could even conjure a mending spell for her damaged dress. Stupid big horned alicorns... my horn was plenty good enough. It wasn’t little! It was. . . compact!

“I need to talk to Sekashi,” I said with a little frown. “I think she knows more about the Remnant than she let on.” Lancer certainly knew and cared more about her than he would about any simple zebra.

P-21 looked less curious than Glory. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll head back to the house. After all somepony’s, going to have to pick the lock and let her back in.”

Priest smiled at the small blue buck. “Actually, I was hoping to talk to you after I was finished healing your friends.” That definitely piqued our curiosity, but none more so than P-21 himself. In fact, he looked almost wary of the black unicorn, but he nodded anyway.

“Well, then I’ll see you later, P-21,” I said as Priest’s healing spell saved us from using our freshest healing potions. Maybe Sekashi would have a fresh batch. I floated out the key to the cottage and passed it to Glory. “Here, you can let everypony—“

“Chaaaarrrrge!” screamed a group of fillies and colts as they raced out of the post

office and pony piled upon me. “Crusaders collection agents!” shrieked Medley as she leaped upon my back while Allegro and Adagio seized my forelegs. Sonata gave a much more reserved headbump against my flank. “You owe Charity for six spark batteries and a bottle of Wild Pegasus! Cough em up!” Medley declared as I wailed and collapsed beneath the four, thrusting my pip buck into the air before I disappeared from sight.

“And to think, I once recommended her to Spike to be the Element of Generosity,” I said to myself as I limped to the house provided to Sekashi and Majina. Sure, I’d had the seven hundred caps, but sending young colts and mares to beat the money out of me? Okay, it’d taken Sonata’s big sad eyes look to make me cough up the money, but still. “No cap in the wasteland is safe from her greedy hooves, the little capmonger!”

There was an odd little wooden mask on the door, and I felt my insides squirm softly as I knocked on the door. Majina peeked out the window at me, and a minute later Sekashi opened the door. “Ahh, greetings, Guardian! Come in. Come in. I will prepare something fair to eat.”

“I’d love to have some of that cold medicine too.” I said as I looked at more half carved masks.

She looked back in concern, “Oh, is one of your friends ill?”

“Nope. But that stuff is pretty tasty,” I said with a grin. “Mix it with Sparkle Cola and a radscorpion egg and it’s even better.” I could see Sekashi wasn’t exactly 100% with me on my opinion of what makes for a great drink. She moved into the kitchen and began preparing a tray. The deaf zebra handled the knives with skill a unicorn might envy as she chopped the greens for the salad. We sat at the table, and Majina tucked in with gusto. “Where’d you get all this fresh food?”

“The Society ponies have been quite thrilled with our wares of late. One in particular was overjoyed at the dresses we collected and has compensated us well in food and wealth. The Finders bring in all sorts of other delectable goods with the building materials.” And trade saves the Wasteland.

The salad might have tasted fine, but it could do with some radaway to give it that citrusy zing. “I ran into an old friend of yours a few hours ago. Quiet buck. Likes to shoot helpless zebras.”

She touched a puckered scar on her shoulder. “Ah. That one.”

“Yeah. And,” I said somewhat hesitantly, “after chatting with him, I got to thinking that maybe you weren’t being completely honest with me before.” Her ears folded back as her eyes turned wary. “A zebra like him wouldn’t have spent all that time trying to kill thirteen zebras just because their tribe mocked the Remnant. They’d let the mine break them. Lancer was there to make certain you and the others died.” I stretched out a hoof to touch hers, “In fact, I think Lancer was there to kill you, specifically.”

She closed her eyes and sighed softly. “You are correct. He was not there to kill the others. He was there to kill me.” She opened her sad gray eyes and smiled, “There is a funny story I know: Once upon a time there was a young zebra who was a member of the Remnant. She trained in the Zenith style of combat, learned her potions and poison, and the art of wind. . . of infiltration and stealth. She was skilled, and drew the eyes of the leader of the Remnant, Legate Vitiosus. He took her as one of his wives.

“But, one day, she was on a solo mission scouting the lands around the black city when she fell in a storm. She was wounded and lost, and feral ghouls were closing in. Then she spotted through the clouds a single star. She promised anything she could to escape that horrible night, and the star accepted her promise.” She sighed softly and bowed her head, “But it also exacted a horrible price, for in her heart doubt was seeded.”

“What happened?” I asked when our eyes met again.

“She questioned the need and goals of the Remnant. What was the purpose of fulfilling the wishes of a Caesar two centuries passed? Were the stars truly evil? She used her position to learn lore of the stars, a forbidden subject to all but to most trusted zebra. But, eventually, the zebra became foolish, and the Legate learned of her studies. His rage was. . . profound.” She looked at the numerous scars on her hide. I knew now that not all of them had been received in the mine.

“She took the knowledge she had learned and with her child she fled her home. His rage redoubled, for a wife to flee her husband was the gravest insult. He ordered she not be allowed a moment’s respite until she was captured. His hunters were skilled. Dreadfully so. But none more than his son, trained in the midnight style of combat. The son named for the slaying lance. So keenly, so quietly did he pursue that she found a group of zebras destined to toil in the earth and joined them to escape his bullets. Still, he found her, but in his haste he missed the shot that mattered most.

Now dead in the eyes of the Remnant, she sought sanctuary in the shadow of the most dreaded of cities.”

She gave a sad little smile. “Have ever heard something so silly? Such a silly mare for wishing upon the stars.”

I rose and walked around the table to hug her. I knew she couldn’t hear, but I whispered anyway, “She sounds pretty courageous to me.”

When we parted, I asked quietly, “Why do zebras hate Hoofington so much? I mean, I hate all the things that happened here two hundred years ago, but that was ponies messing stuff up. What’s the zebra angle?”

She shivered, “To explain that. . . you must know of the Eater of Souls.”

The stars are capricious, fickle, powerful, and mysterious. To some, their interference may be malevolent, but such malevolence is reflected only in our desires and wishes. Others see inspiration and feel the hoof of destiny in their patterns and movements. However, by and large, their actions and motivations are beyond our understanding and knowledge. The wise leave the business of the stars to the stars. The foolish call upon them. The damned demand of them. Such is the nature of such things.

But there are stars who are malevolent. Stars evil and cruel who are cast out from the skies to turn into hard and crushing destruction. When they strike, their destruction is absolute. Their wrath and poison are unimaginable. Their hatred knows no limit and their cruelty possesses no bounds. Cast from high, they fall with terrible wrath. Such stars are truly the monsters most zebras dread.

Once a great zebra city spread out across this valley. Its towers rose to the heavens and its tunnels plunged into the earth. Its occupants were wise and its armies strong, its markets filled with fields of plenty and its fields green and flowing. Gold and silver and gems decorated all from the highest prince to the lowest slave. It was every bit as fine as the ancient zebra capital of Roam.

But for all its greatness, pride gnawed at its belly. In its desire to surpass all others, the city turned to folly and wickedness. Hearts hardened, minds closed, and its wealth was squandered. Its scholars and sages whispered their vile and poisonous worship to the skies and tainted the heart of a star. And so they attempted a terrible ritual. Ten thousand zebra magi carved the talismans of the city into a glyph stretch-

ing for miles in all directions. Rare, potent, and dark reagents were prepared. And in unison, they cast a spell that united their powers. . . magnified it. . . and magnified it again.

And they called down a star: The Eater of Souls.

Perhaps they meant to capture it for their own. Perhaps they erred and meant for it to fall upon glorious Roam instead. Perhaps they knew not what their great spell would do, only knowing it would be wondrous and terrible. Regardless, the star fell. It shattered the great city, blackened its foul towers and ancient libraries. Its fires scorched the fertile fields and turned them to ash. The city's great wealth was buried, its knowledge lost. And so was the dread city lost for all time.

The candle on the table had burned low by the time she finished, casting flickering orange light over Sekashi's face. "Or so we thought. When ponies came to this land, we tried to warn them of the star's evil. We told them that fallen stars only sleep within the earth, not lie there dead, and that which sleeps may dream. They would not listen. And so they built a new city atop the old. And so they repeated the folly of the old."

"You really think there's a fallen star under Hoofington?" I asked softly, feeling a little skeptical.

She smiled, "I know ponies do not think so. Ponies do not believe in curses, hexes, and zebra hocus pocus. They dug and searched, and though they found the bones of the star, they thought them little more than rocks. But dark things are ever associated here; it was here Nightmare Moon rose to challenge Celestia. Here the long night was darkest. Here where the great towers rose and the great battles fought. And the towers stand still, a headstone to the land that was slain in its war."

"It makes for a good story," I admitted. "But it's not proof." She shrugged helplessly, her smile sad. How do you prove a story from so long ago? "So why would the Remnant be looking for meteorites?"

"Perhaps he simply wished to dispose of them. When we find bones of the stars, we hide them in deep caves, bury them in desolate deserts, or sink them far at sea. It is a great honor for any zebra," she said matter-of-factly. Still, I'd bet my itchy mane it had to be something else.

I groaned, burying my face in my forelegs. "Do these stars also produce horribly con-

voluted plots and mysteries that are supposed to be solved by the most immensely unqualified ponies in the world?" I asked as I looked at her plaintively.

She reached over the table and patted my head in consolation.

Walking back to the Star House, I had to admit that I felt a little disturbed at the thought of stars, great and powerful entities, manipulating me and countless others. I simply couldn't accept that we were all puppets of these terrible beings; it was too overwhelming. Fate was something I simply couldn't accept. Was I fated to kill 99? To wander the Wasteland with EC-1101 on my leg? Finding a virtue was hard enough; being a plaything of vastly powerful beings was more than I could handle.

Sekashi had told me that the Crusaders had left a path through the minefield up to the house, so I headed to the little gate in the makeshift barricade by Chapel's chapel. All I wanted was to save ponies and help my friends... and find out what Project Horizons was about... deal with Sanguine... and Lighthooves... and Lancer... and now fallen stars too, apparently! It made me want to stick my head in a hole and scream.

Then I heard a suppressed giggle. It wasn't the giggle itself that caught my attention, though, so much as who it sounded like and the fact that I'd never expected to hear it from him. Carefully, I trotted to the corner of the chapel and peeked around behind it. Yes, P-21 and... oh... my...

Priest and P-21 sat together in each other's hooves, the smaller blue pony resting his head on the black unicorn's shoulder. It wasn't just that they were cuddling that was shocking, though; it was the smile on my friend's face. "This is nice..." he murmured. "I haven't felt like this... happy... in a long time."

"You deserve some happiness. All of you do," Priest said softly.

"I don't," P-21 murmured as he reached up to touch his neck. Priest silenced him with a kiss that turned his whole face red. I started to pull away, but what I heard next made me linger.

"Do not start talking like Blackjack. You both deserve to be happy. It makes me want to thump you both when I hear you talking like you don't." Priest said firmly.

P-21 flushed and touched the scar around his throat again. "She saved me. She keeps saving me. Everypony does. Over and over again." He closed his eyes. "I can't understand it. I'm not her. I'm no hero trotting around the Wasteland. I don't

even like most other ponies. Sometimes, I feel like I hate everypony in the world. Especially her.” He pressed his face into Priest’s neck. “Especially me.”

Priest didn’t recoil or pull away but simply held him. “I’m glad she did. I like you, P-21. You’re serious and you’re focused and so determined. And you have a lot of reasons to be angry with the world. I hope that I get to give you the kind of love and attention a pony like you deserves.” He sighed gently. “You have no idea how hard it is to see so many ponies you want to desperately help. . . but know that they’re just going to finish their pilgrimage and rejoin Celestia.”

P-21 looked towards the bridge a little longer than I liked, but then he shook his head. “No. I don’t think I’ll do that now.” Then he pulled away and gave the black unicorn a little smile. “So. . . if you like bucks. . . why. . .” He gestured in vaguely in the direction of Star House.

“You mean Arlostee? I was barely older than a colt and an older, powerful mare took me into her bed. And she was like you. . . confused and hurt. . . so there was no way I could tell her no. I won’t say it was forced, but she was the first mare I was ever interested in. And the last.” Okay. That was my cue to go!

“Not even Blackjack?” Or stay! Damn it, P-21. Why’d you have to ask that?

“No. No offense to Blackjack, but I could never be in a relationship with her. She’s far too. . . selfdestructive,” Priest said gently, but with a firmness that made my butt hit the floor. Another kiss, and I started to creep away, face burning in embarrassment. I definitely didn’t want to hear any more. Then. . . “Do you like Blackjack?”

I dashed back as silently as a zebra, poking my head around the corner to peek at the pair again. Okay! Maybe I should hang around a little while longer. Just in case. I bit my left foreleg just to make sure I didn’t speak as my ears twitched. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t. . .

“What’s not to love?” P-21 sighed. Habazawah?! “She saves ponies. She’ll save the entire world if she can. I can’t even make it on my own for ten minutes.” He closed his eyes. “I just wish I didn’t hate her so much.” That made my blood chill till I heard him choke and he curled up a little. “I just wish I understood what I was supposed to feel! I’m used to hate. I hate so damned much. And I feel horrible for hating my friends!” he said as he pressed his face to Priest’s neck. The black pony hugged him gently. “I’m such a bad pony. . . and she’s. . . she’s so good it hurts! But she killed him, though. . . I should hate her! Shouldn’t I? You can’t forgive and love somepony who killed somepony you loved! That’s. . . messed up. . .”

Then Priest calmly looked right at me! My eyes popped wide in shock and embarrassment. But he slowly shook his head with a little smile. “The first step towards healing hatred is admitting it. Get it out of your system. . . don’t let it fill you up until you’re drowning in it. You feel what you feel. You do what you do. And you don’t let fear, shame, and hatred control you.” He stroked P-21’s mane. “I’m sure you can tell her how you feel. . .”

But P-21 clenched his eyes and shook his head. “I can’t. Not to her. Not till. . . not till I can look at her without wanting to kill her. Not till I can. . . without feeling. . . shame. . .” he said softly and trembled. “She. . . she saved my life, and a part of me still wants to kill her. . .” He cringed as he curled up against Priest. “What is wrong with me?”

Priest just patted his back. “You’re in the Hoof, P-21.” And that was all that needed to be said. “I’m sure that when you’re ready. . . she’ll be happy to listen to you,” he said as he looked at me with a firm gaze that demanded I treat P-21 with far more care than I had. Still biting my lip, I nodded. I’d never bring it up. . . not till he was ready. Priest sighed, stroking his mane as he looked back down at the buck in his embrace.

P-21 sniffed quietly as he looked up into Priest’s eyes and Priest gazed back. “He told me. . . he told me that meeting me was the luckiest day of his life.”

“I know the feeling,” Priest said softly. And once more, their lips met and their eyes closed, Priest’s in kindness and P-21’s in desperation. I was pretty sure that that was my cue to leave. I trotted silently away.

For once, we had a nice night in Star House. Priest had stopped by with P-21, the two nudging rumps more than a few times as they stood close together. Medley brought some purchases for Glory, mostly ammunition. Glory made dinner. Rampage pretended to be poisoned by it. Everypony was laughing. Medley gave Scotch Tape the ‘stable ponies don’t know nothin’ routine when asked about where the bathroom was. Scotch Tape complained bitterly about having to use an outhouse, the filly promising to bring proper sanitation to the Wasteland or die trying. I teased her about having a toilet for a cutie mark, and she looked so embarrassed that she checked immediately. Lacunae quietly watched from the periphery with a sad, lonely little smile.

Until I asked her to do some magic tricks. Suddenly dragged into the middle of

our attention, the alicorn couldn't seem to help herself. The 'Great and Powerful Lacunae' summoned a little thundercloud that zapped Rampage's rump, animated a rope that prompted a bondage joke that had me blushing and Glory grinning, and made little neon illusions of my fight with Psychoshy. I grumbled a little at the crotch shot; my nethers were twinging in reflex.

Then somepony suggested I get Octavia's contrabass and play for them. Lacunae and Scotch had never heard me perform before, and so I pulled it down stairs and stood with the bow. Both Priest and Medley still seemed faintly amused that I'd use an instrument instead of magic; apparently, you just weren't a real unicorn musician if you didn't use your horn to play... I really didn't know what exactly I was playing as I started to drag the black horsehair bow across the strings, but apparently it was good enough to earn stomping applause. Then Priest stood and moved next to me. His horn glowed, and a violin began to play alongside me. I noticed that the magic music was a little tinnier than that produced by the actual instrument.

Side by side we played, me horrible and him more than making up for my little mistakes. Medley listened before she rose to her hooves and joined us with a second, higher violin noise. She was definitely far more snarky and playful as her music danced and flitted about Priest's more serious notes. When we ended the song, I looked at Lacunae with a speculative little smirk.

"No no no... We couldn't. We shouldn't!" she stammered. "The Goddess... erm... I mean... I don't play!"

"You know the spell, don't you?" Priest asked calmly. The purple alicorn nodded once. "Well, then, we'd love for you to join us. But you don't have to."

"Don't worry, Lacunae. You can't be worse than me," I said as I rested my cheek on the neck of the instrument, feeling oddly like I was hugging somepony. "So don't worry if you're not good."

Slowly, she moved to stand behind the three of us. I levitated one of the books of music over and flipped through. "What should we play?" I asked as I looked at the titles. Then one caught my eye. "Canon D? What about A, B, and C?"

"A fine choice," Priest said in approval.

"Oh, yeah. That's one of my favorites. Won't be the same without Sonata's kazoo, though," Medley added.

"Yes... We... I know it well," Lacunae whispered in our mind solemnly.

I took a deep breath as I gripped the bow, looking at the music. Slowly the notes

began to roll out across the living room. I took some comfort in the easy pacing for my instrument as it rose and fell as casually as breathing. Then priest began to play in careful, calm, considerate notes, his horn glowing steadily as he closed his eyes, playing by ear. A few seconds later, Medley joined in, her notes prancing after his with little variations that mixed nicely with his steady playing.

Then Lacunae started to play. She wasn't good. She wasn't decent.

She was spectacular.

Her violin, sounding deeper and richer than the other two, rolled out beneath Priest and Medley in a sweet sad melody. With Priest and Medley, we heard music. With me, we heard noise that might have been mistaken for music. What rose from Lacunae's horn was pure soul. As she played, I imagined a little purple alicorn sitting all alone, playing the only instrument that gave her joy.

Lacunae said parts of her were missing. I'd eat my tail if this wasn't one of those parts. Lacunae, alicorn or not, was a musician. I was sure of it as our four notes blended together into one whole. The Contrabass hit the eight notes with regularity, providing the foundation for the other three. Harmony. It might not be Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, or Loyalty, but as sure as the stars in the sky and overhead, it was Magic.

That night, Star House was full once more. We doubled up the beds since there was so little sleeping space. I'd given Glory a grin, but her face mirrored Midnight's to an unnerving degree as she trotted to her own room with Medley. Priest and P-21 slipped into the room they'd both claimed. Rampage took her bed with Lacunae in the living room. That left Scotch Tape with me. She didn't seem very happy with it, but there was nowhere else for her to sleep. There was more than enough room as we settled in for the night.

My dreams were normal, full of chlorine and screams, rooms full of foals with a softly singing lullaby, and a hanging friend. I wasn't sleeping on exhaustion, so every few hours I woke, looked at the sleeping Scotch Tape, and drifted back to sleep. Once, I woke to her crying in her sleep, patting her shoulder softly as she called out for her mommy in her dreams.

Then I woke to a very unexpected sensation of warmth on my side. I smelled the ammonia smell and jerked almost completely awake. Scotch Tape blinked as I floundered. I breathed more heavily than I had while getting shot at by Lancer, my

heart flopping like a giant leech inside my chest.

All because Scotch Tape had wet the bed.

The olive mare just wrapped the blankets around herself as she hung her head in shame, doing all she could to not break down completely. I kicked myself for my reaction; I'd dealt with far worse. She didn't need me freaking out now. Slowly I trotted around the bed to sit next to her. "I'm sorry..." she sniffled. "I guess I'm just a big... dumb... foal..." she muttered as she shook.

I hugged her close, "No. You're a filly that's had horrible things happen. That doesn't make you dumb or a baby," I said, repeating almost word for word what had been said to me. She let out another sob as she broke down, vomiting out all the pain she'd been trying to hide.

"I miss her so much! I miss them all so much!" she wailed into my chest as she held me tight in desperation.

I sniffed softly, my tears slower and more practiced. "I do too. I dream about them every night." It took about ten minutes for her to calm down. "I'm sorry. I thought... I thought I could be tough. Not a cry baby. Peeing the bed..." she said in disgust.

"Hey, it could be worse. You could have been me. I wet the bed till I was almost as old as you... only I didn't have anything bad happen to me. I just couldn't be bothered to wake up," I said, exaggerating the facts just a little. She laughed despite her tears and I lifted the sheets to wipe away her tears. "Ewww... gross, Blackjack." "I'm serious. It was so bad mom requisitioned yellow sheets. Almost had medical check me," I said with a grin as she laughed.

Finally she slipped out of the bed and stripped off the wet blankets. "Thanks," she said softly.

"We're all damaged, Scotch. All of us. Even Priest. Probably Medley. You don't have to pretend like you're the only pony in the world too tough to be messed up," I said as I bundled them up with my magic. Quietly, we trotted down stairs to where Lacunae was mending the rips and tears in her dress.

She could teleport, shoot magic arrows, shield herself, use a minigun, play beautiful music, and sew... what couldn't she do? Apparently laundry. We found a bucket in the closet and filled it with some detergent and water, my magic scrubbing and rinsing them clean with water from the pump behind the house. We'd just finished as the others woke up.

Glory looked at the sheets in confusion. "Um... isn't it a little early to be doing the

wash?" she asked as I strung them out on low hanging branches. It'd be a miracle if they ever dried in Hoofington's weather. Scotch Tape flushed as she looked away; Glory looked at the olive filly questioningly.

I took a deep breath, trying to think of something to say. "I wet the bed!" I blurted. She blinked in shock. "Terrible. Absolutely terrible," I added, going more and more red as Glory just stared. "I think the mattress might be destroyed."

"You what?" Medley said from the doorway, her eyes going round with glee. So much for last night earning me some respect or bonding from the chartreuse filly. She raced towards Chapel, laughing. If only I had Taurus' rifle... I could claim it was an accident. A terrible accident...

"You know you shouldn't drink so much before you go to bed," Glory said, adding, "And always make sure you go potty before going to sleep if you think it'll be a problem." I was pretty sure my hide matched the red in my mane.

"What's going on?" Rampage asked as P-21 and Priest stepped out as well.

Oh, sweet Celestia, would it ever end?

Priest had agreed to shutter the house and finish the laundry. Of all my friends, he seemed to have guessed the truth, but if he had he'd decided to keep it to himself. Well rested and restocked with food and ammo, we were ready to take on the tunnel. I expected it to be dangerous. I expected it to be dark and creepy. I hadn't expected it to be huge!

The tunnel was wide enough for four tracks to disappear into the earth and high enough that even Glory didn't appear too claustrophobic. Hanging overhead were immense winches and cables that still remained taut despite the rust and corrosion. An entire freight train loaded with heaps of rusting crates and boxes was still connected to the apparatus, kept from plunging down the steep grade into the earth by what looked like solid rust.

"What were those for?" Glory asked as she looked at the cables overhead.

"Probably to help the freight trains up and down the grade into the tunnel," P-21 said as he pointed down into the musty depths. The walls of the tunnel had been painted a noxious green, and over the entrance were the words 'Hoofington Industrial Access Tunnel #1. Restricted Area.' Beneath that: 'Protected by Aegis Securities'. P-21 pointed at the hulking engine at the end of the train, "That doesn't look like the

steam locomotives in our books.”

“It’s not,” Rampage said as she trotted past the immense vehicle. “At the end of the war, almost nothing used coal besides the power plants. This probably used a spark generator to power the train.”

“I wonder how train flats from Brimstone’s made it through here if it’s so dangerous,” I muttered.

“Oh, that’s simple. Ride down into the tunnel without brakes and throw a few slaves off to feed the ghouls. Works every time, I’ve heard,” Rampage said with a mirthless smirk. “Getting through the tunnels is tons easier when you’ve got some acceptable casualties with you.”

“Bottlecap says that Dusty now just stops at the tunnel and hoofs everything over to Chapel. She’s buried in business now. They don’t even try the tunnels anymore,” Glory added as we slowly trotted down the steep tracks. I wondered why they didn’t use a gentler grade. Great, another addition to the millions of questions I’d likely never the answers to. Maybe Rover knew. . .

The subway tunnels had been a mess of broken trains, crackled walls, and collapsed concrete. In comparison, the green line was almost completely intact. The concrete didn’t show the slightest bit of cracking, and even the metal surfaces showed barely any corrosion. There was far less rubbish down here, too. There was the occasional tin can or barrel, but for the most part the trains sat silently connected to taut cables, waiting for the control or command to get them moving again. When the grade flattened out, we moved through an immense green switch yard beneath the earth. A low thrum surrounded us, and I could feel a dry, warm breeze blowing from deeper down.

“It still has power,” Glory marveled. “We could do so much with Hoofington. . . you know? If the radiation level’s not too high and we could solve the Enervation problem, we could do so much for Equestria.”

“But where does the power come from?” I asked as I looked at the green lights set in the ceiling. Each one cast a wan circle of light spaced along the tracks, but many of them had broken, leaving sickly spots of light amid cloying shadow.

“The dams,” Rampage replied. “At least, that’s what the Steel Rangers think. If they hadn’t been so fixated on the HMS Celestia, they probably would have set up shop in the dams’. Of course, the Eggheads are the only ponies that can actually get the damned power where it needs to go.”

“So why don’t they work together?” Scotch Tape asked.

“Because that would be sane and sensible,” Rampage replied. “But Steel Rangers want to control technology. Eggheads want to fiddle around with it. Not a lot of compromise between the two.” I floated out Rover’s map. “So, we need to find the G-3 tunnel,” I said as I looked into the gloom.

Something flitted through a distant patch of light.

Out came vigilance and my sword. Nothing on my E.F.S. Not a sound to be heard, either. After the museum, however, I wasn’t trusting bars. Everyone else had frozen too. “What is it?” Glory asked as she hovered above us.

Then I heard the soft clicking sound. Faint, rapid, and soft. And all around us. “Something bad. . .” P-21 muttered as he loaded a grenade. A low and unnatural growl echoed through the cavernous chamber. “Make that really bad.”

Suddenly, the clicking doubled, and with my night vision I saw a faint shimmer charging right at the six of us. “Here they come.” I shouted as I raised Vigilance and fired at the racing blur. The bullets clanged as they struck metal, and there was a magical flash as my target leapt the final distance. I rose, my hooves meeting the mechanical monster as it rammed into me. Claws ripped at my armor and pneumatic jaws hissed as they snapped closed inches from my face. The canine was almost entirely metal save for a gray blob of brain matter in a jar atop its head. I’d heard about robot ponies with brains, but this was a first.

Then, as I struggled with the first, a second raced forward and bit my hind leg. A jerk and the cyberdog had pulled my leg out from under me! I went down, kicking and screaming, as the mechanical monsters on top slowly twisted its head and opened its jaws for my throat. All around me, my friends opened fire as more and more of the cloaked robots appeared and attacked. Green lightning flashed from the robot’s glassy dome, and my vision blurred as the world twisted around me for a moment. It was all I could do to magic its jaws apart.

Then Scotch Tape jumped on its back, squeezing tight with all four hooves as she beat on the dome with a wench clenched in her jaws. The dome cracked, popped, and finally shattered as she pulverized the gray wad with the end of her wrench. The dog gave a spastic jerk and tumbled off me. I sat up and my horn flashed, three magic bullets shredding the transparent brain casing of the other one.

As big a weakness as a targetable brain was, I could have done with a few more. The machines were strong, fast, and worked together. They also had those dis-

orienting brain zaps. When not engaged in combat, a blue talisman in their chest would flare and they'd disappear. Glory and Lacunae fought together side by side, Lacunae strafing the open areas around us and Glory sending emerald beams of death into any shimmers that appeared. I worked with Scotch Tape, more shielding the filly than I liked to admit. I wasn't going to have another Scoodle on my conscience! Rampage freely engaged three or four of them at a time, ignoring the friendly fire from P-21. After his grenades hit, she mopped up what was left as her own injuries healed.

"Why are you... nunngh... grinning like that?" Rampage asked the blue pony.

P-21 laughed as he popped open Persuasion and loaded a new grenade. "Oh, this is very therapeutic."

Then four of the cyberdogs fell upon Glory and Lacunae. I had no idea if they'd jumped or could run on ceilings. One of them clamped its jaws down on Glory's wing and began to pull. The jaws worked, chewing and crushing the appendage as she screamed and tumbled. Lacunae teleported ten feet up, leaving the cyberdogs to crash beneath her. The minigun swiveled down and blasted at the fallen canines, eroding them with a pillar of fire and bullets. Then two more glued to the support pillars raked the alicorn with their brain lightning.

"Glory!" I shouted as I raced to her, slipping into S.A.T.S. to blow the dome off the cyber dog. It died with its jaws clenched on the wing. "Hold still!"

She grimaced with pain as she trembled beneath it. "I'm not going anywhere."

I tried to pry it open with the sword, but it wasn't moving. "Scotch! I need you!" I called returning my attention to the fighting. The olive filly raced up with two snapping at her flanks till I split one dome with the sword and blasted my last three rounds into the dome of the other. "Free her, quick!" I said as I shoved the second one away. It wasn't quite getting the message that now it was supposed to die!

As Scotch Tape worked, I saw things weren't going well. I had no idea how many of these things there were. Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? P-21 was trying to use the heavy barrel of the grenade launcher as a bludgeon, his shoulders bleeding from clawed lacerations. The canines were now blasting Lacunae almost continuously with their green zaps and Rampage was all but buried beneath them. Then one of the dogs bit me and ripped at my armor so hard that the magic saddlebag split and dumped half my possessions across the floor. I shouted and struggled as I saw the precious figurines fall free.

Then one bit a forehoof. Then one bit a rear hoof. And then I knew exactly how Scoodle felt as they started to pull! We were about to be ripped to pieces by robotic brain dogs. Could it get any worse?

Did I actually just think that?

A mechanical growl cut through the cavernous space, echoed and magnified. Suddenly, the cyberdogs went still. My legs were released as they cautiously backed away. From the gloom approached a massive beast of metal. This was the Deus of cyberdogs. Armor plating covered every inch of its matte black form. It's red eyes glared balefully at the six of us as two shoulder mounted cannons pointed right at me. This wasn't a cyberdog! This was the size of a bear!

It opened jaws big enough to crush my head as it snarled in my face. I swallowed as I stared at grinders inside its throat. Who the hell had designed this thing?

Then it closed its mouth, red eyes staring down at me. Slowly, it turned as if inspecting the battlefield. It's heavy metal claws scraped at the stone as it walked to the fallen figurines. I cried out as it stepped right on Rainbow Dash, but the figurine was apparently too awesome to be pulverized by mechanical death beasts.

It stopped and then stretched down to bump its muzzle against the tiny orange form of Applejack. From within the beast came a low little whine. Again and again it nudged the bucking figure before it sat down and raised its head in a long low howl. Looking at the figurine one last time, the giant mechanical beast turned and stalked back the way it had come. One by one, the remaining cyberdogs rose and trotted after it on softly clicking claws. Just like that, they disappeared back into the recesses of the tunnel.

"What the fuck was that?" Rampage asked as she adjusted her armor.

"I..." Was that... "I don't know," I said as I levitated the little orange figurine, sitting and hugging it as I looked in the direction the security cyberdogs had gone. I found myself imagining that the tiny Applejack was crying, though.

We found the tunnel we needed, moving quickly and quietly along the wide open space. There was no debris blocking our way, which also meant that there was no cover. Twice turrets dropped from the ceiling above to rake the tunnel with flashing pink bolts of disintegration magic. Without cover, we had only moments to destroy them before they destroyed us. And we didn't always succeed. . .

“Don’t laugh,” Rampage muttered as she trotted beside Scotch Tape, the striped filly cursing under her breath in decidedly unfillylike fashion.

“You shielded me,” Scotch Tape said awkwardly, “I’m not going to laugh. I just. . . I wonder why you’re this old?”

“Huh?” Rampage blinked as she looked at the olive filly. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you look like you’re five or six. . . right? So why don’t you regenerate as a newborn? Or my age?” Scotch Tape asked. “Why five or six?”

Rampage opened her mouth. . . then closed it with a small frown. “I dunno. I never thought about it,” she said as she cocked her head. “I mean, I’m fifty or sixty years old. . . but I don’t know why I’d pop back to this specific age every time.” She rubbed her chin. “Now that you mention it. . . I don’t age up older than twenty or thirty-ish.”

And another to the hundred or so mysteries we were dealing with. Right next to ‘what was the source of all this radiation?’ It wasn’t a lot, but it was consistent. Everyone except Lacunae had taken a dose of Rad-X. I supposed that she was benefiting from it. . . but even she seemed definitely. . . off. It was almost as if she were in pain.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I nudged the purple alicorn. She flinched and bit her lip, shaking her head firmly.

“The screams are. . . strong. Very strong. I don’t want to stay here,” she said in a whimper in my head. “Please, let us hurry.”

But we only got a hundred yards further when we came to an immense door that completely sealed off the tunnel. ‘Hoofington Core Access #12-411J.’ “This must go to the Core,” I muttered as I thumped the door. Heavy as concrete. “I don’t suppose you can pick it?” I asked P-21 with a grin. He gave me a look that suggested that that question opened up whole new worlds of how stupid I was if I was serious. I consulted the map. “Okay. Good news, we don’t have to get through the door. Look for Sewer access 12-99. It should be in that wall.” I pointed to our left.

Glory had found it. Her wing still wasn’t right, even after taking the healing potion. Of course, the hatch was locked, but P-21 got out his pins and got to work. Two tries later, he had it open. This tunnel was far ranker, the air heavy and wet. Oddly, there wasn’t any mildew or rot down here. I supposed the radiation killed everything. There were also no lights, so I turned on my PipBuck lamp. Scotch Tape did the same. Lacunae’s glowing magic illuminated the rear as we entered the tight tunnels. Everything curved, so I couldn’t see how far we had to go.

“Think you can get DJ P0N3 down here?” Rampage asked. “All this quiet is freaking me out.”

“Doubt it. . . but. . .” I turned on my radio and set it to search for a signal. Static. Static. Static.

Then a mare spoke in a rush. “. . . is Team Delta. We’re trapped in adjunct 33-99B. The shields are up. Please lower the shields. We’ve got critical information from Canterlot. The Sun has risen. The Moon has not been freed. The Stars are still in play. I repeat, team leader, the stars are still in play! This is Team Delta. We’re trapped in adjunct. . .” And the message kept looping over and over again. I looked at Rover’s map but couldn’t find an Adjunct 33-99B anywhere on it.

“One of those teams, you think? The ones who knew about the bombs?” Glory asked from behind me.

“I suppose,” I said, wondering if that broadcasting had been looping for two centuries with a message that had never reached its recipient.

“I think we’re lost,” I muttered after half an hour. I turning the map over in front of me and squinted at the faded lines. “I don’t know if we’re supposed be going in this direction or not.”

“Lost?” P-21 said as he nudged in to my left to look at the map.

“No. . . I think we’re supposed to keep going this way,” Glory said, pointing with her uninjured wing tip as she squeezed in to my right.

“I thought it was right at that last tunnel,” Rampage said as she squeezed in under me, looking at the map.

“No, this is the right way. See?” Scotch Tape had wiggled in next to Rampage and was pointing up with her hoof.

“But then shouldn’t we already be at that factory thingy?” Rampage asked.

“I believe we should,” Lacunae agreed, leaning over my head to look down at the map.

“A little personal space, please!” I shouted. I immediately winced at the echo sounding off through the tunnels, but at least my friends fell back enough to let me breathe. Looking at the map, I poked a little square marked HMF. “If this is the right way, then

this place should be just off to our left. Look for some sign of 'HMF', whatever that is."

We spread out a little bit, but the further we went, the more certain I was that this wasn't where we were supposed to be. Why did this tunnel look... burned? A distance past that, we did find a door marked HMF, but, instead of being tightly sealed, the entire thing was twisted in its frame. The burn marks were very prominent here, especially on the wall opposite the door and the floor and ceiling near it. I squeezed through and found a deformed metal-lined passage; the walls of the tube looked like they'd melted slightly and then resolidified. My radiation meter suddenly started to click a lot more urgently. I proceeded down the tunnel cautiously, but it seemed safe. Well, relatively. Nothing down here but drippy-looking metal.

"Come on through," I said, peeking out. I helped the others squeeze through, and then only Lacunae was left outside. I looked expectantly at her, but she took one look through the gap and flashed through to the far side. I looked at her, the gap, and then at her again; okay, yes, expecting her to squeeze through that was not one of my better ideas.

The alicorn immediately took a deep breath and smiled blissfully. "Oh, this is better."

I took one look at my radiation meter spiking and swallowed. "Yeah. Better." I shared a look with the rest of my friends and we immediately took another Rad-X.

We advanced down the passage and found... it looked like something in another chamber had half blasted, half melted through the tunnel's wall. Twisted debris had been melted into the walls, and the floor was covered with what looked like hardened flows of mixed liquid metal and rock. The tunnel continued a bit farther to a short flight of stairs leading up to a heavy door, but that had melted into its frame. If we wanted to continue, we'd have to go through the hole.

The hole looked like something a giant bullet would punch in a metal target, except that whatever had done this had blasted through rock and two layers of metal. On the other side, there was a drop to the "floor", but there was enough congealed molten ruin for us to scramble down. The room was one massive pile of slag. Whatever had happened in here, it had melted every surface into a frozen landscape of dripping metal. Blackened steel stalactites dangled down above us, and we had to take care not to step upon or trip over lumps and spikes extending from the floor like alien and dangerous works of art. In the very center of the mass was a large hunk of cracked, blackened rock; I looked up at the ceiling, but there didn't seem to be anywhere the rock could have fallen from.

“What the hell is this place?” I asked as we spread out a little. There were red bars in my vision in all directions, but for all I knew they could be above, below, or through solid rock. Still, I gestured for everypony to have their guns ready.

“Someplace bad,” Scotch muttered, drawing her wrench. I couldn’t disagree. There was a runny doorway, sans door, in the side of the room; behind it was a stairway leading up. Fortunately, the stairs had been dug as a tunnel rather than built in a vertical chamber and were still mostly intact. At the top was a room full of fried terminals and scattered scrap. One wall of the room had what looked like large windows in it, but blast shields had lowered over them... and been melted through. Now the twisted voids looked out on the room we’d just come from. Burned out talismans and crystals were in abundance. Whatever had happened here, it hadn’t been good.

There was a door in the wall opposite the windows; on the other side, two identical-looking metal corridors led off at angles. The damage here wasn’t as bad; these looked more like the entry tunnel I’d squeezed into than the liquefied blast chamber. At random, we picked left.

At the tunnel’s midpoint was a melted-shut metal door that was probably the one leading to the tunnel we’d entered through, and at the tunnel’s end was an intersection identical to the one we’d found outside the melted chamber. This one’s terminal-filled room was more intact, though, and had a large #5 painted against the far wall beside the observation windows. Sooty ash and burned bones lay everywhere around the observation room, but the chamber beyond the windows wasn’t burned at all. In fact, except for the glass of the windows, everything in the room on the other side, including the large gray rock in the middle, looked as if it was covered in frost!

“Hey, this one is still active,” P-21 said as he sat before one terminal and started to type. Then he frowned. “Okay. Definitely going to take a while.”

“Do we have a while?” Scotch Tape asked as she looked at her own PipBuck.

“Lets look for a way out while he works. Scotch, can you give him a hoof?” I asked from the intersection, peering down the other passageway. She nodded, looking grateful to be staying behind with the blue buck. We broke into pairs and split up, Rampage and Lacunae continuing in the direction we’d been going while Glory and I started back to investigate the other corridor at the melted room intersection.

We found a T intersection and, after discovering going straight ahead would take us to another identical junction, turned right instead. Glory looked a bit pained as we

walked, that savage bite to her wing still bleeding a little.

“How are you holding up?” I asked softly as we trotted past storerooms filled with knocked over, twisted shelves of scrap electronics, spark batteries, and wonder glue. Most of them were fire damaged, but here and there were ones that didn’t look that bad. I made sure to pocket all the reasonably intact-looking ones for when we got out of here.

Glory peered down the hallway before she glanced at her injury with a worried look. “I don’t know. I’ve never hurt my wings before.”

“Never?” I asked in surprise. They looked delicate. Fragile, even.

She gave me a crooked little grin. “I know I’m not a flier like Dusk, but trust me. Pegasus wings are tough. Once a pegasus is airborne, well... there’re stories of pegasi during the war flying full speed straight down into zebra formations. That’s why Rainbow Dash was always trying to get pegasi to sign up.” She swallowed as she looked nervously at the bite. “That dog gave me everything it had. If it’d bit my leg like that... or my throat...” She gave a nervous little shake of her head and smiled, “Lucky me, it bit the toughest part of me.”

“Still,” I said as we continued along the metal hallway, “I’m sorry you keep getting hurt following me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m tough,” she said as she looked through a doorway and frowned. “What is that?”

It was another mostly-intact monitoring room, this one lit with a strange, sharp ar-clight glow. Side by side we moved forward, me with my slug-loaded shotgun ready while Glory hovered above with a look of sharp discomfort. The lights weren’t just sharply defined... they were moving. And what a coincidence, the red bars moved with the light. Step by step, I shuffled closer, and...

Was that a unicorn?

It might have been a unicorn once, but its flesh had melted away and left only the glowing skeleton. Its tattered and burned uniform still hung on its brilliantly glowly bones; a nimbus of glaring white light was emanating from the skeletal remains. They didn’t walk so much as hover silently over the ground as the light flickered around and through them. They looked more like milky crystal than bone. The...thing looked right at me as the green glow within its sockets flared.

Oh fuck this. I entered S.A.T.S. and blasted four rounds into its skull. Shining bone and tattered cloth exploded around it. It let out a scream so high it was almost

beyond hearing but nearly floored me in pain. The bones flickered and went dark, though, and the skeleton collapsed in a shattered heap.

Too bad it wasn't alone.

Two more floated into view, and from the horn of the first a line of distortion wavered through the air and swept across the passage. It had absolutely no effect on the walls, my barding, or my flesh.

It did, however, shatter every bone in my legs as it passed through me. I fell into a screaming heap, tears running down my cheeks as I fired round after round into the floating skeletons. Glory's emerald beam seemed far less effective than my crude but brutal shotgun slugs. I lunged to the side, feeling the broken shards digging into my flesh as another distortion beam sliced vertically past me. The second one shattered in a shower of bone, and finally our combined shots transformed the third into a heap of glowing ash.

I lay on my side, feeling four crippled limbs sag against the floor. "What was that?" Glory asked as she pulled my barding aside to look at the smooth, uninjured skin and the broken bulges beneath it.

"I don't care, so long as we can kill it," I said as I lay back. I saw the hesitation on her face. "What is it?"

"I... Our healing potions aren't much good down here. I don't think..."

"Give me a Hydra," I replied without hesitation.

"Blackjack, remember what Rampage said! Enervation plus Hydra equals liquid Blackjack. And there's the taint in it to consider."

"Don't go Lacunae on me and start quoting fancy math," I replied with a shaky smile. It felt like all four of my legs were being dipped in fire. "Dead Blackjack here or dead Blackjack when we run into more of those things. You decide. If you have a Hydra, give it to me."

Glory closed her eyes and fished out the syringe. The gray goop went to work at once, and I did all I could not to cry out as I felt my shattered limbs regenerate. The shards were pulled into place piece by piece and reformed. Oddly, the pain suddenly slackened to a dull ache, and I blinked as I rose to my hooves. Was it just me, or did I actually feel... good? "Huh. It looks like that did the trick."

"It doesn't hurt?" she asked in confusion, and I shook my head. She didn't say anything else, but she looked troubled as I walked to one of the large observation

windows. There was an odd rainbow glow shining through it.

The chamber beyond wasn't melted at all. At the center of it was an immense diamond as large as a pony's head and shining with a corona of light. Arranged about it in an almost a perfect ring were a dozen unicorn skeletons. Four more trotted around, moving as if checking the equipment along the periphery. I didn't think that any of it looked functional; it was as if the bones were simply going through the motions.

I glanced at Glory and forced a grin. "Let me guess. That's just a really big gemstone and has nothing to do with all the spooky glowing bones, right?"

Glory shook her head. "No, I think it's a direct cause, Blackjack." I resisted the urge to facehoof. At her next words, I found that very easy. "I think that that's a megaspell chamber."

"A what?" I shouted. Then I clasped my hooves over my mouth, but it looked like the bones down there still hadn't noticed us. "That's a megaspell?" What idiot puts megaspells under a city?

Glory nodded. "I've seen diagrams in textbooks. The spell matrix amplifies a spell exponentially with every unicorn that's channeling the spell. The diamond is sort of like a giant spark battery; it stores the spell until it's triggered. Or the storage framework destabilizes; they don't last that long—usually," she added with a curious and worried look at the chamber below, "—which is why fully staffed bases like this had to be built." I frowned as I looked closer at the circle; I had seen something like this before. . . when I was inside Stonewing getting fused with a cockatrice. Over the glare I could barely make out a magical symbol floating inside the huge diamond. "That glyph is a representation of the stored megaspell's effect."

"Effect? I thought that they just went 'boom'," I said with a little frown.

"Well, there were megaspells that exploded. The very first weaponized megaspells were ignition spells amplified by a million, like lighting a billion candles all at once. But there were tons of other megaspells developed that were a lot more insidious. Like one that was supposed to make every zebra in an entire city want a worthless rock to the point of killing each other. Or one that was supposed to transform everything in its volume of effect to water. I understand that one megaspell actually was supposed to made every zebra affected swap sides and be loyal to Princess Luna."

I shivered at the thought. "Mass mind control. . . yay."

Glory gave a wan smile. "Better than killing them all, right?" I wasn't exactly sure

about that. Glory looked pensively at the room below for a moment. "This spell shouldn't have stayed stable for anywhere near this long. I think that when it started to degrade. . . it probably animated those bones, and they've been restoring it since. It's a feedback loop."

"Wow. You know, I think I like the tunnels of Hoofington even more than Hoofington itself. We really should bring everypony down here for tours," I said as I backed away from the window. Knowing my luck, I'd sneeze and set it off.

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. This place is far too hazardous for. . ." she caught my arched brow and smile. "Ah. . . right. Could you please warn me when you're going to be sarcastic?" she asked hanging her brow and looking a little sheepish.

"Of course not. That'd ruin the fun!" I said with a chuckle. Then I heard the faintest whirr. For a moment, I thought it was just a fan of some sort working, but then a sharpeyed pink party pony poked my brain and pointed out a camera no bigger than an apple set in the corner. And as I moved towards the exit, it tracked to follow me.

Somehow, I doubted that it was Spike. . .

Over the next half hour, we'd come across three more megaspell chambers, but these were dark and dead. Their diamond cores had transformed into lumps of ugly gray stone. We'd also come across several more unicorn remains trotting about their business. One lot's horns fired pink disintegration bolts that nearly had me turned into a pile of pink goop. Another, to my infinite chagrin, fired powerful magical bullets at me in a near exact copy of my own signature spell! That just wasn't fair!

And every camera we passed followed us.

There was other fun, too. Protectapony's and turrets happily opened fire the moment they could target us.

I had to admit, getting attacked by a table was a little weird, but Glory had reduced it to emerald dust before it'd rammed into me. Neither of us could figure out how or why it had suddenly come to life.

Finally, we came to what looked like a large control room of some kind. 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences Hoofington Megaspell Facility' was written over a large emblem of a unicorn in profile against a starry sky. It had the same charred look as most of this place: not melted, but definitely not what I'd call intact. A massive monitor covered one wall, the screen blackened and slightly warped but still displaying an

image. A . . . map.

“There! Look. That’s Hoofington,” Glory said as she pointed at a little mote along a river. To the east and south were all kinds of other names, few that I recognized. The entire map was covered in transparent blotches of different colors. Most were green or pink.

“Who marked up the map?” I asked with a smile as my eyes looked at the names. Canterlot. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Roam. Slowly, my smile faded and my eyes widened as comprehension dawned.

“Megaspell targets. Balefire strikes,” Glory breathed softly.

Not dozens. Not hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands. They crawled over the map like a fungus, peppering more of the world than I could have ever imagined. In that map was reflected the insanity of two races unable to stop themselves from mutual annihilation. In that map were the deaths of tens of millions of ponies, zebra, and other creatures swept up in their conflict.

What have we done? The little ponies inside me couldn’t answer that.

“Blackjack! Glory!” Rampage squealed as she charged into the room. A somber-looking Lacunae followed her at a more sedate pace. “We found the way out. It looks like it leads exactly where we’re supposed to go.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Let’s get the others.”

The Lacunae said softly inside my mind, “Shouldn’t you do something about all that blood?”

“Blood? What. . .” but my words failed as I looked at my forehooves. The black material between the plates glistened wetly. Bloody hoofprints marked my passage perfectly. Fortunately, Glory was too occupied with Rampage’s tales of fighting skeletons to have noticed. I forced a grin at the purple alicorn. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not bad. Doesn’t hurt at all. . .”

Not at all.

Together we left the control room, the cameras watching us all the while.

Meeting back up with P-21 and Scotch Tape, I transferred what files remained on the terminal to my pipbuck so we could get out of here. We’d already spent far too

long underground. As we moved back into the tunnels marked on Rover's map, I brought up the files.

Hoofington Megaspell Facility Status

Matrix 1> Discharged. Target 114.5 N, 13.4 E Gallows Crossing

Matrix 2> Discharged. Target 119.1 N, 17.6 E Redstone Train Spur

Matrix 3> Discharged. Target 103.9 N, 19.2 E Grayridge

Matrix 4> Discharged. Target 140.0 N, 17.8 E Okambo

Matrix 5> Discharged. Target 112.1 N, 4.5 E Longrun

Matrix 6> EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR!

Matrix 7> 5% charge remaining. Target not selected.

Matrix 8> 100% charge remaining. Target not selected.

I sure hoped that the one Glory and I had found was the 100% one. I dropped to the next file. There was a lot more corruption, but I managed to find a few more bits of information.

Spell Matrix 5> Details: Refrigeration. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 6> Details: Combustion. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 7> Details: Come to Life Spell. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 8> Details: ERROR. Data Corrupted. ERROR. Data corrupted.

The last bit of useful information was a simple list.

18.41.99> Hoofington defensive alert issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.05.23> Martial Law issued for Hoofington region; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.15.10> StableTec Emergency Broadcast issued: Hoofington region; auth. STec VP Scootaloo.

19.26.11> Redoubt Priority Evacuation issued; auth. ERROR.

19.45.32> General Emergency Evacuation issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.50.54> Mega Spell Release issued; auth. Princess Luna EC-1010.

19.51.01> Spell Matrix 1: Discharged.

19.53.08> Spell Matrix 2: Discharged.

19.55.19> Spell Matrix 3: Discharged.

19.57.49> Spell Matrix 4: Discharged.

19.59.28> Spell Matrix 5: Discharged.

19.59.35> Hoofington Defense System activated; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.59.59> Emergency shutoff override issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak

ERROR ERROR ERROR ERROR

It looked like trying to raise the shield to save the city while firing off megaspells wasn't the smartest of moves. I could barely imagine the chaos: trying to give warning, trying to fire back, trying to defend themselves from the falling bombs. And something bad had already been brought here by the zebras. Some weapon that had killed everypony in the city.

Or Sekashi was right and an abomination from beyond the stars did it...

Great. Now I really loved being down here.

One thing was certain: the longer I was here around Hoofington, the more I wished that the balefire bombs had destroyed everything. This place had so much creepy history that it felt like the city itself was just waiting to finish killing everypony off.

Yes, that's definitely what it felt like. All of us, with the exception of Lacunae, were suffering from the radiation. It wasn't getting stronger, but it wasn't getting weaker. Slowly and steadily, it poisoned us with every little click of my PipBuck. Lacunae had another problem: her magic was failing her, the screams wearing on her. She could barely lift the minigun and had been forced to balance it between her wings.

We'd finally found the subterranean factory; in reality, it felt more like a stable than anything else. There were dozens of small rooms interconnected by conveyor belts. The stillness of the place made me shiver. Rover was right, this place did feel asleep. I knew that Glory was excited by the idea of machines helping the Wasteland, but I didn't want this factory running. I didn't know what it made. I didn't want to know. Every second we were down here, I felt more and more... watched.

Then we reached another large door sealed up tight and I swallowed hard as I looked at the map. It wasn't marked. Either Rover had forgotten, or... what did it matter. The heavy door needed power to open, regardless. Otherwise it was just a lot of wall. A wall covered with a large Robronco logo.

All of us looked tired, despite the fact we hadn't have much of a hard trip in the tunnels. We'd passed a few pony corpses, salvaged what we could from them, and continued on our way. The tunnels simply sapped our strength as quickly as the radiation poisoned us. Suddenly, there was a sharp pop, and Glory yelped as the reek of rotten eggs rolled across my nose. She dug out a healing potion. It wasn't just spoiled, but looked like it was boiling ink inside the bottle. Quickly, we removed our remaining healing potions; every single one of them had spoiled. Some of them appeared to be turning toxic.

Not good.

“Let’s see if we can find a control room or a button or something that can get this door open,” I said as I rubbed my nose. The too-dry air was starting to make my nose all scratchy.

We fanned out in pairs, me with Lacunae. The poor alicorn was in such distress that she finally just dropped the gun. I grunted as I lifted it and slung it across my back. Ugh, how the heck could she fight with a weapon like this? I felt panic nibbling at my spine at the slow creep of death working its way inside me. Every minute, the rad meter crept a little closer. I didn’t think we had enough Rad Away to get out of here now. It was like suffocating.

“And that’s a pretty deep hole,” I muttered as I came to a raw rock wall with a diagonal shaft descending even deeper into the earth. It looked like the factory had been expanding or . . . or something. Power cables plunged into the earth along a metal stair. I felt an unnerving sensation of being drawn into the hole, despite the fact the breeze blew out from it. I heard the slow shuffle of cards in my mind. Okay, now I definitely didn’t want to go down there.

“Blackjack! I think I need you!” P-21 shouted from within the factory.

Lacunae seemed in such a daze that I sighed and nudged her, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.” I trotted along with the dealer following me. “What are you doing here? I don’t have time for crazy. I have enough scary.”

“Somepony’s looking for you,” he said softly.

“Lots of ponies are looking for me,” I said crossly as I looked around for him. “It’s been a running theme these last three weeks. Deus. Sanguine. Now zebras. I’m sure that, any second now, the Zodiacs are going to appear too.” I was so glad that my paranoia was giving me a memo. “If you don’t mind though, I’m in a hurry!”

It took me a minute to find him in some sort of control room. “I think you might be able to unlock the door.”

“Uh, you’re the one that knows terminals, P-21. Not me,” I said warily, looking at the screen.

>EC-1101 Authorization pending

“It wants EC-1101?” Did that mean that this factory had something to do with one of the projects? Or was it something else?

"I don't know, but it looks like all the systems are shut down until it receives a signal from EC-1101," P-21 said as he worked the controls. "That includes the doors."

"Okay. So... how can I do this?" I asked as I lifted the PipBuck.

"Go to your broadcaster and see if it can contact a Robronco terminal. I'm hoping that just contacting the locked program will be enough to access the system. Otherwise, we're just dying in here."

I accessed my PipBuck and opened the broadcaster function. "Oh, wow... um... that's a lot of Robronco terminals." And Hoofington Defense terminals. Hoofington Stable-Tec networks. Then my eyes widened. O.I.A. access node?

I glanced at P-21 as he typed on the terminal, trying to do whatever he needed to do to get us out of here. I selected the access node.

>EC-1101 Access Required. Proceed? Y/N

>Y

"You sure you want to do this?" The dealer asked, the old buck staring hard at me. I glared at him as I pressed yes once again.

EC-1101 suddenly flashed and gobbledygook and strange numbers scrolled past faster than I could see.

Then my Pipbuck went black. "Uhhh... P-21?" I tried to hide the rising panic in my voice. Then the lights went out in the factory. The ventilation fans stopped running. The silence that settled became overwhelming. Then a long deep unnatural voice crackled through the air. "YOU!" Every monitor in the control room flashed on, each one showing a staring eye. Each one looking at me as that voice crackled through countless speakers echoing throughout the factory. "EC-1101! GIVE IT TO ME!"

"What the hell! What the hell is that!?" P-21 said as he staggered back. Why was the room turning... green? A green light began to replace the darkness as green electricity crackled along the walls and machinery. The engines began one after the other, but instantly began to scream and smoke. Alarms started to ring out as the monitors showing those staring eyes popped one after the other. The wires within were moving!

"Running! Running now!" I screamed as I scrambled out with P-21 and Rampage. I had no clue where we were running to. All around us, the machines were going crazy. At first I thought that they were going to start making killer robots, but then I saw that the machines weren't making anything. They were moving. The housing

burst apart as the metallic guts spilled out, rearranging themselves and creeping towards us. Green lightning flickered and danced along the writhing mechanical surfaces as they formed claws and tendrils.

“GIVE IT TO ME!” those thousand voices screamed at once.

That was a face. . . the machines were forming a massive pony face! It was slowly pushing out of the machinery as if the gargantuan monster was being birthed from the equipment. Green light blazed from its eyes as it opened it’s mouth and vomited dozens of electrical cables that crackled and snaked towards us.

We weren’t getting out the door. The door was becoming a part of. . . of IT! There was a scream of metal as an entire assembly line lifted like an immense skeletal hoof towards us. I felt cables snaking around my legs. There was no where to run. Every part of the factory had become a part of the abomination. My friends screamed and struggled but our weapons were nothing. I didn’t think a missile launcher would help against this thing.

But something else might. I reached into my pouch and withdrew the massive pistol, cracking open the breach. The silver bullet hovered in front of me. And then the abomination froze. Its green eyes widened in shock. “YOU! YOU DARE USE THAT?!”

In reply, I slammed the bullet into Folly and clacked it close. Instantly, the cables tightened, the lightning coursing along them burning me through my barding. “DIE!” It screamed through a thousand electrical mouths.

“You first,” I gasped. I glanced at my PipBuck, seeing it active once more. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Once more, strange arcane marks appeared on my E.F.S. as the weapon interfaced with my PipBuck. I waited impatiently in the magical stasis for the words to appear in my vision.

>PipBuck synchronization: complete.

>Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

>WARNING: Biomagical pattern contamination at 25% Please seek immediate medical attention.

>Magical field analysis: confirmed.

>WARNING: Esoteric threshold exceeded by 98.9%!

> Authorization confirmed.

>Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.

>Do you wish to fire? Y/N?

I had no choice.

>Firing.

The magical field spread over all of us, holding us in place and stopping that horrible constriction. The abomination reeled back, raising its forelegs as if it was a pony trying to shield itself.

The world disappeared in a roar of white light.

I choked and gasped, feeling half dead as I sucked in the smoky air. My whole body screamed in protest as I sat up and stared at the collapsed half of the room. Nothing remained but slightly glowing rubble. I had electrical cable wound around half my body, but I was able to carefully disentangle myself as I looked around for my friends.

Scotch Tape was in a bad way. She'd curled up completely, staring straight ahead with her hooves clamped over her mouth. Glory wasn't much better, rising on her trembling and shaking hooves. Rampage was more together; at least she wasn't shaking. P-21 simply looked right at me and asked, "What did you do?"

I raised my hoof defensively, "Hey, don't blame me for summoning that... thing. I just used EC-1101 to access a terminal. I have no idea what that... thing... was..." I looked at the melted rock and tried to take a step. My legs felt like rubber. Not weak... soft. I almost didn't want to take another step for fear that it'd bend. I was trying to keep myself together. We still had to get out of here...

One problem: no doors.

"Lacunae?" I shouted, praying that the alicorn could stand. I had no idea how we'd get her out if she couldn't. Fortunately, the purple alicorn stepped out of the gloom on unsteady legs.

There was a staticy crackle inside my head that made me wince. Then she swallowed, her mouth opened, and she said in a surprisingly high and steady voice, "Impressive."

"Thanks. I am to please," I said, trying to joke through my panic. "We need to keep going. We need to get... out of here. Now." At this point, I wished we'd tried to swim across the river. Hell, I'd have happily blasted my way through the Rangers... signed up with big daddy.

Goddesses, I could feel my bones bending with each step! I drew a desperate gasp

to hide my panic as I stretched down to shake Scotch Tape. She only whimpered and curled up tighter. I looked at the others, then said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Lacunae, but I can't carry her and your gun and ammo."

"It's only a gun," the alicorn replied simply. I shrugged the minigun and ammo drum aside and carefully laid Scotch Tape across my shoulders. I should have left her with the Crusaders. Why had I let her come with us? I took a step, feeling the give in my bones. Another. Another.

"Are you okay?" Glory asked me, her injured wing dangling beside her uselessly. It was a phenomenally silly question. Right now, none of us were okay.

"You betcha," I said with a grin. "Right as rain! Just a little wobbly-legged." I forced myself to keep smiling. And step. Step. Step. In the only direction we could.

Down.

Stairs were not high on my list on things I wanted to try right now. I slumped against the guard rail the whole way down. While my legs could support me, they felt as if they might buckle at any wrong step. I did all I could to not drop Scotch Tape. Glory walked with slow, pained noises as her bloody wing tip dragged beside her. P-21 was slumping against Rampage. Lacunae seemed capable only of walking. She moved like a zombie as we continued down. And down. And down.

And I heard the screaming.

It wasn't a scream as if from a pony's throat. It was almost like the memory of a scream that I couldn't get out of my head. And this wasn't a single pony... it undulated and rose and fell and was mixed with hysterical laughter, babbling, crying, and pain. I couldn't shut it out or shut it up. Scotch Tape whimpered on my back, shaking. She'd broken at the sight of the abomination... what was a little more grievous psychological damage?

It'd almost be more merciful to let her die down here...

I misstepped and staggered, my legs giving out beneath me as I smashed my face against the guard rail. Stars swirled in my vision as I struggled to catch myself. Fortunately, I hadn't dropped her. I slowly took a deep breath and stood.

Then I proceeded to beat the everloving snot out of myself for daring to ever think that. Security saves fucking ponies. And even though I had fucked up... and fucked up... and fucked up... I would die first before I ever killed her in some fucked up

gesture of mercy. I could swear I could feel Rampage's eyes on me, and I was suddenly very glad she was a filly.

"Too old" or not, I wouldn't be leaving her alone with Scotch Tape again.

Why were there stars underground? In the wan light of my PipBuck, I saw countless motes of shimmering light below us. Step by step we descended, closer and closer to those lights. Not stars. . . these were moving.

"What the..." I rasped, then coughed, tasting blood in my mouth as I stared at a wonder ahead of me.

The cavern was roughly triangular in shape, perhaps a hundred feet high and longer than I could see. Buildings of ghostly white stood silently in cracked decay. All around us swirled and drifted countless glowing motes of shimmering gold. They floated in and out of the stone at random. A flat plane of dark water reflected the countless motes. Knowing my luck, I'd plunge into a hole and drown. Step by step. I walked forward between the smashed and crumbling buildings.

A tiny mote drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

The glorious white unicorn looked particularly splendid in her rubber boots and coat as she surveyed the smashed artifacts and statuary with distaste. "Terribly gauche, wouldn't you say, Goldenblood? The marble is positively chilly. Really. What were they thinking?" she asked as she tossed her magnificent purple mane.

His chest burned horribly as he gasped for breath, "Likely. . . that they wouldn't be. . . a quarter mile. . . underground. . ."

oooOOOooo

I nearly fell on my face as the memory flashed out again. The mote continued on its way. I coughed for breath, feeling blood dripping out my nose. "Memories. . . they're memories." I said as I looked back at my friends.

It didn't matter what they were now.

Lacunae looked as empty as a doll. Rampage looked even more unstable than usual. Her cutie mark shifted so rapidly it simply looked like a smear. P-21 hobbled on three legs. And Glory. . .

I stared as the skin holding the wing slowly stretched like taffy and then broke, the wing splashing softly into the water beside her.

I stared at her standing in a daze. She didn't know. "Glory..." I rasped, blood dripping down my chin. "Your wing..."

She looked at it lying there beside her. She slowly picked it up and held it in her hooves. "It fell off..." she said with a whimper, like a foal who's favorite toy had broken. She started to shake, at first with tears... but then she threw back her head, laughing hysterically. "It fell off! It FELL the fuck off!" And with bloody tears she laughed and sobbed at the same time. "We're going to die! We're going to die! Please let us fucking die!"

I turned to face her... a light drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

"We're safe! We're saved! Sweet Celestia! We're saved!" the earth pony mare I was in sobbed in relief as she hugged her children. Green fields of magic rose up in all directions around the city, and the bombs flashed against them without effect.

Then her nose began to bleed. Her foals began to wail. Her sight dissolved in a red slurry as her body collapsed, but the scream went on and on and on...

oooOOOooo

"We... we are not going to die." I gasped, coughing and spitting up more blood. I felt like my heart was going to stop at any moment. "Just... keep walking Glory! There's a way out. There's got to be."

"I'm not even a pegasus now! I'm not Enclave. I'm not anything," she wailed as she broke into bloody tears, hugging her wing to her chest like it was a broken toy.

I used my magic to pull her mane down and make her look me in the eyes, not daring to try and hold her for fear that I'd drop Scotch tape. "Listen to me. Listen to me!" I croaked as I stared into her eyes, stopping her sobs for a moment. "Wings don't make you Glory. The Enclave doesn't make you Glory! Not giving up... that makes you Glory! Keeping going... makes you Glory! And you have to keep going. We are going to get... out..."

P-21 just slumped, and I wondered if his leg would drop off as well. "He kissed me... he kissed me..."

I shook and suddenly puked a torrent of blood and worse into the water at our hooves.

oooOOOooo

“All these artifacts will have to be removed at once,” the unicorn mare said regally as we walked between the broken buildings. “We don’t need any more protesters or resistance on trying to get the new zebra laws implemented.”

Goldenblood walked after her, rasping and coughing. “These ruins are proof that the zebras were here first. Something happened to bury these ruins. They should be investigated, Rarity.”

Rarity simply sniffed disdainfully. “Oh, very well. See that these artifacts are collected, catalogued, and sent to that ghastly building they’re erecting up above. Remember, these artifacts are supposed to be tippy-top secret.”

Goldenblood smiled thinly. “But of course. . .”

oooOOOooo

I drew another shaking breath as I stared at P-21, forcing myself to grin. “You’re going to. . . you’re going to kiss him again. And. . . and you’re going to show him your real cutie mark. . . and. . . and you going to do. . . do. . . whatever colts do. And you’re going to be happy. But you have to keep walking. You hear me. Keep. Walking.”

Rampage collapsed, her body shaking and muttering. The tiny motes seemed to be drawn to her, slipping in and out of her tiny striped body. With each one, her cutie mark flashed. . . a bird. . . a bike. . . two horns. . . I reached down and bit her mane and started to drag her further between the ruins.

oooOOOooo

“What’s going on?” a pegasus buck demanded as he stood before a panel of equipment. “What’s happened?”

“Cloudsdale. Maripony. Manehattan. . . they’ve been. . . there’s been an attack, sir,” a mare in an army uniform said in shock.

“Raise the shields immediately. Seal the city! I want this city sealed!” the buck demanded as everypony worked furiously. There was a green flicker.

“There’s not enough power for the shields! We’re only at 10% capacity!”

“Where’s the rest of the power!” He charged to a terminal, smashing buttons furiously with his hooves. When the picture came up at a smirking green image of a pony, the pegasus roared, “Horse! You bastard! We need those shields, now!”

Horse looked perplexed. “Why? Is something happening, sir?”

“The zebras. . . it’s an attack! An all out attack! We need more power.”

“Well. . . the reactor’s on standby. We can increase its output at any time.”

“Do it!”

oooOOOooo

“Momma...” Rampage sobbed. “I want my momma. . . where’s Momma.” she gasped as I dragged her through the water. She suddenly stiffened and purred, “I’ll help you find your momma. . .” She spasmed and shook. “You have the right to remain silent. . .” Then she sobbed once more. “Apple Bloom. . .”

Step. Step. Step. We walked through those broken ruins. Step by step. Broken ruins. Broken ponies. Going on because we had to. A mote slipped through my horn.

oooOOOooo

Rarity stood facing me, and I knew that rasp. “I know what you have, Rarity. I know where you got it. And I know what it is.” I felt my lips curl in a thin smile. “And I know what you’re doing with it in Hightower.”

“You know nothing,” she hissed as they stood together in the garden-atrium of the Fluttershy Clinic. But there was fear in her pretty blue eyes. “Leave me alone, or I’ll destroy you.” She started to step past him, but he blocked her passage with a wheezing laugh.

“Is it starting to talk to you? It is promising you secrets? Offering you ideas?” Goldenblood whispered in that horrible rasp. “I know it didn’t talk to Celestia. I know Celestia gave you the benefit of the doubt that you’d try and destroy it. I don’t think Luna would be so understanding.”

I didn’t think it possible for a white mare to look paler, but somehow Rarity pulled it off. “You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want it. I don’t need it. I’ve got my own sources. You might have snatched it before I could retrieve it from Zebratown. . . but it was hardly the only one of it’s kind.” He said with a sure smile.

Uncertainty was etched in her face. “What. . . what do you want, then?”

“Anonymity. I want you to wipe. . . hide. . . and bury every story about the O.I.A. You do that. . . and I will forget about just what you have.”

“And do you have one?” she asked in return.

He just smiled. "Of course not. That would be treason. And we're not treasonous ponies. . . are we, Rarity?"

oooOOOooo

Step. Drag. Step. Drag. Step. . . I stared at them. My friends. I'd led them here. I was responsible. I was to blame. Call it self-centered. It was. Call me a selfish cunt. I am. I got them killed. I cost Glory her wing. I was the one responsible.

"Is this it?" the Dealer rasped softly in my ear.

I choked my reply, blood dripping from the corner of my mouth.

"Is this when the Wasteland breaks you?"

"I. . . I can't. . ." I gasped, feeling lightheaded from all the blood I was losing. This was it. This was when the Wasteland killed us.

"Take two more steps," he said softly.

"I. . . can't. . ." I whispered. "I can't move. . . I think my heart stopped. . ."

"Your heart is too strong to quit. Now take two steps!"

"Why. . ." I asked I sat in the cold water. "Why the fuck. . . do you care?" I asked as I shook. "You're not real!"

The old buck smiled at me. "Just because I'm not real doesn't mean I don't care. Now. Take two more steps."

Slowly I took one step forward.

Slowly. . . I took another. . .

And saw the elevator sitting right around the corner. . .

Together, we climbed onto the steel platform, one by one. Broken. Bleeding. Dying. Alive. I reached over and slapped the talisman, and then my rubbery weak legs gave out and I collapsed next to the limp Scotch Tape. The machine gave a grind. Then, slowly. . . and faster. . . and faster. . . we began to rise.

Footnote: Level up!

New perk added: Forged in the Hoof – You've sucked up more Enervation than any pony should live through. You suffer 25% less enervation damage, and your healing items decay half as fast while in your possession.

27. Salvage

“Bah! Trixie is exhausted from performing feats beyond imagination. Begone with you until morning!”

The halls of 99 echoed around me with the screams of a dying stable as I lay in the center of the atrium. A thousand years seemed to pass, the wall rusting before my eyes, the bodies mouldering, liquefying, black fungus spreading from their corpses as the metal pitted and corroded. Acidic water hissed and bubbled in pools that slowly ate their way through the floor and covered the walls in a caustic sheen.

Through it all I lay there. Not dead. I didn't get that blessing. I couldn't move. Didn't want to move. I simply listened to the dripping. The hissing. The groaning of stressed metal. The clatter of breaking glass or tumbling ceramics. The pressure forced the burning chemical I'd unleashed into every pore of my body like countless fiery razors. Still, I lived. I didn't deserve to die. That was for better ponies... like my friends.

I wasn't alone, though. Not alone. He was here too, with his hat and watery pale eyes. He hadn't come for me. He wouldn't take me. I'd broken, but I still wasn't gone. I just wanted to die, move into the Everafter... become whatever ponies became when life was over and done with. But he wouldn't take me. My stable. My mother. My friends. But not me.

“Is this hell?” I whispered.

“If so, does that make me the devil?” he asked in return.

There was nothing to say as the pressure built more and more. Nothing to do but wait, lie there for another thousand years. I dropped like a rag doll to the level below as the floor rotted out beneath me. And the level below that. And the next. Then, finally, I landed in the liquefied remains of Stable 99. Only the pitted feces-colored metal shell of the stable remained, the armor keeping the Wasteland out and the poison in. Submerged talismans still bubbled, still faithfully pumping out more and more of the gas.

The Dealer sat on a long jagged spur of metal resembling a severed gray wing. That vast shell groaned and creaked above me. Beneath me. Within me. From far above, a massive stable door, sealed by centuries of corrosion, gave. A hurricane wind blasted the rubble-choked tunnel beyond clear. A shriek like the screams of so

long ago. The wind slackened, and died.

With one final bending, breaking, tearing cry, that armored shell gave way, and the hilltop collapsed inward like the hoof of an angry goddess. Finally, I thought. . . annihilated with a smile.

“She’s waking up? Sedate her!” some mare cried distantly.

“We did! She’s not responding to the Med-X!” another answered. Distant blurry lights entered my vision. And pain, but I was used to pain by now. I reached for that blur, pushing through the darkness. If I was alive, then Glory might be as well. All my friends might still be alive! I couldn’t lie here and do nothing!

A wave pushed me back towards the black, but I refused to succumb. “Sweet Celestia, she’s still waking up! Bluebell!”

“I already cast it again,” the mare panted breathlessly “It’s not working!” I could see faces now. Bloody faces in paper masks. Unicorns. They had scalpels and little bloody scissors hovering over me. My chest and gut burned as I pulled together my focus. One unicorn’s horn flashed, trying to push me back into Stable 99. I fought that urge to sleep. To dream. I’d kill them all. Teal eyes widened in shock as I stared back into them, pulling together a bullet spell as I slowly sat upright. “What is she doing? Hold her down! Get her under, now!”

“Won’t. . . let. . . you. . .” I choked around a tube in my mouth, my horn glowing white as I readied a shot right at her head. Then hooves grabbed my shoulders and forced me back down. I saw bucks in filthy white coats stained and spotted in blood. “Glory. . .” I rasped around the tube. “Glory!” I shouted, then choked.

“Get a memory orb!” The unicorn mare ordered as I struggled. I felt something inside me tear, but I ignored it. It didn’t matter how much I hurt now. I had to get free. I had to save my friends. “Security! Calm down! We’re trying to help you.”

A lie. They were Enclave. Or Sanguine. Or somepony that was going to sell me out. . . betray me. My horn flashed as I struggled, and the bucks yelped as my bullets bit into his flank. Somepony blinded me with a rag across my eyes. I fired wildly, desperately. Another sedating surge washed through me like a blanket, the lethargy blurring away the rest of my senses.

A glassy sphere was pressed to my horn but I resisted. . . fought. I had to get free! I had to help my friends! Glory! I had to help Glory.

“Come on you stubborn idiot!” the unicorn mare said, grinding the orb against my horn. “Let me save you!” Not me, you idiot! Help her! Her wing. . . sweet goddesses, her wing. . .

Please. . .

I tried to fire another bullet, but my concentration slipped away. There was a spark. . . no, Glory! I had to find Glory and all my friends. “Gluh. . . Ree. . .” I choked, feeling myself cut open and my organs exposed to the chilly air. Then my horn spasmed, and the connection was made. The world faded away.

Glory...

oooOOOooo

I didn’t want to be here in this mare. I wanted nothing to do with this place. I needed to find Glory and put her wing back on. I needed to find Rampage and discover just what was inside her. To do something to help Lacunae recover from that horrible dolllike state. But instead, I was stuck here. And worst of all, I felt two wings.

“I can’t believe we get to go to the Grand Galloping Gala!” Twist squealed. She was wearing a green dress which, despite the mint leaves around the collar, looked vaguely like forest camouflage. “Oh, I get to wear the pretty dress and have the pretty mane, and look! My hooves are painted!” She squealed as she danced on the sparkly ruby hooves in glee. “Best! Night! Ever!” I could only wonder how much brushing and blowing it’d taken to get her curly mane to lay flat. I suspected that magic was employed.

“Famous. Last. Words,” Vanity replied, smiling indulgently at the ladies and making Twist pout a little. The handsome buck wore a pristine white dress uniform. “If your night is pleasant, then consider yourself fortunate. The Gala has a well-deserved reputation for driving mares to drink.”

“Do we all have to attend?” Psalm asked softly, shuffling and fidgeting in a deep midnight blue dress decorated with tiny enchanted flecks of sapphire. Her white mane obscured her face as she looked worriedly out the door, chewing softly on the end of a lock. Twist sighed and brushed it out of her mouth, making the delicate black unicorn blush slightly.

“The Princess herself is decorating us, so the answer is probably ‘yes’,” Jetstream said as she stood before the mirror and carefully nudged her dark hair into place with a brush. The orange and gold dress made her look like she was on fire. A bit too garish for my— what was I saying? Why did I give a fuck about her dress right

now when Glory needed me! Besides, when had I ever worn a big frilly party dress? The blue pegasus grinned over at Big Macintosh and Applesnack standing calmly in crisp pressed uniforms. “Besides, half our boys are escorts of the Ministry Mares. It’s not like they can just skip out.” She looked over at Stonewing, who seemed to positively vibrate in anticipation, and gave a soft sigh.

“I can’t believe you set me up with your sister. She’s going to hate me!” Applesnack muttered as he brushed his shaggy tan mane aside. “Couldn’t you have been your sister’s escort?” he asked the big red buck with a frown.

But Big Macintosh just gave an easy chuckle, “Anope. How’d it look if she was escorted about by her big brother?” He rolled his green eyes towards the door, his grass stem still sticking out his lips. “Besides, she needed me with one of her friends.”

“Still don’t see why I don’t get no Ministry Mare,” Doof muttered dully. It was like seeing a cinderblock in a dress uniform, and his perspiration was already starting to show through. “It’d be nice to go out with a pretty mare like them.” Half the Marauders shared a look, and thankfully nopony laughed.

There was a knock on the door, and a lilac mare poked her head in. “Is everypony ready? I need you gentlecolts to come with me, please. The Princesses are about to make their entrance.” Macintosh, Applesnack, and Vanity all trotted. Stonewing brought up the rear, still almost half-flying half-vibrating across the floor.

“Um... I- I- I’d like to go to the G- G- Gala with a Ministry M- M- Mare too,” Echo stuttered; the yellow buck, looking positively tiny out from under the heavy communications equipment, was nearly stepped on as Doof snorted angrily and plodded out the door.

“Trust me, Echo. Those mares are nothing but trouble,” Jetstream said sourly. “And they’re missing out by not having a great guy like you at their side.” He brightened up immensely at that.

“Well, we should probably get to the party too,” Twist said, sashaying after the others. Jetstream trotted to Psalm, giving the black unicorn a little nudge on the flank. “Come on, Psalm. It’s just a party.”

“I’d rather not. I haven’t done anything that deserves honoring,” she whispered, her dark blue eyes looking up into Jetstream’s. “Are you sure I can’t stay here till it’s all over? I don’t like... crowds.”

“It won’t be so bad. Vanity says that it’ll probably just be boring aristoponies talking

to one another. And once you have your decoration, you can go.”

“All right,” she murmured. “I’m sorry, though. . . .”

Reluctantly, the pair exited the room together.

The Grand Galloping Gala was a positively spectacular affair that I might have enjoyed a great deal more if I hadn’t been trapped in it while my friends... Mentally, I was climbing the walls, trying to find some way... any way... to get myself out of this memory. I needed to help them. To beg for forgiveness. This was almost worse than leaving them to die. They’d been hurt following me.

I’d never seen more stuffed shirts and fancy dresses in my life. The Gala was clearly the social event of the year. Even more so given that, from the snippets of conversation rising around us, this was apparently Luna’s first. It seemed that there was more than a little apprehension from the aristoponies that the Gala would devolve into a common carnival slog. ‘Could you imagine?’ ‘How gauche!’

We trotted past a unicorn buck with a unicorn mare on either side of him. I wished I could plunge a sword into his heart and save two lives and one soul. “How dare she pick him over me! I’m the eldest. It should have been me!” he muttered to the bored looking mares to either side of him.

Trumpets blared and formal processional music began to play. Twilight Sparkle entered in a splendid gown of purple and swirling silver galaxies. Macintosh trotted at her side, his eyes steady and his lips curled in that casual, confident smile. They approached the wide central throne dais. Applejack, dressed in surprisingly normal business like attire, entered alongside Applesnack, the former doing her best to smile as casually as her brother while the later did his best not to be sick. From the doorway flew Rainbow Dash in a dress that could almost pass for a uniform, a grinning Stonewing beside her. There was some applause and cheering from the crowd, which the ministry mare obviously relished. Jetstream gave a little sigh.

Pinkie Pie bounced in on her hooves with an escort on either side. The buck and a mare were decorated as formally as two clowns could possibly dress, but the rainbow wigs still killed it. Then I was astonished to see Fluttershy enter in a simple white gown decorated with pearls and rubies; the design was vaguely reminiscent of a nurse’s uniform. At her side, walking with pain evident on his face, was the scarred Goldenblood. More than once he broke stride, coughing for breath as she waited patiently with a concerned and tender expression. Of course, that was how she always looked.

Rarity and Vanity entered with a fanfare, and almost everypony save one gave a collective gasp of approval at her exquisite gown. The only pony who didn't share their approval ground his teeth furiously behind Jetstream. Vanity, a familiar sword belted at his side, somehow made the white dress uniform even more splendid. For a few seconds, he gazed straight at Jetstream, and I knew that he would have rather had her by his side than the magnificent unicorn mare. Every noble muttered in complete approval, for here were two equines that embodied the image of all that was good in the noble lineage. Truly, there was no finer nor more lovely pony in all the world!

Or was there? The lights dimmed as a great glowing orb and a shining silver sphere drifted from on high to land side by side at the entrance. Celestia looked as she always had. Perhaps a little more tired and wan, but glorious as ever. Beside her, young and vibrant and confident, stood Luna. And, side by side, the Princesses walked through a procession struck dumb with adoration. There was Rarity at her finest, and then there was this! Together, they moved with utmost dignity as everypony in attendance bowed before them. Not out of fear, but out of love and respect. They were Celestia and Luna. There was no other like them in the world.

When they mounted the dais, Celestia gave a formal bow to her sister and then moved to the far right of the stage. Clearly, this was Luna's show, and Celestia refused to upstage it. Twilight Sparkle stood at Luna's right, giving concerned looks at the former monarch. Goldenblood looked as if he was struggling to stand, supported by Fluttershy at his side. I was no expert, but it didn't look like an act. Luna gave him one concerned glance, then looked across the gathered masses of Equestria's finest. She took a slow, deep breath, and when she spoke it wasn't in some blasting clarion but with a strange projection, as if she was talking to me and me alone.

"Ponies of Equestria. For twelve long years we have struggled. . . we have sacrificed. . . we have toiled against an enemy without reason or remorse. And, despite our pain and hardships, we have risen to these challenges with determination and vigor that would make the stars themselves tremble in awe." As she spoke, the volume slowly rose, as if the castle itself was speaking to us. "Regardless of the troubles we have faced on these long and uncertain nights, today we take comfort in our traditions and celebrate our dignity, our unity, and our strength! Therefore, it is with humility and thanks that your Princess welcomes you to this most glorious of nights, and declares: Let the Grand Galloping Gala. . . commence!" And with that word, it felt as though Equestria itself was giving the speech, and the crowd broke into cheers.

And with a gleeful squeal, Pinkie Pie rushed to a bellpull dangling nearby. A gong resounded, and suddenly velvet drapes were yanked up to reveal dozens of clowns, acrobats, jugglers, tumblers and singers. A cascade of fireworks exploded outside with such energy that, for a moment, it seemed like day had returned. Streamers descended like rain, and a cloud of countless balloons rose from cleverly hidden boxes about the throne room. The stunned aristropies suddenly found themselves swept up in a party two short steps removed from a riot.

Jetstream, Psalm and Echo made their way down the stairs and to the dais where the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the Marauders were meeting with a few other select individuals. “A bit much, wouldn’t you say, Pinkie Pie?” Rarity observed as a pie-juggling pony in a loud checkered suit rolled by on top of a large ball.

“What do you mean? I just made the Gala what it should have been! Ponies playing, ponies dancing...!” She fluttered her eyes at the unicorn with a cheeky grin. “Would you rather it be like the first time?”

Rarity took one look at Blueblood watching sullenly and shuddered. “I’d rather not.”

“Excellent speech, sister. I’m glad you modified the traditional Canterlot voice,” Celestia said with a fond smile. “I never found much use for it.”

“You used it for two hundred and sixty three years,” Goldenblood rasped, sitting with his eyes closed while Fluttershy held a hoof to his brow.

“You should be back in bed. You’re still not well,” the yellow mare fussed softly.

“Oh, I should last another hour or so,” he said as he looked at Rarity. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, it would get their attention elsewhere,” Rarity said with a small worried frown. “But only if you’re sure.”

“I’d hate to cause a spectacle,” he rasped softly, coughing into a handkerchief. Fluttershy pulled out a healing potion from the dress; apparently, the similarity to a nurse’s uniform didn’t end with the style. For just a few seconds, he was the focus of a great number of ponies as he drank the restorative draught.

“The ministry mare of the Ministry of Peace, dressed as a nurse, is giving aid to a member of the aristocracy,” Vanity said softly from beside Jetstream. “Very well done, nephew.” The look Rarity was giving Goldenblood was far less admiring. In fact, it looked like a faint expression of unease.

“You’re not staying, Princess?” Twilight Sparkle asked as Celestia turned away, walk-

ing towards an exit behind the throne.

The rainbow-maned alicorn looked back at Twilight and shook her head with a sad little smile. “No. I’m afraid my heart isn’t in celebrations. Besides,” she said a touch coolly, glancing at Goldenblood coughing pink and red flecks into the hankerchief, “I wouldn’t want to detract from my sister.” Goldenblood gave a mirthless smile as he looked up at Celestia before clenching his eyes in another fit of soft coughing. He almost looked... ashamed.

Celestia extended a hoof to Luna’s shoulder and said as if sending her off to battle, “Good luck, Luna. Stay strong. The Gala has broken many great and powerful ponies before.”

“I think I can handle some aristoponies at a party, sister,” Luna said, as if a touch insulted at the implication that she couldn’t.

“You’d be surprised at just how they can push you if you’re not careful,” Celestia warned as she looked at the crowds.

“Oh, like the one hundred and thirty first Gala, where you transformed half the attendees into frogs and the other half into pigs?” Twilight offered with a kind smile. At her friends looks, she flushed. “I was curious whether our experience really was the worst gala ever.”

Celestia shuddered, “Yes. Exactly like that one. I don’t think anypony looked me in the eye for two years after that.” With that, the Princess gave Twilight a parting nod and smile and walked quietly towards the exit.

“I suppose we should mingle and chat things up with folks?” Applejack asked, looking as if she’d rather chew tacks than waste time talking to all these snobby ponies.

Pinkie Pie bounced along with a crowd of performers, giggling wildly. “No, silly! We should have fun!” she said with a squeal. Fun was certainly a relative term. I’d been known to get a little crazy from time to time, but never on the scale that Pinkie Pie operated on. I wondered if, in the time since founding her ministry, she’d opened a school for clowning specifically to have the number of performers needed for the Gala. They were everywhere, and the aristocrats seemed stunned, unable to figure out what the proper actions were. No pony would dare leave with the Princess in attendance.

The Ministry Mares and their escorts started to break up into clumps and mix in with the chaos. Jetstream was left with Echo, the pair having the dubious distinction of being the least interesting ponies to talk to. Other than Doof, who saw the buffet

and never looked back.

“. . . I'm telling ya, they're all a bunch of lying, cheating, no good snakes, the whole lot of em," Applejack complained bitterly to a knot of aristocrats (and one mime doing her best to imitate Applejack's scornful looks and motions behind her back) as we passed. "They'll take whatever you give em, then they'll sell for twice what it cost em in the first place!"

Rarity coughed delicately, commenting, "Applejack, I think that's what we call 'profit margins'." Behind the orange mare, Applesnack grabbed the mime in a hooflock.

"Really? It's what I'm callin' profiteerin'! And greedy shenanigans. I'm trying to keep em honest by putting some kin in charge and seein if that helps straighten em up. I got no complaints if they make a bit or two, but they ain't gonna get away with what they done before," Applejack said with a firm stomp that coincided perfectly with Applesnack punting the mime clear over the crowd.

"Well, surely there must be some you can work with. You're putting Braeburn in charge of Ironshod Firearms." Rarity said with clear concern.

Applejack gave a sheepish smile, "Um, Rarity, not sure you noticed, but Braeburn's got a few tumbleweeds in his acre."

The white unicorn nodded thoughtfully. "Mmm, yes. He does seem a bit distracted at times."

"And he's family. The rest of em. . . Hippocampus, Flash, Boom. . . I walk into a room and it's like they're just nodding and waiting for me to leave so they can continue their shenanigans! I feel like I'm foalsittin!"

"I wish I could make some recommendations, but I'm afraid most of my contacts are limited to my own ministry." Rarity gave Applejack a sympathetic smile.

"Oh, Goldenblood's suggested a few business ponies, but I can't tell them from the snakes." Rarity looked decidedly unhappy with the mention of the sickly pony as Applejack went on. "Horse is the only one I've met who doesn't seem to give a damn how many bits he can pull out of this war. Cares more about his gadgets than making money. But Golden told me I should be careful with him. Careful."

"Well, as useful as Goldenblood might be, I don't need him to tell me how to run my business," Rarity declared firmly.

"Oh? He's meddling in Image too?"

Rarity opened her mouth, then balked. "No. . . no, he really isn't. He's not telling me

things that I wouldn't have done myself." Her lips pressed together as she looked across the room towards Fluttershy. "But I still don't like him. He's..." but whatever he was fell out of ear shot as Jetstream strolled away. Normally, I'd have been fascinated, but right now all I could do was wonder if my friends were alive. I knew better than to hope that they were okay.

Jet Stream wandered through the crowd, clearly looking for the gray pegasus. Pinkie Pie was dancing on the piano in one room, grinning with an expression of 'have fun or else.'

"I was just wonderin if I could ask you somethin about miss Maripony," Big Macintosh said in his low, confident voice. He was standing with Twilight Sparkle in an alcove off to the side, and Jetstream peeked a little closer, her ears twitching. I'd be curious, too, if I wasn't thinking about Lacunae following me about like a broken doll. When was this stupid memory going to end?

"Who?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion.

"Maripony?"

Twilight Sparkle suddenly started. "Oh! Yes, Maripony." She laughed awkwardly. "I... ah... I get her confused. You know... with the Splendid Valley site. Happens all the time," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Well... I was wonderin... has she mentioned me at all? I mean, does she talk about me?" Big Macintosh looked so uncertain and concerned that it was quite touching.

Twilight blinked, then smiled. "Well, yes. I suppose she does, now that I think about it. She wishes she could get away from the ministry more to see you. Everything's so crazy."

"Really? Huh..." Big Macintosh looked baffled and even a little worried.

"Did I say something wrong?" Twilight asked in concern.

The large red pony sighed, "It's just... she's so much smarter than me. I just... I don't understand why she likes to be around me. She's such a clever, nice little mare. Don't see what she sees in a pony like me."

Twilight blinked and then smiled a little, "Oh, don't worry about that. Really." She sighed as she looked at her polished hooves. "At the ministry, everything is crazy. I mean, you throw so many eggheads into one room, and there're so many ideas flying around that, by the end of the day, you feel fried. A pony like you, who's..."

she trailed off and he smiled down at her as she fished for a word.

“Simple?” Big Macintosh offered, and she blushed.

“Easygoing,” Twilight countered with a smile. “It lets a pony like her unwind and relax from all the pressures we deal with at the ministry.” Twilight sighed as she looked back at the crowded room. “Trust me. Being smart isn’t a guarantee for being happy.” Then she returned her gaze to him with a smile. “And you make her happy.”

Big Macintosh’s mood quite obviously improved as his casual smile returned. “Well, thank you, Twilight. I hope you’ll tell her I look forward to seeing her again. I was thinkin on taking her to a hoofball game with some of the other Marauders.”

“Hoofball?” Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion and a little unease. “Um... well... I don’t think she’s ever been to a Hoofball game.” The purple mare rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Sure! It’ll probably be fun!”

“Ayup!” he agreed with a nod. “Then I’ll be sure to ask her. Thanks, Twilight.”

Twilight Sparkle seemed to start, then slumped a little. “Oh. Yeah. Sure. No problem.”

Normally, I would have been interested in the pair and curious about the implications, but at the moment I was simply wondering if I’d be trapped in this memory for hours...days? How long could a memory orb last? It wasn’t a bad memory. In fact, compared to many memories I’d experienced, I’d normally enjoy the party and the obvious fun. Pinkie Pie had taken the stuffed aristoponies and forced all her gaudy, gauche, glittery gala games into their dreary dignified lives. Clearly, it was not what they were used to, but no one dared to complain with the Princess doubling her fun.

There was joy and laughter, too. Two gorgeous tumbling fillies kissing Echo’s cheeks simultaneously, making the young buck blush to his hooves. Doof had found the cheese tray and its unfortunate digestive implications to anypony downwind. Stonewing flew through a solid wall, much to the amazement of the onlookers, including Rainbow Dash, and the chagrin of Big Macintosh. Vanity and Rarity drifted through as a respite and a focus of calm and civility.

The Gala culminated with the Marauders getting medals for their work at securing some coal mine or another east of Hoofington and holding it against overwhelming odds. Finally, the party started to wind down...and Jetstream heard a mare cry out. “Help! Someone! Please, help!”

My host took to the air and swooped down the hall like a comet. She found Flut-

tershy in an alcove with a collapsed, coughing, and rasping Goldenblood. She was pressing a hoof to his throat. “Your heartbeat is irregular and very weak! We need to get you to the hospital.” She looked at Jetstream, “Get Twilight! She can teleport him! Or maybe Rainbow Dash can fly him there. He’s not heavy!”

“On my way!” Jetstream said at once, readying her wings.

“Stop!” Goldenblood gasped as Jetstream turned to follow Fluttershy’s instructions. The blue mare froze, looking back at him as he struggled to rise. He coughed again, blood speckling his uniform. “Please. Stop. I’ll. . . I’ll be fine.”

“You will not be fine! Your heart is failing,” Fluttershy insisted, but he raised a hoof to her mouth, silencing her.

“My heart. . . has been failing. . . for years. I’ll be. . . fine,” he said in wet, laborious tones. “Just another hour. Then. . . Luna will have retired. . . and the. . . important. . . ponies will. . . have gone home.” He spasmed and hugged his scarred chest, wet coughs rasping softly in his torso. “Everything must go perfectly tonight. . . Right. . . to. . . the end.”

“But why?” Fluttershy asked in concern, brushing his sweaty golden mane from his scarred forehead.

“Where the nobles. . . go. . . the people. . . follow. Luna. . . is changing things. . . they have to accept her. Accept the ministries. Support both.” He said in snort, breathless gasps. “Confidence in Luna. . . is all that matters. . . now. If the nobles believe. . . the people. . . believe. And they will fight for her. . . because. . . they will believe in her. . .” He panted as she held him closely. “An hour, and I’ll go.”

Fluttershy’s gaze hardened. “I’m not going to let a patient of mine die. We’re getting Twilight.”

“Twilight. . . needs to. . . be seen. . . with Luna. . . now!” he insisted as he held her foreleg in his clammy grip. “Half an hour. Then. . . everypony. . . will be. . . leaving. The attention. . . can go. . . off Luna.” He squeezed her foreleg. “Please, Flutter. . . shy. . . My life. . . doesn’t matter. . . compared to. . . you seven. Please. . .”

“I can fly him!” Jetstream said confidently. “No one will miss me. I got my medal. I can fly him to the hospital, and you can follow me.”

Fluttershy looked down at him with a gentle smile. “We’re going to the hospital, Goldenblood. And I’ll find some way to make you all better. And you are not going to argue. Understood?” Jetstream shed the frilly dress and, with Fluttershy’s help, carefully got Goldenblood on her back between her wings.

“You should... stay here... the six... with Luna. Symbolic...”

“Does he always talk this much?” Jetstream asked as she adjusted his weight.

“He is a very bad patient.” Fluttershy said quietly as, together, they flew out of the side of the palace. The shadow and firework flashes hid them as they moved together out over the city.

“And not... a very good... escort... I’m sorry ...” Goldenblood murmured with alarming weakness between gasps as they flew into the night amid fireworks and sparklers.

“That’s okay. I’m not very good with big parties, anyway,” Fluttershy replied as she flew close beside him. “But I’ll take care of you, Golden. I’ll take care of you.”

oooOOOooo

As the memory faded away, I was left lying on my back in a bed, a blindfold wrapped across my eyes and tied in place. I lifted a hoof to push the blindfold away, only to find it restrained by a hoofcuff. I jerked all my limbs once, finding them all strapped down. I jerked again and again.

“Like the memory orb?” A mare said to my side, and I turned my head in her direction, my horn starting to glow to remove the blindfold. Something heavy tapped against my horn. “Don’t. You hurt two of my nurses. Take off that blindfold and I’ll smash your horn, then dump you outside for the ghouls. Understand?”

“Where are my friends? Who are you? Where am I?” I asked. If this was the Enclave, then I was going to take them all apart or die trying.

The mare sighed. “Your friends are alive. Some of them are still in serious condition. My name is Doctor Triage. You’re at the University. You’re a guest of the Collegiate.” There was a pause, “I’m going to remove your blindfold. Please stay calm. We almost killed you trying to sedate you earlier.”

I felt the blindfold slowly tugged away, my eyes...my right eye; there was a bandage over my left— trying to focus on the mare before me. Everything was blurry, and sparkles danced in the corners of my vision as it struggled to focus on the pale blue unicorn with a deep indigo mane. Her doctor’s coat was speckled with blood. I gave a tug on my cuffs and she arched a brow skeptically. “Are you going to be able to follow my instructions and stay in bed?”

“I want to see my friends,” I said as evenly as possible.

She sighed again. “Why does nopony ever listen to their doctor?” Walking to the

door, she pushed it open. "I need a wheelchair, please," she called down the hall before returning to my bed. "Now, I want you to stay calm. We went through some rather extraordinary measures to try and save you. If you hadn't helped us at the Fluttershy Clinic... well..."

"How is Glory?" I asked softly. See? Look at me being a picture of calm.

"She's stable, and in better shape than you are. You have severe biomagical contamination. The damage is extensive. We had to place you in the autonomous healing booth just to stabilize you long enough for surgery to remove the necrotic tissue and put you back in for a second run. Be glad the Professor likes you. I don't recall her allowing anypony two trips through the tube before." She lifted a key with her magic. "I'm telling you all this because it took nearly six hours to put you back together. I don't want you to ruin all that work with an overdose of stupid." One by one, she removed the cuffs.

"I need to see my friends. Now," I said resolutely as I slowly rolled out of bed and on to the floor. Then I fought the urge to scream as my legs bent under me and I collapsed onto the yellowed tile. My legs bowed before my eyes! They weren't supposed to bend like that!

"You really need to listen to your doctor," she said as her blue magical glow wrapped around me and laid me back down on the bed. "Several of your bones have transformed into something the consistency of thick rubber. We're trying to find a treatment to strengthen your limbs. Fortunately, your spine, skull, pelvis, and ribs are still largely intact. Your legs, however..." And she gave a non-committal shrug as a white earth pony buck with a pink heart cutie mark trotted in pushing a wheel chair.

"Tell me Glory's condition. Were you..." I swallowed hard. How could I just ask if they could get her wing back on?

"We were able to stop the internal bleeding in the four of you. The alicorn... well... I won't hazard a guess as to her physiology. Rampage recovered on her own. She was the one who found us. Went right to the Professor," Triage said as she carefully lifted me once more and put me in the chair. With my left eye covered by the bandage, I had to keep turning my head to see things. We exited into a far grimmer hospital hall than the Fluttershy clinic... but at least this one didn't have 'PLAY' written on the walls. She trotted ahead as the buck pushed me along. "Believe it or not, your injuries were by far the most severe. Physically, at least."

"Blackjack!" Rampage shouted, rushing down the hall and shoving aside anypony who got in her path like a one filly avalanche. She slid on the tiles, and only Triage's

magic stopped her from slamming into me. “How are you? They said you were stable, but. . . but. . . how are you?” she asked, her eyes huge and round. She put her weight on my knee, and I grit my teeth as I felt it bend. She jerked her legs back, and the expression on her face somehow made the sensation even worse.

“I’m fine. We’re going to check on Glory,” I said as I brushed her mane. From the horrified look on her face, my heart began to thud limply in my chest. “What happened, Rampage?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember anything after we went down those stairs. When I came to, we were on an elevator that opened up at a construction site near the university. I came straight here for help.”

“She was very insistent,” Triage said softly as she trotted ahead of us. “I think she swore a personal, unending, and eternal war of annihilation if we didn’t help you right away. Fortunately, the Professor agreed.”

“I woulda too,” Rampage replied with a scowl. Triage simply rolled her eyes with a soft huff.

“Rampage, how is Glory? You’ve seen her. . . haven’t you?” I asked, and she quickly looked away as the orderly stopped pushing me. The other staff in the grimy ward watched me warily; given that I could shoot them with a look, that wasn’t much of a surprise.

“I haven’t been to see anypony except P-21,” Rampage said softly. “I didn’t want. . . you know. . . anything to happen.” She bit her lip, “Since I woke up, I keep feeling. . . I don’t think I’m safe. . . you know?” She looked at me with shame in her pink eyes before she quietly stepped back. Magic glowed around the wheelchair as Triage pushed me the last few feet into the dirty, dim, dank room.

Oh, Glory.

I wanted to weep as I saw her lying still in the decrepit hospital bed. A magical monitor beeped softly as she lay on her stomach with a blanket around her haunches. One gray wing lay slack at her side. The other. . . wasn’t. . . I shook at I stretched out a hoof towards her, tears running down my cheeks as I watched my outstretched limb slowly droop as the muscles cramped. I hugged my leg to my chest as I looked at her, unconscious.

“You couldn’t save her wing? Put her in the magical restoration thingy again. . .” I muttered thickly with a sniff, my body starting to shake. This was my fault. I had caused nothing but pain and misery in her life. “Do something! Please!” I said as

I twisted and grabbed her dirty medical coat between my hooves. “I’ll do anything you want. Just fix her!”

Triage just sighed. “We can’t. When her wing was separated from her body, putrefaction began immediately. All that reached the top of the lift was bone, dead meat, and feathers.”

“Give her Hydra! Something!” I begged, gritting my teeth as I felt my forelimbs bend. “I . . . I can’t leave her like this.”

Triage grunted in annoyed resignation. “Even if it could work, the amount of Hydra we’d have to use would probably induce such massive amounts of taint contamination that she’d be dead anyway. Just like you,” she said as she lifted a clipboard.

“Contamination? Me?” I muttered thickly.

“I haven’t seen taint corruption like yours in a long time. You should have seen your heart! We removed at least a half dozen tumors in your lungs and lymphatic systems. I can’t even begin to guess what it’s doing to your skeletal structure.” She poked me in the chest with the clipboard. “You know what? Forget your bones,” she said as her lips curled in an angry smirk, “I can’t even begin to guess how it’s fucking with your brain.”

“My brain?” I muttered dully, receiving a look like I’d just proven her argument.

“The brain’s an organ, and your organs are fucked. I’m having trouble finding biological systems that aren’t compromised on some level. Muscles. Epidermis. Looks like your contraception implant spared your reproductive bits. That’s about it, though,” she said as she looked at the clipboard. “You know, a rare few might get exposed to taint and get some decent benefit from it like regeneration or the like. But most, like you, just die. Normally I wouldn’t give a damn, but I spent a lot of time, energy, and good chems trying to piece you back together. The very least you can do is try to pretend like you’re going to try and keep that hulk of meat you call a body in something vaguely resembling working condition.”

“You don’t get it,” I muttered softly as I stared at her unconscious form. “This is my fault. Going through the tunnels was my idea. I cost her her wings.” Her wings. I might as well have lit her on fire and called it a day. “I have to make this right.”

“You have to take care of yourself. You’ve got six months to live. Maybe a year. We removed the most blatant taint tumors, but there are others inside you, and—” I silenced her with a hard shake.

“Don’t you understand, doctor? I don’t matter! All that matters is helping my friends.

I die in a year, so what?! Glory will have to spend the rest of her life stuck on the ground because I took a tunnel and she followed me in.” I clenched my eyes shut, trying to control my shaking. “I have to help her fly again. Tell me there’s a way.”

Triage staggered back out of reach, and I tumbled right out of the chair and sprawled on my face. “Incredible. I’ve heard DJ PON3 talk about you, but I never thought it could possibly be true,” she said as I tried to get my limbs under me. Triage lifted my chin with her hoof and stared into my eye with wonder. “How the fuck aren’t you dead yet?” Her tone was one of marvel and sick disgust. “You’re telling me that you seriously... sincerely... don’t give a damn about yourself? That you’re willing to die and rot so long as you’re helping others? We should have just let you die and save ourselves the materials.”

“Funny... I thought helping others was a good thing,” I muttered. “You’re the second doctor I’ve met who thought I was stupid for hurting myself to help others.”

She stared into my eye and shook her head slowly. “What good is your help if it kills you? You think ponies won’t need your help after you’re gone? That your friends won’t need you? If you don’t take care of yourself, then all you’re doing is a sick, masochistic suicide. And I don’t waste my skill and effort on suicide cases.”

She shoved me away, stood, and levitated me back into the chair. “As to your friend, I’ve only had two pegasus patients before her, neither with severed wings. I suggest that, if you want a more informed, opinion you can just crawl down the road to the Skyport and ask the pegasi there if they have some treatment for regrowing a wing, because I don’t.” And with that, she trotted out of the room.

I sat there for the longest time using my magic to nudge myself closer to the bed. I reached out, gently stroking her choppy amethyst mane as I dreaded when she’d finally wake. It was growing out quite fast. Pretty soon, it’d be thick enough for her to hide behind again.

A soft clearing of the throat made me look over at P-21. Rampage was curled up outside the door, looking as lost as I felt. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey yourself.” He looked wary. Scared. Worried for me. But I also noticed something else: he wasn’t limping any more. I looked back and saw the brace was gone from his rear leg. “They fixed it?”

“Apparently, that regeneration booth is some heavy duty magic. Removed the scarring; I finally feel like I can walk without my leg falling off, which is good, because that enervation almost fused my entire leg,” he said with a mirthless smile. “Scotch

Tape and Lacunae are in a bad way. Scotch Tape had some major internal bleeding. I think, being younger, she was more susceptible to the magical fields. She's . . . not talking to anypony. And Lacunae just stands there. She'll follow you if you lead her, but that's about it." I closed my eyes. I didn't know how I could possibly help them. But I had to. . . I had to help them all.

"At least you're still with me," I said with a smile as I reached over to nudge his shoulder with my limp limb. But his sad smile melted away as he looked off to the side with a worried frown. "What? What is it?"

His blue eyes looked away at the wall, the door, Glory. . . anything that wasn't me. "I'm. . . I'm not sure I can keep doing this, Blackjack. I don't know why we keep throwing ourselves into harm's way over and over again. 99 is done. Throw EC-1101 in the river or down that shaft or something and lets go back to Chapel and have some kind of life again with no monsters or killing. Just a quiet life for as long as we can." He closed his eyes. "Priest is there. Sekashi. The Crusaders. Even Charity." He pressed his lips together and gave a snotty sniff. "I found someone that makes me feel whole and complete and. . . I don't want to lose it again. I was down in that hole and. . . I was going to die. I was going to lose it all forever and I almost let it happen. And if you keep on doing this. . ."

"You will," I said softly, feeling as though my rotting, worthless heart had been ripped from my chest and only a void remained inside. I closed my eyes, feeling the ache.

And what hurt the most was that he was right. I was cursed. I was like a walking ball of pain and misery, and everypony I encountered. . . good, bad, or otherwise. . . was smashed apart as I rolled along. I used to think that, if I kept my friends close, at least I could take the hurt myself. Catch the bullets with my damn hide. But I couldn't do that anymore. I'd tried to be strong, but I wasn't strong enough. I'd tried to be tough, but I wasn't tough enough.

Hell, I couldn't even take care of myself anymore.

"Well, then. . . as soon as you're all feeling better. . . you should go," I said. "Head back to Chapel. You're smart and clever; they'll need you if they're going to build that place right. Take Glory and Scotch Tape with you. Lacunae too. And Rampage, if they'll let her."

"But you won't be coming with us?"

"I can't," I said softly, closing my eyes. "There's something bad in Hoofington. Something. . . something bad that started a long time ago. Goldenblood did something. . ."

some plan or plot involving EC-1101.” Besides, if I did go to Chapel, the trouble would follow me there, too.

“What does it matter, Blackjack? It was two hundred years ago.”

“It matters!” I snapped, glaring at him. He looked shocked at my reaction, and I drew a shaky breath. “One thing I’m absolutely sure of is that Goldenblood didn’t do anything that didn’t matter. And I know. . . I just know deep in my soul that it’s bad. Maybe it was that thing I shot with Folly. Maybe it’s whoever Sanguine serves. I don’t know. All I know is that somepony needs to stop it, or Hoofington will just keep killing. If the killing isn’t going to stop, I can’t give up.”

He just stared at me with that sad-eyed gaze. “You’re incredible, Blackjack. You really are. . . but I’m not. I’m sorry,” he said quietly as he hung his head again.

“Don’t be. It’s the smart thing to do,” I murmured quietly. “And you know me. I’m an idiot.”

He sniffed as he rose to his hooves and quietly left the hospital room. I simply reached forward and stroked her cheek again, trying to ignore the bones bending in my leg. He was doing the right thing. He was a smart pony.

I don’t know how long I sat there alone, listening to the monitor that beeped out her vitals minute after minute, hour after hour. Then I saw the tiny shift of her head. The hairs falling across her eyes as they slowly opened. She didn’t look at me. She didn’t have to. Her right wing lifted only an inch or two and fell back. Her left. . . the bandaged stub moved slightly. Her eyes slowly closed again, seeking that solace of oblivion as she started to weep broken, gasping sobs.

She’d taken the betrayal of her people, the loss of her cutie marks, the abandonment of her family, she’d suffered humiliation and terror and endured my selfish self-destructive desertion. Now she’d lost her fundamental self. I’d always only reached the point where the Wasteland almost won, but that was me. Now the Wasteland was attacking my friends, and it was winning.

I stretched a hoof towards her, and she rolled away from me, pressing her face to the mattress as she wept as silently as she could. Slowly, I withdrew my limb, clenching my eyes shut as I felt a little ball of pain and rage constrict more and more inside me. Glory had fallen for real, and I had to find some way. . . any way. . . to make her better again. Drawing a slow and shaking breath, I stared at the back of her head.

Ante up.

I used my magic to turn the chair and wheel it back out into the hall. Rampage immediately jumped to her hooves. “How is she?” My look was answer enough. I’d been told I had a shooty look. Right now, I expected I had a balefire bomb look going.

Unfortunately, the orderlies didn’t seem to quite catch on as they trotted up, “Doctor Triage said to take you back to your room.”

I didn’t look at him. I was too busy trying to burn a hole through his chest with my stare alone. “I need my gear, now.”

He laughed. “Your gear? You can’t even support your own weight. How...” And then my horn flashed and blasted the wall beside his head. He staggered to the side, staring at me in shock. “You’re crazy!”

“Then don’t fuck with me. My gear. Get it,” I said as I rolled the wheel chair past him. He, however, seemed to feel the need to play hero and kicked over the chair, sending me sprawling. He yelled for help as I rolled onto my chest. He hadn’t been wrong; my legs weren’t supporting me. They bent and flopped as I tried to rise. Oh yeah, and they hurt... a lot. “Rampage, can you find my stuff?”

“Sure, Blackjack. But what are you going to do?”

“What my doctor recommended,” I said as I looked down the hall. She trotted off quickly.

If I couldn’t walk, then I’d crawl. I opened each door and checked the contents. Bathroom. Bathroom. Office. Locked. My horn reached out to the lock and twisted without finesse, but it clicked open. My luck seemed to be holding for now. Opening the door, I looked at the medical supplies in nice neat rows. Including a metal box with four leg braces. I tried not to smile as I saw that one of them had a tag reading “StableTec: #99”. Carefully, I buckled each brace tightly on it’s appropriate limb.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered as I lifted myself to my hooves. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t comfortable. It wasn’t easy, but at least I was standing on my own.

P-21 and Rampage appeared in the doorway, “What do you think you’re doing?” P-21 asked me as he saw me standing in the braces.

“Going to the Rainbow Dash Skyport,” I replied as I levitated my barding and started to strap it into place over the braces.

“You’re going to the Enclave?” He stared at me as I nodded and checked my shotgun. “Is this a suicidal relapse?”

I loaded the weapon with buckshot, slung it, and moved on to check Vigilance. “Nope. I’m coming back. That’s part of the plan. There’s only one thing I know that will help her, and it isn’t me,” I muttered softly as I pointed the pistol and scowled. My depth perception was all futzed up. I tore off the bandages, but it didn’t help. Then I saw the horrified looks on their faces. “What?”

“Your eye,” Rampage muttered.

I trotted past them into the bathroom and stared in the mirror. The right side of my face looked fine. The left. . . raw red lines formed a Y meeting right over my eye socket. A raw and bloody hole lay here my eye should have been. I sighed as I stared at myself; I didn’t even look like Blackjack anymore. I looked like some old, scarred Wasteland raider. “Well, fuck,” I muttered. What else could I say?

“Blackjack, don’t go. Take some time to recover,” P-21 said softly.

“I thought you were going back to Chapel,” I replied as I walked past him, the braces clicking beneath me. That was a cheap ass shot, Blackjack, and I stopped, bowing my head a little. “I have to go. I have to help her. Don’t you see? If we’d just let her go after we left weather station four. . . she never would have gotten hurt. She didn’t deserve any of this. So I’m going to find the only thing in the Wasteland I think can help, or I am going to go stark raving mad.” I glanced back over my shoulder at him. “I don’t expect either of you to come with me. In fact, you should be going back to Chapel. The further you are from me, the safer you’ll be.”

Without another word, I left my friends behind. Where they were safe.

Nopony tried to stop me on my way to the exit. I drew every look, though, as I stepped out into the foggy day. Great, as if Hoofington’s normal drizzle wasn’t bad enough. Six four-storey gray granite buildings rose around a yellowed rectangular field filled with scrapped military vehicles, tents, and cargo containers. Barricades had been built across the gaps with bits of steel and rubble. Turrets atop the corners of the buildings pointed out at the Wasteland, moving slowly as they tracked for hostile targets.

“I think you might be the second worst patient I’ve ever had,” the doctor said as she trotted out after me into the rain, pulled a cigarette from her pocket, and put it

between her lips. A little flash ignited the tip. “You know, there’s at least three ponies here fighting for the chance to get first dibs at studying your corpse? I don’t think we’ve ever had a pony exposed to the degrees of enervation, radiation, and taint you’ve been.”

“Sorry to disappoint them,” I said as I continued through the clammy gray mist. “Which way to the Skyport?”

“The Skyport?” Triage’s eyes narrowed. “You seriously think the Volunteer Corps is going to help you? Your friend is a Dashite. I saw the brand.” I gave her a shooty look, but, to her credit, she didn’t look away. Maybe it was only half as effective with one eye.

“I only need help from one of them. They’ll tell me where to find them,” I said, my braces clattering softly with every step. “If not, I’ll make enough noise that they’ll come find me. Now, which way is it?” I asked as I looked around. . . though it wasn’t as if there were signs saying ‘Enclave this way’.

Triage just took one long look at me standing there before her and sighed as she pulled out the cigarette with and pointed the burning tip towards a scrap metal gate. “Go out the north gate by the planetarium. Watch for ghouls. When you hit Celestia Boulevard, go east. It’s about five or six miles.” She put the cigarette in her mouth. “You’re really going? Alone?”

“I’m not going to get any more ponies hurt following me,” I said firmly.

She just sighed, and her horn pulled a black eye patch from her coat pocket. “Here. Put this on. At least try to keep an infection out of that socket,” she said as she floated it in place and tied it over my missing eye.

I smirked, then started as a pony trotted abruptly into my field of vision on my left. Okay. . . this was going to take some getting used to. “So, I guess this makes me a one-eyed blackjack.”

“I think that taint’s given you some hardcore brain damage,” she said as she looked at me with a shake of her head. “Fine. I’ll just let you know that the Professor wants to talk with you before you go. Chat with her or don’t. She’s in the planetarium, if you care. Second floor.” She trotted back towards the ‘School of Medicine’ building behind me.

I sighed and made my way across the muddy field towards the large domed structure on the north end. I stopped by a merchant working out of a burned out bus and converted most of the junk in my saddlebags into specialty ammo for my shotgun.

The healing potions in stock looked absolutely pitiful, but they would probably be okay for a few more days.

No time to waste; I'd talk when I got back. The guards at the gate were pathetic, but I had to admit that the energy turrets they had rigged looked formidable enough. They gave me incredulous looks as I passed by. "Good luck," one of them muttered just before the door slammed shut behind me.

Once past the razed ruins around the Collegiate's base, I found myself almost lost in the mist. Grim gray buildings were simply dark patches till I moved close enough to their shattered remains. Broken statues reared in silent poses in the mist, and I could swear that they were watching me. There was other debris, too, largely in the form of rusting sky carriages. Cold gray patches of water sat like glazed mirrors between the crumbling buildings on the edge of the campus.

Then I heard a shot. And another. And another. Distant and...hard to tell the direction in the muffling mist. Then there was an inequine scream. And another. And another. Suddenly, I heard the splashing. . . much closer. I twisted my head in time to see a mottled black-and-red boiled pony lunge out of the fog at me. I brought my shotgun up to its neck to block its lunging bite, forcing me to push back with my forehooves as its splintered and jagged teeth chomped at the air before my face.

S.A.T.S. and two magic bullets exploded that head with a spray of rotting matter. I whirled in time to face two more as I set my braced legs and focused on blasting instead of running. My shotgun roared, the buckshot ripping into their soft, pulpy bodies and stripping rotting flesh from yellowed bone. As soon as they dropped, I reloaded, bringing out the sword as more raced at me.

I didn't really know how to fight with a sword, so I treated it like a baton. A disturbingly sharp baton. The razor edge cut into them quite nicely, and once or twice I was even lucky enough to hew off limbs. The shotgun rendered their skulls to bloody goo. My braced legs clicked and strained under my barding as they bit and snapped at any limb they could get their mouths on.

"Why. . ." I shouted over the hissing and snapping. I brought the sword down and split the leathery hide of one ghoul's face. "Are ghouls. . ." I cut the blade horizontally across another's throat and was rewarded with its head arching off completely. "Always. . ." I pressed the shotgun to another's chest and, with a sickening pop, blasted rotten guts and rancid organs out of its torso. Another shot to the face finished it. "Hungry?" I yelled as I emptied the last two shells into one trying to chew through both brace and barding on my hind leg.

More and more came out, and soon I was forced to move as they flanked me. Whatever the reason inside their feral brains, I was food. Better still, I was slow food! I just couldn't move as fast or smoothly with the braces on. Their undead jaws and broken hooves pummeled my already not quite intact body, and I was firing as fast as I could reload while slashing wildly behind me with the sword. I was lucky I didn't cut my own tail off! The flechette rounds, however, proved my salvation. The razor sharp darts shredded the pulpy flesh even more efficiently than buckshot! With their gray flesh rendered to reeking goo, they fell one after the next.

Then, as fast as they appeared, the last one fell. I gasped for breath, turning this way and that. There were red bars still in the fog, but for the moment I wasn't being attacked. I wiped their gunk off the sword, reloaded with flechettes, and continued along the broken road north.

I wasn't alone anymore either. The Dealer trotted along beside me. "You sure about this, Blackjack?"

"It's not like last time. I'm not going to die. I'm going to get help for my friend," I said as I trotted along a flooded street through the fog. There were more gunshots ahead, more ponies I'd probably have to kill.

"Alone?"

"It's better this way. This way, the only pony who gets hurt is me. I have to walk it alone," I replied, feeling the hollow inside me. "P-21 knows it. He's the only one brave enough to admit it."

He said nothing as we walked side by side. "You ever think... maybe you should just accept what happened to her?"

I really wished that I could shoot him. Really. "Accept what? That Glory will never fly again? No. I can't accept that." I kept my eye locked straight ahead. There were more red marks that way, too.

"Maybe you'll have to."

"Shut up!" I screamed at him. "What is the point of you? I'm fucked up enough in the head without having my stupid brain telling me what I already know. I've accepted that I'm the cunt that cost her everything. Now I'm going to give something back to her. The only thing that I can give back to her."

The gunshots were becoming louder, and then I came across them: two ponies trapped on a second story ledge accessible only by a thin ramp of debris. It was the only thing keeping them alive as a dozen or so ghouls slowly crawled up towards

them. Their low caliber rifle was barely adequate for radroaches and bloatsprites, and feral ghouls... Soon as they got tired or ran out of bullets, they'd be ghoulish chow...

I didn't care.

As I stared at the scene... I realized that I didn't care that they were going to die. I didn't know those two ponies. I didn't need to help them. I didn't want to help them. I could simply back away, go around, and get to the skyport to help the one pony that did need my help. Even if I did help them, they would probably shoot me. Or I'd have to escort them back to the university. Or worse... they'd want to hang around me.

In that instant, I stopped being Security. I was just another wasteland scavenger, tainted and corrupted and putting myself first. I might not have had a clue what my virtue was, but at this moment I knew I didn't have it. I slowly backed away, looking for a way around. A blue pegasus inside my head was very put out with me. They all were. This was the antithesis of awesome.

I heard one of the mares calling for help. I clenched my eye shut, tapping the barrel of my gun against my forehead. "Yup... She's right, Blackjack. You're brain damaged... it's the only explanation!"

With a scream, I charged... okay, trotted rapidly towards... the mass of ghouls, firing cones of razor sharp metal into the wheeling, hissing ghouls. A few of the glowing variety received S.A.T.S. guided magic rounds into their noggins. The rest were slowly abraded away by shotgun flechettes. The swinging blade kept them at bay as I reloaded and resumed tearing out chunk after chunk of dead pony flesh.

Finally, I blew the legs out from under the last ghoul. My horn throbbed so badly that I wondered if it would go the way of my eye and just explode or something. Then the pink unicorn mare poked her head out, levitating the rifle at me warily. A bloody earth pony mare peaked out next to her.

Then so did two foals.

"Thank the Goddess. It's Security. Security saved us!" she exclaimed as she lifted the rifle from me. With a clatter my legs gave out beneath me and I fell soundly on my rump as the four clattered down the narrow ramp towards me. The brown earth pony mare's battle saddle had gotten twisted and fouled, the hunting rifles pointing uselessly beneath her. The pink unicorn paused, looking worried again. "Are you all right, Security Mare?"

No. I almost let you die. I nearly trotted off to let you and her and your young become lunch for ghouls. “Yeah. Sure. No problem. No big deal for me,” I said with a grimace. “Are you heading south?”

“Mhmmm,” the brown mare said with an enthusiastic nod. “The eggheads have a book bounty; one hundred caps for any pre-war book that’s undamaged. It’s tough to find books that aren’t pulped, though.”

“Well, I fought a bunch of ghouls a little bit ago between here and the college. If you hurry, it should still be clear.” I looked at the brown mare’s rifles. “Want to trade rifle rounds for shotgun shells?”

“Twenties?” The pink unicorn asked hopefully.

I shook my head. “Twelves.”

“We don’t have many twelve gauges. . .” the unicorn said as she levitated out a half full cardboard box. “Just buckshot. . .”

“I’ll trade you thirty rounds of hunting ammo for them.” Almost two for one, but who was using math?

“We’ve also got fresh food from the Enclave,” the brown unicorn added. I felt a chill go down my spine.

“I’ll buy every bit you have. Three bullets each,” I said without hesitation. I had plenty of ammo. . . and hopefully they hadn’t eaten any of it. Looking confused, they agreed. The four hurried to the south, eager to get to the shelter of the Eggheads. I waited till they disappeared in the fog and dumped four apples, three carrots, and a head of lettuce into the mud. Then narrowing my eyes I smashed them all to mush.

Maybe they weren’t contaminated. I wasn’t going to take that risk. I wasn’t going to let there be another 99. Checking my shotgun, I continued my path north.

The fog never lifted so much as thinned into tattered swirls and chest-high banks. The mucky, broken road underhoof sloshed with every step. This area had a different feel from the ruins around Riverside. There were smaller homes of stone and rotten wood instead of the large apartment buildings. Upscale, but not nearly as opulent as Blueblood Manor. This region hadn’t suffered a direct hit from a bomb, but there was more than enough radiation in the water to prohibit long term habitation.

Oh, yeah. And there were leeches.

Every few minutes, I'd have to flick them off my barding with the sword. Their chisel teeth gnawed at the ceramic plates, and every now and then they were tenacious enough to get at my hide underneath. It didn't matter how many of the things I killed, more were always wiggling through the water. Thorny briars wound around the stones, and there were strange mushrooms growing in the cracks. Deep croaks periodically shot out, making me jump. The skitter of Radroaches and the buzz of bloatflies were everywhere. I'd finally found a place around Hoofington teeming with wildlife, and all I wanted was to drop a balefire bomb on it.

Wait. . . teeming with life?

I paused, feeling something nibbling at my hoof. Maybe a little bit of Glory had rubbed off on me, but I levitated out a healing potion and held it before my eye. In my experience, a healing potion only lasted a few days after being brewed by a unicorn with the healing spells. It'd been milky purple when I'd purchased it. After three hours, I expected the color to fade a little or maybe for it to become more transparent. Instead, I found it still milky purple.

I looked to the west; here, it was impossible to tell where the river ended and the marsh began, but the black towers of the Core were still visible. Conventional wisdom was that enervation was the result of magical contamination, that too many experiments and spells and bombs and worse had just created this energy that sucked the life out of everything. If it didn't kill you, it'd sicken you till something else did. But what kind of accidents or magical contamination could have produced that cave with enervation so strong it made Glory's wing simply drop off?

Ow. . . I lifted my hoof to see a black leech the size of my horn chewing into the base of my hoof. Flicking it off with my sword, and batting its friends off as well, I kept moving. My depth perception was lousy. Past twenty or so feet I was all right, and inside three feet I could guesstimate, but between those two, things were off. I wondered if it'd been the taint that'd gotten my eye, or the enervation..

The enervation was strongest within the Core. Maybe something had happened that made it originate there? The magic shields or something reacting with the megaspells going off under the city. Maybe one of those megaspells had been an enervation spell?

Except Chapel. . . The Arena. . . this bog. . . they were practically next door to Hoofington but had green things still growing. Meanwhile, places like Flankfurt were miles and miles from the city but were virtually sterilized by the enervation fields. Could a megaspell nuke the city core itself and splash across the entire area at

random? I couldn't envision it. And one would think that, after two centuries, the enervation fields would weaken; it would require some sort of heavy duty megaspell-level magic to keep them going after all that time. "But I never hear DJ PON3 talking about enervation away from Hoofington. So it's not something natural, either. . ."

I rubbed my eye patch. Maybe having my brains rotting was making me smarter? How's that for irony? "If it's not accidental. . . and not something that happened in the core. . . there must be some other source of enervation." But what? Even my taint-riddled brain wasn't figuring that out.

Then there was a splash as a frog twice the size of my hoof landed next to me. It swam onto a grimy rock and climbed atop it, facing me with green glowing eyes as it let out a low croak.

"Ribbit to you too," I muttered as I kept walking.

It followed, hopping from rock to rock as it kept pace with me. I stopped. It stopped. I moved. It moved. "Okay. As Scotch would say, creepiness factor rising." My mane was giving it a 6.2 on the itchiness factor. It let out another long low croak, and two more swam over to climb onto the stones. These two were even larger than the first. In unison, they let out another long groak. Creepiness factor approaching shooty levels. . .

Then a pair of briar bushes were shoved aside, and a massive frog easily the size of four ponies pushed its head out. "Braaawwoorrrkkkk!" it croaked, and then opened its mouth wide. Long yellow fangs glistened as its tongue shot out and connected with my barding. It stuck fast, and I was nearly dragged completely off my hooves as the muscle contracted. My hooves slid through the muck towards that pony sized maw.

"I do not need this right now!" Sword met tongue in desperate slashes, but the flesh was almost as tough as cable. I'd nearly been dragged completely into its mouth before the tongue severed. Steadying myself, I brought the shotgun up and blasted it, but the peppering darts didn't seem to do more than irritate the monstrous frog.

Its bloody tongue disappeared in its mouth and, with an enormous splash, it launched itself into the air. If the meal doesn't come to the froggy. . . my braces clattered as I barely staggered aside and reloaded flechettes. These didn't appear much better than the buckshot. As I watched, yellow bile seemed to ooze from the frog's wounds, and they were healing almost before my eyes! Okay. Shotgun wasn't working. I couldn't get enough range for the rifle. I had no idea where its weak points might be.

Crap.

The giant frog gave a short hop and rammed me. The yellow ichor burned where it touched, and I kept moving back more and more. The water was getting deeper, and it was moving me around towards the river, its bulbous green eyes never leaving me. It knew exactly what it was doing; once I was swimming more than walking, I'd be easy prey.

Well... since they were the only things I could see... I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted a blast at each round eye. But as I fired, the eyes retracted into the critter's skull! "Cheater!" I shouted and pulled off a hoof-sized leech, and tossed it into its mouth. It bit down, and I watched the black slug nearly liquefy instantly in its acidic spittle. Glad I hadn't tried the 'let it eat me and shoot it from the inside' plan!

"Not good," I said as I tossed leech after leech into its mouth. Okay, technically this was feeding rather than fighting, but so long as I wasn't eaten myself I was still okay. I even managed to scramble into shallower water, but the giant frog looked like it was getting bored with appetizers.

Its tongue flashed out again and smooshed against my chest, the tip fully healed. I dug in my hooves, but it simply waddled towards me, ignoring my frantic shots.

"Get down!"

My ears swiveled behind me; it couldn't be! Thump...

I dropped into the muck as a grenade flew over my back and into its mouth. Its eyes bulged, "Brrrooo..." And then it exploded in great bloody chunks. I rose from the churned water, a leech wiggling across my face looking for something to bite for a second before I tossed it aside. Then I looked back behind me at P-21 walking through the chest-deep muck. He slung Persuasion as he trotted through the muck at me.

"Are you okay?" P-21 asked as he put a hoof on my shoulder. I stared at him for a long moment, then hugged him close.

"I thought you were doing the smart thing and going back to Chapel?" I sniffed.

He flushed, looking away. "You're not the only one who's allowed to do stupid things."

"But..." I looked around at all the mud and fog around us. "How did you find me?"

"I didn't," he said softly. "She did."

I looked back at Scotch Tape rising from some rushes, looking at her PipBuck

sheepishly. She looked shaky and scared but trying to keep up a brave face. “Well. . . like you said. We’re all. . . all messed up. I just didn’t think you should be. . . you know. . . messed up alone.”

I looked at the rest of the weeds and thorns. “Is Rampage. . .”

“Staying behind with Glory and Lacunae,” P-21 finished. Then he bowed his head as he pressed his lips together. Finally he said softly, “I’m sorry. . . I’m sorry I was weak.”

I stared at him, and some hateful, petty part of myself wanted to rub it in. Hurt him. Four little ponies went to work beating the living snot out of that shameful part of myself as I walked to him and nudged his shoulder with a smile, “You weren’t weak. You were smart. Being around me will get you killed.” We trotted back to Scotch.

“Anypony can die,” Scotch Tape muttered as she looked at the mucky water beneath her. “Even mom wasn’t safe in the stable. . .”

“But. . . I led you into those tunnels. It’s my fault. . .”

“You led, Blackjack. We followed. You didn’t make us do anything.” He took a deep breath. “Chapel will be there whenever we’re done. Till then. . . well. . .” he gave a shy smile and a helpless little shrug. Then he blinked as he caught the look of disgust on my face. “What?” Then he looked at the matching expression on Scotch Tape’s muzzle. “What is it?” He suddenly blinked and his eyes went flat. “There’s a leech on my butt, isn’t there?” We slowly nodded. “More than one?” Another nod. “Big ones?”

“Uh huh. . .” Scotch said weakly.

He looked back. A blood curdling cry echoed through the mire.

“We have got to get you some decent barding,” I muttered, launching one black bloodsucker into the mire. Once we had them all off his rear, Scotch Tape hopped onto his back and we continued north, passing by the corpse of the giant frog. A dozen smaller amphibians were all ready having a cannibalistic feast. “Enjoy your lunch,” I called out to them.

“Thannnks,” one of the larger ones croaked in reply. I think that all three of our manes stood on end before we raced away from the scene as fast as my clattering legs would carry me.

“So, that’s the plan?” P-21 said skeptically as we walked along the Celestia Boulevard.

“It’s all I could come up with,” I replied, keeping my eye on the long ago looted shops and smashed cafés. We weren’t quite clear of the bog or the fog banks.

Scotch Tape blinked up at the mists. “Why is it so foggy and rainy here at the same time?”

“Probably the Enclave,” I replied, glad it didn’t obscure my E.F.S. I hadn’t seen anything red in fifteen minutes.

“It would make it harder for somepony to take pot shots as they fly in and out of the Skyport,” P-21 speculated. “Also, no pony would be able to keep track of them.”

“Yeah, but it’s still depressing,” Scotch Tape said, and then started as she pointed to the side. “Somepony’s over there!”

I looked at the blue bars. “Relax. They’re not hostile.” Not yet, anyway.

The bars belonged to four bedraggled mares and one buck. They had filthy sacks and patched saddlebags filled to bulging with more junk than I could imagine. “Stay back!” the buck warned as the mares readied flimsy shovels, pry bars, and a cracked baseball bat. They also looked ready to run for their lives.

“No trouble!” I said, making sure my guns were away.

“They’re Red Eye’s slavers!” one of the mare squealed. “They found us!”

But the buck looked at my barding. “No. That’s Security.” At once, the five relaxed, and the tension left the three of us as well. “Sorry. We... I... um... never thought we’d see you.”

“We’re on our way to the Rainbow Dash Skyport,” I said, trying to look as friendly as I could. “You thought we were slavers?”

The buck cleared his throat. “Ever since Red Eye took over Paradise, the slavers have been out in force. You join him willingly, and he gives you a gun and sends you to the Everfree. Otherwise... well... you disappear for good in Fillydelphia. Scrapyard was completely wiped out this morning. Even with three VC soldiers, we couldn’t fight them.”

“VC soldiers fighting Red Eye?” I asked. Gasp, were the Enclave really doing something to help? Something that actually mattered?

“Well, they were when we fled, though Red Eye’s griffins were all over them. I don’t think Scrapyard had a chance.” The buck muttered darkly.

“You’re from Scrapyard?” I asked, looking at their bags of junk. They nodded warily.

“Where are you going?”

“The pegasi trade food for ordinary junk,” one of the mares said, sounding somewhat baffled. I squirmed inside, but seeing how slat ribbed these five ponies were...

“Do a lot of ponies eat the Enclave food?” P-21 asked.

“It’s the only food if a pony wants to avoid taint. You can eat hoppers and leaches, but you’ll be tainted in a few years,” the mustard-colored buck said with clear distaste.

“Otherwise, it’s preserved food or Society food.”

P-21 nodded thoughtfully, “With taint in the water, any plants that live get contaminated. That eventually builds up in whatever eats the tainted matter.” I sighed, remembering a lone dragon with the only hope to someday rid Equestria of that poison.

“Ugh. Why does anypony actually live in Hoofington? This place is like a butt and butt sandwich with extra butt on the side,” Scotch Tape groaned.

“I’d go back to Guttersville, if I could... not sure if it’s still there, with Red Eye, but still... better than here,” one of the mares opined. I had to agree, though my home was currently saturated with chlorine gas.

“Food trade, medical aid, or other business?” The bored puce pegasus asked from behind her counter as we shuffled through the Skyport gate while two more ponies dug through boxes. Huge rusting hulks of massive air wagons formed an impenetrable wall along the remains of the chainlink fence. If it took two pegasi to lift a Vertibuck, then I imagined it would take teams of pegasi to pull one of these from Manehattan to Hoofington. I’d thought that the fog would lighten up the closer to the airport we got, but everything here was shrouded in mist so thick and even that you couldn’t see twenty feet in front of your nose. From the blue bars on my E.F.S., I could tell there was somepony overhead. It made my mane twitch.

“Food Trade,” each of the ponies from Scrapyard said in soft, respectful tones. “And medical... please.” The puce pegasus pressed her lips together tightly as she issued them each a green collar and red collar.

“Follow the green lines to the trading station. Follow the red lines to the medical station. Next!” she snapped, sending the ponies following lines painted on the cracked tarmac. Then her eyes took one look at me and widened in shock. “You! You- you-you-“

I trotted to the counter, leaning against it, eye staring into hers as she stammered. “Other business,” I said with a grin.

“You... you can’t be here. You’re that... that terrorist,” she said as she licked her lips. I could make out vague outlines in the mist atop the skywagon hulks to either side of the gate.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” I said in an even, calm, civilized, not-going-to-shoot-you-unless-I-have-to voice.

“What are you here for, then?” she asked, swallowing and looking at P-21 and Scotch Tape as if they were going to suddenly pull out death rays and start blowing things up at random.

“I’m looking for a pony in charge. If you’ll tell me where to go, I’ll get out of your mane and let you get back to boring everyday work.” I smiled as comfortably as possible. Okay... maybe there was just a little shootiness in my grin.

She looked at two other mares processing the visitors, then swallowed and pulled out three yellow collars. “Please put these on.” I glanced at P-21, levitated them over each of our heads, then smiled at her again. My cooperation seemed to disturb her even more. Sometimes, you just couldn’t please a paranoid pegasus pony. “T... this way.” She said as she left the counter and followed a yellow path painted on the ground. I had to admit, it was an efficient way to manage ponies. Anypony on the wrong trail would get noticed right away.

“Thank you,” P-21 said softly, but the puce mare jumped anyway.

“Come again?” she asked in confusion. A Vertibuck landed beside us with eerie silence, and Scotch Tape gaped at the missile pods and energy cannons.

He glanced at me and Scotch. “Thank you for helping these ponies,” he elaborated.

“Oh. That.” Her nervousness gave way to a little irritation. “You’re welcome... I guess.” She looked sharply at Scotch Tape. “Stay clear of the Vertibuck please.”

“Something the matter?” I asked, watching as the pegasi started to load the Vertibuck with what appeared to be heaps and heaps of scrap metal and other junk.

She shook her head a moment as if trying to think of something to say that wouldn't get her shot. "Just.. not how I imagined it. Always hungry ponies... always sick... dirty... smelly... a lot of them crazy or violent," she said, then swallowed. "I just thought it'd be... I dunno... different."

What did she expect? A nice orderly stablemeet? "This is the Wasteland. And this is the Hoof. Worst of the worst. I almost got eaten by a giant frog just an hour ago. A frog. How crazy is that?" And before that, I was nearly eaten by a mechanical abomination. She looked a little uncertain, and I gave a half smile. "So, if there's any place in all the Wasteland that needs your help, this is it. It's really appreciated." She brightened a little, and while she wasn't exactly friendly, she stopped twitching at my every move.

The yellow line led to the terminal, and once inside, I felt my spirits lift immensely. That perpetual fog was gloomy, even for Hoofington. Once inside I saw a number of terminals, monitors, and, of course, pegasi of all colors flying around the large open-aired building. Somepony had hung a banner across the 'Rainbow Dash' part of 'Rainbow Dash Skyport' that now read 'Thunderhead'. A cloud split in half by a lightning bolt motif was on every crate and terminal.

There were also flaws. Most of the ponies I saw looked tired, unwashed, and strained. Weapons were of poor quality and everypony wore threadbare uniforms. There was a general feel of malaise and frustration in the air.

I saw a grand total of three suits of power armor, and they were looking more like they were keeping an eye on the pegasi than looking for trouble. More than a few looked almost afraid of the scorpion tailed armored ponies standing above them with their beam rifles. I also wasn't much of an engineer, but the Thunderhead power armor looked... fancier than the power armor of the Neighvarro Enclave. More little flashy bits and a shinier finish made me wonder if their armor was newer.

I had to admit, their disintegration rifles following me really made me wish they weren't nearly so fancy.

The puce pegasus lead me to an office door marked 'Security'; that made me smile. "Lieutenant? That... um... it's the... ah..." she glanced at me, "Terrorist? The one who attacked Miramare?"

"Terrorist. You blow up one Vertibuck, and suddenly everypony's convinced that you're a complete monster," I muttered dryly.

"You did what?" Scotch Tape and P-21 asked in unison.

“Didn’t I tell you about that?” I blinked at their surprise. Then again, with everything I had to tell him earlier, I might have left that little detail out. “They shot first, you know. I was merely defending myself,” I said primly.

“Funny. Didn’t you geld a buck ‘defending yourself’?” P-21 asked. Scotch Tape gawked, covering her mouth with her hooves as she blushed and started giggling.

I tried to maintain my dignified posture. “That was different. I was drunk. And singing. I got carried away.”

“You do that a lot,” a mare said from within the office. The puce mare stepped aside as I slowly trotted into the office. It couldn’t be. . .

The navy mare behind the desk narrowed her eyes as she looked at me evenly. “Sergeant Wind Whisper.” The puce mare stammered her farewells and quickly stepped out, closing the door once we’d entered. Behind the sergeant flashed a dozen screens of various sections of the skyport. I was disappointed not to see the pony I was after in any of them.

“It’s lieutenant, now, though being lieutenant of the Volunteer Corp is like being captain of a griffin dung cleanup crew. After Miramare, a lateral transition was called for by my superior.” She said as she glanced at P-21 and Scotch. “I don’t see your Dashite friend. A report was filed that she was dead, but, oddly enough, every report on your activities always has you in the company of a gray Dashite with a purple mane and matching eyes.”

“You’ve been spying on me?”

“After all that you’ve done?” She laughed, “Of course. I have a pony on staff whose job is to keep track of all five of you. You destroyed a Vertibuck with an unknown weapon of frankly terrifying destructive power. I’d be an idiot to not keep track of you.” She said as she stood and trotted to the fridge to get a small wire basket with six Sparkle Colas. “Not an easy job, since our last report had you in Chapel yesterday, and yet here you are. I’m dying to know how you and that Dashite travelled without being detected,” she said as she passed out one to each of us. “Really? Chopping her mane, putting on some barding, and calling herself ‘Fallen Glory’?”

“Yeah, I guess that wasn’t the best of disguises,” I agreed, rubbing the back of my head awkwardly as I popped the caps off our bottles and swept them into my pouch, adding sternly, “But she’s not a Dashite, Wind Whisper. She’s still loyal to the Enclave.” I looked at her steadily. She seemed to be staring at me. “What?”

She frowned as she rolled the bottle back and forth between her hooves. “Nothing.

You just seem. . . different.” I wondered if it was the mud, the fact that I had more scars on me than a masochistic raider, or the leech holes chewed in my armor.

“It’s the eye. Once you lose an eye, it throws everything off,” I replied with a snort.

The corner of her mouth twitched in a half smile. “Not that. When we first met, I thought you were an idiot.”

“Can’t imagine why,” P-21 muttered.

“And now?” I asked.

“Now. . . I can almost believe what that radio personality said about you,” she said as she leaned back a little.

Habazawa? “What did DJ PON3 say about me? When?”

“Two days ago,” she replied, looking surprised that I didn’t know. It wasn’t like I always kept my radio tuned to the station. She reached over to the terminal on her desk and started typing. A moment later, DJ Pon3’s voice crackled to life. “You know, I’d go to jail for listening to this back in Thunderhead,” she said as she sat back.

“. . . like to take a moment to talk about a word I hear thrown around a lot. ‘Hero.’ I know. I know. I can hear you from here: ‘But DJ, you use that all the time.’ I know, my little ponies, but let me tell you exactly what I mean when I use the word. In Postapocalyptia, everypony struggles to stay alive and to protect whatever they can. Sometimes it’s all a pony can do to get by for themselves, let alone their children. And it’s even tougher if they can survive while preserving their sanity and decency. Not everypony can.

“But, every once in a while, a pony comes along willing and able to give something of their own to help preserve the life of some somepony who can’t make it. Sometimes, it’s nothing more than a bottle of purified water to a thirsty soul. Sometimes, it’s a kind word to somepony who’s been living hard and rough for too long. And sometimes. . . just sometimes. . . it’s a pony willing to take a bullet so somepony else doesn’t have to. Who deals bloody vengeance to anypony who thinks that other ponies are fair game. Who’s willing to give their life, just because they can.

“I know you probably think I mean just the Stable Dweller, but she’s not alone. There’s her friends as well, fighting the good fight beside her. There’s ponies from Trottingham to Stalliongrad willing to give their own pain and suffering to make life a little better. And there’s some ponies called to sacrifice things that you or I never imagined. Some of you may recall a few days back about an army of psychoraiders

rampaging all over the northwest corner of Hoofington. I know most of you get the jitters just thinking about them, but when we're talking Hoofington raiders, they won't kill you. They'll eat you, and worse. That's right. A hundred or more bloodthirsty, pony eating psychos spreading out with nothing to stop them.

"Nothing, that is, but the Security Mare. She went right to the heart of their territory and stopped them cold. Now I know what you might be saying: 'give me a few crates of ammo and some guns and I'd do the same. But what you folks don't realize... what I didn't realize... was that those raiders weren't just a bunch of psychopaths. They were a stable full of hundreds of ponies all looking to treat the Wasteland as their personal buffet. And not only that children... you see that stable? It was Security's home.

"She didn't just stop hundreds of ponies willing to kill, rape, and pillage. She stopped her friends. Her family. Everypony she'd ever known before leaving it to bring justice to the Hoof. All to help ponies who a few days earlier had hounded and hunted her for a whole mess of bottlecaps. And that, my little ponies, is what I mean when I use the word hero. If there are ponies able to do that then what excuse do any of us have not to give a bottle of water if we can spare it, or a kindly word if we can share one?

"Food for thought, children. This is DJ Pon3, bringing you the truth... no matter how bad it hurts."

I stood there a moment, stunned as Wind Whisper just watched me. That wasn't the truth! She'd left out that they weren't raiders yet! That I tried to kill myself along with them! What the hell, Homage, how can you call that the truth?

"It's true," Scotch Tape said quietly and I jerked, looking at her with my heart pounding in my chest and feeling my breath catch in my throat. "They all went crazy... killing and eating and... worse. And she stopped them."

No. That's not how it happened! I murdered them! I killed foals!

"And I doubt even the Enclave could have stopped them. They were set to sweep all across Hoofington," P-21 said quietly as I bowed my head, shaking and making the braces clatter. I clenched my eye shut. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't. I was just a stupid mare too dumb to die, too stubborn to kill myself, and stupid enough to throw myself in harm's way over and over again.

"I see," Wind Whisper said in a softer, less cynical voice. "Well then... in light of that... what can the Enclave do for you, Security?"

Think of Glory. Remember the plan. Pull yourself together and do it right for a change! I fought to get my heart and breathing under control, but the organs weren't quite working like they should as I looked at the blue pegasus in her black uniform. "My friend is hurt. Badly. She . . . lost her wing."

"Impossible!" Wind Whisper blurted, looking disturbed, her own wings fluttering a little behind her as she scowled at me in disbelief. "You'd need a chainsaw or something to . . ." and her disbelief fell away as my eye drilled into hers.

"I remember a pegasus at Miramare missing her wings," I said slowly. "So don't tell me it's impossible."

Wind Whisper frowned at the mention of the airbase, but also absently stroked the tip of her wing. "I apologize. It's just . . . not something a pegasus wants to think about."

"No different than a unicorn losing her horn," I replied, feeling a belated stab of guilt to Roses.

P-21 glanced at Scotch Tape, "Gee, I'm so glad that earth ponies like us have nothing integral to lose." That drew a little snort from the olive filly.

"She's hurt badly, and I need some way to help her," I said softly, trying to keep my calm and civility. "Do the Enclave have any way to restore a wing?" The question seemed to almost nauseate the navy blue pegasus.

"I . . . maybe in the Tower. But that's only a maybe. Usually, a pegasus dies before their wings come off. I only know one mare who's ever lost her wings and lived to talk about it." I felt a stab of hope, but it died at the look on Wind Whisper's face. "She killed herself. . . stepped off the clouds." She gave one last shiver and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Security. I don't think I can help you. I'm sorry."

"Yes, you can." My tone brooked no argument as I stared at her. "I need to find a particular pegasus. . ."

"I can't believe there wasn't anything she could do for her," P-21 muttered as we left the skyport. I'd felt my spine itching the whole time the power armored ponies watched me. Most of the Volunteer Corps appeared equally relieved to see me go.

"You heard her. Pegasi just don't break their wings. They must have used a chainsaw on that poor Miramare mare's wings." I shivered, glad I'd fed Minty to that

raider. . . and wishing that I could have added Lighthooves as well. Still, hopefully I'd get to take care of that soon. "At least she told us where to go."

"Scrapyard. Only two miles, too," he looked at my legs. "How do you feel?"

"Sore. These braces chafe," I muttered, then flushed as I looked at him. "But you know that, don't you?"

"I have to admit, I'm glad to have it off," he admitted with a chuckle. "Funny, but the doctors seemed surprised that I didn't have a problem with that booth. In, get magicked up, and get out. Wish we had one in 99."

Scotch Tape didn't seem to share his carefree feelings on the subject. Indeed, she looked horrified. "I. . . didn't like it," she said grudgingly, shivering. She caught my concerned look, and her ears folded back. "I thought. . . I thought it was going to eat me. . ."

P-21 snorted, and I smacked his rump hard with my tail, making him jump. "Scotch. . . it's all right now. I don't know what that thing was, but I shot it with the strongest damn gun in Equestria. It's gone." She shivered and nodded but didn't look particularly convinced. I supposed it was hard to believe that monsters didn't exist when you were nearly eaten by one.

Walking due south through the pegasi's fog bank, I was glad to be heading up hill and into drier land. We still couldn't see further than twenty or thirty feet, but I suspected we were entering some sort of industrial district. We passed by one of the yawning entrances to the Green Line, giving it a wide berth. There were tons of railways here, and rusting train cars had dumped heaps of black rock all over the place.

There were also red bars in here.

Scotch Tape and P-21 moved quietly on their hooves. Me? I clicked and rattled and clattered with every step. I glanced at them and nodded for them to hang back a little. I really wanted to get some barding for him. She at least had that utility barding. Softly, I started to whistle about cleaning up winter as I trotted slowly towards the bars.

The bars moved in the fog, fanning out along the train cars. I heard hooves tapping softly on rusting rooftops as I whistled to myself like I didn't have a care in the world. The fog swirled around my hooves as I took step after clicking step. I saw the vague shapes in the mist. I was completely and totally surrounded.

"You there," a mare said from the fog. "Throw down your weapons. You have been

selected to serve in Red Eye's glorious rebirth of Equestria." Step by step, a creature emerged that I'd only seen in a memory: one half a predatory bird and the other a powerful cat. She'd decorated her plumage in bright red paint, and the power armor she wore was decorated with a bright Red Eye. A pair of gatling guns pointed right at me, and I doubted that my dinged up armor would last long. Why couldn't I ever have cool power armor, huh?

"Yeah. Sorry. Can't do that. I got a friend to help," I said as I picked out the other half dozen red bars. There were also two blue bars. "Maybe next time."

She scowled at my response. "Maybe you don't understand. We're not giving you a choice!"

I looked at the griffin and then smiled. That seemed to make her even more unnerved. "What's your name?"

"I . . . you don't need to know my name! Now throw down your weapons!" Her gun's motors hummed as she revved them threateningly.

My eye locked with hers and I repeated in an even softer tone, "What's your name?"

She glanced up at the ponies ready to blow me away. "Scarlet."

"Scarlet? Lovely name." I said as I kept staring at her. Clearly, I wasn't following the script. "Scarlet, my friend is hurt and she needs my help and you are slowing me down. I'm the Security Mare. I've killed hydras, blown up Vertibucks, and put a monsterpony through a rock crusher. And you are in my way. So, please, go away." I glanced to the side where P-21 peeked out from under the train with Persuasion gripped tight in his jaws.

Unfortunately, the glance seemed to break the spell. "K . . . kill her!" she shouted.

At that, both of us were blasted by three bombs set around us as her paired stream of rapid fire death went high and wide. A heavy thump filled the air, and she barely took to the sky before the grenade launched her end over end to arc out over the train's cars. The last two tried struggled to recover as I rose to my hooves and gave each a faceful of buck shot. In less than ten seconds, the ambush was annihilated.

I frowned at P-21. "Is it just me, or are we getting really good at this?"

"Well it's not like it was hard with all of them staring at you," he said as he dug through his bags for another brick of that gray explosive.

I trotted to where Scarlet was starting to pull herself out of the heap she'd landed in. "You . . . you are . . . dead . . . so . . ." she said as her blasted armor smoked. The

minigun motors ground horribly as they jammed. The griffin's red eyes went wide as I pressed the shotgun to her chin and she gulped.

"I'm not an executioner," I said softly. "I just want to help my friends. You've slowed me down. I take it there are more of you at Scrapyard?"

"I... I won't betray Red Eye!" She said as she clenched her eyes shut. I could tell she was expecting imminent death. I could hear the cards.

"I can respect that," I replied softly, pulling the gun from her head. If she was really willing to die rather than tell me, I wasn't going to be able to force anything out of her. Besides, she'd already told me what I needed to know. Her eyes looked at me in shock and disbelief. Then I smiled. "But I can't have you follow me, either."

Five minutes later, we continued on our way. "I'll kill you! We will have our revenge. I swear, I'll get you for this if it's the last thing I'll do!" It'd taken two rolls of duct tape, a broom handle, a plunger and a half dozen tubes of wonderglue, but I doubted that she'd be getting her revenge any time soon. I know it was silly, juvenile, and an utter waste of time... but the three of us enjoyed a good laugh. Four little ponies in my head joined in as the dealer sulked in the back of my mind.

"Okay. This might not be so easy," I muttered without a smile on my face as I stared at the village of Scrapyard. It'd apparently been a junkyard even before the war, and half-ripped-apart skywagons were stacked up as ad-hoc apartments next to a large factory-style building. There had to be twenty ponies on the ground, and three griffins were watching from the roof of the factory. Gunfire cracked from the ponies in the thinning mist towards the open building. It was returned with pink disintegration bolts. There were a couple bodies and a few heaps of pink sludge, but I didn't think they were slavers.

I scanned the compound with my scope and located two ponies guarding one of the locked up skywagons. Jail? The ponies we'd met had said that the slavers were taking everypony they could get their hooves on. No sense in slaughter. I looked at P-21. "Okay, I need a smart pony now."

"A smart pony would be back at the College," he muttered as he peered through his binoculars. "Looks like the Enclave isn't done putting up a fight just yet. Those griffins are keeping them grounded. Probably waiting for them to run low on ammo and try to make a break for it. That's skywagon's filled with prisoners, I think. And that one is probably holding their commander, judging by those runners going in and

out.” Oh, that was a little detail I missed. He looked at me. “Do you still have that spell thingy?”

“I have many thingies. It’s sometimes hard to keep them all straight.,” I said as I showed him my inventory. He smiled a little. “Is there a plan? That looks like a plan!” I asked with a grin.

He frowned back at me. “There is, but you’re not going to like it.” And he explained it to me, drawing it out in the dirt.

“Forget it!” I shouted, stomping my hoof on his diagram.

“Unless you’ve got an extra PipBuck on you, she has to,” he said as he pointed a hoof at me. “All she has to do is get it there.” I seethed at him for even suggesting this! This was bordering on ‘following Blackjack’ reckless! Scotch wasn’t looking very sure about it either.

“P-21, this is your daughter we’re talking about!” I said, gesturing to her with a hoof. How could he suggest that she-

“What?” Scotch Tape gaped at him, her eyes popping wide. Aw crap. . . P-21 closed his eyes and shook his head as he clenched his jaw. I could almost see the curses he suppressed. The olive filly just gaped at him, then at me. “You’re my. . .”

“Sire,” he said flatly. “And that’s it.”

“P-21. . .” I began, but then he gave me his shooty look. . . it was better than mine. Scotch Tape stared at him in amazement, but he refused to look at her. Slowly her eyes drooped along with her ears.

“But. . . I mean. . .” Scotch Tape looked at her hooves. “Why. . . why didn’t you tell me?”

The blue buck sighed. “To avoid all. . . this. . .” he said as he gestured around the three of us. “And of course Blackjack picks now of all times to bring it up.”

“I thought you’d forgotten,” I said, feeling worse for Scotch than I had before.

“I. . . you. . . I. . . I mean. . . momma always talked about you,” she said as she stared up at him. “She said she loved you.”

“That’s nice,” he replied, glancing at her with a scowl. “I didn’t love her. She could teach me what I needed to escape. She was. . . tolerable. But she just used me just like every mare did in 99.” He sighed. “Forget it. I’ll do it.”

“You don’t have a PipBuck,” I reminded him. “I’ll do it, and then. . .”

“I’ll do it,” Scotch said at once, silencing both of us.

“But. . .” I began, but she gave me a hard, hurt look. Short of tying her up, there wasn’t any way I was going to get her to not do her part of the plan.

“Fine. I’d better hurry, then,” P-21 said as he took off his saddlebags and dumped out the contents. He fished out some wires and a spark battery and started to work. He focused with such a great severe look that Scotch Tape just sat back with her eyes on her hooves. I kept my eyes open for more Red Eye patrols.

At least that way the only ponies I’d hurt would be the bad guys. . . I hoped. . .

Two saddlebags lighter, I took position as close to the factory as I dared. I set up in a notch behind a tub and a refrigerator and took sight at the ponies firing away at the pegasi trapped within the factory. The griffins were looking bored, and there were fewer and fewer disintegration bolts coming out those doors. I didn’t think it’d be long now.

Looking through the scope, I watched as a few faint hoofmarks appeared in the dirt approaching the scrapped sky wagon that looked like it was being used as a headquarters or. . . or something. There were ponies coming and going at regular intervals, bringing out more ammo. If it wasn’t a headquarters, then at least it was an important building. I had no idea how long the StealthBuck lasted. . . was it five minutes or three? I didn’t think it muted sound. . .

It didn’t matter, though. She was determined to do it. If I’d just kept my mouth shut about P-21 being her father. . .

“Come on, Scotch.” I looked at the jail. Two of Red Eye’s ponies had brought another struggling young mare with bloody flanks and tossed her inside a few minutes ago, confirming P-21’s theory about the building’s function. P-21 was somewhere over there. . . I knew better than to even bother trying to look. I swept my scope back to the first building, licking my dry lips.

Then the door opened, and out came a mare with an ammo box in her jaws. The door swung closed behind her, but then bumped open for just a second before closing completely. I stared at the door, feeling lightheaded. Then an orange pony bucked my brains and reminded me not to be an idiot and forget to breathe! It’d been three minutes. . . it had to be! I checked my PipBuck. No, two and a half. Damn it, Scotch, get out of there.

Ammo mare trotted back towards the door. She shoved it open with a hoof... just as a buck was exiting. I almost relaxed, but then I stared at the two just standing there, talking in the doorway! "Come on, in or out... Damn it..." I muttered as I stared at the two. It had to be a hundred feet, and if I started the party early with the rifle...

I narrowed my eye. I'd never tried to take a shot with my magic bullet at a range like this! Pressing my lips together, I focused like I never had before. I pressed my hooves to my temples as I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted her rear leg. I wondered if I'd already passed my stupidity quota for the day! "Aw... fuck it.."

The magical bullet streaked across the space between us with a sharp crack and smashed right into the rear of her leg above her hoof. I fell back against the scrap, feeling like I'd just got bucked upside the head and had a basket of apples tumbling out of my nose. Oh... nevermind. That's blood. From the yells and screams, confusion raged at the door. No one seemed to be screaming for a sniper, though. I poked my head up and peered at the ground next to the skywagon.

A tin can lying on its side just seconds ago was now upright. The signal that she'd gotten clear.

I looked at a sparkle cola bottle on top of the refrigerator. All I had to do was set it upright. Just... set it upright...

Something exploded in my head, and stars danced in my vision as my horn flared and went dead. I lifted a shaking hoof to my brow, checking to see if my horn was still there. I swallowed as I lay back. Apparently, that last spell had been too much for my little horn to manage. I stared at the bottle just three feet above me, trying to focus. The pain just built and built inside my skull while the bottle didn't budge a hair.

Oh crap.

Slowly, I shifted onto my hooves, the world spinning as I moved my head. I had to set the bottle upright. Every second I wasted was a chance for Scotch's presents to be discovered! I stretched up the rusty side of the fridge and carefully fumbled for the bottle. I bumped it, fumbled with it... and knocked it off the far side of the fridge. Rover'd been right! Thumbs were better! I looked around for another bottle.

"Hey, is somepony over there?"

Oh... crap...

I fumbled with the rifle, trying to get the mouthgrip out and in my jaws. Ugh, when

was the last time I cleaned this thing? My jaw struggled to keep it steady as I propped the rifle on the bathtub, steadying it with my forehooves. How the hell did Lancer DO this?

Then a deep throaty roar of flame, shrapnel, and pressure erupted as the satchel charges within the command center went off. I'd thought I was a fair distance from the blast. I probably would have been too, but I'd ignored what a mare bringing ammo out meant. And there was a lot more than just bullets inside. The secondary explosion a second later rained flaming shrapnel over everything. Taurus' rifle was dropped as I jumped into the fridge a second before half the flaming sky wagon rained down over Scrapyard! My ears kept popping every time I opened my mouth.

Then something slammed into the fridge and sent it flipping over down the slope. With a crash, I was flung flat on my face surrounded by at least a dozen stunned and concussed ponies in a very bad mood! I rose to my hooves, staggering stiffly on the braces. Then I pointed my hoof at the lot of them. "You! You're... all under arrest! Drop your guns and weapons and lay flat on the ground." I stared as hard as I could, willing their surrender!

The moment lasted for all of three seconds. "Kill her!"

Fine! My horn... fucking hurt as it refused to drag out vigilance! Something snapped inside me. "You fuckers are keeping me from Glory!" I screamed and, braces or not, charged right into the nearest spear-wielding pony. I didn't kick or bite her; instead, I threw my entire body at her and bit hard on the haft of the spear as we went down together. Her teeth were rotten brown lumps. My teeth had the benefit of modern dentistry. Twisting hard, I tore the spear from her grip, rolled atop her, and drove the tip under her jaw, putting all my weight on the haft and driving the tip out by her ear. Twisting, I yanked the spear free as she thrashed and screamed.

No time to finish her off as I rose, barely setting myself for the charge of the next three ponies. The first caught the tip in her chest, my shove driving it clear into her sternum as her momentum impaled her on the shaft. Then I was the pony slammed off her hooves by two earth pony mares far better suited for fights like this. I bounced across the field as more ponies came around to ponypile on Security.

My mouth burned as my teeth clenched down on a smoking piece of Sky Wagon and slashed it across one mare's face while my horn failed over and over again to do something as simple as draw a pistol! The mare yelled as her partner jumped on my back, driving my rump to my hocks as she stabbed at my shoulders with a carving knife. The plates kept the edge at bay as her head jerked again and again.

I threw the scrap at the mare before me before rolling and thrashing wildly.

Either she'd gotten lucky, or I'd just impaled myself with that roll. . . either way, my left shoulder burned horribly as I knocked her free. I twisted my head, barely caught the handle with my teeth, and pulled it free. Oh. . . now I was bleeding too. Well, no time to worry about that now! I fell atop the tossed mare, ramming the carving knife into her windpipe and tearing as hard and brutally as I could. Something arterial split, and hot blood spurted across my face. I grinned despite myself as I felt my own blood running down under my barding.

They were getting the message. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. "Shoot her!" Somepony yelled, and from the shotguns and rifles being lifted, they were happy to do so.

I screamed around my clenched teeth as I staggered at the face cut mare, throwing my hooves around her and jamming the knife into her shoulder. I wasn't trying to kill her. . . yet. I twisted as hard as I could to put her between me and her compatriots as they opened fire. She screamed. There might have been a "stop" involved as I fought to keep her upright. Shots that penetrated her thumped off my barding as they sprayed lead at both of us. New holes opened in my hide as she finally went limp and fell out of my grip.

My armor glistened from the blood of three ponies covering half of it and my eye glowed as if I could annihilate them with my glare alone. They stood in an arc before me, staring in horror as I rose. The braces pinged beneath my barding as they gave way. Only the broken remains kept me upright as I stood there and bled. "You! Can't! Kill! Me!" I bellowed each word at them as they scrambled to reload.

The griffin begged to differ as she flew over me and drew a line across my rump with her gatling gun. I sat awkwardly as my legs shook. My horn flickered as it fought to pull out a weapon. A healing potion. Something! I clenched my eye shut. I was going to fail. She was going to be trapped on the ground forever. Because I wasn't tough enough. Wasn't good enough. A second line drew over my shoulders, and only my locked limbs kept me upright. The griffins were hovering over me now, interested in just how quickly their gatling guns would turn me to paint.

They were reloaded. They were ready to put down the crazy mare that defied them. I took the deepest breath I could and screamed out, "Glory!" Every eye was on me. Every eye wasn't on the factory...

Then one griffin melted in a flash of pink goo as a trio of pegasi in dinged and pitted armor flew from the factory and sprayed pink disintegration bolts and slicing

red beams. From the opposite side came a roar from two dozen recently freed ponies armed with every weapon we'd picked up. They closed on both sides like a mantichore's jaw, a griffin falling from the sky with her feathers aflame while another was blasted from the sky by a grenade shot that bordered on art. One mare bleeding to death was forgotten as they scrambled to their own defense.

I felt my body giving out as my useless limbs fumbled weakly for a healing potion. I managed to get one out of my bags, but the glass bottle slipped out from between my bloody hooves and landed before me. I fumbled with it, the broken braces fighting me as my softened bones bent. I slowly started to fall over. I couldn't die now. I still needed to help her! And Lacunae! And Rampage. Everypony! Death could wait, damn it! But my body couldn't keep up any more. Looks like I didn't need to worry about that taint after all.

Then two hooves pushed me back upright, the pain on my shoulder from the shove snapping me back from the fuzzy blackness. "Hang on!" Scotch Tape said through the sounds of the battle around us. She grabbed the bottle in her mouth and flipped it into her hooves, biting the stopper and pulling it free before holding it to my lips. "Here!" She shouted, and I drank the milky purple potion. I wasn't sure how much it helped, but I wasn't feeling any deader.

"Let me get another!" Scotch said as she dug at my bags. But I sighed.

Sorry Scotch.

I shoved her away as one of Red Eye's raiders charged with a spear, the tip cutting the olive mare's flank as it punched through my failing armor and drove deep in my side. "You die! For Red Eye!" the mare screamed before biting the haft and pulling it out, determined that if they were going to die, she'd take me with her. And the filly as well.

I bit hard on the spear in my side, jamming it inside me. She might kill me, but I wasn't going to make it easy for her. She wouldn't kill anypony else for as long as I was alive, even if that was just for a few seconds! Get clear, Scotch. Sorry I didn't tell you about P-21 sooner. Sorry... Glory...

Then there was a loud bang beside me. Scotch tape stared in shock at the hole that had opened in the mare's neck. The mare released the weapon, staggering away. Another twelve millimeter hollow point blasted out another bloody chunk. Then a third, and the mare fell limp besides me. I slumped over as I saw something die inside the teal eyes behind Scotch's goggles

“Sorry. . .” I murmured softly.

Then she noticed me, and the gun tumbled into the dirt. “Blackjack! I’ll. . . I have. . . please. . . please don’t die!” she begged around her tears as she grabbed the spear in my side with her jaws.

“No. . . don’t pull. . .” But then I felt it pull out as I fell on my side. Then she was pouring healing potions down my throat as fast as she could pull the stoppers. I think I just about cleaned her out as the fighting slowly died around us. She cradled my head as I started up at the sky. . . really wishing I could look somewhere else. “Did we win?”

“We won,” P-21 said. Slowly, I looked at the dozen or so ponies still standing, at the heaps of Red Eye’s ponies laying amid smeared heaps of pink goo and piles of ash. Two pegasi stood apart, seeming at a loss for what to do at this moment. They kept their guns pointing in my general direction as I grit my teeth as shifted slowly on to my hooves, the broken braces struggling to keep me upright. “Blackjack! What are you doing? Wait and rest,” P-21 said as he tried to push me back down.

“No. I need to talk. . . now. . . before she flies off.” I took step after step towards her. I tried not to have my shooty look, but after being nearly painted in blood, I supposed any look of mine was pretty creepy. P-21 kept me on my hooves as I swayed and then sat down hard. “Hello, Dusk.”

She tapped the side of her helmet, the armor retracted, and hard dark eyes stared at me suspiciously. “How did you find me?”

“Wind Whisper,” I replied. “Luckily, you were nearby.” I took a deep breath. “You owe me. Agreed?”

“We could have. . .” she began, but then she looked at all the ponies lying around me and glanced at her companion. Her lips twisted sourly before shaking her head. She sighed, narrowing her gaze as she glanced at me. “I guess I do.”

I nodded once. That was one hurdle I was glad to be past. “You can repay me easily.” The dark pegasus looked at me skeptically. “One. Help me back to the college. I’ll tell you two when we get there.”

She certainly didn’t look happy. Right now, she probably could have turned me into a glowing pile of goo. Heck, right now, I was so shot up that a hard sneeze would turn me into goo. “Alright. But how are we supposed to get you there?” She asked with a small frown. I glanced at their equipment.

“I thought they called it power armor. Not pussy armor,” I replied.

Funny. I never thought I'd fly Pegasus Airlines again, but I here I was slumping against Dusk as the pair winged their way through the cloud ceiling itself. Scotch Tape did all she could to keep me on the flying mare's back while P-21 rode Dusk's companion, a mare named Lightning Dancer.

"So, what was all that about?" I asked as we flew by a particularly...solid looking?—cloud. I looked at the spire of white tipped with glowing amber talismans. A lightning rod, I presumed. "I mean, why were you fighting Red Eye?"

"We're not. We have no interest in surfacer politics," Dusk said firmly.

"Well, then, what were you doing in Scrapyard?" I asked, and was quite proud of myself for not insinuating they were spreading tainted food.

"Buying scrap, obviously." She glanced back at my incredulous expression. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but clouds don't have much metal in them."

"But what does Thunderhead need with lots of metal?" I asked with a smirk.

"Stuff." Was all she said, and I doubted that I'd get more than that.

"So if you don't care, why fight?"

"They attacked the town while we were negotiating salvage rights," Dusk answered sourly, "We would have withdrawn, but their griffins forced us to bunker down inside that factory. They attacked with a full wing but left those three once we were cornered." Leaving them in big trouble till I came along.

We flew through a fissure that nearly reached the bottom of the ceiling; looking up, I could see a band of distant blue. Maybe it was blood loss, but I was finally getting over the urge to vomit as we made our way along. Then, through the fissure, I spotted a huge shape of odd uniformity above the rest of the clouds... like a giant flying donut with its main axis perpendicular to the ground. The interior of the donut had been removed and replaced with tier upon tier of buildings. "Is that Thunderhead?" I panted, marveling at the size of an actual city like long ago. Not a village of a few dozen or even hundreds of ponies, but tens of thousands.

"You're the second surface pony to see it," Dusk replied.

"It's amazing," I murmured. Then we were at the other end of the already-closing fissure, and the sight was replaced by more gray.

I imagined a smile from the pride in her voice. "Yes, it is."

Scotch Tape gave a sniff as her hooves tightened on me, making me wince. She hadn't said much since we'd lifted off. "Are you okay, Scotch?"

"Wha... yeah... I'm fine," she murmured in a perfect 'not fine' voice.

"What is it?" I asked.

She sniffed softly, pressing her face to my bloody, stiffening mane. "I... I killed a pony. I... I didn't even think about it. I just... I pointed and... and..." She shivered behind me. "It wasn't like shooting the robots."

"I'm sorry," I said softly, thinking back to that raider I'd killed with the broken tip of a rusty knife. I'd been so carried away that I'd never thought about it. "I know it hurts," I said softly, reaching to pat her with my floppy hoof. "It'll always hurt. It never gets any easier."

"That's not true," Dusk replied evenly. I really wished I could have smacked the pegasus without falling a long way to my death. "Once you've killed enough ponies, it's easy. Point, pull the trigger, and dead," she said quietly, and for a minute I'd thought that she'd decided to stay quiet for the rest of the trip. She did, after saying quietly, "You kill enough ponies... and you can kill anypony..."

I slowly opened my eyes, looking at an oddly familiar filthy ceiling. "If this is the afterlife... I'm not impressed..." I murmured, trying to shake chlorine dreams. Slowly, I started to rise, and then my body gave out and I fell back against the gray sheets. The windows were dark; night, or close to it. It'd been a busy day, and I wasn't even halfway done. "I must have passed out on the flight back..."

Slowly, I rolled onto my belly and looked back. The bullet holes were gone, only Leo's scar remaining. I still felt... off. And sore, but whether that was from taint or injury, I couldn't tell. I suspected I really owed the Collegiate. I also doubted that they were healing me out of the kindness of their hearts.

"Congratulations. You've set a brand new record," Triage said as she trotted in, her horn glowing as she lifted the clipboard in front of her. "Punctured lung. Torn muscle. Thirty two different gunshot penetrations. Probably a nasty case of magical burnout. Two liters of blood lost... Luna only knows how you didn't die from shock... and the first pony in history I think to go through the autonomous healing booth three times in one day." She adjusted her glasses. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Huh?" I muttered as I looked over at her, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth as

she looked dully at the clipboard.

“Well, if you ask me the scientific conclusion is inescapable,” she said as she smiled at me. Suddenly, the glowing clipboard swung through the air to smack me upside the head. “You! Are! Not! Bulletproof!” She shouted, smacking me with each word. “If you can’t do this heroic shit without getting holes shot in you, then you need to quit and retire!” She pointed the clipboard at my nose. “If you’re so set to die, then do it somewhere nice and quiet.”

“What does it matter if I’m dead from taint in a year anyway?” I shouted back at her, anger providing a wonderful stimulant.

“It matters because every halfwit with half a brain hears all about your noble sacrifices and next thing you know they’re getting shot, stabbed, gutted, and killed by ponies who have spent their entire lives preying on the helpless. And I’m the one who has to put their bodies back together! Even when they’re rotting, drugged, or undead, I still have to put them back together again,” she said as she jabbed her cigarette at my face. “It’s crazy ponies like you who make my job difficult.”

I just stared at her, “What. . . you’d prefer it if I’d let ponies die and get enslaved?”

“Of course not,” she said with every bit of as much contempt as I felt for her. “I’d rather ponies stopped relying on heroes like you and the Stable Dweller and saved the Wasteland themselves. Because every time that DJ starts to gush about how brave and wonderful you are, eventually. . . inevitably. . . you die, or worse, you become just as bad as the ponies you’re fighting. Ever hear of the Iron Mare? How about Strider? Ranger Steelhooves? Big Daddy? Each one a hero till they broke down, gave in, or gave up. One day, the glorious Stable Dweller and Security Mare will fail too. It’s a fact of the Wasteland,” she said as she glared down at me. “Any idiot with a gun can kill for a cause and get shot up for their trouble. How about an idiot who builds a school? Or runs a clinic? Or makes machines work? Oh, no heroism for them. They’re just the poor schmucks who should be grateful for the brave hero till heroing gets too tough.”

“If you think it’s so easy, you do it!” I countered.

“I don’t think it’s easy. I think it’s stupid. You can get shot ten ways to Celestiday, but how does it make the Wasteland any better?” She pointed a hoof. “Your pegasus friend is still critically depressed. That alicorn thing is catatonic. That filly is probably traumatized for life! You can’t fix that with bullets.”

Glory! I rolled and scrambled out of bed and cried out as my legs buckled beneath

me. "I... there was a pegasus... in power armor..." I gasped as I tried to lift myself to my legs. They buckled again, and I sprawled on my side. "I need... I have to talk to her..." I broke off in a cry of pain as my limb bent at a right angle and I rolled on to my back, feeling the rubbery limb slowly straighten.

"Stop!" Triage said sharply as she wrapped my hoof in her magic and tugged it. "Why do you do this? What masochistic messianic moronity makes you try and walk when you can't? Why do you have to do this?" She demanded as my limb slowly straightened.

"Because I have to. Because I owe her," I said as I said there, eyes closed. "I hurt her. I was stupid and selfish and... and I got her hurt. I cost her her wing."

"Enervation rot took her wing. And unless she's a foal, getting hurt is a part of life. So why are you doing this?" Triage asked, looking at me with the ghost of concern in her eyes.

"Because I love her!" I shouted. I took a slow, shaky breath. "I never loved anypony but myself. Never. But she's always been there with me. Even when it cost her her cutie mark. Even when it cost her her family and career. I've been beaten and battered and broken almost daily since I left the stable, and she's always trying to keep me going. To help me in my stupid, fucking... quest!" I said as I lifted my PipBuck and slapped the screen with my other hoof.

I went limp and sighed, staring at that ceiling like it was a soiled sky. "EC-1101 is meaningless to her, but she still believes in me enough to help me crawl along no matter how much it hurts her. And... I have to help her. I have to help all my friends. I'm tired of ponies getting hurt just for helping me." I clenched my eyes shut as I started to shake, and nothing was stopping it this time. "She shouldn't get hurt for me. I'm not worth it..."

Triage stood there with a half-lidded mask of an expression before she took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a sigh. "Wow. Two hundred years ago, I could have written a paper on your particular brand of crazy." She turned, and her horn glowed as she steered in a wheelchair. "Well, your pegasus friends have been waiting for you and making everypony really nervous, so the sooner they're dealt with, the better."

"They haven't been causing trouble, have they?" I asked with a worried frown.

"No, but it's no secret that, if you want healing, you come to us... or the Enclave. Folks are thinking they're here to trash the place or something. Makes every pony

wonder, you know?” She lifted me into the wheelchair and made me promise not to throw myself out of it this time. “Is your horn working again?”

I looked at the chair and concentrated, then winced as magic sparks shot from the tip of my horn. “Owww. . .” I tapped it with a limp limb. “I think I broke it.”

“Just burnout. It happens. Next time, don’t push it so hard.” Triage waved down one of the nurses. “The pegasi outside, could you escort them up here?” The nurse glanced at me sitting there looking like I’d been thrown down a few flights of stairs, and I gave her a smile.

“Can you take me to Glory’s room?” Time to do this.

“She’s been completely non-responsive,” Triage said quietly as her magic pushed the wheelchair. Did everypony in the Wasteland have stronger telekinesis than me? “She won’t eat. All she’s asked is for us to leave her alone.”

“She’s badly hurt,” I said as she pushed me to the door.

“Well if she doesn’t recover soon, we’ll have to toss her out.” Triage caught my glare and returned it. “Wasteland. Limited Space. We fixed her flesh. Mind and soul. . . that’s outside my specialty. So I hope you can help her.”

“You do?” I asked, a little sarcastic. For some reason, cynical healers were really aggravating.

She arched her brows coolly. “Just because I don’t appreciate cheap heroism doesn’t mean I don’t want to help ponies. I can’t help her. I hope you can.” I just dropped my gaze, chewing on my lower lip.

Dusk and Lightning Dancer appeared in the hall, approaching with wary steps. Dusk’s dark eyes stayed locked on mine while Dancer’s citrine ones looked around a bit more curiously. “So. . . what’s the second favor? Let’s get this over with.”

I just nodded towards Glory’s room. “I need you to help your sister.”

Her pupils constricted as she jerked away from me. “Go fuck yourself.”

Damn the promise. I launched myself from the chair and tacked her as the wheelchair went clattering down the hall behind me. Throwing my hooves around her neck, I counted myself lucky she sat down hard as I slumped before her, staring into her eyes. “Listen!” I hissed in her face, glaring like I could vaporize her with rage alone, “I don’t give a fuck about Enclave politics or tradition or your own fucked up issues with pride or honor or whatever you pegasi call it! Glory is in there and she needs your help.”

“If she wanted my help she shouldn’t have become a Dashite!” Dusk yelled in my face.

I punched her as hard as I could... which was honestly pretty pathetic as my limb bent under the blow. “She lost her wing!” I shouted back in her face, and that statement shocked her far more than my physical assault. “She got injured and the enervation rotted it right off her body! So here is what you are going to do...” I growled as I pointed to the closed door. “You are going to go in there. You are going to talk to her. You are going to smile. You are going to make her happy. I don’t care what you have to say, how you have to lie, or what you have to do... you are going to find some way to make her want to live.” I said as I clenched my jaw, tears running down one cheek. “Because I can’t...”

Dusk closed her eyes. “You don’t understand. If any pony found out she’s alive...”

“Wind Whisper already knows. She doesn’t care. Don’t you get it Dusk?” I said as I felt my legs slowly give out beneath me till I was sitting, “I’ve been where Glory is right now. It almost killed me. It would have if I hadn’t forgotten about the gun’s safety! And the only thing that snapped me out of it was someone giving me something... anything... to live for.” I bowed my head shamefully. “I can’t do it... I... I’m the one who hurt her. That’s all I do... and she needs to live.” I took a deep breath and stared into her eyes once more. “You’re going to do this. And do you know why?”

“Why?” she asked, so stunned that the anger and attitude were momentarily abandoned.

“Because she’s your sister, you love her, and you’re a good pony,” I said, trying to convince myself as much as her that it was true. “You’re her older sister. You have to help her...”

Dusk finally relaxed with an angry sigh. “Fine. I’ll... I’ll try...” Then she jabbed my chest with a hoof. “But after this, we’re even... no matter what happens! Got it?”

“Just... help her. You’re the only one who can,” I said as I finally crumpled. This was it. This was all I could do. With a sharp glare at me, Dusk opened the door to her room and stepped inside.

“Hey, Featherbrain...” Dusk said before closing the door behind her with her scorpion tail. I bent over as all the stress and strain of the day poured out of me. When had my life turned into near daily dramatic trauma?

“You okay?” Lightning Dancer asked as she returned with my wheelchair. She used

her scorpion tail to scoop me up and help me take a seat. She gave me a casual, easy going sort of smile. Her citrine eyes and brilliant orange mane contrasted with her stark black power armor.

I rubbed my face with my hooves and sighed. "I haven't seen okay in a long time. I used to be okay. Heck, I used to be happy. Then I started thinking, and it's been all downhill from there."

"Eh, what can you do?" she said with a shrug, nudging the wheelchair. "So, you going to just hang out here? Cause if I know those two, they'll be at it for a while. Dusk and Morning never could fly in formation together."

"No... I..." I sighed and laid my head back, looking at the ceiling. "Yeah... I need to see Lacunae. I don't have a clue how I'm going to help her..."

"The big purple pony? She's down the hall, I think," she said as she hooked her tail on the frame and trotted towards the far side of the building.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're not like most Enclave I've met," I said with a little smile.

"Oh you mean the serious, devoted, lightning-rod-up-the-rump attitude?" She glanced back at me and grinned. "Yeah. They were fresh out of rectal rods when it came to me. Cost me some advancement but, eh... Dusk's more hardcore about that anyway. Who needs the stress?"

I stared at her for a moment. I'd almost forgotten what carefree looked like. "I... I envy you." Her brows arched in surprise, and I explained, "You just seem... happy. I used to be like that, but now everything's gotten... weird..."

"You and Dusk..." the yellow mare chuckled. "Well, don't worry about it. Dusk is always a hardass, especially when it comes to Dashites. The only time she actually unwinds is in bed. Usually takes a good licking, too."

I blinked and flushed a little. "You and her?" Glory had mentioned something about being like her sister. Dancer just grinned. "Huh... Is this going to really cause problems for the rest of her family?" The orange pegasus arched a brow, and I elaborated, "I mean Glory being alive... and branded?"

Lightning Dancer rolled her eyes. "Oh, that. I told Dusk to let it go, but of course she just couldn't." She rubbed her chin in thought, "I suppose it's a big deal cause of what happened with her mother."

"Her mother?" I blinked in shock. "What about her mother?"

“Oh, her mom, Dawn, went Dashite ten years ago,” she said calmly. Then she noticed me gaping in amazement. Lightning Dancer cocked her head in confusion. “Hasn’t Morning Glory told you about it?”

“No... she hasn’t...” I said quietly, glancing at the closed door. No yelling. No shooting. I hoped that that was a good sign, “She told me about her father, but...”

“Well, it was one hell of a scandal. It started when Thunderhead was attacked by Pyrebane. He’s the only dragon who actually managed to damage the city. During the fight, both her dad and the dragon fell to the surface. He was found by a surfacer pegasus. She came back with him. Oh, but wasn’t that a load of bad wind!”

“You mean her mom wasn’t Enclave?”

“Nope.” She seemed amused by my surprise, “What? It happens. Sometimes Dashites have foals, or you’ll get a throwback or something. Most of them last long enough to fly up and get hit by a lightning rod.” She gave a shrug, “For the best. This place has so many diseases and mutagens... well, I had to get two dozen shots just to be down here, and I’ll have to be in quarantine for a month before they let me back up top. But he brought her back and threw all his weight around to bend the rules. Once medical cleared her, they got married. The dragon slayer and the surface mare,” she said with a sigh and a shake of her head.

“But she went Dashite?” I asked. Dancer nodded, looking a little uncomfortable. “Why?”

“Well... Dawn was always funny. I mean, she never really fit in with Thunderhead society. She was always talking about how much we could help and telling stories about the surface. Somepony actually took a shot at her at a speech she made at the university. Finally, somepony planted a bomb in their home. Didn’t kill anyone, thank goodness, but soon after that she went back down. Huge disgrace for her family.” She looked over at the closed door with a worried frown. “Hit Dusk hardest, I think, being the eldest. We were both finishing school when her mom left. Councilbuck’s wife going Dashite... it was pretty bad for her family for a while.”

“And Morning Glory?” I asked as we reached the room. Lacunae stood as still as a statue in the corner.

“She was hurt more than angry. I mean, she was just a filly, and suddenly her mom was gone and everypony was calling her dad a traitor. I think she believed in her mom... and Dusk didn’t.”

“And what happened to her mom?”

“It’s a big Wasteland. Who knows?” Lightning Dancer said as she looked at Lacunae closely. “So this is an alicorn, huh? Never seen them around the Hoof before.” She hovered in front of her, frowning. Then she wagged her head back and forth. “Wagabawagawagah!” she said, her tongue flopping back and forth as she rolled her eyes. Then she followed it up with three more goofy faces before her citrine eyes widened. “Wooo. . . she is so out of it.”

“Out of it. . .” I frowned at Lacunae. “Maybe that’s what happened to her. . .”

Lightning Dancer looked at me. “This is a unicorn thing, isn’t it?”

“Something like that,” I muttered, wondering just how I was supposed to do this. “Can you boost me up? I need to touch horns with her.” It was a shot in the dark, but it was the only thing I could think of.

“Isn’t that unicorn foreplay?” She grinned as her tail wrapped around my waist and lifted me up on her back. Her wings lifted to keep me steady as I stretched up and touched my horn to hers. I had no idea if my horn would even work in the middle of burnout, and looking into her empty eyes didn’t build confidence.

Nothing. . . “Come on, Lacunae. . . I know you’re in there. . .” I tried to concentrate, but there wasn’t even a flicker from my horn. There had to be something. . . some way to make a connection. Something that linked us.

Then it came to me. I closed my eyes as our horns touched and began to hum. It’d only been two days ago, but it seemed like forever. Softly I hummed the notes she’d played in Star house. I felt a tingle in my horn, and the world fell away.

oooOOOooo

I stood on a black plain, the ground scoured bare of everything save shiny stone. A gale tore at me in one constant and unending gust. Only the stones provided any respite from the storm that cut at me with every second. The stone itself had been eroded into drawn out spears of glass that shattered with the slightest pressure. In the distance were the black spires of Hoofington. . .

I could hear the screaming from here. I couldn’t tell if it was the wind or something else. Embers were swept along in the gale, but I had no idea what their origins were. Everything was in shades of gray, and I took a look at myself. Instantly, I wished I hadn’t. My body was translucent white, but there were black blotches that seemed to crawl and creep slowly within me.

Okay. Freakiness established. Now. . . where was Lacunae?

I trotted along this hellscape for who knew how long before I spotted them. A tree. A street lamp. A chapel. . . one that I knew.

Slowly, I approached the building, my normal colors returning as I stepped inside. Something was definitely off, though. Things seemed to blur and run together in the corners of my vision and only come in focus when I looked directly at them. The building seemed off, as well: larger and better built than I recalled. It was late, the room lit only by candles and the city glow through the window.

“Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another. Dearest Luna, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another,” a young mare whispered as she sat on a small pillow beside me. She was jet black with a cutie mark of a lit candle. She rocked slowly back and forth, head bowed as she murmured the lines over and over again.

“Lacunae?” I asked softly as I stood beside her. No response. Then I reached down and stopped her rocking. She blinked, then slowly looked up at me. “Psalm?”

“Who are you? You shouldn’t be here. The chapel is closed until the Goddess wishes to return.”

A wind outside made the building rock and creak. “Psalm. . . this isn’t real, is it?”

She shook as she dropped her gaze to her hooves. “Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another. . .” she began again, shaking as she clenched her eyes shut.

I stopped her again, the whole building rocking and groaning from the wind outside. “Psalm. . . you’re the Marauder, Psalm.” She gasped, her eyes going wide. “Macintosh’s Marauders?”

Before my eyes, she aged to the black mare in body armor. She hugged the sniper rifle, bowing her head. “This is my penance.”

“Your penance? For what?”

“For us,” whispered a host around us. I turned my head, and dozens of zebras appeared around us. . . and ponies too. “Why did you kill us, Psalm? Did your Goddess forgive you for our murders?” They whispered in unison. Each one had a perfect ring in their heads and matching holes blown out opposite sides.

“Sweet Celestia, please forgive me. . .” she prayed desperately. I looked at the dead. The zebras I could understand, but why ponies? Why. . . young ponies?

“Psalm. . . what did you do?” I asked softly.

“She took the shot. Pulled the trigger. Ended our lives. She deserves to go to hell. Eternal punishment. Not forgiveness.”

“No!” Psalm cried out as she hugged the rifle tighter. “The Goddess forgave me! The Goddess took me in Unity!”

“The Goddess cut you off! Unworthy! Blood soaked hooves!” wailed the host, “You killed my family. You killed my children! You killed me!” shrieked the undead host around her as the building continued to creek and shake like it was about to come apart.

I stared at Psalm. Doof had been a rapist. Vanity had worked for Goldenblood. What had happened to Psalm after the Marauders split up? Slowly I knelt, reaching out to hold her. “Psalm. . . I know what it’s like to do the wrong thing. I know what it’s like. . . to kill. . . because it’s all you can do. Because you have no choice,” I said softly.

“She had a choice!” roared the slain. “She choice to pull the trigger!”

“F. . . F. . . Forgive me. . . for. . . for I. . .” she stammered softly.

“I do,” I said quietly. “I forgive you.” I pulled the plug. I pushed the button. I knew what it was like to damn myself. For all I knew, Psalm was a monster worse than Deus, but right now she needed my forgiveness. After all, there was no way she could forgive herself.

The room around me turned into glowing yellow embers and whooshed inside me. For a moment, standing on that tortured plain, I knew exactly how much forgiveness she needed. I’d killed forty with the push of one button and four hundred with the push of another.

Psalm had been one hell of a sniper. She’d killed one. . . by. . . one. . .

I looked at the remaining two structures, smelling chlorine and thinking about headshots. Slowly, I approached the second, the street light. Somepony stood beneath it, and as I approached I heard the strange city sounds building. Slowly, the mare came into focus. Her blue hide was a perfect match to P-21’s, but her mane was a pale blue white. She wore a gauzy dress of faintly discolored white lace that drew more attention to her intimate bits than concealed them. And there was shame, empty shame in her soft lavender eyes as she looked at me with a hollow smile. “Hey. . . want to see a trick? Twenty bits.” As I stared at her, her smile trembled at the edges. “I mean. . . fifteen?”

I was completely baffled. “Who are you?”

The question was a knife through her. "I'm... ah... Trixie... cause I can do... you know... tricks..." I supposed the look she was trying for was 'sultry' but delivered 'pathetic.' "Twelve bits? Please?"

Trixie? Who the hay was Trixie? I opened my mouth... reconsidered... then forced a smile. "Sure." I never saw a unicorn look so relieved to earn so little. I'd found that many bits just sorting through the trash.

"Thanks... you... you know... I'm really good... so maybe you might... um... pay more? If I am, I mean?" Somehow, it didn't seem to register that I didn't have any way I might be keeping money on me. Either she couldn't tell in this... memory? Projection?... or she was just really bad at this! She led me to a near by motel just down the street.

"Rent's due, Trixie," the sour lemon buck said without looking up from his television. "Better fuck a gold mine out of her."

I wanted to shoot him right then and there from the shame on her face. But she didn't say a word. No comeback comment. Nothing. From the shame in her eyes, it was clear she was hoping to get a goldmine out of me. So to speak...

The dingy little room had a musty, musky smell to it, and the sole bulb painted everything in amber. Still, there were posters on the wall, aged and delicate things showing a mare on stage while bold letters declared "Behold the Great and Powerful Trixie!" There were pictures of her animating a rope, of summoning a swirling lightning cloud. I looked away from the posters to ask about them.

She was trying to do a striptease... and was so bad at it that I hadn't even noticed. "So... do you like what you see?" She said as she climbed onto the bed. I didn't. I didn't want to have sex with her. I wanted to hug her... but a hug would kill her. Still, I went though the motions with her.

It wasn't good. This wasn't good. No amount of sex should have that many quiet tears.

When we finally gave up and lay there together, she stared at my chest. I stroked her mane; it needed a good washing. "So... um... again? ...baby?" she added as she dared to meet my eye. I killed her with a look. My expression crumpled her like a tin can as she shook. "I'm sorry..." she whispered.

All I could be was kind as Trixie clung to me in that filthy room surrounded by walls of failed dreams. If things had been different... but I stroked her softly. I'd maimed her with my pity. "Not even worth one bit..."

Worthless. I knew that feeling. I knew what it was like to feel undeserving. Unwanted. Unneeded. To think my life amounted to just a legacy of murder and death. I cuddled with this strange mare, wondering who she was. How was she in this nightmare of Lacunae's? I touched my horn to hers. "I don't think you're worthless," I whispered in her ear, kissing her softly. I wanted to take her away from here. Protect her. Prove her wrong and find out about that mare in the pictures.

But I was two hundred years too late...

The room dissolved in a cloud of blue sparks, and I was left on that wind-scoured stone. As they disappeared inside me I felt the slow decay of a mare's life... failure after failure... till all that was left was turning tricks in a dirty motel room. I wondered what had happened to Trixie... Had she died in that place when the bombs fell? No... she must have survived long enough for Unity... somehow. How else could she had been inside Lacunae?

I had self-loathing and self-worthlessness coiled inside me. I looked at the tree with trepidation. What was Lacunae, a toxic angst dump?

As I approached the tree, I saw it wasn't just a tree but some kind of building. I ran my eyes over the sign out front. Ponyville Library? "And the weirdness just keeps on coming..." I said as I took a deep breath and slowly pushed it open.

I would have loved to have seen something bright and clean. Really. But the library looked as if it'd been ransacked. Dozens of books lay in disarray. Some piled in heaps, others scattered and ripped. "Spike? Is that you?" a mare called from the stairs as she walked down with slow, unsteady steps. The middle aged mare levitated a bottle of wine beside her as her purple eyes narrowed, then relaxed. "Oh, good..."

Twilight Sparkle?

Gray shot through her mane in premature aging, and wrinkles were forming creases in her face. She looked... tired. And drunk. "If you're here to check out a book, I'm afraid you're out of luck. EC-102... the book review... all books are to be reviewed for appropriateness to the conduct and well being of Equestria." She scowled at the empty shelves and dirty piles. "I used to love this place..." she said with a scowl before taking a drink from the bottle.

I approached cautiously. "You're... you're Twilight Sparkle."

"The one and only!" she said with a bitter twist of her lips, spreading her hooves wide. "Or a piece of her. The garbage that doesn't matter," she said as she waved

the bottle around the building, “Nice endopsychosilluory projection, huh? I wonder what all this represents? Huh? The loss of my friends? My hypocrisy?” She saw me staring blankly and sighed. “Figures... first pony I get to talk to, and she’s a moron.”

Okay... that stung, but still. Getting pissed at a ‘projection’ wouldn’t help. “Hypocrisy?”

She scowled at me. “Oh, don’t be stupid. I was the biggest hypocrite in Equestria.” She pointed at a picture of herself hanging askew on the wall. “Read! Only it’s kinda hard when I stood by and did nothing to stop Rarity’s Image from sucking every remotely seditious phrase from the shelves of Equestria.” She sighed, took a long pull off the bottle, and stared down at the sloshing contents. “For ten years I did everything I could to try and help ponies. Luna. Fucking Equestria! Everypony except the five ponies who really needed it.” She took another drink and grimaced. “Ugh. . . I’m glad I never actually drank this swill.”

Okay, this was approaching critical levels of ‘huh’? “What do you mean? You mean, you know you’re not. . . well. . . real?”

“I’m a part of a mare who was, and all this is a reflection of that part. That’s all I am. The worst parts,” she said with a twisted little smile, then shook the bottle at me. “Twilight never drank. She should have... but she didn’t. No, she just condemned her friend who was consumed by addiction. Covered for her. Lied for her. Let everypony manipulate her. But she didn’t drink herself.” She set the bottle on the stairs.

“The other parts. . . they didn’t seem to know,” I said as I trotted towards her. “How are you. . . here?”

“It’s called poetic justice,” she said with a snide little laugh. “I’m getting everything I deserve. See, when I failed. . . again and again. . . to win the war for Luna, I got a little bit desperate. We were close to hitting the million mark for pony casualties. . . fuck only knows how many zebras we’d slaughtered. Then Trueblood came to tell me about a highly classified project.”

“Chimera.”

She blinked and smiled, “You know about it? Huh, I didn’t know about it. Goldenblood had shit going on that I couldn’t imagine. It was crude and unfinished. . . but the second I read it, I had the idea: an army of alicorns! Unstoppable! I’d finally accomplish something. I perfected the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion from Chimera’s crude mutagenic gunk.” Her eyes peered at me, “I can see you’ve already had a dose of it yourself.”

“What?” I said as I looked at myself, then at her.

“You call it taint,” she said as she slumped on the stairs. “So even my crowning achievement is a grotesque failure.” I frowned at the naked self pity before me. . . this wasn’t Twilight Sparkle. This was a part of her. The worst part. She looked up at the dirty ceiling. “I found a mare I knew I could manipulate into taking it. See? I’m soooo much better than Rarity. . . I trick mares into being my test subjects rather than use criminals. I located Trixie, who’d just barely clawed her life back together, and gave her an offer she couldn’t refuse. Power. Glory. Fame. I might have thought I was helping her. Really, I was just the final nail in her coffin.”

I thought of the blue mare I’d laid with and couldn’t argue. A mare in that state. . . “So, what happened?”

“Bombs fell. Everypony died,” she said with a shrug. “More specifically, they fell right in the middle of the test. But, good news. . . my potion worked! Trixie got her power. Her glory. Her fame. And, in thanks, she saved us by pulling us all into her. . . one after the next. Glued together in that. . . being. That monster I created.”

I stared at her with a small frown, trying to figure out the pity party. Or was it self pity? “What about Gardens?”

Her eyes stared away and she took a slow pull off the bottle. “Gardens was a dream. I made a few experiments. Got the Restoration Megaspell to work in Tenpony. . . the Arcanum nullification matrix was tricky. . . then there was the contagion devivication spell that had to be added. . .” Then she sighed. “All for nothing. Goldenblood talked me out of it. . . Luna wouldn’t tolerate anything that would suggest she’d failed. So two and a half years of my life wasted. And tens of thousands of ponies while I wasted my time with a pet project that’d never come to pass.”

I stared at her in shock. She really didn’t know! Goldenblood hid the truth from everypony but Spike, and Spike had kept it to protect Twilight Sparkle. “Probably for the best. . .” Twilight muttered, “If I had created it, the Goddess would do everything to make sure it’s destroyed. After all, if alicorns are perfect to survive in the Wasteland, she’d have done all she could to destroy something that could save the wastes. Or worse, she’d have me corrupt it.”

My words died in my throat. Was that true? “It. . . it wasn’t a waste. Maybe. . . maybe someday, somepony could finish it?”

“Yeah. I’m sure that’ll be a mistake, too,” she said with a sniff. “I should have listened to Goldenblood back at the beginning. . . I shouldn’t have been responsible. None

of us should have agreed. We should have found another way. Any other way. Such a mistake. . .” she said as she grit her teeth. “Pinkie Pie. . . why didn’t I stop you? Why didn’t I realize what Fluttershy had done? Why didn’t I keep Rarity from. . . from gutting so many books? One of a kind books. . . ! Why didn’t I do the right thing?!”

Why hadn’t I gone another way? Why hadn’t I convinced Morning Glory to leave Miramare? Why didn’t I leave forty foals alive till somepony could help them? I should have. . . I’m sorry. . .

Regret.

Lacunae was a dump. A place where the Goddess had dumped all the memories and feelings she hadn’t wanted. If Lacunae was going to be separated, why not rid yourself of things you didn’t want to feel?

I trotted to Twilight and did what I did best: I hugged her. “I wish I could tell you more, but your life wasn’t one big mistake. There were better parts to it.” We don’t always see the good we do. “I know you mattered to other ponies... and your friends. It wasn’t all a mistake.”

“I wish that were true,” she murmured softly as everything around us fell away.

The ruined library dissolved in purple motes, flowing inside me. And now more motes were floating from across the blasted landscape towards me, in spite of the wind. They came with the shame, guilt, and angst of broken ponies. The repair pony who neglected his wife and kids till they left him and died in Manehattan. The raider who had let her foals starve to feed herself. The green unicorn twins’ shameful incestuous relationship because neither could love another as much as they loved each other. More and more.

Lacunae: something missing. I’d thought that Lacunae had been a pony who’s memories had been taken away. She wasn’t. She was a collection of the pain and angst of hundreds of ponies. Their shame. Their regret. Their guilt. All collected into one vessel sealed off and tossed into the one place they couldn’t hear. I wondered what such a being would be... stripped of all its misery and doubt. No mistakes. No confusion...

Suddenly, the stories of alicorns abroad being complete monsters made a whole lot more sense.

With that, the motes were gone. “So... now what? Is something supposed to happen? Are we done here? I asked as I turned around to look at the windswept field. For once, I actually wanted the dealer to show up and provided me with a clue.

Instead, I got a mirror?

Slowly, I approached it. Just a simple standing mirror. A bit fancy. Maybe I'd seen it in Blueblood manor.... or maybe it was something from the countless memories inside me. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I trotted towards it. "Okay... horrible mind rape or emotional crush time incoming. Bring it on." I stood before my battered, bloody, bleeding self. "Okay! Bring it on! Evil twin combat? Mind messing? Some horrible self revelation? I can take it."

But... nothing. Just me. White hide. Two bright red eyes. Clean. Goddesses, how long ago had it been since clean was normal and muck, mud, and blood an aberration? Neat security barding. Old normal PipBuck without some damned megaspell program inside it. Happy. Goddesses, I looked so happy! Well fed. No worries but to deal with the next shift and the next game.

I stared at my reflection. Really? What was the point of this? I narrowed my eye, gritting my teeth. "What? I get it! I was an idiot then!" What's your point?" I yelled at myself, then reared up and shoved the mirror back. It shattered... no... not the mirror. Me. And when I looked again, there was the mirror... and there was me...

Bloody, battered me on my weak limbs. My one freakish glowing eye staring back at me. Goddesses... did I look this hurt to everypony? I turned, looking at the bullet hole scars dotting my hide. The ugly splash on my chest. The mar on my face. My hide looked like it was starting to become diseased. I was so dirty that I'd never be clean again; the dirt and blood seemed part of my hide. Mutated limbs bending before my very eyes... like I was turning into some sort of pony leech hybrid. Even my teeth were going yellow; my ribs showing. I didn't even look like a stable pony any more.

"I get it! I suck! I'm dying! What's the fucking point?" I screamed, shoving it over again and seeing myself shatter in bloody bits.

The mirror... I didn't want to look in it now. I was sick of this place. Sick of these mind games. Sick of always being hurt...

The pony in the mirror...

I screamed as I shoved the mirror away, clenching my eyes. I wasn't that. I wasn't going to be that! That pony belonged in a cave! I was going to be dead in six months... a year at the most!

Please... let me be dead...

"You still want to die..." whispered a mare inside me. It sounded like Trixie.

I closed my eye, lifting my head as I fought the despair inside me. Even after Gardens... Even after finding out about Marigold... I didn't want to live if it meant turning into that thing. I was becoming a monster. A bloody, brutalized, beaten monster. The Wasteland was moulding me into another Gorgon or Deus with all the finesse that Sanguine could muster. I fought the sob in my throat. "I'm scared..."

And that was it. Fear. I was afraid. Afraid I'd hurt my friends. Afraid of what I was becoming. Afraid of what would happen to everypony if I died. Better for me to hurry the process along. Fall apart. Push as long and hard as I could before I fell apart for good. Death was easier. I sobbed there in that dark emptiness, ignoring the contents of the mirror as it wept too. "I don't want to die... I don't want to... to become that thing!" I said as I pointed at the mirror with a limp hoof. "I want to live!"

"Then live," Twilight murmured softly inside me. "Live for your friends. Live for Gardens. Live for something you want to live for. Don't make my mistake... Don't live for something you hate."

I sniffed, looking at that thing. It couldn't look back at me. "And... what if..."

There was silence for a moment, and then Psalm said quietly, "That's what friends are for."

I sat there a moment, blubbering like an idiot. The fact that I was going to inevitably die young looked back at me. Twilight's taint was slowly and inevitably transforming me into something monstrous.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered to that thing in the mirror. To those mares inside me.

"There's no shame in fear..."

"The shame is in letting your fear control you."

"You have to keep faith, even when you're afraid."

"You gotta giggle at the ghosties, even when laughing's the last thing you want to do!"

"Don't let being afraid stop you from being awesome!"

"Don't let fear turn you mean and hateful."

"Be honest with yourself. Lying never changed nothing."

"Ante up..."

I finally looked at that thing that was once a happy and healthy mare and sighed, "I'm going to be dead soon... or I'm going to be a monster." And then I smiled a little.

“Well... guess I better make the time count. Now... how do I get out of Lacunae?”

“Just ask...” the mare replied, complete and whole within me. I heard the soft hum. My own humming. And I hummed along with myself. Maybe I was doomed. I was afraid. But I wouldn’t let fear destroy me. I had too much to do.

oooOOOooo

I blinked into Lacunae’s eyes as they focused on my own. She blinked, then looked down at Lightning Dancer holding me up. “Ah...” she said delicately. “I assume that there have been... developments?”

“You could say that,” I said, and the yellow mare nodded and deftly placed me back in the wheelchair. “Thank you, Lacunae.” I said as I settled back, looking up at her with a soft smile. “That last bit... with the mirror. That was you, wasn’t it?”

The alicorn fidgeted a little and gave a sheepish smile. “It only seemed right. You pulled me out of the dark and put me back together again.”

Virtue isn’t something inherent. The Goddess and countless ponies within had shoved their flaws and weaknesses into the equivalent of a closet and created a mare who was gentle and kind, who had learned from her mistakes. Who was better for them. You couldn’t have empathy if you anesthetized yourself to the pain of others.

“You get a horn, and suddenly everything’s all magical and mystical,” Lightning Dancer said with a teasing grin, looking at Lacunae curiously. Clearly, anypony with wings was an okay pony to a pegasus.

“Yup. It’s a great, mysterious world for us horn heads,” I replied with a grin. Lacunae lifted me easily with her horn, adjusting me in the seat. I had to admit, I felt a bit foalish being lifted around like that.

“Well, if you’re done, I’ll go wait for Dusk. She’s probably going to need some cloud-berry wine and a good cry after all this is done,” she said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. “The tougher the mare, the bigger the softie inside.” Deus must have been stuffed with down fluff, then. She trotted off back towards Glory’s room.

“That is a very interesting mare,” Lacunae said softly.

“Ponies keep surprising me,” I agreed with a smile. Then I looked up at her. “I need to find P-21 and Scotch... and Rampage. Push me? My horn isn’t really working right now.” I frowned, screwing up my face. There was a sparkle from the tip, then a zap like the blowing of a light bulb. I rolled my eye, looking at the char barely visible

on the tip of my horn. "Yup. Still not working." I pouted. Stupid little defective horn... hurrmph.

It took a bit of time to find them in the 'School of Literature.' One classroom had been converted into a kitchen. The fare was distinctly basic, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Most of the Eggheads sat around with books, talking about their ideas, problems, and plans. Scotch Tape stared at a Sparkle Cola slowly going flat before her. P-21 read an arcane science book like his life depended on it. Rampage was explaining in exact detail the best way to snap a neck to two horrified looking research mares.

She gets turned into a filly, deals with a tech abomination, has at least three different mares inside her, and goes on without a tick. I owed her a hug. Later. Right now, I pointed at P-21 and Lacunae steered me to his table. He glanced at me, glanced at the alicorn, and returned to reading with a focused stare that implied that either he didn't want to talk or he was trying to levitate it with his earth pony magic. Somehow, I doubted it was the latter.

"I didn't realize it was a problem for you," I said softly.

"Well, given that I didn't tell her, I would have thought you'd have picked up on it. Silly me," he replied in an acid tone.

I supposed I deserved that. "So, why is it a problem?"

He finally looked at me. "Blackjack, what does the word 'father' mean to you?"

I hadn't exactly thought about that. "Well... um... when a buck and a mare love each other very much..." I said lamely, but he clearly wasn't in the mood for jokes. Definitely in grumpy pony mode. "I don't know. I never really thought about it. Textbook told us that they helped mares care for foals back before the incident." And that we didn't need them any more with the breeding queues.

"Well, to me it means 'sperm donor'," he replied flatly.

"I still don't see the problem," I said.

He clearly fought to repress what he wanted to say. Then he said, in low, even tones, "Scotch Tape now thinks of me as family. As her 'father'." He sighed and closed his eyes and he sat back, "Her mother always went on and on about us being a family once we were out of the stable. Living together. Having more children. Love..." He

sighed and rubbed his face. "All I wanted was to escape. Now she expects me to be a 'father' to her... I doubt that she knows what that means either."

"Maybe not," I replied softly. "But here is what I do know. Over the last month, that filly has lost more than you or I. She's lost her home... her mother... and today she lost her innocence. Now, maybe she does have expectations of you that aren't fair, but you are twice her age and she needs all the help she can get. We're all she has in the world!"

"You don't understand," he hissed softly, clenching his eyes shut as he rubbed his face. "I can't be her father... it's... I just can't!" I'd seen that look in his eyes just a few days ago. There was more to this than just unexpected relationships.

"All right, but I hope some day soon you can at least tell her why," I said softly. I wouldn't press further... not right now anyway. I could still see the angry ring around his neck. I nodded for Lacunae to wheel me over to Scotch Tape.

The filly didn't look up from her bottle. "Hey. Rubber hoof brigade, coming through," I said as I wagged my limp limb at her. "Wooga wooga wooga."

She narrowed her eyes, leaning away from me. "You are so weird, Blackjack!"

"I'm trying to get you to smile," I replied,

"I'm not a foal," she said with a huff, returning her gaze to her soda. I glanced at P-21 sitting in the exact same pose. Dear Celestia, their obstinacy was genetic!

I gave her a flat look. "I'll have you know that I have body tackled raiders, Enclave power armor, and monsterponies." Oh, now she was looking at me like I was disturbed. I grinned. "So tackling you and tickling you till you cry probably isn't impossible."

"You wouldn't!" she gasped.

I did, and to hell with everypony who stared like I'd lost my mind! I didn't stop till she was laughing and gasping and begging for mercy. I was laughing, too. And from across the room, I thought I saw a ghost of a smile on P-21's face.

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said softly once she'd caught her breath. "For caring..."

"We all care about you," I said as I shifted and shoved myself into sitting upright against the wall next to the olive filly.

"He doesn't," Scotch Tape said. "He hates me." Three guesses as to who she's talking about, Blackjack...

“P-21 doesn’t hate you. He’s just... he’s just like that. He’s serious about everything,” I said as I gave her a patient smile and brushed her mane out of her teal eyes.

Her smile didn’t last. “I screwed up,” she said softly.

“Come again?”

“In the office?” She reminded me as she stared at her hooves. “I was so scared I just froze up. I think I wet myself a little...”

“Well, it was dangerous...” If it hadn’t been for my clattery leg braces I’d have done it myself.

“Not that,” she said softly, pressing her limbs together. “I saw... it. The monster from the tunnels.” She drew a trembling breath, “There was a heap of scrap in there. Just a pile of junk... but I knew it was going to come alive. It was going to eat me... eat us all. I would have stayed there till I reappeared if some mare hadn’t brushed against me. I nearly got caught anyway....”

She shook, and I put a leg across her shoulders. “I see it all the time. I hear it in the walls.” She pointed at a Sparkle Cola machine in the corner. “I... I think its in there, and any second it’s going to pop out and eat us all.”

“Scotch, it’s gone. I shot it with the strongest gun in Equestria. It’s not coming back,” I said, but I saw she wasn’t convinced.

Triage trotted in and immediately approached me. She had four new leg braces floating beside her. I broke into a wide grin. “Finally! I am so tired of being pushed around like an old gray mare.”

“You also have an appointment, remember?” she said as she buckled the braces onto my limbs. “The professor wants to speak with you.” Funny, she didn’t seem like she was very happy about that. My mane was starting to prickle.

Slowly, I rose to my hooves, waited for my legs to settle in the metal frames. “All right, just let me check on Glory first...”

“I’m afraid that that wasn’t a request,” a buck said from the doorway. The unicorn levitated a bow and arrow, the black arrowhead glowing with an inset talisman. Looming behind him was a massive sentry bot with a white crab painted on the front. A zebra mare bearing a scorpion cutie mark— were they still called cutie marks on zebras?— and carrying a rifle the spitting image of Lancer’s skulked on his left, and a white pegasus mare with two needle rifles on her battle saddle stood to his right. The buck with the arrow glared right at me. “Professor Zodiac will see you. Now.”

Footnote: Level up!

New perk added: Made of Stubbornium – You just don't know when to up and die! When reduced to 25% or fewer hit points, you gain +6 DT and regenerate 2hp/sec till above 25% hit points.

Quest perk added: Magic Bullet (rank 3) – The range of your magic bullet spell has increased by a factor of five.

28. Orientation

“Thanks guys, you’re all great friends too, even when I don’t understand me!”

“What am I afraid of? Seriously? I’ve seen some real fucked-up shit around the Wasteland. I’ve seen foals bought, sold, and rented. I’ve seen monsters tear a pony to pieces. I’ve seen ghouls crawling out of the earth. But, for the most part, I’ve never been afraid of it. I’m usually more ‘oh fuck, this is gonna hurt’, than ‘I’m afraid’.

“You want fear? Fear is being strapped to a table as a permanent lunch for a bunch of cannibals. Knowing they’re going to rip you apart and eat you over. . . and over. . . and over again. Fear is knowing you might spend years or centuries that way, your flesh fueling the nightmare and you helpless to stop it.

“But even that’s nothing. You want real fear? Fear is not knowing. Fear is looking at the future and knowing that something bad is hidden in it. And the greatest fear of all is knowing that the something bad might be you.

“I’d gladly take a dive through a dragon’s digestive tract than face that.”

Okay. Four Zodiacs. One of them was a heavy mech, the zebra probably had dangerous sniping skills, and I anticipated some sort of deadly diversity from the bow-wielder. The pegasus. . . eh, I had nothing. Poisons on the needles? On our side, I was unarmed, my horn wasn’t working, my legs weren’t working, Rampage was a filly, and Scotch, P-21, and Lacunae were unarmed. Well, only one thing to do.

“Rampage! On the zebra! Lacunae, arrows on the big guy! P-21, use whatever you have hidden on the pegasus! Scotch, find Glory! Arrows is mine!” And with a battle cry, I snatched an eating utensil from the table in my teeth and lunged towards the bow-wielding green unicorn.

No pony moved as I flopped on my belly with my mouth set determinedly around my weapon. “Ell chut yer eart oot!” I swore as I swung my head wildly in his general direction. Everypony just stared in shock as I wiggled towards him. Then Triage’s magic enveloped me, and I was lifted into the air and dangled in front of her as if held by the scruff of my neck.

“The Collegiate is the home of the Zodiacs, you half-horned idiot!” the blue medical pony told me firmly and with just a hint of exasperation. “How do you think we get the caps to keep this place running? Trust me, sickly ponies are not cash makers!” I glared at her, my teeth tightening on the the weapon’s handle, and she looked at me a little uneasily. “And take that spoon out of your mouth!”

I spat it right in her face as hard as I could, and the impact distracted her just enough to break her magic’s hold. Lacunae’s purple glow immediately enveloped me, and I threw my arms around Triage’s neck, pressing my horn to her throat. “Now my horn may be... compact, but I bet it’s long enough to hit one of those vein thingies in your neck. And since you saved my life like, three times, it’d be really shitty to kill you, but I’m not going anywhere with them. So. Zodiacs leave. We get our gear. We get Glory if she’s feeling better and... wants to come. Then, and only then, will I meet this professor.” I felt her swallow.

For a tense moment, I hung there, wondering just how big a mess this would be if somepony said ‘no’. Then the security bot said in a tinny mare’s voice, “Please back down, Sagittarius. I believe that Security will come see me now in good faith.” The security bot’s metal head turned towards me. “Correct, Blackjack?”

I glanced up at the indentation my horn was making on the paralyzed Triage and didn’t dare nod. “Sure.”

The green unicorn had an arrow trained right at my eye, but he couldn’t be sure I wouldn’t take Triage with me. Then he nodded once, and the four carefully backed out of the cafeteria. “Go get our things, Rampage. P-21, check on Glory,” I said as I hovered there in Lacunae’s magic. The pair nodded once. If the Zodiacs tried something, they’d have the best chances of surviving and evading. “Got me, Lacunae?”

“Easily. Though I feel obliged to point out that, typically, heroes do not take doctors that have repeatedly saved their lives hostage,” the purple alicorn said wryly. “The Goddess does not know if she should be impressed or disappointed.” Or concerned, but she didn’t add that one out loud.

Triage didn’t say a word till my friends returned. “I couldn’t find Glory,” P-21 informed me as they dumped my gear on the table. “Dusk and the other one are gone too,” he continued, clearly worried about how I’d take this news. To be honest, I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t help Glory myself. Ever since meeting me, her life had been one painful mistake after another. If Dusk could get her back to the Enclave, good.

Wasn’t like I was going to be around much longer anyway.

Now that I had guns, barding, and leg braces, I released Triage. She staggered back, rubbed her throat with her hoof, and stared at me in shock. “You . . . you would have killed me?”

“Dunno. Maybe,” I replied as Lacunae buckled the braces on my limbs. I looked at her shocked and hurt expression and pointed to the scar on my chest. “You see that? Leo Zodiac did that. Aries burned me. Heck, even that Virgo mare used hostages to try and kill me. That’s beside the dozens of ponies I’ve had shooting at me for a bounty! So, having four trot in on me like that was not good. Once my friend was okay, you might have pointed out that I needed to talk to the professor. No problem. Like to meet her. But springing four Zodiacs on me was not a smart move.” Lacunae helped me strap the barding on over my braces. “Be glad that it didn’t go bad.”

“Still. . . I can’t believe that you did that,” Triage muttered, flushing.

I wasn’t feeling very sympathetic at the moment. “In case you didn’t notice, ponies try and kill me a lot. You didn’t take me seriously, so I grabbed what leverage I could.” And you’re a bit of a nag, I added mentally. “Yeah, I help ponies. Yeah, DJ P0N3 thinks I’m a hero. Me? I’m just Blackjack. And I’ll do whatever I have to against any enemy to survive and save my friends.”

Triage actually smiled. “That’s the first sensible thing I think I’ve heard you say.” Getting approval from Triage was certainly a mixed sensation. Sort of like Scalpel telling me ‘good job’.

Armed and armored, the five of us walked out. I might not have been a smart pony, but I was nopony’s fool.

Clearly, my treatment of Triage hadn’t endeared me to the Collegiate, but I was in little mood to worry about that. Finding out these ponies had sent the Zodiacs after my head didn’t endear them to me, and while I was grateful for their doctors saving my life and the lives of my friends, I wasn’t going to roll over for them.

The planetarium was on the northeast corner of the complex, a huge, heavy concrete building topped by a massive dome. The Zodiacs, with the flaming red Aries in her power armor, blue Aquarius colt, and a soft pink unicorn mare, presumably Virgo, wearing a PipBuck were in attendance. I looked at the first Zodiac I’d ever encountered; she looked the same age as Scotch! Back outside Miramare, I hadn’t realized I’d almost shot a filly. I’d been more concerned with the color on my E.F.S.

back then.

As we stepped inside the heavy structure, Scotch Tape balked. “We’re . . . we’re not going underground, are we?” Panic rapidly spread across her features as she looked around the foyer; with the heavy gray walls, it looked a lot like we already were.

“Relax, Scotch,” I said, smiling at her. She didn’t, but she continued with us.

The green unicorn, now without his bow, greeted me with a challenging stare. His eyes took in my weapons; I supposed we’d have to leave them behind to meet this professor. Instead, he looked at Taurus’ rifle. “I heard you killed Gem, Mini, and Taurus,” he said gravely. “Is that true?”

The question took me by surprise. I could still hear Gem pleading to her twin ‘go ghosty.’ “The Reaper Deus killed Taurus. Mini died in an accident. Gem killed herself to kill Deus,” I replied softly. “I would have killed them if I had to. They were after my head, after all.”

“They were after your PipBuck. Sure, they might have been a little . . . intense . . . about getting it, but they weren’t after the bounty,” he explained with a little shrug. “Virgo was the only one after the money; she didn’t understand why you were different from the others. Kid’s a prodigy, but damn thick some times.” He took a deep breath. “We were just wondering. We didn’t know.” With that, he turned and led us up some concrete stairs. We passed a two-century-old display: ‘Explore the constellations! Get your free temporary magic zodiac cutie mark tattoo at the gift shop!’ declared a Twilight Sparkle cutout.

“How can you use fillies and colts to collect bounties?” P-21 asked curiously. Rampage did not look happy about that . . . which was a bit odd to see, considering her current apparent age.

“Because they’re willing and able,” he replied evenly. “We don’t use just anypony, and this place needs caps the same as any settlement. And they work. Any village has colts. Aquarius can blend in, get intelligence, drug drinks. . . kid’s good like that. Gemini was even better getting in and taking down marks. It was a game to those two. Virgo’s more of a special case. She’s a Zodiac because her father’s a Zodiac.” He screwed up his face and added, “Sorta . . .”

He stopped at a pair of double doors. “Okay. Professor is inside. She’s protected, so don’t try and pull something again. She just wants to talk. Alright?”

“I can do talking. I like talking,” I said with a smile. See? Blackjack being the calm,

civilized pony. Sagittarius didn't look particularly convinced.

The door opened into an immense, domed chamber. I immediately thought of the Reapers' Arena, though this room was still far smaller than that immense space. A dozen tiers ran around the perimeter of the room; some still had black floor cushions scattered on them, but most of them had been removed for the rest of the junk that occupied the space. In the center rose a massive black piece of equipment studded with hundreds of gemstones that twinkled brightly; a large metal cylinder stood next to it. Cables snaked all over the place, and I spotted several pieces of what looked like Sand Dog bionics. Countless robots, ranging from securiponies to sentry bots, stood silently on the tiers and around the edge of the central floor, and, in my amber night vision, I thought I could see a telltale stealth ripple next to one of them.

"I love this part," Rampage muttered to Scotch Tape. The olive filly shrank away from all of the mechanical devices surrounding us, chewing on her bottom lip and fidgeting with her goggles.

The lights suddenly dimmed, and the massive machine in the center lit up and slowly rose into the air. From the countless gems emerged a million points of light that splashed against the great dome overhead and formed slowly into a starry sky. Unlike the arena's enchanted ceiling, this projection looked... deeper. Still, I couldn't help but feel these little motes to be somewhat lame; they just didn't match up to those tiny lights I'd seen in Maripony's memory.

Wait a minute... The stars were moving, slowly, then flying off the ceiling and drawing together into an immense glowing unicorn head floating in the air above the central machine and staring down at us! A booming voice echoed throughout the chamber. "I am the great and powerful Professor Zodiac! Mistress of the Mechanical! Lorekeeper of Legend! Look upon me and tremble!"

Scotch Tape gave a little shriek and dove under me, shaking as she hugged my hoof. P-21 kept backing up towards the door. Lacunae was staring at the image in mild confusion. Rampage, however, just grinned as she looked up at the starry head. I looked down at Scotch and scowled, then levitating out my shotgun and turned back to the floating head.

"Yeah? Well I'm Blackjack the tired and annoyed! So turn down the volume and turn up the lights before I start sharing my bad day!" I bellowed up at her as I racked a round into the chamber.

She blinked in shock, and then the stars almost instantly scattered back into their original positions. The room lights came up a bit, the volume dropped to a normal

level, and from the device in the center flickered rainbow beams. They formed into a middle-aged, normal-sized silver mare with glowing white eyes who scowled at Rampage. “You told her, didn’t you?” There was something... off... about her, though, besides her being a glowing, translucent projection. Was it her face? Her tail? She looked... just odd, somehow.

Rampage fell back, laughing. “I didn’t say a word. I knew Blackjack wouldn’t fall for the great floaty head of doom routine, Zodiac. That’s fifty caps you owe me!” The ghostly mare snorted, and one of the securiponies trotted over to Rampage. A little door opened up, and out tumbled a hoofful of caps. “Here, hold on to these for me, Blackjack,” she said as she dumped them in my bags. I noted that my PipBuck counted only forty-five caps.

The flickering, ghostly silver mare looked at me and snorted softly. “Fine. Again, without the showmareship. I’m Professor Zodiac, head of the Collegiate. I was hoping to talk to you earlier, but you just trotted right out of here. Wanted a word before you left again.”

“About what?” I asked sullenly, suspicious of flashy ponies wanting things from me. And I just knew it had to be something to do with the program in my PipBuck.

“Your bill,” she replied. “We utilized a considerable amount of our limited supplies, time, and resources to restore you and your friends... you in particular,” she said with a grin, pointing a hoof at me, “More than we would have for anypony else. Certainly more than we would have for free.”

“I... I...” I blinked and considered the caps we’d amassed. “How much do you want? I think I can swing a few thousand...”

“Oh, you used enough healing materials to well-exceed that. One trip through the booth costs five thousand caps. So, I think we’re looking at... for the five of you treated... and you, two additional times... plus surgery... healing potions... rejuvenation talismans... time... eh... fifty thousand caps!” she said with a grin. “Rounded down.”

My mouth worked silently. Suddenly, I felt like I was back at Megamart with Deus putting a price on my head. “Fifty... fifty thousand...”

“Oh yes. And that’s not counting hospital time for your friends...” she said as she rubbed her hooves together. “But! I am happy to waive that fee and all future uses of our medical facilities... in exchange for EC-1101.”

I felt my head spin. “What? What do you want it for? Project Chimera?” Of course!

With that, she could make all kinds of freaky new pony-things to use as bounty hunters.

“Project Chimera? You know about that?” She was momentarily surprised, but then laughed. “What do I look like, a Canterlot ghoul with delusions of grandeur? Don’t be ridiculous.” She shook her head in amusement. “I’m interested in an entirely different Project,” she said, then looked at me levelly. “I want Project Steelpony unsealed.”

“Ah. . . excuse me. Question!” Rampage said as she waved her hoof over her head. “What the heck are Project Chimera and Project Steelpony?”

P-21 nodded grimly. “Yeah, I’d kinda like to know that as well.” Lacunae nodded primly, and even Scotch Tape seemed to overcome her worry to look at the glowing unicorn questioningly.

Professor Zodiac smiled smugly and opened her mouth. “They,” I said, “were secret projects during the war. Project Chimera made Gorgon from a pony named Stonewing and a cockatrice. Project Steelpony made Deus. He was originally a soldier named Doof who was convicted of raping a squadmate.” Four pairs of eyes stared at me in shock. Professor Zodiac’s expression, though, was more intrigued.

“There are perhaps three or four ponies outside this room who know that information,” she murmured softly.

My friends were a little less sanguine about it. “You mean you know who made Deus?” P-21 shouted, then waved a hoof at the ghostly pony, “And she wants to be able to make more of him?”

“Gorgon was one of the few Reapers I liked! What do you mean he was made that way? Who? How? Why?!” Rampage demanded as she grabbed my head to look me in the eye.

“Was that monster in the tunnels from that Project stuff?” Scotch Tape asked as she tugged at my leg.

“The Goddess wishes an immediate explanation, Blackjack! How is it that you came by this information?” Lacunae said imperiously and in full Goddess mode, despite her expression of discomfort.

I looked from one to the next, my head spinning. “Well. . . I. . . I must have told you! I mean. . . didn’t I?” I looked from one to the next. “I mean. . . I’ve told you about Goldenblood. The O.I.A.?”

“You never told me you found out what Chimera was,” P-21 said with a scowl. “And the only time I’ve heard you mention Goldenblood was when you told me he was up to something. I thought you were referring to Sanguine, but you were so focused on helping Glory I didn’t press you.”

Zodiac chuckled softly. “Well, Security. It looks like you’ve got some explaining to do. But, first things first. Now, as I was saying, I can take all debt and worry off your hooves in exchange for EC-1101.” A robot approached, two mechanical arms ending in PipBuck removal keys.

I was so overwhelmed that I landed firmly on my butt. My friends were pissed with me... and now I owed more caps than I could even imagine! I wanted to scream! I wanted to hand it over, along with all my questions, worries, and annoyances. Just then, I wanted to give it all up to a pony who actually seemed to have a clue about what to do with the damned thing. Take my PipBuck. Enjoy! I was toast anyway. Take this damned weight from off my hoof and do something better than trot all over a damned city with it.

Then a clear, wonderful voice shouted over the babble. “Blackjack doesn’t owe you anything!” I turned and stared at the sight of Glory looking more beautiful and radiant than I’d ever imagined, even with one wing replaced by a dull nub. She looked at me with her brilliant purple eyes and gave me a smile that made me want to melt in her embrace then and there.

Zodiac frowned at Glory. “Excuse me, but we spent serious money on you and your friends. . . .”

“Did Blackjack agree to assume these debts?” Glory asked sharply, pointing her wingtip at the flickering pony projection.

“Of course not, she was unconscious. But Rampage. . . .” Zodiac began, but Glory cut her off with a magnificent sweep of her wing.

“Did Blackjack ever say that Rampage spoke for her and the rest of us? You might want to collect your fifty thousand caps from her.”

Rampage blinked, then the striped filly suddenly grinned. “Sure! I got fifty caps on me. I’ll pay the rest later.” Zodiac looked like she’d swallowed a shot of The Price...well, like Rampage did when she’d swallowed a shot of The Price. Rampage nudged me. “Hey, Blackjack? Can I get my fifty caps back?”

Glory stepped past us to slowly walk back and forth in front of the projection. “Not once did Blackjack agree to pay you anything. Not once, I bet, did you ask her, or

even mention that you were going to want her to pay for it. You spent all that material before telling her so that you could spring all of it on her at once and guilt EC-1101 out of her.” My jaw dropped as I stared at the shimmering mare. And it had almost worked!

Zodiac looked pissed for a moment, then finally slumped. “Okay. I admit it. I was hoping to get her to pass it to me and leave and be grateful.”

“But you had me unconscious for hours. Why didn’t you just take it?” I asked as I rose and stepped forward next to Glory.

The professor rolled her eyes. “Blackjack, do you know how much success any-pony’s had at taking anything from you? Your PipBuck? Your life? Your friends? Heck, you’ve faced half the Zodiacs and lived! If I were Sanguine, I’d be living in constant terror of the day you finally track him down!” She sighed. “I hoped that, if I just convinced you to give it up, you’d move on. No harm, no foul.”

P-21 stepped next to me. “Well, then, if you don’t mind... right now, I think we’d all love to hear everything Blackjack knows about... everything,” he said, looking a little bit hurt. “Along with an explanation of why she didn’t tell us sooner.” Oooh, there was fifty thousand caps worth of guilt right there in his expression. I hung my head and sighed.

Everything I knew... well, that wouldn’t take long. “It’s not like I was trying to deceive you or keep it from you. It just... snuck up on me,” I said as I took a seat, rubbing my striped mane. Glory sat down next to me, stretching her wing across my shoulders, and the others sat in a circle around me. I sighed as I was gently pulled against her. Smelled her sweet hide. Heard the faint beat of her heart. Okay, I could do this. “Well... I guess I should start with a pony named Goldenblood...”

“How do I feel about Blackjack? Do... do I have to answer? Okay... she’s... she’s not going to hear this, is she? Cause... you know... I don’t want to say anything bad. Okay..

“Blackjack is... scary. I don’t really mean that I’m scared of her. I mean... I am. A little. But I know she’s not a bad pony. She cares. But Blackjack... I think she’s a little bit crazy. She left the stable, which was crazy. She came back, which was crazy. She killed everypony... which was crazy. And I think, if she was given the choice, she’d do all three again. And that makes her crazy scary.

“So, I know if something bad happens, she’s not going to do what’s smart. She doesn’t think about things like that. She just does things and hopes that they work out. And sometimes they do. And sometimes they don’t. . . but no matter what, she’s going to do something. She just doesn’t hang back and think. She goes. . . and if what she does is crazy, then it’s better than just standing around doing nothing.

“I mean. . . she said she wet the bed. . . I mean. . . really? Heh. . . Thanks, Blackjack. . .”

A few hours later, their questions for me were exhausted, as was I. I’d told them every bit I could think of about Goldenblood, the O.I.A., and the Projects. The only things I omitted were Gardens of Equestria and Spike. The Professor, using more robots, had brought drinks and snacks, playing the part of the contrite host. My friends’ reactions varied from worried, to baffled, to suspicious, to bored, to angry. I never expected Lacunae to be the angry one. “That. . . that fiend. That plotter! That. . . ooh. . . the Goddess does not want to hear any more!”

“But how could the O.I.A. pull off such a widespread deception?” P-21 asked. “Didn’t anypony think to check what he was up to?”

The Professor chuckled softly. “Oh, Goldenblood was a sneaky bastard, but, really, back then, most ponies didn’t think about things like that. They were used to a thousand years of Celestia running things. Celestia was always open and honest. Luna’s government was as different as night from day, using deception and obfuscation to keep ponies confused and obedient. And Goldenblood knew all the loopholes, tricks, and intricacies. After all, he helped Luna set them up.” She rubbed her ghostly chin. “And I suspect that Luna herself enjoyed the games on some level.”

“But you can’t tell me the Ministry Mares were okay with that!” Glory protested as I slumped against her shoulder. Had she always smelled this good?

The Professor shrugged. “They were used to working for Celestia too. They expected straightforward deals from their ruler. Friendship. Trust.” She sighed and shook her head. “Luna respected the Ministry Mares and their capabilities, but. . . really, I was always shocked they were sucked in as readily as they were. They really seemed to believe Luna was their friend. I doubt that the Princess ever had a real friend.”

I looked at the shimmering projection, the others followed my gaze, and then P-21 asked the questions on all our minds. “What are you, and how do you know all this?”

The shimmering image seemed to consider him before responding. "I am Professor Zodiac. What you're looking at is a arcane projection. A nice little modification of the planetarium system developed by Flash Industries. It's a pleasant way for me to have conversations with ponies." She gave a little shudder I nearly missed. "As for how I know... well... I was there two hundred years ago." She looked right into my eyes and gave an apologetic little smile. "I was one of the research leads of the Office of Interministry Affairs."

We'd had to take a little break. My brain was reeling. Here was a pony who'd tried to trick me out of EC-1101 and who'd actually known Goldenblood. Who'd worked under him. Who possibly had answers to all my questions. Glory and I'd gone up to the roof; I stayed in the doorway while she took in some air. Scotch Tape had finally left with Rampage; the machinery clearly scared her to death. She wasn't over the tunnels yet. Lacunae had walked off, still talking to herself in the plural and apparently very put out with Goldenblood; I wondered if she knew I could hear her faint telepathic babble. P-21 skulked off to be on his own.

"How are you feeling?" I asked softly.

She glanced over her shoulder at her missing wing for a moment, then immediately lowered her gaze to my hooves. "Grounded... but better." She looked at me, and her smile returned. Goddesses, she was so beautiful. "You actually tracked down my sister to help me?" she said, cocking her brow at me.

"It was all I could think of..." I said lamely, tapping my rubbery hooves together.

She gave me a wry smile. "You realize that Dusk and I hate each other, right? I think she spent more time shouting at me and comparing me to mom than comforting me." I winced, but she smiled. "It was the kick to the rump I needed. Thank you."

"I knew... I knew I couldn't help you." She looked at me more sympathetically as I went on. "I cost you your wing. I cost you everything. All I've done is hurt you, Glory." I said with a sniff, feeling myself start to shake.

And then she was hugging me. Holding me. I took a deep breath to try and steady myself, feeling her feathers, so soft on my cheek. "You saved my life, Blackjack. Again and again. I don't blame you for my wing." She drew back enough to look me in the eye and smiled. "Not telling me about Goldenblood and the projects, though..."

"I'm sorry," I repeated for the twentieth time. "I really didn't mean to keep it from any

of you. It wasn't a big secret. It wasn't a big deal at first. Just... sorta cool, secret stuff. Stuff that happened two centuries ago. But then I found out about Chimera and the other Projects... saw Goldenblood's memories... It all sort of built up around me."

"Well," she said, relaxing a little bit, "I think that Lacunae is even more upset. I think you managed to offend the Goddess big time by not mentioning that Sanguine has Chimera." Then Glory looked me in the eye, stroking my cheek under my eye patch. "And how are you doing?"

"Me?" I felt a cold shiver along my spine and lied with every bit of effort I could. "Fine. Never better. Just great. They fixed me up swell..." I felt my grin become so tense that it felt like it'd snap. She looked at me like she was about to cry. Finally, I slumped. "You know, huh?"

"I was there for part of the procedure... while they had you open..." Glory said softly.

"Oh." I sighed softly, hanging my head a little. "And do I really look that bad inside?"

"You really do," Glory said softly as she stroked my cheek. "Your organs are in bad shape, Blackjack... Triage told you?" Clearly, she shouldn't have, from the look on Glory's face.

I grinned. "Oh... about the whole six months thing? Pppfft. Never tell me the odds," I said as I grinned back at her. "I'm sure I can pull off... like... a year..." I was grinning, right? "No big... big deal..." Smile, damn it! Damn it... my head slowly bowed as I started to shake again. She put her hooves around me as I pressed my face to her chest as the sob broke out all at once as the inexplicable truth crashed through me: I was going to die.

I was going to die! Without Glory's suffering and the Zodiacs and the Professor to distract me, there was nothing I could do to avoid facing it. The taint inside me was going to twist my body up more and more until finally something critical failed. Better if I blew my brains out now while I was still whole and 'healthy.' Better if Red Eye's slavers had killed me! I could almost feel my insides churning up, my sick and diseased heart beating slowly. My braces clacked as I hugged her close and sobbed against her again and again. I hated it... hated these tears... but I couldn't... stop...

"It's... It's not fair..." I gasped. I shook with each new spasm of tears. "I... I wanted to save mom... I wanted to save Midnight... and... and everypony in 99.

I wanted to save you. Have kids some day. Have a . . . have a life! I found something to live for, damn it!" I said, my voice hoarse and choking as snot and tears seemed to flow equally. "And now . . . now I'm just . . . just going to die?! Why the fuck is this happening to me? What the fuck does it take for me to get a fucking break? To have something fucking good happen? Anything!" I yelled into her chest. "I'm sick of it!"

I used to think that there was a bottom to tears. That eventually you just couldn't cry anymore and then you'd feel better. But now I knew better. Whatever strength I'd shown facing the Zodiacs was a lie. My confidence was a front. I was going to die . . . and it was going to be a bad death. And, like that, I was falling into a pit from which there was no escape.

Then I felt Glory's tears falling on the back of my head. "I'm sorry . . ." she whispered softly in my ear. "I'm sorry I can't help you. I wish there was somepony in the Wasteland I could find to help you."

I closed my eye. What was I doing? How could I be crying and pitying myself like this now? It wasn't fair? No, it wasn't fucking fair. It wasn't fair that Glory had lost her wing. It wasn't fair that P-21 had been raped. It wasn't fair that Scotch Tape was an orphan, that Lacunae was the dumpster for a Goddess's insecurities, or that Rampage had been denied her own identity. None of it was fucking fair!

Am I trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty, whiny ponies in the Wasteland? Maybe. Despite everything, I finally put a lid over that pit inside me. Right now, Glory needed me to be strong. I sucked at being strong, but for her, somehow, I pulled myself together and wiped the tears from my eye to look at her.

"You do, Glory. Every second I'm with you, you make things better. Make them easier. I couldn't do this without you," I said as I looked into her eyes. Our brows touched.

Our lips did the same. Sweet Celestia, how I missed this.

I was going to die, but at least I wouldn't be dying alone.

"Sooo, am I forgiven?" I asked as we trotted back down to the planetarium.

She smiled. "Dusk may be an infuriating mare who tried to kill me, but she said that anypony who'd do what you did after the stable shouldn't be touched with a ten foot cloud . . . unless she did what you did when you found out how hurt I was." She gave my rump a nudge with hers. "Then you should probably get another chance." She

had a weird little smile. . . and why was she blushing?

“I always liked Dusk, you know?” I said as trotted along, my braces clattering.

“She also said that you were a terrorist and an idiot and would probably get me killed,” Glory added.

I cocked my head, thinking about that for a moment. “Mmmm, nope! Still like her.” I glanced at her and, of course, risked injecting a cloud into the discussion. “Did she have any news from Thunderhead?”

Glory sighed and nodded. “Yes. Most of it mixed. Dad refused to resign, challenging my ‘confession’. I’m MIA at the moment, since my ‘remains’ couldn’t be magically analyzed. So, technically, there’s a warrant out on me. Lambent and Lucent were both pretty upset by it all.” She looked at me and asked in concern, “Do you know anything about a surface pony named Red Eye?”

“I know he took over Paradise. Apparently, the Stable Dweller is fighting him.” I had images of magical unicorn power armor striding around firing death beams from its horn. Pzow! Pzow!

“Well, he’s got the rest of the Enclave stirred up. And, apparently, they’re very upset with Thunderhead. They’re blaming the Volunteer Corps for drawing attention. And I suppose they have a point,” Glory said with a sigh. “Even though DJ P0N3 barely mentions us at all, most ponies wouldn’t even think of us if it wasn’t for the Volunteer Corps.”

“The Volunteer Corps is also pretty much the only good thing I’ve heard about pegasi doing since the war,” I said softly as I bumped her rump back.

She gave a pleased little smile. “Well, the rest of the Enclave is using it as an excuse to demand all sorts of things from us. They want new energy weapons, new talismans, and a larger food reserve built up in Neighvarro. And they want the VC ended, never mind that our food trade is how we’re getting the materials for weapons, gemstones for talismans, and new food.”

I didn’t like the thought of the Enclave getting more weapons, but I was more surprised by that last bit of news. “The pegasi are importing food? From the surface?” I blinked in shock.

Glory smirked at me. “Believe it or not, that’s one of the major selling points of the VC. The fact is that only a few surface crops were adaptable to cloud seeding. It gives us basic staples but lacks something in the way of variety. Have you ever tasted a strawberry?” I shook my head, and she gave a shiver. “Well, neither had

anypony in Thunderhead. Dad won a major vote to get the VC more assistance from the security forces after passing out a dozen cartons. And there was nearly a riot when blueberry samples were provided.”

“A riot? For berries?” I muttered, stunned.

“Oh, yes. Cloud grain may be nutritious, but it’s hardly tasty,” she said with a laugh. “Folks were so amazed by the flavor that now anything with the word ‘berry’ in the name is classified as a controlled substance. So, despite all the stories of death and disease, VC recruitment numbers haven’t dropped off as much as some anticipated.”

“They do know that the Society is probably the only place in Equestria where you can find berries, period, right?”

“I think that they gloss over that point in the interview. But the public consensus seems to be changing to the surface being worth something rather than just being death, misery, and violence. That’s leading to some major gusts of foul air with the rest of the Enclave, though; the VC period is bad enough, but anything good about the surface... I guess the science and political broadcasts are having a sunny day bashing Thunderhead right and left. Criticizing our independence and our willingness to break tradition.” She actually sounded proud of that. Despite the fact that I still wanted to buck Lighthooves to the stars, Glory made Thunderhead sound like the Blackjack of the Enclave.

They were doomed. . .

Once we’d all gotten back inside the planetarium, Professor Zodiac shimmered into being before us as the robots cleared away some of the junk and brought over cushions from the seats. “Sorry. Normally I don’t have visitors. They come, are awed, and run off.”

“Sorry for being so jaded,” I replied as I settled down. Braces might let me walk, but they were a long way from comfortable.

The silvery projection laughed brightly. “Oh, don’t be. Aside from my Zodiacs, I never have as much company as I’d like.”

P-21 looked towards the door. “What is your deal with them? Is it like a Reaper thing?”

“No. Honestly, it’s more like the Zodiacs’ have a deal with me than the other way around,” the Professor replied softly. “Many ponies have come through here for help. We do what we can, take what payment they can make, and send them on their way. A few, however, stay. The Zodiacs are twelve ponies who see themselves as. . . I don’t know? Knights, I suppose. While their activities abroad are as bounty hunters, bringing in caps we need, here they protect the Collegiate. This is their castle and I’m their princess. I don’t command them, though.”

Zodiac Knights. “So, then, why’d they come after me?” I asked with a little frown.

She gestured at my hoof. “Because I needed your PipBuck. Virgo thought you were just another exceptionally large bounty. Oh, and thank you very much for not killing her,” she added quickly. “The others were hoping to get it from you one way or another. They actually turned it into a bit of a contest till I told them to cut it out.”

I sighed as I settled in on my cushion. “So. What’s your story?” P-21 asked.

Professor Zodiac sighed and looked around at the walls wistfully. “Well, originally my name was Silver Stripe, and I was a professor of engineering and arcane science here at Hoofington University.” Suddenly, the Professor’s image dissolved and the air overhead filled with dancing lights that coalesced into a moving image of a lecture hall. The view seemed to be from a camera set in the corner of the room. A white unicorn mare with gray zebra-like stripes on her legs and mane was writing on one of the boards at the front of the hall with a piece of chalk. She finished writing a line of weird mathy stuff, put the chalk down, and sighed.

“There. Well, I hope that you’ve found my lessons useful. The university will see to getting you an acceptable instructor for this class by next week,” she said, turning to a lecture hall that was virtually empty but for a dozen students. They didn’t seem to be paying much attention, either, and most of them shuffled out immediately. A few gave her commiserative farewells though, and one even offered a comforting hug. The professor maintained her composure as she said her goodbyes and put her notes into a saddlebag but slumped after the last student had exited.

“So sorry you lost your tenure, Professor Silver Stripe,” a rasping voice said. A soft cough followed the words as the voice’s owner walked down from the back of the lecture hall. I pointed him out, and my friends murmured softly as the scarred buck approached the mare in the picture. “I suppose that the Board of Regents felt a halfblood to be a complication in the present climate,” Goldenblood said in his raspy, rusty-nails voice. He looked like hell, even worse than at the Gala; his pale hide looked raw, as if it were flaking off.

She flushed, narrowing her eyes. “Yes, no thanks to you and your grand speech! The ministries have made it abundantly clear that a zony like myself is a liability to the war effort and tantamount to a spy,” He hacked sharply, sitting and bowing his head, and she softened a little. “Are you all right?”

“There’re apparently several ponies in the ministry of Peace answering that question. I’ll be fine in a moment,” he said, catching his breath. The scarred buck then leveled his golden eyes at her once more. “I sympathize with your predicament, Professor. Nopony, or zony, should be discriminated against for their lineage. I have some personal experience in that regard.” And, more and more, I saw her relax.

“Well, regardless, the Ministries have made it abundantly clear I am not trustworthy,” she said as she slipped on her saddlebags. “So, whatever it is you desire of me, I can assure you the ministries will not approve.”

“Your father is Doctor Propos at the Roam Academy of Sciences and a part of the Caesar’s cabinet. Your mother is the aunt of a ministry mare. The suspicions of the ministries are unfortunate but not unreasonable,” he said in his soft, raspy voice. It made Silver Stripes lean towards him a little. “However, I am not here on behalf of the ministries. I am here looking to recruit you for an alternative program of my own. And, I assure you, I could not care less about your lineage.”

The image scattered, and the shining projection returned. “That was my first meeting with Goldenblood. I’m sure you noticed his timing; approaching me right at the end of my last lecture?” she said as she arched a brow. “How he pointed out that his own lineage had been used against him? That was classic Goldenblood to a T. He got me involved in the Office of Interministry Affairs as a science advisor.”

“You were a zony?” Scotch Tape asked, drawing a slightly annoyed look from the projection.

“Even after two centuries...” she muttered, then sighed. “Yes. My father was a zebra. My mother was a pony. Hence, zony. The only consequence of it should have been an inability to have children, but it was used against me from the start of the war until the burning of Hoofington. I didn’t have any loyalties to my father’s people, even when Equestria was making it so hard to be a productive member of society, but ponies just saw the stripes. Goldenblood really didn’t care, though; I honestly can’t remember a single instance of my background being used against me at the O.I.A.”

“But... what did the O.I.A. actually do?” Glory asked with a little frown. “I mean, Blackjack said that they were supposed to facilitate projects between the ministries.

How did you get from that to . . . making Deus?”

“Luna’s government was nothing like Celestia’s, but few ponies truly appreciated how radical it was. On the surface, the ministries handled most the functions of government, and the rest were covered by Luna herself or the civil service. But in the shadows was the O.I.A. It did what it was supposed to do, let the ministries work together on projects more easily, but it also got things done that couldn’t have been done otherwise. Sometimes the ministry mares would have a project that simply couldn’t be done in public view. Monsterponies? Extensive cybernetics? The public couldn’t handle it. So, the O.I.A., ignored by or unknown to the public, was tasked with developing these projects in the shadows to their fruition.” She gestured to herself. “I was involved with some of the technical aspects of Project Steelpony and Project Eternity.”

“And Sanguine? He supervised Project Chimera?” Lacunae asked, sounding like she already knew and just wanted confirmation. “I thought it’d been destroyed. . .”

“Yes. And Trottenheimer handled everything to do with Project Starfall and Project Horizons.” She rubbed her chin, then waved a glowing hoof. “Don’t ask me about specifics of the other Projects, though. Goldenblood was very adamant about keeping information contained in each Project, and I only know the most basic information about the ones I wasn’t working on.”

“So what was Project Steelpony?” I asked.

The air above her flashed into a still image of a hospital ward full of ponies with missing limbs. Fluttershy and Redheart were looking over them with aching concern in their eyes. “Like Chimera, Steelpony got started in the Ministry of Peace. Despite the MoP pushing healing magic to its limits, ten years had disabled thousands of combat and non-combat ponies.” The image changed to a mare swinging a silvery foreleg and hoof. “Originally, we focused on prosthetics. Making them resilient, adaptable, and as effective as the missing limb.” Then images of diamond dogs getting their limbs replaced filled the air. “Eventually, most of the research was done in Hoofington. Reconstruction and the battlefield gave us a constant supply of needy test subjects.

“Then we had soldiers wounded in battle who returned to the war and found themselves more effective than before.” The overhead image showed steel-legged ponies smashing zebra soldiers in brutal hoof to hoof combat. “Suddenly, the emphasis of Steelpony wasn’t just replacement but augmentation. But that pushed things further than Fluttershy or Applejack were comfortable with. It’s one thing to want to protect

ponies; it's another to turn a pony into a war machine." The image overhead showed Applejack and Fluttershy shaking their heads gravely at a solemn Goldenblood and frustrated-looking Silver Stripe.

The image disappeared, and Professor Zodiac grinned at us. "So we continued it anyway."

"You what?" P-21 blurted. "How?! I mean... it had to take money and materials and...somepony should have caught on."

The professor shrugged. "Goldenblood was related to royalty. He never had problems paying for materials. I don't know where the money came from, but he always paid his bills on time." I frowned; had Goldenblood been fantastically wealthy in addition to a sneaky bastard? Could even a fantastically wealthy pony's money have covered all of the O.I.A.'s secret expenses?

Zodiac seemed to take our silence as a cue to continue. "It was thought that, if we introduced the augmentations gradually, the ministries would accept them. We started with animals before working up to non-pony sophonts and then ponies themselves. Doof was our first fully augmented battle model. And he exceeded our wildest dreams."

Another moving image took shape overhead, this one showing Deus being dropped, literally, from a skywagon onto an enemy tank. He landed like a multi-ton cat, smashing an indentation in the turret's armor, and proceeded to blow apart the enemy lines. Some of the zebra hoof-fighters inflicted considerable blows in his armor, but they repaired themselves before my eyes. Heavy weapons tried to blow him apart, but he was either too tough or too fast for them. Eventually, the zebras scattered. I suppressed a shudder; if it hadn't been for all the munitions blowing up in his guns, could we have ever beaten him?

Then he started raping the survivors; Glory snapped her wing in front of Scotch's eyes, in time I hoped, and immediately after that the image scattered. The Professor coughed delicately. "Sorry about that. We determined we had to leave some parts of him intact for psychological reasons. Other test subjects became so listless and apathetic after conversion that they just lay there till deactivated." Funny. She said 'deactivated' like I would have said 'retired' not long ago.

"So what happened?" Rampage asked. "Balefire bombs fell, everypony died?"

She shook her head with a sigh. "Nearly, but not quite. Towards the end, the O.I.A. went too far. Goldenblood did something that pissed off Luna... immensely. She

removed him and put Horse in charge, but the fact was most of us were loyal to Goldenblood. That tick Trueblood was the only one who sucked up to Horse. And Goldenblood had made damn sure that all of us were integral to the O.I.A. Horse wanted to fire all of us, but he wouldn't have had an O.I.A. left. If he'd had a year, he would have cleaned us out and put his own ponies in charge. But as fate would have it. . .” She made a gesture.

The next moving image that shimmered into being was of a city. A massive city far larger than even Hoofington. Balloons of. . . Pinkie Pie?... floated in the air as if looking for naughty ponies. It looked like a perfectly calm, blue-skies day around noon. Normal. Like life was supposed to be. The viewer was standing in a posh café far up in a fancy building.

I glanced at my friends as they stared up at the image of life before the bombs. I was the only one among us, with the possible exception of Lacunae, who'd really seen it before...well, if you counted memory orbs. Scotch seemed astonished at the sight. P-21 looked more pensive. Glory's expression was mixed, but then, she'd grown up in a civilized world with a view of the sky. Rampage... well, clearly not all Wasteland ponies were interested in old times, as she was picking at her nose with a hoof. Lacunae appeared coolly indifferent, even a touch scornful; after all, what place would she have in such a world? Me? It looked... nice.

Then a second, smaller sun burst to life low in the sky. A roiling, green sun with a garish rainbow sheen that clawed at the eyes. All around, ponies began talking in worried tones. More murmurs, almost curious rather than worried. A purple field rose up over every window. Directly in front of us was a large pink building...I wondered if the architect had intended it to kinda resemble a—

In a horrible flash of stabbing light, it was transformed into a black silhouette. From behind it rose a dome of fire expanding in all directions. It flowed like water between the skyscrapers and along the narrow streets. Moving like a living, hungry thing, it probed and poked and crept around every building till they were all aflame. Some buildings it shoved over entirely. Others, protected from the flash like this building and the distant pink tower by flickering magic shields, became consumed in the firestorm like party candles.

The artificial sun receded, but the fires spread further and further. The clouds of smoke in the skies stabbed down with thin spikes, and at the tip of each spike another green sun was born. No moon rose above the opposite horizon in that artificial twilight, a darkness punctuated by bursts of terrible light and fire. No pony in the café screamed. Talked. Moved. Not till one turned away. Then another. Babble.

Screams. Cries and sobs. Reality, such as it was, reasserted itself.

The image flickered away. Professor Zodiac hung her head as she said quietly, “I survived in the Manhattan M.A.S. hub along with everyone else fortunate enough to be inside the tower when the world ended.” She looked a little pained. “At first things were...as good as could be expected, under the circumstances, but my O.I.A. affiliation and sterility made my place in the Twilight Society rather difficult. I put up with it for a while but eventually decided to leave and try to find a new home for myself. Fortunately, my augmentations gave me quite an edge. I ended up falling in with a group of others with roughly the same idea, and, after some time spent wandering what used to be Equestria, my friends and I dared venture into Hoofington.”

Twilight Society? What was— “Excuse me,” Glory said with a frown. “Your augmentation?”

“Oh. Well...” There was a hiss next to the projector, and the walls of the metal cylinder peeled away to uncover a glass tank within. “I wasn’t just in charge of Project Steelpony...” she said as we stared at the contents of that jar. In the hazy water was a pony, technically a zony, flayed of its skin and missing three of its limbs. Wires and tubes snaked in and out of the carcass and into a port in the floor. Tangles of wires emerged from empty eye sockets and missing ears. And, maybe it was just me, but the corners of the ragged mouth curled in a smile as the projection declared, “I was also a client.”

And that was when Scotch Tape started screaming.

“Do I like Blackjack? Are you serious? Really?”

“... ”

“Fine. No, I don’t like Blackjack. Because every second I’m around her I’m reminded of a place that hurt me. Because every time I think I’m over it she does something to remind me of how much it sucked. She’s a walking, talking reminder of everything that I hate. Sometimes, I don’t think that I’ll ever be over it till she’s dead.

“But no matter how much she hurts me, I know it’s nothing compared to how much she hurts herself. She seems to have this masochistic need to suffer for simply surviving. She runs on guilt and angst, and one day she’s going to choke on it. And I hate it because there’s nothing I can do to stop it. She’s like an addict hooked on

martyrdom. She'll sacrifice her body, happiness, sanity, and life trying to help others even if they don't deserve it. And she'll beat herself miserable when she fails.

"How can you like a person like that? How can you love a person like that?"

"... No more stupid questions."

Okay. Letting Scotch watch the end of Equestria... kick... Letting her sit in on the meeting... Kick... Letting her leave Chapel with us in the first place... kick kick kick! I mentally kicked myself over and over again as I waited outside the hospital room that had once housed Glory. I suspected that at this rate they were going to name a wing of this place 'The Blackjack and Co. Trauma Wing'. Maybe two wings.

Triage stepped out with a sigh. "She's sedated. Just upset."

Glory shook her head softly. "She's not the only one. What the heck was Professor Zodiac thinking? How could she think that that was appropriate for a filly to see?"

Triage just looked at her levelly. "Right, because most things in the Wasteland are age appropriate," she said in a tone saturated in sarcasm. She pulled out a cigarette and lit up. "Anyway, you survive for two hundred years, spend the last twenty stuck in a jar, and then tell me what's appropriate and inappropriate. I'm glad the Prof isn't a complete basket case."

"But what happened to her?" Rampage asked as she looked in the direction of the planetarium. "I mean, most ponies don't end up in jars. Not unless you folks take making pickles to a whole new level."

Glory coughed at the smoke. "Excuse me..." she said, fanning her wing and wafting the cloud aside.

Triage ignored her and snorted another roll of smoke from her nostrils. "Not quite. She took an exploration team down the elevator shaft you lot came up. When she came back, half her body was gone. If it wasn't for her augments..." She shook her head slowly. "The collegiate got her stabilized and in that jar, and she's been that way ever since."

I sighed, looking around. No sign of P-21 since we'd left the planetarium. I scowled, not liking this at all. Whether he wanted to admit she was his daughter or not, he should at least be here! Lacunae was also MIA.

"Excuse me!" Glory said again. "You're smoking? In a hospital? Around patients?"

And oxygen tanks?" Her eyes blazed. "You're a doctor!"

Triage blinked at Glory. "So? Look around you." Glory snapped her wing out and swatted the cigarette out of the air. Triage scowled. "What are you, the last Ministry of Peace inspector?"

"You are a doctor. That means being more than a pissy, bitchy, angry nag. You're supposed to be a professional. Act like it!" she said as she brought her hoof down on the burning end. Wow. Go assertive Glory! "Now, to the subject of Scotch Tape and not the person who tried to trick Blackjack. Are you certain there's nothing else you can do for her?"

"Look, unless you want us to start messing with her memories, there's nothing I can do. And memory therapy was hard enough before everything was blown to pieces," she said crossly, glancing down at the mashed cigarette.

"But you can do it?" I asked with a small worried frown and a glance at Glory. Somehow, this felt... easy. It made my stomach churn... though, honestly, that could have been the taint.

Triage sighed, glowering at Glory one more time before floating another cigarette to her lips but not lighting it. "Well, I did get a few books from the Fluttershy Clinic on how the spells are performed...I know enough to remove a block of memory. Everything from event one to event two. I'm not going to start dicing up her memories to take out just the bad stuff, though, and I'm definitely not going to try adding things. That's freaky stuff even I can't do."

I sat down with a clatter as Rampage trotted up beside me. She was definitely aging, looking much more the mature filly. Still needed about a day, though. "Blackjack? Are you actually going to do this?"

"I don't know," I muttered.

Triage rolled her eyes. "Well let me know when you do know. I'll be outside, finishing my unprofessional cigarette."

Rampage watched her leave. "I think she's angrier about losing a cigarette than nearly having your horn through her throat." Personally, I could do with a shot or two of Wild Pegasus. Could I just... have her memories taken away? Would that fix her? Make her happy? It felt dirty. Like a cheat. Rampage seemed to read my thoughts. "You can't do this, Blackjack. Taking away her memories just to make her happy is wrong."

"She had a panic attack, Rampage. Are you saying we should just let her keep

suffering?” Glory countered with a worried look.

“Should we take Blackjack’s memories of 99 away?” Rampage asked sharply. “Or yours, Glory?” I could never forget 99. I didn’t deserve to forget that scream or that smell. The striped pony took in a deep breath. “Our memories make us who we are. Scotch Tape is hurting really bad, so we help her work through it. Send her back to Chapel and the other Crusaders. Let her get over it.”

“And what if she never does, Rampage?” Glory countered. “What if she can’t get over it? So she loses two lousy days of pain and misery. There’s nothing in that day I want to remember anyway. I could do with losing an hour or two myself.”

Rampage stared at both of us. “Not . . . remembering . . . sucks. As terrible as it is, I wish I remembered killing Thorn . . . and . . .” She closed her eyes and swallowed hard before continuing, “because it would feel like I actually did it. Then my guilt would be justified but I think about it and all I remember is crying and then . . . nothing! And next thing I remember, Blackjack got me disintegrated and everypony was pissed and . . . and Thorn was . . .” she grit her teeth. “I’d give anything to remember so I could understand why!”

Glory sniffed and rubbed her nose with her wing before resting her hoof on Rampage’s shoulder. “It’s not the same. Scotch didn’t do anything in that time but experience monstrous things. She’s not losing anything.”

I slowly pulled myself to my clattering hooves. There was only one way to deal with this. I trotted across and tried to use my magic to open the door. Thankfully, the glow flickered a few times and then stabilized long enough to turn the handle and let myself inside. I closed the door behind me; I’d heard from positions A and B, but now I needed to hear from position Scotch.

I hated hospital rooms, I realized. I hated the equipment that told you second by second if you were living more or less. I hated the promise that you are always going to get better when in reality, some day, you wouldn’t. My days might be numbered, but I wasn’t going to end them in a place like this if I could help it. Scotch looked tiny and abandoned in the hospital bed. And thinking about P-21 . . . perhaps she was.

“I haven’t seen you for a while,” I said quietly to the Dealer.

The old pale buck stood opposite me. “Haven’t needed to be seen. I reckon you got enough on your mind without me.” He paused. “You look like hell, Blackjack.” I felt like it too. Goddesses, I was tired of being shot up. It didn’t matter how many times they’d stuffed me in a magic healing box, I felt injured. I’d give anything to remember

what it was like to not know how it felt to hurt all the time.

“Eh... I’m dying,” I said with a shrug. Just like that. Tears of angst to a shrug. I really had to be crazy. “So... what’s your position on this?”

“My position is no position,” he replied softly. “What happens, happens.”

“Because I’m screwed either way?” I muttered quietly. Goddesses I wished I could shoot the Wasteland right in the face.

“If you want to think of it that way,” he replied as he shuffled his cards and dealt a three of hearts, a four of hearts, a five of hearts, a six of clubs, and an eight of hearts. “You might have a hand like this. Can’t win with it. Got to discard one. So what do you chose?”

“The six of clubs. Better chance at a flush.” He tossed it away and dealt the next card. Ace of spades. I smirked. Of course I didn’t get the card I needed. “Surprise surprise.”

“Yeah. You lost. So tell me, should you be kicking yourself for not discarding the eight and going for a straight?” I blinked in surprise, and the cards disappeared. “You want to do the right thing because you’re afraid that, if you do the wrong thing, she’ll suffer for it. Celestia wanted to do the right thing. Twilight Sparkle wanted to do the right thing. Even Goldenblood. But no matter how you analyze and predict, the fact is, sometimes you just lose. And you have to deal with it. Dealing with it isn’t looking back with regret for making the wrong move.”

“Yeah, but... she’s just a filly...” I murmured softly. A filly who was watching me with a look of confusion. Sedated didn’t mean unconscious. Right. She was looking at me with more than a little worry, which was probably not unjustified. I smiled, rubbing the back of my head. “Ah... sorry! Just talking to myself. Me and my crazy... me...” Okay, she wasn’t smiling. I sighed as I trotted to the side of the bed. “I’m sorry, Scotch.”

“He’s not coming, is he?” she whispered. “I’m not really his daughter, am I?” Oooo, P-21, you are in SO much trouble right now... and so am I for spilling the beans. “Mom told me I was different from other fillies. That... that I had a daddy in the stable. I had to look up that word in the database; it’d been blacked out of the books at school. And when you told me I... I thought it was a good thing. I thought I wasn’t alone.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “I wish you hadn’t told me, Blackjack.”

I stroked her mane with a soft sigh, trying to figure out how to tell her I could take it all away. Or if Rampage was right and we should just help her struggle through,

painful as it was? I stroked her mane gently. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine. . .”

“No, I won’t. I can’t look at a wrecked wagon without wondering if it’s going to move. I saw that. . . that thing in the jar, and I thought she was going to eat me! I loved working on machines. I do. Mom taught me how to fix stuff when I was just a foal. If something in our quarters broke, she’d show me step by step what went wrong and how to make it work.” She shook her head. “Now. . . now I think the machines are going to eat me.”

Damn it. For once, I’d like the Wasteland to be ‘Here’s a nice and easy choice, Blackjack! Door A with fluffy bunnies and carrots or Door B with spikes and land-mines!’ Oooo, tough call. “Just try and rest. The doctor will check up on you in a bit,” I said quietly. She didn’t say a word, closing her eyes again with a miserable little sniff. I wanted her back in Chapel now. With fillies her age, fixing up the place. Playing with Allegro and Adagio. Having a better life than any other filly in Equestria. But this wasn’t Equestria. This wasn’t even the stable. This was the Wasteland, and I should just be happy she was alive. But I wanted to give her more...

What was the price of peace of mind in the Wasteland? Could I give her that? That indulgence?

How could I not?

I told Triage what I needed. She couldn’t care less either way. I could have asked her to cut Scotch’s head off and stick it on a spike and she probably would have. She just made sure I understood that she’d be erasing everything from the tunnels to now. The story would be that she was injured in the tunnels. Glory nodded; Rampage muttered a whatever. Both would be present while Triage did the spell.

That left P-21. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to find him... until I glanced out a window and was amazed to see him sitting with his back against a dead tree in the muddy quad as the rain drizzled down. I trotted out to him but slowed as I got a good look at him slouched there. I knew that slouch. He had a barely touched bottle of Wild Pegasus and an empty syringe of Med-X next to him; I guessed his leg still bothered him. “I thought this stuff was supposed to make you feel good,” he said as he nudged the bottle with a sour frown. “Just makes me feel sick.”

“You get used to it,” I replied as I carefully levitated the bottle. “You mind?” He groaned and gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. I pulled the cap off, took a pull, and then looked down the neck at the amber contents. It was like looking into a

glass well of piss. I felt like I'd stepped across a mirror in that hole underground and now nothing was right. Glory had one wing. Rampage was pissed. The goddess was back in spades. And I'd lost my happy friend for this blue lump.

"Scotch Tape?" he asked softly as the rain pattered around us.

I tried to assemble a response, feeling that dull glow starting in my gut. Thank the goddesses for that. "Asked for you," I replied, seeing him wince in response. "You don't have to worry about it now, though. Triage is altering her memories. As far as she's concerned, you're a stranger now."

"I always was," he replied crossly. "I never wanted to father her." He scowled at me; I snorted and took another drink, making his frown increase. Then I stood and started for the planetarium. "I never had a choice!" he shouted at me.

I rounded on him. "Yes, you did! Maybe not in 99, but you had one now!" Maybe it was the rain or the booze, but right this second I wasn't taking it. "You could have been something to her. You could have at least have been nice!" I hissed at him as I glared. "She never wanted to lose her mother, home, and everypony she knew. Damn it, you could have at least tried!"

He closed his eyes and laid his head back against the tree. He looked like a corpse. I sighed. What was I trying to do, make him feel even more like a shit? I could still see that mark around his throat. Even P-21 had a limit. I sighed. "Well, now you don't have to worry about it. If you want to be her father, you tell her yourself. You don't? Don't." I floated the bottle back into his hooves. "Take it from a booze pony like me, P-21. If you're gonna drink, don't do it out in the rain. Hangovers are bad enough without adding a head cold to the mix." And with that, I turned again, leaving him under that dead tree and the hard, cold, Hoofington sky.

"So, if you were involved with Project Steelpony and Eternity, what was Eternity all about?" I asked as I sat in the planetarium. I still had questions and a choice to make.

"Eternity?" the flickering image said sourly. She'd been scanning the ruins to the east with some sort of bobbing sensors on top of the buildings, letting me get a look at the activity around the Skyport. I'd half hoped to catch a glimpse of Lighthooves there. "Eternity was a complete flop. Rarity micromanaged that project into the ground and wouldn't let me get past setting her up at Hightower Jail." The air above her came alive showing a number of pages of text that made little sense to me.

“Why was Rarity managing it? Was it related to Image?”

“If it was related to Image, Rarity wouldn’t have needed the O.I.A. She would have just done it herself.” She sighed and mused, more to herself than to me, “A way to keep her friends safe forever...”

Forever. Sounded nice. Better than six months. “What’s it like?” I asked softly as I fiddled with my leg brace. She looked at me in surprise and a little confusion, so I elaborated. “To live longer than anypony, I mean?”

Professor Zodiac smiled sadly. “I want to go to a Pony Joe’s and get a chocolate-dipped cinnamon ring with extra sprinkles. I know they don’t exist anymore. Haven’t for two hundred years, but there’s a part of me that’s always back there. I think about friends. Work. A vacation I was slated to take after the conference at Tenpony. You’d think it’d all fade away, or blur, or something... but it doesn’t. It just gets stretched out.”

“But how do you deal with the pain?” Again, she looked baffled, “I... I found a memory orb from Deus. He was in agony every moment.”

“Ah. Yes.” The flickering image hung her head a little. “It rather depends on the nature of the augmentation. Deus’ implants were invasive and the link to his nervous system was fairly crude. When I was forced to get my upgrades, a year of refinement had taken place. But it doesn’t feel... normal.”

I regarded the flickering projection with a little sympathy. “Why’d you get them in the first place?”

“Oh. That.” She sighed. “Let’s just say that some ponies took Big Macintosh’s death quite personally and any held anyone with stripes culpable. I was accosted by a mob on my way home. It was quite unpleasant... and afterwards I needed a new heart... among other things. Fortunately, hearts were the first synthetic organ we’d made for Steelpony. After that, it was a gradual process of replacing this for that. New eyes. New lungs. Stronger legs and a reinforced hide. I never installed an augmentation I wouldn’t put in myself,” she said with a touch of pride.

“Not even Deus? I don’t see hydraulics sticking out of you,” I replied. Why was I defending him? Deus had been a monster... but... did he really deserve all that for one mistake?

She looked at me and said levelly, “I am sorry for the pain I caused him, but Deus was a convicted rapist. I honestly did not expect him to survive the battle testing.” Boy, that was reassuring! “When he did, Goldenblood put him in stasis somewhere.

The point was made. If things hadn't exploded, I anticipate that all Steel Rangers would have been augmented into steelponies within a year. Why worry about power armor when you can become power armor?"

"Probably because you can take power armor off and it doesn't hurt all the time?" I suggested.

She rolled her glowing eyes. "You sound like Applejack."

I sighed, pressing my lips together. Sanguine wanted Chimera to make new and interesting monsters. Zodiac seemed nicer, but I trusted her as far as I could throw that projector. Did the O.I.A. intentionally go after borderline nutjobs, or did working for Goldenblood turn them that way? I didn't like thinking about what two hundred years in the Wasteland had done to her. "So, Trueblood wants to make monsters. What about you? Going to make an army of Deuses?"

"Monsters? Is he still going on about that?" Zodiac said with a sad smile. "All that 'Endless possibilities and biological potential' garbage?" The glowing projection shook her head sadly.

I blinked. "Are you saying that he wouldn't do that?"

"Oh, eventually. Probably. But I doubt that that's what truly drives him," she said with a sigh. "But as for making more Deuses, no. I don't want Steelpony to win a war two centuries over that was pointless in the first place. Very simply, I want out of this jar," the projection said as she trotted to the metal cylinder and soundlessly gave it a soft tap. "You probably noticed my meat parts, but the reality is that I'm in bad shape. My repair talisman, which is responsible for rebuilding damaged components, needs to be reactivated. With that fixed, I could repair my internal healing talisman. With that fixed, I could get out of this bathtub. Otherwise, this jar isn't just my prison, it's my casket too. Five years... ten... fifteen..."

"So you're in the same boat I'm in," I muttered.

She looked at me with a slightly sympathetic smile. "I suppose, but I've at least had a decade to come to terms with it. To the well prepared mind, death is nothing to fear. Of course, after years in this jar..." The glowing projection sighed. "To be honest, I owe you an apology. You see, I was the one who told Sanguine that EC-1101's routing ended at your stable."

"What... you're... you..." I spluttered, trying to get a handle on my anger. "How could you?"

"It was my only hope to get out of here," she replied firmly. "Would you turn down

the only hope at getting your life back? I had no idea that Stable 99 was intact. Most of the stables were complete failures, so I saw little point in not telling him.” That helped me get my emotions under control. It wasn’t like Zodiac had gone out of her way to screw 99. “He gave me the usual sales pitch. . . find EC-1101, use it to force open Chimera and Steelpony... So six months ago I tracked down the data paths with the help the Collegiate. Of course, as soon as I told him where to find it, he cut off contact.”

“But if you were to get out. . . are you saying you wouldn’t return to your research?” I said skeptically.

The glowing pony smiled, cocking her head as she rolled her eyes a bit. “Oh, perhaps. One day. But it would take years to set up new augmentation production. Maybe a decade to get production scaled up to the point where it could help the Wasteland.” She sighed softly. “Funny, when the six of us came out here after so long, I was so eager to return and find out what became of the O.I.A. and Steelpony. Now I wish we hadn’t.” She shook her head. “This city has a way of tempting you with exactly what you want.”

“You were with Big Daddy!” I blurted.

She chuckled and nodded. “And Awesome, Crunchy Carrots, Finders Keepers, and little Dawn. Six friends trying to save Hoofington.” She sighed and shook her head. “Such a horrible time. So much killing and for nothing. And eventually we turned on each other.” She looked at me and her eyes seemed to turn soft. “You care for your friends, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Then leave this place. Spend what remains of your life somewhere else. Hoofington destroys everything around it. It consumes friendship as readily as life. Go to Tenpony. New Appleloosa. Friendship City. Stallongrad. Trottingham. Even Fillydelphia. . . but get out of here as fast as you can and don’t look back.”

“But. . . what made you split up?” I asked softly. The projection went still for a long moment, frozen in place.

Zodiac looked back at me, and her lips curled in a little smile. “Sorry, Blackjack, but I usually don’t talk this much, and I think the projector’s getting overheated. Why don’t you come back tomorrow?” she asked, and the big machine flickered and went dark. Big secret? Painful memory? Both? I paused at the entrance and gave a look back over my shoulder, my eyes lingering on that metal cylinder.

I needed to think, which was a bad sign. I'd spent most of my life not thinking about things. My time in Hoofington had changed all that. Now I couldn't stop thinking, and my poor mutated brain kept tumbling over and over again. If only I was able to dig through all the stuff tumbling around inside my head for something useful. . . like what I was going to do now.

Think. Think think think. What would the Stable Dweller do? "Sheeee'd. . . cast a failproof failsafe spell that would instantly make the right choice just pop right out at her. And then she'd hop into her magic flying tank and do it! Cause she actually knows how to do this heroic crap!" I said with a grin. I slumped. Once more, the vast gulf between the Stable Dweller and myself loomed inside me.

Well, I could try to find out what somepony who knew what she was doing was doing, at least. Not that it was likely to get anything done, but it wasn't as if I had a better idea. I turned on my PipBuck radio and started to pace. It wasn't long before the music stopped and DJ P0N3's voice burst out of with news about the Stable Dweller. Clearly, Homage must have been a fan. So, the Stable Dweller. . . was all the way down in Fillydelphia?! And apparently she'd just screwed over Red Eye and reestablished DJ P0N3's eyes and ears down in the city! I expected at any moment to hear about how she'd personally and literally punted Red Eye right out of town, but Homage just gave another thank you and put on more music.

Was it just me, or did Homage have a. . . nah. Though...a super unicorn mare capable of doing all that? Heck, I'd be a bit moist in the. . . "Uggghhh! None of this is helping, Blackjack!"

I needed to make a choice. I hated making choices. In 99, my choice was 'do what I was told'. Outside, it was 'get away from Deus'. For a while, it was 'Find out what EC-1101 is'. Now it was 'Try not get anypony killed.'

And, if I was honest, 'Don't die in six months' was really up there too.

"Try to think what you should do, Blackjack. . ." I said as I trotted through one of the Collegiate buildings.

"What about what Security would do?" I heard a voice mutter. I looked around. I was in some kind of gymnasium; there was a swimming pool full of murky water that looked more than a little unhealthy, but next to it were two bathtubs. Big beautiful basins brimming with steamy water. Oooh, whatever pony had invented self-heating bathtub talismans, thank you!

“Well... first of all... I know what Security would do.” I tested my horn’s magic; it seemed like it was finally starting to return... at least for basic telekinesis. Then I shucked my barding and my braces and... flopped... into the nearest unoccupied basin. These tubs were clearly ‘Big Macintosh’ sized; I didn’t even take up the entire thing! I laid my head back and stared up at the roof.

Blackjack was a frayed bundle of neurotic impulses. The Stable Dweller was a pony too awesome to really imagine. What about Security? I hadn’t thought of that identity in a while, the one manufactured by Homage’s imagination... but in the end, ponies around Hoofington didn’t care about Blackjack. Hell, Blackjack had almost speared a doctor’s throat. Security wouldn’t have ever done that.

Security saved ponies. Mom had told me that back when I believed it to be true. Security wanted to save Hoofington and everypony who could be saved. Ponies who followed the most basic laws like ‘Don’t kill other ponies just cause you want to’ deserved a chance to have a safe life. Security would trust her friends to take care of themselves, help them if they asked for it, and not agonize about dying in months when she could die tomorrow.

“But would Security help Professor Zodiac?” I muttered.

“I sure hope so!”

I blinked at a pony... thing peeking at me from the other side of the tub. It was half pony, but the other half looked like... like an eel or snake or fish... thing! It had a webbed spine for a mane, and though it had forehooves of a sort, there was another smaller spined webbing along the backs of her limbs. The soft pink pony... thing... smiled warily at my expression.

Then another one popped out of the tub next to me, this one turquoise, and leaned over with a wide, pony-eating smile. “Boo!”

“AHH!” It was some sort of monsterponies! Taint monsters! They were gonna eat me! My horn flashed as it tried to shoot my magic bullet spell... it really tried! The flickering ball of light struck the turquoise pony in the face with a zap that blackened her face with soot. She stared at me and coughed a little cloud of smoke before flopping back beneath the water with a groan.

“Capri!” The pink one shouted and jumped from the tub I occupied into the tub beside me with shocking grace. I flopped about, trying to climb out and get my gun, but instead I floundered and flopped in the slippery metal tub. The pink cradled the other pony in her hoof... flipper... things. “Sagi warned us not to mess with

Security!”

“Who... what... how...?” I babbled, pointing my right hoof at them. Then I saw the hurt in the pink one’s red eyes and sighed. Okay, freaking out not helping anypony. “Sorry. I didn’t know these tubs were... occupied.”

“That’s okay... most ponies don’t come down here, anyway. Sagi and Virgo, mostly,” the pink one said shyly. “I’m Pisces. This is Capri. Well, Capricorn, but she doesn’t like being called that.”

“Blackjack,” I replied, feeling adrenaline giving way to shock, and even that wasn’t lasting long as Capri recovered. The turquoise pony ran her hoof... flipper... thing... along her bright blue spines. “Sorry about blasting you,” I said. She had a sort of rubbery hide that transitioned to small scales halfway down her body.

“You’re sorry? I’m sorry I forgot you could do it. Pretty sensible reaction, if you ask me,” Capri said as she washed her face off in the tub. “Do I still have my eyebrows?”

“What are eyebrows?” Pisces asked with a little frown. Capri just sighed, shaking her head with a little groan.

Okay. These were zodiacs... right? Chimera monster ponies? Something... else? “Um... if you don’t mind me asking... what are you?” I gave the best smile I could.

Capri smiled broadly. “Well now, that’s a great question, isn’t it? What are we? Are we perhaps the vanguard of the royal seapony invasion force, coming forth to establish ties with the land ponies? Are you prepared to submit to the rule of the great Oceanus and his mighty leviathan?” That set off a few fuses in my brain, not least of which was wondering what a leviathan was. Capri continued on. “Or maybe we’re the result of some super secret military naval program to make seaponies to swim into zebra harbors and blow stuff up? Or we’re taint super mutants with powers beyond your-“

“We ran into killing joke,” Pisces said softly.

Capri immediately slumped against the wall of the tub. “You always give away the ending, sis.”

“Sis?”

“Right. Sister. As in sibling. As in related to by blood. All ponies were in our village in Ghastly Gorge,” the turquoise water pony said. “As for Killing Joke... well, it’s a blue vine you can find here and there. None around Hoofington, thank the Goddesses. One time I’m glad almost nothing grows here. But if it touches you... well... it likes

to play jokes on you.”

Pisces nodded. “That usually get you killed.”

“A vine that plays. . . jokes?” I needed to scavenge a box of brain fuses. Here I was almost convinced that maybe I’d found out all the messed-up stuff around the Wasteland.

“Well, to elaborate, once I said to sis, ‘Gee sis, wouldn’t it be great to be a sea pony?’ to which sis replied. . .” and she pointed her hoof flipper at the pink pony.

“Shoo be doo. . . Shoo shoo be doo,” Pisces said with a little smile. “That’s from the sea pony song,” she said with a little nod.

“So one day we were starving and decided to find our way into the Everfree looking for something non-radioactive and un-poisonous to eat. . . not one of my smarter choices, in retrospect. . . and we came across killing joke. It burst out of the ground and played it’s joke by turning both of us into this,” she said with a broad smile. “By the way, did I mention that we were miles from any water source?”

“That’s the killing part,” Pisces pointed out.

“So, yeah, we flopped around the Everfree. . . drying out. . . crawling on our bellies. . . really not happy with life. We finally found a pond we could wet ourselves in.”

“That was full of radigators,” the pink pony pointed out.

Capri rolled her eyes with a soft snort. “Which was full of radigators. Fortunately, the joke gave us a few little tricks that let us drive them off. . . probably an accident on its part. We eventually flopped and flipped our way to a creek and just followed it down stream. Eventually ended up in the Hoofington Reservoir. That’s when we came across other ponies.”

“Mean ponies.” Pisces said with a shiver.

“Raiders?” I asked with sympathy. Capri snorted with a scowl.

“No. Fancy high to do Society ponies,” she said with a flick of her tail. “Caught us in a net and threw us in a jar. They took us to be a part of some menagerie. . . fancy name for a zoo. Stayed like that for six months. The Society’d rap on the glass to make us move around. All. . . the. . . time. . .” she said through grit teeth.

Pisces whimpered, covering her ears. “I don’t want to remember the tapping. They just wouldn’t stop!”

Capri hugged her. I wanted to do that myself. “Anyway, Professor Zodiac found out about us and paid a whole bunch of caps to King Jackass to let us go. She had to give up something really valuable that she said was hers, too. But she said that nopony should be locked up for looking strange.” I thought of a zony trying to teach in an empty lecture hall.

“So now you’re Zodiacs?” Pisces smiled and nodded.

“That’s what Sagittarius said. He was the one who told the Professor about us being in Awesome’s menagerie.” The pink sea pony flushed at Capri’s glower. “I mean... King Jackass!” That mollified the turquoise sea pony a little bit.

Capri leaned against the back of tub, and on her rump I saw an odd symbol: a zodiac magical tattoo like the decals we’d worn leaving Megamart... wow, that seemed too long ago. “Now we do whatever we can to help out here. Sometimes we catch bounties if they live near water. Sometimes we scavenge sunken wreckage. One good thing about being like this is that we don’t seem to get any more mutated by taint or the crud in the water.” She looked at the pink sea pony. “We’re going out to the bay soon. Gonna see if we can pull something useful off the Luna.”

“That sunken battleship?” I asked, and she nodded. “You can’t tell me there’s useful stuff on that wreck!”

“Plenty!” she laughed. “All kinds of talismans still intact. Tons of equipment that’s still sorta useful. That ship had so many enchantments protecting it that it took years before it finally sank. Barely any rust on it at all, in spite of all the saltwater.”

“So if I found that killing joke stuff...” I speculated, rubbing my chin. “I’d love to be a taint-free, two-eyed, non-jellylegged pony again...” I said to myself and any killing joke I might encounter in the future.

“You’d be an idiot and dead,” Capri said flatly. “Killing Joke doesn’t help ponies. Ever. It screws them. You can’t say ‘I’d love to be Princess Celestia.’ and dive in... because it’ll mutate you into an alicorn that can’t do magic and fly or something. Or turn you into a two-hundred-year-dead copy of the Princess. Or do something you said back when you were a filly. Trust me, you are not the first pony to think of using killing joke to do something cool.”

I blew a raspberry. “And once more reality squashes what would otherwise be a completely awesome plan.”

“Yeah,” Pisces said with a sigh. “If it wasn’t for stupid reality, we could have chocolate milk rain and cotton candy clouds.” I sighed as well. Wouldn’t that be awesome?

Rivers of Wild Pegasus. Sugar Apple Bomb bushes. . .

“Hey. Quick question,” I said as I looked at the pair. “Why’d the zodiacs go after me and my PipBuck?”

Capri shrugged. “Sagi’s idea. He heard that the Professor needed it really badly.” She folded her hoof flippers under her chin. “He’s the oldest Zodiac, so he’s kinda in charge. The idea was it’d be a surprise or something.”

Pisces nodded, “Libra spilled the beans, though.”

Capri shivered, “Professor was so pissed. . . I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so mad before.” The turquoise pony looked at me with a sympathetic look. “She said you’d never help her now.”

That lined up with what I’d heard from the professor herself. “Well, it sure doesn’t help,” I muttered. I lifted the leg braces with my faltering magic and tied them on my forelimbs.

“Does that mean that you’re thinking about it?” Pisces suddenly arced back into the tub I occupied and gave me a very squishy hug. “Please help her! Please. I know she’s creepy and freaky and strange but she’s the only pony who’s been good to me and sis. Please!” Oh, wasn’t this awkward?

“Pisces!” Capri said, and her tail slipped out to smack the back of her sister’s head. The pink sea pony went even redder, flushing and bowing her head in embarrassment. “Sorry. She’s like that. . .” then the turquoise mare tapped her hoof fins together as she chewed on her bottom lip. “But. . . if you did decide to help the professor. . .”

I sighed and slipped from the tub, putting on my last two braces. “Yeah. Like I said, I’m thinking about it.” And if my answer was no, then I’d better be well gone from here before giving it.

What is the Goddess’s interest in Blackjack? Your question is so simplistic that it makes one wonder why you would bother to waste the Goddess’s time with it!

Our first interest is the interest that We have for all of ponykind: elevating and preserving all ponies through Unity in The Goddess. We know that through Unity, ponykind will be transformed into a state of being perfectly suited to thrive in this wasteland. Once a hoofful of trivial complications are resolved, We will give all of

ponydom a safe and prosperous future in Us.

However, We are also interested in Blackjack for her capability and her determination. The Goddess appreciates ponies of mettle and fortitude, and she has demonstrated that she excels in both areas. Despite her copious flaws, she has managed to persevere against tremendous odds and yet seems to consider them quite ordinary. She seems hopelessly unaware that only a few ponies could face what she encounters daily and still continue onward. Such traits are... valuable.

Thus, the Goddess's interest in her is the same as anypony's: how can We use her to achieve Our goals? Is that not how all heroes are eventually exploited?

Saying it was about to rain in Hoofington was like saying the Wild Pegasus would run out: it was inevitable and dreaded at the same time. Triage was in the middle of the procedure. P-21 was somewhere... Rampage wasn't speaking to me... Lacunae was meeting with the professor. That left me and Glory with nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nopony shooting at us. I'd found a window and was staring at the gray world outside while she calmly did some maintenance on Vigilance besides me, replacing the firing pin with one from a battered ten millimeter IF-21 Caramel.

Where'd I pick up that gun? Red Eye? Scavenged it? Was it from the tunnels? I couldn't remember any more. So many damn fights. So damned tired of fighting. And yet I couldn't stop. Who knew how long I had before I died... no, not even that. Ponies died of cancer in 99. It was rare and horrible, watching them struggle for months. Weeks. Days. Bodies falling apart as they fought for one more day before either the disease killed them or they begged for the needle. Now that was me. Would I last months before the taint crippled me? Weeks before tumors devoured my organs? Days?

"Sanguine contacted me," Glory said softly, not looking up from her work. "That Psychoshy brought a message while you were... getting your things in the eatery." I said nothing, just inhaled. Her hooves, normally so sure, dropped the firing pin from the Caramel as she added quickly, "Dusk and Lightning Dancer were with me. She didn't try anything."

I felt nothing. I thought nothing. I was as gray as the world beyond. "Huh," was all I could say.

"She told me... she told me to let you know that he could regrow my wing with Chimera." It was amazing how she could even keep her voice; how she fought to

keep the tremble of desire to a minimum.

“Mmmm. . .”

“And. . . she said that he. . . he could clone you new organs. A new heart. Lungs. All the parts of you that are failing.”

What could I say? What should I say? I listened to the drops as they hit the window.

What could she say? What would she say? She sniffed softly. “I want you to do it, Blackjack. I do. . .” I didn’t blink. Didn’t turn away. I stared into the reflection of my own eye. I wondered if I could see my soul.

I wondered if it was tainted too.

“But. . . I know you shouldn’t accept it,” she said with another sniff as she nudged the pin in place with the tip of her hoof. She was so gentle like that. So careful. I could see her crying in my mind. Slow tears. “I know he’s a monster. . . that he’ll do terrible things with Chimera. That he’ll probably stab you in the back anyway before he helps you. I know it’s the wrong thing.”

But she wanted it anyway. I wanted to do it for her. I did. I wanted it so much that it hurt inside.

But we don’t always get what we want. Even when we deserve it.

I sighed softly and dropped to my knees beside her. Now it was her turn to be held. The guns forgotten, she pressed her face into my shoulder and sobbed. “I know it’s wrong but I want it so damn much!” And that was all that needed to be said. All that could be said. And like the rain in Hoofington, tears would come. But eventually the rain would end.

“The Goddess would have a word,” Lacunae said from the shadows of the hallway. I marveled at the slide. . . could Glory have somehow made the action even smoother than when I’d first gotten it? “You will pay attention to us!” The Goddess stomped her hoof firmly. I used to do the same thing when I was a filly.

I didn’t look away from the chamber. A lot of mechanical work had gone into this weapon. I heard the soft rasp of metal on metal, barely audible after being oiled. I wondered if this had been custom built for Card Trick. Slowly, I worked the slide back and forth. That rasp was still there. “Go ahead, your deityness.”

“We command you turn over EC-1101 to this Sanguine character. We have need of

Chimera. It could be the key to the future of ponykind.” I saw her scowl in Vigilance’s reflection. “You will do as the Goddess commands!”

“No,” I replied softly. There was a little bit of wear on the slide. Nothing serious. Goddesses, Glory did nice work with what she had.

The Goddess stared at me with Lacunae’s face. She’d gotten rid of the dress. She looked... ordinary. Mass produced. Not the alicorn who had saved me so many times. “No?”

“It’s two letters,” I replied as I slid a magazine home and loaded a round in the chamber.

Her eyes flared in rage, “You gave your word!”

“Yup. So it looks like I’m a liar too,” I said before looked at her. “Project Chimera came before Twilight’s Alicorn project. And you have Twilight’s memories... or something... inside you. So what do you need it for?”

“IMPUDENT FOAL! THE GODDESS NEED NOT EXPLAIN HERSELF TO ANY-PONY! WE ARE THE FUTURE OF EQUESTRIA! WE ARE YOUR SALVATION! THE GODDESS-“ she began, and that was it. Before she could get past that point, Vigilance was shoved in her mouth. She looked so stunned that I might have found it funny that she’d cut off her tirade even though she had been just beaming it straight into my head.

“Let me make something clear. I do not like the word ‘Goddess’. I can’t even think of Celestia and Luna as Goddesses anymore. I don’t even think there are Goddesses at this point. All I know are friends and enemies. Lacunae is my friend. The Goddess isn’t.” My eye narrowed; I hoped Lacunae would forgive me for this. “So my suggestion would be you let Lacunae speak for you, Goddess, because right now I’m pissed off enough to ignore you out of spite.” I wanted to find a certain ghoul and make a pink, smoking wallet out of him!

For a second, I was sure that I was going to have to pull that trigger. Then I saw the slight tensing around the eyes that was more worry than indignation and pulled the gun from her mouth. “I’m sorry, Lacunae,” I said softly. I felt ashamed for doing that.

She worked her jaw a moment before saying softly in my mind, “It’s all right, Blackjack. But as you said, the Goddess is definitely not your friend.”

I sighed and looked at the rain creeping down the window panes. “I don’t like beings that think they’re perfect. Powerful. Better.” I spotted my reflection in Vigilance’s

polished silver plating. “I know I’m weak and powerless. I don’t need some Goddess rubbing it in.”

Lacunae was silent for a second and said, in a voice tinged with irony, “You have an odd understanding of the concept of weakness.”

I smiled slightly. How in Equestria did the Goddess believe humility, restraint, and compassion were weaknesses? If the Goddess had been like Lacunae, Equestria would be flocking in droves to join Unity. No pony wanted to be a part of something that believed it was already better without them. “So why does she need Chimera?”

“It’s a rather simple problem of biology,” she replied softly. “You see, all alicorns are biologically female.” I just blinked at her, not comprehending the problem. She elaborated delicately, “And we require males to procreate.”

I blinked, furrowing my brows. “Well, I wouldn’t ask P-21 for the honors, but there’s probably a lot of males who’d take you up on that offer.”

She shook her head slowly. “We are... unfortunately... incompatible with male ponies of any variant.

Now I was frowning. “Wait a minute. If you can’t breed with pony males... then where the hell did Celestia and Luna come from?” I blurted.

“That is a great mystery. Twilight theorized that alicorns may have been manifestations of some primal magical energy, but Celestia and Luna never confirmed this. Since the fusion megaspell originated with Chimera, though, the Goddess theorizes that perhaps it can be adapted to create a male of the species. To be honest, the Goddess is expending all her energy on various possible means of solving this dilemma. She is under a great deal of strain.”

I sighed softly. “I won’t give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Not to save my life... not to save your species.” Not even to replace Glory’s wing, damn me. “But if I can find some way to help you as you need to be helped, I will.” I looked up and gave her the best smile I can. “That’s the most I can promise.

She seemed to be listening for a moment. I heard the faintest of whispers as Lacunae bled over snatches of conversation. There was a mention of a book, and using ‘LittlePip’ to get it. From the little bits I gathered, she was more intelligent and less stubborn than I. The name nagged at me; where’d I heard it before? Finally, an agreement seemed to be reached as Lacunae said, “The Goddess is not happy, but she accepts your offer.”

“Good, because I honestly don’t know what I’d have to do otherwise.”

“Oh, that is simple. I would have teleported behind you, raised my shield, killed you with my magic, torn the PipBuck from your limb, and returned to Maripony,” she said quite matter of factly. “Of course, I promise you that I’d feel absolutely terrible about it afterwards.”

I chuckled softly. Couldn’t get much more fair than that, could I?

There are certain things that get my attention. Nuzzles to my flanks. The sound of a shotgun shell being actioned into the chamber. The sweet smell of Wild Pegasus. And the impact of a nearly full grown Rampage slamming into me from behind and sending me sliding down the hall. Normally I would have rolled with it to my feet, but my braced limbs clacked as they struggled to support me and move as they were supposed to. That gave her the time to jump right on top of me.

“Hi. I wanted you to know that Scotch is done. She doesn’t remember anything from the tunnels. Not a thing,” she hissed down at my face. “Do you know what she did? The very first thing?”

“Rampage, I’ve had a lot of people jumping on me today. . . .” I really hoped I wouldn’t have to shoot her in the head again.

“She asked for me!” she shouted in my face. “Don’t you get it? She’s young and scared and afraid and asked for me to see her.” I saw the tears beneath the rage. “Just like Thorn! Just like. . . .” She grimaced and sobbed, pressing her face to my chest. “I had to tell her no. I ran from her. She needed me and I ran!”

Because otherwise she might kill Scotch Tape. “Rampage. . . I’m sorry.”

My striped friend rubbed her nose. “Why’d you have to do it, Blackjack? Scotch is a tough girl. So she had a scare or two. . . she’d get tougher from them. But now she’s scared and all she knows is I can’t be around her. And I can’t tell her. . . not the reason why she doesn’t remember or why I can’t give her the hug she needs.”

I sat up, “Who’s with Scotch now?”

“Glory and the Zodiac filly Virgo. I think she’s the first friend that Scotch Tape’s had.”

I gave a little smile. “Maybe she should stay here, then, instead of going to Chapel.” She certainly wasn’t— and then Rampage’s hoof across my face ended that thought process.

“Don’t you get it?” Rampage shouted in my face. “She doesn’t want to go back to

Chapel anymore. She wants to stay with us! So if we send her away, it'll seem like we're all abandoning her. It'll break her heart even more!" To my shock, she started to laugh. "It's funny, when you think about it. Like me catching the killer only to become a killer myself." There wasn't any mirth in that laugh. Only a ragged madness that grew sharper and sharper. She slammed me harder and harder into the tiles. "I killed her! I killed her!"

There was something very wrong when you needed a bullet in the head to calm somepony down.

As she regenerated, I made sure to get out from under her and on my legs. Two collegiate ponies came around the corner and spotted the crimson spray on the wall and the sight of her head pulling itself together. From the way they ran off, I supposed that Scotch wasn't the only pony needing their memory modified.

Of course, being shot in the head didn't solve anything.

"Rampage. . . I'm sorry. I did what I thought was right. Maybe I'm wrong, but if I can give Scotch Tape some peace, I will. She'll be upset for a while. . . but then she'll get better. And we'll get her someplace safe and happy as soon as we can. Okay?" Was I trying to convince myself or her?

"I don't want another Thorn," she said softly as she turned away. "I can't take another Thorn." And then she quietly walked back down the hall, leaving patters of blood in her wake.

It was getting late. After my little display in the meal room, the collegiate had found a place for us on the second floor over the old gymnasium. The classrooms were full of junk and stank of musty carpeting and dust, but they were dry and private. We'd lit a fire, and the orange and yellow flames danced and flickered across the faces of my friends. The rain had picked up again was washing the fog away. It sounded as if it was trying to scour the entire city away. A flash and boom made the windows rattle, and Scotch Tape jumped for cover underneath some blankets. I couldn't blame her. Every flash made my hoof jerk in response.

Scotch looked confused; she had since she rejoined us. Her eyes were big and round and afraid, not of what she'd experienced but of what she'd lost. We'd fed her lies: she'd been injured in the tunnels and knocked out. She'd swallowed them and now they were sour and heavy in her stomach. But she didn't complain because she didn't know any better. Children should listen to their parents. What should

parents listen to?

“I need to decide what to do,” I said softly, my eye turning from one to the next. Scotch hadn’t been the only pony to lose. Not even the first. Ever since my alarm went off for that last shift in the stable, I’d been losing. So had everypony with me. So had everypony in this damned city. Hoofington was a maw that—no, not all at once. No, that would have been decent. That would have been respectable. Hoofington was a leech sucking everything away as slowly as possible.

Right now, I hated this city. I hated it with every bit of my being. I stood up to address the others. “As some of you realize, I’m not doing too well at this rate. Triage gave me six months before taint eats me up. Even if I say ‘fuck that’ and live twice and long... I’m still dead in a year. Professor Zodiac’s told me to leave Hoofington... and that all of you should too. Go somewhere else. Help the Stable Dweller... something.” I closed my eye, taking a deep breath. “But I’m not going to.”

P-21 was almost completely turned away from me. Only the thinnest sliver of his face showed in the flickering light as his forehooves incessantly rubbed his rear leg. He stared off; was he looking into Stable 99 right now? Was he hearing the Overmare? He was a smart pony... but not a good one. The chance to be a good pony had been taken from him. Now he was just trying to not be a bad one. Priest would never love a bad pony.

“It’s also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Professor Zodiac. Hand it over and let her deal with it. And I’m mighty tempted to do that,” I said softly. “She seems a decent sort... if a little weird. But I’m not going to do that. Like it or not, this is something I have to see through.” I looked at Lacunae in the corner, feeling the stare of hundreds of eyes reflecting the flame. “It’s also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Get myself some new organs, Glory a new wing, and the Goddess a date.”

“Well I’m not going to do that either. After what he’s done, Sanguine’s never going to get his hooves on Chimera if I can help it. Maybe we can get that Project to Professor Zodiac or something and explore that possibility later. But not through Sanguine. Not after 99 and Deus.” I looked at the dark alicorn, wondering if I was addressing my friend or my enemy.

“What about Steelpony?” Glory asked. “Maybe the Professor could do... something?”

I shook my head. “It’s not like there’s a great overabundance of bionic parts out there. She’d have to make the synthetic organs from scratch. There’s not enough

time for that to save me. Sorry.” Glory hung her head and nodded silently.

The fire flickered and danced across Rampage’s face, every lick of flame from the barrel seeming to make her change. Was she a foal-murdering psychopath? Perhaps an ardent defender of law? A zebra traitor? Someone else? She’d be back to full strength in the morning, but what would she do?

What would I do?

Glory looked at me. She’d follow me to the end. I didn’t want her to. She deserved her own life. Her own happiness. I’d reunited her with her sister, at least. Who knew what else was possible?

“Goldenblood did something before the end of the war. I’m sure of it. He did something. . . and I suspect it was something big and something bad. EC-1101 is at the heart of it. If I have a short time left, I’m going to do what I can to find out what. And I’m going to do whatever I can to stop the fighting. We’re going north, and I’m going to tell the Steel Rangers we were behind that attack and see what we can do to end their war with the Reapers.”

Rampage snorted softly. “You’ll be going into a meat grinder, Blackjack. That’s Flash Fillies territory. They like Psychoshy and don’t like you.”

“We could circle around to the east. Towards Black Pony Mountain,” Glory suggested.

“That’s right by Paradise. Red Eye’s there,” Rampage countered.

“Well. . . go past Red Eye and along the eastern mountains.”

“Even worse Idea. Ever hear of an Ursa Major?” From the gasp from Lacunae, one of us had. Rampage didn’t elaborate. “Let’s just say there’s a reason everypony stays away from Black Pony Mountain.”

“It doesn’t matter. If the Flash Fillies want to fight me, they’re going to fight me. But somepony’s got to talk to the Steel Rangers and get this stopped before one side wipes out the other.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if they did?” P-21 said quietly, staring off into space. “You’ve pretty much said you won’t back the Reapers. If they’re so determined to kill each other. . . let them.”

“Nothing’s going to get better if we do that! So the Reapers kill off the Rangers or the Rangers kill off the Reapers. That’ll just lead to another round and another round. Eventually, there won’t be anything left!” I said, with a stomp of my hoof, the

brace clattering with the motion. I looked at Rampage. The poison spreads a little more year after year. I looked to each of my friends. “If we’re going to matter at all, then we’re going to have to do better. All of us. Not just we six, but everypony. And if I’m only here for a short while, then I’m going to do my damndest to encourage folks to do better.”

“Or die trying. . .” I finished grimly. The Dealer stared at me from the far side of the burning barrel, his lip curling in a small smile.

And that was that. Decision cast. I would stay in Hoofington and chase down Goldenblood’s secret projects and learn what that bastard had done with the O.I.A. Because I suspected that, apocalypse and two centuries notwithstanding, it wasn’t dead yet. Just sleeping, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what would happen if it woke up.

Twilight Sparkle had created Gardens to save Equestria. Goldenblood wanted to save Equestria more than anything.

With all the resources of the six ministries, what could Goldenblood have created?

“Do I love Blackjack? That’s. . . an oddly personal question. I’m not sure how to answer. ‘Yes’ would suffice, but it really wouldn’t explain much, would it? I suppose what you’re really asking is: why do I love Blackjack?”

“When Blackjack is at her best, she’s like ponykind at its best. I really believe there’s nothing she can’t accomplish when she’s like that. It’s almost scary just what she can get done when she puts her mind to it. She tracked down Dusk, fought a whole slew of Red Eye’s soldiers, and brought her back to help me. And it worked. I don’t think Dusk and I have ever talked like we did when she saw my injury. And that’s why, when she talks about saving Hoofington and Equestria, I think she might be able to do it.

“At the same time, I’m scared of her. I’m scared of what she’ll do; what she can do. She killed her stable because she thought it was the right thing to do. She almost killed herself for the same reason. I don’t know what snapped her out of that, but it had to be miraculous. She went through those tunnels and she kept going when we all just wanted to die. And so I’m scared that one day she’s going to go somewhere. . . and I won’t be able to follow her.

“So, do I love her? Yes. But will I always be able to be there for her? I don’t know. . .”

There wasn't much discussion after that. My friends knew my plan. Would they leave me? It would probably be for the best. Rampage had no reason to stay and every reason to go. P-21... there was a better life waiting for him in Chapel. Lacunae... how could I know that the Goddess wouldn't just sweep her aside and take over? Scotch should be left behind; where I was going was no place for a filly. And, though I loved her more than my own life, it wasn't a place for Glory, either. I was destined for a bad end.

I still didn't want to be alone again... I hated being alone. But I hated my friends being hurt by me even more.

I rested my head on Glory's chest, listening to the beat of a sound and healthy heart, and let it soothe me off to sleep.

My hooves crunched softly beneath the snow, the night turned to amber hues as I trotted along with my PipBuck clicking in my ears. For some reason, I was dressed all in black. Black gas mask. Black barding that completely covered me horn to hoof. Black coat covering it all. The heaps of snow seemed to glow on their own as I trudged silently along the road.

Above me hung a city of dreams, or maybe nightmares, on a grand and terrible platform clinging to the side of a cliff. My lips moved silently, but the familiar words were dull and meaningless. Streamers of gas seemed to trickle off the edges of the city. The rancid taste of orange filled my mouth from a tube at the corner. There were other tracks in the snow. Bodies in the snow. A trail of dead ponies. I walked on them whenever I could to get out of the snow. The dark clouds overhead continued to dump layer after layer of the fluffy material. It was knee deep now.

There were lights ahead. Skywagons. Tents. Ponies milling about, crying softly as they huddled in the shelter of the vehicles. I moved off the road, as silent as the snow around me, creeping closer.

"Get another case of Rad-X opened and keep them out of this green snow," a mare wearing bright yellow barding called out. "Get those emergency suits handed out. Foals first, damn it!" she yelled as she waved her hoof at the ponies around her. The suits were marked with the Ministry of Peace's butterflies. There were soldiers, too, looking scared as they stared out at the night.

I crept closer. A soldier said to the mare in the yellow emergency suit, "Is it true? Is Hoofington gone too?"

"There's no reply on any of the emergency channels," the mare replied. "We might be able to make it to the Fluttershy Medical Center. . . if it hasn't been hit. . ." There was a note of despair on the edge of her voice as she looked out at the darkness. ". . . is there any place that hasn't been hit?"

"Long as we hit them too," the soldier muttered softly as she scowled up at the dead city. "I don't think anypony else is coming out of there. We can't keep this evacuation center here forever." She stamped her hoof in the snow. "I can't believe that the Steel Rangers just abandoned us. 'Recalled' my ass. What were they recalled for?"

Then I floated a rifle out in front of me. The leg-long scope made the soldier's head leap clearly into view. Matronly. Definitely a motherly type. Not the sort you'd expect to find in combat barding. Crosshairs aligned on the side of her head. A small hole appeared just behind her temple; her body blocked most of the sight of the blood spray in the snow. The mare in the emergency suit froze, but the glassy helmet distorted my targeting. A second later, the rifle fired silently into her. Chest shot. She dropped and started to crawl towards one of the wagons.

The other soldiers in the evacuation camp began to scramble. "Sniper! Zebra sniper!" they called out as the refugees started to scream.

Crosshairs swept the camp. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. The others were behind cover. Taking another sip of rancid orange, I rose and moved towards the camp. The rifle disassembled itself in the air above me, returning to my bags, and out came two matte black sub machine guns: IF-44 'Angel Bunny's. A hoof-long silencer was screwed to each as I moved like black death upon the camp, the cylinders muffling the noise and cutting down the muzzle flash.

Soldiers came out of cover, trying to protect ponies in a dying world. The Angel Bunnies thumped silently as three-round bursts of ten millimeter ammo cut them down. My black barding protected me better than their combat armor as I systematically eliminated all opposition in the camp.

A little more death in Equestria.

No more bullets being fired. I headed to the medical crates and began to resupply. Rad-X and Radaway first. Healing potions next. Bullets from the fallen soldiers, even if I didn't have weapons that could use them; I wasn't going to leave anything

that could shoot me in the back. Food and purified water last, as much as I could carry. There wasn't much left after that.

"Please. There are children here," the mare in the Ministry of Peace emergency suit gasped. "You're killing children. . ." she begged as she hugged my back hoof. "Please. . . enough ponies have died. . ."

For a moment, I looked down at her, then drew a pistol from the mare who had died first while wanting to protect the evacuation camp. I checked the soldier's pistol and walked to the fallen skywagons. "No. Please, no!" she shouted behind me, stretching her hoof after me.

Killing foals was no different than killing their mothers. They screamed, bled, and died like animals. One round in each head to make sure. Nine millimeter rounds were trash anyway. In less than five minutes, the soldier's pistol was tossed into the snow. "Why. . . ?" the medical mare gasped as she crawled towards me. Not that she could understand. They were all dead. All of them. Of radiation. Poison. Lead poisoning. Time. I was simply saving them the pain. She gets to live. Maybe. Maybe she'll figure it out. Maybe not.

I continued on the road east. No answer. Not a word. No forgiveness any more. No absolution. Only the mission. The snow consumed all her wails and cries. She should be thankful; she had enough supplies remaining to maybe last a few months. Me? I had a pony to kill.

I raised my head, looking at the amber hues of the room and my sleeping friends. Scotch had scooted up under Glory's wing. P-21 was a dark blob in one corner, Rampage another in the opposite corner. Lacunae stood as still as stone by the cold fire barrel. I stared into the darkness and whispered, "What the hay...?"

I paced back and forth in front of the projector. "And then I just left her there. Like I was trying to teach her a lesson! And I just trotted off with all those stolen supplies! Like. . . where the hell did a dream like that come from?" I asked, trying to ignore robots peeling away withered flesh from some blasted bionic parts against the far wall.

The flickering projection just shrugged. "If you asked me the strength to mass ratio

of enchanted silver or the velocity of a southbound pegasus carrying a coconut, I could tell you. I'm an engineer, not a psychologist." She cocked her head. "What do you normally dream about?"

I sighed, looking in at a box marked 'medical supplies', Med-X, Rad-X, Buck, Steady, Dash inhalers... well, Dash had kept me alive long enough to get to Scalpel. "Gassing Stable 99... usually. Sometimes I get other freaky dreams. Blowing up Deus." One filly torn in half... One crushed in an embrace... A lullaby... "That thing in the tunnels... Me and sleep aren't real friendly." I held up a few needles of Med-X and boxes Rad-X tablets with a little smile, and the projection sighed and nodded. Score!

Once I'd refilled my stock of chems, I sat on one of the cushions. Fortunately, one side effect of being a cyberpony: you really didn't need that much shuteye. "So, the theme was right up there... but everything in it was out of left field. I mean, it felt almost like a memory orb, but far more real and familiar. Like... it was me remembering them, not just watching the experiences of others."

"Well to be honest, I can't imagine. If it wasn't an internal dream, then it must have been external. You've been exposed to unprecedented levels of taint and enervation. It's caused microtumors in your brain that are thus far fairly benign but could possibly be affecting your mental processes. Your friend Glory helped us determine their growth rate." Cause Glory was just awesome like that. And me having brain tumors sure would have explained a lot back in 99.

I sighed and shook my head. "Can I ask you something? Triage mentioned you went down the elevator too. Why?"

She sighed. "Well, you know that I was predominantly involved with Steelpony, but I heard rumors about the other projects. It was a bit of a game back then to try and find out each other's secrets. The only pony who knew everything was Goldenblood... and maybe Vanity."

"Vanity? His uncle?"

She nodded slowly. "He was always accompanying Goldenblood. Technically, he worked for the MoM keeping an eye on bad ponies in the military, but after the Marauders disbanded he was brought into the O.I.A. directly." She frowned. "Some ponies think that he was really spying for Pinkie Pie. That he turned over something that made Luna dismiss him from his position, because he worked with Horse and Trueblood. But if he really was against his nephew, Vanity could have done a lot more damage to him. So it's a mystery."

The projection then smiled. "I'd heard about those ruins and the memories. Rarity and Goldenblood had been down there. I was hoping to catch a memory of either of them, especially Goldenblood. Unfortunately, I was down there so long that... well..." She pointed a glowing hoof at the jar.

"And did you find out anything?" I asked eagerly.

"I did encounter one memory... But... let me see if I can do this..." and the room lights began to flicker, then darkened as the projector lit up the space overhead. The colors combined and oriented themselves into that dreary buried ruin. There were no swirling motes of light. Just magic lamps illuminating the crushed stone.

It was back in the ruins, and there were two mares, not counting my host, collecting pot shards. It became apparent why the memory was selected when Rarity walked past. "Wonder what she's in a hurry about?" a mare I guessed was the host said.

"Leave it be, Dewdrop. Rarity's going to have you sweeping floor scraps if she catches you eavesdropping," one of the two replied.

My host chuckled. "I'm not eavesdropping. I'm collecting pot shards." And she happened to be collecting them very quickly in the direction the white mare had gone.

Rarity trotted along the buried ruins, looking particularly magnificent in her purple rubber boots and coat that shielded her from the water dripping from above. Goldenblood stood at one of the walls next to a hole the water in the cave was trickling into. His eyes were distant as he floated a piece of rock in front of him, turning it over and over. The spiral chunk of silvery stone glittered coldly in the light of the lamps and seemed to have him mesmerized.

"Goldenblood, a word," Rarity said softly, but voices carried in the tunnel and whoever was remembering this moved closer. The wheezing, scarred buck regarded her with an arched brow, "I wanted to... thank you. For helping save Pinkie Pie. If that bomb had gone off..." She took a deep breath, "I've never faced the possibility of losing my friends before."

"Never? Not even when facing Nightmare Moon and dragons?" Goldenblood said softly but with a small, sincere smile.

She brushed a hoof across her mane, smiling sheepishly and giving a feigned care-free roll of her eyes. "Ah, the invulnerability of youth... but no. Not even then." She closed her blue eyes and took a deep breath. "But when I heard about it..."

"Most credit goes to Pinkie Pie and the Marauders. She sensed it, and they evacu-

ated the club. I simply gave her a nudge in the right direction,” he said as he turned the spur of stone over and over in his magic. When she looked at it, he smiled. “Fascinating, isn’t it? We’ve been finding more and more of this ore the deeper we excavate. Its properties and potential are astounding.” Rarity dropped her gaze, chewing her lip. Clearly she didn’t want to discuss stupid rocks.

“Goldenblood, I need to ask a favor. I need a project. A . . . a secret project,” she said softly. “Normally, I’d never ask, but. . . after Pinkie. . .” She chewed on her lip. “I think I may have a way to protect my friends. But. . . I need. . . something. Something terrible.”

Goldenblood just stared at the hard spiral as he turned the rock over in his magic. “I see. . .”

“It’s. . . it’s a new kind of magic. Or perhaps a very old kind. I’m not sure. . . but. . . I don’t trust it. I need to make certain it won’t hurt my friends,” she said softly, keeping her eyes on the water as it trickled over the edge and through that dark gap. “If it works, I can keep everypony safe forever.”

“You need test subjects,” Goldenblood murmured softly in his watery, rusty voice. Rarity flinched but then nodded. “Say no more. I’ll get you situated. We’ll call it. . .” He mused a moment as he stared at the rock before saying softly, “Project Eternity. After all, forever is a long time to keep a pony safe.”

“I. . . thank you, Goldenblood,” she said with a relieved smile. She started away, then hesitated. “I. . . I think that you and Fluttershy make a wonderful. . . erm. . . couple.” She grinned sheepishly at him, pawing at the water-covered stone.

He smiled, but his eyes simply looked sad. “Thank you, Rarity. I hope I prove worthy of her.”

“Yes. Quite. Well. . . ah. . .” she bobbed her head once more. “I look forward to hearing from you, Goldenblood.”

The viewer immediately rushed back to collecting pot shards as Goldenblood looked in her direction. The the image dissolved “This is an hour later,” Zodiac said as a new picture took shape. “It was a long memory, and nothing particularly interesting to a non-archaeologist happened in the intervening time.” Well, this was an improvement over being stuck in a memory orb.

“Come on, everypony. Last ride out of this hole,” some buck called. The viewer trotted to the elevator and it started to rise out of the earth. It flashed by other subterranean workings as it lifted before finally reaching the top. It looked like the

foundation of a large concrete building. Ponies started filing out, trotting towards the exit and laughing about their day.

All except for Goldenblood. He stood against the rail surrounding the elevator shaft as ponies left. His eyes stared right into mine. “A minute, Dewdrop.”

“Um... yes... sir?” my host said softly.

“You heard my conversation with the ministry mare.” It wasn’t a question. The silvery metal turned over and over beside him as he approached her. My viewer started to back away. “What did you think?”

“It was... it was... ah... interesting...” the mare stammered.

“Interesting. Indeed.” He said softly as he kept approaching. Now I realized what so disturbed me about Goldenblood, more than the scars and the sickly cough and ragged breathing; on top of all that, he didn’t seem to blink. “Do you know what the three most precious things in Equestria are, Dewdrop?” he asked, and she could feel the breeze blowing out of the shaft on her flanks as he backed her right up to the metal rails surrounded the dark, bottomless-looking pit.

“Family, sir? Friends? Um... money?”

“Family is a dime a dozen,” he said with a soft snort. “Friends are articles of convenience. And money is trash.” He shook his head as his horn glowed, and he whispered softly into her ear, “No, the three most precious things are loyalty, love... and secrets.”

Suddenly, the rails weren’t there anymore and she was falling back over the edge, just barely grabbing on with her forelegs. “Help! Somepony help me!” she shrieked. The glowing metal bars that had twisted away behind her slowly returned to place. “Please... I have a family!”

“My condolences, but I’m afraid that some ponies just can’t be trusted with secrets.” And with that, he stood there and watched as her legs and then her hooves slowly slid over the edge. He didn’t look away. He still didn’t even blink... The world became tumbling darkness. I shuddered, closing my eyes and unable to watch any more. That was a long way to fall. . .

The image flickered out. “That’s the memory I experienced in the cave. When the memory ended, I was nearly dead and was fortunate to get back up the elevator before I completely dissolved.

The Goldenblood-being-a-murderer thing... I was... disappointed. I’d hoped that

I'd be wrong about him. That once you got past all the secrets and lies, there was a good pony. How could he kill somepony just to keep a secret? Loyalty, love, and secrets. And a relationship with Fluttershy? How did that happen? I had more questions than when I'd started! It was supposed to go the other way around! Well...nothing to do but start trying to get answers to them.

"So Rarity was... experimenting? On ponies? Rarity?" I said, now trying to wrap my head around that one. How does a pony go from dressmaking to that?

The glowing pony nodded once. "Mhmm... what kind of experiments... and how she was planning on protecting her friends... I don't know. I know that she pursued it for several years, then abandoned it abruptly. Beyond that, I only know it was based out of Hightower Jail. Here." My PipBuck chimed softly. "You can investigate it yourself if you like."

I checked my map and saw the blank square to the north. Well... it was on the way. "And there's nothing you can tell me about the other Projects?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not. Chimera was Trueblood's baby. Starfall and Horizons were Trottenhiemer's. I don't even know who oversaw the rest. I'm sorry. I wish I could be more help."

I gave the projection a tired smile. "I wish I could be more help," I said. She looked confused. "Well, it's just, I'm nobody special. I'm just staggering through all this the best I can."

The professor shook her head with a small smile. "Nobody special? Blackjack, you emerged from your stable with one of the deadliest war machines in history after you and lived. Since then, you've destroyed that war machine, helped stabilize Flank, are virtually the patron saint of Chapel, brought together Sand Dogs and ponies in mutual protection, ended one of the gravest raider threats to the city, and during all of that you were also unraveling a two-century-old conspiracy involving one of the most secretive and powerful ponies in history. You've gotten to the point where your whim is a major consideration for all the powers of the Hoofington region and you carry with you our single best hope for recapturing the greatest technological and arcane treasure troves in all of Equestria. If you are a nobody, then you are the greatest nobody in the history of the world."

I blinked, blushing hard as I rubbed the back of my head. "Gosh... when you put it that way..." I was still a nobody, but at least it was nice to hear she regarded me so highly. I looked at my PipBuck... "I can't give you EC-1101, Professor. But... if there a way I can give you access to Steelpony... I will." I looked at her stunned

expression. “It probably won’t do me any good, but you might make some use of it.”

“I . . .” she stared at me, and then the glowing projection threw its arms around me. The light flickered and sparked, dazzling my eye. “Thank you . . . so much.” She drew back. “Well . . . if you can get to the Flash Industries headquarters’s maneframe and use EC-1101 to unlock it, I should be able to extract the Steelpony activation files and schematics from here.”

“Flash Industries?”

“One of several cover companies we worked with while developing Steelpony. I’d direct you to the Aegis Security headquarters, but it took a direct hit from a balefire missile. There’s naught left but a crater.”

My PipBuck chirped as a few new icons lit up. “These are the O.I.A. fronts I know of where you might find something useful.” Boom Inc. O.I.A. Progress Office. High-tower Jail. Horizon Laboratories.

Hippocratic Research.

I felt lightheaded. Places all in the northeast corner of the outer city. Places where I might find answers. A place where I might find Sanguine himself. I nearly trembled in anticipation. “Thank you. This is wonderful! I don’t know what to say!”

She flushed . . . well, her cheeks were a little shinier than before. “And if I can make one last request . . . I’d like to interview all of you. I think it’s something that might be valuable someday. Ponies are going to want to know just who Security and her friends were.”

I couldn’t think that that would ever be valuable; in six months I’d be gone and in seven probably forgotten . . . except maybe by Glory and my friends. “Well . . . I’ll tell them when I see them in the morning . . . but don’t hold your breath.” The projection arched her brow and I coughed into my hoof. “You know what I mean . . .”

“What do I want?”

“Gosh, that’s an easy one. Give me a box of Sugar Apple Bombs and a bottle of Wild Pegasus and I’m good . . . Look, I’m not a complicated pony. Really. I’m not smart enough to be a complicated pony. I want folks happy and safe. That’s it. If my actions make some ponies able to live their lives, then I’m good.

“Of course, that means that sometimes I have to take lives as well. I never like doing

that. I know some ponies feel a rush when they kill, but it's just something I have to do. And sometimes. . . sometimes I'm really good at it. I wish it was as hard for me as it used to be, but I guess that's growing up, huh? So if I do kill, I try and kill the ponies who cause harm. I do my best to make sure that no pony gets hurt who isn't causing hurt.

"But what I'd really like is a nice place to live with Glory, a kid of my own, in a safe place, with a weekly poker night with my friends. I'm pretty sure that's all I need. If I get that, I'm pretty sure giving whatever I have to everypony else who needs it isn't much of a problem.

"Oh. . . I suppose I should throw 'not dying' in there too....

"Crap. . . can I do this again?"

I waited at the north gate, calmly checking my shotgun, rifle, and twelve millimeter ammo. Fresh healing potions from Triage for the next few days. Food and purified water. The thunderstorm was soaking everything, transforming the quad into a muddy lake.

Glory trotted out of the mist, her beam rifle shifted to the side to compensate for her missing wing. She smiled broadly up at me in her Equestrian Air Guard barding. "Leo didn't want his gun back?" I asked with a smile of my own.

"He did, but I beat him. . ." she said with a chuckle.

"You fought him?" I asked in shock. Glory fighting for a gun?

She brushed her purple mane out of her eyes. "No. I guilt tripped him about almost killing you when you were going to do so much for the Professor, so he dropped it."

I smiled at her. "I love you." She flushed in delight.

Scotch Tape came staggering out of the fog. "Don't go! I'm coming with you."

My smile strained. "You're sure. . ." I'd done all I could to convince her to stay here with Virgo or return to the Crusaders. She remained adamant. Rampage had been right...

"Of course. We stable 99 ponies have to stick together," Scotch said brightly. She wore her brown work goggles and 99 utility barding. I sighed at the sight of her with the nine millimeter automatic pistol. She'd have to go through her first kill all over again. Hopefully it wouldn't be for a while.

“Yeah. We have to stick together,” P-21 said from my side. I jumped. . . okay, I would have jumped clear over Glory if my legs were working right. My blue friend gave me a small smile and shrug. “I’ve stuck it out with you this long. I can manage a few more months. Chapel’s not going anywhere.” His eyes flicked down to Scotch, and for a moment I thought he was going to say something. Then he just flushed and looked away. The filly dropped her eyes with a sigh.

“The Goddess shall not be excluded,” Lacunae pronounced as she trotted forth in her black dress. No gun, but we’d find some way to remedy that. In the meantime, she had her magic. Her purple eyes stared down at me coldly, but then shifted and softened as she smiled. “The Goddess is quite curious about what you will find in the future.”

“So she’s not going to try and make me find Chimera for her?” I asked, arching a brow curiously.

“No. The Goddess anticipates that she may task another to that end. Hopefully that one will be far less. . . stubborn,” Lacunae finished with a soft smile as she looked at me fondly.

I looked out into the mist-shrouded quad and the hazy outlines of the buildings. I expected Rampage to emerge any second. Any second. . .

Any second. . .

“Where’s Rampage?” Scotch Tape asked with a worried frown.

“I guess. . . she’s not coming.” And I supposed that would be for the best. Damn it, it still felt wrong, though!

We filed through the gate, past the guards and the beam turrets. Hopefully I’d made a big enough dent in the ghoulish population that we wouldn’t have to fight for a while. I took point, Glory watched the left, and P-21 watched the right. Scotch Tape was in the middle. Lacunae doffed her dress and took to the air. . . really, why had she bothered putting it on at all? The entire collegiate had seen her wings while the Goddess was in control of her.

I turned back, looking at the gray block buildings through the haze of the rain. For a moment, I thought I saw a white pony with a flash of red atop one building. But then the rain stung my eye and I blinked... and she was gone.

Footnote: 50% to next level.

29. Mortality

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

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

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

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

Is that so wrong?

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

What did my life matter if it bettered theirs?

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

Sometimes, even when you win, you lose.

The rain hissed and splashed into the cold, wet, slimy, and, from the faint ticking from my foreleg, mildly radioactive swamp water slogging around our hooves. Rot-

ting logs and tangled weeds poked out of the obscuring rain, and only my E.F.S. indicated if they should be avoided or not. The only thing I could hope was that anypony, or anything, that could possibly give us trouble wouldn't be stupid enough to go outside in weather like this. An acrid chemical smell was blowing from the north. Not much we could do about that besides breathe through our mouths and made the best time we could.

The plan was simple: head north to EC-1101's last routing point in the Ironmare Naval Base's command center. Somewhere along the way we'd run into the Steel Rangers. Find somepony in charge. Explain how we started this whole mess and get them to stop fighting with the Reapers. Yeah, that should be easy... right... In the meantime, Flash Industries, the O.I.A. office, and Horizon Labs were all in a relatively straight line north of us. I checked my PipBuck again. My eyes kept drifting to that empty square off to the west near the river, just southeast of Toll: Hippocratic Research.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We moved through the rotting, flooded houses. I kept up a constant watch for red bars on my E.F.S., looking away only to flick off the more determined leeches that started to make holes in my barding. I saw two fat frogs watching us pass. Was it

just me, or did they look familiar? Nothing remained of the hopper P-21 had killed earlier, not even bones. Eaten, or liquefied in its own acids? I didn't want to know.

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

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

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

...A building that moved. . .

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

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

After reaching Celestia Boulevard and getting out of the mire (and shedding a dozen slimy hitchhikers), we started looking around for someplace to dry off. The rain had no indication of letting up; if anything, it seemed to be falling even harder. We staggered into a ruined shop in the center of a strip that still seemed more or less intact. It was dry, at least. . . well, drier. I guessed from the large sheaf of wheat on the hanging sign outside the door that it had been some sort of food shop. Empty

Dash inhalers, used syringes, and busted bottles of booze made it pretty clear what it was used for now. . . and, in true raider fashion, somepony had dressed up some yellowed mannequins in studded bondage gear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

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

Glory frowned and knelt as she looked at his limb. "It shouldn't," she said, glancing

up at him but not touching it. With his glower, I couldn't blame her. "I checked Triage's files. You practically have a brand new leg."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

I hate waiting.

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

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

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

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

I guessed it was an indirect 'screw Blackjack.'

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

oooOOOooo

Okay... not quite what I was expecting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vanity sighed, making a face of annoyed resignation. "Good Goddesses, pull yourself together. If anypony sees you like this, they're never going to stop talking!" He herded the exhausted, frazzled-looking Blueblood out the door. "Now, get some sleep, get something to eat, and, above all... wash. Then we'll schedule a proper grooming. You simply have to put her behind you. She's just one silly old mare who can't appreciate you."

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

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

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

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

"If I knew what a big baby he was going to be, I would have passed it on to Luna." Rarity sniffed disdainfully. "I'm sure she would have helped him get over it far more

efficiently and effectively. Likely with a wartime commission,” she said sourly as she flopped back against the pillows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sometimes we make mistakes in those we choose to love,” he replied softly, and her smile disappeared as she looked away. He stroked that ruffled mane. “How’s Fluttershy?” he asked in a gentle, concerned tone.

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

Vanity sighed. “Actually, I think he is.” Oddly, Rarity’s satisfaction seemed to turn to a thin sympathy. “He never meant to hurt her. But he did, and he knows it. And I

don't think he'll ever forgive himself for it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

oooOOOooo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was soon corrected.

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

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

The rain hadn’t let up much. It came down in heavy sheets that seemed to wave over the cracked ground. I felt physically bruised, despite my barding. Lacunae’s

rain shield barely covered herself, Scotch, and P-21. The only silver lining I could think of was that the rain kept visibility to almost nothing; as long as I had an E.F.S. and anything dangerous didn't, we'd probably be able to avoid hostiles. We were now following the churning brown flow of the rain-swelled river. The further north we went, the bigger and more elaborate the shops became. The ones here were built along a walkway the opposite side of which had a railing and a wall straight down to the water.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not remembering sucks.

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

forget.

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

"Come on. Let's find the others," I said, walking towards the back rooms. We found P-21 tapping away on the manager's terminal. A picture on the wall showed an aged gray buck grinning smugly with a huge cowboy hat on his head and a sheriff's star on his vest. 'Our founder,' read the caption. 'Sharing and Caring is for suckers.' There was an odd word... an obscure word rarely used in 99. I'd always wondered about it, but it seemed to summarize the picture perfectly: Schmuck.

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

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

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

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

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

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

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

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

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

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

So take it easy. Brohoof.

Bro.

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

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

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

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

Bro.

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

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

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

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

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

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

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

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

Lights are flickering again, dunno how much longer we'll have power. Shields are still up, so hopefully somepony comes out of the city to get us. Just wish shit would stop screaming. I think there's somepony nearby that keeps on yelling... I'd bring them in here if they'd just stop. Makes my head hurt. Till then, we'll just keep hopin'. Take care.

Bro.

Shit. Now I knew why P-21'd not shown me that one. Those little reminders of life...

of millions who died for no reason. As ‘millions of ponies,’ you could ignore it. ‘Lots of ponies died. Whatever.’ But turn one of those millions into ‘Bro,’ and suddenly I was sniffing and rubbing my eyes. The Dealer just looked at me from the corner office, his lips pressed tightly together in a stark frown as he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

“The door had been locked...” I murmured.

“To the outside. There wasn’t anything to stop us from locking it once we were—” P21 began, then stopped. He looked around. “Do you hear that?”

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

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

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

But that was nothing compared to the screaming.

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

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

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

Six months might have been overly optimistic.

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

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

I looked at Lacunae, but she could barely stand, let alone teleport. "Okay. We're stuck, but we know about it. So, no pony fall asleep. If your healing potions have any purple at all left, drink them. If not, toss them." Stupid country banjos played some folksy tune as the lights now filled the store with steady illumination.

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

Okay, right now, I was really missing a super-strong striped mare. If she showed up before we keeled over, I'd give her a nice big happy kiss. "Okay. Glory, look for a back door or window or anything. I'll take a broken leg jumping from a third story

window at this point.” She nodded at once and headed for the stairs. “P-21, can you rig a bomb to blow open the doors?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

>Store automation: On

>Lights: On

>Ambiance: On

>Coffee Machine: Warning. Critical failure!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

covered floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know what it was. I was pretty messed up at that point. But I don’t think it’s

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

at each other.

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

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

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

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

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

P-21 looked up at the bridge; the first fifty feet was completely open. “No. . . .”

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

This just screamed ‘bad idea’, but what could I do? Somepony had to pry into other pony’s business. Might as well be me. “Well, lets go say hello. . . .”

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

As I stepped onto the bridge, my PipBuck chirped. ‘Fallen Arch’ appeared in my E.F.S.’s navigation tool. Now there was a name to inspire trust and community.

As I approached the main gate, the back hatch of a covered steel wagon, the two watchponies stationed above it turned and started. They began banging on a metal drum, calling more to the gate.

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

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

“What do you want?” The buck yelled.

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

“Go away,” the buck retorted.

“I got caps for trade.”

“I said go away!” and there was a rifle shot pinging off the asphalt before me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fallen Arch wasn't much as far as settlements went. I gathered its name was due to

a hundred-foot span of fallen bridge. A half-dozen wagons had been converted into rusty shelters. "I need everypony out here right now," I called out into the rain. One by one, the bucks emerged. . . and only bucks. There were maybe eight or ten. My eye swept the rusted shelters. . . but there was one building full of blue bars. "I said everypony!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clover exploded.

It wasn’t like a grenade or anything I’d experienced. In fact the detonation was a sharp ‘KraK’ noise. The explosion was focused by the heavy metal collar. After all, no pony wanted a slave whose death might injure the owner. The resulting blast sent a pink hourglass fanning out above and below the collar as everything between her head and shoulders was atomized. Pieces of hot pony mixed with the rain.

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

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

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

I figured the most intact wagon would be his, but they were all pretty thrashed. I ignored the bullets biting into me; the burning pain helped me focus as I reloaded the antipersonnel rounds. I saw a door closing and raced to it, ramming it open with my shoulder. A stallion was trying to hide under his bed! Not the buck I needed, though!

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You scrapped my only detonator." Why didn't I feel any better as he reached up to

the clasp of his collar? “Ever hear of linked collars, Security? Without the detonator setting them off... if one goes off... they all go off.” I felt a sensation like I’d just had my belly sliced open and everything had tumbled out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if he’d ever do such a thing. . .

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

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

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

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

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

Then another star. Another. Another. . .

Another. . .

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

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

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

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

Why? I was so good at it.

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

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

'Hoofington Rises.'

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

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

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

“I get the idea, Glory.” I replied with a smile, the first little smile I’d given in hours.

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

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

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

Then the ground exploded.

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

Oh. Hello, Steel Rangers.

A pair of them. They were firing missiles and guns at my friend and the filly levitated besides her. The mare’s purple shield flashed white with every impact. Lacunae focused all her strength on keeping it up, and more missiles from one of the suits

of power armor streaked towards her. The shield flashed again and again as she struggled to maintain it.

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

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

I chowed down on a tablet of Buck and charged at the cover of the first Steel Ranger. My inventory said I'd picked up some Flash from somewhere. Fuck it. I floated it out as I ran as fast as my clattering braces allowed and bit on the tube, letting the chem fill my lungs. Time slowed to a crawl as I closed the distance. The Steel Ranger seemed to realize there was threat other than my alicorn friend. I left the Flash-induced acceleration just in time to enter the slow time of S.A.T.S. and toggle four shots to the Ranger's skull.

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

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

I'm so sick of bodies.

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

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

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

"Salad? You okay?" asked the other as I backed off. For a moment I was certain I was finished. Then she turned to where the other stood on a balcony, raining gatling fire down on Lacunae. Her magic arrows had gouged holes in its armor, but it still fired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Him? Him wh—” Fruit Salad began, but suddenly shook their head hard. “Oh no, not him! That’s crazy, Radish! That guy’s a nutcase!”

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

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

“You just don’t like him because he’s a unicorn,” Radishes chided.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. That’s their main base. Not a settlement, just where their leader, Diamond, issues orders.”

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

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

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

“Just the Highlanders, but they’re not as bad as the rest. You can find them off to the east. Some zebra tribals or something to the northeast. Ghouls, of course, creeping all over the place. And the damned Enclave.” Radishes said, and at once Glory stepped forward.

“What’s that about the Enclave?” the gray pegasus asked with a worried frown.

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

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

“Thanks. Gotta get Hoofington under control. Like the Star Paladin says, it’s our duty to safeguard the technology of the Kingdom. Can’t let these Reapers control the city,” Fruit Salad said, turning to Radishes. “Come on. Let’s go play some more tag.” The two disappeared into the rain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

they would have gutted your stable to possess it and then locked it up somewhere rather than use it.”

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

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

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

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

Because I didn’t want my friends hurt anymore.

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

“I...” I rasped, then choked. I couldn’t say it. I had to, but I couldn’t.

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

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

“I don’t want to lose you. I... I don’t want you hurt. None of you.” The words were like poison dripping out of my mouth. “I don’t want P-21 to have to fight mares like... like the Overmare. I don’t want Lacunae killed for being what she is. I need to keep

doing this... but you... you don't. You can leave... go back to Chapel. Go have a life that's not following me around getting shot up." I kept seeing Clover exploding before my eye, seeing Glory's wing peel away, seeing P-21 raped by the Overmare, me ramming vigilance into Lacunae's mouth... images coming again and again. I imagined a small pegasus with a sweeping mane holding me like Mom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory sighed softly. "I know that you're scared about losing us, Blackjack. I am too. But I'm more afraid for you. You want to help everypony so much, and you want to

help us, too. Let us help you, Blackjack. If something bad happens... it happens. But as long as we can, we'll be with you."

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

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

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

Lacunae had taken a bath in some radioactive sludge we'd found in the office building's basement (and what it was doing there I didn't want to know) to regenerate her injuries. There was something fundamentally disturbing about the way she splashed it all over herself. Nopony should have that much fun in magical waste. Once she rejoined us, I pointed out the unguarded door, letting her see the location through my scope. "Can you teleport us all to that little side door?"

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

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

We went back down to the main floor and Lacunae trotted off to soak up a little more

radiation while I explained the plan to Fruit Salad and Radishes. “That’s not much of a plan, but if you’re sure she can get you inside. . . well, we’d be happy to keep them nice and riled up out front. How were you five planning on getting out?”

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

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

I pressed my lips together for a moment. “She’s my friend.” That’s all I needed to and would say on the subject.

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

Way to keep up the positive thinking, Blackjack.

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

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

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

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

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

Then I learned how Steel Rangers played tag. Brown Betty let out a surprisingly

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

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

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

The lock clicked. I pulled the door open with my magic, and my friends darted inside. I hopped in last and we pulled the door shut. The narrow hall was strewn with junk, but nothing recent. Finally, we'd gotten lucky; it looked like no pony used this section of the building. It'd been picked through at least once, but despite everything, we found up some junk that might be useful as we moved through the choked offices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twilight’s voice frayed in frustration. “But why can’t we use something else? A nonlethal spell?”

“I agree,” Fluttershy chimed in. “I vote for the nonlethal.”

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

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

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

“I know. It’s just. . .” Twilight trailed off.

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

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

Diamond snorted and said derisively, “You’ll merely provide some magical expertise, and nopony’s asking you to put your hoof in personally. For instance, we’re trying to find a gem that’s better than diamond for the spell matrix. Diamonds are useful but horribly expensive.”

“You’d want something like a ruby or red sapphire, preferably a well tuned fire ru—” Twilight started to say in a perfunctory tone, then cut herself off. “Oh. . .”

“See?” Goldenblood said in his raspy, hacking voice. “That’s not so hard after all.”

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

There was a low grunt. “I don’t like it. . . but all right.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“One would hope,” he muttered.

“I’m taking you someplace you can rest, Golden,” Fluttershy said firmly. . . or as firmly as Fluttershy ever said anything. “If that’s okay with you.”

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

The coughing drew fainter and fainter. Finally, Twilight Sparkle said, “Is he trying to work himself to death or something?”

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

“Pffft. My ministry’s all done,” Rainbow Dash chuckled.

“Easy when yer ministry’s not doin’ nothing.”

“Hey, we do things. Awesome things. Which is why we’re done first.” But I thought about the conversation she’d had with Goldenblood and that ratty book from Rivets’s ancestor. What was the Ministry of Awesome really planning? “Anyway, all these stupid meetings made me miss breakfast. Want to go get some lunch? We can hang out together like old times!”

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

Applejack sighed. “Yeah. And I got... let’s see here... meetin’... meetin’... meetin’... oh, lookie here... another meetin’.” She sighed. “I’m plum meetin’ed out.”

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

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

“Yeah. It’s a peck more responsibility than just applebuckin, that’s fer sure.”

Rainbow Dash sighed. “Just don’t like it. Well, then, I guess I’d better get back to Cloudsdale... or something.”

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

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

We picked our way through the trashed offices. There were a few other terminals with snippets of information. Apparently there were shipments being misplaced;

spark batteries and spark generators for Stables 90 and 92 were missing. Heads were going to roll. Questions about the AER series and the swap from rubies to emeralds. A notice of a pony having a baby. A notice of praise for the mother. Five nasty comments about how she got that way. Honestly, didn't ponies have anything better to do two centuries ago?

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

Idea . . .

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

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

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

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

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

Even better, from the look that spread across her face a moment later, she'd finally clued to the fact that the sword was quite sharp and I did not look like miss happy pony. She came quietly along back into the offices and we had a little chat. Occa-

sionally she lapsed into threats about how the Flash Fillies were going to dust me, but a little tap of the sword against her neck snapped her out of that.

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

Wonderglue is aptly named.

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

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

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

"The Enclave is not yet prepared to engage in open hostilities with the Rangers, Diamond. Our arrangement was with you. And you have yet to fulfill your end of the agreement," the pegasus replied calmly and reasonably. He had two power-armored pegasus troopers with him, and Diamond had a half dozen Fillies around her. "We need those systems."

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

Talismans? What kind of talismans? What did Lighthooves want with talismans?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then don't," I replied with a smile. "And don't worry about failing me."

"Yeah, worry about getting caught," he muttered. There wasn't much difference between him and Sparkler now, and the mare was just watching us with a disturbed look. He trotted to Sparkler, who tried to pull back, but with her hooves glued to the floor, well. . . He whispered something in her ear, and her eyes widened. She

nodded absently, then started and glared. But that seemed to be answer enough.

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

Please know what you’re doing, P-21.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So. You’ve got a Vertibuck to call and two rangers outside to go dust. I have

to make sure it's ready to move," she said, and then feigned remembering, "Oh yes. And get you those worthless talismans. Honestly, doesn't the Enclave have targeting talismans of their own?"

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

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

The elevator doors beneath us chimed faintly and then opened. A moment later, they closed again. I tapped the gem beside the elevator doors on our level, and they opened. The Flasher looked back at me in shock just long enough for me to slam Taurus's rifle butt into her face. In seconds, we'd ponypiled into the now cramped elevator. I looked down at P-21. "You planned to get caught?"

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

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

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

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

"Oh! Well, then, welcome to Flash Industries, home to many amazing and miraculous magical products. I'm sorry, but Miss Diamond isn't available at the moment. I'm sorry, but all senior staff are unavailable at the moment. If you would like to

schedule an appointment, I will do so now. If you would like to wait, I would be happy to answer any and all questions you might have about Flash Industries until somepony becomes available to see you.” The white mare smiled as she stared at me with her blue eyes. She reminded me of a cleaner, nicer version of the mare below.

“You’re Diamond’s secretary?” Glory asked with a concerned frown.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m sorry, but that’s not allowed. If you would like to wait until Miss Diamond is available or schedule an appointment, please do so now,” the projection said brightly.

“What are you?” Scotch Tape asked. “A ghost?”

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

“What kind of creations?” Glory asked.

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

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

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

So they didn’t like the word ‘weapon’? Surprise surprise. “What about-“

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

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

“Okay. So tell me—“ I started.

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

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

“But it didn’t have enough power,” I blurted. “The Hoofington shield failed because it didn’t have enough energy.” I looked out the window and. . . looked at a perfectly intact city! It was even sunny. The Core rose like a cluster of smoky quartz. It even glistened. But. . . there was something off about the image. I stretched out a hoof and the entire window shimmered where my hoof penetrated. I felt grimy glass beneath it.

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

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

“What?” she blinked in confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I slipped into S.A.T.S. before my eye closed completely, queued up two attacks, and hoped for the best. My first shot ignored the giant glowing target and struck the blue gemstone squarely. It shattered with a tiny pop of blue smoke. The other

fractured and I had to blast three times before a lucky pellet smashed the gem. The alicorns winked out. “Don’t worry about the alicorn. Target the gems,” I said as they reappeared, this time with red gemstones. Beams of burning energy swept across the reception room, and all of us save Lacunae dove for cover. Glory yelped as a line of char was drawn from her scarred flank down to her hoof. I swore, aiming for the fire rubies. However, a small shield appeared around each, and my pellets were harmlessly deflected.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m Security. I’m here to rescue you,” I said, a little skeptically. “I mean, if you’re not busy?”

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

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

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

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

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

At that moment, the elevator door chimed and the buck fell from my attention as eight Flashers spilled out and immediately began firing red beams of incineration magic at the lot of us. The bed was the biggest thing for Glory and I to take cover behind, so we found ourselves shooting over Turnip as I tried to slash him free. Splitting my concentration wasn't doing much good for either accuracy. I swapped to the rifle, saving my S.A.T.S. for Diamond.

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

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

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

The bullets just flicked right off the shield. Shit, I hated being right sometimes. Diamond set herself and the glowing gatling beam weapon began to strafe over the entire office in a rain of red blasts. My barding sizzled and Glory barely ducked as

the beams walked from one end of the office to the other. Some miracle reached out and shielded Turnip's bits from being vaporized. "You're dusted! All of you!"

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

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

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

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

Goldenblood.

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

"You're Goldenblood," I murmured softly. I was having difficulty standing... even breathing. "You're... you..." What was I supposed to be feeling right now?

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

He looked a touch annoyed at my speechlessness. "You're a bit overwhelmed. I'm just glad I was able to help. Now." He took a deep breath. "About EC-1101."

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

"What did you do to Fluttershy?" I asked softly.

"Fluttershy?" it was just a moment. Just a moment of incomprehension and confusion.

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

He scowled at me, "How dare you-" No shock that I knew he'd killed a dead mare to protect one of his secrets.

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

Suddenly, the beams flashed on my leg and I felt a tangible force lift the limb into the air. Goldenblood's voice had dissolved into an mechanical, inequine scream. "GIVE IT TO ME!" The last word rose higher and higher as I was lifted up. I had no idea where the magical shield came from; perhaps it was built into the office? Regardless, it hauled me up by my PipBuck. "GIVE IT GIVEIT GIVEITGIVE GIVEGIVEITITITIT..." it rattled madly. Two other shields around my rear hooves were pulling in the opposite direction. I lifted my shotgun, but a beam sliced it in two. Then my focus went all to hell as I felt my torso start to stretch.

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

"Glory! Get out of here!" I screamed... and kept screaming. Torn to pieces. Slowly. Exactly what I deserved for Scoodle. For the clinic. For Clover. This really wasn't that bad. This was poetic. Glory had cut him free. Now they could run as the voice screamed higher and higher.

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

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

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

A blue band flashed.

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

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

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

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

Then the floor below us gave a colossal shudder and broke free with a roar that made my ears throb. The entire building shook, and I felt the PipBuck start to twist out of that metal fork. The next floor gave. Then the next. And now the entire gutted shell of Flash Industries was full of collapsing concrete and steel, noise and choking

dust. My eyes burned, but I couldn't look away... she was starting to slip from my grasp. I could barely breathe... could hardly see... as the collapse finally reached whatever depths were in the tower, probably crushing the maneframe to dust. Bit by bit, I felt my left leg stretch. The brace began to give way. "Hold on!" I yelled, unable to do more than hang there. I felt the PipBuck slowly working free.

I felt Glory slipping away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory fell.

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

Glory.

Glory.

Glory...

Footnote: 75% to level

30. Allegiances

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

death. When we reunited, I had drive, purpose, and meaning. I had hope.

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

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

I'm not a smart pony.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

oooOOOooo

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

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

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

friend Steam? Well, there was an accident.”

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

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

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

“Not this, sweetheart.” Momma swallowed hard. “She’s dead.”

Dead? Dead. Dead! Dead dead dead dead. Deaded? Deads? It sounded like a stupid word. “What’s that mean?”

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

“Well, just. . . go and bring her back!” There. ‘Nuff said. Momma could do it. Momma could do anything.

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

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

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

“Even you, Momma?”

“Even me, Fishy.” She said it so gently that somehow it hurt even more. Like a dress

rehearsal for when the day came. “But as long as we remember how they loved us, they’re never really gone. Okay, Fishy?”

“Yes, Momma, I’ll remember,” I’d promised. I’d forgotten a week later, till now.

oooOOOooo

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

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

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

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

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

Wait. . .

I carefully lifted a hoof and felt the leg curled around my side. I looked at the cloud-gray feathers resting gently along my flank and lower leg. I felt the warmth of breath

on my neck, and for the longest time I could hardly breathe. Slowly, I summoned the courage to turn my head and look over my shoulder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s fine. . .” And, honestly, at that moment, I couldn’t care less. I was sure that, eventually, I’d find out what he wanted them for and be all angry about it, but right now I’d have giftwrapped the talismans for him.

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

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

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

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

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

“You tend to do that,” Lighthooves said dryly. “In any case, let’s not quibble over each other’s degrees of monsterdom. Please believe me when I say that everything

I've done has been to preserve my home and my people," he said calmly. I really didn't want to hear it. Give me my braces and gear. I had a shower for two to arrange. By the Goddesses, I would build a shower for two just for us if I had to. Just watch me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory bit her lip. "It was an event... ten... twenty years after the bombs fell. The sun and the moon... they were in the sky together. And then... then they came together." I gawked at her in shock. They couldn't come together. How could they ever come together?! "Pegasi thought that it was some final zebra superweapon. That the moon would burn up, the sun would go out, and the world would end. But apparently, it was only temporary. The moon had moved between the sun and Equestria... but the chaos was terrible."

Lighthooves nodded grimly. "In the end, it was the military that restored order. Mar-

tial law was declared. Neighvarro and Thunderhead dispatched troops to quell the rioting. And when it was over, the military formed into a unified force that's persisted to today. The Enclave. The Grand Pegasus Enclave," he said with a mirthless smile, "and its lie of democracy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory flushed and retorted “Well, why not?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. I did not want Lighthooves thinking about Spike. “You think you should return to the surface?”

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

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

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

He gestured abstractly with his wings as he paced. “Ideally, I would have us re-

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

So he was fine killing with everypony he needed to so long as Thunderhead was protected. "And taint?" I asked, making him blink, but then he gave a dismissive snort.

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

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

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

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

The crimson pegasus rubbed his nose with a wing, his eyes half narrowed as he looked at both of us. "Yes, it might seem more prudent to interrogate you, extract your memories, and learn everything you've done for the last few weeks. But there are some benefits to simply letting you go," he replied as he walked to a rotten map of Equestria taped to the wall. "Expedience, for one. We may have years before we must act, but we might have only days. The other reason is simple: you are exceptionally disruptive, Blackjack. With you trotting around, my opposition is far more likely to waste time dealing with you than paying attention to me. Also, there's

the slim chance that you might come to realize that I'm right. A mare of your talents could be a potent asset."

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

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

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

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

"Did you get a chance to poke around their maneframe?" I asked, and Glory gasped. He looked coolly from Glory to myself. "Yes, but the data within was encrypted."

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

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

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

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

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

Glory gaped. "What?"

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

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

“And save his life,” Lighthooves countered.

“What?” I asked, keeping my eye on him.

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

“They wouldn’t,” Glory muttered weakly.

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

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

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

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

Finally, she took a deep breath. “No,” she said, and his amiable expression hardened a moment. Then he shrugged as if it was no matter. But from the look on her

face, she wasn't done yet. "No, but I will talk with him."

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

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

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

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

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

He curled his lips. "Of course."

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

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

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

Except...

"Glory, I really... I don't think..." What was the matter with me? We had privacy.

I was probably the cleanest I was going to get in a long while. Goddesses knew I needed it after that little ‘adventure’ with Rarity and Vanity. But for some reason, my mind was telling me this was wrong and I should stop it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, sweet Celestia save me, I could feel! And what was inflicted upon me was some of the most intense feeling in my entire life. Some sour, rational, sane part of my mind grumped that it was no time for... this! That part was grabbed by the rest of my brain, beaten with rubber hoses, and tossed into that closet in the back of my mind. I crested, wailing into the gag, and she didn’t relent.

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

When we’d finished she’d returned my sight to me, and I was feeling quite confused and exceptionally buttery inside. I wanted to ask where she’d learned to do such things, but the taste of mare had completely overridden my ability to think. Good

thing too, because my brain was trying to come up with all kinds of reasons for why what we'd done was wrong and undeserved. I was a bad pony who'd almost got her killed. . . but that voice was dulled by the fact that Glory had done almost everything. She'd decided it and done it. And so that sour pony lurked in the back of my mind muttering bad things about me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory nodded. "Thank you, Northstar." The gray mare helped me to my hooves as we trotted through the weather station. There were eight or nine pegasi working on imported terminals and checking paperwork; most of them gave at least a glance in my direction as we passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The terminal screen flickered for a moment, then coalesced into the image of a middle-aged buck just approaching elderly status. His coat was a rich plum and his purple mane was shot with gray. I noted, with a touch of concern, he also had

an eyepatch covering his left eye and the left side of his face rippled with old scars that hadn't quite worn away. His gray eye widened in shock and he half rose to his hooves. "Morning?"

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

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

"No Father. I'm fine."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry, Father. I know you want to keep me safe, but I'm not your little sunrise anymore," she replied. She glanced over at Lighthooves and then back at the screen. "I'm here with an Operative Lighthooves. He says that things are bad between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Really bad. And the VC is driving it." Tell him

Lighthooves burned off your cutie marks, Glory. I wanted to shout it, but Northstar looked at me and shook her head slowly. I bit my tongue.

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

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

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

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

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

“Morning Glory, who’s this?” His tone was light, but I suspected that his death gaze was merely charging up.

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

“I see,” he replied evenly, and muttered, “I’m never getting grandfoals at this rate. . .” Then his eye hardened on me. “Miss Blackjack, I’ve been guarding and protecting Thunderhead my entire life. Thunderhead needs the VC. We’re just realizing how badly we need metal and materials from the surface. And we’re becoming an example of just how much the surface offers us. In time, the Enclave military and other

cities will come around to our way of thinking. The military won't risk damaging Shadowbolt tower. They need it."

"But—" I began weakly.

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

"Right," was all I could mutter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Too bad."

"And the twins?"

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

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

can bring them down to see the surface.”

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

“And you, Father.”

“Sunshine and rainbows, Morning Glory.”

“And clear skies ahead, Father.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But I... you... she... we...” I collapsed on my haunches with a clatter. “What the hell is wrong with all you pegasi?! This cloak and dagger stuff... it just isn’t healthy!” All this intrigue was starting to make my head hurt. The flashing and numbers didn’t help much either. What the hay was my PipBuck doing?

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

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

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

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

Fifteen minutes later, we were out of there. I had a splitting headache from that download, I really did not want to be around Lighthooves any longer, and almost

everything around me was made of clouds! Intangible gear is where I draw the line! Lighthooves seemed exceptionally pleased with himself, which didn't do me any favors either. Fortunately, Glory and I were escorted out of Weather Monitoring One by Northstar. I'd poked her black carapace armor and was relieved to find it quite solid under my hoof.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

see Glory comparing earth ponies to radroaches, but she was still convinced that her people and her home were the best future for Equestria.

And maybe she was right.

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

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

Northstar sighed. "And she'll probably send me somewhere else. Why is nothing ever easy?"

I chuckled. "Cause then it just wouldn't be any fun."

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

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

So why was my mane going so crazy?

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

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

things, but Glory didn't have either of those advantages.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe. Or it’s possibly a knockoff. Or maybe somepony in the Wasteland found enough parts to make one. After all, why only make three when you can have nine at triple the price, only the six get to be kept secret for your own sinister ends?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I turned my back to Glory so she couldn’t see my face. “I almost lost her, Spike.” I said softly as I looked at the Spritebot’s remaining eye. “She was right there in

front of me and I... she... she fell. And I couldn't do... do anything!" I felt myself melting down as I let myself finally face that horrible truth. "One of my enemies saved her to fuck with me... and I'm so happy she's alive. Goddess... I'm so happy! But I'm scared shitless it'll happen again, Spike!" My legs were shaking so badly that I couldn't hold on to the robot. I took a deep sniff. "I don't know what to do. I don't. I want to keep her safe... and happy..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah," I replied and wiped my face for any treasonous tears as I trotted towards

her. “Well, nothing’s going to stop u—” A spasm of pain shot up my leg and it was all I could do not to scream as I sprawled out on my face in the muck. What in the Goddess was-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Did I mention there wasn't a swimming pool in 99? Oh, and that I was wearing combat armor? And that I had four surprisingly heavy leg braces on? I swam like I had an orange pony bellowing in my ear to keep moving. Be strong! Be tough! Don't let this stop me! I couldn't let this stop me. I could hear grinding below me... and I imagined a pump with great chopping blades to break up the garbage pulled through it.

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

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

I was going to get us both killed.

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

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

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

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

That shaft that was rapidly filling with water!

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

There was a metallic explosion, and like that I was once more in the air. I tumbled end over end for a moment in the jet of water before I finally slipped off and landed on

my back. Glory flopped down next to me, coughing and hacking up water. The end of her rifle had snapped in a sharp L shape. I had no idea how she was supposed to fix it now. I looked up at the gray clouds and did the only thing appropriate at a moment like this.

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

And an old buck chuckled, “Well, damn! Don’t you two know just how to make an entrance!”

Contrary to what some may believe, travel by pipe, while fast, is neither comfortable nor safe. In a few minutes, we’d travelled nearly a mile west and popped out right next to a battered but intact fire station. From the second floor I could see a glimpse of the naval base and harbor to the north. Downstairs, next to the rusting fire pump wagons, the old buck’s brahmin were warming up and taking a load off their powerful frames. A filly was feeding them piles of yellowed grass and thorny bushes—brahmin could apparently eat anything, no matter how radioactive or poisoned—while a sour-looking mare scraped away shovelfuls of their reeking dung.

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

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

“Never seen the like! Ground rumbling and shaking fit to split in two, and from it issued not just a fountain but two of the greatest beauties as could ever be imagined. I confess I could tell this story to everypony I meet the rest of my days and they’d never believe it!” he said as he slapped his hoof on his knee. I had to admit, I didn’t feel very beautiful. My barding was thrashed and waterlogged, my leg braces were

bent, and I was missing a patch of skin along the left side of my face where it'd brushed against the side of the pipe. Glory was even worse off. Her legs and rump looked as if they'd been sanded raw.

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

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

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

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

"But that's a gatling beam frame!"

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

"Twelve hundred," she countered at once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ve got an IF-80 and an IF-84 Stampede riot gun,” he replied.

“Twelve gauge?”

“Of course.”

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

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

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

“Good luck,” he replied with a chuckle. “Fact is, a few more days and those would have spoiled, so. . . eh. . .” He gave a shrug as he took his caps and carefully

measured them out in stacks to count them. He looked at me and her, then sighed. “What?” I asked with a small smile. I’d seen that look before from Mom: vaguely disapproving but with a hint of amusement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Stable 94 was. . . well, pretty darn close to here, actually,” he said. He dug into one of his bags, took out a strange brown cigar, bit off the top, and then took out a brass lighter and lit the end with that earth pony deftness I so admired. What they did with their hooves was as magical as what I did with my horn or what pegasi did with their wings. “Pretty funny stable, now that I think about it. Whole place was based on money. Overpony was whatever pony had the most money. Everything was for

sale. Everything! You could buy, borrow, rent, lease, exchange, or barter anything and everything you wanted. Sell your kids. Sell yourself. One big endless market of wheeling and dealing. And if you went broke, you got kicked out.”

“And you went broke?” Glory asked.

“Oh, heck no!” He broke out laughing. “Me? Go broke? Why, you are looking at a three time Overpony of Stable 94! Nah. See, some of us were really good at the game. So we changed the rules. Charged what we wanted and kept most of the stable dirt poor. Good for us. Bad for everypony else. Then some poor pony in 94. . . and this was when I wasn’t Overpony, I must add. . . figured out that, if they wanted all our comfy things, then all they’d have to do was take them. So they rounded up a dozen of us and tossed us right out the door.” He rubbed his chin. “Might be that charging ponies for air was going a mite too far.”

I glanced over at Glory. Really? You think? I smiled. “So what happened then?”

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

“You sold each other?” Glory gasped.

“Now, I know it sounds harsh, but we were buying and selling each other in 94 well before all this. Granted, I wasn’t too happy to be one of the ones shoved in a cage, but it saved my life. I learned a lot from the nomads I was living with. Those eight, well, they might have had some guns, but I never did hear from them again. I made myself a useful slave and within two years purchased my freedom from the tribe chief. Got out on my own, hooked up with a ghoul to start our business; I was the handsome face and she was the set of wings that got us from place to place while she was hammering out a guide to the Wasteland.” He groaned and rubbed his hooves. “When I think of her wanting me to sneak into a radigator nest to ‘observe wasteland wildlife’ . . .” he shivered and shook his head. “Eventually, we parted ways. . . . she wanted to sell it for cheap. Me. . . I fell in with a crazy bunch who’d be my friends.”

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

“Companions? You make it sound like it was a big thing!” he chuckled. “Nah, we were just friends. I figured they’d be handy to hide behind while everypony was shooting at us. They probably would have been dead a dozen times over if it wasn’t

for me. Did you know that the Professor wouldn't loot corpses? Guns, ammo, caps and chems just left behind before I came along! And Big Daddy wouldn't haggle. Just took whatever price was quoted him!" He sighed, took a long pull on the brown wrap, and let out a long stream of rich gray smoke. "But they were a good bunch in a world full of bad."

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

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

Then he gave a long sigh. "Sometimes, I wish we'd never thought of coming out here. Even FillyDee isn't as bad as this damned city. But we were young and sure of ourselves and DJ Pon3 made us an offer to re-establish contact with the MASEBS towers out east. So we trotted all the way out here." He gave a sad smile. "Might be I was a touch nostalgic for old 94."

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

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

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

“Save it? Fuck no. I set out to plunder it! And you can’t imagine how much plunder there was in this place. A cornucopia of caps, bullets, bombs, beams. . . like half the weapons of the war just here for the taking. Saving the Hoof grew up bit by bit. We found Dawn’s tribe slaughtered. We kept coming across more and more ugly sights. 94 was gone. . . some genius had opened the stable to the outside to ‘trade’ and discovered just now nasty the locals were.” He sighed and shook his head. “Never would have happened with me as Overpony. No siree.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What happened?” Glory asked.

“Dawn,” he muttered, then looked at her. “Found some buck who’d tumbled from the sky all burned up. Nursed him back to health. Awesome didn’t like that one bit. He’d always been sweet on her. So when the buck wanted to go home and offered to take Dawn with him...” He blew out a long stream of smoke. “Got ugly. Awesome called her a whore. Big Daddy beat the snot out of him. Carrots said she should go. Prof wanted her to stay. Dawn left in tears.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“For a time, I figured we’d make things better on our own. I had a reputation as a fair business buck... maybe a bit of a loose wag... but folks saw trading as a better alternative to taking. Did all I could to keep trade going. I figured we’d be like the Ministry Mares of old... the five of us would just work until finally the Hoof’s problems were gone. But it didn’t turn out that way. The Society ponies used the Collegiate to make their plantations, then screwed ‘em. The Rangers and the Collegiate fight over scraps of technology. The Reapers and Rangers rip each other

apart on general principles. And the Reapers and the Society ponies are in a take and take relationship. Only us Finders have managed to keep ourselves out of it. Till Usury had to go and start slaving.” He sighed at my scowl. “Now she’s scraping up brahmin turds.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I dunno...” she muttered, swallowing. “An hour... two...?”

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

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

“Afterwards,” Glory said firmly. She lifted the bottle to my lips. “Take a good long drink... in case this memory is shorter than we think it is.” I did, feeling the alcohol burn down my throat and settle in my stomach. “Another,” she said firmly. Well, always follow the orders of your medical pony. Gulp. “And one more for luck,” she said with a nervous smile. I closed my eye and took three gulps off the bottle.

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

oooOOOooo

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

Sweet Celestia. I knew this buck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Please don’t use the director voice,” Fluttershy said as she closed her eyes.

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

“Please don’t tell her. It was just one time!” Fluttershy said, then clasped her hooves

over her mouth. Slowly, she melted as he just looked at her. Finally, she squeaked, “She collapsed at work the other day. She’d been up for days working and working and working. She’s taking this... thing. It’s called Dash. She had little inhalers all over her office. Apparently, she ran out and was trying to make more when she collapsed. Her secretary found her.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe. We’ll have to see,” he replied softly.

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

“I know...” he replied after the kiss was broken.

For a moment, I was afraid I was going to have to endure another marathon sex memory, but the pair simply cuddled. Fluttershy wore glasses as she shuffled through papers and he read reports about the Equestrian Space Program. He

asked her about her forays into memory modification spells for dealing with emotional traumas. She asked him what names he was thinking of for the baby. “As long as it doesn’t have ‘blood’ in the name,” was his only requirement.

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

“It’s lovely! Did you get it from Rarity?” she said as she nudged it with her hoof.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sighed and pressed a button. “Robronco HQ please, ladies,” he said into a speaker. The wagon lifted into the air and started towards the city core. If I’d thought he’d use now to dig up all kinds of secret information, I was disappointed. He settled back, took out a picture of Fluttershy, and just stared at it for almost the entirety of the flight. Finally, the skywagon landed, and his horn packed up several things into his saddlebags before he stepped out. There were four pegasi harnessed to it and

four more armed with high-power automatic rifles. “Thank you, ladies,” he said with a respectful nod to the team before trotting towards an elevator.

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

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

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

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

“Settling in to our cozy new accommodations courtesy of the Ministry of Wartime Technology and the Hoofington Reconstruction effort,” he replied. Goldenblood looked at several metallic spheres. “Ah. . . is this that spritebot I’ve read up on?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s what I need to figure out, Mr. Horse.” Goldenblood said softly as he stared

at the blood and brains on the tip of the rod, the last wisps disappearing into the silvery metal. “That’s what I need to figure out. . .”

oooOOOooo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t want to live as a Gorgon or a manticores-thing. And my life isn’t worth the

damage he'll do to the wasteland with Chimera," I said softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'd never seen a mare destroyed before. In that moment, I took away everything from her, even her revenge. She pulled the gun from my throat and trotted away to

a filthy corner. A few more weeks of me in misery was the most she could hope for. I wished there was some way I could have helped her. Something I could have given her. At this point, even revenge would have been a gift to a mare who had almost nothing. She was left following her father, cleaning up after his brahmin.

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

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

Glory was finalizing things when I spotted something in the corner. The sight of it made my heart beat a little faster as I stared at the black case. "Add this too," I said as I picked it up with my magic. Keeper looked curious, Glory skeptical. "Where'd you get this?" I asked softly as I turned it over.

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

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

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

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

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

operational Folly would be worth.

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

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

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

His smile disappeared at once, and he sighed. “Neither.”

“But—” I began, but he shook his head firmly.

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

“I can’t,” I replied, shaking my head.

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

After that, the caravan moved off to the northwest, heading towards Toll. The early morning was punctuated by gunshots, faint explosions, and the reek of cordite and rocket fuel. Scotch’s PipBuck tag was just south of us, but I wasn’t quite up to walking around the Wasteland just yet. That meant sitting around in the fire house. Waiting. Well, at least I did have some other things to do. I munched a box of Carrot Crunch and flipped through my PipBuck to the Steelpony file. “So, how am I supposed to open this thing with EC-1101?”

Glory moved next to me, snuggling besides me as she looked at the screen. Then she frowned. “You don’t have to. It’s decrypted.”

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

I half expected my PipBuck to explode or something.

“You sound disappointed,” she said with a smile.

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

“I’d love to see that,” she said softly as she kissed my left cheek. Me too...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It looks like it.” I selected the Planetarium, and Glory nodded. “Now hit ‘Connect’.”

I did and there was a beep. Then another. Again. “Is it supposed to be doing that?”

“Ask somepony in Intelligence. I’ve just read a book on these things,” she replied.

Suddenly, there was a crackle, and a synthetic mare’s voice said, “Blackjack? How are you contacting me on the MASEBS?”

“Ask a pony smarter than me, Professor. I got Steelpony,” I said with a smile. “I’m going to try and send it to you.”

“You... I... thank you, Blackjack.” The synthetic voice seemed quite speechless.

“Don’t thank me. I have no idea if this will work,” I replied. I selected ‘Send file’ and looked through the list until I found ‘Steelpony.acv’. I selected it and confirmed.

My EFS filled my vision with more streaming numbers, and then it stopped. To my alarm, Steelpony.acv was no longer in my PipBuck’s memory! “Um... Professor?”

“Thank you so much, Blackjack,” she said quietly. “I have it. I have... everything...”

I checked to make sure that I hadn’t sent EC-1101 too. Fortunately... or unfortunately... that was still in my PipBuck.

“Professor,” Glory said, “Now that you have it... are you sure there’s... there’s nothing you can do for Blackjack?” She bit her lip as she looked at me. There was a long pause.

“I’m sorry, Glory,” she replied. “If I had a full fabrication facility and staff, yes. We could start making the the things Blackjack needs in a few hours and begin installing them tomorrow. But right now, all I have are assorted pieces collected from all across the Wasteland. I even purchased Deus’ remains, but...”

“Don’t worry about it, Professor. Just do something good. Alright?” I asked softly.

“Absolutely, Blackjack,” she replied, and then with a click the connection was broken.

Funny. I felt good. I might be dead in months, weeks, or even hours, but at least I would be able to say that I’d done something... substantial. Something that would really matter.

I checked Scotch Tape’s tag. She was just a half block away. “Come on. Let’s go meet our friends.”

“You know, I’m pretty sure this is the point where something goes terribly wrong,” muttered the Dealer and I stopped in my tracks.

“That’s it.” I whirled on him and narrowed my eye, “I am sick of you and your snotty attitude, mister! I’m happy! My friends are safe. Everything is going sunshine and rainbows so I do not want to hear it! If you can’t say something nice then just get back in my head with all the rest of my doubts because I do not want to hear it!” Okay, Glory looked like she wasn’t sure if she should be confused or amused, but the look of shock on the Dealer’s face had been worth every single word.

My braces chafed, my insides hurt, and I was about to deal with ponies who had some kind of weird technological fetish. But I still felt good. I gave a smile to Glory, who’d mounted the very formidable-looking gatling beam weapon she’d purchased on her barding. For once, life was good, and things were going my way. I turned slowly to face the a cracked road and a collection of blue bars approaching the crossroads.

A lot more than just three blue bars...

Lacunae stepped around a smashed wagon, her magnificent frame chained and bound. A very familiar collar rested around her throat. The sight of it gave me the curious sensation of my blood both boiling and freezing at the same time. Beside her trotted P-21 and Scotch Tape, equally bound, though at least the filly wasn’t collared. A half dozen Steel Rangers surrounded them. At their lead was the biggest suit of armor I’d ever seen; it looked as if it had been custom built to contain the size of the pony within. Its matte black frame was gilded in golden leaf, and all four hooves ended in glittering hydraulic rams. The enormous Ranger looked down at me and said in a deep, booming voice, “Step aside! We are escorting these prisoners to Ironmare Station.”

Ante up.

Footnote: Level up!

New Perk Added: Eye for Eye – For each crippled limb you have, you do an additional 10% damage.

31. Battle

“Just because you’ve failed the sonic rainboom a hundred thousand times in practice doesn’t mean you won’t be able to do it in front of an entire stadium full of impatient, super-critical, sports-fan ponies.”

It could be said that I have, on occasion, picked fights with opponents far outside my proverbial weight class. Hydras, Gorgon, Deus, Enclave troopers, dragons, mysterious incomprehensible technomonsters... More or less, I’ve survived with help, luck, wits, luck, unpredictability, luck, and more luck. So pulling my gun on the biggest damn Steel Ranger I’d ever seen while outnumbered three to one and with three of my friends bound and wearing explosive collars wouldn’t actually have been all that unusual for me.

Which, if anything, meant that it was even less likely to be a good idea! And, for once, it wasn’t my plan at the moment. “What the hell is going on here?” I asked as I pointed my horn at Lacunae. The purple alicorn caught my eye.

“Step aside. You cannot honestly think to challenge us,” the huge buck said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. He wasn’t the one I was really paying attention to at that moment, though.

“We freed Turnip and helped him recover his armor from a locker in the office,” Lacunae said, her telepathy sending her words only to me. “Unfortunately, when we left, we encountered the large one and his subordinates. They were less understanding of my appearance than the first pair we encountered. Scotch Tape was terrified of him and his demand for her PipBuck. We were outnumbered, and, after so many teleports, I could not get away with the others. I would not abandon them, so I surrendered myself rather than fight. The Goddess is quite put out with my weakness.”

“That cunt!” I hissed, making the rangers look at each other. I probably looked like an idiot, a crazy mare, or both, but there was nothing new about that. “I didn’t know the Rangers used slaves! Can’t the alicorn just teleport out of the chains and collar, though?”

“The collars are for our protection. Not that it is any of your concern,” the huge buck said as one of the others trotted up beside him. He was saying something about me being the one to drop a building on the Flash Fillies. “When we have done our duty

and recovered the young lady's PipBuck, I will personally escort her to any location she desires!" He looked at P-21. "This one, however, will be submitted to justice by our Elder for attempting to place explosives upon my person! And, of course, the alicorn will be treated as is appropriate for a captured enemy."

"P-21 has examined my collar. It has sort of proximity sensor and will detonate itself and the other collars if I move too far away." I frowned, wondering if she could maybe... "And unfortunately, no, I cannot teleport us away and leave the bombs and bonds behind." She couldn't? Why— but then the super hive mind intellect began to tell me exactly why! Oh, Goddesses, didn't she realize that I wasn't a smart pony? I lasted five seconds before my eye began to glaze... which would be bad, since I had six Steel Rangers looking at me. Fortunately, Lacunae apparently finally realized how far over my head it was and stopped. Was it just me, or was she looking a bit smug? Damned big-horned alicorns...

A little pink pony in my mind caught sight of the blue buck's lips moving as he looked right at me. Gee! I loved smart ponies! "P-21 can disarm it; he is sure," Lacunae said. "But he needs a distraction." There was a pause, then, "He swears, he will not mess up like at Fallen Arch."

I tried to calculate my odds of providing enough distraction for P-21 to get the collars off my friends before somepony pushed a button. Okay. On the other hoof, I couldn't see a detonator anywhere; that meant that it was probably built into the armor. No obvious pony to blast, which meant that the only way out was to get the collar off. So... distraction it would have to be. Well, there was only one thing to do: something stupid. In a snap, I had my shotgun out above me and cocked an explosive round with as much drama as I could muster. "Well, then, I'm afraid that you and I have got ourselves a problem. I want you to let my friends go this instant!"

We were located at the crossroads of two major streets, with the firehouse occupying one corner. The rain had finally let up, and there was cover in the form of several rusted-out wagons. Blasted stores and two- and three-story buildings formed the bulk of the ruins around us. Fittingly, there was a faded billboard that proclaimed: 'Better wiped than striped! Join the Steel Rangers today!'

"Do not interfere with our sacred duty, young mare. We are the Steel Rangers, proud inheritors of a noble and distinguished duty to safeguard Equestria and to reclaim and protect the artifacts of our glorious past!" He rose on his hind legs; I readied myself to jump aside from a super heavy pneumatic stomp, but gaped as he thrust one hoof dramatically into the sky and flexed the other leg. "We are the last protectors of the Equestrian Wasteland, serving to put down monsters, fiends,

and villains of all kinds, and we will not stop until we have fulfilled Applejack's wishes for a safe and prosperous future!"

Was he actually... posing?

My gun barrel dipped a little along with my jaw. I pointed at their captives. "Right. Well... um... those are my friends you have there, mister." I tried to refocus myself. "So you best hand them over."

He curled both his legs in front of me and, sweet Celestia, I swore I saw the metal bulging! "I am Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy!" He dropped his hooves to the ground with an impact that cracked the stones around him before turning to look at Lacunae. "This monstrosity is an alicorn, one of an unholy army that has forever waged terrible warfare against my order all across Equestria! The filly possesses a functioning PipBuck, an example of one of the finest pieces of Equestrian technology ever created! And this buck is guilty of attempted assault and interfering in our most sacred duty!" He snorted, and two jets of steam actually blasted from nostrils built into his metal helmet. "We are sworn to take them back to our order."

That helped me refocus myself. "Well, I'm the Security Mare, and nopony is taking my friends anywhere like that. So, like I said, I'm afraid we have a problem. And if I have to take you all on, so be it. You'll be the first to go."

Three more Rangers, bristling with guns, galloped onto the scene. "Of course, in the spirit of love and tolerance, I am willing to negotiate," I added quickly. Then I blinked at the sight of a familiar gun. The armor might all look the same, but I never forgot a gun. "Radishes?"

"Please, Paladin Bo..." Radishes began, and the huge buck looked over with a bizarre, dangerous gleam of his glowing eyes. "I mean, Paladin Stronghoof. This is the mare who helped free Turnip from the Flashers."

The buck with a missile launcher and gatling gun combo coughed. "Yeah. I would have been a complete goner if she hadn't helped."

"And she's been trying to stop the fighting in the Hoof," added Fruit Salad. "Her friend's not a real alicorn. At least, not like the other ones." Okay, so not all Rangers were jerks. I still was not happy with them.

"As you said, which is why I was willing to spare that magnificent and terrible creature from a summary execution. But I cannot disobey my oaths to our sacred order!" he proclaimed, rearing once again and making all of us step back a little. "Oh, such

a horrible conflict of two heroic characters!” he proclaimed as he pressed his hoof to his brow.

O . . . kay. I looked at Fruit Salad, trying to convey with a look that she’d been right: this pony was definitely not playing with a full deck! “Right . . . okay then . . .” how to deal with the crazy huge pony in charge? I needed all eyes on me. I took a deep breath and looked at Glory, but she simply gaped back at me in stunned bafflement. Clearly, this was too much crazy for her to deal with.

There was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath and rose on my rear legs. My braces wobbled a little, but I pointed my left leg right at him and grinned as wide as I could. “Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy! I, Blackjack, Security Mare of Stable 99, descendant of the legendary Card Trick herself, challenge you to one on one combat for the safe release of my friends Lacunae, Scotch Tape, and P-21!”

I easily imagined nine jaws dropping at once. I could see at least four . . .

He looked down . . . way way down . . . at me. For a moment, I had a horrible image of those massive piston hooves dropping and turning me into a round black-and-red-maned pancake. And then, faster than I could believe possible, he moved. But rather than smearing me into pony jelly, he swept me up in a massive hug, his speaker booming, “Oh what nobility! What courage! What heroism! Fighting a battle of impossible odds against a vastly superior foe for the safety and wellbeing of her comrades!” Holding me easily in one foreleg he thrust his hoof towards the sky. “This is the embodiment of all things the Rangers should strive for!” He tossed me above the ground, catching me once more in his hooves and shaking me like a doll. “I shall not decline your glorious sacrifice! Truly, this shall be a duel for the ages!”

My head reeled simply from the volume of his speaker. I was just about to tell him that I had reconsidered and would quite happily accompany him to speak with his superior when he set me down again. “Prepare yourself, Blackjack! We engage in glorious combat! Hoof to hoof! Armor to steel! None of the noise and vulgarity of firearms for warriors like us; we shall engage in a battle of gentleponies!”

Wait? No guns? When had I agreed to no guns?! That wasn’t in the challenge! He was trotting away from the others, so I really had no idea how to bring it up. I looked at Glory, who hissed at me, “Blackjack?! What do you think you are doing? He’s huge and in power armor! How are you supposed to fight that?”

“Working on that part . . .” I muttered. “Why isn’t he freaking out about my PipBuck?”

I asked as I glanced at her.

“I don’t think they realize it is a PipBuck,” she said softly. I had to admit she had a point. It was sleek and black and might have been a part of the combat armor; it barely looked anything like a normal big, gray, bulky PipBuck like Scotch Tape’s. Small favors, I supposed. I just had to be sure to not use it where they could see it.

“Give me a Buck,” I said, not wanting to take my eye off her. She balked, and I quickly added, “My legs are jelly and I need all the muscle I can get, and I’m dead sooner or later anyway. Give me a Buck.”

“I remember a time when I knew chems were bad for you. Worst doctor ever.” She sighed and fished out a tablet. As I chewed, she reached out and hugged me. “Try for later rather than sooner. . .” she murmured in my ear. “I’ve got many other surprises I want to show you.”

Okay. I could live for that. “Chat with the other Rangers as much as you can. Keep their eyes off P-21.” So long as my friends could get to safety... that was all that really mattered. As I walked towards the huge, gold-decorated Ranger, I caught P-21’s eye, then smiled and gave the tiniest nod. He could do this. Whatever had happened in Fallen Arch, I knew he wouldn’t let me down again. He paused and gave a tiny nod back, then turned towards his tail.

Now all I had to do was put on a good show till they were free.

The Buck helped steady my legs as I trotted before him. I made a show of tightening my braces, and he gave a snort. “You’re crippled, I see. Well, that makes this duel somewhat problematic. I suppose that you may be permitted to use a firearm.” He sounded so disappointed.

“Oh, no, I don’t need guns to beat you!” I retorted, then blinked. Wait, I didn’t? Wait. . . I didn’t! I drew my sword and swung it like a baton before me. “Is this acceptable?” I asked with a grin, praying it was because I really didn’t have a backup plan. I looked along the razor edge. It was certainly sharp. Damned sharp. Sharp enough to cut through power armor, though?

He nodded once. “We fight till one of us is beaten and surrenders. I’ll not rob the Wasteland of so valiant and noble a spirit intentionally!” He reared up and flexed as he thrust his hoof towards the heavens. “We fight for honor and civility itself! Let nothing dare interrupt our most glorious of battles! Pony against pony! Hoof against blade! Steel against steel!” And then he boomed, in an echoing voice likely heard for a mile, “Begin!”

His hooves dropped in a monumental crash, pistons slamming downward with a powerful hiss of steam and a detonation that shook the ground beneath my already unsteady limbs, making me stagger. The stomp was merely a prelude to a massive leap far too elegant and graceful for so colossal a pony! I raced forward and swung the silvery saber, the razor sharp edge pinging against his helmet as he passed overhead. The impact of his landing knocked me from my feet and I rolled twice across the broken asphalt of the road before I scrambled to my feet. He turned, and I saw a definite cut in his armor along his neck.

If I could mark him, then I could beat him.

If I could beat him, then I could kill him.

Wait. . . what? "Sorry about the nick," I said as I rose.

"I wear it with pride and gratitude! The Stronghoof family armor welcomes a mark from an honorable and valiant mare!" And then I was fighting for my life as he lunged in with lightning fast stomps, kicks and thrusts of those piston hooves. It was all I could do, clattering back step after step and trying to deflect those powerful kicks with the blade and finally just trying to stay out of the way. We might have been fighting till one of us was beaten, but one kick of those hooves and I'd be more than beaten, I'd be scrambled!

There was no way I'd stand a chance like this! I had to attack! He reared up, and instead of dodging back, I moved inside his hoof. I didn't see very many gaps in his armor, but from my own barding I knew the joints were my best bet. I slashed the glowing sword at the pit of his foreleg and body. But Paladin Stronghoof reacted faster than I anticipated; clearly, he wasn't completely without thought for his defense! The Steel Ranger closed the gap, and my blade struck off gilt steel leg plates.

"Well struck, but you will have to fight better than that, I assure you!" he said as the massive buck's body slammed me clear off my hooves. My braces clattered and I rolled again, swinging the blade towards his helmet. If I could take out whatever he used to see. . . but he ducked his head and the blade sparked off the armored ridge along his spine.

I was cutting through his armor, but I was also getting battered to pieces. We danced around in a circle with me giving ground. One of his kicks flipped me right over one of the wagon hulks and into a mud puddle. I levitated a glob of muck and splashed it right across his glowing blue eye panes. In the moment he balked, I slashed at his legs and was rewarded with a hiss of air as one of the pneumatic lines broke. With

luck, that would slow him down!

But my advantage lasted only as long as it took for him to toss his head; the goop refused to stick to him! “That’s. . . that’s cheating!” I shouted as I backed away. He did seem to be moving slower.

“You’ve fought well and valiantly. I commend you and ask with my deepest respects that you yield.”

“Not happening! Not when my friends’ lives are on the line!” I said as I gasped for breath. “You must be getting tired in all that metal.” I wanted to kick somepony when I heard one of the rangers snicker.

“A little longer. P-21 is almost done with our bonds.” Lacunae said; hopefully, nopony would ask why the giant alicorn was lying down.

I forced myself to grin as I kept moving back. “Either way, I’ve got the range and you don’t. Eventually, I’ll cut something important. Better watch out. I’ve nicked bucks before.”

“A cunning fighter takes stock of their enemies’ vulnerabilities! I commend you for the attempt!” he said as he stepped back and rammed his forehooves into the ground. I moved to attack, but then suddenly the ground was lifting underneath me. The paladin heaved the slab of roadbed I was standing on up with all his strength. “However, with sufficiently applied leverage, your advantage becomes a disadvantage!” he cried out as I fell on my side and he kept pushing the slab of roadbed over. I barely got my hooves raised in time as it slammed down atop me.

I barely had time to drink a healing potion before two hooves slammed through the slab, pulverizing it atop me and hauling me up through the rubble! “Don’t feel bad! This is a part of the legendary Stronghoof combat technique, passed down for generations!” he said as he lifted me high in his hooves. Somehow, I doubted he planned to hug me again.

Okay! Enough of this! I hit S.A.T.S. and targeted every magic bullet I could squeeze out of my horn at his helmet. Four flashes arced into his armored face. The magical energy tore into it, shattering the steel and visor. He dropped me as he staggered back, and I landed hard on the crumbled roadbed. The hilt of my sword peeked through the rubble and I pulled it free as I turned to my opponent.

Wha. . .

Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof looked down at me, such a paragon of muscular beauty that I swore there were sparkles dancing about him. Baby blue

eyes twinkled merrily as they regarded the dirty bug that was myself. The white coat I could see was utterly smooth. A thick blonde mustache sat elegantly above his lip, and a tiny golden lock of mane curled off his brow. Radishes had said that he'd cut off his horn, but she'd been mistaken. For the first time ever, I'd met a unicorn with a horn more compact than my own.

He regarded me soberly. "I see I owe you an apology. It was unfair of me to think less of you for your infirmity." He rose, and with a crackle and metallic popping he shed his armor, revealing more of his impressive musculature. Truly, I had no idea if his armor was powered by magic at all, or if it was all just him! He stepped free, rising up and flexing his legs, making his abdomen pulse with every potent twitch of his body. "But now you directly face the physique that has been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations!"

I glanced over at the others as he flexed his many massive muscles; it was astonishing how even suits of power armor could look stunned in a moment like this. P-21 had a nosebleed. "Oh my..." murmured Lacunae in my head. I managed to make eye contact with P-21, and he immediately wiped his nose and got back to work. Good thing, too; I'd hate to have to shoot him to get him back on track! I did that too much with Rampage already...

"Um..." I sat down, blinking in shock. "You can put your armor back on. Really..."

Instead, he planted his forehooves, twisted around, and blasted me with an apple-buck right to the face. I barely raised my limbs in time to absorb some of the blow, but his kick sent me rolling across the torn up ground. My head kept spinning for a few seconds, my vision filled with flexing images of a sparkling, beautiful buck beefcake before I shook it off.

"You should never underestimate your opponent, Security! Others have done that when facing you, and you've defeated them all!" he said as he approached and then once more slammed his hooves into the ground, sending a ripple through the pavement that blasted me into the air. Was he using some kind of freaky magic, or was he really just that strong?

I landed in a heap and hauled myself to my hooves. Then he was once more upon me, and almost all thought of defense was gone as he systematically pounded me again and again and again. It was all I could do to keep myself out of his hooves. I finally pulled together enough focus to bring my sword to bear and got myself a little room to work with. Yet no matter how I swung, I couldn't catch him.

"Damn it! I have to win! They're my friends!" I shouted as he deftly avoided a

horizontal slice. How did a buck that big and beautiful move that fast?

“Your devotion is commendable, but it is no greater than my devotion to my oath and order!” he replied as he twisted under a slash, sweeping his hind legs under my own and knocking me over as he deftly regained his feet. “Yield, I beg you.”

“Never!” I shouted as I brought the blade down in a savage killing blow! He rose once more on his hind legs, his massive, majestic hooves slammed together on the silvery blade, stopping it cold as he stood before me.

“There is no shame in defeat, Blackjack,” he said as those bright blue eyes gazed down at me. I gasped as he tossed my sword aside, exhaustion finally having scattered my focus. He dropped to his hooves and turned, presenting his side. It was a clear shot in a futile struggle. . .

But I was just that stubborn! I twisted and pulled back both my rear legs and slammed my hindhooves directly at his side with all my force. He’d be able to block or deflect or simply take it, I was sure. Then he’d punt me clear over the horizon, but I’d be damned if I’d give up before then. But my hooves connected solidly against his left side just below the ribcage.

Instantly, he rolled over, wailing. “Oh no! You’ve struck my splenic ganglion nerve cluster, a Stronghoof vulnerability that’s been passed down for generations! Oh the agony! The injury! Oh, I must yield!” He lifted his legs to protect the spot I’d thumped. Glory was mouthing the words “splenic ganglion. . .” and looking confused. “Release this noble fighter’s friends.”

Buh? All eyes turned to P-21 holding Lacunae’s bomb collar in his hooves as unlocked chains dangled around the three; his own collar was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at the explosive in his hooves, then back up at the Rangers. He spat the bobby pin back into his brushy tail. “Oh. . . this is awkward. . .” I’ll say. I kind of expected. . . not to win..

Then the street exploded. Thank Celestia the street exploded! This was just the right time for an explosion! The blast tossed me aside, but Paladin Stronghoof calmly looked in the direction of the smoking crater and beyond where two dozen ponies dressed all in spiked, red-painted metal armor were charging. Several unicorns were flinging explosive parcels, and many of the earth ponies had flamers already spurting burning sheets apparently at random.

“To arms, Rangers! Our enemies have found us!” Stronghoof declared as he ran to his shed armor. Magically, it reassembled itself around his massive frame, and

even his helmet repaired itself around his head. The red ponies were herding some familiar frothing psychopaths ahead of them. There had to be closer to thirty! Maybe more.

Any ponies that would use sick raiders as living weapons weren't my allies.

"Let my friends help you!" I shouted, my magic seizing a tossed explosive and throwing it back at the gangers.

"You've demonstrated your honor," he replied firmly. "But my order's code refuses accepting the aid of outsiders!"

"We may as well accept their help, Paladin. They're free anyway," Turnip said as he trotted up to us. "Besides, there's no question who's a bigger threat to our technology."

"It seems we have no choice," he said as he curled a hoof, pistons hissing ominously. "So be it! But even with your assistance, I fear that the Burner Boys will not be easily dissuaded. Here they come!" he announced as the racing burners closed in and things started getting toasty. I staggered out of the path of a gout of flame that washed over where we'd stood. The burning fluid made every bit of exposed skin prickle even as it missed me. The ganger moved closer, twisting to immolate me as he laughed in glee. Until the sword cut through the fuel hoses to his flamer and draped him in a crimson sheet of fire. Then, suddenly, he was gone as the Paladin gave the thrashing fireball a kick into another buck.

Okay, I felt my stomach clench as two flaming ponies thrashed wildly, taking way too long to die. I really did not like fire. That was an ugly way to go; give me a bullet any day.

The explosives they threw were on a delay, and I saw P-21 leap upon one and deftly pull a wire out of the thing. He stuffed one of the bomb collars with the explosive, and then another... and another. One of those bombs was impressive enough, but I wondered what twenty of them would do... I recalled what he'd done back in Flank. I knew a bomb like that would certainly convince me to back off!

"Lacunae, get Glory on that roof. P-21, keep doing what you're doing. Scotch, stay back. Rampage—" Crap.

One of the Burners was charging me as Lacunae teleported Glory onto the roof of the firehouse behind us. From the elevated position, she could send a stream of crimson beams to wash back and forth over the advancing Burners. The Steel Rangers had established a firing line, and gatling guns, grenade machine guns, and

the thumping Brown Betty were starting to take their toll. The burners were taking cover and throwing smoke bombs.

Frenzied raiders slammed into us with axes, clubs of rebar and concrete, and even a sword made out of a wagon's rear bumper. The earth pony wielding the sword seemed particularly focused on me, the mass and power of his swings slamming into my own upraised blade. I saw an opening as clear as day, though, and my sword turned faster than I'd ever wielded it before. The tip slipped through his spiked armor to his throat, and I felt a supreme sense of satisfaction as I sliced his artery. His blood sprayed over me as he tried a few more feeble swings with the massive sword. As his weapon drooped, I cleanly sliced his head free of his shoulders. Like cutting butter.

Then I realized that I was bleeding too. I'd been so caught up in the fighting that I'd missed it entirely. My opening hadn't been as sure as I'd thought, and he'd cut a jagged tear just above my cutie mark! Another of keeper's healing potions stopped the bleeding; if I lived through this, I'd have to send him a thank you note and ask where he got fresh healing potions.

Suddenly, I heard the clatter of hooves, and on my E.F.S. a red bar appeared. I balked as I pointed my shotgun into the pall of smoke rolling up the street. It made my eye water, and the reek and rasp of whatever chemicals were in it set me coughing. Suddenly, I spotted a buck racing right at me. He was wearing a gas mask adorned with four dash inhalers screwed in place. The pupils were nearly nonexistent in his infected yellow eyes as he raced right towards me.

Oh, and his barding was made of explosives. . .

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and had just enough time for one explosive shell to his head. It pulped his noggin, and a moment later the buck exploded. There was no blood or bone; he simply vaporized in a cloud of steel and a sheet of flame where he'd fallen. I was thrown clear off my hooves, rolling across the cracked asphalt. I looked up in time to see another one charge the Paladin, but with his astonishing grace and power, he grabbed the head of the suicidal pony and spun, throwing him back towards his comrades.

One ranger wasn't quick enough, though; the explosion crumpled his armor like a tin can. I couldn't tell who it was, as their entire front was blown away, launching a smoldering rear half into the street behind us. The heavy, cloying smoke clung low to the ground and filled the street rather than rising up. Every now and then, a fiery red plume sprayed out at us and sent me scrambling backwards.

“Too bad you don’t have a gun, Paladin!” I shouted, firing blindly at a red bar in front of me.

“A Stronghoof is never disarmed!” he decreed as he stepped up to a wagon. “Observe the Stronghoof technique that’s been passed down for generations! First step!” And once more he stomped with an incredible explosion that rippled and cracked the asphalt, and knocked the entire rusty wagon into the air. “Second step!” He turned around, and a blast from his pneumatic rams and his potent rear legs sent the entire wreck flying down in the direction of the Burner Boys.

I just stared at the fuzzy image of a raider getting smashed by the bouncing debris. “You threw that fight!” I shouted at him.

He snorted, blasting two jets of steam again. “You dare question my honor? The splenic ganglion is a well established pressure point weakness exploitable by the very few knowledgeable of the Stronghoof lineage. Clearly, you knew of that weakness and thus won our duel fairly, winning the freedom of your friends! How else could you have possibly defeated me and thus allowed me to overlook my oath requiring your friends to be taken to my elder?”

I blinked, then smiled. “Thanks, Paladin Stronghoof.” He gave another blasting snort, and I swore that the glowing eye panel winked at me! Then I frowned. “But did you have to hit me with a road?”

In a faintly embarrassed tone, he muttered, “Well, I thought you could take it.”

We’d fallen back to the crossroads, where the collision of three rusty wagons offered some cover. The Burner Boys seemed to be falling back, which was good; I really hated that smoke. My eye was watering terribly, and I kept coughing and hacking. There weren’t any more bomb-barding raiders rushing us yet. Were they really pulling back? Please tell me that they were pulling back. All my EFS confirmed was that there was still a lot of red bars out there. And over there. . . wait? I looked off to the side as a little pink pony in my head wearing a green camouflage helmet pointed out a whole lot more red over there.

“Get down!” I shouted as crimson beams flashed into us from the left side, and even the massive buck had to duck for cover from the glaring energy barrage. Apparently, my destruction of the Flashers hadn’t been complete. I couldn’t count numbers of red bars through the smoke, but at least two dozen Flash Fillies filled the side street with flickers of incinerating death. My hide burned as an enemy gatling beam gun splashed over my side. We were caught in a crossfire!

“P-21, we need that bomb!” I yelled as Glory, Turnip, and Fruit Salad turned their fire down the side street at the advancing mares. He’d finished with one collar and was now working on a second one. If Lacunae could drop the combined charge he was making into the middle of their lines, they might scatter and run. I knew I would!

The smoke and reek was making everything one big confusing glare, so I barely had time to notice the flying grenade before it smacked me right in the forehead. I took two steps to react from the sudden stab of pain, then one second to lift it up. . . then it went off in my face!

The blue band flashed once, and an electric tingle ran from my horn to my hooves. And nothing else happened. I blinked and let out a relieved laugh... and then I noticed that Glory was the only pony still firing! I looked over at Fruit Salad, but the mare was just standing there. “What’s wrong?” I yelled as I fired wildly in the direction of the red bars on my EFS.

“Spell matrix crash!” she yelled from the confines of her helmet. “I can’t restart the system! The ejection system isn’t working either!” On the other side of me, Turnip was also frozen, muttering expletives over and over again. More discharged grenades rolled around at their feet; the one that hit me hadn’t been alone.

Oh shit. “What can I do?” I yelled, popping out the shotgun’s ammo drum and loading slugs; those explosive rounds were cooking the barrel like crazy. It was smoking! It was almost brand new, and one drum of explosive rounds had already made it look like it might not last much longer.

“I need a PipBuck spell matrix to restart it!” she replied.

Well. . . I was busy. But I wasn’t the only PipBuck here! “Scotch! Scotch Tape! I need you!” I screamed out, but with all the gunshots and explosions, I knew she couldn’t hear me. Lacunae, however, appeared beside me in a purple flash. She had the minigun from the dead ranger’s armor floating above her as her shield appeared around her and the helpless Ranger.

“Go. I will protect her as long as I’m able,” Lacunae said calmly in my mind. Then the minigun motor revved as it floated overhead, and the alicorn began to return fire with deadly and precise bursts. “The Goddess is quite keen to put this rabble in their place! After dealing with that. . . that mare. . . well. . .” Her eyes flashed and her voice boomed. “THE GODDESS FINDS THIS VERY THERAPEUTIC!”

“Miffle. . .” whimpered Fruit Salad. Therapy, Hoofington style.

I loaded Scotch’s PipBuck tag and raced across the crossroads. There was P-

21 strapping together a bomb that I hoped Lacunae would be able to drop on the Flashers, but where was Scotch?

Hiding in a wagon. The filly was curled up in a ball, shaking. I reached down and held her close. I couldn't ask her to do this. I should ask P-21 to take her out of here. Take her someplace safe. Someplace better. The rusted wagon jerked as a grenade detonated outside, and she gasped, hugging her hooves over her head.

"You can't protect her, Blackjack," the Dealer said as he trotted up next to me.

"I have to. . ." I whispered.

"You can't. Even if you protect her today and tomorrow, someday you'll be gone. You can't spare her the horror," he insisted softly.

"Why not? Is that too damn much to ask? That she be safe and happy and... and not scared?" I shouted at him. I'd saved one. Just one. And I'd give anything I could to keep her intact. "What kind of sick world goes out of its way to hurt and scare a filly?" I demanded.

He just shook his head slowly. "It's called growing up, Blackjack. And you can't keep her safe from that." Maybe I couldn't. . . but was it so wrong to try?

Yes, if it meant leaving Fruit Salad to die. Damn it.

I clenched my eye shut as the wagon rocked again from a detonation outside. I looked down at her and sighed. "Scotch. I need your help." She sniffed as she shook, looking up at me with wide, teary green eyes. "There's a Ranger who needs your help. She needs something called a 'spell matrix' restarted. Can you do that?"

"Y... yes..." she stammered, then clenched her eyes shut. "But... but I can't! I'm scared. . ."

"I know you're scared. I'm scared too. If you stay close, I'll try to keep you safe and sound. Okay?" I said as I poked my head out. A red beam flashed before my eye, and I watched the tip of my mane transform into ash. My lips twisted into a trembling grin. I was fairly sure that Scotch might be the sanest one of us all! "S-see? Nothing to be s-scared of!"

"I'm not scared of the fighting. I'm... I'm scared of the metal ponies!" she said as she shook her head hard. "But... but I don't understand why I'm scared! I shouldn't be scared! I like machines. We tried to hide from the Rangers after Lacunae saved that one buck, but when he dug out his armor and put it on... I... I thought he was gonna gobble me up! It's like I'm a stupid baby or something!" she said as she

smacked her temples, shaking even harder.

“But you shouldn’t be afraid...” I muttered. Had the memory spell failed? Was it temporary? Or was there some instinctive part of her mind that remembered? Damn it... I knew it had been too easy...

“I know. It’s just... It’s just stupid. I’m stupid,” she sniffed as she covered her face. “You should have left me in 99. Then I’d be with Momma.”

I held her firmly. “You are not stupid. Look at me. I’m stupid,” I said, thumping my chest for emphasis. “I get hit by boats. You’re at least smart enough to avoid that.” Despite everything, she made a noise, half sob and half laugh, and I held her close. “I know you’re scared. Being scared is perfectly normal right now, Scotch Tape. But there’re two Rangers who need your help.” She curled up even more. “If you can’t go... tell me how to reset their spell matrix thingies.”

For several seconds, she didn’t answer, but then pulled out a strange golden wand thing the size of a pencil and studded with little gems. There was a tiny inscription: ‘Property of Rivets, give it the fuck back when you’re done’. She murmured softly, “Hold this, link up to the armor, and access System Tools, System Interface: Master Spell Matrix, Spell Matrix Programs, Spell Matrix Restore, and if that doesn’t work, Full Matrix Reboot.” She wiped her tears. “I’m sorry, Blackjack.”

“Hey, don’t be,” I murmured as I stroked her mane. “You gave me what I needed. Stay safe, okay?”

I ran back to where Lacunae was almost single-hornedly fending off the entire Filly front. She’d not only levitated her own gun, but Turnip as well, her magic manually manipulating the weapons strapped to his armor while also firing deadly volleys of glowing arrows. “DROP A BOXCAR ON US, WILL YOU? TRAP US IN A MEMORY ORB? TOSS A BALEFIRE EGG IN OUR FACE?” she roared with the voice of hundreds.

“Put me down! Put me down! Put me down!” screamed Turnip as I rushed to Fruit Salad and began to try to use the ‘System Tools’ to restart his armor. I really hoped Paladin Apple Sugar Bombs Stronghoof didn’t see... pretty much anything going on over here right now. I didn’t want to know what his oath and honor might force him to do.

Lacunae’s eyes flared as she glared at the screaming Ranger. “SILENCE, FOAL! BE HONORED THAT THE GODDESS ALLOWS YOU TO FIGHT ON OUR BEHALF IN THIS FASHION! AND CEASE YOUR WHIMPERING LEST THE GOD-

DESS THROW YOU AT THEM!” Turnip wisely silenced as Lacunae focused down the street. “WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?! WHY DO THEY FIGHT A GODDESS SO?! WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THEIR MADNESS! THEY SHOULD FLEE SO WE DO NOT SMITE THEM!”

“It’s not madness, Goddess. It’s hate,” I shouted as my PipBuck told me all the systems were active and aborted the restart. “They hate so much that they’re willing to die if it means they can kill the ponies they loathe.” Right now, I wanted to shoot something myself as my ‘System Tools’ told me that the matrix was active. Was I doing something wrong?

“FOOLS!” she boomed. “FLEE BEFORE OUR MIGHT! RUN! FIGHT US NO LONGER!” Her glare shifted to one of shock as they still came on! “STOP MAKING US KILL YOU!”

‘Error.’ ‘Error.’ ‘Error.’ I wanted to scream. Then something came flying out of the smoke and haze. It bounced twice, but it was much too small to be a grenade. It was just a little hoop of metal.

A silvery ring with a spark battery wired in the middle.

“Goddess, get out of here!” I shouted up at her.

But the Goddess clearly didn’t see or realize. All I knew was that that ring increased Enervation and that Enervation was bad for alicorns. Who’d thrown it? Had they known? Or was it just some desperate gambit? The battery flashed, and suddenly the ring began to glow a baleful green. I had a sensation like being caught in that cistern; the screaming was building up and growing and I felt it tearing at me.

The Goddess had a much worse reaction.

The shield distorted wildly and shredded apart; Lacunae struggled to keep herself and Turnip in the air. The alicorn screamed as white tatters and motes began to be drawn out of her eyes and mouth. The wisps were being pulled down through the ring, like the dancing firefly motes in the ruins deep beneath the earth. Now the Goddess was being reminded why her children stayed out of the Hoof. I left Fruit Salad as I felt my insides spasm terribly, aimed my shotgun down at the flickering spark battery, and fired; I got hit with a burst of radiation, but the green glow disappeared and the wisps stopped being pulled away. Still, it was too late for the alicorn. Lacunae collapsed beyond our cover next to the ring, and Turnip wailed as he smashed down on the wagon and thankfully bounced inside.

And the Fillies were moving in for the kill.

I clattered over the wagon as scarlet beams tore into my barding, making my eye tear as I fired wildly, not even bothering to aim but simply trying to pour on as much fire as I could. I bit down on Lacunae's mane and started to pull, but as fast as my fire was, I just couldn't suppress the advancing mares.

But Glory could. And on fire station's roof, she stood in full view to pour down a stream of red bursts that swept back and forth over the Fillies. They might have been able to ignore individual shotgun slugs, but not that stream of glowing death. The Fillies balked for a few critical seconds. I grabbed Lacunae's mane and started to pull, firing at any red I could. But even with Glory's suppressive fire, the Fillies were spreading out and moving closer. And damn it, why did alicorns have to be so damn big and heavy?

Two crimson bolts slammed into my chest, and my heart stopped as I fell back besides the fallen alicorn. I lost my focus, the riotgun clattering down beside me as three Fillies who'd been creeping along the sidewalk next to the blasted storefronts popped out. I saw one's lips moving; I think that she was yelling something about Diamond. Maybe some word of revenge or something. It didn't matter, though. I tried to fumble for a healing potion... for something! Glory was firing so long and fast I thought I saw smoke rise from her weapon. I wondered how much ammo she had left... couldn't be much.

The three Fillies pointed their weapons at me: game over.

Then they exploded, and my eye slowly followed the smoke stream up to Fruit Salad standing atop the wreck. Missile after missile streaked down the street, forcing the fillies back into cover. A few moments later, Turnip pulled himself up as well and joined her in driving the Fillies back. "How..." I murmured weakly.

And then Scotch Tape was there, lifting a healing potion to my lips. She was shaking so badly that she nearly dropped it, and from the smell she was going to have to wash her utility barding. The purple fluid was a bit watery and not-too-pleasant-tasting, but it restored me enough to drag Lacunae the rest of the way around the cover of the wagon.

"How..." I coughed, aching as I looked at the young olive mare. "It kept telling me it wasn't busted."

"Wrong matrix, Blackjack. I think that you were trying to reboot your own PipBuck," she said with a nervous smile. She then frowned and lifted the key. "And you dropped this. Don't you know how pissed Rivets will... would... be?"

“Hey! I’m Security, okay? I handle shooting things and enforcing the rules. Maintenance actually has to do the stuff that matters,” I said with a nervous smile.

But I was done for the moment. Those two shots had nearly taken me out. Lacunae was still unconscious, and who knew when... or if— she’d recover? Glory had disappeared from the rooftop. Radishes and Stronghoof were withdrawing as well. Their armor was smoking, and Brown Betty had taken quite a beating. The Burner Boys pushed in from the south. The Fillies from the east. If the Rangers carried Lacunae and me, perhaps we could run for it.

Maybe. Right now, we could only get as far as the fire house.

“A pity; it seems that we won’t have an opportunity for a true rematch,” Paladin Stronghoof said as we fell back inside. Glory was in the corner, working furiously to convert her gem cartridges into drums for her gatling beam gun. She saw me, and I gave a wan smile and wave to put her at ease. She nodded. P-21 joined us, a particularly ominous-looking bomb sitting on his back. He’d turned the two collars and the explosives into one large formidable duct-taped wad of boom.

“Where are they all coming from?” I asked as I saw a wall of red advancing. I knew there were some big gangs in the Hoof, but this was ridiculous.

The huge paladin answered us. “Big Daddy ‘liberated’ every slave west of the river, gave them a gun, and sent them to fight. The Highlanders are getting involved as well, and the Halfhearts are competing with the other gangs for the most Rangers killed. I understand that they’ve got fighters from as far south as Flank brought up here, and there’s talk of griffon mercenaries to the west. I suppose we should be grateful that those damned Zodiacs haven’t gotten involved,” Paladin Bombs said darkly as his armor repaired itself around him. Scotch had her eyes closed and seemed to be focusing on trying to help Lacunae by rubbing her shoulder and muttering that ‘it would be okay’. “It seems that our order has done little to earn the love and admiration of the rest of the city, and that most will quite welcome our destruction.”

“Oopsie,” I muttered as I rose to my hooves. Lacunae’s eye was open, and she looked at me with an expression of profound suffering. Having a Goddess stuffed inside you and then ripped out couldn’t be fun. “So... what’s the plan?”

“I will go forth and engage their forces on my own. While they are distracted with me, your friends will be able to escape. Use the bomb to cover your withdrawal when I fall,” he said matter-of-factly. “It has been an honor, Security. For the record, I feel you would have made an outstanding Steel Ranger.” The Fillies and Burners

outside were grouping up for a big push.

“THAT WON’T BE NECESSARY!” From outside boomed a buck’s voice fit to make my teeth rattle. A half-dozen explosions tore into the gangers, making them scatter for cover. A section of wall was blown in, showing us with rubble, and in walked a buck who could have been Deus’ power-armored twin; he wore two massive artillery guns just as the former Reaper had. “Paladin Stronghoof, your reinforcements have arrived!” There had to be at least a dozen Rangers arriving from the north.

“Star Paladin Steel Rain!” Paladin Stronghoof said as he rose to his feet. The “Star Paladin” armor was even more fancily decorated than his own, but with silver scroll-work. I wondered if this was a norm for Steel Rangers or just for their leaders. It seemed like a good way to know who to shoot, but then when he had guns like that, I supposed few ponies dared take a shot in the first place, or lived long enough to take a second.

“You have fought admirably, Paladin Stronghoof. You have my thanks for drawing our enemy together so that we may finally end this war once and for all!” He gestured to the door. “Take your soldiers and lead the counterattack. Leave not a single one of our enemies alive.”

“Sir, the Oath dictates—“ the white pony said before his superior interrupted him.

“That you execute the orders of your superiors quickly and without question. You have your orders, Paladin. Now return to the fight,” he finished in a tone that suggested very ugly consequences if Stronghoof argued.

“Very well, Star Paladin,” Stronghoof said with a salute, but he was looking at me as he said it. Those glowing blue eye panels seemed to suggest caution to me. He and most of the other Rangers left, and my mane went right to high ‘oh this isn’t good’ status as I approached Steel Rain and the trio of Rangers he’d brought in with him. This was my chance.

“Star Paladin Steel Rain. I’m Security. My friends and I came here to tell you that this war is completely unnecessary.” I looked behind me at Glory and then back at the massively armored Ranger. “My friends and I were passing by the Zenith Bridge. We used a bomb to distract you so that we could slip past. This war isn’t the Reapers’ fault.”

There was no answer, at first, and then I became aware of a deep rhythmic noise inside the armor. I scowled up at him as it built and grew louder.

He was laughing.

"I should thank you, then!" he chortled with glee. "Do you have any idea how many years I've tried to provoke those idiots across the river to attack us? How many times the Elder has refused to allow me to wipe out those vermin?"

Uh oh. "You wanted this war? Your own soldiers are dying, and you're happy about it?" I shouted at him as I stood, making damned sure I was between him and my friends.

"Of course not," he replied in that amused tone. "But I won't deny that, when I heard about the fighting, it felt as though Hearths Warming Day had come and I'd been a very good buck. Finally, the Hoofington chapter has the opportunity to show the Wasteland just what the Rangers should be about."

I glanced in the direction that Paladin Stronghoof had gone before looking back at him. "Why do I have the feeling that you don't think that it's about protecting ponies?"

"Paladin Stronghoof's naïve and adolescent fantasies of honor and protection hardly interest me. He inspires fools to waste our technology for the shallow and worthless admiration of others. Really, what do I care if some useless primitives live or die?"

P-21 slowly approached him. "You think that technology should be hoarded, then? Stronghoof told us that your Elders believe that."

There was a frustrated growl from the armor. "Yes. They do. They would have us hoard weapons and technology like dragons, clutching our findings with paranoid hooves while we cower in our bunkers and bases." He turned to the side and gestured to the gun with a forehoof. "This is a one hundred and twenty millimeter anti-dragon cannon built to fire custom engineered concussion, armor penetration, and chemical rounds. It has one hundred and seventy two perfectly engineered parts all manufactured of high strength alloyed steel infused with a magical repair matrix to maintain perfect operation at all times. It has a precision range of over two miles at which shells will still impact with a force of five kilomacs." He looked right at me. "Do you really think that a gun like this should be left in a weapons locker to collect dust?"

Honestly, no, I didn't. But I'd be damned if I'd admit it to this bastard.

"The Elder believes that the Reapers started this war and so it must be fought, and I will do everything I can to extend it as long and far as possible. We will destroy the Reapers, subjugate the Collegiate, drive off the Enclave, and conquer the Society!" he proclaimed grandly, standing and spreading his legs wide as if he wanted to give me a hug. "And you started it all! Thank you!"

“And now I’m going to stop it however I can!” I replied sharply. If Elder Crunchy Carrots really didn’t want this war fought, then perhaps she could end it?

His happy tone cut off as he snorted and swept his hoof to the side. “This is the time of the Steel Rangers. Right now, to the west, our Manhattan chapters are reclaiming one of the largest and most advanced stables in all the Wasteland to be put to our use. Abroad, other operations are taking place to reassert the fundamental truth: technology is to be used. Hoarded, it is wasted. Used to protect worthless gutter trash, it is wasted. Only when it is employed to assert our power is its true purpose realized.”

He looked at Lacunae. “I imagine Elder Cottage Cheese will be elated to learn that we captured one of these freaks; the acolytes have been quite eager to learn how they’re put together and how to take them apart.” He looked at the gray PipBuck on Scotch’s leg. “Oh. . . and we’ll be taking that as well.”

Right. “So I guess you won’t be honoring Stronghoof’s offer to let me go.” Figures.

“You have an admirable grasp of the obvious.”

And just like that, the admiration I’d built up for Paladin Stronghoof’s order vanished in a flash of acrid cordite smoke. “Well then, we’ll just be going. Glory, Scotch, help Lacunae back to her hooves.” The pair immediately moved to help, and the three Rangers with Steel Rain immediately pointed their many, many barrels at the five of us.

“And I’ll just hold on to this really big bomb!” P-21 shouted as he nodded his head to the taped-together ball of explosives balanced on his back. “Should be enough to level this whole building,” he added as Steel Rain pointed his guns right the blue pony. My friend didn’t flinch in the slightest. A bomb without a detonator, and I really hoped this ass didn’t know that. The four Steel Rangers slowly started to back out the hole they’d blown in the wall.

“I got the bomb. You handle the trigger,” I said as my horn lifted the. . . ooff. . . very heavy wad of explosives. In unison, we backed out of the firehouse into the chaos of the street battle as I kept it levitated right in the middle. He nodded, and I clapped mentally in glee. He should have been an actor or something. I could just see him in a Hearths Warming Eve pageant; he’d make a wonderful secretary to my chancellor.

With them backing out the rear and us backing out the front, there’d be a narrow window for us to make a break for it. . . not north. They’d be expecting that. West.

We could. . .

We were bucked.

In every direction was fighting in a horrible cloud of clinging smog. Rangers fought in groups of two or three back to back as they sprayed the surrounding cover. Crimson beams and sooty flames lit up the smog as they strafed wildly, and the five of us had to crawl just to avoid being shot by accident. It seemed like every bullet, gem cartridge, and flamer tank had been brought to this fight to be fired, spent, and emptied, and now we were caught in the middle of it. Lacunae still reeled; I doubted that the Goddess was going to give her the extra juice she needed to get us out of here. Damn, I wanted to gut whichever pony had figured out how to weaponize Elevation!

The Steel Rangers were clearly having a better time of it than the gangers, though. They didn't just have the edge on firepower; they also possessed a knowledge of how to fight well; with devotion, focus and discipline. As much as they might be bastards to outsiders, they were dedicated to their order and each other. The Fillies and Burners fought as a ferocious mob, but that mob was dwindling. And as soon as they withdrew, Steel Rain's ponies would take us apart.

That was. . . provided Steel Rain himself didn't take us out.

We crawled west along the front of the fire station. The fighting seemed a little lighter in this direction, though there were so many red bars moving around that I couldn't tell where the firing line was. I led the way with Scotch right behind me. Lacunae and Glory came after, with P-21 bringing up the rear. Then there was a 'crump' as a flaming bomb detonated to my left, the heat and glare making me turn my head away towards the north.

To the sight of Steel Rain's barrels as the smoke parted between us.

I kicked back as hard as I could, smacking Scotch right in the face and knocking her into the hooves of Glory and Lacunae. I heard a familiar click as I crouched and jumped, a little blue pegasus shouting at me to go 'Higher! Higher!' I drew up my legs. Then there was another click, and for a moment I felt stuck in S.A.T.S. as the anti-dragon cannons fired. The shells missed, flying under me and past or over my friends to impact the ground and tear a twenty foot line across the crossroads. The shockwave flipped me end over end, and the entire world became oddly muffled as I crashed to the asphalt.

Steel Rain ejected the two spent shells, and I saw them spinning away behind him

trailing smoke as the autoloader slid two more shells home. I just lay there as little ponies tried desperately to get me to my hooves. Move! My body didn't. Get up! My body couldn't. Hurry! Everything felt like I weighed a thousand pounds. Two Rangers went straight at my friends on the far side of the torn up section of street; only Lacunae's feeble shield protected them as they fired back.

The star paladin leveled those guns right at me. I think he said something. Somepony was screaming words, but it all sounded like I was at the bottom of a bathtub. I tried to rise, but the brace on my forehoof was busted. The leg just bent instead of supporting me.

Then a familiar pony crashed into the side of the massively armored Ranger. At first I believed she'd been thrown against him, but instead she wrapped her hooves against his armored frame as if giving him a hug. Slowly, it seemed, her legs straightened as she lifted his entire front up before her. The cannons fired high, the shockwave again bouncing me across the broken ground but the shells arcing away into the sky. Once again, my elastic bones saved me from some breaks, but I could barely do more than simply lie on my back in the rut his first two shells had blasted. I stared through the smoke feeling as if my entire body was being drawn away. I felt blood across my muzzle, wetness in my ears.

Then my face was filled with the image of grumpy, worried blue pony buck. His lips were moving but, only funny little honking sounds came out of his mouth. Everything was spinning away, and I fought to keep my focus on his face. It was weird to feel spinning as he held my head still in his hooves and pressed his lips towards mine.

Oh, yes. This would be a nice way to go. . . I puckered up for him. . .

Then I felt the stem of the healing potion bulb on my lips and blinked. I rolled my eye down to look at the healing potion bottle in his mouth; the flat-eyed look he gave me seemed to say 'Just drink it, you idiot.' Good idea, P-21. I slugged down the potion and felt the pain in my ears subside. When I finished, I lay back in the middle of the battlefield.

Then my gaze connected with a trio of ponies charging a pair of Rangers. It wasn't the number that drew my eye, but their weapons. How many mares around the Hoof fought with a massive hammer, a chain, and a fire axe? From the west came a charging, whooping, gleeful mob of ponies, many dressed in their genuine ponyhide armor. At their head, a massive black buck bellowed orders to fan out and crush anypony that would oppose the Reapers. Right now I hoped he wasn't including me. I couldn't oppose gravity at this point!

“Is there a plan?” P-21 asked, flinching at a nearby explosion that pattered us with gravel.

“Oh, we are so far from a plan...” I muttered as I looked around. Red bars in every direction. Reapers against Rangers against raiders against gangers. In the smoke I could only make out a few blue bars; the rest was a solid milling mass, like blood. “West...ish.” Fuck, was there any direction that was safe? “We’ve got to get clear of this.” I’d go north, but right now I really did not want to get within two miles of Steel Rain.

P-21 rose and waved his hoof. From the wreck of a smashed skywagon Lacunae and Glory ran to the gouge where I’d made my temporary home. Lacunae looked like she was almost fully recovered... but my eye swept back and forth and the blue buck’s eyes went wide. “Where’s Scotch Tape?” he asked as he looked back at the smashed wreckage.

Glory shook her head. “I don’t know where! We ran for cover and she was beside me and then she wasn’t. . .” There was a scream as a Steel Ranger charged us, his minigun chattering bullets off the rubble of our wound in the street. On the opposite side ran the unarmored ponies. . . Fillies, Burners, Reapers. . . did it matter any more?

Lacunae’s magic arrows bit deep into the Steel Ranger’s armor, and P-21’s grenade blasted him off his hooves. Glory and I laid down a withering spray of cover fire. Save them. Save them. The words seemed to thrum inside me and gave me the strength to rise to my hooves.

Through the smoke and flame, I saw Radishes... or, rather, a Ranger with Brown Betty attached to their armor. I never forgot a gun. Her armor seemed to glow with the fires that burned brighter and brighter around her from the flamers. Then from the fires rose the dark form of Brutus, and the massive buck brought his hooves down upon her burning armor heedless of the flame. Just like that, a Ranger who’d helped me. . . who had accepted me. . . was dead.

On the opposite side, I saw Mallet’s power hammer swinging wildly at the two Rangers pouring on their minigun rounds. I’d been shot by a minigun before. I knew the sewing sensation that miniguns inflicted as the barrage of bullets liquefied flesh. I’d seen one mare torn to pieces by just such a weapon, but she’d vomited forth bullets as she magically regenerated afterwards.

Mallet had no such advantage. When the Rangers stopped firing, she was so much bloody goo. I sat down hard as I looked at the lump that had once been a pony.

A pony I'd known. Not a friend. Not an enemy. But a pony killed senselessly. Pointlessly. What the hell was I doing here? Why were my friends stuck in the middle of this fight? "Damn it. . . Stop. Stop it!"

"We need to find Scotch, Blackjack," P-21 said. But I didn't quite hear what he'd said.

Everything had gotten lost. "Stop it!" I shouted as I tried to fight my way out of the hole on my broken braces. I could barely stand, let alone walk, but I had to end this. I had to end this right the fuck now. "Stop! Stop killing each other!" I screamed from the lip of the hole as I began firing, ignoring my friends around me. "Stop it! Stop it!" I didn't know who I was attacking any more. With the smoke and the flame and beams I didn't care. If it was red, I shot it. Shoot me, not each other. Shoot a pony who's dead meat anyway! Just fucking stop! I was shooting and crying and screaming as I whirled from one to the next to the next. Bullets bit into my blasted barding; it wasn't going to last much longer at this rate, not without some serious repair. That was okay, though. If ponies were shooting me, then they weren't shooting each other.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop!" I screamed till my throat was raw, my legs were staggering and flopping around as they slipped out of my broken braces, and my barding was slick with blood. Most of it wasn't mine, at least. I'd shoot till nopony else was shooting! I didn't want to see another Radishes. I didn't want another Mallet. I didn't care if they were enemies! I was sick to death of ponies dying to stupidity.

And then a buck stood before me and filled my vision once again as my barrel pointed right at his face. His familiar, stern, blue face. . . and the gun clicked on an empty chamber. He didn't flinch as he looked right along the barrel into my eye.

I'd almost killed my best friend. His eyes, hard and angry and confident, mirrored my own. He knew that this was fucked up. Pointless. Worthless. But he wasn't freaking out. He wasn't screaming like a lunatic and blasting ponies in a fit of rage. He just looked right in my eye along the gun that had almost taken his head off.

I'd nearly killed him. Nearly killed. . . Oh Goddesses, what was happening to me?

"It's just. . . so. . . stupid. . ." I sobbed as the spent shotgun clattered beside me. I swayed back and forth; I'd gotten shot by more than a few ponies in that little shooting spree. "I can't make them stop," I sobbed. Then he reached out to hold me steady as Glory's beam gun blasted bursts at the fighters around us while Lacunae touched her horn to my wounds. Now that I was aware of it, I realized just how much I hurt. "Please. . . tell me how to make them stop killing each other. . ."

He held me without flinching or revulsion as I pressed my cheek to his neck and closed my eye. He smelled nice, too; even if he was a grouch. “You can’t stop them,” he said, sharing the horrible truth I knew all too well. “No matter how much you try and get them to stop fighting, you. . . you can’t make them stop.”

“I’m sorry. . .” I whispered in his ear. “I thought I was strong enough.” But now I knew better. Now I had a clue of just what war really was: a fight so massive and all-engulfing that no pony. . . not Security, not Marauders, not Ministry Mares, not even Princesses could stop it. I’d faced monsters and threats I’d never imagined a month ago. . . but finally, I’d encountered a monster so vast that no amount of bullets would kill it. That monster was war, and I couldn’t slay it.

Suddenly I had a great deal more sympathy for those mares so long ago. . . and remembered two princesses meeting in a tent. ‘We invented it. . .’ And it had been birthed here. Here in this horrible city.

“It’s not that you’re not strong enough to stop it. The amazing thing is that you care enough to bother,” he said softly before he pulled away. “But we can’t stop this fight now. We need to find Scotch and get out of here. Can you find her PipBuck tag?” Because that was something I could do. Something that I could accomplish.

I sniffed and nodded. “Yeah. If you have any duct tape left, can you tape up my braces? Damn things broke.” Damn things had busted from Steel Rain’s two near misses. I’d have been Blackjack foam if he’d actually hit me! I loaded the tag for Scotch’s PipBuck. Don’t think about what you almost did. Don’t stop. Just get Scotch Tape and get out of here.

Then I looked at the shotgun and hesitated. I’d almost blown my friend’s head off. Would I be safe with it? Would they be safe if I had it? As if reading my mind, he scooped up the weapon and pressed it to my chest. “Take it. Just stay with it, okay, Blackjack? If you lose yourself, we’re all lost.”

“Right. Yeah. Good point,” I said as Lacunae finished her healing. The purple alicorn looked as if she’d been put through the wringer; apparently even alicorns had magical limits. The PipBuck tag was to the northeast, back at the fire station. A good place for cover. I looked at my duct taped limbs; this was rapidly approaching pathetic. “Let’s get her, quick.”

Together, we kept low as possible as I click-clacked my way back towards the building. The roof was on fire; there was something ironic about that, I thought. Get her, get out, don’t get dead, and get north to talk to Crunchy Carrots and stop this insanity. There. That was a plan I could do. I pulled my head together as we moved

between puddles of burning chemicals. I wondered if there was some mysterious force resupplying the Burners with flamer fuel and the Fillies with gem cartridges and magic energy weapons? Arming... arming... arming... just waiting for a spark.

Then a shape lunged out of the cloying, swirling smoke. It was all fangs, claws, and a great stabbing scorpion tail. I looked at the swooping manticore and felt something shrivel inside me. "You got to be kidding me..."

Glory knocked me on my side as the beast swooped low over us. The monsters were dropping out of the sky, ripping into gangers and Rangers alike. Any semblance of an organized fight was transformed into a chaotic melee. I loaded a drum of flechettes and, laying on my side, pumped four blasts into the monster's flank. It roared, stabbing wildly with its tail as it brought its face around to bite. A fifth blast liquefied its features. I stared at its great gouged-out eye sockets as its mouth spread wide. A sixth blast tore down its throat and it finally, finally collapsed.

I swapped to slugs after that, forcing myself to my hooves. "You can move faster than any of us," I told P-21. "Get in, get her out."

"Right. Then do you want me to set off the bomb?" he asked. I blinked in confusion. Maybe I had more brain damage than I thought. He waved his hoof at the building. "The bomb! The great big honking bomb we left in there!"

"Are you saying that that thing works?" I gaped back.

He rolled his eyes. "Do you really think I'd rig something like that and leave the detonator in their hooves?!" Right. Because he was a smart pony. He gestured to a detonator he had taped to his forehoof. "When you talked about me handling the trigger, I thought you knew!"

"Right. Of course I did. You get her and we get out of here." Because this was just getting ridiculous. Who the heck was I supposed to shoot now? He nodded and disappeared into the smoke as Glory, Lacunae, and I moved back to back. She levitated a grenade machinegun. "Are you going to be all right?" I asked her

She smiled thinly, wanly. "It is hardly my weapon of choice, but I will make do. I've succeeded in giving all of Unity a splitting headache due to that infernal contraption. The Goddess decrees that, when all of the Wasteland has been converted to the alicorn race, the first megaspell we perform will be to push the entire city of Hoofington into the sea."

"Right. I might just join in on that one, if you don't mind," I said as I looked at Glory.

“How do you like your new gun?” I asked as I swapped to Vigilance and the sword. I needed headshots, and the riot gun wasn’t exactly built for pinpoint accuracy.

“It’s very. . . flashy. It’s also going through gem power drums like crazy!” Glory said as she looked around for incoming fire. “I’ll be fine!”

“Good,” and that was all I had time to say as the next wave of manticores struck. The leonine monsters dove towards our group, and I could barely duck aside on my tottery legs. As deadly as their fangs were, they seemed to want to grab a pony like a mouse, so I kept my eye open for their claws. In the calm of S.A.T.S., I used the accurate pistol to blow out their foreheads and turn them into tumbling missiles as they passed. Of course, as insane as fighting manticores was, we were still open targets for anypony else who wanted a piece of us.

Then a Steel Ranger darted out from a storefront and pointed her missile launcher at us. I brought out Taurus’ rifle, but, fast as it was, I didn’t think I’d get it up before she got a missile off. I opened my mouth to yell to take cover when a glittering, steel-armored pony dropped down upon the Ranger. She wrapped her hooves around in a hug that bent steel and crowed, “Pony in a can! Good thing I got a can opener!” She grabbed a familiar chainsaw knife in her mouth and bit on the grip. The blade whirred as she jammed it into the neck of the Ranger; the power armored pony struggled, but the Reaper just crushed down even more as the blade chewed up the side of her armor. Suddenly, red began to spurt out through the jagged tear in the metal as the pony within the metal shell screamed and then fell silent.

Then Rampage tossed the Ranger aside. Her armor showed hundreds of dents from minigun rounds and her hoofclaws were blackened by fire. Blood smeared her helmet’s blade and the jagged spine along her armor. “Hey Blackjack.” She grinned widely as she trotted towards us. “This is wild, huh?” A manticore swept in and she leapt up to meet it, using her weight to flip it over in mid air. The manticore crashed to earth before us as she finished the flip and rammed her armor’s foot long spines through its sternum. “I don’t think I’ve ever had such fun!”

I just grinned like as idiot as I trotted towards her while she pulled herself off the carcass. “Rampage, I—“

Then she was on top of me, smashing me down and pressing her hoofblades to my throat. “Big Daddy told me to kill you on sight. So you have one chance to say something. Say it,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Get off her now,” Glory shouted as she brought the gatling beam gun to bear. “Or I will give you another childhood!”

“Right. I’ll get to you in a second, turkey. This is between me and Blackjack.” She looked down at me. “Well?”

I closed my eye and said, “I’m sorry. You were right.” She didn’t tear out my throat, so I continued. “We should have helped Scotch through it. I shouldn’t have tried to shelter her.”

Rampage sighed softly as I looked up into her pink eyes. Then she thumped my head softly. “Technically, I’m only supposed to let you live if you agree to fight for us, but I’m really lousy at following orders like that.” She climbed off and helped haul me to my feet. “You look like shit, Blackjack.”

“Appropriate. I feel like shit,” I replied as I stabilized my wobbling legs, looking around. “Where the hell did all these ponies come from?”

“Are you serious?” she asked with a little smirk. “You don’t think that Big Daddy’s only big in with the Hoofington Gangs, do you? Soon as the fighting got serious, he called in favors across half of Equestria. More are coming west every day. This is the greatest stomp in the history of the Wasteland; the Rangers are finally getting everything they deserve. It’s wonderful.” Then she pointed at the dead manticore. “These are a bit much, though. . .”

Gangs from all across Equestria. “It’s insane. Why? What the hell are they coming for?”

“What? It’s not like we’re the only ones. A contingent of Steel Rangers arrived by boat this morning from Trottingham. There’s fighting in the south with the Pecos and Flank against zebras out in the badlands. Red Eye’s forces are picking fights with the Society ponies. I’m amazed the Enclave and the Collegiate haven’t started shooting. Hell, the only part of the Hoof that isn’t crazy is the northwest.”

And that was because I gassed my stable, preventing the Overmare from leading a cannibalistic crusade across the Hoof. “It’s not a coincidence,” I muttered weakly as I looked around at the fire and smoke. “I get EC-1101 out of Stable 99, and suddenly everything explodes? It can’t be a coincidence.”

“Well, it’s not just here, either. Apparently the Rangers are stomping some Stable outside Ponyville. There’s war in Fillydelphia. Red Eye has an army that’s moved in around Tenpony Tower. All of Equestria is going nuts! It’s amazing.” Rampage said with a grin, then looked to the side. “Hold onto that thought, Blackjack.” And she crouched and leapt on to the back of a manticore savaging three unarmored ponies.

“At least we can trust the Enclave to stay out of it,” Glory said as she coughed. “There’s no way they’d stick their wings in this mess.” I gave her a skeptical look, and she said stubbornly, “No pony up there would be dumb enough to mess around with things on the ground right now. Okay?” But she still looked worried. The Enclave might not do anything against the surface. . . but what about against its own?

I looked towards the firehouse. This was taking too long. Had something happened to Scotch? Had they gotten caught? Killed? My mane crawled at the possibilities. Right between my shoulder blades. . . maybe I was paranoid, maybe I’d finally cracked, but I flopped over to the side. For a second I felt like a complete idiot. . .

And then the monsterpony swooped by over me. The mare’s scorpion tail glanced off my barding as she flapped her bat wings wildly. Then she dug in her claws into the asphalt as she slid to face me. “How’d you hear me coming?” she asked, her tail stabbing at the torn up street, her blue eyes glaring at me as she bared her fangs. “Oh well. . . at least we can finish this.”

I hauled myself to my feet. “Yeah. Let’s end this, Jetstream,” I said as I looked at the tawny combination of pony and manticore, not taking my eye off her as four more manticores landed around us.

Then she blinked her blue eyes in confusion. “Jetstream?” Suddenly she burst out laughing. “I’m not Jetstream.”

I blinked. “Well. . . aren’t you?” Had Sanguine altered her memory? Had the fusion megaspell robbed her of her identity?

She looked at me with a smirk. “What the hell are you talking about, Security? My name’s not Jetstream. You couldn’t pay me to be that stuck up. Before my change, my name was Brass.”

“Brass?” That. . . that mare who’d fucked with Doof? I stared at her. “Then how’d you become. . .”

“This?” She gestured to herself with a clawed hoof. “Oh, I jumped on this the first chance I got. A leg up on the food chain, wings, and command over these dumb critters. . . what was there to not love? True, they stuck me in stasis when the file was locked down, but I got to admit, I like the Wasteland a whole lot more!”

I looked at her and then pointed a hoof. “So. . . you were a soldier, volunteered to become this, and couldn’t be happier?”

“That’s right!” She said with a chuckle, snapping her tail.

“No angsty back-story? No regrets? You’re perfectly happy being a monster?” I said as I smiled.

She scowled at me, her claws scraping the broken up pavement. “Absolutely!” Then she growled as I burst out laughing. “What’s so funny?” Glory and Lacunae looked at me in concern; understandable, given that I’d been running around screaming like a maniac just a few minutes ago.

I sat hard on my haunches and looked to the sky, extending my legs as if thanking the Goddesses themselves. “Finally! I finally have an enemy to fight that I don’t have to feel sorry for!” I said, tears running down my cheek as I loaded a magazine of hollowpoint rounds into Vigilance. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to fight a monsterpony only to guilt and whine and angst about it afterwards? But you? You’re a complete monster, Brass!” I said as I slashed the sword in front of me. “Do you eat foals? Tell me you eat foals and rape helpless little ponies. That’ll be the icing on the cake!” I laughed in mad glee, doing a shuffling little dance with my taped up legs. “Woo woo! No regrets... no sir... no regrets... not for me... woo woo!” I sang as I danced around in a strutting trot.

She roared and charged, and then just as suddenly danced back on her claws as my sword sang in a slash before her. Back and forth the blade slashed, inches from her face as I charged at her. “No angst! No moral dilemmas! No wondering if I did something wrong! Hold still!” I shouted in glee as I raised Vigilance, slipped into S.A.T.S. and queued up four shots. It was a testament to her speed that she was able to raise her clawed hooves to shield her face as the bullets blasted great big bites out of her hide.

“You’re insane!” she shouted. “Fury, damn it! Kill her!”

From my blind side a mare said in a bored tone, “You’re such an idiot, Brass.” And I turned to see... a mare on fire? No. It was an earth pony with a mane and coloration that resembled crackling flame. “And don’t use that stupid ‘code name’ on me. Honestly, what are you? A filly reading comics?”

“Just shut up and kill her! Where the hell is Precious?” the manticore pony yelled as two of her beasts came to shield her from my gunfire.

“Who cares?” the orange and red mare drawled. “Get clear.” Now that’s never a good thing to hear.

I brought the gun around and pointed it at her head. “Get back.” She didn’t. “Get the fuck back!” I did not like how casually she strolled towards me or how the tawny

manticore monster was moving away.

“Yeah. Add a few more expletives. See if that works for ya,” she said as she started tossing bits of junk and garbage onto her back. “So. Sanguine wants it bad. In fact, he wants it so bad that he’s started cutting power to our stasis pods for more help. So you can come with us and give it up, or we take it.”

“Or you tell him no dice,” I replied as I backed away from this weird mare, trying to figure out her thing. What was she fused with? Given how the other was moving away, I gestured for Lacuane and Glory to move away too. Neither looked particularly happy about it, especially given that they each had a manticore snapping at them. Beam gun bursts and magic arrows kept the monsters back, though, as the mare kept on picking up pieces of junk.

“Look. Deus wouldn’t have been after it if Sanguine hadn’t had his hooves in the fire. And Sanguine wouldn’t be after it if something didn’t have his hooves in the fire. So just give it up,” she said as she looked at me dully. “You know what? Fuck it.” The flame mare closed her eyes as she started to glow.

And she exploded.

You know. . . I was rather sure that I had completely surpassed my quota of explosions for today, and it wasn’t even noon. The junk she’d tossed on herself became deadly shrapnel that whizzed past me as I slid across the ground to come to a halt against a dead Ranger. Then the pile of ashes glowed, and from them reformed the flame colored mare. “Ow.” She muttered with a hiss of pain, looked at me, and started trotting towards me again with an annoyed look. “Wow. . . most ponies don’t need to see this a second time,” she said as she started to glow once more.

Rampage darted in front of me as the mare flashed and exploded again, the flames washing over her armor and cooking her striped hide as she shielded me from the blast. “Toasty!” Rampage yelled, the blackened flesh already beginning to heal. “I got this one, Blackjack.”

“Rampage? Are you back with us?” I asked and saw her pink eyes hesitate.

“Is Scotch okay?” she asked, biting her lip.

“I. . . don’t know.” I admitted, looking towards the firehouse. What was taking them so long? I could see the tag and the blue bars.

“Let me know when you do,” she said as she turned towards the regenerated yellow and orange mare. “Okay, Sparky, let’s see it again!” And she charged the startled-looking mare, who glowed as Rampage bulldozed her off to the north. Then the

mare exploded again, and I heard Rampage laugh in glee.

“Okay. This is getting surreal,” I muttered, then grinned at the manticore pony as I struggled to my hooves, tottered, and fell flat on my face. Well, I wouldn’t let that stop me. “Oh Brass...” I sang as I lifted the glowing sword. I felt... drunk. Like I’d shot down a whole bottle of Wild Pegasus. My hide was numb and my mouth kept slipping on my words.

“Blackjack, shouldn’t we be getting the heck out of here?” Glory asked, her red beams peppering the annoyed looking Manticore; clearly, her gatling beam gun didn’t pack the shot per shot punch of her beam rifle. Still, she had a point. If I could only think. So many blasts and crashes and impacts left my brain feeling like it was so much mashed jelly.

“Right! Right!” I said as I picked myself to my hooves. And the tag was moving again, towards us? Yes! Towards us. But the smoke and fire and monsters and brain damage were all adding up on me and I managed four steps before everything went sideways and I collapsed on my face again. I rolled onto my back, looking at the smoke pouring up into the sky, and I stretched my hoof towards it for a moment, as if I could just push the clouds away and see the blue beyond.

Sweet Celestia, I was messed up. How many times had I been blown up today?

A grenade drove off Glory’s manticore and announced that P-21 had arrived with Scotch in tow. He looked more frazzled than usual as Persuasion thumped and the precisely aimed grenades blew the monsters back. Scotch Tape looked sullen, though. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t let me bring her with us!”

“Not right now, Scotch,” he replied in the middle of loading another grenade.

“Stop talkin’ at me like you’re my mom. She saved me from those Ranger ponies!” she insisted as she pointed back at the fire station. Who saved who from what? Oooh... head hurt.

As they argued, Lacunae exhausted the ammunition in her purloined grenade machine gun and tossed the bulky weapon away. All she had was her magic, and not even that seemed inexhaustible. Then two Rangers slammed into the beasts she faced, distracting them. One had to be Paladin Stronghoof; I thought I saw him looking towards me as he smashed the beast like a stuffed animal. The other was Turnip, firing a missile at the manticore at almost point blank range. Rampage fought the exploding pony. Other Rangers shot at her. Fillies and Burners fired at them.

I could see the Dealer standing beside me, and part of me noticed that my crazy had gotten good enough to make it a bit harder to see him through the smoke. “Do you understand now, Blackjack? Do you understand what you’re trying to stop?”

Lacunae took the opportunity to return to me, lowering her horn and applying a trickle of healing magic to my head. My PipBuck labeled it as ‘crippled’. That explained a lot. “Yeah. But I got to... got to... do... something to stop it...” All we needed now was the Enclave to sweep in, and I’d wave the white flag. It couldn’t get any worse than this...

And then the roar sounded.

It was close, deep, grinding, and loud enough that everypony around stopped fighting and looked about. Again it sounded, sending a shiver along my mane. “We need to go...” I said as I struggled to my hooves. That seemed to be a growing consensus as everypony started to back away from the burning fire station. For a few seconds, there were only the sounds of crackling flames and the more distant fighters. Then a rumbling crash grew louder and louder as the roar became a growing scream from the north east.

The firehouse exploded. No, not from a bomb or the like. Instead, the flaming structure was pushed completely over as a massive monster of metal half crawled over and half burst through the structure. I’d seen a machine like this before, half rusted and buried in a hillside. This one wasn’t rusted; it was operational, mobile... and much bigger.

Just what this fight needed... a tank.

The huge vehicle was covered in black and white stripes and coated with flaming debris. Everypony with a gun pointed it at the steel beast and opened fire as they fled in any direction they could that was away. Its heavy armor plates were barely scratched by the heavy weapons of the Rangers. Steel Rain might have been able to do something, but he was nowhere to be seen. Smart pony.

Two huge barrels swept across the battlefield as the turret turned, shaking off heaps of rubble like a dog. Smaller gun barrels recessed at the corners tracked back and forth for a moment, and then belched out streams of gunfire that tore through everything equally, pony and power armor alike. The exploding pony was hit and exploded, but didn’t reform immediately. Dead? Waiting? Brass was hitting the clouds. I hoped she ate a lightning rod. Rampage blinked, was blasted off her hooves by a spray of high power machine gun blasts, and came to rest near me. “Oooo... That is one big can.”

Those turrets now all pointed right at me, and the mechanical beast let out a long low rev of its engines. Its treads started to grind through the firehouse rubble as it moved towards us.

Of course it was after me. Everything was after me! I was wondering where the zebra infantry was. Then I looked at P-21 staring with his jaw dropped, looked at his bare back, and glanced at the rubble. Well... it'd be a shame to waste it. I reached out with my magic, flicked up the guard, and pushed the red button.

You know, this was turning into a regular thing with me today.

The bomb buried in the remains of the firehouse ripped up directly underneath the rear corner of the tank. Its left tread flew apart as the entire back end of the vehicle crumpled. For a moment, I was sure that there was going to be a secondary explosion, but the tank just lay there like a busted toy. Bricks and dust and flaming bits cascaded down upon us as we huddled on the ground. I slowly rose to my hooves and took a few steps towards the war machine.

Then I looked back over my shoulder at my friends and grinned. "I win."

Then the engine growled to life and a pink glow began to spread along the damaged vehicle, the metal bending back into shape, knitting together, and reappearing. The guns began to move in their sockets, and all together we rushed away to the west, disappearing into the smoke. A minute later, the tank's engine let out a roar that echoed across the battlefield.

We didn't stop running for almost ten minutes. We spotted one or two Reapers, but they were scattering too fast to give us any trouble. Finally, we tumbled into an intact basement bar and spread out. Everypony was covered in a mat of blood, soot, dust, and sweat. We reeked of smoke and flamer fuel. My brand new shotgun was in dire need of a new barrel, and Glory's beam gun barely had enough charge to function as a flashlight.

But me? I couldn't be happier. We were alive. No pony was missing body parts. Well, no pony except me, but, still, I hadn't lost any more. And we were all together again!

Lacunae used her magic to recharge our remaining potions before we drank them. I was still far from top notch. Now that the shock had worn off, I was one throbbing nerve head to hoof. P-21 and I both took a Med-X. Scotch had gotten over her

shock at the tank and was now telling Rampage about an odd filly she'd met in the fire house who had saved her from Steel Rain's Rangers. Glory tried to repair my braces with something more effective than duct tape; hard to know how she'd manage that.

Me, I just smiled as I drank a room temperature Buckweiser and looked at my five friends.

"You look happy..." P-21 said as he sat opposite me. He'd taken one drink of the tepid beer and grimaced. Wuss. But that was why I loved him. He still looked mixed about Rampage rejoining us. Glory remained cool, now that things had calmed down. There was no doubt we needed her, but it'd take a while before Glory forgave her for leaving us back at the Collegiate.

"I feel happy. I look like shit," I replied as I looked at the dusty pool table. There were bones around it. Well, that was a downer. I wondered who'd been playing when the bombs fell. Who'd been winning. Had they been having fun getting one last game in as the air sirens wailed? There had once been pictures all over the walls, but most had fallen to the floor and were ruined by mud and moisture. From the few that remained, it looked as if this had been a hangout for the soldier bucks at the naval base. Most of them were smiling at the camera, or grinning like idiots, or raising bottles of beer in salute.

I lifted my bottle to the pictures that remained. Having had a taste of war, though I admitted it had been a small taste, I knew they deserved all the respect I could muster.

Especially when I knew one of these ponies.

Twist and a zebra sat at the bar in one grainy photograph, and I carefully levitated the frame off the wall. There was a news article taped inside the frame.

Barroom Brawl Becomes Battlefield.

By Ace Buckley.

Chaos reigned yesterday night in Progress at Billiard's pool hall as a group of sailors from the Ironmare Naval Base encountered several soldiers from the Miramare Air Station. Sergeant Twist, formerly of the now infamous Macintosh's Marauders, was sharing a drink with Shujaa, one of the elusive Proditor zebras still fighting on behalf of Equestria, when the sailors arrived and took umbrage with the presence of the red zebra. Sergeant Twist told the sailors what they could do with their anchors in a quote we cannot reprint, and the fight was on.

When soldiers from the air station learned that the sergeant was in trouble, they immediately rushed to her assistance. All told, almost two hundred off duty soldiers rushed to the scene to assist their side. Though there were no casualties, Colonel Cupcake at Miramare said that there would be severe punishment incoming. Some observers, however, have expressed concerns that the former Marauder enjoys special privileges due to the attack on her last year. The question has also been raised of whether the Sergeant's open intimate relationship with Shujaa is a conflict of loyalties. Few zebras remain in the Hoofington region, and most of those who do are inmates of the Yellow River internment camp.

Billiards, owner of the establishment in question, has said that anypony wishing to fight on behalf of the Princess and Equestria was welcome, striped or not. He assures his clientele that his bar would be reopened in just a few weeks.

I looked at the pair in the photograph, holding hooves and resting their heads against each other. It could have been Glory and me in that photograph. Looking at Twist, I glanced over. There were some differences. . . they had different grins. Different eyes. Then there were the stripes. And the zebra simply looked exotic with that 'not-quite-a-pony' look they had. I turned it over, and there was a little note: 'Twist + Shujaa' with a heart drawn around the words. Should I tell her about it? Would she freak out? I didn't want to shoot her in the head again, especially not with Scotch Tape watching.

Not remembering sucks. Shit. . .

"Rampage. . ." I called out.

She looked over from Scotch. Her armor had holes in it she hadn't been able to patch yet. I could only imagine how she'd gotten another suit. Had she gone down into the tunnels for the armor we'd been forced to leave behind? Maybe she had a second suit left with Big Daddy.

"Yeah? What's up?" she asked as she trotted towards me.

"I found a picture," I said softly. "Back at the Museum a few days back, when we were fighting zebras. . . you said that your name was Shujaa." I tapped the overturned picture. "I found. . . I think I found a picture of her."

Rampage sat down hard. "You mean. . . one of the ponies. . . inside me?" I nodded slowly, and she clenched her eyes shut.

P-21 slipped off of his seat and trotted to Scotch. "Let's get you washed up. There's got to be some clean water somewhere around here with all this rain."

“Hey, I want to stay with Rampage!” The filly protested as he shoved her towards the stairs.

“She’s not going anywhere. Now move.” P-21 said firmly as he shoved her up the stairs.

Rampage took the picture and looked at the little note. Shaking wasn’t a good sign. She slowly turned the frame over, reached out with her hoof, and ran it over the glass, as if caressing Twist. “I... I don’t understand these feelings...” she said as she started to cry. She gave me a snotty sniff. “I feel... I feel all... all mixed up! This... this is me!” she said as she looked at me with wide eyes. “And... and I love her so much...” And then she pointed at Twist. “But this is also me! I know it... I... I see it. And... and I love her... I love her so much it hurts! And yet... I hate her too! I’m so angry at her!” And she dropped the picture and hugged herself. “But why? I don’t know these ponies!”

“Two souls in one,” Lacunae said softly.

Rampage’s hooves dug into her sides. “I don’t understand... I... am I Twist? Am I Shujaa? Am I both?” She sniffed and shook her head. “I don’t understand at all. I feel... I want to rip open my chest. I want... I want to save her... but I don’t understand why. None of it makes any sense!” She stared at me with her wide, pleading eyes. “Who am I, Blackjack? What am I?”

I knelt down and hugged her, hoping that she wasn’t going to crush me like a bug. “I don’t know, Rampage. Arlostee? Twist? Shujaa?” I stared at her. “I wish I were a smarter pony. Then I could figure all this out.” I looked up at Lacunae, wondering just how many souls you could fit in one pony.

My whole life, I’d always been Blackjack; maybe not the smartest pony in the Stable, but still me. I had a mother who raised me better than other ponies I knew and I had never had to question who or what I was. The sight of the Reaper looking at that picture with such an expression of confusion and pain... Her jaw grit as she looked from pony to zebra and back again. Finally, she pushed the picture away as she sniffed. “If Big Daddy could see me now...”

“How do you feel?” I asked, and she hiccupped and rubbed her nose.

“I feel... Goddesses... I’d say messed up and crazy, but apparently that’s not how crazy works. I look at the pictures, and part of me says ‘that’s me’, and other parts say ‘no, it’s somepony else’ and they’re fighting with each other. And part of me loves what I see... a part of me hates what I see... and... it’s just wrong. I

want to apologize to myself... and kill myself... and cut out my heart... and... ugh... just crazy!" She looked at Glory plaintively. "Are you sure that I'm not crazy? Positive? It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

Glory sighed and gave a small, comforting smile. The gray pony just didn't have it in her to hold a grudge. "No. If you weren't aware of the conflicting impulses... maybe then it might be some sort of personality disorder... but since you are... Sorry. "

"Eh..." She took a deep breath. "It's how I normally feel. Little impulses and urges and conflicts inside me and all of them screaming for attention. Sometimes I feel like a schoolteacher or something and my head is a kindergarten." She groaned. "Mint-als help me focus on what's what... keep it all straight."

"Well... sorry I can't help more," I said with a sigh.

She just laughed weakly, shaking her head. "Blackjack... before I met you, I didn't think that I could be helped at all. Nothing made sense. Now I know the name of at least one pony inside me. Maybe two. At least I've got some hope that I can figure it all out. There's nothing worse than being a stranger in your own skin, feeling different parts of yourself battling it out."

"Do you think you're still a threat to Scotch?" I asked with a concerned frown.

"I don't know," she said as her smile disappeared. She hung her head with a sigh. "Now that I know... I felt that urge. I won't lie. Like a pressure inside me wanting to snuff her out before she could hurt more. But I didn't let it lock me out this time." She rubbed her head. "I think I'll be fine. Just try not to leave her alone with me if you can help it. No reason to tempt fate, right?"

Right. Tempting fate would be the last thing I'd ever do. I asked the question I'd been dreading since seeing the Reapers fighting. "Do you think Big Daddy can cut this war off if we get Crunchy Carrots to agree?" More importantly, would he still want to?

She sighed. "Maybe. I think so. If we do it soon."

"But why would he want to? I thought that Big Daddy liked a good stomp." Glory asked with a small frown.

Rampage chuckled mirthlessly. "He does. But he's smart enough to look past the stomp and figure out that, even if he crushes the Rangers, he's not going to have much left afterwards. Big Daddy's always been about encroachment. Squeeze the Rangers out block by block, month by month. He never wanted a war; he just fought because they shot first... well... somepony else shot first."

That gave me hope. “Okay. Well then, we’ll keep going to meet with Crunchy Carrots. You can say that you’re Big Daddy’s ambassador or something. It’ll sound better coming from a Reaper than Security anyway. We’ll explain how we started things, apologize, and hope she can rein in Steel Rain.”

“It should. It takes a lot for Rangers to break ranks.” Rampage agreed.

“But you can bet Steel Rain won’t just let us meet with the Elder,” Glory chipped in.

“Correct.” I sighed and looked at Rampage. “Do you know the naval base at all? You’ve been all over the Hoof.”

She nodded and walked to the bar, digging around a bit before coming back with a piece of scrap paper and a pencil. She drew a rectangle and pointed a hoof at it. “This is the naval base itself. Mostly a bunch of reinforced warehouses. Whole place was lousy with radiation for years, but I guess enough of it washed out or wore off for the Rangers to move in. West of it are a whole bunch of docks. That area’s one massive rusty tangle. East of the main area, there’re these big factory buildings where they used to make ships and stuff.” She drew a scribbled mess on the left side of the rectangle and a smaller square to the right.

“South of it is Ironmare Town. Mostly ruins. There used to be squatters, but the Rangers stomped them years back. Still, that area is probably thick with Ranger patrols.” She drew a great big backwards capital F above the central rectangle. “This is the breakwater and pier. Not sure how much cover or stuff there is.” And then she drew a lozenge shape on the bottom of the lower arm of the F. “And this is the Celestia. The Steel Rangers have made it their fortress in Hoofington. It’s the big reason the Reapers haven’t tried a war before. No pony knows if the big guns work. No pony wants to find out what it’ll take, if they do work, to get Crunchy Carrot to use up any ammunition for them.”

Finally, underneath the square, she drew a circle. “This used to be the headquarters for the base. Big old building; guess it used to be a bunch of offices. But. . .” she drew another circle, this one made of a dotted line, to the right of the headquarters. “This is the Ironmare crater. The bomb missed the base outright, but you know what they say. . .”

“The only time close matters is horseshoes, hand grenades, and balefire bombs. . .” I muttered.

“They really say that?” Glory asked with a confused frown.

“Spoken like a pony who’s never gotten a ringer,” Rampage chuckled.

“Balefire bombs ring?”

I waved my hoof. “Okay. So... if we can get through the headquarters building, then through the factory, we should be able to find somepony to set up a meeting. Maybe Stronghoof, if he survived.” And it’d be hard for me to think of anypony who could kill that stallion!

“I smell a whole lot of ‘make it up as we go’ coming off this plan,” Glory said with a resigned sigh.

“Of course. Wouldn’t be fun otherwise.” I said with a smile. I looked at Rampage, who was looking at the newspaper clipping. “You want me to hold onto that for you?”

She jumped, looked at me, and then nodded once. I carefully removed the picture from the frame and slipped it into my saddlebags. I’d keep it safe. It was one of the few things I could do for her.

We all took a few minutes to rinse off the grime and grit from the battle. Already I was missing the last time I had wonderous hot water cascading over me with a mare scrubbing my flanks. An unoccupied bathtub would be wonderful, too. I had never appreciated how a hot shower was a hallmark of civilization. It seemed so simple, but right now I could go for a weeklong soak... which would give me a few more weeks to get stuff done before I died.

Tick tock tick. As we set off, I imagined the taint battling with my cells, slowly advancing and encroaching on healthy tissue. Building up bases and fortifying tumors. Staging raids and assaults on my intact organs till it completely controlled the territory of my body. I could swear I felt little explosions inside when I moved wrong. Twinges like gunfire. A general burning in my rear leg like flamers at work. And, every now and then, I imagined a bomb inside me going off that would make me pause and gasp.

“Well, you were all running one way, but I couldn’t run. I was so scared. And those mean Ranger ponies were laughing about how they should just cut off my PipBuck and figuring how to disarm his big old bomb. Then this purple and green filly walked in. And they seemed to think she was one of my friends or something and went to grab her. Well... she opened her mouth wide and SHE bit HIS leg off. And then the other one started to shoot her, but the bullets? They just bounced right off. And then she breathed fire at him! Green fire!” Scotch looked at us. “I’m not making this up!”

I smiled as I clattered along beside her. "I didn't say you were, Scotch."

"You had the smile," she said sullenly.

"Smile?"

"That 'I don't believe you but I won't say so' smile," she said crossly, then looked at Rampage. "You believe me, don't you?" There was more in her tone and expression than just that. She might as well have been asking 'You're not angry with me, are you?' or 'You're not going to leave again, are you?'

Rampage looked at her a long moment and then gave a crooked smile. "Sure kid. I knew Gorgon. Freakiest damn pony you ever saw," and her smile slowly faded away. "And one of the nicest." I recalled him turning my friends to stone but kept my silence.

"Who hired him to up production at the mine?" I asked as I trotted along. We were making our way north, more or less trying to keep off the streets and always watching the skies. We may have killed off a bunch of Brass's flock, but I didn't think that we'd gotten all of them. "I mean, it seemed pretty sudden, from what I recall."

"Dunno. Apparently, some buyer wanted every last gem they could claw out of the mine. Basically took it over. Funny, because normally those gems would get converted into flamer fuel or gem cartridges, but they were going somewhere else." I frowned, my head throbbing.

"I know that look," P-21 said as he limped up beside me. "What are you thinking, Blackjack?"

"Just... ugh... everything is happening now. I get EC-1101 out of 99. Gorgon gets sent out to mine gems. Everypony starts killing everypony else. What triggered it? What's behind it? Who wants the gems so much, and why?" I pointed in the general direction of the battle. "And that monsterpony said that somepony was really pushing Sanguine to get EC-1101. So why now?"

Rampage looked at me. "No offense, but why not? Things are finally organized enough for groups of ponies to tear each other apart."

"But that's part of it too. The companions come out east and just happen to weed out all the dozens of little tribes so that they could get five competing organizations? And one of the companions goes up to the Enclave to get them involved too through the VC? I can't believe it's all coincidence. It's like there's something... something sweeping all this along. And not just in Hoofington. Why does the Stable Dweller

shake everything up now? Why has Red Eye come to power in Fillydelphia now? Why is everything happening now?"

"Maybe it is all just one big coincidence?" Glory suggested. "I mean, it's all circumstantial."

She was probably right. . . but I couldn't help but feel the niggling sensation that all of this was connected. That things that happened two hundred years ago were happening now.

I looked back at Lacunae trailing behind us as Glory and P-21 began arguing over coincidence verses pattern. Well, that was fine; I'd raised the question, so now the smart ponies could argue over it. I dropped back and gave Lacunae a little nudge. "How are you feeling?"

"The Goddess was hurt. . . very badly. I do not think Unity has ever been so threatened before." She shivered. "She has cut me off as completely as she can. I have been forsaken. I can hear the others. . . but next time I am threatened, she will let me die. She will not endanger everything for just me."

"I'm sorry," I said with a sigh. "I guess. . . I guess you and the Goddess would have been better off if you'd never met me."

"Why do you say that?" Lacunae asked with the ghost of a smile. "You are. . . in many ways. . . the most fascinating pony the Goddess has ever encountered. Tenacious. Foolish. Brave and cowardly. Painfully devoted to those in need. Had ponies like you lived two centuries ago, perhaps things might have been different. At the very least, you have inspired the Goddess to a radical plan."

"Radical?"

"Yes. The Goddess knows a dire enemy is coming to us. We will. . . treat with her. Seek to use her rather than destroy her outright. Allow her to achieve mutual goals in the hopes that our great biological problem can be addressed."

"That sounds dangerous. What if she betrays you?"

"That's a great concern. But as you have pointed out. . . two centuries of Wasteland has accomplished little." Two centuries of Watcher and the Enclave hasn't accomplished much either, I thought. "We do not know if this will work, but we are becoming increasingly aware that old methods are not succeeding. Things must change, one way or another."

"Are you really cut off forever?" I asked in concern, worried about what it meant for

her.

“So says the Goddess, but she’s said so before. Twilight is terribly curious about Hoofington, Enervation, and your own concerns.” Lacunae gave a mysterious little smile. “I have faith that she’ll one day return to me. I’ve lost Goddesses before. . .”

That was an odd thing to say, but when she mentioned that name, I gave a half smile, “Is she. . . is she really in there?”

“It’s. . . complicated,” she said with another faint smile. “It’s like. . . music. The Goddess is the conductor, and we are her orchestra. She selects the music, but we must play the notes. Some of us play well, some softly, some with amazing skill. Twilight is one such musician, perhaps the best in the orchestra, but the Goddess still picks the music. And I think that she is glad to yield the decisions to the Goddess. . . the choices of her time as Ministry Mare were not easy on her. It was a time of much pain and regret.”

“Funny how she wants to add us all to her band,” I muttered dryly.

“We once thought to make it optional, but the process was too slow and painful. The acolytes of Unity were too vulnerable to the predators of the wasteland. And it seemed somewhat cruel to leave the poor and ignorant and fearful to die when they could be saved in Unity. Once they were part of us, they would know it was a better state.” She gave a tiny shrug. “It is a matter of perspective. For us, it would be monstrous not to offer Unity to all.”

I didn’t think about it like that. “What was it like for you?”

She gave me a sad smile. “I don’t know. I didn’t go through Unity,” she replied, and I kicked myself. It was so hard to remember that she wasn’t actually a pony, that she was just a collection of thoughts and regrets. “I have memories, though. A cup of golden fluid. . . vats of rainbow lights. . . catwalks. . . why catwalks?” She sighed and shivered slightly. “Then falling into a great dark filled with whispers and motes of light.”

“And then?”

“Learning to play. Some fight it. But I think, on some fundamental level, we all long for harmony.”

“Harmony, huh?” I looked in the direction of all the smoke. “Somehow, Hoofington doesn’t seem to know how to play along.”

Two hours later, we'd left most of the industrial section of the city behind. Crumbling factories gave way to a narrow band of yellowed grass, dead trees, and smaller patches of tract homes. In the middle of this band was a parking lot, a foundation, and a sign proudly proclaiming 'Horizon Laboratories'. Beneath that, 'Proud Subsidiary of the Ministry of Arcane Science.' Everything else had been scraped away by a balefire bomb, given the crater beside the building. It'd probably been blown out into the bay.

"Well. That's disappointing," Rampage muttered. She pointed at the junk scattered over the slab of blasted foundation. "Was this someplace important?"

"It might have been a place with some answers," I grumbled. Now it was no place.

"If you don't mind, I think I should take the opportunity to replenish myself," Lacunae said as she looked yearningly at the red radiation emanating from the bowl-shaped depression.

"Have fun. Keep an eye open for Rangers... Reapers... manticores..." I sighed and hung my head. "You know what? Just keep an eye out for anything that isn't us." With a flutter of her wings, she trotted happily towards the wan glow of the crater.

I walked across the slab, finding the elevator shafts completely choked with rubble. There were a few smashed and rusted bits of office equipment; most of the concrete was burned to a crisp and still gave slow clicks on my radiation meter. We met back in the parking lot.

"So... nothing here, then?" Rampage asked as she drummed her hooves on the rusted hulks.

It looked exactly that way. A small parking lot for wagons... a big empty slab. Wait... Small. Big. Slowly, I turned around and faced away from the building. Nothing that way either. A few smashed homes. A gutted recharging station. A lot of ponies must have worked here, and to do that they must have had some way to get here. There.

A subway...

Slowly, I trotted towards it. The blue sign was pitted with rust and largely illegible, but my PipBuck navigation icon told me what it had said. 'Horizon Station.'

"Bingo," I said with a little smile.

Scotch balked. "You... you want to go down there?" she said as she looked at the rusty doors that hung half open at the bottom of the stairs.

“Just a little way,” I said as I looked at her. “You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to.” I glanced at Rampage, but she shook her head slowly. “P-21 can—”

“I’ll go with you. You might come across a lock or a terminal,” he countered flatly. Damn it.

“I’ll stay with her,” Glory volunteered, as if there was somepony else willing. “Who knows? It could be fun.”

“Yippie,” Scotch muttered as she walked away from the subway stairs. “Babysat by the world’s most boring pony.”

“I’m not the world’s most boring pony! We can braid manes... swap stories... um... pillow...fight?...” She chewed on her hoof for a moment and looked at me. “I’m not really the most boring pony, am I?”

I looked at her and thought that outright deception was called for. “Absolutely not.”

That brightened her up. “Come on, Scotch. I’ll show you the principles of beam rifle technology!” she said as the two headed back towards the center of the parking lot.

“Someday you’re going to have to tell her what happened,” Rampage said from the doorway of the subway station.

“She’s fine. She’s dealing with it,” P-21 muttered. “Last thing she needs to do is go remembering anything else.”

“But why is she remembering at all?” I asked as I looked in at two rusty escalators dropping into the earth. I took that for a good sign and slowly started down with Vigilance and sword out.

“Memory spells remove memory,” Rampage said from behind me in a slightly off voice. I glanced back. Her walk was less... stalking. More normal. Another pony inside her? “However, mental trauma is rarely so black and white as good memory, bad memory. Stripping away an unpleasant memory may prevent the mind from actively recalling the event, but it doesn’t necessarily remove the countless subconscious reactions to the trauma itself. If a pony falls into a river, the memory of the fall and nearly drowning can be extracted, but the anxiety around water and the phobia of drowning can remain. True memory therapy takes years of work to adjust those subconscious problems.” I looked past her at P-21, seeing his eyes wide in surprise. Rampage muttered softly, “What a dreadful station.”

“Yeah. Somepony should call maintenance... Doctor...?” I guessed. The emergency lighting still flickered and danced as we followed the escalator lower and lower

into the earth.

“Octopus,” she replied with a crooked smile. Really? “Yes, really. I was quite grabby with my magic as a colt.” I didn’t hesitate as we continued down lower into the earth. “I quite like my name, actually. It’s one few ponies forget. After a while, all the hoof-this and wing-that blur together, don’t you think?” I saw the red marks on my EFS below and lowered my voice.

“Right. And what do you do for a living, doctor?” I asked, trying to divide my attention.

“Senior psychologist at the Fluttershy Medical Center,” she said, and then frowned. “At least. . . I was. I think. Has something happened? I feel dreadfully out of sorts.”

Not crazy, but not entirely here and aware of what was going on. “Nothing major,” I said softly, wondering how a pony like this ended up in Rampage. “What was the last thing you recall clearly, Doctor?”

She curled her lip as she stepped over several bodies, not seeming to recognize them completely. “I. . . believe I was attending a lecture on methods of psychological deconstruction and reconstruction in Manehattan. There was an accident. . . I think. A dreadful accident.” She suddenly looked around. “What’s going on? This. . . this has to be some sort of hallucination!”

“Please. . . Doctor. Focus. You said an accident. . . did it happen after Big Macintosh’s death?”

She looked at me and her panic increased. “Why are you asking an old buck about that horrible affair? This must be some sort of stress-induced break from reality.”

“How long ago was it, Doctor?”

“A year. . . I think. . .” she said in a trembling voice. She reached up and touched her forehead, her pupils shrinking. “Sweet Luna protect me. . . am. . . am I. . . is this real?”

“I. . .” I looked at P-21 helplessly. He just gave a tiny shrug. “Yes. I’m afraid you’re not dreaming, Doctor. You’re. . . you’re inside a mare named Rampage.” I prayed she wasn’t going to freak out, but, though she seemed disturbed, she didn’t become violent. Instead, she reached up to her eyes and then blinked.

“Ah. . . no glasses. . . My word. Well, I suppose that, unless I’ve gone completely off my nut, I may as well accept what you say at face value,” she muttered as she looked at the decaying station. “Though it seems as if something has gone quite

terribly wrong?" she asked with a worried smile.

"It's been two hundred years. And yes, something did go quite terribly wrong," P-21 said quietly. "You're a buck, Doctor?"

"Well, I was," she said. "And I was a unicorn. Really, how did this happen?"

I sighed. "You tell us, Doctor?"

"As I said, I haven't the foggiest idea. I was... asleep I think. It was dark, certainly. Unpleasant. Then I recall some folks discussing memory manipulation. I was quite keen to join the conversation... but unfortunately, I couldn't quite wake up. Then it happened again just now, and suddenly I was... well... in this odd state. I didn't feel myself at all..." she replied as he looked at her hoofclaws. "My... how positively horrid. The future isn't at all what I'd anticipated."

"Did anything unusual happen to you? Anything to do with the Office of Interministry Affairs or their secret projects?" I asked with a smile. "Anything you can tell us would help."

"My dear, I was living a life of constant referrals and anticipating more time with my grandfoals once I retired. I was never a big supporter of the war or the Ministries and certainly not involved with anything secret," she said with a sad shake of her head. "I wonder... did my grandfoals... what became of them?" She asked with a look of terrible worry.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. They probably died," I said softly. "The war... there were bombs..." I stammered and dropped my gaze. "I'm sorry."

She put her hooves on my shoulders. "No my dear. I'm sorry. I'm sorry we didn't work things out. I always knew we were developing too fast. Changing too much. Too much pride and too much anger... but nopony was interested in the opinions of a buck who fondly remembered steam trains." She took a deep breath. "Now, if you'll excuse me... I think there's somepony who wants... something. I'd best go back to wherever I was."

She blinked, and suddenly her eyes popped wide. "Tell me I didn't kill her. Please tell me I didn't kill her!"

"You didn't," I assured her. "Actually, we talked to somepony who was... Well... actually pretty nice, if a little confused."

We trotted down to the station; I was relieved to find it intact. However, there were some ghouls shuffling around aimlessly. I was glad that the doctor was gone; I'd

hate to have to explain all this to him. It was surprising how casually we dispatched them; after a battle like earlier, it seemed almost foolishly easy. The train tunnel ran north and south, right towards the fallen Horizon Labs.

“What are you hoping to find?” P-21 asked as he stuffed his saddlebags with some semi-decent salvage. There was always a need for more duct tape, wonderglue, and scrap metal.

“No idea. The Professor said that this place was involved with the O.I.A.” I said as we stepped off the platform and walked along the tracks. I kept looking up, to the sides, and all around.

“This is a bad idea,” P-21 muttered. “We don’t have any healing potions left. . .”

“As I recall, you volunteered,” I said as I looked at him with a flat look and even smile. Then I spotted the door in the wall, a terminal mounted next to it. I rapped on the glass monitor. “And good thing too.” He scowled sullenly at me before getting to work.

“What was he like?” Rampage asked.

“The doctor? Well. . . he was a grandfather. A professional. Cared for his grandkids. Didn’t mention a wife. . . seemed to think he was dreaming or something at first. And he was a psychologist of some sort,” I said with a smile and a shrug at her baffled look.

We were silent for a few minutes as P-21 worked on the terminal, muttering under his breath. “Blackjack?” Rampage asked softly.

“Hmmm?”

“Do you think I’m real?”

I blinked in surprise. “Real? What are you talking about?”

“I mean. . .” she hugged herself. “What if. . . what if there is no Rampage? Or Arlosté? Or me? Am I just. . . just a collection of ponies all blended together?”

I bit my lip, not sure how to answer that. But P-21 snorted, “You’re real, alright.” He looked at the striped mare sharply. “I have no idea who that doctor was. Or Shujaa. Or Twist. Or anypony. I just know Rampage. That’s all I think of when I think of you. I don’t know if you’re crazy or possessed or what. . . but you annoy me, so you must be real.”

Rampage looked at him, her eyes growing wide. Just as she started to move to hug

him, he pointed a hoof at her face. “Hug me and I’ll put enough C-4 in your bed to launch you to the moon.”

Rampage stopped mid-hug, giving me an awkward smile. P-21 looked at the terminal and hit a button. There was a beep and then an electrical click, and the door swung open. “Well, there’s probably something bad here,” he said as he looked at me.

“Why?”

“The password is ‘Trottenheimer.’”

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected from the basement of Horizon Laboratories. ‘Arcane Solutions to Magical Problems’ seemed to be their motto. The basement offices were neat and tidy, if slightly dusty. There were no bodies lying around, and while the walls were cracked, they were still mostly intact without too much rubble. A number of posters of Applejack and Twilight Sparkle could be found, along with pithy motivational posters.

What there wasn’t a lot of was paper.

“Something wrong here. . .” I muttered as I checked the twentieth desk. No clipboards with financial reports. No papers. No office supplies. There was more stuff in the utility closet than in the whole of the office combined. Where were the coffee mugs and the bottlecaps? There were always bottlecaps.

“This place has been cleaned,” P-21 said quietly. “And not recently, either.”

“No bullet holes. . .” I said. So this wasn’t a raid like at the museum...

Then we found the doors and, pushed against them, a crate filled with strange yellow suits. Bright purple tape was stretched back and forth across the doors, and a sign reading ‘Biomagical Contamination Level 5. Quarantined by order of the M.A.S.’ had been hung in the center. I looked at it and nodded my head to the door. “What do you want to bet all the interesting things are through there?”

“Of course. Because I’m travelling with the only pony who wants to go into a place marked ‘Biomagical Contamination, Quarantined’.” P-21 muttered.

“Why are you bitching so much, P-21?” Rampage asked flatly as she cut through the strips. “You could have stayed outside. . . you know. . . with your daughter.”

“Shut up,” he growled as he rubbed his leg. “I didn’t ask for this. Any of this.”

“So what?” Rampage replied. “I didn’t ask to have a doctor, a zebra, and a foal killer inside me. Glory didn’t ask to lose a wing. Scotch didn’t ask to lose her mother. And Blackjack didn’t ask to die of cancer. But we’re sucking it up and dealing with it as best we can.”

“Rampage,” I said, trying to head this off.

“Yeah?” P-21 said, ignoring me and glaring at her. “Well, this is me dealing with it.”

“No. This is you running away from it. Because you’ve got family right here in front of you and you’re terrified of actually having a relationship,” Rampage said firmly.

“You know what?” He rose to his hooves. “I really don’t need to hear this from a mare who ran away and left us to go join her marauding friends. You deal with your shit your way. I’ll deal with my shit in my own way.” He started limping towards the exit.

“Wow,” I muttered.

“Urrrgh. . .” Rampage snorted and smashed a table hard, denting the metal with her hoof. “I really need to pick my timing better.”

“You think?” I arched my brow as I pushed through the door. Beyond. . . here was what I was used to. Walls blackened by fire. Partially melted glass airlock. No bones yet, but there were orange drums marked ‘Biomagical Waste’. I gave them a wide berth as my rad sensor began to tick. I fished around in my saddle bags for some Rad-X and even drank a little Rad-Away for good measure. Looking back at Rampage, I smiled a little.

The fire damage became more intense the deeper we went. These labs had held equipment and terminals. I didn’t see much in the way of cages. Then I found my first body. . . well. . . something like a body. It was a bright yellow suit with a strange bubble-like helmet. I’d seen it in the dream I’d had: an environmental protection suit. This one was empty, though, the faceplate shattered. I detached the recorder from its belt.

Unfortunately it’d been damaged. . . somehow. Beaten? Battered? Chewed on? It crackled as I tried to get it to play back.

“...kzzzzt. . . responders cleared out all the aboveground personnel. Up to us to clean up the mess. Of all the fucking times for Twilight to go to a fucking party in Manehattan. . . dzzzzttt. . . grade five contamination everywhere. No clue where the bodies went. Contacted the new O.I.A. director but he’s fucking worthless. Probably just tell me whatever they were working on was classified. Who knows what we

have to deal with down here. . . .”

We moved to a second set of reinforced airlock doors; these had been twisted and bent away. “What do you think are the odds that this place is unhealthy for me?” I asked with a small smile.

“You? With your luck?” Rampage answered with a soft snort.

“Yeah,” I replied, looking ahead. Then I turned around abruptly. “Be right back.” Rampage sat down, watching me trot down the hall to wiggle into one of the suits. I couldn’t fit it on over my barding and sighed as I removed my armor and left it by the crate. When I finally got the suit sealed up, it filled with magically supplied air from a blue talisman on the leg. I trotted back and looked at the smirking Rampage. “What? Some of us aren’t immortal.”

She just smiled and shook her head.

We went in deeper and found a staircase that took us down a level. “Kkkkzzzz. . . real mess here. I don’t get how these folks got their hooves on this stuff. All the materials here look legit. I’m not seeing anything contraband anywhere. First honest lab in Hoofington, I swear. . . . Fzzzk. . . .” I looked at the puddles of rainbow sludge and felt my pulse quicken. “. . . .Celestia. . . what the hell happened here? There shouldn’t be this much. . . fuck. . . .”

I stepped around the glowing heaps and strange shimmery pools that I was completely certain wasn’t water. The metal walls seemed melted, but the distortion was all wrong. It was as if the metal had softened and deformed, but there wasn’t much in the way of soot. “Dzzzt. . . . No fucking bodies anywhere. About fifty researchers were supposed to be in here. What the fuck happened to them all. . . Buttercup? Pickets? Hey, where are you guys?”

I reached a lab with a flickering terminal and slowly stepped past. The rest of the terminals were deformed and twisted almost beyond recognition; the screen of this one was warped too, but I could make out a few words: ‘Silver Bullet test in cryogenic lab’. “Cryogenics? Why would they need to freeze a fucking bullet?” the recorder said through the buzz. And why couldn’t they just call it a ‘freezing lab’ instead of making up a fancy word?

That was when I noticed the sign above the door to the room; apparently it was the cyrogenics lab. It didn’t look frozen. Actually, it looked as if the entire lab had been made of wax and then heated just enough to distort but not not enough to melt completely. Everything around me seemed fused into one solid surface. “That’s it. . .

kzzzzkkk. . . I'm getting the fuck out of here. . . wait. Pickets? Is that. . . stop fucking around. . .”

I turned slowly, and then I saw the pony standing in a suit. A suit just like mine. . . I approached, step by step, cautiously. My hooves found the floor sticky. “Uggh. . . what is this stuff?” Rampage asked as she looked at her hooves. “Blackjack. Let’s get out of here. This place is way too messed up for me.”

“Just a second.” The pony in the suit was leaned right up against the wall just inside the door. Slowly, I trotted closer and closer, leaving Rampage to scrape the goo on the floor off of her hooves.

“Kkkkkkzzzztt. . .” the speaker crackled and sputtered as I looked into the lab, my eye drawn into the middle by a familiar object.

The entire room had been liquefied. In the center was a sort of pedestal. It rose like an organic growth in the center of the room, holding the only solid object in sight. A deformed metal arm dangled above it like a skeletal appendage.

I’d seen the object before; I had one sitting in my saddlebag right now.

Laying on the pedestal was a split-open shell of a Silver Bullet. It’d been mostly hollow, a thick silver casing around a softly glowing white stone core. A faint rainbow residue coated the interior.

Slowly, I backed away as the recorder crackled. “Pickets? Pickets?! Fuck! Pickets!”

I turned to look at the pony; she wasn’t leaning against the wall. She was a part of the wall.

And she was staring right at me.

She opened her mouth and began to scream.

And the rest of the lab joined her.

Footnote: 95% to level.

32. Choir

“Though quarrels arise, their numbers are few. Laughter and singing will see us through.”

I’ve dealt with a few monsters before. The hydra in Flank... the mutated dragonlings in Stockyard... radscorpions... manticores... all of them dangerous. But no matter how big or how small they were, they all made sense. Limbs, legs, head, fangs, hooves, stingers... the arrangement might be odd, but in their own way, they made sense.

This... this didn’t make sense.

The walls, floor, ceiling... everything was moving. It was impossible to tell where metal ended and flesh began. Eyes were bulging. Mouths were opened in one long scream. There were organs between the equipment. Meaty appendages... intestines... I clutched my stomach as I backed away. I felt... it felt like my insides were moving! Like my tainted guts were trying to crawl right out my throat! I fought for one moment and then puked on the inside of my helmet. It wasn’t bad compared to what followed at the other end.

And worst of all, I wanted to join that scream. It scratched at my throat.

“Stop it!” I shouted as I tried to back away, but my limbs were stuck to the floor! No, the floor was crawling up my legs! No! My legs were sinking into the floor! “Stop it, please!” I begged. Then things got worse.

It stopped.

Those eyes watched. The molded steel and flesh seemed to be waiting. Watching. “She has not joined our choir...” the mouths whispered.

Sweet Celestia... were they...

“You’re... you can talk?” I murmured as I stared... pony eyes. Pony mouths. Luna save me, I saw cutie marks in that mix!

“She is very close. Close to joining their choir,” one mouth whispered. Rainbow spittle drizzled from its lips. “We should make her join ours instead!” the drooling lip grinned.

“I don’t understand, what do you mean... a choir? I can’t sing!” I looked over at

Rampage, but her eyes were wide and staring. She looked like a foal trapped in a nightmare.

There was a long low snicker. “Oh, everypony can. Listen. . .”

The mouths began screaming. One scream of many notes going on and on and. . . I’d been wrong. We were both trapped in a nightmare. I wanted P-21 here to blow this all up. I wanted Lacunae here with her stupid Goddess to sneer in disdain. I wanted Glory. . . Sweet Celestia. . . I needed Glory to tell me it was going to be all right. “Stop!”

And again, they did. A wide, slack mouth poking between two monitors murmured, “She does not like our song.” It sounded almost apologetic.

“Why?” snickered a mare’s mouth. “She’s so close to us already. She’s singing parts herself. We’ve heard her.”

I felt something move around my hooves. . . but I couldn’t look. “You mean you were singers before. . . this?” I gasped, refusing to look down. If I saw. . . I would start screaming. I don’t think I would ever stop.

“No. We joined the choir. . . after,” the mare stuck in the wall beside me murmured softly.

“Force her to join! Make her sing!” several of the voices began to babble.

“Wait! Wait! What happened here?” I asked, looking around. Oh Goddesses, my insides were moving! I felt a little wire in my mind, and it was being drawn tighter and tighter.

Then it stopped. The eyes stared at me; pony eyes watching and blinking and staring. There were veins running along the deformed metal and around the equipment. It pulsed as the lips slowly moved on their own. I started at the ropey gray intestines and felt my own squirming within.

“There was a box,” whispered lips near the pedestal. “A box came with a mystery within.”

Rampage murmured behind me, “Blackjack, we need to get out of here. . . Please, let’s get out of here.”

“A mystery containing a wonder,” the lips whispered. I felt something on my legs, but I was incapable of moving. I could only stare into the eyes. Goddesses. . . was there something in my eye socket again? Glory’d burned it out! Burned it!

One of the screens, its surface bulging out like a blister, flashed to life. The image was a mess of bilious greens and yellows as it showed bucks and mares around a small black box. One mare with some sort of pastry or cake on her rump opened the black case. “I was Applejack’s cousin. I could open it,” came a whisper from a green mouth above.

The Silver Bullet came out and was placed on the warped pedestal. “What are you doing?” I asked as I felt my stomach heave again, then swallowed.

“Freeze... cold... so cold.” a blue pair of lips muttered before licking back a trickle of rainbow snot. On the screen, a mechanical arm swung over the pedestal, and a diamond wafer touched the metal. “We tried to cut oh so carefully... but we could not. We knew not.”

A twisted grin cackled, “But I remembered the secret. I remembered the metal. The note.” One of the bucks on the screen waved his hooves enthusiastically to the rest gathered around the frozen bullet. “The note of our song.”

Now I watched in fascination as the blade cut the silvery metal with ease. Unicorn magic pulled it apart. “Blackjack, we have to go. This is fucked up. We need to go now.”

But I couldn’t move. I had two choices... watch and learn, or start screaming. I felt something in the back of my throat. I prayed that I was only imagining it... moving. “A minute...” I croaked as the Silver Bullet was cracked open. “I have to see this...” Because everything else would make me scream.

“That’s a weird bullet,” Rampage muttered on my blind side.

That was no bullet. I might know dick about... this... all of this... but I knew bullets. It might have been bullet-shaped, but the entire thing was one solid worked piece of metal divided into two sections. The larger of the two, a distorted half-sphere near the base of the shell and with its broad, flat side on the dividing wall, was packed full of a grayish paste like P-21’s explosives. A small hole pierced through the shell to the small compartment, most of which was taken up by a strange, glowing hexagonal piece of crystalline stone that the robot arm’s saw hadn’t been able to cut through. Packed around the stone was some kind of thick goop that reminded me of the rainbow sludge now drizzling out of the... lips... of the room...

I’d exposed myself to that sludge each time I’d fired Folly.

I remembered the warped and twisted bones in Ironshod Firearms R&D. Melted like this room. Scalpel had detected the taint in me days after I’d fired Folly at Miramare.

After firing it in the factory, I'd been told by Triage that my taint exposure had jumped once again. . . I'd been killing myself with every shot of the superweapon.

No, not killing myself. Turning myself into. . . this. The room muttered, giggled, and laughed softly.

“What is that. . . that crystal? That sludge? That metal?” I gasped. I lurched but managed not to fall over. I knew I'd seen that odd glowing gem before somewhere. . . The room, however, gave a hateful shriek that made me spasm. The walls began to pulsate.

“Blackjack. . . tell me we can get the fuck out of here. . . Blackjack?” Rampage said. I tried to wave my hoof, to buy some time, but I couldn't lift it. “Shit. . . oh shit. . . shit shit shit. . .” she muttered.

“That rock. . . of a lesser song. The metal. . . of a greater glory! The potion. . . the ichor of the meddler. . . a neutral buffer to separate the two,” the mouths muttered in unison. “Sing with us. Sing your screams with us! The other cannot join. She is of a false unity. But you can be together with us!”

“Unity!” I gasped as I struggled to step back. I couldn't step anywhere. My heart was beating so hard that I was amazed that I hadn't fallen flat on my face. “You're with the Goddess?”

The mouths were silent. One chuckled. . . then another. . . then the rest in wild, mad glee. “She is not a child of the other choir. Imitation. False. Forgery. Manufactured. She babbles her own tune and will be undone. She is not a true choir. Nor is your friend there. Isolated. Separated. She cannot join us.”

“Thank goodness. Now, Blackjack. . . out. . . now. . .” But I couldn't get out. I couldn't leave. If I did, part of me would tear its way out of my body and stay. A part that wanted to stay. . .

“And you're a true choir?” I gasped for air again and swallowed, desperate to puke again if I could. I wanted to get whatever was inside me out. The walls were beating like a heart, but with an alien beat: singular contractions rather than a double pulse. I imagined my own heart was beating in time with the meat.

Please. Let it only be in my head.

“We are, but trapped in flesh. Kept apart. We will join it in time. We were the latest to join the greater choir in such a long time. The greater song,” they murmured in unison. “Let us sing for you.” And one began to scream. Then another. And another.

Their screams blended together, one building on the next in a singular note. A note that grew and grew; and I was singing with it. . . not through my lips.

No. . . it was coming from inside my chest. I was going to sing with it too, till there was nothing left but that song.

“Blackjack! Glory’s waiting!” Rampage yelled in my face. Then I stared at my friend, her red and white stripes seeming to melt together. Her tissue looked mottled and knotted, even scaly... and there was a wing forcing itself out of her shoulder through a gap in her armor. As I watched, a small horn was twisting slowly out the side of her head. “Are you just going to leave her up there wondering what happened to us?!”

That shout and that look snapped me out for a precious moment. I looked down at my hooves, but the metal-meat amalgamation had sealed itself around each of them like concrete; I only hoped that the safety suit had prevented me from fusing completely with the floor. “Cut me out. It’s time to get out of here!” I tugged and struggled, and Rampage tore at the floor with her hoofclaws. But each slash spat-tered us with rainbow ichor, and the rends healed, and the scream bored deeper into my mind with every passing second.

Rampage turned to the screens; the distorted pictures now showed the bullet letting off plumes of rainbow gas and the ponies around it melting and falling into still-living heaps. One showed the wall chewing Pickets. . . oh Celestia. . . were those teeth I felt working on the ends of my limbs? Chewing through the suit? I blasted with the shotgun, wishing I’d loaded incendiary rounds.

“Damn it, will you bastards play something else? That song is old!” Rampage yelled as she struggled to get my right leg free.

And then I felt it. A squirm inside me at the words as the scream went on and on inside me and around me. . . oh Goddesses. . . inside me. . . inside me! It was screaming inside me! I felt like I was going to. . . give birth to something. It was going to claw its way out of me; turn me inside out. I wanted to take her ripper and tear myself open. Get it out! Get it out now!

“Calm down, Blackjack,” rasped the Dealer in my ear. “Go into S.A.T.S.”

“What. . .” but I couldn’t argue. I simply wanted to scream forever.

I did. It was all I could think of. But S.A.T.S. didn’t help. I couldn’t target myself, and this was one time shooting Rampage wouldn’t help! Even Folly was back with my barding and saddlebags. The room didn’t offer any obvious target or weak point. It

just let me see the pony flesh wiggling its way out from the gaps and vents in the room.

But then I realized something else the spell gave me: time. Time to think. Time to calm down. If I lost it completely, then I wouldn't be able to do anything.

"That's it. Panic never helped anypony," the Dealer said softly as he trotted out in front of me to stand beside Rampage. "Now. I know you can't speak, but you can think. So think about this thing. What is it? What does it want? What is its weak spot? Everything has at least one."

I looked at the gaunt, pale buck in the battered hat. What did the room want? To eat me. . . or fuse with me. . . no. That was what it was doing to me. A terrified pink pony inside me pointed out those wide mouths. It wanted to sing. It wanted me to scream right along with it. And I wanted to. . . some horrible, treasonous part of my mind wanted to sing right along.

But I had other songs, too.

My PipBuck had a number of music files I'd collected from the Wasteland. If this thing wanted music, then I'd give it something else to listen to. Something better than just screams. I selected the song, the most powerful one I knew, and cranked the volume all the way up. I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and hit play. For a moment, I thought that the music wouldn't be able to overcome that single horrid screaming note, but then it rose. I felt my insides spasm in response, but the song of dozens of ponies in a little chapel filled that pit. . . and I could almost see Priest as I listened to his majestic music.

Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place.

Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long.

Show us how we should be kind. Teach us beauty and peace of mind.

Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Show us your gentle, shining face.

The horrible scream faltered, with some voices babbling curses or hissing in pain. My PipBuck continued to play the swelling music made by Priest, Medley, and all the other ponies in that little knot of hope.

Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Keep us safe all night long.

Under your soft and watchful eye. Let your stars fill up the sky.

Know our hearts are always thine. Protect us with strength sublime.

Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Let us honor you in song.

As I watched, the flesh seemed to be driven away. The eyes clenched in pain as the pulse fluctuated wildly. Rainbow ichor burst from some of the veins as the room reacted horribly to the swelling hymn to two princesses now long parted from this world. I might not have been able to believe in goddesses any more, but I could believe in beauty, kindness, and harmony.

Sweet Celestia, we sing to thee. That our worries be set free.

Dearest Luna, we praise your skies. Delight us with night's surprise.

Know you're in our fondest prayer. Mighty Princesses sweet and fair.

Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Dearest Luna, our song embrace.

My legs pulled free of the pits they were stuck in, and I took a few staggering steps. For a moment, I thought of running for it. Leaving this place forever, even seeing if P-21 could seal away or collapse it. And I would have, too... except for one thing. Just one.

The room was crying. The dozens of mouths now sang the melody that I'd been playing. Dozens of pained, ashamed ponies turned into something horrid... but still ponies. And I had to give them something... anything... that would help. Not peace from violence, but peace from this horror. I slowly stepped towards the wall. "I'm sorry," I murmured as I looked at those bright and pained eyes. "I don't know how to help you..."

"You have," a mare said quietly as the rest hummed the melody. "You have, so much. You reminded us of what we were... what we should be."

"Is there... can I change you back?" I asked, thinking it had to be impossible. From the way her lips turned in a sad smile, it was. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something... give you something..."

"You can," a buck said softly. "In the storeroom next door... there are chemicals. Benzene. Ethanol and methanol. Hydrogen and oxygen talismans. Acetone. Toluene. Spill them... ignite them. Don't let us go back to... to what we were." The lips trembled and it whimpered softly. "We're so tired of screaming."

"Right," Rampage said with a nod. "I'm going to need your shotgun... and it's probably going to be ruined."

I passed it to her without hesitation. "I've had it less than a day," I muttered with a thin smile. "Are you going to be okay?"

“Eh, I’ll burn up, but,” she said as she looked at her warped hide. “Two apples, one stone. I’ll be fine. Believe it or not, this isn’t the first time I’ve gotten all mutated up.” I could believe it. And I couldn’t help myself, I hugged her for helping me do this. . . snapping me out of it and helping these. . . these poor ponies.

“You’ve got two songs. Get clear before then. I don’t think they’ll stay lucid long,” Rampage said softly as she patted my back. Then she turned to the room and said grandly. “Okay, everypony. Let’s hear an encore!”

And the chorus began to sing, and it hurt. Whatever had made them like this. . . gave them that scream to sing. . . also made the melody pierce like nails. Even I hurt. . . but at least I didn’t think that my insides were singing. Oh please, let them not be singing. As I trotted towards the door, I spotted something that had been hidden by the mat of metal flesh. It was the strange white crystal that had been inside the cut-open silver bullet. It wasn’t very big. . . about the same size as my hor— as a shotgun shell.

I peeked into the storage room. Glass bottles. Metal storage tanks. Lots of warnings about flammables and keeping the door shut at all times. Perfect. I used my magic to turn on the hydrogen and oxygen talismans, glad they were clearly labeled. There were also leaking drums, marked ‘Hippocratic Research’, that had once been filled with the rainbow crud. Just another reason to go there the second I was finished with the Rangers. Rampage grinned and said, “Get out of here. It’s going to get toasty pretty quick!” And with that, she started knocking over some large glass jugs.

I paused at the door to the lab, picking up the white crystal and floating it beside me. “Goodbye,” I said as the room started on the next stanza. Rampage was violating every safety rule posted on the walls as she kicked the ripped barrels into the cryogenics lab, taking great glee in the destruction. I had picked my way up the stairs by the third stanza. I looked back, but kept going as I headed for the exit. As I reached it, here was a muffled bang behind me, followed by the sound of a great breath being sucked in and then let out all at once. The pressure wave knocked me over, and a tongue of flame raced up the stairs behind me, spreading out overhead.

Fortunately, the fire didn’t go much further than that. I lay there for a moment, then slowly sat up, my PipBuck still playing the tune. I turned it off and stared at the flames pouring up the stairs.

A black, pony-shaped silhouette appeared amid the flames. Black plates of char and flesh moved with careful steps as she stood at the top, fire licking off her hide as the edges and tips of her armor glowed a faint red. Only Rampage could bathe

in fire.

The blackened flesh sloughed off in crunchy chunks with each step as she walked towards me. She clenched her eyes hard, and when they opened she looked at me and slowly grinned. She shook herself, scattering charred, greasy flakes like so many playing cards, then coughed a little ball of rolling smoke and spat black phlegm to one side. The raw pink flesh paled to white with her familiar red stripes showing through. “Ugh... hate fire,” she said, looking at her blackened steel hoofblades. “Takes forever to clean my armor.” I just smiled in amazement.

“Are they...” I asked as I looked behind her.

“If they’re not, then I don’t think there’s anything we can do for them.” I started to remove the hazardous materials suit, and she raised a hoof. “I’d wash before you take it off! You’re sort of dripping there, Blackjack.” Ugh... I felt and smelled like I was trapped in a well-used toilet... but I was bad enough off Taintwise at the moment. I could wait a little longer...

“So,” I said as we walked out into the subway tunnels. “Just curious... where the hay did you get that armor?”

“This?” she asked with a little smile. “This is Hammersmith’s finest work; he makes all the quality weapons for the Reapers. Since you left my armor down in the tunnels, I had to go and get it.”

“And... you didn’t get messed up?” I asked as we started up the rusty escalator.

“If I did, I don’t remember it,” she replied calmly. “Down the elevator, then way up the stairs to the factory. Right where you dropped it next to Lacunae’s gatling gun,” she said with a smile. “One weird thing, though.”

“I’m not sure I can take any more weird... like, period. I have exceeded my weirdness quota for the rest of my life...” Not that that was very long anyway. She arched a brow, and I sighed. “Okay. Lay it on me. Talking walls? Flesh melting magic fields? I can take it.” I braced myself for another soul-crushing revelation or infuriatingly vague puzzle.

“It was being cleaned up.” I stopped and looked at her. “Like somepony had come along and was putting everything back, fixing all the stuff you blasted.” Then she looked a little more coolly at me. “And by the way, Blackjack... I’ve got to say I am a little put out that you had some sort of mega super destruction spell you were going to fire and I wasn’t in the way.”

I gave her a little smile... the most I could manage. “I was a little occupied, but

I promise... the next time I fire a super taint-ridden weapon of mass destruction, I will make sure that you are in the line of fire." I sighed as I thought about it, but honestly, my brain just couldn't put it together. After dealing with that... choir... thing... what I'd felt beating inside my chest... hearing... I wanted to butt my head against the wall till I'd expunged the thoughts from my mind. Maybe I could get Triage to... no... no, I couldn't do that. I'd just have to try and deal with them along with all of the other horrors of the Hoof.

For the first time in a long time, I was glad to see that it was raining. P-21 and Glory were arguing about leaving me down there. Lacunae looked politely disengaged from their squabble. Scotch was fiddling with Glory's busted beam rifle. At the sight of Rampage and I, Glory started towards me, but I warded her off with an upraised hoof. "One sec... I'm coated in magical death juice."

She looked like she wanted to hug me anyway. "Oh. Was it bad?" she asked as she chewed on her lip.

I glanced at Rampage and passed a knowing look to her. Glory didn't need to know the details. "Well, we were underground so... yeah. Pretty unpleasant." I took off the helmet after the downpour had washed most of the rainbow stuff away and then unsealed the suit. Her eyes widened even more as I let the rain start to wash off the filth. Not for the first time, I missed the wonders of civilization... like soap. "I found out something interesting, though." I levitated my saddlebags and took out the black case. "This seems to be the source of most of my taint." I popped it open and lifted the bullet free. "See this half? All full of pure taint."

"But... but why? Is it some sort of chemical shell?" Glory asked. My PipBuck started ticking.

"It's an annihilation shell, Glory. Putting poison inside would be like putting a BB gun on a tank," P-21 said archly.

I spoke quickly to head off the argument. "It also has this inside." And I held up the little white crystal. "You know gems..." I floated the glowing crystal to her.

"Well..." she turned it over. "It's hexagonal... it might be quartz. It looks like it's a talisman, but there's no glyph for the spell inside." She held it up to P-21, but the blue buck just frowned and shrugged. She tossed it back to me and I caught it with my magic.

I sighed and lifted the silver bullet next to the glowing stone. “Well. . . whenever this thing blows, it soaks every inch of me in taint. Heck. . . you know how it surrounds me with that magic field? It probably holds in all that taint residue. Which means I exposed all of you when I fired it underground.”

Scotch Tape waved her hoof. “Uh. . . okay. What the heck actually happened down there? Because every time you say ‘underground’. . . my mane stands on end.” And she was scared. I could see it. She might not remember going down there, but some part of her knew it was bad. P-21 frowned and looked away. I just sighed and smiled.

“Long story short. . . bad stuff happened. Really. Not fun. You didn’t miss much,” I said, but she hardly looked satisfied. Okay. . . something to deal with later. “Anyway. . . Trottenheimer made these bullets. . . why, I have NO idea. Apparently, it was right before the bombs fell. They cut one open down in the lab and sprayed everything with taint juice. So. . . not going to use it again. Bad bad bullets.” And I smiled as I tapped the stone to the side of the bullet.

Then it exploded. Of course it exploded! I couldn’t take a dump without it. . . okay, I could. But still, this was ridiculous! At least it wasn’t a full on blow-off-my-hooves explosion. Really, it was just a flash and pop that sent the silver bullet one way and the stone the other. Me, I was flat on my back in the middle listening to my PipBuck screech.

Wait? I stared at the rad readout as I watched the needle visibly rise! Lacunae groaned, her eyes closed with an expression of bliss and a blush on her cheeks. I was getting almost twenty rads a second; the amount was dropping fast, but. . . holy shit! “Rad-Away, gimme!” I shouted as I dug through my saddlebags. “Everypony, drink some if we have enough.”

One dose of Rad-Away later, I was stabilized, though Glory insisted I have one extra. It was hard to argue; that stuff was delicious! I picked up the stone and saw a tiny scuff where I’d tapped it. I retrieved the bullet and saw that the polished silvery metal had a tiny indentation.

All that from a tap.

“How the hell does this bullet have a stone inside if they explode on contact?” I asked as I put the bullet back in its case. I didn’t want to set the damned thing off just by touching one to the other!

“Perhaps the taint solution within acts as a neutral buffer? If they cannot come

in contact with each other, they cannot react,” offered Lacunae. It was the best suggestion I could think of. Still, though, I’d traded the mystery of the silver bullet for the mysteries of the metal, the stone, the taint, and the reason why the hell anypony would ever make a weapon like that! One that killed its wielder? I could see Folly on a tank or as some power armor gun, but it was a pistol! Had Trottenheimer been exceptionally poorly endowed or something?

‘Thank you, Hoofington,’ I thought as I finished washing myself. Then I paused. I looked at my legs. My hide had been white before, but now my legs were piss yellow and there were ugly purple bruises at the ends of my hooves. I saw a little growth poking out the side of my fetlock. Just a little teardrop-shaped thing an inch or so long and poking about a quarter of an inch out from my leg. Then I spotted another. And another.

Suddenly, I became aware of everypony staring at me. Only Glory was actually looking... but the rest had obviously just found other things to stare at while they paid attention to my tumors. I felt... ugly. Unclean... worse than just the mess I’d made of myself. I was suddenly aware of how slat-sided I’d become; I was still eating, but it seemed like all the food was going somewhere else. I felt like I was becoming something less than a pony and more like those poor creatures in the lab. I pulled my security barding into place and strapped it down over my braces, keeping my eyes low. Don’t look at me. Please don’t look at me...

I decided to hold onto the hazmat barding; it might come in useful later. You never knew when you’d have to descend into a taint-saturated hole of nightmares! Sweet Celestia, somepony shoot me if I ever did that again.

Well, at least I’d gotten one mystery solved... and four more added. Frustrating as that might have been, though, it took my mind off... that. Goddesses, how I hated this place! I’d honestly preferred running from Deus. That was a threat I understood: a great big cyberbony who wanted to rob me, rape me, and kill me. He was something to run away from or destroy, things I could do. Now, though—

I needed to keep going. I’d fall apart if I simply stopped and let everything catch up with me.

It wasn’t that far from Horizon Labs to the Ironmare naval base; in prewar times, we probably could have made it in an hour. In prewar times, though, we wouldn’t have been trying to evade patrols of Steel Rangers, mobs of Reapers, and the occasional

manticore flying overhead. We finally reached the base, fortunately without being spotted; the place was laid out more or less as Rampage had indicated, and the half-crumpled building that looked like a cake dropped on its side was impossible to miss. Now we just had to get as close as possible to Elder Carrots before being discovered so that Steel Rain couldn't make us disappear. Then, hopefully, we'd be able to convince her to stop the war, and after that we'd be able to find something that would tell me where EC-1101 was supposed to go next.

...But really, what was the point? I was dying, and even if I found out where to go next, even if I stopped this war... I'd still be dying. I felt it. Everything inside me just felt wrong. This didn't feel like my body any more. This body felt old and tired and used up, an aching old bag of hurt. And no matter how fast I went, it would still be with me. This was one thing I couldn't leave behind.

I was going to die. But... if I was, then I wanted my life to mean something. Something to make up for all the ponies I'd hurt and killed. It wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough. Something to atone for the pain I'd caused all my friends. Something so that, when I died, I might have a chance at the everafter... or something better than what I thought I deserved. Finding EC-1101 and Horizons might not matter at all... but the alternative was to either give in and accept Sanguine's tempting offer, or give up and wait to die.

All in all, death by a Ranger's shell sounded better.

We were passing more atrocities. Rows of dead ponies pressed to a wall and then drawn through with lines of gunfire. Most of them didn't look like Reapers. They looked like dirty, desperate ponies caught in the middle of something that was chewing everypony up. The rangers hadn't even bothered to loot the bodies. I looked the other way while P-21 went about that job. My shotgun had gotten cooked, so I was left with Vigilance and Taurus' rifle... and while caps were pretty much worthless to me, my friends would need them after I was gone.

We'd disguised Lacunae as well as we could; her black dress had been lost, but we'd found some canvas we could use to hide her wings. Hopefully nopony would wonder why she was half again taller than Rampage! The Goddess was clearly ignoring us, given that there wasn't a single telepathic mutter about the indignity of her hiding her wings. I picked up telepathic mutters every now and then about 'that little mare' and what they were going to do when she arrived, though. Apparently, it was quite a debate between putting her in Unity, killing her, or using her. I tried to tune it out as best I could; I had enough problems myself.

And I wasn't the only one, as we crept along the main street of Ironmare Town. I'd spotted the red bars around the corner. . . and a group of blue non-hostiles. I waved the others to stop and carefully poked my head around the ruined wall. The blue bars a small family making their way towards us from the east with a brahmin behind them. They looked desperate, their eyes alert. But they didn't have a magic E.F.S. that could see through walls, and the red bars...

"Well, lookie here, Crumpets. Reaper spies, if ever I saw some!" a mare said, her voice amplified by the speakers of her power armor and echoing down the side street she was trotting up.

"We're not spies!" the buck in the lead on the small band protested. "We're just trying to get home. We live in Toll. Please, we've been stuck out here for days!" The others began to shy back. . . all except for a unicorn mare who seemed quite amused by all this.

"They don't look like spies, Shrapnel," muttered the other Ranger mare in a doleful voice. "Are you certain. . ."

"Look, that just means that they're good spies!" Shrapnel laughed. "I know you're used to dealing with things differently in Trottingham, Crumpets, but this is the Hoof! Shoot first. Shoot last. Let the Goddesses sort 'em out!"

Well, fuck me if I was going to let that happen. "Hey!" I yelled as I tottered around the corner. "Yooooohooo! Much better target here!"

"Blackjack, you idiot!" P-21 growled as he limped out after me.

"Great. More nutjobs." Shrapnel turned towards me. Grenade machinegun and missile launcher configuration. "Who are you supposed to be?" she said as she took a look at me. Three magic bullets to the head... I could drop her. I could end her life, even at this range.

So why was I hesitating? After all the shit I'd gone through today, why didn't I just end her there and then? She was scum threatening a family. . .

You don't kill ponies to save ponies. Security saves ponies. And I was still Security. I suppose that also meant that I was a damned idiot too.

"I'm Security," I said, thinking it should be obvious. . . but then. . . my barding was shot, I had braces taped to my limbs, and I was using a hunting rifle to threaten a mare with a missile launcher strapped to her side. "Really," I added.

"You're either crazy or stupid. . ." Shrapnel muttered.

“Crazy. Definitely,” P-21 muttered.

“. . . but either way, you’re fucking dead!” she shouted, and I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy. I wanted to do better. I tried...

Then Crumpets trotted in front of her companion. “You? You’re the Security I’ve heard so much about?” Unlike Shrapnel, Crumpets spoke with a strange, smooth accent. Her armor had slightly different decorations along its edges, and instead of heavy weapons she possessed a long rifle and what looked like a belt fed shotgun. “Jolly good to meet you, girl! Been following you ever since DJ mentioned you helping those Crusader children.”

“Uh. . .” Shrapnel said exactly what I thought as Crumpets reached out and shook my hoof vigorously. “Hello! Crumpets, we’re supposed to be shooting her!” I looked past to where the family was creeping out of sight into the ruins as more rangers approached. I’d call that a victory.

“Shooting her?” she whirled on Shrapnel. “Are you daft? She’s the heroine of Hoofington! She’s fought things I can hardly imagine! Why, half of us agreed to come to your aid because of her! And you want to shoot her?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” I bit my lip as I pointed at her belt fed shotgun. . . “Is that. . . that’s not an Ironpony? Is it?”

She turned and looked at it. “Oh, no. It’s an Archer 16, based off an early model of the IF-86. . . . Useful against bloodwings, manticores, crawlers and goyles. I don’t think they made a non-power armor model, though. I think we have far more monsters about old Trottingham than you do here in the Hoof.” That certainly made sense; Hoofington was so deadly that even the monsters had a hard time.

“And is that an IF-72 Longhorn?” Lacunae asked softly as she pointed at the rifle, prompting all of us to look at her. She shrank back. “I was simply curious. . . .”

“Oh! Look, I’m pointing an IF-99 ‘I don’t give a fuck!’ at them. Now get with the program, Crumpets! Are you Trottingham pansies going to actually help us out or not? We have our orders and we need to take her out!” Shrapnel shouted.

“You think I’m going to kill Security?” Crumpets replied. She turned, and her weapons clicked. “You cowardly, dishonorable, contemptible, callow slattern; I would sooner shoot a despicable fiend such as yourself than ever dare train my bullets on a hero who has bled so much for so many others!”

“I. . . you. . .” I suddenly imagined exactly what Shrapnel was seeing: a whole lot of red surrounding her. “We have orders!”

“Easily remedied!” bellowed a familiar voice as he loomed up behind her. Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof picked Shrapnel up, armor and all, and pointed her to the south. “I am immediately assigning you to accompany us to the battlefield to help defend our order! I am pleased that you will fulfill this commission to the best of your ability!” The other Rangers behind him all had the Trottingham style of armor.

“Paladin Bombs!” I said with a grin; in return, his blue visor gave me a dangerous gleam that made me shiver. “I mean, Paladin Stronghoof! You made it through that fight!”

He threw Shrapnel casually behind him as he dropped back to all fours. “Indubitably! The Stronghoof endurance has been passed down the family line for generations! And I am quite glad that it was I who found you.” He looked back over his shoulder at Shrapnel, steam blasting out of his nostrils. “As you can see, the Star Paladin has ordered you and your friends to be killed on sight.”

I grimaced. “Damn. I was hoping you could introduce me to your Elder.” Why couldn’t it ever be easy?

He sighed and shook his head. “Any who might aid you are being sent out to keep the line. I fear that, until you get to the Elder, you won’t find any friends aboard the Celestia.”

That would be a problem. “How am I going to get to her, then, without Steel Rain juicing me?”

“I can think of only one way,” he said in a low voice. “You must surrender yourself to Chief Acolyte Napalm Strike. He oversees our studies of various munitions and will be at the base in the old dry docks. Give yourself up to him and request to see the Elder. While he shares some of Steel Rain’s sentiments about technology, he is an honorable buck.”

I didn’t like this at all. Giving up. . . and I doubted that my friends would let me hand myself over alone. “You’re sure?”

He nodded once. “And you must do so soon. . . Even with the Trottingham reinforcements, we are being sorely pushed on all fronts. I fear that the Elder may do something drastic to end the war.” He then looked at Lacunae. “Now, there is one last thing I must do. . .”

I felt a nervous prickle; he didn’t seem like the type to kill her just for being an alicorn, but. . .

He approached Lacunae, my other friends moving aside. With a hiss, his helmet

detached and he exposed his beautiful visage, his bright blue eyes seeming to cause sparkles to dance as he knelt and reached out to take her hoof between his. "Please... glorious lady... will you accept my humble apologies for the indignity that I performed upon you? To mar your beautiful throat with such an ugly device is a sin that weighs heavily upon my conscience! Never before have I seen such an expression of perfection, grace, dignity, or humility as yourself!"

Lacunae just blinked as she looked down into the shimmering blue eyes. "Oh my... what do I do? What do I do! The Goddess...I... we... This has never happened before!" she asked me desperately as she blushed furiously.

She was asking me for relationship advice? Glory, however, smiled as she covered her lips with her hoof and gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like, "Say yes."

Lacunae glanced at her, then back at the kneeling Stronghoof. "Ah. Um... yes?"

His eyes shimmered, and Lacunae looked quite delightfully stunned as he rose and thrust his power hoof into the air with a whistle from the pneumatic pistons. "Yes!" he roared, and I could almost have sworn that the sun peeked out behind him; how else could he be glowing like that? Then he took her in his hooves and said, "Thank you for your generous forgiveness, sweet lady. My treatment of you was unforgivable."

Lacunae blushed from head to hoof. I wondered what the Goddess thought of it.

"I noticed he's not apologizing to me..." P-21 muttered.

Suddenly, Stronghoof loomed over the blue buck. "You? You attempted to glue a live grenade onto my armor through sneakiness and deception!" P-21 went white as a sheet as he cowered away from Stronghoof, looking as if he wanted to disappear into the ground. Then Stronghoof put his hoof on P-21's shoulder. "It also took phenomenal bravery on your part to try and do so to help your friend. You easily could have paid for that with your life. Not many would think enough of an alicorn to risk their lives for her. For your gallantry, I apologize to you as well."

P-21's mouth opened and then closed. Finally, he just nodded once. Really, what could you say after that?

Stronghoof straightened and put his helmet back in place. "Once, long ago, we served at the behest of Applejack, not to wage bloody war but to defend this land and its people. We've strayed from that noble origin and allowed ourselves to grow petty and covetous." Shrapnel gave a sour snort, though, with a half dozen others watching raptly, I couldn't see her trying something. But then Paladin Stronghoof turned to face her. "Yes, Shrapnel. There is more to being a Ranger than power

armor and oaths to follow orders! Behind both there is an ideal, a calling to not simply be stronger than our enemies but better as well! A standard for others to look up to. Can you say that you hold to such a standard, Shrapnel?"

The mare just stared back and shrank a little as every eye settled on her. She stammered a moment, then fell silent. The huge buck nodded once and said gravely, "Without that idea, I fear that we are little better than a well-equipped gang. And it is past time for that point to be decided." He turned back towards me and my friends. "Good Luck. I shall hope for your success."

After that, the Rangers galloped south towards the sounds of gunfire. "Well, that was nice of him," Glory said pleasantly before smiling at Lacunae. "And he fancies you. Imagine that!" She frowned as she looked at the furiously blushing alicorn. "Are you all right?"

"It . . . won't stop," Lacunae muttered softly.

I smiled and shook my head. Steel Rangers hitting on Alicorns. Monstrous screaming rooms singing hymns. What next? The filthy family emerged and slowly approached us. "Thanks, Security. I thought she was going to shoot us all." The buck rubbed his neck. "We've got to get out of here. Everything is nuts. Just nuts!"

Rampage trotted up to him. "Anything to report?"

"The Rangers hauled a bunch of giant bullets and stuff out of the water while we were collecting Radigator eggs. Really huge bullets. They're also moving lots of materiel on board from the shore. They've had power armor going in and out of the water for a while now," the buck reported. "Twenty more arrived from Trottingham this morning, and another thirty from all over. As you can see, they're saving their own. Bastards." He looked in the direction the Paladin had gone. "And they're sending their best to die."

Rampage nodded. "Well, hopefully all this will be over soon. Bloody butcher's bill is gonna be terrible. Doubt there will even be any Fillies or Burners after this fight is over. Heck, might not be any Reapers. We lost Deus and Gorgon. Splitter bought it this morning. Frenzy, too. No pony's seen Black Dog or Talon. That leaves Big Daddy, Brutus, me, and Psychoshy of the top ten."

"Something else, too," the buck said. "Ghouls have been more active than usual. Rocket Town's under attack."

"By who?" Rampage snorted. "No pony can get within five miles of that place! Radiation's so bad it gives me a sunburn."

“Hellhounds, I’ve heard. Whole damn pack attacking the missile base. Not the space center, though. Not yet. Red Eye is making a mess of the VC all over the east. Zebras sniping at Society ponies in the south. It’s crazy. Just crazy.” He shuddered. “We’ll get a report in, then get back to Toll. Hell, maybe move to Megamart or Riverside. Everywhere else is just insane right now.”

“Or you could just leave the Hoof,” P-21 pointed out dryly.

“Nopony leaves the Hoof,” the dirty, haggard buck said fatalistically before continuing east.

Glory stared at them as they left before gaping at Rampage. “You mean they really were spies?!” I just smiled, shaking my head a little.

Rampage rolled her eyes. “Right now, anypony who isn’t in power armor is a spy against the Rangers. You’ve only really known Stronghoof; the fact is, most Rangers don’t give a shit about helping others. They think that they have a Goddess-given right to take whatever tech they like. Every now and then, you might find a good Ranger. Your Stronghoofs or Steelhooveses—maybe it’s a ‘hoof’ thing—but inevitably, they get eaten up while the rest hide in their bunkers and survive.

“Big Daddy told me about it once. They’d found a water talisman in a gutted stable. The Professor extracted it and got it working. It was amazing. Clean water, enough for a settlement. But, of course, they couldn’t decide what exactly to do with it. Keeper wanted to sell it. Awesome wanted to install it in his own little kingdom. Dawn wanted to give the water away. The professor wanted to study it. But Carrots insisted that it be returned to her. Not to do anything with it. Simply because it was old tech. Anything made by Stable-Tec was the Rangers’ by right. And when the others pressed the issue, she took it and stomped it to dust rather than let another use the MWT’s tech. That is what the Rangers represent. Stronghoof might be what they could someday be, but he’s a minority... and he knows it.”

I sighed, looking to the north. I could only hope that there was something I could say or offer. “I’m more worried about them loading the ship with ‘giant bullets’. Maybe they just want to stock up, but...” I’d only seen the Celestia from a distance, but I remembered the size of those guns.

We’d crept as close as I cared to creep. Every second that passed, I kept remembering two little things: ‘two mile accuracy’ and ‘120mm’. That was the size of my hoof. Peeking through my scope, I saw Rangers keeping lookout for us. All their

firepower aside, I just imagined Steel Rain's guns turning any one of us, or all of us, into a fine, lingering red mist. The Rangers' perimeter looked pretty well laid out; I couldn't see any way to get through it or over it, and I wasn't even going to try to find a way under it.

But that was what an alicorn was for: cheating.

We were a mile from the crumpled headquarters building, and Lacunae had a nice load of radiation boosting her. She peered through my rifle's scope at the collapsed pile of rubble; there was at least one Ranger on the roof and another one at the base, but none in the middle.

There were constant sounds of gunfire behind us; the Reapers were pushing in from all sides. Power armor didn't matter much against ten to one odds, and with every Ranger they killed, they moved closer to taking the base. Normally, that wouldn't bother me... but now that I'd met Stronghoof and Crumpets, I knew that the good ones were the ones who would die first.

Lacunae found a spot she hoped she could get us in from, and we gathered together. In a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared on a narrow shelf next to a door. Fortunately, it was strong enough to support us. My PipBuck started a slow clicking. 1 rad per second. No problem now, but if we lingered here for too long...

Overhead there was a dull rumble of thunder, and I narrowed my eye, glaring up at the rain. Of course... it had to start really pouring now...

The door was locked, but P-21 worked his own magic on the lock and we were in. Papers were strewn all across the floor, and the walls were covered in cracks and gaping rents. Many of the walls had an ominous lean to them, not quite enough to come crashing down but definitely enough to make me worry. Still, I was encouraged by the garbage covering the floor; it meant that the Rangers didn't come through this section.

"Okay, magical mystical PipBuck," I said as I checked my navigation. "This is a great big blasted building and I don't have all day. Where do I need to go?" There, on my navigation, was a tiny little chevron to the south. Well... at least I had a direction. Now I just had to figure out how to get to it.

I don't know what I'd expected in a Hoofington 'command center', but it wasn't all these offices. We passed one after the next, most collapsed or well looted. Just because the Rangers didn't come through here didn't mean somepony else hadn't come a century before them. P-21 found the obligatory random assortment of bot-

tlecaps, bullets, clipboards, and coffee mugs as we picked through the offices. My sword picked off the radroaches that came scurrying out with suicidal glee.

Looked like we'd have to go down... and that was never a good direction in Hoofington.

There weren't any intact stairs, but there was an elevator shaft. Lacunae hovered in the middle and lowered us all down to the next level. More offices, these a bit more intact. More radroaches, too. I let Rampage take care of these; the relish she tore into them with was still a bit disconcerting, but at least she was enjoying herself.

"Blackjack, did I kill somepony?" Scotch's question stopped all of us cold. I saw her off to the side, staring at a heap of bones.

"Why... why would you ask that?" Glory said in a voice loaded with forced sweetness.

"I just... I keep feeling like something really bad happened... and I don't know what." She looked up at us with her brilliant green eyes as she chewed on her lip. "I... I wonder if I did something bad or... or something."

She was bringing this up now? I sighed. Of course she was. Because I made a mistake. And because it bothered her. And because I was the only one who would tell her...

P-21 just stared away. Lacunae simply looked sad, Rampage angry, and Glory scared. I sighed and took a seat. "Come here, Scotch." I wondered if this was how Mom felt. "The part of your life you can't remember... we were in the tunnels. We came across a monster... really big and scary. And for a time afterwards, you tried to deal with it. But..." I glanced at P-21, but he simply focused on his bum leg. "You did kill somepony... trying to save my life. But it bothered you a bunch. You said you wished you didn't remember any of it. So I asked Triage to modify your memories. Take them away..."

"You..." Scotch backed away from me. "You... you've messed with my mind?"

"I did," I said softly. "It was my call... mine alone. The others were against it," I lied, glancing at Glory's shamed face. "I wanted to give you peace... keep you safe."

"By messing with my mind?" she yelled, glaring at me. "Were you planning on taking away that battle just now too? Or how about destroying my home? How about killing everypony I ever knew!" she shouted in rage. "How about Mom dying! Why didn't you take that memory away, Blackjack?!"

Well... this was going swimmingly... "I only wanted to help you," I said softly, feeling tired.

"Help me? You've been fucking with my mind! I hate you! You came back to 99 and destroyed my entire life! I hate you!" she screamed at me and then turned, galloping away and sobbing.

"Scotch!" Glory shouted. I glanced at P-21, but he just sat there like an angry blue lump.

"I'll go help her," Rampage said as she rose to her hooves. Maybe it was the phrase, maybe it was the tone... but as I stared at the striped pony starting to walk after Scotch, my mane prickled.

"No," I said as I stood too. "Glory, Go bring her back. Rampage, you're staying with us."

The armored pony tilted her head towards me and smiled gently. So very kindly. "Only I can give her the help she truly needs. I'll take the hurting away, forever." And as I watched, that soft, kindly smile stretched wider and wider as her whole body slowly tensed like a wound spring.

"Glory, go," I said as I lifted the sword and Vigilance and looked into a murderess' eyes. Suddenly, Rampage turned and charged. Two hundred pounds of steel-encased fury smashed into me like a wrecking ball and knocked me off my hooves. Lacunae lifted Rampage into the air, but she twisted and thrashed, slamming her hooves against the ceiling and powering down at Lacunae. Hoofclaws dug deep into the alicorn's purple side, tearing six bloody furrows in her flank.

I rammed Rampage with as much power as my braced legs could muster. My magic pressed the pistol under her chin and fired, but she jerked away at the last moment; all I did was blow off half her muzzle. Glowing arrows flashed from Lacunae, slamming through Rampage's thick plating and into her sides.

The holes closed before my eyes as her grin twisted back into place. She pounced atop me, her hoofclaws tangling with my leg braces as I was knocked onto my back. I stamped Vigilance to her belly and fired again... and again... "Let me give you peace, too. You hurt so damn much... but I'll help you! I'll help you like you helped Scotch!" she said as she twisted her hoofclaws back and forth. Working the tips into my flesh. My focus broke, and I dropped my weapons as I felt her rear claws start to dig into my rear legs and belly.

Then my sword went through her eye, and I looked up to see the handle gripped by

P-21. He shoved it deep and twisted hard, the tip digging into her brain and making her spasm and jerk. Slowly, she turned to stare up at him. “You’re hurting too. . .” she slurred, then slowly pushed herself towards him, more and more of the blade slicing through her head.

Wasn’t this whole thing supposed to be some kind of stealth mission? Hadn’t that been part of the plan?! I’m pretty sure that getting hated by a filly and attacked by a friend didn’t belong in a stealth mission!

Then he twisted the blade hard and she screamed, blood spurting over his face. Every time she resumed moving, he twisted it back and ripped a new hole. Again and again he wrenched the blade inside her skull. Finally, she went limp atop me. There was a pause, silent but for P-21’s panting. Then, “Can you please. . . get this. . . fucking. . . thing out of my eye?” Rampage slurred thickly. He looked at me, and I nodded. If she wasn’t talking about hurting and peace, it was probably okay.

He pulled it free, and she shuddered as the hole he’d augured healed. She kept shaking slightly as she pulled herself off me, sniffing. “I’m not crying, okay? I just had a sword in my eye. It hurts.” She looked at Lacunae and me and grit her teeth. “Fuck. . . not again. Is Scotch okay?”

“Scotch Tape is okay. Pissed with me. . . but she didn’t see that.” Lacunae was using her cheating alicorn powers to slowly regenerate while she pointed her horn to the cuts in my limbs to heal them.

P-21 stared at me for several long seconds like there was something he was fighting with. Then he turned his head and spat the weapon away. His eyes were hard and pitiless as he stared at Rampage. Almost frantically, he started to wipe the blood away, his eyes digging in as he glared at the mare and ground his teeth.

“I should go. I shouldn’t have come back. I was. . . I was just so happy to be with you again. . .” she shook her head. “I felt like. . . like I was somepony more than a killer.”

“Well, that’s what you are,” P-21 snapped crossly as he rose to his hooves. “If you were in 99, you would have been best friends with Daisy. I bet you would have hit the breeding queue every second you could.”

“P-21!” I yelled, making him round on me. Not him too! What was with everypony? All my friends were going crazy!

His eyes narrowed as he hissed, “And you! Why don’t you just accept facts? It’s over, Blackjack. You’re dying. She’s crazy. Scotch is helpless. Glory is hopeless.

The sanest damn one of us is the damned alicorn! Rampage wants to go? She should go! We should all go! Do you really think we're going to hang on together once you die? Carry on your great quest? It's time to face the fact that we're done. You're going to die and... and..." He clenched his head and squeezed his eyes closed tightly.

I stretched out a hoof toward him as tears crept out from between his eyelids. "It's okay, P-21."

"No, it's not okay, Blackjack!" he said as he shook his head. "We just keep fighting and we just keep losing. Rampage can't control herself any more than when she killed Thorn. You can't keep Scotch safe and happy. Glory just watches you falling apart more and more every hour. And nopony is willing to admit it that this... this... stupid little dysfunctional band of emotional retards is doomed! I'm sick of it!" he said as he hissed his breath through his teeth and looked at me miserably. "Why can't we just go home? It's better there. I didn't have to see... everything in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland hurting you."

I carefully put my hoof on his shoulder. He recoiled a bit, then slowly turned and curled against it. "My whole life..." I said, "I was nothing. A failure of a daughter and a joke of a security mare. I was clueless... unwilling to admit just how fucked up my home was. Then I came out here with you and... suddenly I'm doing something with some meaning. Saving ponies... fighting monsters... even trying to unravel this stupid quest thing." I hugged him lightly. "I know I'm going to die. We all do, eventually. So before I go, I want to do something that matters. I want to give this damned city what it deserves and help as many ponies as I can."

He sniffed as he looked at me, and I touched his cheek softly. "A person a lot better than I am once told me how to make up for getting Scoodle killed. He said that you do everything you can to make up for it. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better. And you hope that, when it's all over, the good you do will even start to come close to paying for your mistakes. And I've made mistakes, P-21, and they've hurt ponies who never deserved it. Scoodle. Those foals. Clover. Those zebras. 99. I know that I can never fully pay the price for those mistakes. Not ever. And if I hurt... well, it's just a little tipping of the scales to make things square. That's why I have to do this. Because if I give up and go off to die comfortably without trying to do better, then their deaths really were pointless murder."

"It's so... stupid," he sniffed, shaking his head.

"Hey. It's my plan. Of course it's stupid. I'm not a smart pony, remember?" So much

for my plans. I needed a few backup plans. Preferably made by somepony other than me.

He gave the ghost of a smile. "Yeah. But you're a good one." He rubbed his eyes and sniffed. "Sorry, Rampage."

She looked at him evenly and shrugged. "Eh. Don't worry about it. Like I said: doing all this stuff with you guys makes me feel like I'm doing something important for the first time in my life." She pointed a hoof at me and added with a sharp grin, "Even if you get in the weirdest frigging situations, Blackjack! Seriously... what is it with you and rooms that want to eat you?" And with me constantly having to shoot her in the head, I wanted to add, but with her blood still smeared on my sword, I thought better of it.

Once we were regrouped and restored, we continued downwards. Scotch Tape wasn't speaking to me; I couldn't blame her for that. My attempt to try and protect her had gone down in flames. Glory kept giving me the 'she'll get over it' look, but she didn't know just how long a mare in 99 could hold a grudge. I mean, I was still ticked off at Pastels for stealing my crayon. Well... okay, not really, but we had gotten really good at not letting old slights be forgotten. Still, I had to think of some way to make it up to Scotch. Some way that wasn't going to blow up in my face in a few more days.

The deeper we went into the command center, the more apprehensive I became. We'd passed an armory looted within an inch of its life. The only things that hadn't been cleaned out were two large security storage boxes set in the walls, their surfaces scored from where somepony had tried to cut them out of the wall entirely. There was a stock of IF specialty ammunition; I was particularly interested in the 12mm rounds with bright blue tips and loaded several of Vigilance's magazines with the spark rounds. It might have been a handgun, but I'd do my best to give whatever Rangers I came across a break. I also loaded a magazine with explosive rounds and another with armor piecing, though, just in case.

Now we were underground, and still the PipBuck navigation tag was below us. How it knew what it was after, I couldn't imagine, and, honestly, my legs ached so much that I didn't care. My chest hurt and my lungs burned. When nopony else was looking, I pulled aside my patch and let Glory check my eye socket. She looked grim, replaced the patch, and then kissed my forehead and told me not to worry about it. I tried my best.

Now we were in the more intact areas of the base, and I recognized where we were: this section was almost an exact copy of Miramare. It was a little bigger and had some more extensive damage, but I knew that below us and ahead, was the base operations center. Like Miramare, only the close balefire blast and radiation had killed the base occupants. We could have split up to do things more efficiently, but after the lab I was done with splitting us up while we were underground. We reached the operations room and found it dead cold. The door's motors weren't locked or anything; there just wasn't any power. Glory and Scotch held an impromptu conference, and we set out to find the circuit breaker and power supply.

Ugh. . . why couldn't this be any easier?

Since it was more or less on the way, we stopped by security. I picked up a slightly dusty assault rifle; an IF-64 Bloomberg, if I recalled. Still, I finally had something to do with all those light rifle rounds! There were even extended magazines! When we moved on to the medical room, I took an opportunity to oil and service the weapon as well as I could. I caught Scotch's eye for a second before she looked away, lips pressed together, determined to be pissed at me.

After picking out every last drug, we made our way to the maintenance bay and then finally to the power supply. While P-21 filled his saddlebags with goodies, Glory and Scotch Tape pored over several gigantic switches set in a wall next to three massive cables coming out of the ground. I peeked down through the grate on the shaft they descended into, but, even with my mutated vision, I couldn't see the bottom. Scotch finally took out a rubberized cloth, stuck it in her mouth, and grabbed one switch. It clicked into place with a loud electric buzz. Then the second switch and with it another buzz. Then a third pair. The lights flickered to life overhead.

Hoofington Rises.

It was painted on the wall in bright red letters. The author lay in a pile of bones beside the message, paint can between its forehooves. I couldn't tell if it was two or two hundred years old. It still made my mane crawl. "Come on. I'm getting all kinds of weird vibes," I said as we walked back to the operations door. "Just in and then out. I want to get out of here."

"Me too. This place is creepy," Scotch said, then glanced at me as if questioning if this was due to the overwhelming creeposity of the place or my brain manipulation.

We trotted back to the door to the operations center, now powered but locked, and P-21 started banging away at the computer. Meanwhile, our PipBucks were ticking from the slow, steady radiation. Scotch Tape pulled out a spanner and in less than a

minute had a panel next to the door out. “Why couldn’t Daddy have been a unicorn?” she muttered before sticking her hoof in the space and fishing around. I looked at the flustered P-21 as he tried for the password even faster, in a de facto race with his daughter.

There was spark of wires coincident with the beep of the computer, and both declared simultaneously ‘Done!’ before glaring at one another. I smiled, closing my eye and shaking my head as I stepped to the door.

I opened it just in time to see a crackling green fireball being flung right at us!

Fortunately Lacunae had been paying attention, and she teleported in front of us to block it; the blast of magical fire still washed us all in crackling radiation, but only the alicorn bore the brunt of it. I should have known this’d been going too smoothly! Red bars were lightning up right and left, and a choir of undead ponies howled in mindless hunger. Behind them reared a unicorn glowing with a harsh green glare and firing off balls of radioactive fire at us. The rest of the ghouls, now racing towards us on broken, jagged hooves, still had combat armor on.

“Nothing is good under Hoofington! Nothing!” I shouted as I stepped beside Lacunae, Glory taking position on the other side of the purple alicorn. My rads were climbing rapidly, so I shouted for everypony to take a Rad-X and chewed down on a tablet myself. Time to put the assault rifle to the test. I blasted automatic bursts at the first of the undead ponies that charged; the alternating armor piercing and explosive rounds chewing great gooey rents in them. Glory laid down a strafing barrage of green beams; it looked like she’d gotten the conversion finished. Lacunae shielded us from the rain of fire, her own magic bolstered by the radiation washing over her. Too bad the rest of my friends weren’t so well fortified.

There were too many coming too fast. I didn’t have time to look as I heard the clattering of hoofclaws in the hall behind me. Rampage leapt onto Lacunae’s back and sprang over the alicorn as a ball of flame burst against her shield. Trailing burning tatters, the unimpeded pony smashed into one of the armored ghouls with such force that his body nearly exploded in a pulpy mess. Rolling smoothly, she laughed gleefully as she latched her hoofclaws into one charging Glory and swung him away.

“Invaders!” roared the undead unicorn. “Die, you striped bastards! You won’t take us without a fight!” The ghouls’ voice barely reached me over the sounds of battle.

I could have used some help myself. The assault rifle barked spray after spray of fire, and I jumped into S.A.T.S. as often as possible; if I didn’t destroy the head they

just regenerated the damage. Three charged me at once, and I braced myself for some more pain. Then Persuasion thumped and the blast knocked the three flying. I spotted a blue pony in the corner, barely visible as he loaded another.

Even Scotch joined in the battle, laying on her stomach as she fired at any ghoul that got too close to Lacunae. The glowing ghoul unicorn halted lobbing exploding balls and turned to pouring out a stream of radioactive flame. I hissed as it scorched my legs and face from a near hit.

“You shall never make me abandon my post!” The unicorn screamed as we fanned out. It was hard to say which would get me first, the fire or the radiation. “Burn, stripes! Burn in Luna’s righteous fury!” Radioactive fire sprayed from her horn like a sprinkler in all directions, and I dove under a desk as I lined up a shot. My bullets flickered and melted away as they got close to the ghoul, unable to penetrate the layer of radioactive flame around it.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. . .

I focused hard, hoping that maybe I’d mutated up enough that all this radiation was doing me some good too. S.A.T.S. and four magic bullets, go! My glowing bolts shot across the room, guided by the precision spell to impact against the ghoul’s skull. The flames died a little as each luminescent round smashed home; the quartet sent it reeling, its heat diminishing. A volley of magical arrows, green beams, and a grenade blew the rest of the ghoul apart.

I was relieved to find that the radiation in the room was dropping. . . but not to zero. “I need some Rad-Away, bad. . .” We probably all did. Glory broke out one for each of us save Lacunae. The alicorn said nothing, but I thought I caught a look of ‘poor mortal creatures’ in her eyes.

With my rads bouncing in the yellow, I approached the unicorn ghoul’s corpse. The Dealer stood by and sighed, placing a queen of hearts on her still glowing side. The uniform she had worn had burned away, leaving bits of metal fused with her hide. I spotted one still glowing chunk. Gen. Shimmerstar. A little square appeared around the nametag in my vision and dancing lines of data scrolled rapidly before terminating with:

EC-1101 Status update> General Shimmerstar: Deceased. Denied.

Okay. That cleared that up. I spotted the terminal in the corner and clattered over towards it. “Okay. . . so where do you want to go now?” I asked as I tapped the terminal keys. . . pretty much at random. I’d need P-21 to. . . woah. The screen

immediately flashed to life and began to scroll with numbers that made no sense to me.

EC-1101 Routing information> Fluttershy Medical Center, Hoofington.

“I’ve already been there!” I groaned and smacked my PipBuck. “Stupid freaky magic tech!”

“Blackjack, can we get out of the deadly radiation now?” P-21 drawled as he looked around. The room was still damned hot, and I nodded. “Lacunae, can you teleport us back to where we came in?”

“With this much power...” there was a purple flash, and disorientation made my head spin. “Certainly.” Ooooh... somepony gets cheeky when she’s high on radiation. We were back on the floor with all the offices, and the radiation meter dropped to a comfortable slow click every few seconds. Everypony—but Lacunae, again—looked sick, though, even myself. “We have any more Rad-Away?” I asked Glory.

“One pouch,” she said with a small frown.

I sighed and nodded my head over to where Scotch was being sick. “Give it to Scotch.”

Glory nodded and trotted over to her. I’d accomplished... well... something. Fluttershy Medical shouldn’t be a problem... oh... don’t start thinking that, Blackjack! Still, I couldn’t think a finer place in Equestria to suck out all the radiation swirling around inside me. Once Lacunae picked the location out of my memories, we could teleport straight there; after all, there was plenty of radiation around here for her to soak up. If the worst came to the worst, she could tap that crystal and silver bullet together a few times and hopefully not blow up.

Now for the harder step: getting to Elder Crunchy Carrots and negotiating an end to this. And for that, I needed a plan. Giving myself up to this acolyte might get me in. Or it might get me killed. More importantly, it might get my friends killed...

Crap, I couldn’t just hand myself over and make it up on the fly. I had to think... think of something. I looked at Glory as she tried to convince Scotch to drink the Rad-Away. She made me smile as she explained the effects of radiation poisoning, and that smile only continued as my eyes trailed along her flank. Her sweet, sweet...

There was a flickering bulb going off in my brain. Shit... would that work?

I trotted towards Scotch Tape. “Hey,” I said as she fidgeted with the pouch.

"I hate this stuff. It tastes like butt and it makes me pee rainbows," she muttered sullenly. "Radiation never hurt. . ." I looked at the olive filly with a small smile, arched a brow, and pulled back my left sleeve to show her the mottled, growth-laden surface. It looked like one solid bruise, yellow with ugly greenish-red blotches beneath the skin. Glory looked alarmed, but I shook my head. Now was no time to play doctor. Scotch took the hint and started drinking the orange medicine with a sour look.

"Sorry about messing with your head," I said as I sat down beside her. "I just wanted you happy. Guess I fucked that up, huh?" Glory rolled her eyes as she trotted away, muttering something about language.

"You'd be happy if somepony messed with your head?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Are you kidding? I'd be bouncing on my hooves happy," I lied. I couldn't tell if she believed me or not as she looked down at the pouch of medicine. "I need you to do something for me, Scotch. And it's something no pony else can do."

"You're going to ask me to stay behind so that I can stay safe. Again," she grumbled. "Why does everypony insist on treating me like a baby? I can disassemble a sewage pump in fifteen minutes with two wrenches and a hammer. . ." Then she sighed. "I'm gonna end up with a toilet for a cutie mark, ain't I?"

"Be nice to find a working one, that's for sure," I teased softly, mussing her short blue mane. "And I am going to ask you to stay behind. But not because I want to keep you safe. I have to go meet with the Rangers. If everything works out. . . well. . . if it works out, then great. But if it doesn't. . . the only pony who can end this war will be you. Understand?"

I told her my plan, and she found a way to make it work...well, up to a point. "Still, this is crazy, Blackjack. What if they just shoot you?"

"Then they're smarter ponies than me," I replied with a smile and kissed her brow. "You know we care about you, right?"

She flushed a little. "Yeah. Just. . . don't get dead, Blackjack. There ain't many 99 ponies left."

"There's P-21," I replied.

"He don't count. He hates me," she muttered.

I sighed. "He doesn't hate you. . ." At least, he better not! "He just has a hard time with things that remind him of 99. It wasn't easy for him there."

"I know. Colts are weird. . ." she said, rolling her eyes.

“Tell me about it,” I said with a smile. Then I sighed again. “I also need you to hold on to something for me, okay? This is an IF-22 with expanded magazine. It was my mom’s. If something should happen, I don’t want the Rangers to have it. Just... be careful when you fire it. It’s got a whole lot more kick than that dinky nine mil Parasprite you shoot.”

She took it with the care of someone who respects a machine that can hurt you. I appreciated that. “There’s one last thing I need you to do. You’re not going to like it, but you’re the only pony who can pull it off.” She looked intrigued as I took a breath and said, “I need you to act scared so Glory will stay behind.” I couldn’t bear to see her in another situation like the one at Flash Industries.

For a moment, she looked confused and then annoyed, but finally she seemed to understand and gave a little smile and a roll of her eyes. “Great. More time with the most boring pony in the Wasteland.”

I thumped her softly on her head. “Maybe, but she’s my marefriend, so be nice.” Scotch Tape stuck her tongue out at me. “And finish your medicine. Remember, it’s not a rainbow if you don’t hit all six colors.”

She smiled crookedly as she wrinkled her nose. “Ew... gross, Blackjack... and everypony thinks I’m the filly.”

I chuckled as I clattered back towards the others. You and P-21 both, kid. “Okay. We actually have a plan B. So... P-21 and Rampage are with me again... Glory, Lacunae, and Scotch are here.” And cue in three... two...

“Absolutely not. I’m coming with you,” Glory said firmly, frowning.

“You have to stay here. Scotch is still freaked out, and if Rangers come up here, I need you to help fight them off,” I said as I glanced over my shoulder at Scotch. She mouthed my words with impudent annoyance before she caught my glare and suddenly gave Glory a big-eyed look that just screamed ‘look at me, I’m helpless!’. And if Steel Rain got his hooves on Glory, I’d give him EC-1101 and tell the Elder that Big Daddy planned to turn her into a hat if I had to.

Glory sure didn’t like it, but I knew that she had hoofcuffs; I’d use them if I had to. “So... not just a plan A, but a plan B?” P-21 asked with a thin smile.

“And a plan C...” I replied. “Yup... I am just brimming with the whole... plans... thing.” Of course, knowing me and how my plans worked out... yeah. “Let’s get started before I have to worry about a plan D.”

The dry docks were basically four giant long buildings covered in rust and salt. Huge cranes hung on gantries overhead, silently waiting to resume work on ships that would never be completed. All of the locks had failed, filling the rooms with the reek of brackish water. The place had power and tools, though, and that, I supposed, was all that mattered. Most of the noise was coming from one corner of the cavernous space. We had everything ready... or at least as ready as it would ever get. My PipBuck was covered with duct tape that was ostensibly, and to a degree actually, holding the brace on that leg on. Everything else had been left behind with the other three.

“Glory’s starting to feel left out. She misses out on the hole of terror and now on the suicidal strut,” Rampage said as I limped along beside her. If things went stupid, she was our plan D. Water poured through holes in the roof in cascading columns as we stepped over heaps of rusted chain and bolts. A huge faded mural of Applejack in a sailor’s outfit saluted us all over the motto ‘Victory through blood, sweat, and tears.’

“Yeah, but she gets to have sex with me, so she can’t complain,” I retorted. I didn’t want to spook them and start off the shooty. I was so nervous going in unarmed... I didn’t even have a fancy sword!

“You’re that good?” Rampage asked with a smirk.

“No, but she is,” I replied.

“Well then, maybe I should have sex with her and find out for myself when you’re gone,” Rampage said, her smirk transforming into a naughty grin.

I rolled my eyes and snorted. “Be my guest. She loves it when you nibble on—”

“Could we please cut out the lesbian sexcapade chitchat while walking towards an enemy that wants to kill us?” P-21 said tersely, his already bristly mane frizzing even more. “I don’t even know why I’m here.”

“You’re here for when this chief acolyte commits his sudden and inevitable betrayal,” I replied. His name was ‘Napalm Strike’; it hardly screamed ‘trustworthy’ to me.

“Next question. What is the plan if the Elder says ‘thank you for your concern; now I’m going to shoot you anyway?’ Because that’s the step I’m missing,” he said sourly.

“I shoot her in the face and we run for our lives and hope Lacunae can swoop in and port us to safety. Then we shut down the Rangers,” I said firmly.

“You’re siding with the Reapers?” Rampage asked with pleased surprise.

I snorted. “I’m siding with whoever has less stupid and kills fewer innocent ponies. Right now, Steel Rain trumps Psychoshy in both departments.”

We stepped into view of ten or so unicorns handling all kinds of strange techy equipment while fixing up suits of power armor. They all froze at the sight of us. “Hi. I’m Security. I’m looking for Napalm Strike?” For several seconds, they just looked at each other and us; they were clearly not ponies who expected three dangerous, wanted strangers to trot up to them. I rose and put my hooves in the air. “We’re giving up?”

A power-armored pony pointed a gatling gun at us, and I readied myself for sharp and painful death. Then an older-looking buck in red robes trotted towards me looking quite put out. “I’m Chief Acolyte Strike. What are you doing here? How did you get inside our perimeter?” He looked at Rampage with alarm. “You’re that Reaper! The immortal one!”

“You survive being put through a wood chipper, and suddenly you’re famous,” Rampage said with a chuckle as she shook some rusty salt water off her hoof. “I’m just glad they recognized me without the armor.”

“We’re here to speak to your leader about halting this war,” I said, and the flat look he gave me did not bode well. “I’m prepared to give her the location of my stable in exchange for hearing me out.” It was full of poison gas and dead bodies, but the words got the reaction I wanted. He immediately looked intrigued.

“In my opinion, you’re too late. We’re about to crush this war once and for all. But if you insist. . . I suppose I can take your request to her.” He nodded to the acolytes. “Search them.”

I did my best to hide my disappointment when they found the bobby pins under P-21’s tail. . . and in his mane. And mouth. They gave me the same treatment, even taking off my eyepatch to make sure I didn’t have a grenade or something hidden in there. Really, what were they expecting? Given that my busted braces were taped to my legs, they couldn’t exactly check them. I really doubted they wanted to. No pony wanted to look at swollen nasty pony flesh.

After that, the armored ranger fell in behind us while Chief Acolyte Strike trotted in front. I hoped that the Ranger was a real good shot if she decided to fire. We trotted out of the dry docks and towards the pier the Celestia was tied up to. Once, she’d clearly been a magnificent ship, and even after two centuries she possessed

a strength and grandeur that I found impressive. Three turrets, two in the front and one towards the rear, pointed their barrels towards the city. And then...I gaped as I saw one of the rear turret's cannon barrels slowly elevate.

"You got it to work?" Rampage gaped in alarm. "You've been working on this rust-bucket for years!"

"Indeed, and it's beginning to pay off. We fixed Turret Three months ago. Of course, the Elder resisted our many requests to fire it. There was a lack of proper ordnance, for one thing."

"No bullets?" I asked in surprise.

"No shells," he corrected, and I suspected that the orange acolyte would have been great buddies with Textbook. "The Celestia had been docked for a major refit at the time of the attack, and all her shells had been removed. Sadly, their bunker is buried under tons of debris, too much to be practically cleared. So, while we possessed ample stocks of powder, we had no shells. Until recently, that is." He pointed to a crane that was lifting something out of the water. A dripping net with a suit of power armor hanging onto it. "Fortunately, the Luna's ordnance was intact. Marvelous engineering."

I saw that the armor had been modified with numerous air tanks. "Clever."

"Technology is to be used, not merely collected. The Elder is growing to appreciate that fact," he said matter-of-factly.

"Except using it for war gets it blown up," I replied, earning a sour look from the sour chief acolyte. "I'm just saying."

"And the Elder would agree with you as well. But when we are attacked, we must respond. The codex commands it," he said as he walked out onto the wet pier. The rain was still pouring, and it was quickly getting dark.

"Well, that and common sense," I replied. "But somehow, I doubt all the scavengers I saw with minigun bullets in them were attacking power armor." He frowned sharply at me but said no more as we trotted along the dock. Then I noted with surprise two other ships. One was far less grand: a rust-red ship half the size of the Celestia. It was flying a flag showing the steel ranger emblem, but with three apples instead of gears. Between it and the Celestia was... the Seahorse.

"What is Thrush doing here?" I exclaimed in surprise.

He chuckled dryly. "Oh, so you know that pirate? No surprise. She's guilty of

numerous counts of technology smuggling and other assorted crimes.” He pointed a hoof at the far ship. “When the... sigh... HMS Applejack was en route from Manehattan, they encountered the Seahorse, intercepted her, and towed her back here. Once we’ve wrapped things up, we’ll strip out the engine. The rest is garbage.”

“And what happened to the captain and her crew?” Things were rapidly veering towards Plan: ‘Blackjack does something incredibly stupid and violent.’

“They’re in custody. They should have been thrown to the mercy of the sea, but the Trottingham Rangers are notoriously softhearted and soft-headed. I suppose the Elder will let the crew go and shoot the captain.”

“Try not to sound so disappointed,” P-21 muttered. “That reply just saved you the trouble of having Blackjack tear this place apart. She gets destructive when her friends get hurt.”

“Stupid, P-21. I get stupid when my friends get hurt,” I corrected. I received an uneasy look from the chief acolyte.

He looked decidedly out of his comfort zone as we walked up the gangplank and onto the Celestia. I was surprised by the number of Rangers who weren’t trotting around in power armor. I guess I’d gotten the idea that if you didn’t have power armor you weren’t a Steel Ranger, but most of these ponies didn’t wear any. They were moving boxes and containers of supplies aboard the ship. It made sense; if the Reapers swarmed the base, they’d be sitting ducks on the pier.

We were walked past the number three turret. Up close, you couldn’t miss the rusty streaks; magically protected or not, saltwater was hell on steel. Even I knew that. It looked like only the middle cannon was moving, and the gun elevated agonizingly slowly as the turret slowly ground around. Ponies were slopping grease around the edge with mouthheld mops while unicorns floated grease guns into the crevices. Clearly, battleships ran on grease.

“Down,” he directed as we crossed a pegasus landing pad at the rear and clattered down some narrow stairs. I had to wonder if Rangers could even wear power armor in these tight confines! After that, we went down more stairs... and more stairs... and incidentally did I mention I didn’t like stairs? My braced legs slipped and I went rolling down to the bottom. “Are you sure you’re Security?” Napalm Strike asked me bluntly.

“Catch me on a day when I’m not walking on screwed-up legs, and I’ll show you Security...” I muttered as I pulled myself to my hooves, once more glad I couldn’t

break my legs. Of course, I still felt like I'd been beaten with a stick, but at least nothing was broken.

We reached a long room that smelled of salt and dead sea things and followed it along past large white plastic drums set in rows along a mechanized track. There were Rangers pushing the plastic drums from the track to a hoist that I guessed pulled it up to the gun. One of the drums had been dropped, spilling dark powder in a fan that two unicorns were very carefully scooping up.

If one drum held that much powder... There were hundreds of drums down here; too bad magic bullets didn't create much in the way of sparks. I'd need something incendiary to do a proper job, a grenade or flamer or something. "Planning a party?"

"Given the possibility of the base being overrun, it didn't seem prudent to leave a whole bunker full of gunpowder to the mercies of the Burner Boys. We loaded as much as we would need and sealed the rest away," he replied dryly. We passed through a thick door to another room loaded with missiles and ammo crates by the thousands. There were enough bullets and missiles in here to kill everypony in Equestria a thousand times over!

Why in Celestia's name would any country need so many bullets?

Past that, we entered a space that was far more run down. Given how much effort they were putting into getting the turret working, getting the rest of the ship operational would take lifetimes. There was rust everywhere I looked, and most of the talismans were shot. Some engine or power source I couldn't imagine growled under our hooves, though, and we occasionally passed work crews trying to get some other part of the ship to work.

Finally, we were escorted to an empty magazine which had far more rust and fish reek. The cages that had held the powder drums in the other room were empty in this one, and they had been converted into cells. "So... going to tell the elder straight away?" I asked him.

His sniff told me not to hold my breath. "Eventually. I have my duties. But I will inform her that you wish to meet."

"If you want to know where my stable is... a nice, fully-operational Stable... you'll inform her before you start firing that gun," I said as we were marched into an empty cage. The crew of the Seahorse roused at once as we were locked in across from them.

The acolyte sniffed. "Yes, well, the elder is a very busy mare. There's a war on, you

know. I'll see she's informed." I gave a little sigh. Of course he would. With that he stepped out.

"Blackjack? Is that you? Are you all right?" Oilcan asked as the mare looked around. Oh yeah. I was the pony with the nightvision eye.

"Blackjack?" a mare whimpered in pain in the dark. I looked around, but the other cages were empty.

"Thrush? Where's Captain Thrush?" I asked.

"Here. She's in a bad way though. When she caused too much trouble, they made her go into a memory orb and she still hasn't woken up. It's been hours!" Tarboots grumbled.

I recalled going into one like that, a trapped orb that had shut me down until Priest snapped me out of it again. I thought I spotted Seabiscuit in the back. I heard familiar little snuffles and sobs somewhere in the dark room. "Who is that?"

There was an uncomfortable pause and then Oilcan said quietly, "The sea ponies. They're... in a bad way too."

Seaponies? Oh, shit! "Piscies? Capri?" Somepony had thrown them in here without any water?

"Blackjack..." came Pisces' whimper. "Please... help..."

"Okay. Plan B now," I said as I pulled off my eyepatch. "P-21, do you have any pins they missed?"

"Nope. They were more thorough than you. Why, do you have one?" he asked in surprise.

"Mhmm! They were busy searching me, but not my eyepatch." I ripped open the padded backing and carefully tugged out the pin with my magic. The glow was one of the only wan lights in the room. I passed it to him, then carefully untaped a part of my 'brace' which happened to be a screwdriver.

He eyed it and then looked up at me. "Celestia save us... Blackjack is becoming clever. Okay, keep that little horn of yours lit up."

"It's compact! Not little!" I'd show him light! I fished around for a piece of scrap metal I could lift. I focused as much as I could to light it as he worked.

A click, and the door opened. This is why he was awesome. Only he could unlock a door in near darkness.

The lock on the Seahorse's crew's cage clicked, and the four ponies moved out. Then we moved to the next cell over... and I froze. I'd never really appreciated what a fish was: a creature of water. I only knew them as glittering shapes in books next to the little fact that they lived in water.

I'd never thought of what happened to them if you took them out of water...

Pisces and Capricorn lay on the floor. Their scales were cracked and flaking, their skin split and bleeding. Their fins had dried out and stuck to the floor. Capri was unconscious, maybe dead. The pink seapony was partially glued to her sister. They needed water, badly, and whatever pony had thrown them in here like this needed to die.

It was a good thing I'd met Crumpets and Paladin Stronghoof when I had. I was in a particularly shooty mood when it came to the Rangers. I knelt as P-21 started on the lock. "Just stay easy. We'll get you out... find a fire hose and a bucket or something."

"Momma... please, Momma..." Capri whimpered weakly. "Not monsters... we're... we're not monsters..." No, you're not. No pony was... and I was going to save them... no pony deserved to die like this!

"Get it open. Please... get it open..." I begged. P-21 scowled, rubbing his knee as he got to work. The screwdriver quivered... the lock's drum slowly rotated...

The bobby pin snapped.

"No! No!" I slammed it with my hooves.

"Blackjack? What's plan B?" P-21 asked me in the dark. I lifted a rag so that everyone could at least see the pale white glow.

"Get free and find her ourselves, but..."

"You can do that. You and Rampage. Go," he scowled at the others as they gawked. "Well, don't just stand there. Get some sort of light and find me a damned bobby pin and a bucket of water!"

I looked at him with a thankful smile. "Right." The large Tarboots threw Thrush over his shoulder. "As soon as you can get them out, get to your ship. We might have to get out of here fast if we can't meet up with Lacunae." I sighed and said, "I really hope plan C is ready. 'Cause at this rate, plan D is all we've got left."

"Relax. I excel at Plan D," Rampage said modestly.

“I’ll remember that when Steel Rain blasts you into fine red mist,” I muttered as she opened the door.

A pony in bizarre gray barding jumped to her hooves as the hatch opened. She scrambled for a beam gun as Rampage leapt upon the mare, wrapped her legs around her neck, and heaved her clear over her back to crash to the deck with Rampage on top of her. The blue pony lay in a daze. Rampage smirked at me and tossed me the beam gun. “You forget. Close combat is my thing, Blackjack. Now take her stuff. It might keep you from getting shot.”

I stripped the mare, passing to P-21 any gear that wasn’t a weapon as I dressed up as a Steel Ranger. “If we see Rain first, though. . . I’ll need to talk to him.”

“Talk to him? Ah, Blackjack. . . that’s a little suicidal,” she said as I slowly began to make my way up some stairs. This was a big ship. . . I’d have to ask for directions. “And, no offense, Blackjack, but how are you going to know the elder when we meet her? ‘Cause I have no idea what a Steel Ranger Elder looks like.”

I sighed. “She’ll either wear the biggest hat, carry the fanciest gun, have the most ridiculous outfit on, or be surrounded by ponies happy to kill us.” What, did I have to work out everything in advance? I’d gotten us aboard the ship, hadn’t I? Couldn’t think of everything myself, now could I?

The HMS Celestia came in two flavors: recently refurbished machine of war or abandoned derelict, and you could find both flavors within ten feet of each other. One section would have the rust scoured away with bright and humming lights, and the next would look like it hadn’t been touched in two centuries. I couldn’t figure out any rhyme nor reason to it either. Somewhere there was an engineer in need of a good kicking. There also wasn’t a sign anywhere in a language I understood. ‘STLBCKACC?’ ‘PRTENGNAV?’ ‘RVTEXTBST?’ WHTTTHFCK?

We staggered into something that might have been a mess hall at one time but was now collecting dust. . . except for the hoofmarks that went through the room. I spotted a red bar ahead and moved against the wall. Another red bar moved slowly in front of us. I caught the swirl of red robes as the Chief Acolyte paced back and forth.

“Shouldn’t you be preparing the cannon?” came Steel Rain’s voice, making my mane stand on end. My eyes popped wide. He was here. Actually here!

“Listen up,” I said softly, and Rampage’s ears perked as the Star Paladin entered. To my immense relief, he was armed with a gatling gun / grenade machinegun combo. . . which actually was still not that good for us, but I liked it more than the idea of ‘instakill at two miles’.

“Security is here,” Napalm Strike said.

“That’s impossible. I’ve soldiers stationed with shoot to kill orders. She couldn’t be anywhere near here,” said Steel Rain.

“She walked up to us politely as she pleased with her friends. Offered me the location of a stable to speak to the Elder.” He hesitated, then added, “I must inform her of this. My oath—“

“Oath!” Steel Rain snarled, cutting off the other. “What good are Oaths these days? We swear to obey senile fools who have the power to force order on this city but refuse to exercise it! Who could use this ship to batter down the walls of the Core and use the riches within to force a real tomorrow. Oaths...” He snorted in disgust. “Only a fool honors a foolish oath.”

“But the Elder. . .”

“Is a dying breed. I’ve spoken with Elder Cottage Cheese and Star Paladin Nova personally about this! Naive optimists like Steelhooves and Stronghoof have no place here. They’re fodder for the city. But ponies like us, who have the vision to see the potential of technology and the audacity to use it. . . we are the future!” There was no hiding the fervor in his voice; it practically trembled with his every word.

“She’s going to find out eventually!” Napalm Strike protested. “And then there will be questions.”

Steel Rain chuckled long, low, and slow. “Let her find out. Let her ask her questions. But let her do it after we’ve turned the Arena, the Collegiate, and the Skyport into rubble. Once we are victorious, it won’t matter how she protests. And when the old nag finally expires, either you or I will replace her. And we’ll have a glorious new future to look forward to.”

“I suppose,” he muttered sullenly.

“Get that cannon firing. The sooner our enemies’ strongholds are rubble, the better,” Steel Rain finished. “Let me worry about Security.”

I couldn’t believe my luck! This was exactly what I needed to hear! I bit my lip as I

fought the urge to cheer. Then there was a pause, and my ears prickled. Then he said, in a louder voice, “You know, technology is such a wonder. Take this power armor. Rebreather. Repair talisman. The armor itself. The heavy weapons. But do you know what the most useful feature is?” I frowned as I looked at Rampage.

“Eyes Forward Sparkle,” he finished in a grave tone. Then there was a heavy choom as the grenade machinegun blasted the doorway we sheltered in. Rampage grabbed me faster than I could have imagined and threw me away as his exploding rounds blew her into chunks. Clanging forward, I barely got to my feet when he appeared in the doorway and blasted a streak of minigun fire in a spray that made my ass burn.

We were now officially on plan E: run for my fucking life! So long as Steel Rain was on me, P-21 and the others would have a clear shot, as would Rampage when she regenerated. My legs clattered and jerked, my flanks on fire as he ran down the hall behind me. I tried to yank shut hatches as I passed, but they were too heavy for my magic to move. And I didn’t dare stop as he followed. I passed a set of stairs, but with my legs wobbling around beneath me I didn’t dare try and scramble up it. One slip or trip and I would be over.

I dared look back behind me in time to see him pass through one of the tight hatches, and my jaw dropped in amazement as he twisted his body with ease to allow him to pass through without getting stuck. And here I could barely run and keep ahead of him. I needed a door. Something I could close. I raced past one unarmored mare who stepped behind me only to be blown to pieces by the grenades! “Get out of the way!” I screamed as I ran, passing by another two unicorn onlookers.

Finally, I passed around a dogleg and onto a steep stair. My legs skidded and slipped as I kicked and scrambled up. I pushed against the hatch overhead, my horn struggling with the rusty wheel. He came around the corner just as it gave with a screech and opened onto a rainswept landing pad at the rear of the ship. A few spotlights illuminated it in glaring light and shadow. I got clear as his grenade machine gun choomed and sprayed me with ricocheting metal.

Did I mention that I hated Hoofington?

Two mares scrambled to me as I lay there, writhing from the dozens of little holes that’d appeared in my hide. “Hold still!” One shouted, pulling out a healing potion. I slurped it down eagerly. There was an alarm sounding somewhere. The mare shouted to the other, “We have to get below decks! Before—”

Celestia fired.

The cannon was at least a hundred feet away, but the force of its firing washed over me like a full-body sledgehammer. Maybe it was the healing potions that spared my ears, but for several minutes I just writhed futilely. Far off, a flower of flame bloomed to the south west. I recovered first; I supposed that I was more used to getting blown up by this point. I pushed the mares down the hatch; Steel Rain was gone for the moment, and I couldn't leave them up here.

Then I started across the flight deck, but the waves and my ringing head and woobly legs sent me sprawling once again. Cold rain slobbered around me. I really wanted some Buck. Something... anything... to get me out of here. The Celestia fired again, a spectacular tongue of flame scraping away the night. Flat against the deck, I had some protection, but it left me with the distinct sensation of being stepped on. "Stop... firing... damn it..." I muttered.

"Did you hear that?" Steel Rain's voice boomed from his armor as he stepped out into the rain. "That was the roar of technology. Of power! It is a sound that will be repeated all across Equestria as we finally take our proper place!"

Slowly, he walked out towards me. "You've given me quite the gift, Security. This war. The excuse to purge this city of the filth that keeps us from our legacy. We will obliterate all that stand against us. We will put this technology to use! Not let it rot in some bunker."

Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves. "You also murdered innocents..." I said, trying to use my rage to focus. "I saw the execution piles!"

"Simply ridding the Hoof of a few extra mouths. Why waste it on filth like that?" He said as the rain poured down upon us. "You can never begin to appreciate the importance or usefulness of technology."

I straightened as I looked at him. "Oh, I don't know. I've gained a whole new appreciation for hot showers, soap, and flushing toilets." Slowly, I smiled. "You know what else I've appreciated?" I could imagine him scowling as I swayed a little on my hooves. "Silence."

I pointed my hoof behind him, and there, looking down at him, was a unicorn under a rain shielding spell. I'd been right about everything except the hat. Elder Crunchy Carrots looked so rough and raw that she could chew steel and piss nails. Suddenly, I had the sensation that I was about to be grounded for the rest of my life... okay, that was actually possible at this point. The orange mare floated a strangely delicate-looking gun beside her as she glared down with a furious gaze. Around her were dozens of power armor-clad ponies and acolytes.

At her side were Scotch Tape and Glory.

“Elder? What is going on? I . . .”

“You got a big mouth,” Scotch Tape yelled as she reached to her PipBuck and pushed a button. His voice began to play loud and clear. No pony moved. With my night vision, I saw a dark Lacunae fly overhead and drop my barding and bags beside me. I smirked as I shed the shredded Ranger barding for my own . . . slightly less shredded security armor. I slipped on one of my saddlebags. The olive filly chuckled, “Courtesy of Radio Blackjack.”

I smirked, tapping my covered PipBuck. “Ain’t technology grand?”

“Star Paladin Steel Rain. You have demonstrated gross contempt for our order, your oaths, and your position. Have you anything to say in your defense?” the elderly orange mare said with a fierce glare. I might have done her a favor with that recording, but I had to remember that we still hadn’t settled things.

For several seconds, he stood there, and then slowly turned to face her. “Defense? What have I said that wasn’t the truth!? How many generations have wasted their lives hoarding and gathering weapons and technology only for it to be wasted! How many more generations will we have to suffer the weak incompetence of leaders like you who hide and cower and quote rules and talk of oaths and do nothing!” He pointed his hoof up at her. “For the first time ever, we have an unrivalled weapon against our foes. And you are the only thing standing between us and the future we deserve!”

As I finished buckling everything into place, I looked around. Then I frowned. This wasn’t going like it should. Now every pony wasn’t just facing the Star Paladin. Now there were more and more Rangers turning to face the Elder. Oh . . . shit. Why did I suddenly get the sensation that everything was about to blow up?

I’d come here to stop a damn war! Not start a second one within the Rangers themselves!

“Are you fucking serious!?” I screamed as I stepped into the middle of it. “What the hell is wrong with all of you? I don’t care if you guard tech or use it, but are you so caught up that you can ignore the shit you’re inflicting on every pony in the Hoof?” I pointed towards the shore. “Right now, Stronghoof and Crumpets are fighting to save lives in the hopes that you are going to pull your heads out of your armored asses. I came here with that hope. I’m willing to give you the location of my stable if you only knock this shit off!”

Please, I begged mentally. Don't do this.

The Elder glanced at me, her sour expression softening a touch. "Thank you for your kind words, Security, but this is an internal matter. For your assistance in bringing this to light, I am issuing you and the young mare here a pardon, and you are free to leave." She pointed back down at Steel Rain. "Paladins, arrest him!"

Nopony moved. Then one armored pony slowly approached him. Then another. And another. For once, it seemed as if sanity would prevail and there'd be a hope of the butchery ending. That sanity broke as they reached Steel Rain... and turned to face the elder shoulder to shoulder. And there were more than half standing with him.

"So be it," The elder said softly.

Oh shit—

She pulled the trigger, and a bolt of lightning blasted out. A ranger leapt in its path, the lightning cascaded over the armor, and his lights went dead.

A full barrage of grenades and missiles answered. The elder disappeared behind a shield as she fell back while the rest of the acolytes returned fire. I didn't care about that, but Glory and Scotch were up there. Out came my assault rifle as the other rangers realized I was still a threat, and I sent a line of crackling blue bullets against them. The insanity had come to a head. I'd tried my best. . .

Some ponies refused to do better.

"Get Glory!" I screamed and thought as hard as I could as I staggered to some stairs up to the deck with the turret. I don't know if Lacunae heard me or anticipated me, but she swooped down to where they'd taken cover and disappeared in a purple flash. Beside the Celestia, the Seahorse slowly pulled away. I just needed to live long enough for her to come back for me. I guessed a minute. Maybe two.

Two minutes is a lifetime when eighteen ponies in power armor are shooting at you. They were moving up along the ship as the elder and her acolytes fell back. I was surprised to see Napalm Strike fighting alongside the elder, the orange unicorn conjuring up sheets of flame and exploding blasts of fire. The elder had been wounded and was being dragged back.

As horrible as the war was, I couldn't think of this ship being in Steel Rain's hooves. Weapons were used for a reason. You didn't fire them simply because you could! Speaking of Steel Rain, he seemed to come straight at me. The Star Paladin appeared to have taken a personal dislike towards me, and I responded with bursts

of crackling blue bullets. I was taking cover far more than he was, though, as that grenade machinegun sprayed death at me. I had to get higher. Get out of here. Maybe meet up with Stronghoof and Crumpets and work out... something. . .

I couldn't just give up.

I staggered up to the turret, then clambered up a narrow stairway to the top of the heavily armored structure. There was so much gunfire that I wondered if somepony was taking shots at Lacunae and keeping her away. Did Rampage get out? What about P-21 and the sea ponies? "Any time now, Lacunae. . ."

Then he climbed atop the turret opposite me. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four bursts. . . yet only two hit through all that rain. I managed to squeeze off three magic bullets that were far more lucky. They struck his helmet, peeling away smoking steel.

He was a surprisingly gentle-looking buck. . .

Then my world went black as his grenade rifle blasted the turret before me. I screamed as fire erupted in my face, shrapnel cutting deep across my front, and I tried desperately to wipe the blood out of my eye. I had to see! If I couldn't see. . . why couldn't I wipe the blood away?

That blood was my eye.

My hoof touched the fiery ruin of my missing eye. I needed Hydra. A healing potion. Something! My hooves fumbled with my saddlebag. Then a minigun burped, and pain erupted in my shoulder. At least it got the saddlebag off.

"I should thank you again," he said from somewhere behind me as I scrabbled in my bags. Was that Hydra? Med-X? Rad-X? There was a burst that tore into my cutie mark, and I screamed, jerking as I fell over into the bag and scattered the syringes. "You finally brought it to the fore. Now we can have a new beginning. A proper future." Another burst along my opposite side. I fired wildly. . . but once my gun was empty, I couldn't load it blind. I reached in, desperate to find something. . . anything. . .

My hoof nudged a smooth case, and I felt it pop open. My other hoof felt the smooth, heavy barrel. I froze, feeling myself grow cold. "I am coming. . ." Lacunae said in my mind.

Thanks, Lacunae. But I couldn't leave this ship in the hooves of this mad pony. Inside the saddlebag, I cracked open the breech and slammed the silver bullet home. I heard the weapon latch and hum as the systems interacted with my PipBuck.

“Blackjack, don’t do this,” the Dealer said. I ignored him as I struggled to my hooves. “You know what it will do...”

“Yeah, but I can’t get much worse...”

“Blackjack... don’t...”

“I’m doing it,” I replied. I had no time for crazy any more. I had to stop this for good, if it was the last thing I did...

Steel Rain paused in his tirade as I drew the loaded Folly from the saddlebag. “What is that supposed to be?” he asked as I pointed the weapon. “You don’t actually think you can hit anything with that, do you?”

“Something... yeah,” I replied, slipping into S.A.T.S. with practiced ease. I mentally hit ‘yes’ over and over again. Then the tingle of the magic fields wrapping around me. The feeling of immobility.

Well... This was it. Folly fired.

Straight down.

I wasn’t sure which was worse, the sound Folly made as two feet of reinforced armor vaporized beneath me or the monstrous explosion that followed. I felt the wet pressure soaking every inch of my body; trapped against my skin by the magic. Only the magic fields kept me from an instantaneous death, but when they faded I felt the turret lifted higher and higher as if we were all floating away. Everything was tumbling end over end; up and down didn’t exist. There was simply the explosion and the scream of steel and twisting metal.

I hit the cold, salty water, bobbing there as it stung my bloody eye sockets. I could barely move. Somewhere nearby were screams and the noise of the ship. My barding... my braces... everything was dragging me down. Then I heard the sound of groaning metal above me. I lifted my battered hooves as I was crushed beneath the waves into the cold black depths.

Funny, Glory... went my very last thought as I was pushed deeper and deeper into the frigid waters... only a pony with my luck could have a boat dropped on them... twice...

Footnote Level up

ERROR: QUOTED BOUNDS EXCEPTION: ERROR: YES: OTE: RIGLIM: LC: RITICAE

33. Black

“ . . . ”

Advisory Warning:

(Somber) This chapter contains a brutal scene which may be disturbing or upsetting to some readers. I've discussed this scene with others, and they've convinced me that, bad as the scene is, it should be included. I will provide a link bypassing the scene at the end of the second memory orb sequence.

(Mutabah) The skip point is on page [907](#) and is also a section bookmark

Since leaving the stable for the first time, I'd felt that my life had become one great struggle. Against enemies, or mysteries, or simply my friends' unhappiness, it was always a contest about when the Dealer would finally deal me my last hand, when the Wasteland would break me in two. It'd tried. It succeeded in 99. It'd come pretty close a few other times. Within the push of a safety toggle. But I always got dragged back. Of course, I could have just let go and allowed myself to die, even then. But I couldn't, really. I knew that I hadn't atoned yet. I still had hope that somehow I had something else to give. Some comfort. Some peace. Anything to draw a bit more of the Wasteland's attention to me so that it would leave some innocent alone for a bit longer.

And I wasn't broken yet.

The Celestia. . . or a part of it. . . had fallen atop me with a grinding metallic scream punctuated by thumps, groans, and booms. The impact pushed me down deeper and deeper, the cold depths squeezing me as my injuries burned in the salty water. My braces were now weights taped to the ends of my limbs, my tattered barding pulling me down. This was probably where I was going to die. . .

But not yet.

Swimming really wasn't a part of my skill set, and right now, as the water rushed around me, I didn't even know which way was up. For all I knew, I was flailing deeper and deeper into the water. I just knew that I floated in the bathtub and so hopefully the direction I was going was the right one.

Then I smashed into armored hull. The metal vibrated with terrible force; I could feel the strain humming through the plates as the Celestia tore herself to pieces. I could hear distant explosions. My lungs burned as I felt my way along the surface. Up, a primitive instinct screamed at me. Breathe! Bubbles started to leak out my nose as

I crawled like a bug.

A little longer. . .

Then my head broke through into a pocket of air, and I gasped as the groans and screams of metal were mixed with those of ponies. I felt sorry for that. I knew there had to have been acolytes and other initiates who hadn't deserved to die down here with me. One thing was for certain, though; Steel Rain would never get the Celestia to fire another shot. If he'd managed two, I didn't see anything stopping him from firing two hundred more.

But still, I hadn't wanted them all to die this way.

I had no way to tell what I was in, or where. Suddenly, a pony surfaced beside me, screaming hysterically as she gasped for air as well. Her flailing hooves grabbed me and shoved me beneath the water again. Wildly kicking hooves smacked into my head, and I nearly lost my precious lungful of air. I could have gone back up, fought her for the ever precious bit of oxygen left in that space, but I let her have it. Good luck. I scuttled along the overturned ship, hearing swooshing water racing in somewhere. I'd probably put one hell of a hole in the bottom of this thing. I came across a pocket of air no deeper than my muzzle, but it held just enough for me to cough and sputter as I tried to get one or two more breaths.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer. . .

There was one last detonation, and the plates above me jerked and hammered into my head. Now I was pushed against the wreck as it started moving in the direction opposite of floating. I suddenly had an image of the upside-down ship slamming into the seabed and squishing me into paint! I wiggled and kicked and struggled as I tried to find any direction that was 'away'. Then I felt myself thrust into a slimy morass that oozed into my every nook and cranny as the ship gave a final tired groan. The sludge was being squished like the inside of a radroach, and I was squirted out into water.

My legs worked slowly, trying for some progress as I felt the silt swirling around me. My mouth worked slowly. . . I had to breathe. . . I had to. . . Bubbles slipped, and I felt my rear legs sink down into the sticky gunk. My rump touched down, and I sat there as a burning sensation roared inside my lungs. . . and then coolness spread through my chest. This wasn't so bad. . . Disemboweling was worse. . . I felt as if I was drifting away.

You win, you bony son of a bitch. Now let me rest. . . I'm so. . . tired. . .

oooOOOooo

It'd been a while since I'd had a nice long nap. I yawned and stretched, then blinked... and blinked again as I looked at the interior of a glassy egg. I gaped at the end of the weird little pod I occupied, opening one eye and closing it. Opening the other and closing it! I winked a few times just to make sure I wasn't imagining it! "Yes!" I cheered and pumped a hoof... a white smooth hoof that neither flopped about nor bulged with growths! And no PipBuck...

I was alive. Whole! Complete and intact and for the first time in weeks feeling healthy and alive. How long since I'd had this kind of energy? I saw a little red button in the wall that read 'release' and hit it. I had to wonder what kind of miracle was responsible for my—

The door swung open into the stripped-out remains of Vanity's bedroom. The bed was a filthy mat, and the desk had been pushed against the doors. I was in an egg-shaped pod similar to the ones in the Fluttershy clinic. A little jury-rigged magical generator pattered and hummed beside it. What was I doing here? I looked around in astonished worry. Where were my friends? What had happened?

A corpse on the bed moved. No. Not a corpse, but a pony very near becoming one. Dark hide was covered head to hoof in scars. His cutie marks had been deliberately torn away. 'Trick Pony' had been branded in their place. Slowly, he crawled out. Goddesses, he was skinny. So very skinny. "P-21?" He flinched away, then slowly shook his head. A filthy mane, so dirty I couldn't even tell what color it was, was pushed back from faded, golden eyes. A bloody stump of a horn marred his brow. He looked at me as if he was staring at a ghost, and then his lips curled in the smallest of smiles. "Priest..."

The wasted stallion just nodded once.

I approached him, and he backed away almost fearfully. "What... what happened? Where are my friends?" He shuddered, walked slowly to a blasted-out window, and pointed down the road. Pointed towards Chapel. An unwholesome hum filled the air, a single note that went on and on. "But..." He shook his head and then opened his mouth wide. Nothing remained of his tongue. He gave an apologetic little shrug.

"How... How long...?" I murmured in shock. Slowly, his hoof rose and fell as he tapped out fifteen steps. "Fifteen... Weeks?" He shook his head. "Months?" Again. "...Years." At that, he nodded. Fifteen years? I staggered but tried to focus as I stared at the swaying buck. "But... why am I here? What happened? Where are my..."

He lay down on the ground, one golden eye looking up at me. His lips moved silently, then he closed them. He took one breath and let it out forever. . .

No. This was wrong. This was very very wrong! I needed guns, barding, and my friends beside me now! I shoved the desk away and threw open the doors.

Hoofington had risen.

The rest of Blueblood Manor was a leveled ruin. Only a thin ramp of debris and the corner remained. I looked out directly at the Core. The clouds were gone, but so was the sky beyond. From horizon to horizon, a solid wall of baleful green illuminated the skies in an oppressive monochrome. The Core was awash in green light, the center of the green nimbus that spread over everything. Shadowbolt Tower rose like a dagger pointed at the heavens, and the land around the island was lit with thousands of fires. That droning buzz rolled on and on as if the city itself hummed.

I kicked my way down the debris and raced along the cracked road towards Chapel. Where else could I go? I passed the first empty and wretched camps. Then a few with earth ponies. Then a few with earth ponies and pegasi and unicorns. Then there were zebras. Griffons. Sand Dogs. All together around the guttering fires. No one spoke. No one moved. They simply hummed that single resonant note or sat silently, staring at nothing. At least they weren't killing each other. . .

The graveyard had been torn up; it looked like somepony had tried to plant crops, but they were strange and bloated things. Chapel sat empty and half-finished, its defenses long ago shattered. I peeked in one building after the next, but only emptiness and that droning sound filled them. Finally, I approached the shell of the chapel itself. 'Hoofington Rises' had been spray-painted over every available inch.

Slowly, I stepped to the door and was hit by a palpable wall of stench. Yet, though I hesitated, I took a step in. And another. Another.

I'd found where everypony had gone.

From the heaps of tiny bodies emerged a larger one. A withered, yellow filly's severed head was kicked past me as she worked herself free. Bits of gore cascaded off her as tiny pink pinprick eyes focused upon me. It was hard to tell what were stripes and what was dried blood and dangling viscera. Her lips curled wider and wider as her hooves hugged a tiny dead infant. . . one with red stripes. One of a dozen lying around her like so many scattered dolls.

And then Rampage spoke. "Shh. . . baby finally finished crying. . . but she's sleeping nice and peaceful now. . ."

I backed away. I wanted to scream. Everything was screaming as Rampage laughed. "Come back! I'll help you sleep too!"

I turned and fled, not towards the city but to the last refuge I knew. The only refuge I knew anymore. I ran past the reeking camps up the hill towards Star House. To my immense relief, it seemed intact. That horrible message had been spray-painted on every surface, but there was a mare stepping out.

An olive mare with green eyes and a blue mane. "Scotch!" I shouted happily as I raced up towards her. But she turned and looked at me in shock and fear. I saw her pregnant, distended belly as she stared at me like I were a ghost. Then I slowed. In place of a cutie mark, I saw slashed scars... and the word 'BREEDER' carved into her rump. There were nine marks under that violation, three pink and six blue.

"Blackjack?" she murmured softly. "You're awake... finally awake..."

"Scotch! What happened? What happened to... to everything?" I asked as I sat down hard.

She sat down slowly, rocking back and forth. "You... you died. Or nearly died. The seaponies fished you out of the water... Lacunae and Glory got you breathing again." Her eyes darted left and right. "Glory... Glory swore she'd save you. She did. She... she gave EC-1101 to Sanguine. And he made you a new body... but he said it would take years for you to... to mature. So we were just going to have to wait. And we did..." and she started to shake and sob. "And... and everything went bad!"

I reached forward to hold her, but she just smacked my hooves away. "There was a war, Blackjack. And another one. And another one. For a time, things seemed to get better. The Stable Dweller and her friends did great things... got the skies fixed... cleaned the earth... but they didn't get how bad things were out here. How terrible. Hoofington rose. The city woke up... and nothing could stop it."

I took a deep breath. "What about our friends, Scotch? I saw Rampage," I said as I looked back at the distant little building. "Where's Glory? P-21? Lacunae?"

"Glory..." her eyes turned to the door. "I... I bring her things to eat... as a breeder, I get a little extra..."

I looked to the door as well, but she was shaking too much to say anymore and simply hugged her stomach with one leg as she backed away. I slowly pushed the door open. The room was dark. I could still hear the hum, but it was muted as if heard from far away. Something was eating from a basket in the corner. Something

gray. I saw a wing. I saw two. A smile started across my face. I saw a third. A fourth... Fifth...

Purple eyes opened, one after the next along the side of her neck. Of course Sanguine had tried to fix her too. Maybe he'd experimented. Maybe this was intentional. But those purple eyes widened in shock before they clenched shut. "Don't look at me..." she rasped, low and heavy.

"Glory... how...?" was all I could mutter.

That hulk of flesh and feathers shivered, tears running down her neck. "I didn't have you... I didn't have anything. So nothing mattered. Nothing..."

She'd... let him do this...? "Glory... I..."

"Why did you have to leave? Why did you have to be a damned hero?" the gray... pegasus... said in an inequine voice. "You left me behind... always... always..." She closed her eyes again. "Leave me... or kill me... I can't survive being with you, and I can't live being without you, so I'm dead either way."

I backed out. "I wish I'd never met you..." Glory rasped. "I wish you'd never saved me..."

I fell back over my hooves as the door slammed shut from a powerful gust. I just sat there and stared at it. There had to be a way to fix this. To make her... right... again. I'd find Sanguine, and I would beat a way of fixing her out of him! Scotch Tape sat nearby, rocking and humming that slow single tune. I rose to my hooves. "What... how did this happen? What did you mean by 'Hoofington rose'?"

She started to walk slowly towards the bridge. "With EC-1101, Sanguine took the city. The Overlord came to power and used the factories under the city to make weapons. Everypony who'd lost everything in the war came to fight for him. Any mare that could bear foals was a breeder. Any stallion, a warrior."

"What about the Stable Dweller? The rest of the Wasteland?" I asked as we walked side by side. I couldn't believe she would just... let this happen!

"They tried to fight. They did. They sent hurricanes and tornadoes and terrible spells... but Hoofington had the megaspell facility... and with EC-1101 they got it working again. Megaspell... after megaspell... after megaspell. You joined the Hoof... or you were destroyed. Ponies. Alicorns. Zebras. Griffons. Dragons. It didn't matter. With EC-1101, they could do everything. So you came to the Hoof, or you died," she said softly as she walked. "The Overlord killed the Stable Dweller."

“What?!” Oh, I was going to go plan D on this ‘Overlord’ all over the place. Maybe I could get through to Rampage... or somehow Glory could help... or... I looked at the swollen Scotch Tape, and she quivered. Stop using us in your stupid fight, her eyes seemed to beg me. “What about Lacunae? P-21? Where are they?” If I could find some way to get EC-1101 back... some way... some... something!

She looked at me and trembled. “This way...” she murmured as she hung her head and walked slowly towards the bridge.

I followed after her. She seemed so... drained. So empty. I thought being a mother was supposed to be a wonderful thing. “Um... congratulations? Who’s the father?” Then she looked at me and I shut up. I’d never talk about her being a mother again. There was such despair and hopelessness in her eyes that I knew I could never bring it up.

“The Overlord... Majina and I are his favorites...” was all she said. Oh... damn.

Time to shut the fuck up, Blackjack, and start concentrating on putting as many magic bullets as possible into this bastard the second I see him.

We walked together, side by side, towards the bridge. A trickle of people were already walking one way or the other across it. Earth ponies, unicorns, ghouls, sand dogs, and others. All humming a common note and moving around as if half dead. If this was peace, then it was at far too high a price. Severed heads adorned the bridge, all species butchered equally and ground down under the Hoof. The walls of the Core were painted with the words ‘Hoofington Rises’ in streaks of vivid red.

The humming made my head hurt. No, not just a hum. It was like a drill trying to get inside me. It hurt to think about anything. I stared at the glassy-eyed creatures moving as if they were so much machinery. A few ranted, screamed, fought, and struggled... but they were ignored. From the few others who showed expression at all, it was clear that these people were more annoyed than disturbed by the outbursts.

The towers rose, seeming to stare down at the insignificant meat funneling through their dark canyons. The cracks and breaks in the towers bled green light. Purple lamps and yellow flares made glaring contrasts that hurt my eyes. It was as if every appearance of the city were designed to inflict pain! Who could be the Overlord? Sanguine? Maybe... Steel Rain? That seemed more likely. Somehow, he’d gotten his hooves on my PipBuck... been able to use it. My stomach churned and I coughed. The very city itself made me feel like crap.

Then I spotted Lacunae. The purple alicorn stood by as silent as a statue. “Lacunae!” I shouted as I raced to her. She glanced at me, then stared straight ahead again. “Lacunae?” There was another purple alicorn standing by, staring. And another. And another and another. I looked at Scotch standing quietly by, waiting. There was a lump of black rubble beside Lacunae; I stood on it and I stretched up to touch my horn to hers.

I felt the world blur away. . . except for that annoying hum. I felt the same vast space that had been here before, but, instead of a seething mass of whispering voices dominated by the Goddess, now there was only the same hum. It was everywhere. Inside everything. In the alicorns themselves. “Lacunae?” I asked. . . and the word was a discordant jumble echoing and ripping through that single note. “Lacunae!” I shouted into the humming darkness.

Then, soft as a lover, the darkness whispered back, “There is no Lacunae. There never was.”

I staggered back and fell off the lump of stone and onto my rump. Scotch was walking away, and I hurried to catch up. My eyes turned to every single still alicorn; I was surprised to see a few males, but I supposed that Sanguine had made them with Chimera. There was no life in any of them. They were simply living machinery now.

We passed under a severed purple dragon head hanging from chains. Spikes had been driven into his eyes. . . I didn’t appreciate the irony. Beneath it was written in harsh words that hateful slogan. “Goldenblood is the Overlord, isn’t he?” I asked, pressing my lips together. It all made sense. He’d know about Spike. He’d known about Hoofington. He had secrets; he’d probably found some way to survive, and now he was in charge of this nightmare. It’d probably been his plan all along.

It looked like I was about to find out. . . except. . .

I puked a deluge of foamy water; I guess it was the only thing I had in me. Suddenly, I was feeling. . . wrong. Really wrong. But it didn’t matter. I was almost to the Overlord. We were in the great plaza where the ministry buildings rose like headstones. The plaza had been torn up by the balefire blast, and horrid green light shot up through holes in the paving slabs. Every building. . . every person, pony or otherwise. . . they all hummed that single uniform note.

I wanted to sing. I wanted to scream. I wanted to do something. . . anything. . . to break up that monotonous note. But I couldn’t. . . my chest flared as I moved slowly forward through the crowd. There was a sort of throne there. Good. That’d

make shooting this Overlord much easier. There were mares up there, all of them pregnant. I spotted Scotch on the left side of the throne. I saw a young zebra mare on the right. And in the middle. . .

“Hello, Blackjack,” P-21 welcomed me, the crowd falling back as my blue friend stared down with undisguised malice. With my PipBuck on one foreleg and Folly cradled in the other, his gaze blazed brightly. “Welcome to the future,” he said coldly as he loaded a silver bullet into the breach and clapped it closed. I couldn’t shoot. Of all the ponies ever, he had the right to shoot me. I just sat there, my chest burning as I was pierced by his hatred. “Goodbye.” Then he raised the gun, and everything went brilliant white. The scream went on. . . and on. . . and my world faded to black.

oooOOOooo

“Is she alive?” Scotch Tape asked shrilly.

No. I wasn’t alive. Life wasn’t this. This was another nightmare. My lungs throbbed like they were on fire as they sucked in watery air, spasmed, and coughed again. My stomach clenched as it tried to void itself yet again but had nothing to bring up. I felt hooves holding me down as I jerked and coughed and gasped yet again.

Life wasn’t black like this.

“Sweet Goddesses, her eyes,” I heard a mare say. . . Oilcan, I think.

“Give her a Hydra. Give her one right now,” Glory demanded. I remembered how, weeks ago she’d gone on and on about how horrible Hydra was. How damaging to my systems it was. But there was something different now. Something had changed. With this last firing of Folly, I felt as if something. . . something vital had been touched. Something integral had been corrupted. And as the Hydra helped soothe the searing pain in my face. . . the blackness endured. Glory started to sob. “Give her another. Please. . .” I felt her wing on my wet cheek.

“It. . . won’t do anything. . .” Oilcan protested weakly. From the faint swoosh of the water talisman and the rocking, I guessed we were on the Seahorse.

“Give her another Goddesses-damned Hydra!” Glory screamed at her. She collapsed over me, weeping as I gasped for air, holding me tight. I lifted a hoof. . . no. . . it didn’t feel like a hoof. I didn’t know what that appendage was, but everything about it moved. . . wrong. Other voices started to raise their concerns as my condition changed from ‘dead’ to ‘not dead’.

Lacunae had shown me. I’d stared into the mirror. I’d seen what I was becoming. A thing. A thing that used to be a pony. And as I lay there with all the panicked chatter,

I heard the soft whisper of Lacunae in my mind now. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I thought softly back at her. Then I cleared my throat. "Stop... no more... please... no more."

Glory held me even tighter as she shook, and hot liquid trickled down my cheek as she cried for me. "Blackjack. . ."

"What happened to the Celestia? To the Rangers?"

"Who gives a fuck what happened to them?" P-21 snarled. "They're dead, or they should be! Every last one of them!" I winced at the anger in his voice, trembling and tight.

"I give a fuck, P-21," I said as evenly as possible.

"The ship blew up and rolled over," Lacunae said softly. "Capri and Pisces were in the water. They looked all over for you. The Rangers had to fall back to the Applejack. Reapers had finally breached the base, and everything was blowing up. I don't know who else survived." Was it me, or was there additional worry in that soft mental voice?

"Where's Rampage?" I asked as I strained my ears.

P-21 said, in a slightly less furious voice, "She chained herself to the front of the boat. She says not to let us let her get within twenty feet of you..." Oh, yes, I imagined that the murderess in her was just aching to give me peace.

"And Capri and Pisces are okay?" I asked, then coughed hard again. I still felt like I had water filling my lungs. Ugh... drowning sucked. I gagged and choked and fought for every breath.

"P-21 got us out while you were getting shot at," came the slightly distant voice of Capri. "We just did what any seapony should do..." she said softly.

"Shoo be doo..." Pisces echoed quietly.

"But how'd they catch you in the first place?" Scotch asked.

"We came down to get some sort of navigation thingy for the Orions. But this time, there were Rangers salvaging shells off the Luna. They had spear guns with tethers, and I got harpooned."

"I got caught trying to save her," Pisces murmured.

"They said that we were spying for the Reapers, and that Steel Rain bastard said that we were enemies of the Rangers. They were going to shell the Collegiate

next. Said they were going to use a balefire shell.” A what?! What, had everypony discovered megaspells and balefire bombs and shoved them into everything they could? What was next, Balefire artillery? Balefire tanks? Your own personal Balefire gun? Balefire armor? Balefire snack cakes?! “You... you saved us all. The Professor... my family... all of us,” Capri said amid the splashing.

“Thanks,” Pisces sniffed.

I lay there in Glory’s hooves. “Consider it payment for Gemini and Taurus.” From the waves came a sad snuffle, then a splash.

Tarboots cleared his throat. “Steel Rain must have been planning a coup like that for months. He couldn’t have used the gun with the elder still in charge. You just forced everything out into the open. I’m pretty sure the Hoofington Rangers are finished now. They don’t have a base to fall back to, and will probably have to pull back to Trottingham or Manehattan.”

I sighed at the stupidity and waste. I’d seen what the Rangers could accomplish at their very best. A hoofful could save the lives of dozens if they were inclined to do so. And some were. I was glad I’d met Paladin Stronghoof, Fruit Salad, and Crumpets. That I’d seen the decency before the callousness and cruelty. I’d wanted to end the war, though, and it looked like I’d succeeded.

Yay...

“What about the Reapers?” I rasped. I imagined I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth that I’d even ask about them.

“I don’t know. Some of them were shooting up the base. After the gun fired, though, I think... I think they’re pulling back. I don’t know,” Oilcan murmured. There was a long silence. A terrible silence.

Finally, Scotch asked, “What are we going to do now?”

Glory gave a little gasp. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to take Blackjack to Sanguine and give him that frigging PipBuck, and he’s going to fix her! That’s what we’re going to do!”

I wanted to protest, but the water still in my lungs turned my objection into a spasm of coughing and hacking. I struggled to tell her not to do it. “No...” I managed to get out. I’d seen what would come of that. Maybe it was a nightmare. Maybe it was something more. I couldn’t let her.

“Yes, Blackjack! We are going to make you better! We’re going to fix you! And you

are not going to argue with me on that!” Glory insisted as I started to thrash about, struggling. I coughed harder and harder. “Relax, Blackjack. It’s the right thing to do!”

I’d wished that I’d been left down there. I wished that they hadn’t found me. If I were dead, my friends would move on and not accept Sanguine’s damned offer. But worse, I was sure that there was damage done to me that he couldn’t fix. He might replace my organs, but the taint inside me would just corrupt the new ones too. Something inside me had changed, and this wasn’t a solution.

I felt something against my horn... something smooth and round. No, not right now... but I wasn’t exactly with it as I coughed and struggled. Once, I’d fallen into memory orbs by accident. Then I’d had to fight my way in. Now I fought to stay out, but some treasonous part of me made contact as I heard Glory and P-21 begin to argue... Don’t do it, Glory... please... just let me go...

oooOOOooo

Once more, I was in a memory orb that I didn’t particularly want to be in. I wanted to tell her that I wasn’t worth it. But unlike those other times, I was simply too tired to even try and attempt the impossible task of breaking myself free prematurely. I simply sat back in the mind of some other pony and took a little solace at being able to see again, even if it was through somepony else’s eyes.

At least it was somepony familiar. I knew this buck well now. His stride. His horn. He felt older, though. Tired and a bit sore. He walked through the halls of Blueblood Manor with a slow and ponderous step. Downstairs were the worried shouts of dozens of concerned ponies. He stood in front of the mirror. There were touches of gray in his emerald mane and shadows around his eyes. Distantly, I could hear the soft wail of the Hoofington air raid siren. He pulled his dress uniform into place, sucking in his gut before letting the belt out a notch. Finally, he nodded with a sigh.

As he walked back out and slowly down the hallway, the door opened and a young pegasus mare in a white uniform peeked out at him with worried blue eyes. “Master Vanity, everything is going to be all right, isn’t it?”

He smiled softly at her. “Of course, Harpica.” His eyes looked past her at the foals sitting together in a nervous circle. “How are the children?”

“Frightened, Master Vanity. Terribly so,” she said in a meek little voice. “As am I. I’m telling them all about Wigglehoof and the Wandering Wolves. They worry about the shouting, though.”

“A fine story, Harpica. Keep them quiet. Stay inside,” he said softly, then stepped closer to the door and addressed the fillies and colts. “I expect all of you to be on your absolute best behavior. Listen to Harpica, little ones. She will keep you safe.” He beamed a smile at them and received several nervous smiles in return.

“Y . . . yes Lord Vanity,” they replied, nodding obediently.

“Keep them safe, Harpica,” he said, giving her a little nuzzle between the eyes.

She sniffed and nodded. “You are better than your name, Master Vanity.”

Step by step, he made his way down the stairs. The entrances had sandbags and ponies with machineguns in place. From outside, over the wail of the siren, rose the roar of an angry mob. They were screaming to be let in, their shouting filled with frequent insults. Walking away from the entrance, he trotted further in. The shouts dwindled to nothing, and the air raid siren was barely audible over the sound of the orchestra playing. The ballroom was filled with fancy ponies gathered in knots and groups and talking together in low tones. The fear was evident in all their faces.

A dapper buck with a snowy mane trotted out into the hall. “I say, that mob outside is getting quite unruly. Shouldn’t we be evacuating to the stable?” A blue unicorn mare who looked like she was barely a quarter his age moved up beside him. “The Skyguard ordered us to land before we could reach Canterlot. My little Rosette here is quite terrified.” He sighed, levitating a monocle as he looked down the hall at the barricade. “I fear that everything has gone quite wrong.”

Vanity sighed softly. “I’m sorry, Fancypants. I’m going to look into that right now.” He gave a polite nod to the pair and continued down the hall. Soldiers hauling boxes of ammo galloped by.

He trotted into a study. “What do you mean you’re not coming?! We’ve given you a fortune for this very occurrence!” Blueblood yelled at the terminal on his desk. Like his younger sibling, his mane was shot through with gray. “You can’t do this! I demand to speak to the director immediately, Garnet!” On the screen— a color terminal? I guess it made sense for someone as rich and stuck up as Blueblood to have something like that —was a ruby red mare who wore a decidedly smug smile.

“The director is otherwise occupied, Prince Blueblood. As am I,” the mare said with a snort and an annoyed look that slowly turned malicious. “Save your own ass, Blueblood.”

“You dare—“

Her laugh cut him short. “Of course I dare. I’ve wanted to see this look on your face

for years, and now I finally have a chance. By the way, did you like the memo I sent the locals? Have they broken down your door yet?" The crimson mare's lips curled gleefully. "I hope they all live long enough to string you up." Blueblood stared at her in stunned silence.

Her dark eyes turned to Vanity, and her sneer faded. "Prince Vanity."

"Lord Vanity!" Blueblood snapped. "I am the prince of this family."

Both ignored the seething stallion. "Garnet. Am I correct in understanding that you will not be evacuating us to the Redoubt?"

"That is correct, Prince Vanity. The director apologizes, but he is seeing to other needs of the kingdom."

"You understand that there are children here?" He didn't shout; he kept his voice even, low, and calm.

She smiled again. "Certainly, but this is a crisis. We can't save—"

"There is enough room for thousands, Garnet," he interrupted, his voice hardening as he stared at the screen. "Are you saying you are leaving children here to die? We can send them to you."

A dark gray mare ran up behind Garnet. "We have to go! Now!" she said, then darted away.

Garnet sighed, waving a glittering red hoof. "Coming, Onyx." Then she frowned and then looked back at Vanity. "We're sealing the Redoubt. I'm sorry. Don't come here, Vanity. Go die somewhere else." Then she reached forward, and the terminal went dark.

"This is outrageous! I must contact Auntie Celestia at once! She'll set this right!" Blueblood stammered as he started to hit keys with his magic. But there was a green flash, and the elder prince was knocked away from the terminal. His round eyes looked up in astonishment. "Vanity? What are you doing? We must. . ."

"You must go do whatever you must. As must I." He began hitting keys on the terminal.

A purple and blue icon of three gemstones appeared on the screen, and the terminal began to speak in a familiar voice. "So terribly sorry, darlings, but I'm out of my office at the moment. Leave your message, and I promise to get back to you as soon as I can."

Blueblood stared in shock as Vanity took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Rarity. It’s Vanity. I’d hoped to speak to you before now. Tell you what I wanted to say. It appears that our time is up, though. We’ve been betrayed. . . all of us. If you get this message. . . I’ve gone to Elysium. If you can meet me there, then I’ll tell you what I should have years ago.” The screen flashed and went blue, and a message appeared at the bottom: ‘>Connection interrupted.’

With a sigh, Vanity rose to his hooves. Blueblood stared in shock. “You. . . you and my Rarity? You betrayed me?”

Vanity looked down at his older sibling. “She was never yours, Blueblood. She was never anypony’s. She was far too precious for that.” Then he looked at the door. “Now, I suppose I must give some bad news,” he said with a soft sigh. Without another look back, he walked out the door and towards the ballroom. The musicians played and the aristoponies in their fancy, expensive outfits chatted as if this was simply another party and not the ending of the world.

Vanity walked through the crowd and stepped up onto the platform upon which the quartet was playing. I recognized one of them: a gray pony with an elegant charcoal mane and a familiar instrument. Sadly, though, Vanity looked away from Octavia to the crowd below him. I was glad she got to play somewhere again before she returned to the Flank to die.

Dozens of concerned faces stared up at him. “Fillies and Gentlecolts,” he began slowly. “Five years ago I, my brother, and my nephew came to you with a plan to establish a sanctuary for the elite of the country. Let the bureaucrats scamper away to Stable One; we would have a shelter of our own design and comfort. A place where the Princesses and the aristocracy could retire and live until it was safe to return and rebuild Equestria. You gave generously. Some of you even had the privilege of seeing plans of what we were creating. The majesty and grandeur befitting Celestia and Luna.”

He paused for a long moment, then said evenly, “We are betrayed.”

Murmurs broke out, cries and shouts. Vanity simply stood there before them, looking out calmly as he surveyed the crowd. That calm demeanor seemed to spread through the assembled aristoponies; they quickly composed themselves, far more quickly than I might have guessed they would. “The Redoubt is sealed, and those who have taken shelter in it have set this mob upon us for petty revenge. And while we may defend this place for a time, eventually, this manor will fall. There are simply too many ways in. Therefore, I propose that you utilize Fancypants’s airship to

relocate to the Elysium Resort. It is both defensible and well provisioned. Perhaps there, you will be able to weather what is to come.”

The old buck stepped forward. “I’d be more than happy to, old boy. But... I noticed that you didn’t say ‘we’.”

Vanity pressed his lips together for a moment before sighing softly. “I will remain here. Somepony must pay for this failure. I accept responsibility.”

Fancypants’s monocle popped from his eye, and he chuckled. “I say, but that’s the most rubbish I’ve heard in ages. And I’ve listened to your brother,” he said as he shook his head. “Somepony is going to have to lead us and get us situated, and you seem to have a good horn on your head. Now, if whoever double crossed us would like to step forward... well... I would happily leave them here to rot. But you? You’ve only ever wanted what’s best for Equestria.”

Vanity’s mouth worked, but then there was a scream from the kitchens as the work staff raced into the ballroom, a group of shouting, rampaging ponies following on their heels. “Find the stable!” some bellowed. “String up the nobles!” roared others. A cluster charged the stage, wielding knives, improvised clubs, and the occasional firearm.

Vanity’s magic reached out to seize the nearest, largest object he could find: Octavia’s contrabass. The green light surrounded it as it slammed into the charging four like an immense club; the heavy instrument sent them all falling away, and for an instant the invaders’ momentum was broken as the huge bass rammed horizontally into the group. One last mighty swing knocked another outshoot away from the aristoponies fleeing the room. From the screams and shouts and crashing glass and gunfire, though, bedlam had erupted in every corner of the mansion. Some of the invaders turned their guns to the stage, but the contrabass rose, the bullets pinging off the wood.

The white unicorn blinked and then looked at the stunned musician. “Quite a sturdy instrument.” He levitated two dropped revolvers from the floor and began to carry out careful and deliberate headshots; faced with such opposition, most of the attackers retreated back to the kitchen. He paused a moment to float the contrabass back to Octavia, who hugged it tightly. “Do you have anywhere safe to go?” he asked as Fancypants and his filly walked to the door, the elderly unicorn lifting a dropped sledgehammer.

“Does anypony?” she said softly as she looked up at him with dark, sad eyes. Then the chaos flooded back into the ballroom and she was lost; Vanity turned away and

raced to join Fancypants. The guards were still trying to fend off the surging masses, but the battle had turned as they were overwhelmed and their weapons seized. As the arisoponies raced about, there was an immense crash and explosion that shook the immense manor; the screams built as the chaos spread even further.

Fancypants and Vanity reached the upstairs hall where a line of sandbags and furniture still formed a barricade. “Get over! Get over quickly!” Vanity shouted at the panicked servants and aristoponies scrambling for their lives. A few he lifted up and over with his magic as a wave of raging ponies raced up the stairs. Vanity and the few guards left held with bursts of fire from small machine guns for a minute. Then one of the guards ran. Then the other two.

And still they came on. They tore at the barricade, their bullets shattering the elaborate mirrored walls and gouging holes in the fancy furniture as they chopped at the obstruction and tore at it with their hooves. Perhaps it was his control and poise or simply that their fire was wild and undisciplined, but, even as bullets skipped around him, not one found Vanity’s hide as he kept his place.

Then he looked over as the door to the nursery opened and a terrified blue eye peeked out. Their gaze met for one second, and then he looked at the mob. “You will not pass!” He yelled as his magic reached out for every dropped firearm and wrapped it in his green glow. At once, every single weapon around him levitated into the air and pointed at the head of the stairs and the stunned faces of the mob who realized too late their folly. Then the guns roared in unison as a stream of bullets and gunfire tore the attackers to pieces. More were coming, though, and, one after another, the floating guns clicked on empty chambers. Bloodied, maddened, they came yet again! Vanity lifted a broken chair leg to meet them as they rushed the barricade.

Then a glowing sword swept through the throat of one of the attackers as Blueblood calmly trotted forward to stand beside him. “Touch my collection, will you? Trample your mud all over my home, you filthy peasants! Get my coat all dirty?!”

Vanity smiled. “You’ve been working on your swordplay, brother!” And, side by side, they bashed and sliced the attackers till finally the assault crawled away back down the stairs. Vanity let the chair leg drop as he panted. “Now. . . let us get the children to the airship—“

A sharp pain tore through his belly as a foot of steel buried itself in his gut. Vanity fell to his side, hooves hugging the wound as he stared up at the bloody sword floating beside his sibling. “You should have kept your hooves off her, Brother. Rarity was

supposed to be mine. She was supposed to marry me.” He swung the blade and wiped off the blood as he trotted back down the hall.

Slowly, Vanity pulled himself to his hooves. He magically removed the uniform and pressed it to his injury as he looked at the terrified eye peeking through the nursery door. Slowly, he smiled. “Keep them safe, Harpica.”

“Master Vanity, you’re hurt. . .”

He took a deep breath, his guts on fire, and lifted his head high. “This? ‘Tis only a scratch,” he said as blood trickled down his back legs. “Now, keep the children silent and safe, Harpica. They’re counting on you. Leave when you think it’s safe to go.”

“But. . .”

He raised his hoof to her lips. “Any pain. . . any injury. . . any indignity. . . is a small price paid in the defense of an innocent. Remember that,” he said with that shaky smile. He nuzzled her gently between the eyes again. “Now, close the door and don’t worry about me. I think I’ll retire to my room. I have a very sternly worded letter I need to write.” He kept the smile, standing there patiently with that calm expression before she finally closed the door once more. His head drooped as he grimaced in pain and trotted back to his room. He tossed the rumpled bloody uniform into the trash as he finally took a seat at the writing desk.

The sounds of shooting were dying down now. Through the window, I thought I saw some kind of boat thing suspended from a gasbag making its way east. It was already starting to snow as he drew out a piece of stationary and began to carefully write, the blood from his injury soaking slowly into the seat of the chair.

“I doubt you’ll ever get this, Rarity,” he said softly as he folded the letter and took out a small empty orb. “I don’t know if anypony will ever see this memory, but it is something that needs to be said,” he drew a slow breath as he started to shake, his body growing chill. “I am to die. Let me say that. Let me begin with that. Then let me say that, had things been different we could have been the greatest of lovers. If you were not a Ministry Mare and I not a prince, we could have had a better life. A life that you deserved. I know the mistakes you made. . . your many regrets. . . and I will take them all with me into the hereafter.”

He groaned at the throbbing buried deep in his gut. “For any other who sees this, I pray that you will forgive a fool. I joined the project with the best of intentions. . . to save lives. So much money. . . so much material. . . and now what does it all matter? I am dying. . . my brother is mad. . . Rarity. . . sweet Rarity. . . I did it to

protect others against the inevitable. My nephew once said... it seemed to him that the only way to save Equestria was to destroy it. I thought he was joking... in one of his moods. He so loved this country. Loved more than any other, I fear. Now all is undone. And damn me... I helped him.”

“The Redoubt... I don’t know what will become of it now. Perhaps Garnet and the rest of the O.I.A. cower in there still?” He shuddered and closed his eyes. “I am sorry. I wish I could tell you more. Miramare. My old locker. Regret... I am sorry.” He opened his eyes to look at the glossy surface of his desk, at the tears that streaked his cheeks. “Goodbye, Rarity. I pray we meet again... in better... lives...”

The world swirled away, returning to darkness.

oooOOOooo

I heard the faint swoosh of the Seahorse’s talisman and the tap of the rain on the roof. Smelled the acrid sweet stench of the bilge and felt the cot around me. My legs felt... like something other than legs. The muscles moved all wrong as I shifted in the bunk. But that was nothing compared to my heart. My lungs didn’t feel like they worked right anymore, either. I wondered if I was turning into some sort of sea creature. Some blind thing that crawled in deep dark places not fit for ponykind.

My PipBuck was gone.

“Glory...” I rasped, my voice throaty and raw. I felt sick, and coughed and hacked as I turned my head about, as if just twisting my neck might magically regenerate my eyes. Then I overbalanced and flopped down onto to the Seahorse’s wooden deck. “Glory!” I rasped again, my chest clenching in pain as if I were trying to expel my own lungs.

Then I heard a terrified little sob, a filly’s sob. She sniffed a snotty nose. “She’s... she’s outside, Blackjack.”

“I need her. I need to talk to her,” I said as I turned towards the sound of Scotch’s voice and extended a limb towards her. I felt a leg under my... and I heard her scream a little and jerk away. I shivered as I pulled back. She gasped and sobbed as she shuffled away from me. I simply lay there before saying quietly, “I’m sorry, Scotch. I’m not a monster. I’m not... even if I look like one.”

She sniffed again. “I’ll... I’ll go get her.” She trotted for the exit, her clopping hooves receding into the distance. I dragged my body after her. I didn’t get very far before more hooves trotted back towards me.

“You’re out? Don’t worry...” Glory said from near by, “We’ll get you another orb and...”

I then wrapped my legs around hers. “Stop... I’m going to die.”

“No!” She snapped. “No! We are not talking about this. We’re going to Sanguine and getting you fixed!” She tried to pull away, but I simply held her as she started to shake.

“Glory. I’m going to die,” I repeated, and I was amazed at how calm I felt. It wasn’t that I wanted to die. There were so many things I wanted to do that I’d never get to do... but that was the way of things. You got your life until you didn’t any more.

“Don’t say that, Blackjack. Don’t...” Hot tears falling on my cheeks. I smiled as I nuzzled her chest... her strong heart. So very strong.

“Let me say it... because it’s true, Glory.” I took another burning breath. “I don’t want to, but I am... and I’m not going to give Sanguine the most dangerous piece of technology in the Wasteland just to save my own life.” She shook her head as she sniffed. “And I know how damn much this hurts, Glory. I know because if it were you... I’d move heaven and earth to find some way to stay with you. And I know that you... you would tell me not to. And it’ll hurt like hell... but if you asked me to... I wouldn’t do it. So I’m asking you: don’t trade saving me for EC-1101. I’m not worth the harm he’ll do.”

Maybe it had been a nightmare... or maybe something else... but I remembered a row of purple eyes weeping along a gray neck.

“I can’t... I can’t just do nothing. I can’t...” she whispered in my ear. “I love you too much... I wanted to do... to do so much with you.” She sniffed as she shook. “Don’t tell me to do nothing and watch you die.”

“Well, you could just dump me in the river. One more piece of junk in the water; who’d notice?” I said with a little smile.

She gave a curious little hiccup before muttering, “You’re unbelievable, you know that?” She kissed softly right beneath my horn. “I won’t just... give up. You never gave up on me... on any of us. You always came for us. Please... let us try and find some way... any way... to take care of you.”

“All right,” I replied softly, making that concession. “No Sanguine, though...”

She sighed as she carefully lifted me onto her back and then into a cot. “No Sanguine,” she replied as she laid me on my side. “I’m sorry Scotch was...”

"I guess I look pretty bad. Did I at least regenerate my cutie mark?" I asked as I smiled again. "I mean, losing eyes is like... whatever... but having my flank shot off? Horrors!" She made another hiccupping laugh and sniffed.

"Yes... but your eye..." she said softly as she nuzzled my cheek.

"Hey. The only thing that sucks about not having eyes is that I can't see you," I said as I nuzzled her back. And that I couldn't see my enemies. And that I couldn't shoot anything. And that I felt the panic slowly chewing up my brain. I fought to keep it away, because if I fell apart right now, I might as well pass EC-1101 to Sanguine myself. If a cheesy line kept us both together... well... she made another of those hiccupping, laughing sobs.

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard, but really, I can't believe that's the only detriment to being blind. After all, you can't..." and since my hooves were limp noodles, I shut her up with a kiss instead. To be fair, it was a very nice kiss. Finally, though, she pulled her mouth away. "We're going to find some way to help you." She had to say that. Just like not thinking about what had happened to me was holding me together, the thought of saving me kept her together. I couldn't deny her that.

"Just no Sanguine," I repeated. She sighed, then nodded against me, and I smiled. "And bring my PipBuck back. I feel naked without it."

"Uhhh, Blackjack, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but we don't normally wear clothes."

I nuzzled her cheek as I said, "You might not normally wear clothes, but I've gotten shot enough to consider barding clothes." Was she always so soft and sweet? Yes, yes she was.

"Okay. I need it just a bit longer. Then I'll bring it back," she swore before finally pulling away.

I sighed as I lay back in the bunk and I listened to her light hoofsteps recede out of the wooden hold. Then my ears twitched as she said, "She doesn't want us to go to Sanguine." Given that I couldn't peek in on their conversation, I could at least eavesdrop.

"Well, duh. 'Cause she's an idiot," P-21 retorted. "He's our best and only bet for saving her life. You saw her legs. You said yourself its only a matter of days before gangrene sets in."

"Her blood circulation's getting pinched off in her extremities. I don't know if that's from the taint or the cancer, but after firing that last Silver Bullet..." Glory grunted

softly. “Why did she have to do that?”

“Because it was the only way she could win,” Rampage answered. Apparently she’d felt with it enough to let herself be unchained and join in the conversation... I was glad. She didn’t deserve to be treated like a monster, even if she thought she was one herself. No pony did.

After a long silence approaching the realm of awkward, Glory sighed. “Well, between the cancer, the... growths... and the brand new case of infection... we don’t have much time. We’re losing her.”

Somepony stomped their hoof in irritation as P-21 said, “Then we go to Sanguine and Blackjack can just suck it up.” A long pause, silence broken only by the rain drumming overhead. “Glory, you said it yourself. There’s no other way. Unless you’re reconsidering the pods again.”

“It might stop the progression of the cancer, but it would not prevent the taint from contaminating other aspects of her mind... and soul,” Lacunae said quietly.

“Who cares about that? We’re talking about her life, Lacunae!” P-21 protested.

“There are worse things than dying, P-21. All of you know that better than any pony,” Lacunae replied calmly, a voice of compassion and kindness. The voice of a real Goddess. I pitied Unity for not appreciating what it had created. “You might save her flesh, and that would be a worthy cause, but what about the cost of the guilt and shame she would feel? Would you see her suicidal again? And what of the magical contamination to her soul?”

“Soul...” P-21 muttered in disgust.

“Actually, there is no scientific evidence for the existence of—” Glory added.

“Souls exist,” Lacunae interrupted in a firm, inarguable tone. “Your soul is nothing less than your quintessential self... the pure you. To change that is to fundamentally alter your complete being. The corruption inside Blackjack isn’t simply biological... it is magical, and that magic is changing her soul into something different from a pony.”

“So you want us to just let her die?” Scotch squeaked.

“You should accept the certainty that eventually she will die. Even if she were turned into a ghoul or alicorn, nothing lasts forever. We are born, we live, we wear out, and we expire. Our souls move into the everafter, to be reborn or to find another life. That is the natural order of things. When that order is violated, a mistake is created

that must inevitably be undone at great cost and sacrifice. That is what makes life precious. Life persisting simply because it is alive is a fool's game bereft of meaning. Souls matter infinitely more." Lacunae said in a gentle, if somewhat lecturing tone.

"Damn it, I don't want her to die," P-21 sputtered.

"Of course not. You love her," Lacunae said simply.

What? Oh, now wasn't this an awkward silence!

"Don't you talk to me like you know me. Don't you act like you know what I feel, you freak!" P-21 shouted.

"You love her or you wouldn't care if she lives or dies. Don't treat it like an insult," Lacunae replied.

"I love Priest," he said firmly.

"You like Priest because he makes you feel safe and wanted," Lacunae countered. I winced at that; blunt much, Lacunae? "You love Blackjack. Perhaps in a brotherly way. Perhaps in other ways. Regardless, you love her. And that scares you. Or shames you. I'm not sure which."

P-21 hissed sharply through his teeth. "Blackjack killed the pony I loved. She beat him to death in front of me! Did you know that? Did any of you?" A horrible silence descended as he panted. "She handed me... and countless other bucks... back to medical, to be raped again and again. Do you know how often she stopped it? How often any of them stopped it? Never. It never happened. Not Blackjack. Not Gin Rummy. Not even Duct Tape."

I lay there in that eternal black as he panted, then said in a slower, low voice, "I thought... once we were out here... somehow... she'd change that. Blackjack can do anything. And she would have. But every buck in there was resigned to the life they knew. Every mare was just waiting for the freaky outsiders to go so they could stop thinking about it and go back to the way things were. Not one of them had the vision or the decency to admit how fucked up it was. No one but Blackjack."

"I don't love her. I can't love her. Because every time I think about her, I think about how she wronged all of us and I don't know how to forgive that. I don't think I'm capable of forgetting it. But I can't hate her, either. I can't leave her. So I follow her around as she rips herself apart for ponies who are no better than meat, wondering what the hell all of it is for!"

He broke into harsh breathing once again, and for the longest time there was just

silence. Then Scotch said softly, "I'm sorry, P-21. I am. I'm sorry I never did anything to help you. I once got in trouble for saying it was wrong to hurt you just because you're boys. I said it was stupid. I got whipped. Mom did too. And we never said it again."

His voice relaxed a little. "You don't know what you're apologizing for, Scotch. I hope you never do. And neither does Blackjack. So don't tell me I love her. I just want to help her so she can keep helping others. Because I can't. . ."

I sighed, shaking my head as the rain drummed on and the boat rocked on the water. Tarboots coughed, then said, "Not that all this stable pony drama isn't fascinating, but the captain's been unconscious for at least a day. She'll need some unicorn able to snap her out of it soon."

The arguing continued, but it all became fuzzier as I rolled onto my side, coughing hard and feeling knotted muscles struggling and throbbing. My legs hurt like damn and I wasn't even on them any more. Every breath was a struggle, and I sighed. Maybe I'd die in a little bit and spare them all the trouble. That'd be the sensible thing, right?

oooOOOooo

Snow swirled around my black boots as I moved through the drifts towards a massive concrete building... the Fluttershy Medical Center. The light of the city shields painted everything for miles in a baleful green glow that illuminated the still heaps of snow. Thick gray clouds swirled overhead as I moved like a black ghost through the woods and past abandoned wagons towards the distant lights that seemed to beckon ponies for miles. Dozens of wagons lay in the parking lot along with tents staffed with doctors in yellow hazmat suits who hosed the radioactive snow off the ponies as they straggled in.

I approached the emergency room doors, and a dozen soldiers at once raced to attention, a few pointing their weapons at me. "Hold! Identify. . ." one with sergeant's bars on his uniform began. Without a word, I levitated out my badge and flipped it open, and immediately they lowered their guns. "Our apologies, special agent." They stepped aside as I walked in.

Inside the hospital were dozens, perhaps hundreds of scared and sickly ponies being cared for by exhausted yet still dedicated doctors. One approached me with nervousness. "Healing? Food? Radiation flush?" he asked. In my EFS-enhanced vision I could see the bright red radiation sickness warning.

“No. Yes. Yes.” I replied, my voice thick and muffled by the respirator. He directed me over to a spare IV stand draped with pouches of high strength RadAway. I pulled off the rebreather and began to drink, watching the rads fall away.

“It’s good to see anyone from the government here. Everypony’s been scared to death since the shield went up. Most of them are trying to hoof it to Manehattan; they heard it was still intact.” There was a questioning tone to his voice as he sought some sort of confirmation. I said nothing. I ate a bar of emergency rations and drank the medicine. “What about Fillydelphia?” I didn’t answer again, and he seemed to get the hint.

“What are you doing in here with those?” demanded a pink doctor as she scowled and pointed her hoof at my armament. I finished drinking the medicine, then calmly took some of the still full RadAway pouches, levitating them into my saddlebags despite the doctors’ outrage. The pink mare’s eyes went wide. “How dare you! Get out this. . .”

The spell was simple. She went completely silent. The next spell was equally simple as her foreleg was twisted two hundred and seventy degrees. She fell to the ground, her mouth opened in a silent scream. The nurse backed away but froze when I looked at him. Finally, I pressed my hoof to the doctor’s throat and cancelled the spell as broken bits of bone protruded from her limb.

I looked down at her, then said softly, “My business here doesn’t involve you. Do not make my business here involve you.” Then I turned to the nurse. “I need access to the generators immediately. I have intelligence regarding possible saboteurs.” He just pointed to a door on the far side of the atrium, and I nodded once. “Thank you. Leave her. Let her learn some new realities,” I said, and with that I left them both behind.

I slipped around the perimeter of the massive atrium full of scared ponies. The hospital had multiple redundant power sources, environmental isolation, and supplies to rival a stable for at least several years. Theoretically, it could have become one of the last bastions of civilization. I walked to a door, pulled out a small runed rod, and pressed it to the lock. A surge of magic and the door opened. Slipping it away, I made my way down into the basement and then the sub-basement.

The generators were huge affairs, bigger than commercial skywagons and running the entire length of the room. Beside them were massive cables connecting to the reinforced Hoofington power grid. A half dozen ponies nervously watched both, so it was understandable that they missed my entrance. The noise of the machinery

made the silencer superfluous, and six shots later, I was the chamber's only occupant. From my black saddlebags I withdrew gray bricks of explosives, pressed the remote detonator talismans to them, and placed them against the equipment.

I emerged back into the atrium, returning to where some guards, the nurse, and others were seeing to the doctor with the mangled limb. Two turned towards me, obvious anger and confusion on their faces. "What the hell do you . . ." one began.

"Zebra commandos have infiltrated the hospital. They've killed a half-dozen ponies already and placed explosives all over the place. You need to evacuate these people immediately." The guard's mouth moved silently. I continued smoothly, "Where is Fairheart?"

"She's on the fourteenth floor," he stammered in shock. "Near the hospital administrator's office." I turned away, and he called after me, "Wait! Where am I supposed to evacuate all these people to?" That was hardly my problem, and I trotted towards the elevators and magically activated one set of detonators. The resounding boom signaled the severance of the hospital from the power grid. Everything plunged into darkness. From my saddlebags came four grenades, and I sent them magically rolling away into the crowd. Seconds later, the explosions filled the atrium with screaming chaos. The lights flickered to life as the generators came back on. Smoothly, I left the screams behind as I started up the stairwell.

On the fourteenth floor, nurses were scurrying about. Foals were crying. Bedlam reigned. Somepony mentioned the weather monitoring station to the north. No matter. They made way for me in my black barding and coat. I said the magic letters 'O.I.A.' and got directed to where I needed to go. In the hospital room were two Steel Rangers, apparently ignoring their recall orders, the hospital head, and an elderly buck.

The white mare with the medic's cross was saying, "...backup generators are running and these floors have their own independent power generators if the building's fail. . ." she trailed off at the sight of my guns. "What are you doing with those here?"

I suppressed the urge to repeat my lesson. "Chief Justice Fairheart?" The sober maroon earth pony buck nodded once. "O.I.A. intelligence. We're scrambling to pull things together, Sir. We believe that zebra infiltrators are attempting to assassinate you."

"Balefire bombs weren't enough?" he replied lightly. "I take it the Ministry Mares are dead then, if they're after me."

“Unknown, sir. Applejack may be alive, but we will likely never be able to extract her from Stable Two, her last tracked position. Rarity and Fluttershy were both reported in Canterlot, which is a complete loss. Twilight is still being tracked in Maripony. Rainbow Dash’s tracking put her in Cloudsdale around the time of the first strike. Pinkie Pie died in Manehattan.” I said matter-of-factly. “Horse’s tracking was lost in the Hoof. We’re still working to determine the status of the military heads.”

“Likely not good. I would have died in Canterlot if it hadn’t been for this damned heart surgery,” he said as he touched his chest with a grimace.

“Do either of you have experience with explosives?” I asked as I looked at the pair of Steel Rangers. Of course they did. All Rangers did. “There are bombs placed on the building’s generators. Careful, though; the zebras are likely still hidden.” The pair looked at the chief justice, who nodded, and together they trotted out.

“I can’t believe they would attack. . . why? What do they hope to gain? Hasn’t there been enough death?” Redheart said as she looked out the window.

“The zebras want our total and complete annihilation, Administrator,” I replied. “You’d best see to the evacuation.”

“Evacuation to where? There’re so many. . . where are we supposed to go? And what about the ones who can’t be moved?” Redheart fretted.

“Once the basement is secure, you can return. Right now, you have to get to safety,” I said. Safety in the radioactive snow. . . how ironic. The administrator sighed, chewed her lip, and then slipped out as well.

“How did you learn of the zebra assassination attempt?” Fairheart asked, and then that question was answered by the sight of my silenced pistol. “So. It’s a coup after all.”

“The O.I.A. serves Luna and Equestria,” I replied evenly. “We will not allow it to fall into the hooves of another. I’m sorry, Justice Fairheart.”

“Just one question. Who’s behind this? Horse? Goldenblood?” he asked. The only answer he received was a silenced bullet clean through the eye. I magically turned his head away, holstered my gun, and trotted out of the room.

Once outside the secure area, I tapped the talisman again. The explosions sounded deep below the building, and another place that could have been a bastion of hope and civility went dark. Using my light amplification goggles, I loaded up on more Rad-X, Radaway, healing potions, and rations from a storeroom. Then I made my

way out. I passed by the maimed doctor and the terrified nurse. Their eyes reflected pain, fear, and confusion.

It didn't matter. One more was dead. That just left one other to take care of. Ignoring the yelling and screaming in that radioactive night, I walked back into the darkness. My mission still wasn't finished. . . not yet.

oooOOOooo

I woke from that doozy with a sigh. Crazy dreams or something else? Given my current state, I supposed I could flip a coin to find out for sure. Had I been asleep for hours? Minutes? I couldn't tell anymore. I never imagined that with the loss of my eyes I'd also lose my sense of time. I couldn't even look at my PipBuck to find out. Well, at least I had my PipBuck back again. Somepony had tied a cloth over my eyes. Better than looking at. . . well. . . whatever I had.

My friends were still arguing. No. . . not arguing. It looked like whatever the plan was, it'd come together. They just didn't like it.

"I can't go and leave her like this!" Glory protested.

"You have to. She's going to need your help. You know what she's giving up for this," Lacunae replied evenly. "Seabiscut will carry the captain. Tarboots, Oilcan, and Scotch will watch the ship. The sooner you get there the sooner you get back."

"Meanwhile, I can teleport P-21 there and back and get the rest of it," Lacunae pointed out.

"And I will do everything I can to stomp everypony who wants to keep fighting into glue," Rampage said. "Brutus called a ceasefire, but the Halfhearts are wiping out what's left of the Flashers. BJ wouldn't want us to get her her present but let everything fall apart here. So if somepony is shooting, they get rampaged." So now she was a verb.

Lacunae gave a delicate cough.

"Except for Paladin Studmuffin, provided he's still alive." Rampage added.

"You really think you can stomp enough?" P-21 asked.

"Now that I got reason to? You bet," Rampage said, then adopted a reflective tone. "You know, now that I think of it, I never really was very into the whole Reaper thing. But now that I've got something to fight for, I'm actually going to enjoy this. Plus, I'll be able to sit on Psychoshy. Give her the whole mushroom treatment."

“Mushroom treatment?” Glory frowned.

“You know. . . feed her lots of shit and keep her in the dark,” Rampage replied.

“That’s how you get mushrooms? That’s disgusting!” Glory retorted.

“Glory. . .” P-21 muttered.

“Right! Right. Who cares about mushrooms right now, right?” Glory sighed. “Let me go tell her. . .”

“Glory, there’s no time, and she’s sleeping. Let’s just get there and back again,” P-21 said impatiently. I wondered if that tapping hoof was his.

“Right. . . Okay. Please keep her safe,” Glory pleaded. “We’ll be as fast as we can.”

“We will. We’re tied up to the bridge, so short of it falling on us, we should be safe. You just be careful. It’s a long trot out there,” Oilcan said in a soothing tone.

I heard hooves trotting closer and sighed. “So, is there a plan B?” I asked, and there was a little filly gasp.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Scotch said softly.

“Nope. I’m talking in my sleep,” I replied, then smiled. “So. . . what’s the plan?”

“I. . . I’m not supposed to tell you.” I tried to move my legs and fold them under my chin, but they were too sore and swollen.

“Scotch. . .”

“Please. Glory and everypony made me promise not to tell.”

“Tell me. . .”

“They said. . . they said you wouldn’t like it.”

“Tell me.”

“But miss Glory. . .”

“Tell me tell me tell me!” I grinned, and wondered if I was making her smile or freaking her out.

“All right! She was talking for hours on your broadcaster thingy. She contacted the pegasi and the professor and that big hospital and even a bunch of ponies in some faraway place. I think... they were after some super healy talisman like they had in medical or something.”

Another regeneration talisman? Put it in me, disintegrate me, and let me come back? It had... potential. Of course, knowing my luck, I'd be regenerated like this. Something inside me had been touched by the contamination, and now... now I didn't know what I was. I didn't feel like a pony. I didn't feel like anything that belonged in this world.

I sighed as I settled back. I'd told her she could try anything... I didn't like it, but I couldn't deny her that. I just hoped that, once I was dead my friends could find some way to move on.

"Oilcan gave me a memory orb for you. It's one of the captain's. She said it's a good one," Scotch said from my side. I waited, then smiled.

"Scotch, if I can't see it, then I can't grab it with my magic. You're going to have to hold it to my horn." Then I hesitated. "Or am I really that scary?" Now she hesitated, giving me my answer. I bowed my head. "Sorry."

"It's your legs. They're all black and red and... clumpy." Scotch swallowed. "Glory said your blood's getting all goobered up in there... she said we're probably going to have to... to..." She swallowed again as her voice shook. "Sorry. I'm not supposed to say."

"Thanks, Scotch," I said softly as I stretched my horn towards her. "Well, Thrush's memories should be interesting... Just hold it to my horn."

"Okay..." but again she balked. "Blackjack, are we... bad ponies for what happened in 99?"

I wanted to reach out and touch her... but that'd probably just make things worse. "You're not, Scotch. You're just a filly. You're not responsible for what happened in 99. And neither was your momma. Duct Tape wanted a family. She wanted to end the breeding queue and have an actual life on the surface."

"Blackjack... is P-21..." she started, and I stretched out my hoof... please let that be a hoof... against her lips.

"Ask him, Scotch Tape," I said softly. I had enough trouble without eating those rotten food chips. She sighed and a moment later dropped the memory orb into my hooves.

"I did. He told me to drop it. But... he was momma's favorite. I don't think she ever had another buck on her queue. And he was over a lot... more than any male." The Overmare's bribe, I recalled. "It was like that whole... family thing momma was

going on about.” She sniffed a little. “I wish I knew for sure. Maybe then I’d know why he hates me.”

I could scream. She wanted to remember. She was unhappy. But if I told her, then P-21 would be pissed! But if I didn’t, then she would be sad. . . . Arrrgh! Was there any way out of this that didn’t involve me fucking up? “I. . . let me talk to him. Okay?” Please please please let me die before that conversation came up!

“Just tell me, Blackjack. I’m not a baby!” she insisted.

Right. I already tried that! It ended in tears, recrimination and loads of Blackjack guilt! “Let me talk to him. Please.”

“Uggh. Why does everypony keep treating me like a little filly? I stopped being one when Momma died.” She trotted away, muttering sullenly under her breath, “I wish ponies would stop trying to protect me all the time.”

She had a right to know. . . P-21 had a right to keep his secrets. . . but it was making her sad. . . but it would make him mad. . . but. . .

Memory orb! Now! With luck, I’d wake to some horrible monster raping my ass or find out they went through with Plan A after all. I rolled the orb up my hide till I tapped it against my horn and swirled away into memory.

oooOOOooo

Big earth pony. . . Red. . . Buck. . . Macintosh! I remembered his slow and careful walk, his restrained power and casual grace. He trotted through the Miramare Air station with an easy smile and saw it respectfully returned from the ponies stationed there. He walked up to an open door and peeked in on half the marauders clustered around a table. He might not have been. . . well. . . anything like me, really, but I really liked being in his memory. It felt comfortable.

“So, what do I roll to hit, again?” Applesnack asked as he frowned at all the funky shaped dice.

The yellow earth pony smiled and pointed at the piece of paper. “Since you’re using a heavy gun built into your suit, it’s your dee eight agility skill plus your dee twelve steam armor skill. But you have one penalty for the train rolling towards the zebra encampment, so you’d drop one of those one die sizes. Unless you want to spend a grit; then you’d negate the penalty—“

“There has got to be an easier way to kill zebras,” the green buck groaned as he covered his face.

Twist grinned across the table at him. “Hey, you were the one who wanted to go after them. I was fine taking the bits, but noooo, Mr. Steam Ranger just has to go blowing them all up.” Applesnack snorted as he frowned back at her.

Jetstream sighed from behind a folded piece of cardboard, shaking her head before looking up at Big Macintosh. “Looking nice, Sarge. What’s the occasion? Got a date with your marefriend?”

“Ayup. Taking her to Billiards,” he said with a nod.

“Nice. Didn’t know you were a pool fan. Thought that was more a unicorn thing,” Twist said with a smile as she nudged a little pyramid-shaped die with her hoof. In front of her was a weird sheet of paper with a bunch of lines and boxes and numbers and things on it, including a drawing of a buffalo filly in one corner.

“Well, she likes most anything that takes her mind off work. Guessin’ Twilight’s got her tying her tail in knots out there in Splendid Valley.” He looked towards the door. “So, If that’s what makes her happy, then that’s what I’ll do.” Simple as that.

“When you see her can you tell her to tell her boss to leave the magic with the M.A.S.? Last thing we need is more megaspells bringing our enemies back to life,” Applesnack snorted. “I don’t know what Fluttershy was thinking.”

“She wants to save people, same as any decent pony should,” Big Macintosh said around the grass stalk between his lips. Applesnack snorted again, bit some of the dice, and tossed them. They clattered across the table and came up 1’s.

“Oooh, botch,” Echo winced. “Roll your luck! Maybe you’ll negate it!” The green buck made another roll. The whole table sucked in their breath sympathetically. “Oooo. . . critical botch. . .” Echo said as the green buck groaned.

“Great. Knowing my luck, my armor will turn sentient and crazy, or I’ll end up stuck in this stupid can for the rest of my life. Or both.” The green buck turned back to Big Macintosh. “Well, you go have fun. I need to find out if I explode or not,” he said as he nudged the dice.

The creme-colored, buzz-cut mare chuckled. “Look at it this way. Maybe your gun will explode and kill you and then you’ll come back as a Steam Ranger Revenant! Wouldn’t that be cool?” Twist asked with a grin.

“Right. Cause that’s just how anypony would want to spend the rest of his life: an undead pony trapped in a hunk of metal.” He snorted as he glowered at the incomprehensible sheet of paper in front of him.

“Hurry up and roll, Snack. Let’s find out what happens to Steelhooves. Then it’s Smiling Jack’s turn,” Jetstream said with a nudge of her blue wing. Echo nodded as he flipped open one of the strange ‘Wasteland’ game books. The pegasus looked up at Big Macintosh as the earth pony began to turn the pages. “Enjoy your date, Sergeant.” He nodded and walked away, followed by Applesnack’s plaintive cry. Macintosh just chuckled as he headed out the exit.

A short subway ride later, he trotted towards the grand plaza surrounded by the six ministry buildings. Shadowbolt tower loomed above all the rest, rising like a spire into the evening sky. As he approached the front doors, there was a bright purple flash ahead of him, the blue mare in a simple, practical blue dress appearing from it and looking only slightly disheveled. Maripony shook herself briskly, nudged her glasses back into place, then noticed Macintosh. At once, she smiled and ran to him. “Macintosh!” She held him close and nuzzled his neck. “Am I glad to see you! You wouldn’t believe what a day I’ve had!” she groaned and covered her face with her hoof. “The entire ministry is crazy!”

He chuckled and put his leg around her shoulders, giving her a gentle and careful squeeze. “Well, at least it was nice of Twilight to teleport you all the way out here. Or was that your magic?”

Maripony blinked, flushed, and smiled. “Oh yeah. Twilight teleported me here. Told me to have some fun. In fact,” she murred, kissing him softly, “she insisted on it.”

He flushed politely as he said, “Well, I got some decent fun in mind. You should like it. It involves lots of fancy mathematics.” Then he paused. “If you’re interested in the not so decent kind. . .” Now it was Maripony’s turn to blush.

“...We can do that later,” she stammered. Ugh. . . please let this not turn into another marathon sex orb! I couldn’t take another one of those. Not that sex with Rarity hadn’t been spectacular, but. . . damn. . . why was I thinking this? I took in how happy she looked to be with him. I wondered if that was how I looked with Glory.

The whole trip on the subway, Big Macintosh received a case by case analysis of just what was wrong with everypony in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Maripony complained about Luna’s constant ‘hooves off’ approach to governing, leaving Twilight on her own to figure everything out. She complained about Fluttershy keeping her megaspell research secret until a disastrous ‘field test’ required a battle to be fought twice. She mentioned how Goldenblood should have kept her in the loop. And the meetings. A meeting to plan meetings! Endless talk about projects and programs and spells. “I thought I was going to be able to create new magic! I

thought that I'd be a part of something greater. Instead, my whole day seems to be sitting in meetings so that everypony else can talk around me!"

"Well, tell Twilight you want to quit. If it's not making you happy, find something that does," he replied quietly. "Simple as that," he said as the subway train arrived at Horizon station. They rode the escalators up to the street level. Horizon labs was just a big, dark, glassy block.

Her mouth moved before she dropped her gaze, "It's. . . not so simple." She looked at him. "Do you like fighting? Does it make you happy?" she asked as they trotted towards the bar south of the subway station.

"Anope. But my friends need me. Equestria needs me to fight," he replied casually.

"Well. . . it's the same for me," Maripony replied quietly as she hung her head. "At least, that's what everypony keeps saying."

"Mari? Is there something you need to tell me?" He asked with a worried look.

The blue unicorn just shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing." Then she smiled at him and pulled herself together. "Lets just have a great night together. I don't want to think of ministry business or Twilight Sparkle at all tonight." He just looked at her, then nodded as they strolled into town. Down in the pool hall, she at once lit up in glee at the game; in short order, she was lining up shots. . . and then she magically produced a chalkboard and slide rule and started to work out shots while Macintosh just looked on.

Of course, executing her precisely measured shots was another matter entirely, and more often than not she sent the cue ball bouncing away from where she wanted it to go. Macintosh, on the other hand, simply gripped the stick in his mouth, braced it against his hoof, and took the shot. And, much to Maripony's chagrin, sunk more balls than she did.

"Clearly there's an element I'm not accounting for," she muttered as he bought two plates of daffodil and daisy salads with apple slices. He just smiled, and she arched a brow and gave a little smile of her own. "Aren't you going to tell me what I'm missing?" A small knot of ponies in white uniforms who'd been playing cards at a nearby table were watching the pair, nodding their heads in our direction.

"I figure you'd rather just figure it out yourself. If you need me to tell ya, ya'll ask," he replied as he munched on the clean, fresh food. Oh so delicious. . .

She looked pleased at his reply. "You know, you're the only person who'll do that for me. Everypony else, if they know I need to know something, they'll trip all over each

other trying to give me the answers. They never stop to think maybe I'd like to find the answer out myself."

"Twilight too?" he asked, and instantly her mood was blown. "Sorry. I'd put a word in with Applejack, if you'd like her to talk to Twilight about your problems at Pleasant Valley."

"No..." she sighed.

"Hey, cutie. Is this Miramare mook giving you trouble?" a unicorn buck asked as he trotted up with his three buddies. He had an anchor for a cutie mark.

Maripony looked at Big Macintosh and then back at the four sailors. "Trouble? Not particularly."

"Yeah? Why don't you come over to our table? I know all kinds of tricks we can teach you involving balls and a shaft," he chuckled. Oh... I knew somepony about to get his rump rearranged. I could smell the booze on his breath. Not enough to make him weak, but probably enough to make him stupid and dangerous.

"You need to go back to your game, sailor," Big Macintosh said firmly. "Everypony's having a nice time. Don't need to spoil it."

The tan unicorn scowled up at Big Macintosh. "You listen here. You come all the way to our pool hall, the least you can do is let us enjoy the company of your marefriend. And in case you didn't notice, there's four of us and only one of you."

"Ayup. So I reckon you best go and round up a few more so it's a fair fight," he replied. "You might want to sober up, though. Make sure this is a fight you can handle."

"We should go," Maripony said in concern, looking around. The conversation had suddenly generated a lot of interest from the other sailors.

"Oh, you think I can't handle you? You think I can't handle you?" the unicorn laughed and grinned at Big Macintosh. Big Macintosh tensed his muscles as the unicorn buck whirled around and smashed his rear hooves into Macintosh's chest. Macintosh didn't budge. The unicorn went sprawling on his face.

"I'll chalk that up to y'all bein' drunk," the red pony said evenly. Eyes glaring, the brown unicorn picked himself up, lifted a chair, and sent it flying at Macintosh. The crimson buck knocked it away with his hoof. "And that to ya'll bein' stupid. Ya don't get a third." He nodded to where the sailors been playing. "Y'all go back to your game, folks. Otherwise, this is gonna get bad."

“Oh, It’s going to get bad. It’s gonna get real bad!” The brown unicorn yelled as he lunged, rearing to smack Macintosh in the face. Big Macintosh caught the descending hooves with one limb and then powered his other forehoof straight into the sailor’s gut. The unicorn’s breath whooshed out as he doubled over, wheezing and sputtering, and then became violently ill.

“Lets go, Maripony,” he said as others rose to their hooves.

“But. . . I don’t understand? What’s wrong with showing me tricks?” Maripony asked, then frowned. She rubbed her nose, looked at the pool table, then at the sprawling buck. Suddenly, her eyes popped round and blue behind her glasses. “That. . . he. . . was he. . . ?”

“Ayup. Now, we need to be going,” he said firmly as the pair backed out of the pool hall. It was dark and starting to drizzle. “Let’s hurry up. Some folks don’t have the sense Celestia gave a bag o’ beans.”

“But. . . can’t you just tell them you’re a sergeant and. . . I dunno. . . order them to go away?” Maripony asked as they trotted quickly down the street. A glance backwards confirmed that the unicorn and his friends were following.

“There ain’t a rank been invented that could compete with Admiral Drunk and General Ticked Off.” Big Macintosh frowned. “They’ll be right sorry in the morning, but I’m more worried about dealing with them right now.

The pair had nearly reached the subway station when a dozen more sailor bucks trotted up the stairs. They took one look at the pair and moved to block the entrance. Maripony and Big Macintosh were forced into the abandoned Horizon Labs parking lot. “I want you to get out of here, Maripony. Don’t worry none about me.”

“I’m not going to leave you to a mob!” she cried.

“Get him!” they shouted.

“Sneaky earth pony!” called another.

“He’s disrespecting the uniform!”

“Probably a stripe lover!”

“He’s a Sergeant! He’s a soldier!” Maripony yelled, but from the fervor of the crowd and the reek of alcohol, they either weren’t hearing her or didn’t care as they surrounded him and knocked her back. The shouting sailors piled on all at once. While he knocked them away at first, even he couldn’t prevent them from piling on. Still, I

was amazed that, despite the beating, he really wasn't all that hurt even as he disappeared under them. Then Maripony let out a yell and all at once Big Macintosh moved.

I'd never felt that kind of strength before as his body lunged and launched half the ponies into the air in rolling arcs. A kick behind him knocked a half dozen flying. Now that powerful frame was all action as he battered the sailor ponies like a force of nature. No. I take that back; there was nothing excessive in his force. For all his strength, he kept his kicks, shoves, and bites controlled and precise. I marveled at the focus and the care he took in preventing severe injury to the sailors.

Then the brown unicorn who had started the whole damn thing lunged at him with a drawn knife. There was a purple flash and a shriek as Maripony appeared between his side and that plunging blade. She staggered, glasses falling as a three inch gash appeared in her shoulder, blood spreading along her dress as her purple eyes stared at the injury in shock. "Oh... my... that went differently in my head."

Big Macintosh looked at her standing beside him, bleeding, then looked at the buck holding the floating knife. His body came up and his hooves crashed down. The unicorn was struck with such force that he bounced like a ball filled with crunchy twigs. Then he lay still. "This fight is over," Macintosh bellowed. "You've attacked an officer and injured a civilian."

Now there was muttering as sense began to reassert itself and many of the sailors started to realize the amount of trouble they were in. "You three drag that to the medic," Mac ordered before turning back to Maripony. "Okay. That's deep. Take the dress off; we'll have to use it like a bandage."

"Oh no... no no no... you don't need to do that. I'm fine! It's just blood... just... a lot of blood..." she stammered as he stared into her eyes.

Purple eyes.

She dropped her gaze, and he slowly lifted the hem of her dress up to expose a purple and pink starburst on her flank. "Twilight?"

"I... um... I wanted to tell you earlier..." she stammered. He frowned, then looked at the dress. She took it off, folded it over, and pressed it to the injury.

"Don't worry about that now, Ministry Mare," he replied flatly as he looked around at the sailors. "Can you teleport with that injury? Get yourself to the hospital?"

"There's a Quik-Kare back at the corner," Twilight said softly. "Hopefully they won't ask too many questions." Twilight kept her eyes low in shame, her magic holding the

makeshift bandage to her wound, as the two walked carefully back.

“So... how'd you magic your appearance? Rarity?” Big Macintosh asked in a low, slightly hurt voice.

“Yes. She's developed a surprising number of spells to alter a pony's coloring and mane. Minor transfiguration magic that... can... ah...” She faltered, her ears drooping as she limped beside him. “I couldn't get it to change my eye color, so I had to enchant the glasses. And no magic can change a cutie mark, so I had to make sure it was covered.” He didn't say anything, and she muttered lamely, “Been trying to make a magic decal that would cover it but... ah... it doesn't quite work right.”

“And you always kept the lights off when we were together in bed. Thought you were just being shy,” he murmured.

“I was being shy, Macintosh,” Twilight said with a furious blush on her blue cheeks. “I didn't... I mean... I didn't know how... how any of that worked outside of books. The most I knew about a buck I got from reading the Zebra Sutra. I never... ever... imagined I'd do it, let alone with you.”

“Always wondered where you learned some of those positions...” he murmured as they approached the Quik-Kare 24 hour medical service. “So why the disguise?”

“It was the only way I could get away, Macintosh!” Twilight replied, looking up at him with pleading eyes. “You don't understand... every minute of my day is scheduled. Meetings, presentations, openings, project reviews... I'm lucky if I can find a few hours to myself! And if I ever go somewhere on my own, everypony who sees me recognizes me. I'm not supposed to go anywhere in Equestria without a dozen O.I.A. security ponies around me at all times. It's like that for all of us. Rarity and Fluttershy have to clear a spa meeting with fifty ponies just to have an hour off together.”

“And me?” he said quietly. “Why didn't you tell me, Twilight?”

“I... I wanted to...” she said lamely. “I meant to on our first date. A sort of... ‘Surprise! Nice to see you again!’, but we had such a nice time out, and for the first time I... really enjoyed myself. I didn't feel like I was a Ministry Mare. And you... you were different, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when the Marauders helped clear out Splendid Valley? I came up to talk to you. Asked you how you were doing. Would you like to get lunch,” she said

as she looked at him, “Do you remember what you said to me?”

“Said it wasn’t proper for a soldier to be socializing with a Ministry Mare.”

“Exactly. So if I’d told you the truth, would you have kept seeing me? Would you have kept sleeping with me?” she asked pointedly, and his ears folded back as he frowned in worry. Twilight sighed, “Well. . . I guess that’s all over. Funny. . . I was looking forward to this date for days.”

He blinked in surprise as they stepped into the Quik-Kare. The sharp antiseptic smell clashed with the coppery scent rising from the blood. The nurse began, “Welcome to Quik-Kare, for the quickest care anywh—whoa!” Her eyes popped wide “Oh! Um. . . this way!” the puce pony said as she gestured for them to come around the counter. “We’ll get some healing potion in you lickety split! What happened?”

“Mugging,” Big Macintosh said. “I’ll file a report as soon as we’re done here.”

The nurse got a healing potion, and Twilight drank it as Big Macintosh put a pencil in his mouth and started to write on a clipboard. The silence was palpable, and the nurse kept looking from one to the other. “Um. . . if you don’t mind, could you please fill that out outside, sir? We normally only allow patients in the back room.” Big Macintosh sighed, held clipboard and pencil in his mouth, and trotted to the waiting room. Ten minutes later, Twilight emerged looking half angry and half confused. The nurse took the paperwork and wished them both well.

“She thought you’d cut me. . . with how we were acting and everything.” Twilight said as she turned to face him. “I almost wish you had. . . then I wouldn’t feel so bad.” She closed her eyes and asked the dreaded question I knew was coming. “So. . . what now?”

“Nothing. You go back to the ministry. I go back to base. That’s that, Twilight.”

She looked as if she’d been stabbed again. “Oh.”

“I meant what I said bout it being improper. You’re a leader of Equestria and I’m just a common grunt slugin’ things out in the trenches. If folks know we’re together, then neither of us will be able to do our jobs. I can’t be datin’ the number three most powerful mare in Equestria. You can’t be socializing with a dirt pounder like me.”

“But. . .” she began.

“No. No buts. And I have to admit that I’m mighty hurt this was how I found out. I never would have thought it of you. Rarity perhaps, but not you,” he said firmly as he looked down at her. “Now, if you feel up to it, you best get yourself back before they

worry about you. And I need to make sure that that brown jerk is peeling potatoes till his horn falls off.”

Twilight crumpled a little more as he turned away. “Well... then... I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

Her flash coincided with the rumble in the clouds overhead. He got three steps before the hard Hoofington rain began to fall and six before his rump hit the ground and he turned his face to the sky, hot tears mixing with cold rain as he showed his own broken heart.

oooOOOooo

The memory orb ended with me once more in darkness. I stared into eternity as I listened to the gurgle of water around the ship and felt the steady rolling. I let the orb rest on my chest. I could see Big Macintosh in that rain, feeling his heart ripped out as he tried his best to keep up his stoic and calm demeanor. He’d said what he had to drive her away and protect her, I was sure of it. Suffering for the one you love, because caring hurt no matter how you sliced it.

But then, so did bullets.

The gunfire outside was sharp and light. Low power carbines and varmint hunting rifles, but there were a couple of them. I heard the pop of a hunting rifle and the boom of a familiar heavy automatic pistol. The rifle fire increased. We were under attack, and I couldn’t do anything.

“Scotch?” I called out as I rolled out of the cot. I didn’t have a gun, barding, or any equipment. My legs folded beneath me, and it was all I could do to crawl forward... whichever direction that was. “Scotch? Where are you?” Somepony yelled in agony up on deck, and the hunting rifle went silent.

And then I heard the panicked breaths of Scotch Tape staggering in along with the sounds of somepony dragging their hooves in the door before collapsing hard to the deck. “No... no no... mister Tarboots.”

“Scotch? Scotch, what’s happening?” I asked as I felt around. Then I felt the hot blood rapidly cooling on the wooden deck.

“The others are late. And... and there’s ponies. Like four or five ponies. They shot Oilcan and... and now Tarboots. He’s... he’s got a hole in his head...” And from the sound of the hooves on deck, they were coming right here. “Oh... they’re coming... they’re coming.” Her terror ratcheted her voice higher and higher.

“Okay. Scotch. I want you to give me my pistol and point my head towards the hatch. Then I want you to find the hatch to the bilge. Get down there and no matter what you do, don’t make a sound. Do you understand?” She panted, and I smacked her. “Understand?”

“Y...yes... but what about...”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve had ships fall on me. What are they going to do? But you need to hide. You need to stay quiet, no matter what. Can you do that?” They were almost to the hatch.

“Y..yes...” she replied. I felt the mouthgrip on my lips and bit down. Then she turned my head. “There. That’s... that’s the door.” I patted her once and pushed her away, then sent a bullet towards the hatch as I sat there, a lump of flesh who could barely move. There was cursing and shouting and bullets were fired in towards me. I couldn’t risk moving. With the creaking sounds the boat made in the river, I couldn’t tell if it was them coming or not. I just used my best guess, firing single shots with enough space for Scotch to get herself hidden.

I managed about two minutes before the gun fired on an empty chamber and I sighed and spat the gun out. A moment later, I heard a buck say, “She’s out.” Yup. I’m out, genius. I just kept sitting there; what else could I do?

“Afternoon. If you’ve come to steal the ship, well, I’m afraid the captain won’t like that much. And she’s the only one who can make it work,” I said. Who knows; maybe I’d chanced upon practical bandits who were in a charitable mood and highly gullible.

“Holy shit, is that... that’s the Security Mare?” One said with a gleeful giggle. It was a familiar voice. As I remembered, he’d been screaming for me not to kill him the last time I’d heard it. “Well, we come back to Fallen Arch, and not only do we find a nice old boat but my family’s murderer too!”

“Seriously? That the bitch that killed Sidewinder?” another drawled.

“Technically, Deus killed him,” I said, but these ponies weren’t interested in technicalities. The realization of who I was spread rapidly.

“She killed my brudders...”

“Ransacked our home...”

“Took our property...”

“She’s the mare what nicked me in the museum!” one shouted.

Oh, this was going to suck. . .

“You’re fucking dead,” a buck growled as he pushed a barrel against my blindfold.

I swallowed. I couldn’t let this be quick. Once I was dead, they’d rifle the ship.

It would have to be slow. . .

I grinned as wide as I could. “Thanks for doing me the fucking favor, jackass. Go ahead. Put me out of my misery!” I yelled as I twisted my head.

Their shouts dropped to a dreadful silence broken by low chuckles. The gun was pulled away. “No. . . you don’t get any favors from us, Security.” And it smashed against my face.

The fun began.

I tried to put up a fight. I did. My legs might have been useless, but I could still swing them around, and my mouth worked just fine. They grabbed my flopping legs and hauled me face down over a crate. “Let’s stop her flopping around once and for all!” One cheered, and the others laughed as they pinned down my leg. Then I felt a sharp stab. “Pin her down, Nails.” Wait. . . what?

I didn’t scream. Not at the spike of pain that went up my foreleg as the hammer struck the head again and again. Nor did I scream at the second, higher up. No, it wasn’t until the third one, just below where my elbow had been, that I cried out, to their laughter. I called them every variant of ‘fuckers’ I could as my other foreleg was nailed to the floor too. No matter how I tugged, they weren’t coming free. Not without leaving my legs behind. My rear legs were hauled apart, and one. . . two. . . three. . . they were nailed to the floor as well.

I squirmed and jerked; I couldn’t help it. Every move hurt, which kept me moving. “How’s it feel, cunt? You took everything from me.” That was the one from Fallen Arch. . . I was getting better at picking out their voices.

I was barely able to spit out, “I left you your life.”

“Yeah. Well, let me pay you back for the favor,” he replied. Then my tail was lifted and I felt a tongue. I couldn’t help myself, I started to shake. I knew what was coming. I knew damned well. Hell, I was inviting it. . . any indignity, pain, or humiliation.

Just keep focused on me.

It didn’t hurt like the nails. Those had hurt more, certainly. No, as it was pushed into me, I cried out. . . much to their delight. And as they got going, my own biology

betrayed me, easing the violation. I hated it, but so long as I didn't hear Scotch cry out as well, I could endure. I had to. And so I let them fill me however they wanted. And they laughed and called me a slut, as if words could hurt me now. Go ahead, I thought. Take another ride. Shoot another load. I can take it.

I couldn't do anything. . . . But I could take it.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But eventually, even violation gets boring. And then a buck said from nearby, "Finish her up. I'm going to see if there's anything else worthwhile in here. . . ."

The fuck you are. I bit hard on what was trying to choke me, making him cry and pull out. Then I jabbed my horn into the side of the one who'd just spoken.

I blew out his guts all over me with a magic bullet.

Fun time was over.

"Cunt! Bitch! Whore!" Pretty unoriginal, but they were upset as they stomped me. I fired again and again until one of them got a hoof around my neck. I struggled. "Do it! Do it!" They began to cheer.

I felt a sharp metal edge press against the base of my horn.

One blow of the hammer and I screamed like I never had before.

Two blows and I felt blood trickle down my face.

With the third, there was a resounding crack, and I felt a snap within my head like a rubber band breaking. And I wailed like a foal. The pain of the nails was nothing. . . . nothing at all. . . . compared to this. An integral part of myself had been torn away. Finally, I went limp, my body glazed in at least three kinds of bodily fluid as I lay there over the crate. "Enough. . . . fucking end this bitch." My face must have been masked in blood. Wherever Roses was. . . . I apologized to her.

"Come on. . . . I can take. . . . a little more. . . ." I whispered hoarsely, spitting out more than just saliva as I lay there. Just a little longer. Just a little more. . . .

. . . a little more. . . .

Then I felt a sharp and strangely cold pain erupt in my side. Everything seemed to be oozing out of me. What, didn't I have enough holes? "She's done. Now toss the

ship.”

“Toss this, motherfuckers,” P-21 said. Then there was a dull thud and the most curious sensation. . . I couldn’t move at all. “Stun grenade, courtesy of the Sand Dogs.” Every bit of me was limp and growing colder and colder. “No. . . no no no. . .” he muttered softly before he summarized my state nicely with a tell, “Oh, shit! Lacunae! Lacunae, get in here now! She’s been stabbed!”

. . . a little more. . . I just had to hang on a little more. . .

There was a faint pop and a presence beside me. “Oh. . . Blackjack. . .” was all she said, and her horn touched my side. The warmth of her healing brought home the pain, but the pain reminded me I was alive. It let me hang in there. . .

“You fuckers! You beasts! You. . . you touched her! I’m going to cut off every piece of you that you put inside her! I’m going to nail your fucking legs to a rock and see how well you can swim, you motherfuckers!” P-21 screamed, and I heard a dull thump over and over again. My mouth worked slowly as I fought to speak. . . but it was hard. I was so tired. So sore. . .

“Shh. . . lay. . . lay still. . .” Lacunae stammered in my mind. “I. . . I will try and find your horn. Perhaps it can be reattached. . .”

“Don’t. . .” I rasped softly. I felt her ear on my lips.

“Don’t? Don’t worry. We won’t let them get away with this.” Lacunae swore.

“No.” I coughed softly. “Don’t. . . kill. . . them. . .”

Lacunae didn’t move an inch as P-21 continued to rave and stomp my prone attackers. “I don’t understand. . .”

“Let them. . . go. . .” I said softly.

Lacunae was so startled she spoke aloud. “Let. . . let them go?!”

P-21 finished his stomping. “Let them what?!”

I concentrated on breathing; it was all I could do. My attackers simply groaned. “Killing them. . . won’t. . . make things. . . better.”

“Blackjack. . . look at you! Look at what they did!”

“I know. . . but I forgive them. . .” I rasped softly. “I. . . hurt them too. . . I. . . understand now. . .”

“They aren’t worth your forgiveness!” P-21 erupted. “They’re raping, murdering

meat! They're scum! They're filth! They need to be wiped out! They need to be killed as slowly as they... they hurt you! How can you spare them?! They killed Tarboots! They almost killed Oilcan. They were going to kill you. And Scotch..." He paused. "Where is she?" he asked in a rush.

I coughed. "Safe... below. Don't let... let her see... still a kid... no matter... what... she says..." I said with each heavy breath. "P-21... I'm... dying. Please. Let them go... for me..."

"Why..." One of my attackers rasped. "He's right. We are scum... and... I don't want to die... but... why?"

"A yellow... pony... once said... do... better. And I... don't want... My friends... to... kill." I breathed slowly a moment. "If you're... dead... you can't... do better..."

"You're crazy..." another of my attackers murmured. "How do you know we won't just do this again?"

"I don't." I admitted. I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth in frustration. "Just... do better... please... just... do better..." I begged. I couldn't give back to them what I'd taken... but I could give them two things... a second chance and my forgiveness. I was probably dead soon anyway.

I heard the sound of Lacunae dragging them out. "I will... remove them, per your wishes."

I saved four more. They might have been scum, completely and totally. They might have been better off dead, and maybe they would do this again. Maybe I'd made a horrible mistake.

But they at least had a chance to do better...

After that there was the problem of removing my legs from the floor. With them gone, Lacunae tried prying the nails out, but they'd been hammered deep and the feeling of them being withdrawn nearly stopped my heart. Oilcan was injured but would recover. Unfortunately, there was no recovering from a case of death. There was only one thing to do.

"Get some rope... and make sure that knife is sharp," I said quietly.

Four tourniquets and some sawing later and I was free. Lacunae set me in the bunk. My whole body wouldn't stop shaking. I thought that my heart would stop at any second as I shivered but couldn't seem to warm. I felt filthy, like some kind of

biological discharge.

But I'd saved Scotch and four others.

For that... I could endure.

Needless to say, when Glory arrived with the Captain and Seabiscuit, the shit hit the fan again. There was a whole new round of 'what?!', 'I'm sorry', and Thrush telling me how stupid I was for sparing Tarboots's killers. Fortunately, by then Lacunae and Scotch had washed most of the fluids off me and wrapped me up in a blanket. I'd lost four limbs and Celestia only knew where my horn had gone. Lacunae had healed the gash in my brow and regrown my horn, but it still felt like a useless stub like the rest of my extremities. The hydra had done nothing for me; I think I was at the point where my body just couldn't heal anymore.

It didn't matter. I just focused on breathing. Scotch had nestled the Fluttershy figurine where my left front leg met my shoulder and let me feel her smooth, pink mane on my feverish cheek. Apparently there were quite a few ponies coming and going all at once.. A little bit later, there was talking on deck. Then we cast off again. The motor purred and the water jet talisman whooshed. Octavia played her music on my PipBuck. I felt limbs I didn't have any more wanting to move and join in the notes.

Scotch hadn't said a word since she'd emerged from the hold. She just waited nearby. If I was thirsty, she provided a sip of Sparkle-Cola. I was sick, tainted, and dismembered, but I worried more about her. "Hey, Scotch. What do you call a mare with no legs who's in security? Baton."

She began crying. I sighed... "Scotch... that was a joke. You're supposed to be laughing."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"For what?" Her silence told me exactly what 'what' was. "Look, we were screwed, Scotch. The only way we were going to live was to stall. And, honestly, you got a whole, intact, healthy body. Maybe your head's been fiddled with a little, but you're going to have a long life ahead of you. I'm not. If there's anypony who's supposed to be put through the meat grinder, it should be me. That's just simple facts."

"You were screaming. They were doing... things to you. Weren't they?" she muttered softly, "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

“Let me tell you a secret. Come here.” I heard her move closer and nudge the cot. “No no, closer.” I whispered. I felt her breath on my lips. Then I stuck my tongue out and nailed her ear perfectly.

She jumped away and fell over something from the clatter, “Ewww! Blackjack!” I chuckled. . . because I had to. Because if we all started crying now there’d be nothing left. “You’re so weird.”

“I’m dying. I’m allowed to be weird,” I said softly.

“You’re not going to die,” Scotch replied. “No pony as boring as her can be wrong.”

“I assume you’re talking about me,” Glory said as she trotted closer. “Blackjack. . . I’m so. . .”

“If you say sorry one more time I will soil myself right here and now. And it will be nasty. I mean it! Poop so nasty it’ll sing and tap dance,” I threatened as I turned towards the sound of her voice.

“She’s being weird,” Scotch informed her.

“She’s always been weird,” Glory replied.

“I have been interrogating Scotch for details on your miraculous plan to save my life.” And if there was a hint of Sanguine in them, I was going to find some way to roll myself into the river. “Something about a healing talisman? If it cures taint, then I’m all ears. Really. . . hearing’s all I got,” I rasped, my throat still raw from what had happened. I could still taste it. Smell it. I’d almost prefer another deep breath of chlorine to clear it out.

“A healing talisman is involved. We’re calling it your birthday present,” Glory replied.

“Details?”

“No details.”

I pouted. “Aww, why not?”

“Because if we told you. . . then you’d stop us.”

I sighed at her words. “So Sanguine. . .”

“Is not involved. He’s the only pony who isn’t.” She kissed my cheek. “I made a promise to you.”

Okay, good... but it was apparently a plan that I’d still hate. “Okay, now I’m curious. . .”

“You get to stay curious. For now, we have to take a little boat ride. Thrush says busting her and her crew out of the Celestia is worth one free trip.”

“Free trip where?” I asked with a smile, playfully. Then my lungs spasmed and I started coughing again. Apparently, inhaling water was a very quick way to get a nasty case of pneumonia. . . even without tainted organs.

“Shush. Rest and conserve your strength.”

“Mmm,” I replied softly. “I want Rampage to come with us.”

“She’s doing Reaper stuff. . . fighting and. . . doing what she does best.”

“Don’t care. Want her here. She’s my friend and I want her with me,” I said simply and pointed one of my stumps at Glory. “Make. It. So.”

She tried to sound indignant. “Just because you’re. . .”

“Beautiful? Charming? Witty?” I asked with a grin. Those were all preferable to the truth: mutilated, maimed, and dying. She gave a hiccup, and I added, “No crying either. I mean it. Epic bowel movement of nastiness if you do.” She sniffed and I smiled. “I want her with us, Glory. I know why she left. Me and Scotch on a boat, alone. . . something bad might have happened. But now we’re together and I want all my friends with me. Okay?”

“It’s going to be a crowded trip,” Glory said softly.

“Make sure you have a proper rotation to check my bedpans. The stench will probably peel paint.” I knew it wasn’t necessary. I hadn’t eaten all day and wasn’t the slightest bit hungry. And I was pretty sure my doors were so swollen I wouldn’t be able to go without some heinous screams. But I had to be as Blackjack as I could be.

Ah well. I’d just hold it for the rest of my life.

“Alright. I don’t like it. But we’ll get her,” Glory said in resigned tones.

“See, Scotch? You can get anything if you’re sick and pathetic enough.”

The filly grunted skeptically. “All being sick ever got me was a trip to medical for a shot in the flank.”

I slipped in and out of consciousness. I really didn’t know if hours were passing or not. Aside from water and Sparkle-Cola, I didn’t drink anything. Glory tried to get

me to eat some mashed up and roasted Sugar Apple Bombs mixed with raw egg, but I was too sick for even her cooking. I knew there were ponies sharing the cabin with me, but I could never exactly tell who they were. Soon we'd left the river and were bobbing up and down.

"Are we on the ocean?" I asked no pony in particular.

"Yes," P-21 said right at my side, and I jumped. Well, would have jumped. Spasmed, really. He chuckled softly, "I thought that, when you couldn't see, your hearing got sharper."

"Yes, but you're still one quiet pony," I muttered. "So. . ."

"I'm not telling you anything about her plan, no matter how badly you shit yourself, Blackjack. I've seen the kind of mess you can really make, remember?" He said with a soft chuckle. "I don't think her plan is going to work. . . but it's her plan. Even if you'll hate it." He then put a hoof on my brow. "How's the fever?"

"Blargh." I muttered sourly. Why couldn't he be easier to manipulate?

"And the soreness?" he asked quietly. . .

For just a moment, I was confused. How had he known. . . but of course he knew. I went a little red. "Hurts. . ."

"I'd suggest an icepack, but I doubt there's an ice machine in the Wasteland," he replied. "And has it hit you yet?"

"Has what hit me yet?" I asked with a confused smile. But I knew what. . . I was just pretending. And he knew I was pretending. "It's not a big deal. . ." But it was a big deal. "It doesn't hurt that bad." It hurt really bad. I started to shake. But I couldn't fall apart. . . not now. Yet I couldn't stop. "I had to do it. I had to." But that didn't change a thing. I could pretend with Scotch and Glory. I could smile and act like what had happened to me didn't bother me a bit.

But not with him. Because he understood. Because once, I'd done something similar to him; more than once, now that I thought of it. Used him. Sent him back to be used. Sent him back to be the Overmare's trick pony. And then, slowly, I turned. I tried to keep myself as quiet as possible as I rolled towards him and buried my face in his chest. And he held me close and muffled my sobs with his chest as all the pain and humiliation leaked out of me.

I'd done this to him. Now I really, truly, understood. I could only hope no pony could hear me now. I hurt, and he did all he could to help me bear that hurt. Now I

understood why he'd wanted to kill them so badly. To kill anypony who might do this to another. And next time I met those four, or anypony who'd done to another what had been done to me, I prayed to the little yellow pegasus statue that I'd still be able to forgive.

When I finally pulled myself together, I said with utter sincerity, "I'm sorry." And now... I really knew what I was apologizing for. And he knew it too. "And... I'm sorry for killing him. I was scared and... I screwed up. I... I should have done more. I should have done better."

"Shhhh..." he shushed as he stroked my mane. "You know now. You really do... and so... I'm sorry." He sighed. "Every time I see you and Scotch, I'm reminded of that place... of feeling like... like meat. A thing. Being ashamed of my body reacting to the abuse." I shivered. Had I... I had. Goddesses, I had... he stroked my mane some more. Now that we were both broken, he could. He could comfort a hurting mare. "Thank you for saving my daughter from being raped," he said quietly.

I nodded, "You need to tell her that." I coughed and amended, "The daughter part I mean."

"I can't. Everything I feel for her is all twisted up inside me. Her mother was kind... but she used me. She never asked me if I wanted to be a part of the family she wanted. She simply assumed that I'd be there to give her the family she desired. I was never a person. Just a role." He sighed softly.

"That was wrong, but you're punishing Scotch for what her mother did. She's a smart kid. A good kid. She's already figured most of it out. Talk to her."

"Maybe..." he murmured softly. "When you can, get Glory and Lacunae to wash you... that always made me feel better."

But I was already drifting off with a smile on my face. After all, I heard Rampage coming aboard.

It was nice to sleep without dreams. It was what I imagined dying to be like. Nothing bad... good... or otherwise.

Being woken with a hoofclaw at your throat... that wasn't so pleasant.

"About time," I murmured. "What was taking you so long?"

"You were expecting me?" the Angel of Death murmured in my ear.

“Expecting? You’re late. I’ve half a mind to not let you kill me after all.”

“Very presumptuous,” she chuckled. “What happened to you calling me a monster? A murderer?”

“Well, now I need a monster. Glory plans on doing something to save me. P-21 knows I’ll hate it. So... I need to die before it happens. So. Get going. I’m raped. I’m mutilated. I’m ready to cash in.”

There was a silence, and then the hoof withdrew. “No.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. “No? What do you mean no? This is... this is your thing! This is what you do.”

“I give a gift to end suffering. You spurned that gift,” she purred in my ear. “Take your own damned life.”

Quietly, she left me lying there. I listened to the hum and coughed up a wad of something... raw. Something bloody and dark. “Well... fuck,” I muttered. Why was nothing ever simple?

I wasn’t sure how long we’d been travelling? Hours? Certainly we should have reached the Fluttershy clinic by now. Glory and Lacunae lifted me up and floated me out onto the deck. I heard the waves and felt the wind... and as I floated there in Lacunae’s magic, I felt something else. A warmth playing all up and down my body. “What... what is that?”

“What’s what?” Glory asked.

“I feel all... warm? But not like it’s from a fever,” I said as Lacunae began to wash me with a sponge. I was swollen and sore like damn, but I had to admit that it felt better than lying in that cot.

“That’s the sun,” Thrush said.

The sun? But... we must have been far out at sea. “Where are we going?” I asked softly.

“Told you. Surprise. We should be there soon,” Glory said. I was set down on a blanket. As I lay there, despite everything, I felt a little more peeved than usual at the Enclave’s cloud cover now that I felt the sun’s warmth playing on my hide. “I always took it for granted,” Glory said softly as the engine hummed. I nuzzled up against her, and her wing slowly stretched over me, keeping me warm. I wasn’t sure

how much time passed like that, but gradually, things began to cool off. Then the talisman slowed and stopped.

“Need to give it a little while to warm up. Starting to form ice,” Thrush explained. We lay there on the back of the ship as it rocked in the waves. I could hear my heart beating. Thump thump... thump thump...

“Is it night?” I asked softly.

Glory murred. “Mhmm.” Thump thump... thump thump...

“Can you see the stars?”

“Oh yes...”

“A lot of them?”

Thump... thump thump... thump...

“All of them,” she replied.

“Are they beautiful?”

“Yes...”

Thump... thump... thump...

“Thank you, Glory.”

“For what, Blackjack?”

“Trying...”

Thump... thump...

“Blackjack?”

Thump...

“Sorry...”

...

I should have fought. I should have held on longer as she shook me and called my name. But I was so tired, and I could see the stars.

They were calling to me.

I let go... relaxed...

And died.



Game over.