
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 III

Second Chances

Events build towards their inevitable climax in Equestria at large. Meanwhile, in Hoofington, rumors spread far and wide about the sudden disappearance of the notorious Security Mare. Strange groups accumulate outside settlements throughout the region, bearing an ominous standard. Life-stealing Enervation fields are on the rise, and something terrible stirs beneath the ruins of the Core. One way or another, the fallen city's dark secrets will soon come to light, and dramatic changes are in store for a certain group of friends...

34. Birthday

"This is the greatest day ever! We need to celebrate your birthday, babies, 'cause you were just born today!"

Once, after Hatches got killed, I'd asked Hymnal about what happened when we died. The question seemed somewhat pertinent at the time. The answer she gave was simple: we went into the recycler and somepony took our place. Finding that answer somewhat less than fulfilling, I pressed on. She attempted some muttered comment about how, when you died, you went to the everafter to be reunited with the princesses and your loved ones. Then she reported me to Mom, and one sore butt later I learned not to harass our stable's duly appointed spiritual leader.

Personally, I was finding being dead not much different than being alive in the ocean. It was black and quiet and I couldn't feel anything. I was just... nowhere. I had a vague sensation of motion, but I couldn't begin to tell you how I was moving or where I was going. I had no limbs to move, no heart beating, no mouth to speak or breathe through.

It was at this moment that I had my epiphany: death is really boring. Mom had taught me about how the living dealt with death, but she'd been somewhat lax on what the dead were supposed to do about...

A tiny pinprick of lavender light far off in the distance came to life, and with it I heard a single soft note and felt a gentle pull towards it. Now, I know that most ponies say not to head towards the light. Those ponies failed to mention that there weren't actually a lot of other options. Considering how many bad choices I'd made in my life, what was one more?

Though, considering how many bad choices I'd made, I looked forward to Celestia punting my sorry ass straight into Hell. I guess I could have fought against the pull, but... I was tired of darkness.

As I moved, I could hear the tone more clearly. It wasn't one constant drone but a single musical note that pulsed with the throb of the light. And... another pulse accompanied the first one. I moved closer still and saw a second light, a soft orange point that sang the other sound. And then a third was born, a cheery pink. Another, majestic purple. Teal. A pair, green and gold. A pair of pink motes pranced and tumbled around each other with a tinkling like laughter while a purple and lavender

pair hovered attentively nearby. Each with its own note. Its own music. There were hundreds. Thousands. Millions...

Wow... stars...

They weren't just lights in the sky. Well... they were. But they were other things as well. Like how, when you took a hoof and held it in front of one open eye, you could see both your hoof and whatever the other eye saw. But I didn't know what I was looking at. They were luminous things... Strange and unusual and powerful... some kind, most politely indifferent. Some were the shapes of wheels and eyes and brahmin. Others were strange patterns that twisted and seemed to sing notes of music my mind couldn't understand.

And some were ponies, glowing outlines that frolicked as they sang their music together, their individual notes rising and falling and growing and blending with the notes of the other things that shared this great expanse. They filled the void with song and light and their own strange beauty... their harmony. Other beings flitted among them and spread chaos and discord to stir up new melodies and music they could not create themselves. And I knew that I was home. I could stay here, if I wanted. There was always room for one more. For countless more. And I'd be happy here, I was sure of it. A part of me belonged here.

Except...

I looked back behind me at a round ball orbited by two lights, one pale and beautiful and the other bright and radiant. But the world they revolved around was dark and ominous. What of my friends?

The song turned mournful. There was nothing I could do now. I should stay. There wasn't any place there left for me, nothing that could hold me. But I kept looking down at that distant world. I felt one of those giant luminous shapes move behind me and gently hold me in her hooves. Stay, please... she seemed to beg.

I saw other worlds with other lights. Some orbited distant radiant orbs. Others had dozens of expectant motes above them as they sang down their own melodies. But all these worlds were bright with countless twinkling specks, like glitter or dew. And I watched as one of these luminary beings grew bright, and in a burst of light and song disappeared. The glowing cloud left behind spread, and new lights began to settle on other worlds or birth new luminary beings. Even these things were not eternal.

But in that darkness beyond their light, I felt certain there were things that were.

I looked back at my world. There were so few glimmering lights, and there seemed to be almost a spider's web of shadow draped over the entire world. Some light escaped... but most seemed caught in that dark web covering everything. The light of those orbiting spheres couldn't reach most of the world, try as they might to find some gap in the darkness and shadows.

What the hell had happened? The hooves holding me tightened, and off to the side I heard another note rise. It accompanied a star glowing with a fierce blue-white corona. A pony... no. An alicorn, proud and regal and glorious. He spread his wings wide and sang his note loud and gloriously across the heavens. He drove back those shadows beyond and all things that dwelled within. Such was he that his song drowned out all others as he swelled with pride. I expected the star to eventually stop and take a break, but he didn't. Instead, he grew along with his volume.

It grew to the point where the melody of the those luminary bodies was drowned out. Grew to where it became almost painful. I kept waiting for him to burst as the others had and let something new take his place. The mischievous ones floated about him, trying to trick him and break his onerous note, but he burned them with his scorn. Louder! Louder! It was if he were trying to fill all the universe with the single overwhelming note! He struggled with the strain, the note transforming into a scream.

Then he exploded. It was not a gentle burst of lifegiving light. No, this explosion was raw and violent as his scream echoed to the farthest corners of the universe. Then his cloud fell inward; he would not die as the other luminous ones had, would not share his life. His blue glow contracted and darkened. Something that was a star hardened and transformed from light to something dark and base. And still it screamed, tearing at the melody around it. No trick by the spirits could stop it. No song from the others could reach it. And as the song died, the darkness encroached.

Finally, a blue radiance altered its place in the heavens and plunged straight at the screaming mass. It sang its own ominous melody as it plunged in faster and faster towards the sullen ember, one song combating the other as they closed together. The impact and the blast of light filled the skies as the blue luminescence died and the screaming ember shattered. Only a dark and twisted core remained, tumbling through the heavens like a heart of black iron. Its scream rendered pitiful and thin, it flew towards that darkness untouched by the stars.

But by chance a world, green and rife with the tiny specks of ghost light, drifted too

near. The twisted remains curved towards it, speeding as they plunged towards the highest snow-capped mountain. The blast shattered the great peak, blasting it apart into flying stone. An immense pillar of cinder and flame shot up, raining down in an ever-widening circle of destruction. More mountains split and shattered, vomiting great torrents of fire and surging floods of magma. The forests transformed into sheets of flame. The seas were poisoned by ash and pieces of the star. The sky was rendered black with clouds. Those fragile motes and their infant songs snuffed out in an instant.

From the great impact a ring of stone formed, the pieces drawing together to collect the tiny specks of life. Sun and moon orbited the blackened rock. Eons passed before me, and I watched the clouds thin and the first rays of sunlight and moonlight play on the blackened ground. The dead seas lay calm and still, the broken mountains finally silent. Where the dread heart had fallen was a vast bowl filled with black rock. The heart, its spiteful malice sated, slumbered, its hateful note dropping to a whisper. Rain fell, washing out the dust and smoke and filling the bowl with a deep lake of dark water.

Tiny patches of life began to grow beneath the passing sun and moon. The patches became brush and forest. Insects and fish began to populate the world once more, then larger and more complex animals. Mountains rose and fell and the world shifted and changed as life once more flourished. And then those motes of life began to sing their own simple melodies. Their songs became more complex, rising and falling and evolving. Trickster spirits came to mold and meddle and inspire. The songs spread to every corner of the world... save one.

In the dark lake the buried heart stirred. It shrugged, and the mountains broke and the waters drained into the sea. The heart could do nothing but hum its one hateful tone and wait. Life crept innocently into the crater, and soon there was no warning to the rest of the world save for a knot of granite rising like a tombstone in the center. Deep within the earth, the vicious star waited. It could do nothing, its dread power spent.

But then zebras came to it with their songs and their dances. They built their homes and temples and finally a city. Most had no idea what was beneath them... but for some, sleep was troubled as the star droned its hateful tune. And from the pain it caused came inspiration for magic dark and foul. The songs were silenced. The dances stilled. Dark robes were donned, and the temples soon rang with the resonant drone. The ground was torn away, and fragments were forged into terrible weapons. The zebras went out to silence all other songs and to turn all voices to the

star's dread tone. It grew strong as others sung its song on its behalf, that hateful noise so like a scream.

And the stars perceived.

With magic and sorcery, the zebras called forth the fallen star and bade it rise. Return to the heavens. Thousands were offered in sacrifice, their screams rising up until the heavens could no longer bear them, and one star plunged down to silence it forever. Like a great flame it fell and shattered the zebra city, and the broken mountains shuddered and collapsed to bury all beneath their rubble. But the dark heart was still not destroyed; it caught the falling star and consumed the luminescent being within. Only two specks escaped... one rising to the sun... the other to the moon.

Time passed, and the buried star waited. Greenery returned. Zebras shunned the valley, calling it cursed, and did not tempt the stars to fall again. Clouds obscured the sun and moon so they could not see its resting place. But soon, new creatures came to the valley: ponies.

The star once more whispered and tempted, ensnaring the heart of a beautiful princess and turning her against her sister... but the sister wisely banished her from the earth and to the moon where the glowing light could leech out her poison and venom till a chance at redemption was possible. Time, though, was forever on the side of something older than the moon itself, and when foolishness and wickedness stirred in the hearts of pony and zebra alike, that thing hummed its hateful note once more. Ponies built their machines and weapons and spells and slew one another in bloody combat. The song was lost to a scream of hate and pain. This time, however, as ponies and zebras died, not all their tiny motes returned above. Many, a small fraction, but still so many, were snared in the spider's web and whisked to the dark heart, there to scream the dark note. Waiting. Tempting another star to fall and be devoured so that the heart could be freed.

And now I looked down at my dim world with a sense of horror and sadness. Was this true? A war between stars and monstrous things from beyond? A fallen star humming madness in the ears of the ponies of Equestria? I wondered if I was crazy; I hoped that I was. That all this was just my brain making its last feeble connections before finally expiring. This couldn't be true! It just couldn't!

It was too big. Too much. Even for me. And the glowing ponies around me agreed in their song.

But that was the point...

Of course it was too big for one pony. For one anything! That was why the single star with its single note had failed. Not even these glowing stars could keep back the darkness alone. It was when they worked together, combining their songs and changing... growing... that they could drive that vast and terrible darkness back. Harmony, not power, was their strength. Life, not destruction, was how they won.

So why didn't they help us? Here their song changed. Why help a world so close to complete failure? How could they spare more luminaries when every last one was needed? Some calmly, perhaps callously, suggested that we clean up the mess ourselves. The help of others would be of little use; what good would it do ponies to be transformed into spires of singing gelatin? But most stars simply had concerns of their own, and those that could help were helping as best they could.

But it wasn't enough. The dead heart of that star continued to hunger for the souls of its own, and its own dread note was beginning to build. It was intolerable.... And with each light that spiderweb captured from my world, its song grew...

I had to go back. I couldn't be here while Glory... P-21... all of them were there. Make me a ghoul. A ghost. A monsterpony. Anything! I couldn't sing with the others and leave them down there. I had to do something. Anything. Whatever it took. They mattered more than me!

And the stars' song turned mournful. No parent wanted to lose their child. But I wasn't a child any more. I turned to see that glowing lavender unicorn with a striped pink mane, and she smiled. 'Security saves ponies', she seemed to say. Then she leaned down and kissed my brow, and her gentle light became my world.

"Welcome back, Blackjack," a mare said quietly. I blinked rapidly, and the white resolved into four gray walls. Stable walls. Two rows of desks with the projector in the middle and the teacher's desk in the corner. Only Textbook hadn't ever smiled... well, except when she was a psychopath trying to kill me. I was the same age as Scotch. I looked around, feeling disoriented. Hadn't I just been floating... or something? I had a vague recollection of lights... and before that, being on a ship. No... dying on a ship!

"Oh crap," I muttered. "I've died and gone to Hell."

Textbook laughed. "Well, you're half right. You most certainly did die. Complete cardiac and respiratory failure for almost eight hours. Fortunately, your pegasus and Reaper friends are resourceful. Since Rampage is effectively immortal, Glory

was able to shunt her circulatory system into yours, keeping your body and brain alive long enough to reach your destination." Considering how Rampage healed... that couldn't have been pretty.

"So... are you Doctor Octopus or something?" I asked with a little frown. "Cause you're using a lot of really big words that make my head hurt."

"You don't remember us coming aboard?" she asked with a small smile, then sighed. "Well, that's no surprise, considering the state you were in. We kept quiet for most of the trip. We didn't want to risk you guessing our plan and stressing yourself with objections. No offense, but you're remarkably stubborn at times." Her form shimmered and became an aging grey and white mare with a curious striped mane and legs. One that I'd seen teaching in a university before Goldenblood had recruited her.

"Silver Stripe?" I blinked.

"Nice to meet you brain to brain," she said as she looked around. "Is this really what you think of when you think of school? I was hoping for some nice lecture hall." She sighed again and nudged the projector. "Ah well. The concept's what's important, not the aesthetics."

"This is taking place in my head?" Well, unless I'd inexplicably reverted to a filly... which, actually, I had seen happen before. "If you're here... then... Steelpony?"

She nodded, and the projector lit up. "Project Steelpony." An outline of a mare with three cogs in the center appeared. "One of the O.I.A.'s projects to build a better pony. We're using it to save your life."

I stood on my chair, pointing my hoof at her. "You are not turning me into Deus!"

She rolled her eyes. "And this is why we didn't tell you beforehoof..." Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. "Sorry, but it's all done. We were just waiting to see if your consciousness emerged or if your brain had suffered too much damage." The picture on the screen changed to a frowning Stable-Tec pony icon with several organs displayed. She pointed a hoof at the projection. "Heart, both lungs, stomach, and some other organs were all irrevocably contaminated and had to be replaced with synthetics." The bad blackened organs disappeared, and new shiny silver ones appeared. "Your stomach and digestive tract were also removed and replaced with a special processor developed by your friend Rover. Your mouth has also been altered, so you can now eat not only regular food but also gemstones and pieces of scrap metal. According to your friends, this won't be a big dietary change for you."

"Wait. I can eat metal and gems?" I asked, blinking in shock. This was too much, too fast...

"Can and have to. Your systems are powered by an internal microgenerator... we were actually very lucky to find an appropriate gem to run it... but to supplement that and repair damage, you'll need to ingest gemstones and scrap metal occasionally. On the upside, though, you'll never get tired again." The stomach on the picture disappeared and was replaced with a tiny generator picture like what I'd seen in the medical center dream. "Though you will still need to sleep occasionally to let your brain rest. There's a function in the PipBuck interface to let you know how badly you need it.

"You'll be glad to know you'll be seeing your friends very soon. You've got two full ocular implants; they should look relatively similar to your old eyes... barring a slight glow effect when you look right at somepony. Well, and the lack of a glow from irradiation; you're a rather unusual patient." She tapped the screen, and two eyeballs appeared. "You also had some brain damage. While we were able to remove the taint causing it, the damage itself was beyond our ability to repair. However, as far as we can tell, all of the damage is benign, which I'd probably not believe if I hadn't seen the diagnostics myself. Of course, we won't know for sure until you're awake."

"Why am I not awake now? And, am I going to have... have pistons and things sticking out of me?" I asked in a rush. I remembered that sensation Deus felt every minute of his life. The feeling of machinery struggling with flesh. I fought to calm down; if this was what they had to do to save me, then... wait. There was something... something Zodiac had said days back... no... I looked at Silver Stripe in shock, and she blinked, then smiled and shrugged.

"You should be okay. We neutralized the remaining taint. And no. While Rampage suggested something along the lines of Deus or Rover, Glory thought you'd prefer something less blatantly mechanical." The legs appeared on the projection. "All four limbs are reconnaissance grade, light and agile with rubber soles to cut down on sound. You can still crack skulls with them, but not tanks." She sighed. "Though why Rover insisted on adding—"

"Professor... you said..."

The Professor didn't look at me, keeping her eyes on the projection. "Now, while your limbs may be powered, you'll still need to take care of your own flesh and blood. Most of your other biological systems are still intact and functional, and we were able to make a few improvements there, too. So long as you survive and

aren't in truly ridiculous levels of Enervation, your biological parts should regenerate slowly. Nothing like Rampage's regeneration, but—“

“You said it would take years to make cybernetic organs from Steelpony!” I said as I jumped off the desk. Oddly, I felt myself transform into my adult self as I trotted in front of her. “Did you lie to me about that?” I asked as I stared into her gray eyes. I saw the tired sadness within them. “Please tell me you lied to me.”

“They’re good parts. Two centuries old... but well made,” she replied softly. “I know you’ll use them well.” Her lips curled in a small, sad smile. “It’s not like I’m planning to die. Rover’s just going to move my head into a jar. Not much difference. Body in a jar. Head in a jar. Really, it’s much more efficient.”

I gaped at her. “No... no no no... you can’t do this!”

“It’s already done,” she replied. “And it was my idea, Blackjack. Believe me, Glory was no happier about it than you are now.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, I’ll be stuck in Tenpony until I can get a new body. My life support isn’t exactly portable. Not one of those brainbots... that’s too much crazy for me to deal with.”

“But... why?” I asked, my rump hitting the ground, feeling numb all over. “You waited years to get your freedom.”

She looked at me for a long time. “I’m more than two hundred and fifty years old, Blackjack. In that time, I was a somewhat decent instructor, the leader of an illegal research project, and not much else. For a hundred and fifty years I sat in Tenpony Tower planning for the day when I’d actually start fixing things... and as soon as I got the chance, all I did was trot around in circles killing raiders and gangs and driving my friends away from me. In the end, I wound up in a jar.”

“But what about the Collegiate? What about the Zodiacs?” I pressed, not believing what I was hearing.

“Both fine groups. I have faith that Triage will run things well now that I’m gone. She’s cynical and hard, but she’s a realist who won’t let the rest of her fellows down. And the Zodiacs will support her. I made sure all of them will continue.” She dropped her gaze. “Now that they have Steelpony, I know they’ll have a future to work towards.”

I stared at her hard. “How long?”

“Excuse me?”

“How long till you have a new body? Till you’re trotting around like normal?”

“Oh. That. Yes... well... there are many different factors to consider. The fact

is that Steelpony was made to augment an existing body, not replace it outright. I could be shoved into a robot, I suppose, but that tends to degrade one's sanity pretty darn quickly." I glared at her, tapping my hoof on the floor as she looked away. "Well, taking into account current technological levels and the fact that most of my body was synthetic... Probably... fifty or sixty years..."

If I hadn't already done it, I would have sat down hard. Fifty years? That was two pony generations! "But why? Why me? Why throw your life away when you finally have a chance to get it back? You had Steelpony. You could finally have been... been something!"

But she simply shook her head. "You don't understand, Blackjack. All my life, I've wanted to make the world a better place. That was why I became an engineer and a teacher. To make things to help ponies." She pointed to her math equation cutie mark and then sighed. "But I haven't helped anypony at all."

"What are you talking about? You helped—"

"No, Blackjack. I didn't." she replied firmly. "I didn't heal a single hurt soul. I didn't take down a single criminal. I didn't do anything but sit in a glass jar while ponies like Triage and Sagittarius did the real work." She then looked at me, and I saw the anger and shame etched on her face. "For two hundred years I watched ponies die. I stood in the background while my friends actually fought to change things. And in the end, I accomplished nothing but losing their friendship!"

She gripped my shoulders. "In one month... you..." She paused to nudge my chin upwards so her gaze could meet my downcast eyes. "You have done more to help ponies than I have in a quarter of a millennium. You have suffered and sacrificed and paid in blood, sweat, and tears. Do you understand how incredible that is?"

"It's nothing. Luck and my friends. I cause more mess than I solve," I said, now the one feeling ashamed.

She shook me once, and forced me to look back into her eyes. "It's not nothing. You've changed ponies' lives for the better. And I won't let you die, not when you can have a chance to accomplish so much more." She closed her eyes. "If me spending the rest of my life in a jar is the price paid so you get another shot, then I actually feel like I've done something worthwhile. Something not undone by war and death."

I stared at her for a long moment, and she looked away, her ears folding back. "There's something else, isn't there?"

She closed her eyes. “There is something else... yes.” She took a deep breath. “You may be related to one of the Ministry Mares.”

What?

“That’s... that’s ridiculous.” I laughed, expecting a smile or something... some hint this was a joke. She wasn’t laughing, though. She simply looked at me, almost with pity. “Completely ridiculous! How could I be related to any of the Ministry Mares? Why would you think that?”

“Two reasons,” she replied soberly. “The first is that Glory told me about the silver bullets and the black security cases they came inside.” A picture of one of the Silver Bullet cases flashed onto the projection screen. “Each of these are enchanted so that they can only be opened by a very few select ponies or relatives thereof.” I had a feeling that that list neatly matched everypony EC-1101 was supposed to go to. “The Ministries used the security cases to transport very secret letters and small objects to each other towards the end of the war.”

“So, what... my great great aunt twice removed was Rarity’s cousin? What’s the big deal?” Certainly not something worth dying over, that was for sure.

“If that were it, then it wouldn’t be a big deal. But then there’s project Steelpony. I expected the data to be damaged. In fact, I was dreading the months or years needed to repair it. After all, trying to force EC-1101 to unseal it when you’re not authorized to do so would hardly be good for Steelpony or the program.” The picture on the projector showed me cutting open a terminal with a chainsaw. The zony began to pace. “However, Steelpony wasn’t damaged. It was unsealed with all its data completely intact. There were files there that even I had forgotten about. The only way that would be possible is if EC-1101 actively removed the seal... and it would only do that for a direct descendant of a Ministry Mare or the princesses.”

I stared as the picture changed to one of me pushing a button with a hoof and the terminal saying ‘access granted’. “But...” I thought of Fluttershy, Rarity, and Twilight.

She gave a little smile. “But that’s impossible. I know. The Ministry Mares never married or had children. Rainbow Dash was widely believed to prefer the mares, but the others didn’t, and believe me, they were under constant and intense public scrutiny; only Applejack was ever in a confirmed relationship, and even that was often regarded as questionable.”

“Yeah, what was with that?” I asked with a small frown. “I mean, the whole ‘no

dating, no kids' thing."

The zony sighed and shrugged. "It was a prevailing attitude during the war. So many were giving so much in blood, sweat, and treasure that it was seen as indulgent. The Ministry Mares were supposed to be working on winning the war full time. Towards the end, I'm afraid the public would have been outraged at any act of self indulgence. I heard Luna herself asked Applejack to postpone her relationship with the buck she was dating till after the war was settled. The closest one ever came to being married was Rarity to Prince Blueblood. I understand her rejection was quite legendary."

"Yeah. He was still feeling it two centuries later." I sighed as I rubbed my leg. It felt flesh and blood here in my head. "So... what does it matter if I am or not? I mean, if I remember correctly, EC-1101 goes to each of the people in the line of succession and then to a 'descendant.' And that was broken or something."

"As far as EC-1101 is concerned, I don't know how or if it will matter. But there are other considerations too." Great! Lay it on me. I was now part robot and apparently the great great grandkid of one of the Ministry Mares. I could take it! "You see, in order to purge the taint saturating your system, we had to have access to a spell held by the Twilight Society, a group of ponies descended from the M.A.S. researchers in who survived the bombs. They control Tenpony Tower, where we, physically, are now, and unlike us, they had some very specific demands."

"So, let me guess, I owe them a million bits plus my firstborn?" I asked with a snort, knowing that would never happen.

"No. What they want you to do is to try and open a door," she said grimly. "A door that can only be opened by a Ministry Mare. One particular mare."

"Twilight Sparkle?" I wondered if the Twilight Society could have just asked the Goddess. Twilight was a part of it... somehow.

"Right. A one in six chance is better odds than they've had in ages," she said quietly. "If you can't open it, then I'm sure they'll pat you on the head and send you on your way. But if you can, then they'll try to get their hooves on whatever is inside." She looked at me soberly. "But if you do open that door, that means that everything inside is yours by right. I know you're inclined to give things up, and I know they will plead their need. Trust me, it's a lie. For a century and a half, I worked with them. Whatever help they need is nothing compared to the help they've denied to others. They could have dedicated themselves to improving the Wasteland; instead, they turned Tenpony Tower into a gated community and turned away everypony they couldn't either exploit or use. And the second you turn the room's contents over to

them is the second they will boot you and your friends out the front door.”

Well... that sounded... pleasant. “But... Professor... I... I don’t want you to be trapped like this.” It felt like she was going to die or something! Was it just me, or was everything starting to get hazy around us?

“Looks like the sedatives are taking effect.” She put her hoof to my lips. “I’ve had years to come to terms with this. You saved Capricorn and Pisces. You gave us Steelpony, even after I tried to trick you. By destroying the Celestia, you saved the Collegiate as well. I have no doubt that Steel Rain would have destroyed us if we resisted, and if we surrendered, well...” She closed her eyes as she smiled, looking tired but happy. “By saving your life... I can save more. Isn’t that what you always do, Blackjack?”

That was different. I’d killed ponies who didn’t deserve it. Deep down, I wasn’t much different from the people I fought, if maybe a little more stupid and reckless. I didn’t want good ponies to die for me. But... that wasn’t what she needed to hear from me right now. “Yeah. It is,” I said as I looked at her. Funny, but did she always look so old and tired? “Thank you, Silver Stripe.”

“No, thank you, Blackjack,” she said as with a curl of her wrinkly lips. “And happy birthday.”

My eyes opened, and at first all I saw was a gray haze. Then a black and white picture of a hospital gurney took shape next to me, beyond it a wall decorated with a butterfly motif. A sheet was pulled over a vaguely pony-shaped mound... a mound missing its legs. Black and white gave way to grainy color, and I stared at the pink splotches on the sheet, matching the wings of the butterflies on the wall. A cable trailed from the covered head to my own temple. A dark tan earth pony stood next to some equipment that beeped and bubbled, his hoof disappearing under the sheets. “She’s sedated. We can make the transfer.”

“Pickled pony is best pony,” growled a familiar voice. I slowly turned and looked up at the cybernetic Sand Dog, Rover. He snorted. “Pony is awake. Pony should still be sleeping.”

I felt hooves on my shoulder, and feathers tickled my side softly. “Welcome back,” Glory said in my ear before she bit the cable and gently pulled it out. I felt something tickle behind my eyeball as it was removed. Oh... that sense of wrongness was kicking in. These legs didn’t feel like my legs. They felt like... like enormous

complicated booties glued to my body. I kicked and rolled off the table, and my body moved on its own to put its hooves down. Of course I fought it and went rolling across the concrete floor. Alarms and alerts flashed in my vision.

This was bad. This didn't feel like me. Every movement I made felt awkward. I flailed on my back. I finally just stopped as I panted and looked at every eye on me. My friends all stared at me in shock. I could see their faces as clearly as if I was looking at them through a scope: fear and worry. I gasped... and yet... my heart didn't thunder in my chest. My pulse didn't pound in my ears. My body felt unnaturally quiet and still as I stared up at them.

"Pony is so dramatic," Rover snorted, rolling his gray eye before returned to the sheet-covered mare. "Doctor Pony. Pegasus Pony. Best we work now, or only have scraps left."

P-21 trotted towards me, kneeling. "Blackjack..." I jerked again, my mechanical hooves driving me back and bouncing over the floor. I fought it, which resulted in me rolling over. My flailing limbs caught him in the gut, blasting the wind out of him.

"Stay back!" I shouted. "I have no idea what's going on!" What was my body was trying to do? My random rolling knocked over a table; hopefully I hadn't broken anything.

"This is no way to operate a surgical environment," the brown buck said behind his operating mask.

I managed to rise to my hooves, but it was tough trying to learn how to walk. My brain kept sending signals that my legs weren't following right. So I'd move, then I'd correct, then overcorrect, then overcorrect for the overcorrection... and then land on my face. I didn't walk out of the surgery so much as repeatedly fall over in the general direction of the door. Finally, out in something that looked more like a recovery area than an operating room, I found a corner and collapsed in it.

'ERROR,' flashed over and over in my vision. That seemed to sum up everything in me right now. Rampage, P-21, and Scotch trotted after me. I wanted to gasp, but my lungs didn't gasp. I wanted my heart to race, but it didn't beat at all. They stared at me, P-21 in pain as he held his gut. Rampage stepped closer. "Blackjack..."

I closed my eyes, then looked at her again. A targeting icon appeared on her head... then I looked over at P-21... and watched the blue crosshairs lock onto his head as well. And Scotch. I clenched my eyes shut.

"It was the only way we could save your life," Scotch said softly. "Sorry I lied," she

added as her ears folded back. I looked at her and gave a small smile.

Alive. I was alive. My friends had worked their asses off to save my life. I could see. I could- at least in theory- walk without feeling like a cripple. I'd been given a second chance. So why was I so upset? Would I seriously have preferred being dead to this?

I'd been given a second shot. Was this really how I was going to treat it?

Slowly, I opened my eyes again, and thankfully they weren't throwing targets all over the place anymore. Things still felt... off. A sort of nagging discomfort where my shoulders and hips met my body. It didn't hurt... exactly. More like my brain wasn't sure what to make of it. At least my mutated limbs had been a part of myself. Now it felt like half my body was wrong.

But I'd gotten used to faking it.

"No problem, Scotch. I probably would have freaked out horribly if you'd told me the truth," I said as I tried to hug myself. Again, my legs went wonky and jerked spasmodically.

"We weren't sure you made it," Rampage said with a little frown. "We were hours away from Manhattan when your heart stopped. Rover had some pipes Glory was able to jam into my chest and yours to keep everything going inside you. Thrush set a new speed record, and once we were outside the tower, Lacunae got the army outside to let us in." She jerked a head towards the window. "Red Eye probably has a thousand troops surrounding this place... but apparently nopony messes with alicorns around here. They stepped aside easy as you please. Then she stayed behind. Said the tower wouldn't be friendly to her."

P-21 nodded. "They almost didn't let Rover and Rampage in."

"They insisted we turn over all our ammunition," the armored mare said as she looked at her hoofclaws. "I think they realized at that point that there was a mistake in their security policy. Actually, I think they were going to shoot me on general principle, can you imagine? Nearly had to commit a bloodbath just to be allowed inside," she said with a little pout. "Fortunately, they reconsidered when I shot myself in the head in front of them. For some reason, that just cut right through all the arguments."

Somewhere in Tenpony, I was sure there was a head of security taking either antacids or shots of hard liquor. Possibly both. I made myself smile. "Tell me you behaved yourself." The three of them clearly relaxed. I hoped that meant that

they didn't see me trying to squirm out of my own limbs.

She inhaled and rolled her eyes. "Please. One pony did say something about zebras and filthiness, but when I asked him to elaborate, he suddenly remembered an appointment," Rampage said as she tapped her chin. "There may have been claws on tile, too. Hard to say."

"You're on Mint-als again, aren't you?" P-21 asked her flatly.

"I've been out for days! I finally got to replace my stock!" She giggled as she bounced on her hooves in a very glittery circle. "These Tenpony guys always have the nicest shit!"

"Yeah. Well, they provided the very nice hospital to put me back together again," I said as I looked at the clinic. "What about Rover?" I couldn't imagine being in a tower full of ponies was good for the old dog.

"He's staying out of sight. He doesn't like ponies and ponies don't like him. Apparently, when Zodiac asked him to do the surgery, he was quite... something," P-21 said as he looked back into the operating room. "He wanted to make sure she was taken care of. I guess there aren't many folks in Equestria like them."

"When Glory used your broadcaster, she got help from all over the Hoof!" Scotch said with a grin. "Sure, Sanguine made his snotty offer, but so did the professor. Well, not snotty in her case. Dusty Trails sent a box of gems straight quick. Bottlecap didn't have any parts, but she said the vendors took up a collection for when you were better. Hell, even Caprice sent a whole case of quality chems, plus every chunk of Deus she could find. Apparently, she only sold Zodiac the back half and was still trying to figure what the front end was really worth."

"You mean I have pieces of Deus in me?" No wonder my insides felt out of it. I could almost hear tiny metal parts inside me screaming 'CUUUNNNNTTTT'.

"A few. Apparently she had to extract some sort of metal stuff to strengthen your bones... or what used to be your bones. And there're some other parts in there too," she replied softly, not quite understanding my reaction; but then, she hadn't been chased halfway across the Hoof by him.

Pieces of Deus. Pieces of the Professor. "Is there anything left that's original?" I muttered, looking at my... hooves and tapping them together idly.

"Can't you just be happy to be alive?" P-21 asked with a little frown. "A lot of people wanted to help you." I smiled at his stern tone and looked up at him. He flushed, rubbing his brushy blue mane as he looked away.

"You're right. You're right. I just... it's a lot to get used to." A target locked on to his head, then closed my eyes tight. A lot to get used to. "Speaking of broadcasters, where is my PipBuck?"

P-21 reached over, took my right hoof, and pressed in a plate. It slid away, and there was the familiar screen. "It's built in now. You don't need to cover it up any more."

"They'd have to take your leg off to get it now," Rampage said with a grin. Then she frowned and rubbed her chin. "Of course, I'm pretty sure Psychoshy and Sanguine wouldn't have a problem with that, so I wouldn't get too comfy."

"Right," I chuckled mirthlessly. "Comfy..."

"Blackjack? What's wrong?" Scotch asked. I sighed and closed my eyes, tapping my head against the wall.

"Nothing, Scotch. Just been through... a lot," I said as I tried to sort through my emotions. All this help. All this attention... I was nothing special. Even if what the professor said was true, I didn't deserve it. I looked at her sitting there with her head bowed. "And none of it was your fault. Understand?" She sniffed again and nodded, pressing her hindlegs tightly together.

"Well... I got some news you'll like," Rampage said, and she used a tone that promised that, if I didn't like it, she was going to do something unpredictable to me. "Big Daddy is alive, and the first thing he did was thump the gangs into pulling back. He's got your eyepatch, somehow... not sure if he lost an eye in the shelling or if he just likes the look, though. The peace is holding; it's been three days, and DJ Pon3 hasn't announced any new killing." She looked at me with a cool smile. "Oh, and for blowing up the Celestia, you are now a Reaper, whether you want to be one or not. They're scrubbing out Deus' room for you."

"Well, so long as everypony understands that I am one lousy Reaper," I said as I closed my eyes, then frowned and peeked, catching the three of them giving each other skeptical glances. I gave a stern look, and all of them blinked and grinned.

"Absolutely! Blackjack: Worst. Reaper. Ever," Rampage said, and Scotch nodded quickly along with her.

P-21 chuckled. "Things are a little messier on the Steel Ranger side. Apparently, the entire order has gone crazy. The Rangers attacked the Stable Dweller's stable out here. Then there was Rain's shelling. Some nasty business elsewhere. The whole thing's blown up in their faces. Apparently Crunchy Carrots didn't make it. Good thing, or she'd probably be shot for having lost their base. Stronghoof rallied the

outcasts, but he needs somewhere to operate from. Steel Rain's gone to ground. He must have had some fallback point planned."

"Sounds like him," I muttered as I rubbed my head. "So... that leaves the Enclave... Red Eye... the zebras and their tank..."

"Actually, I don't think that that was their tank," Rampage said as she fished out another Mint-al from her pouch.

"Uh... it was striped?" Scotch Tape said, wisely omitting the 'duh?'.

Rampage rolled her pink eyes. "I mean that, while that was a Zebra Behemoth class tank, I doubt it was fighting for just the zebras." The three of us looked confused as she popped the Mint-al into her mouth and chewed. "Nopony throws heavy armor like that at a bunch of infantry. It's stupid. They just scatter and call in air support, artillery, or armor of their own. If that were a zebra tank, I'd like to kick the shit out of their commander for not using a fire team to pin us down. Two sniper teams and we'd have been dead meat. Or a melee specialist unit..."

"Twist?" I asked softly.

"Hmm?" She smiled at me, then blinked. "What?"

"Just... making sure of who I'm talking to..." I said as I glanced at P-21 and Scotch.

The striped pony chewed thoughtfully. "My guess is, that wasn't zebra. So somepony else has a Behemoth class tank after you."

"Well, that's so much better," P-21 muttered sarcastically.

"Actually, it is. One tank is pretty easy to avoid if you're careful. But you get a few dozen foot soldiers pinning you down so that it can blow you to pieces, and you'd better hope your air support is top notch," the striped mare said matter-of-factly. "As I was telling Shujaa and Minty, you can't just throw a single..." Then she blinked as she looked around. "Wait... something's the matter..."

I saw the pupils contract. "Twist... don't panic. Please..."

"What's... what's happened? Where am I? This isn't Miramare! Where's Pepper-mint? What happened to her?" She began looking around wildly. "Where are they? This is a hospital! Are they hurt? What's going on?"

I sighed. I couldn't have her freaking out now, in the middle of Tenpony Tower! "Rampage!" Please don't make me have to hunt down a gun to sedate you! I sure didn't want to find out how busted my horn was.

The pink eyes blinked as she stared at me in horror, and then slowly they relaxed. She closed her eyes and slumped, hugging her head. “No blood anywhere.... That’s a good sign.”

“You just went out again. It wasn’t bad,” I added quickly, and she looked relieved for that. “You were talking all military and stuff.” I frowned a moment as I looked around. Scotch suppressed a yawn as I asked, “So where is Lacunae?”

“The professor’s quarters,” P-21 replied. “An alicorn, a sand dog, and a cyberzony’s severed head. Sounds like the start of a bad joke.” I had to wonder about his sense of humor...

“Ponies is all bad joke,” growled Rover from the doorway. “Is done. Is okay.” I rose to my hooves and slowly walked towards the aged canine. His cybernetic eye followed my steps carefully as I staggered. “Pony is doing all wrong. Do not think of walking, pony. Walk. Legs is smarter than pony.”

“I can’t help it. My legs want to do something else,” I said as I looked down at them. “I’m tripping over my own hooves!” I protested as the damned things twitched under me. He just sighed and rolled his filmy eye. I sighed too as I looked at him, then past him at Glory and the brown buck. “Look. I just wanted to say thank you. To all of you, for everything. It’s just... right now, it feels all muddled up. I’m trying to sort it all out.”

“Ponies is always whining,” Rover growled, shaking his head, and then shuddered as he closed his eyes. “Always the whining.” Then he pointed a mechanical finger at me. “Pony has better leg now, like dog. Dog make best pony legs ever. Better than professor pony.”

“Why did you help?” P-21 asked with a small frown.

He looked at the blue buck and snorted. “Pony take home. Dog work under city. Many accident. Many. Pony not care about dogs. Professor care. She make new leg. Strong leg. Show dogs how make, too. Make organ and parts so dog can do job and live. When bombs fall, dogs use metal parts to survive. Not become twisted. Not become hellhound. Stay dog. Stay sane. So she say she need dog help, dog help.” He growled and pointed a finger at P-21. “Dog remember promises and favors.”

“Well, thank you,” I replied as I looked at my body. My synthetic limbs were some sort of light metal painted with a matte white enamel. The forelegs ended all the way up at my shoulders, but the metal of the hindlegs stopped just below my cutie

mark. I still had my lucky... well... relatively lucky queen and ace. "I'll... I'll try to remember, too." Then I laughed. "At least I have hooves again. For a while there, I thought I was going to grow—" I froze as four white digits extended from my hoof and flexed before my eyes. "AHH! I have fingers!"

Rover snorted, but I swore he was smirking! "Thumbs is better, pony. Pony will see."

"Come. Let's get you to the cargo elevator," the brown buck said. "Crazy times in Tenpony. I swear." He smiled though, as if quite welcoming this craziness. Then he pointed a hoof at me. "Stay here, please. At least a few hours for observation. After working on you for three days, last thing we need is for one of those synthetic organs to be rejected." He escorted Rover from the clinic. Given how dark it was outside I figured most of the tower was asleep. Glory gave a tired yawn, and all my friends seemed likewise bushed.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" I asked as I looked at them.

"The Twilight Society provided a room," P-21 said with a little frown. I agreed with his expression; the Twilight Society of Tenpony Tower definitely wanted something from me. I had to wonder what I was going to do about it. He fought another yawn. "We were worried... I mean, after three days we weren't sure you were going to be coming back. Or if you did, that you'd be... you know... you."

Glory bit her lip as she peeked at me behind her falling mane. "You said... any way to save you..."

"That didn't involve Sanguine," I finished for her. I looked at the white appendages sticking out of the end of my right forehoof and bashed it a few times with my left. Finally, there was a clack, and the fingers retracted. I really wished there was some sort of manual or something: 'Your New Mechanical Body and You.' Finally I smiled as I looked into her eyes. A real smile. "You did good," I said as I nuzzled her cheek. "I really thought I was toast."

"You were," Glory pointed out with a sigh before she kissed me back. "After two days of fiddling with you... I was seriously about to track down some zebra witch doctor or something to bring you back." She sighed as she held me in a tight hug, kissing the side of my neck. "Do you remember anything? While you were out, I mean?"

"No... not really. Something about stars, I think," I said softly before I pulled back. Blood smeared her forelegs and she looked like she needed a good long day of rest. "Why don't you go clean up and catch some shuteye? I'll try and figure out... stuff." I forced a smile as a crosshair appeared on her forehead. "You know, while

it's quiet?"

"You promise you won't get into trouble?" Glory asked. What was I, a foal? What kind of trouble could I get into here in Tenpony Tower? "I think Helpinghoof would be okay if I slept in here." I sighed, shaking my head as I tried to carefully stroke her cheek.

"Glory. It's a bed. A clean bed. With a shower and a toilet and..." I sighed again; now I was really wishing that I could go with her. "Nnnngh... maybe I can leave Helpinghoof a note?" I looked at the enamel coating my limbs. Hopefully they were waterproof.

"Already disobeying doctor's orders? It's his clinic. Try to follow..." She yawned and swayed. Rampage caught her before she staggered.

"I think we should all go." P-21 muttered as he rubbed his eyes. "It's late... or early... somewhere between the two." He pointed to some boxes in the corner. "There's a bunch of stuff there folks gave us to give you. We were going to do a party, but I don't think anypony expected you to pull through so early."

"You all go ahead. There's not much I can do anyway, beside figuring out complicated skills like walking." And, according to the refreshingly familiar screen of my PipBuck, I wouldn't need to sleep again for a few more days, minimum. After watching my friends leave, I walked back to the operating room, every third step sending me staggering as I overcorrected.

I felt a stab of guilt at the bloody mess left behind; I had to do something about it. I looked around the back room and found a janitor's closet. I stared at the door handle and concentrated. I knitted my brows, grit my teeth, and crossed my eyes trying to get my horn to work.

Just as much nothing as when Lacunae first regrew it; I was a horn-headed earth pony now. I sighed, opened the door with my hooves, found a bucket, filled it up, and added some Abronco detergent. I started to clean up the blood that smeared the floor and the operating table. On a counter was a large jar covered with a sheet, a monitor machine next to it. The talisman hummed as it beeped softly.

I was halfway though cleaning up, and probably making more of a mess in the process, when the brown buck returned. He looked at me in surprise as I squeezed out the dirty sponge between my hooves. "You know, we have janitors for that."

"It's my fault there's a mess. Least I can do is clean it up," I said softly as I scrubbed the floor. He looked at me curiously.

"Actually, most of it was from Rover removing her head. Say what you will for neatness, those claws of his can sure dismember a pony," he said as he got a sponge as well.

"You don't have to do that," I said as he started cleaning up the mess from the other side.

"It's no trouble," he began.

"You don't have to do that!" I snapped. I stared at him in shock. I looked down at the dirty floor, my eyes targeting soap bubbles now. "Nopony should be troubled on my account. I'll clean it up."

He just stood there for almost a minute, watching me as I worked. "You really hate yourself, don't you, Blackjack?" I stared at him for a moment, half in confusion and half in fear. "You don't think we should have saved you, do you?"

"I'm glad Glory did," I said as I looked back at the mess I was making worse.

"No doubt. She's happy, which matters to you. In fact, if Glory wanted you dead, you'd probably shoot yourself just to make her happy," Helpinghoof said with a little chuckle. "What I mean is, you don't think you deserved to be saved, do you?"

I didn't answer. I just sloshed around dirty water as I stared down at the sponge. Finally, I said quietly, "There are better ponies... ponies who should be back." I sighed softly, closing my eyes. "Scoodle. Radishes. Mallet. Tarboots. Elder Crunchy Carrots. Roses. Thorn." I clenched my jaw. Marmalade. Rivets. Midnight. Mom... "So why is it I get to die and come back but they have to stay dead?"

I wanted to gasp. I wanted my heart to pound. Instead, everything inside me was still. "The Professor... Glory... my friends... everypony... they all think I'm special. That somehow I'm important or better or... or something! How can they think that?" I asked as I stared at him. "I've screwed up so many times... how is it that I'm worth giving a second chance?"

Helpinghoof just chuckled and shook his head. "Because folks like you, Blackjack. You're a good pony."

"Am not..." I muttered, squeezing out the sponge. "I'm not special at all."

He sighed and then barely suppressed a yawn. "You don't feel you're worth the help others give you. You feel that there's somepony better who should get it. So you feel guilty, and when half the Hoof springs to action to help you... you feel bad because you think you don't deserve it."

I looked at him curiously. I hadn't thought of that. He asked after a minute, "Do you think your friends show good judgment, Blackjack?"

That's a good question... "P-21 follows me into irradiated tunnels, I've shot Rampage in the head on more than one occasion, and Glory loves me." He laughed as he squeezed out his sponge, and I smiled despite myself. "Honestly, I think Lacunae's the smartest one of all of us. But on average, I'd say my friends have better judgment than me."

"Then trust their judgment. If they... and so many others... think that bringing you back was the right thing to do, then trust it. Accept it's good and worthwhile." He smiled. "But if you insist on cleaning up, then by all means. I'll be in my office." I watched as he stood, dumped the bucket of dirty water into the sink, set the bucket down, and started to leave.

I blinked as I watched him go. "So... you're going to let me just clean it up on my own?"

He looked around at the mess and then at me. "Well, we could talk about it, but you'll just say you're not worth talking to. We could fight over it, but you'd just thump my rump." The brown buck chuckled as he shrugged. "At least with cleaning therapy, you work off some of your guilt issues and I get a clean operating room." And with that, he trotted out and left me to my work. I laughed despite everything, shaking my head. Security... blows up battleships and cleans floors. All I had to do was learn to cook, and I'd be perfect.

I played some of Mixers's finest, and an hour later I had the room as clean as I could get it. The constant activity was helping me figure out some of the weirdness in my body, too. Finally, I dumped out the buckets and put everything away. I looked at the covered jar next to the beeping equipment but couldn't bring myself to look inside. After all, what would I do if she looked back? Instead, I trotted out into the recovery room, glanced into the small office, and turned off the tunes.

The brown buck had his head on his hooves, snoring brokenly as he slumped over his desk. I sighed, looked around, and spotted a threadbare prewar jacket. I draped it over his shoulders and then closed the door behind me.

So... what was there to do in Tenpony Tower at two in the morning?

I trotted over to the crates. Birthday presents in 99 were usually an extra portion of recycled yogurt and maybe a 'free bump to the head of the breeding queue' voucher. I looked at my thrashed saddlebags and shot-up armor. The poor rearing filly patch

was stained brown and half peeled off. The word ‘Security’ had so many bullet holes and dings that it was hard to tell if I was Security or Secretary. I looked at the shreds of duct tape still clinging to the legs. I sighed, running my hoof over the chewed and patched kevlar.

I smiled as I saw Vigilance. My horn couldn’t even flicker, but I cradled it in my hooves as I lifted it out. Well, I needed more practice using the mouthgrip anyway. Then I looked down at the grip.

A new name had been carved into it. ‘Blackjack.’ I sniffed as I looked at that list of names, from Card Trick to myself. I looked at Tarot. Could there somehow be some way that Tarot was Twilight’s child? And the gun had been passed down from mother to daughter, to me. I pressed the cool metal slide of the weapon to my warm brow and sighed. Then I set the pistol aside.

Beneath that box was one box from Bottlecap. By ‘collection’, she’d clearly meant a collection of ammunition. I looked at the box of ammo and then recalled what Rampage had said. Filling up my saddlebags with bullets at this moment might not go over well with Tenpony security. I wondered how they’d gotten the crate in. Panic, rush, and threats? I covered it up. Really... why confiscate ammo, anyway? It seemed a lot more energy-efficient to confiscate weapons... but it wasn’t my show. Besides, I doubted I’d be as easy with the idea of Vigilance taken from me rather than bullets for the gun.

Underneath that was a box filled with a bottle of Buck, Party Time Mint-als, some Dash inhalers, Rad-X, and Rad-Away, as well as a little jar of bright blue dust that I assumed was Moon Dust. It seemed that Caprice had been all out of Med-X. Still, there was a little note: ‘Sorry.’

I’d probably give most of the box to Helpinghoof. Underneath that was some black, reinforced leather barding. I pulled it out and checked it carefully for cutie marks. None. It had a pony skull on the flank, and written on the back was ‘Reapers’ over the number ‘99’: an old hoofball uniform. Sadly, it was in better condition than my combat armor. I looked close and saw that the 99 had once been 66... altered just for me. I wondered if Lacunae was behind it.

In a small cardboard box were a dozen cupcakes with red and white swirled frostings and a little ‘Happy Birthday’ card from Homage. I tried one. It was good. Really good. I felt a sick little knot in my stomach... or where my stomach had been. Was it now my ‘reprocessor?’ Was that where the guilt came from? A old, battered book from Triage: the Canterlot Journal of Medicine. Well, it’d be good reading for Glory

in any case.

Finally, the last box held three things from Chapel. The first was a little note from Priest.

I've known many ponies who have gone to Celestia. Now I'm thrilled to know a pony who's come back. No matter how black things become, there is always... inevitably... a dawn.

I sniffed and felt a sick little joy that I still had tear ducts. I supposed even cybereyes would get pretty itchy without them. Helpinghoof was right... I felt so damned guilty. I didn't deserve any of this. I sighed, swallowing as I pulled out a small gold and silver pendant in the shape of Celestia raising the sun. I'd give it to P-21.

I set it aside and saw six bottles of Wild Pegasus in all their amber glory. Exactly what I needed right now. And if I was somehow incapable of getting drunk, then I was going to have Glory turn off my liver. But then, at the bottom was the absolute perfect present. It was from Charity, and it was precisely what I needed right now:

An invoice.

I'd just finished sorting the presents and was sitting on one of the recovery room's beds playing with my 'fingers' when the doors into the entry room opened. I glanced over through the open folding divider, expecting Glory. Maybe she'd washed and wanted to finish snoozing here with me? But instead, a young mare poked her head in. She looked like hell, with shadows under her eyes and a definitely frazzled expression. I noticed her stable bardings and PipBuck and smiled. She looked over at me and my wiggling appendages. I gave a half smile. "Hey. I have thumbs."

The little unicorn almost skidded to a stop and she gave me the look. That look that said that she was assessing whether or not I bore hostile intent and that the color of her E.F.S. would determine if I was about to receive new holes or not. But after a second, the little unicorn relaxed. "Sorry," she said as she rubbed her rumpled mane. She'd definitely been through the wringer, as had her friends.

"Doc! You got business!" I called at once. The black unicorn and the brown pegasus buck who followed were only slightly better off. The zebra in the back was the only one who didn't look half shot to hell.

I went back to fiddling; it'd take more than a medical journal to make me worthwhile in a situation like this. Besides, none of her friends were really critically injured,

though clearly they'd been well chewed by the Wasteland. The black unicorn had a nasty scar on her leg that bespoke a dire injury. At the moment though, the friends were more engaged in argument with each other than whatever had brought them to the doctor. I took a long swig off one of my bottles.

"And that, LittlePip, is why you don't go trotting right up to Red Eye's folks to have a chat. And it's 'specially why you don't do it alone!" the brown, winged cowpony said just before he drank down a healing potion. "If we hadn't been ready..."

LittlePip groaned. "Red Eye would have done it..." she muttered as she glowered at the purple healing potion before her.

The black unicorn sighed as her own nicks and injuries healed. "Well, while I admire your attempt at diplomacy, I'm afraid that, in the face of alicorns, griffons, and this army, it was a little... ah... overambitious?"

I then noticed something out of the corner of my eye and turned. The zebra was a hoofreach away and was just watching me. She didn't glower or frown, but I had the distinct impression that if I sneezed wrong, she'd turn me into pulped pony. "Hi," I said, blinking. She didn't respond. I lifted the bottle of whiskey in my hooves. "Drink?" She still didn't respond. "Okay, am I going to have to kiss you to make you relax?" I'd seen eyes like these before...

"That probably wouldn't be good. She's had a bad experience with another cyber-pony," the charcoal unicorn said, fighting a yawn. I looked again at the zebra. A bad experience... like P-21 had had his whole life in 99? Like I'd had... my nethers clenched and I dropped my gaze a moment.

Then I looked into her eyes and said, "I know what that's like. I'm sorry." Because I knew what it was like, and I was sorry any pony or zebra had gone through it. Her expression didn't soften in the slightest, but she finally looked away from me.

Helpinghoof fought another yawn as he passed out a tray of healing potions. "Well, you all made it out alive. It could be worse," he said as he made sure that the potions went down.

"It nearly was. I almost lost a leg!" the black unicorn said as she showed off the gnarly scar ringing her foreleg. The healing potion had smoothed its lines a bit, but that was the kind of mark you carried for the rest of your life. I knew; I still had them decorating any part of me that wasn't metal.

"Just one?" I asked with a small smile, tapping my hooves together. Oh... hello awkward. Welcome to the party! Just take a seat everywhere. She flushed and

looked away as I shook my head. "Sorry..."

The pegasus stallion looked at the brown bottle between my hooves. "Is that... shoot, is that Wild Pegasus?"

I couldn't help it. I grinned and said, in my best Dusty Trails drawl, "Surely is, pardner. Only the finest single malt whiskey made from the greatest barley in all of Equestria, stored in oak casks for a minimum of ten years and bottled in custom-enchanted preservation bottles. Guaranteed to ruffle your feathers, curl your tail, polish your horn and get you good and fuckered up." I knew that from the back of the label. He nickered, his eyes lighting up like he'd just seen the sunrise, and I tossed him the bottle. He blinked as he caught it with his hooves. "Here."

"Yer just givin' it to me?" He stared in amazement. I nodded. I had more. Why not? "Well, shoot my nuts and call me a mare... this is... really nice, stranger."

"Blackjack," I replied, digging out a second bottle with my mouth.

"Calamity," he said, "and my friends are LittlePip, Velvet Remedy, and Xenith," he added with gestures at the appropriate ponies. We tapped the bottles together and shared a drink. Well... it burned smooth and sweet and rested with a warm glow in my... well there was a warm glow somewhere in me, and that was what mattered! He wiped his mouth with a hoof. "Oh my... that surely is the real deal. Can almost taste the sky barley." Sky barley? "Heh, you can get six months fer possession of this stuff back home. Food waste." He snorted in disgust, then looked at me holding the bottle between my hooves. "Why are you drinking like that?"

"Oh. Yeah. My horn doesn't work," I said with a smile and a shrug. "Got chiseled off a few days back." What was that, awkward? You want to bring your whole family? Well sure, come on in! Now LittlePip and Velvet were staring. "What?"

Velvet flushed, then said to Helpinghoof, "Anyway, enough of our little problems. When can you take care of Littlepip's... erm... little problem?" she asked with a flush.

The brown earth pony looked at the little unicorn. "Oh. Well, unfortunately there's going to be a bit of a delay. We had to purge another patient's contamination earlier." It was amazing to see how hard they tried to not stare at me. I looked indolently back as I took a sip from my bottle. Personally, if she didn't have jelly legs, I thought she'd live.

Clearly, LittlePip wasn't worried either as she sighed, "It's not a problem. Look, why don't you three go up to your rooms, clean up, and catch some shuteye? I'll just wait

here till they're ready."

Velvet frowned. "I don't know. I think one of us should stay with you." LittlePip scowled slightly. "Calamity or I..."

"I get a bottle of Wild P and yer telling me I have to drink it alone?" Calamity whined, wagging his eyebrows at the black unicorn. She blushed quite rosily.

"I will stay with her," the zebra said softly.

"No offense meant, Xenith, but once the rest of the populace wakes, they might not take well to your presence," Helpinghoof mentioned. A zebra in a town full of ponies... yeah, I didn't see that ending well. Particularly this zebra. She reminded me of Lancer rather than Sekashi. At least you could laugh with Sekashi. Xenith scared the piss out of me.

"I'll do it," I said as I sat back on the bed I'd claimed for my own. The four looked at me as I took another sip from the bottle. "What? Doc wants me to stay. I'll keep an eye out for her. No problem." Velvet looked at me skeptically, and I gave my best 'trust the strange cyberpony in the clinic' smile.

Finally, fatigue or bad judgment prevailed. "All right. We'll see you in the morning." LittlePip sighed as she looked at her hooves. Velvet Remedy gave a bedside smile. "I'll suggest that Homage wait till after the procedure."

"Indeed. It will be difficult for them to beat her old record if she is not fully restored," Xenith deadpanned. LittlePip's depression was overcome by furious embarrassment, and I looked from one to the other. Record? Was I missing something here? The little unicorn was rendered speechless as her friends left. Calamity had the bottle balanced on his flank as he trotted out singing, "Wild P... Wild P... Got muhself some Wild P..."

I looked back at LittlePip as the doctor went back into his office. "You have some interesting friends, kid."

She glanced at me as she slid back into a funk. "Yeah. They're great..." She clenched her jaw and then smacked her hooves together hard. "Damn it! It should have worked!"

"I take it that 'it' is whatever got you all shot up?" I asked as I slipped off my bed and trotted over to her. She frowned and nodded. "So what went wrong?" I asked as I held out the bottle.

She took it with her magic and then sighed. "I needed something of Red Eye's..."

but I couldn't convince them to let me speak with him... or whoever is in charge of that army out there. I got frustrated, yelled... and they started shooting. So I shot back... only there were a lot more of them than me. If Calamity hadn't been ready... I dunno. I know Red Eye doesn't want me dead yet but that doesn't mean some overeager thug of his might not kill me anyway, just to be on the safe side."

She took a drink, and her eyes bulged as she gulped and then coughed. "And I thought apple cider was bad! What is that stuff?"

"Eighty proof," I replied with a smile as I took the bottle back and took another drink with my hooves.

"How'd it happen?" LittlePip asked as she stared at my horn.

"Oh... ah... no big deal," I replied as I tapped my forehooves. "A bunch of bucks were in a raping mood. I was with a filly friend of mine from my stable... good kid... and so I made sure they focused on rutting with me rather than looking for her. Of course, when they got bored with me, they started looking anyway. So I shot one with my horn." I rolled my eyes. "Needless to say, that blew their mood, so they chiseled off my horn. After that my friend showed up and saved both of us." I took a drink as she stared at me in horror. "Not a big deal. I mean, the plan still worked. If they'd thought to take my horn off when they nailed my legs down..."

Funny how I didn't feel horror at it. I didn't feel anything at all, thinking back to it. "They nailed your legs down?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yeah. Had to cut them off," I said softly and tapped my hooves together with an awkward clank. "Then my friends went and got me new ones. New legs... new eyes... new organs..." I sighed.

"You don't sound very happy about it," LittlePip said quietly. "I can't imagine having parts of me replaced with..." she trailed off, closing her eyes. I gave a sad little smile. I'd mentally kicked myself like that far too often to miss it. I sighed as I swirled the bottle. "I know I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," she finished.

"Even if the alternative is being a corpse?" I asked, arching a brow. She looked, then frowned and sadly shook her head. "My friends moved heaven and earth to save me," I said. "You'd think I'd be all yippie skippy. But I don't feel like myself anymore. I feel like a... a thing... this thing that was once Blackjack but now... I can't even do magic anymore. I'm a half-metal horned earth pony now. And all my friends are so desperate for me to be happy and thank them and stuff..."

"There was a pony I... knew... she was smart and good, but she made some

mistakes and she was dying.” LittlePip shivered a little. “To save her... this thing... this monster I’m trying to fight... absorbed her. Technically... she’s still alive. Or... something.” Clearly, not something good.

“Not that I think—” she said hastily, then paused. “Sorry,” she said, scowling. “It’s just... it’s tough. Celestia’s flaming solar anal probes, why the hell do some ponies do that? Why would anyone do that?! It makes me so mad!” She frowned at me. “At least tell me you blasted those bastards so they’d never do it again!”

She sounded like P-21. I wondered if she understood. “I let them go.” At least, I hoped they were let go. I wouldn’t put it past P-21, Glory, or Rampage to have exacted some vengeance on my behalf.

“You what?” She blinked, eyes wide.

“I let them go. I was dying anyway at the time,” I replied with a shrug. “Killing them wasn’t going to make me any less dead or my butt hurt any less.” I sighed as I looked out the dark window. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they’ll just do it to another. Maybe if I catch them, I’ll have to kill them anyway. But at least I could give them a chance.”

She smiled and took the bottle, sniffed, and then passed it back to me. “You’re amazing.”

“Wuss,” I teased and took a drink. “Amazingly stupid and naïve, anyway.” Was that a buzz? I really hoped it was a buzz. “Amazing at getting ponies killed. Amazing at hurting folks who don’t deserve it.” I sighed. Ugh... was I this whiny before I died?

“What do you mean?” she asked with a frown. Then I looked at her PipBuck and her bardings and I closed my eyes. I shouldn’t say. Don’t tell her. She wouldn’t want to know. She doesn’t mean it. I took another pull off the bottle.

“I killed my stable,” I said softly. “Being a stable pony yourself... you can appreciate what that means.” I sighed. Why was I saying this? Why couldn’t I just let it go? Hadn’t I found peace with Gardens? Hadn’t I paid the price on the boat?

What was the price of four hundred lives? I looked at the revolver in her holster.

LittlePip was just staring at me in horror and I closed my eyes. “There was a virus. It infected a part of the population. Turned them into psychopathic cannibals. Nasty stuff. We were able to kill them all, but... I was tired. I wasn’t paying attention to what I should. Distracted by... by other stuff. And while I was getting laid and resting and taking care of myself... the remaining four hundred ponies were exposed.” I sighed, grimacing. What did I want? Why did I hate myself? Why wasn’t atonement enough?

"They were starting to turn. They were becoming more and more aggressive and the population was armed. A few more days and they'd be killing and eating everypony they came across. We got one uninfected filly out... and then... I gassed them." I mimicked pushing a button with my hoof. Making a clicking noise. "Easy as that. Flooded the whole thing with chlorine gas." I let it fall. "Of course, I'd planned on gassing myself with them, but Lacunae ruined that. So... yeah. Four hundred innocent ponies." I looked at her gun.

I wanted justice. I wanted the pony responsible to pay the price. That was why I didn't feel the horror and shame of being raped. I wanted to be judged and condemned and punished for what I'd done. Not suicide. That was trying to escape from justice. I needed somepony to call me the scum that I was and to put a bullet through my brain like I deserved. I wanted to find somepony like the Stable Dweller who would do the right thing and kill me like a mass murderer deserved.

I didn't have four hundred and something lives to atone for four hundred and something deaths; but I could at least surrender one.

Then I closed my eyes and waited for the bullet that I so richly deserved.

Instead, I got a hug.

"I... I can't imagine being... doing... what you had to do. But... it sounds like it was one of those situations where they were doomed either way," she said softly in my ear. I sighed, slumping. "I know that if I were in that position... diseased... dying... I wouldn't want to die going crazy or worse. I'd want to die like a pony. And... quick. If you'd sealed it..." I sighed, remembering Stable 90. The shortest-lived stable in Equestria. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

I jerked away from her and flailed as I overbalanced and fell on my side. My hooves kicked as I struggled to roll over and find my footing. Finally, I stopped and just lay there. "Why do you say that? Why does everypony? I could have tried telling them! I could have gone pony by pony! I could have... I could have gone to Sanguine... given that murdering bastard what he wanted in exchange for a cure! I could have had the decency to die with them!" Why didn't she understand? Why didn't anypony?

Then she levitated me into the air, and I blinked in surprise. The little pony looked long and hard at me. "Would you dying have cured them?" I hung there in the air before her. Okay, an alicorn with magic this strong I could understand. This was a little intimidating. I shook my head. "Then all your dying would have done is killed one more pony," LittlePip said firmly before she set me back down beside her. "You

forgave those rapists. Why can't you forgive yourself?"

"Have you ever gotten innocents killed?" I asked. She looked me in the eye and then shook her head. "If you do... tell me the trick, and I'll do it." I sighed, feeling dejected as I rubbed my face with the cool metal of my forehoof. If I stayed here, I was sure I'd start spilling every whiny, angstly thing that'd happened to me. "You know what... let's go do something."

LittlePip frowned. "Huh? What do you mean 'do something'?" I took a nice long pull on the bottle and smiled. Attention Canterlot, we have inebriation. Take that, super magical synthetic organs! "I thought we were supposed to be waiting here."

"You are waiting for a healy taint purging. You can do that anywhere. I am supposed to be observed. You can observe me anywhere! So do you really want to waste time here trading sob stories?" I asked as I slipped to my hooves, a little more carefully this time.

"It's two in the morning!" she said with a disbelieving smile.

"So? Haven't you ever worked the late shift? Trust me, there's always something somewhere... some trouble... that we can get into!" I said with a wiggle of my brows.

"How did I let you talk me into this?" LittlePip shrieked as the next wave of screaming, clawing ghouls came charging at us. Her revolver, a sweet custom-modified IF-18 Horseshoe that I slightly wanted to snuggle even while fighting for my life, barked and transformed the head of the monstrosity slashing against my upraised hooves into twitching corpse meat. I heaved the body away from me and into a crowd of three more. It was amazing... think about walking: fall on face. Don't think about it because you're too busy dealing with dozens of shrieking zombies while inebriated: limbs work fine.

Which was a very good thing. One ghoul opened its mouth wide as it lunged, and I reared on my back legs and punched my hoof into its maw. The combined momentums drove my hoof out the back of its head, rotting brain smearing it as I pivoted on my rear legs and threw the corpse at the three scrabbling to their feet. "Hey! This is your secret passage!" I shouted as another ghoul lunged in low and I leapt over its snapping jaws. All four legs came straight down on its head, and the zombie's skull popped like a rotten apple.

"I wanted to levitate you down from the roof, but no!" The trio of ghouls rose a third time, but three blasts from Little Macintosh transformed their skulls into bony, goop-covered shrapnel. "You don't like heights!" Spent revolver casings popped into the air and got turned into hot brass projectiles, briefly driving one of the zombies back into the blasted subway tunnel it'd been crawling out of.

"I'm sorry! Not all of us fly everywhere in skywagons, okay?" I yelled as another group crawled out of a hole in a rusted sewer grate. I hooked my forelegs into either side of the gap and swung in, my rear legs pistonning wildly as they hammered into whatever soft flesh undead flesh made itself available. "I suggested getting Lacunae, but nooooo! You don't like alicorns!"

"They're monsters!" LittlePip shouted as her horn flared and scraped a fallen piece of roof along the side of the subway. The block of rubble was easily as big as I was and tore the emerging ghoul in half as she loaded another six rounds into the revolver. "It wasn't an option, okay?" She whirled and placed three shots into the head of a glowing ghoul; its head exploded like a fountain of luminescent snot. "You were the one who insisted on doing this in the first place!" she yelled as she backed towards me while I scabbled away from the sewer grate and into the middle of the subway passage, tackling a zombie that had been about to snap at her flank.

"You said you had to do it... no friends... Remember?" I said as I hooked a foreleg into its mouth like a bridle, gripping it with my hindlegs. I wrenching as hard as I could and was rewarded by the head coming off in my hooves. "So then you say 'Oh, there's a secret passage in the basement. We can get out that way! Only a few ghouls!' She'd worked her arcane sciency magic on the terminal beside the door and managed to override the lockout; neat trick. I'd ask her to teach P-21 if we made it out of here alive! I threw the head as hard as I could into another charging zombie; it broke the creature's run just enough for me to bring both metal hooves down on its head with a pulpy crunch. "This is more than a few!"

LittlePip carefully planted three more shots in the zombies coming out of the a side tunnel as we moved towards the head subway car. The tunnel was lit by the sickly green radiance of even more glowing ghouls. "Well, you said the more there were, the more fun!" A ghoul scrambled onto her back, its jagged hooves hooked into her reinforced utility bardings. Her horn glowed as she lifted the monster into the air, and there was a crack as the entire creature was squeezed. She threw the crushed remains back down the tunnel behind us.

"LittlePip, I'm drunk!" I yelled before biting hard on a length of rebar and swinging the chunk of rubble on the end like a club. The weight knocked back three more of

the screaming monsters.

"No, you're crazy!" she yelled back as she looked around. Okay, this was rapidly getting past 'dozens' and into 'fucking ridiculous' numbers. What, had Tenpony been built right on top of Manehattan ghoul central? "Get in the subway car! Hurry!" Well, it was better than my plan to 'hit them some more.' Somewhere in the process of planning this adventure, I'd trotted off without bardings, gun, or even saddlebags. No, the only pieces of 'equipment' I'd brought were bottles of whiskey tied together around my neck like some sort of tribal good luck charm.

It'd seemed funny at the time.

I scrambled in first. One ghoul charged down the aisle at me; I hooked my forelegs into the seats, swung my back legs up, and smashed both rear hooves into its head. Then, of course I landed flat on my back next to the wiggling corpse. I smashed my legs down on its head repeatedly, looking at LittlePip upside down as the small unicorn hopped in after me. "Okay. Now what?!"

She tossed Little Macintosh at me; I caught it in my forelegs and transferred it to my mouth, sitting up. A ghoul was thrashing its way through the doors at the other end of the car. "No ticket!" I shouted before hopping into S.A.T.S. and planting one of the revolver's heavy bullets into its skull. ...Actually, what I really said was 'nung thhhgkts' with lots of slobber, but it wouldn't have known the difference anyway.

As I pulled myself to my hooves, the subway car lurched. A glow had spread from LittlePip's horn to envelop the massive vehicle. The wheels underneath squealed, and there was a metallic bang as something broke underneath the car. With a scream of metal and rust, the subway car broke free of the rest and began to roll down the decayed tracks. Of course, there were still ghouls leaping onto the side of the rolling car, trying to pull themselves through the windows; I raced from one to the next, Little Macintosh blasting their skulls to fragments until the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

No problem. Have hooves, will thrash! Ghouls fell beneath the screeching, grinding wheels, and chunks of undead spattered at the pursuing crowd. A few more tried to scramble on; I manually persuaded them to get the hell off.

In a minute, we'd left the undead behind and I'd finished off anything still wiggling. LittlePip gasped as she looked at me a touch wild-eyed. She levitated the gun from my mouth, wrinkling her nose at my drool. "This is one of the crazier things I think I've ever done," she yelled over the shrieks as we rolled along.

I took a long pull off one of the bottles of whiskey, watching the text in my E.F.S. warning me of the drug toxicity that my system was trying to purge. “Really? I thought it was Tuesday.”

“So... why is it you couldn’t bring your friends along?” I asked as we made our way through the subway station. “I mean, Xenith I can understand. She has that whole ‘I can kill you with one hoof’ vibe going. Calamity seemed okay, though. And Velvet seemed nice... even if she’s got that whole bossy momma bear thing going for her.”

LittlePip was drinking a healing potion she’d found locked in a medical supply cabinet. The sight of it had floored me. Healing potions as fresh as you please even after two centuries. Sweet Celestia somethin’ obscene somethin’ (where did LittlePip learn to swear like that?) did Hoofington suck! She sighed as she looked at the empty potion bottle. “It’s... complicated. I’m going up against two monsters, and each one wants me to destroy the other. Both have armies and power, and one can even read minds.”

“Ouch,’ I winced, then extended my ‘fingers’ to carefully pick up a piece of scrap metal. ‘Eat, huh?’ I tried to bite it in half. Nothing. Finally, I stuck the chunk in my mouth and felt a strange warmth. The rusty lump softened to the consistency of taffy... tasted pretty good, too! I smiled as I chewed the lump of metal and swallowed, then caught LittlePip’s shocked stare. Okay, maybe it was a little freaky. “What? I’m on a high iron diet.” She snorted, and I smiled as I took another drink.

“Well... if I take Calamity along and he gets too close and gets his mind read, then it’s game over.” She sighed, then floated my offered bottle over and took a drink herself. “Velvet Remedy... well...” A small smile spread on her face. “She’s a special kind of girl. She wants to help everypony she can. Even slavers and monsters and... everypony. So if she knew what I was going to do... well... I dunno. She might try and stop me.”

“And Xenith?” I asked with a smile. “Same deal as Calamity? Or would she headbutt the beastie?”

She looked a little sad and a little guilty. “Pretty much.”

“So, once you get the bomb, what then?”

“Then?” She smiled. “Then I blow Red Eye’s citadel to the moon. I think that’s the most you should know.” She wasn’t telling me something, but then she fought

mind-reading things. I imagined great big tentacle brain monsters... ooh, or maybe magical computer things! I chuckled, taking a drink. Considering the shit I'd dealt with, who was I to insist she tell me more? Then she gave me a small, thankful smile. "Thanks for helping me with this, Blackjack."

"Thanks for giving me something to do," I said with a laugh. "Shoot at me, stab me, or fuck me, but whatever you do, don't let me think." She blushed... why was she blushing? Why was she acting all... Gloryish?

"So, next part of the plan?" I asked with a smile as I stood and turned towards the doors leading outside. "We make like the Stable Dweller, you drop a building on them, and I thump anything that keeps wiggling, right?" Then I blinked when she didn't call me an idiot... or laugh. I looked back at her, and... was she staring at my ass? "Uh... LittlePip?" Maybe she really liked my new hardware?

She snapped to and looked at me. Wow... she blushed just like Glory. "Right! Plan. The plan... with the planning things and the... ah... planning... stuff... plan plan plan..."

Was she actually checking me out? Oh Celestia... something something... she had been, and I couldn't help smiling. I could count the number of mares interested in me... well... honestly interested rather than planning to sell me out... on one hoof. I turned slowly towards her and watched her eyes get big as she gave a crooked little smile. "LittlePip..." I said as I leaned towards her. "I'm sorry..." Her ears fell... "But I'm just not drunk enough to forget that I have a mare already."

Wow... I didn't know a pony could achieve that shade of red! "Oh... I mean I shouldn't... I... Homage... and..." she started to babble. So... I kissed her. I was also quite delighted to discover she was an exceptionally sweet and adorable kisser. And despite just how embarrassed she was, she definitely kissed back. Now she was red and stiff as stone; I imagined breakers blowing in her head. "Celestia's flaming cuntdrips..." she murmured, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Have I no fucking self control? And I thought you had a mare..."

"But I am drunk enough that she'll probably forgive me one kiss." I pointed out with a laugh as I walked to the door. "You grew up in the wrong stable, LittlePip. If you were really into mares, you should have been in 99."

She snapped out of it a second later. "Yeah... but... didn't you say it was a horrible, brutal rape factory or something?"

Did I mention that? I'd told her something about what 99 was like. My brain was

a mite fuzzy, but the alcohol was definitely lubricating the whole walking... thing. "Well yeah... it was. But for a mare that really likes other mares... well..." I looked right at her with a wide smile that I think set her blush in stone. "I think you would have fit in just fine. I'd love to have had you in my stable." Then I took a deep breath. "Anyway... don't you have a leader to sweet talk?"

She stared at me, then shook her head hard. "Right... right! Right... with the talky... sneaky... plan... thing." She thumped her temples lightly. "Next time you wanna mess with me, could you... I dunno... just shoot me?"

"Kissing you was funner." Oh my, there she went again! Didn't anypony ever hit on this mare? Sure, she wasn't insanely gorgeous, but she was outrageously cute. "Okay. So... we got to trot up close enough to speak to somepony in charge without getting shot at."

"Yeah. And the camp's huge. I dunno if I have a stealthbuck that'll last that long."

"So... plan B."

She blinked and looked at me warily. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Last time I did this, my friend shot me. A lot," LittlePip said as she tied on the red sash of one of Red Eye's enforcers.

"Last time I did this, I had to eat my friend's heart," I said as I made sure my nice artificial legs were good and covered up before slipping on a pair of battered sunglasses.

She looked at me a moment and finally asked the million bottle cap question: "Black-jack, how in Luna's frosty bits are you sane?"

I looked back at her. That was a fair question. "Maybe I'm not. I do what I can to help and I do what I have to do to win." I looked at her in surprise. "Don't you?"

She dropped her gaze. "Some things you shouldn't do..."

"Well, yeah. I mean, you gotta make sure winning's worth it," I said as I turned towards her. "And sometimes you screw up big time in the process... but nothing's worse than losing because you sat on your hooves when you could have acted." I rolled my eyes and looked at the knocked-out guards we'd gotten the uniforms from.

"Would you break a promise to a friend?" she asked, not meeting my eyes.

"Look, I'll explain to Homage about the kiss..." I said with a sigh and a smile.

She flushed again, then shook her head. "I don't mean that." She adjusted her helmet so it covered her horn. "It... I mean..." She stomped her hooves once... "Damn it, why is this so hard?" I sat as she struggled. "I feel like... like I can't trust myself." She closed her eyes. "I had a problem with a drug a while back. Party Time Mint-als. Brain enhancers."

"Right. Rampage chews them all the time. Mellows her out," I said with a confused smile. Actually, I had no idea if she ate party time or not, it'd never occurred to me that they might come in different varieties.

"Exactly. They make ponies more agreeable. Nicer. Charismatic," she said. "They're also extremely addictive... It was a big, big problem for me."

"Sounds useful. Got some?" I asked. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together as her magic pulled out a tin from her bags... wow... she must have known precisely where they were. "So... I'm guessing you promised to never ever take them again? No matter what?"

"Yeah. Something like that," she replied. "So right now, I've got a little pony in my head telling me to take them locked in mortal combat with another little pony in my head telling me to keep my promise and find another way."

"Right." I took a deep, contemplative drink from the bottle. "Let me ask you this... your friend you promised this to... would they want you to die to keep your promise?"

LittlePip sighed and looked towards Tenpony before saying, "No."

"And if we botch this up, are we going to die?"

"You're helping the wrong pony cheat," she muttered. "You're supposed to be helping me keep my promise. That's the right thing to do." The little unicorn sighed. "I just... I don't want it to be my addiction making me take these. I don't want to fuck up and fail my friends again."

"Shows you deserve your friends," I said with a smile. I took another drink, then sighed. "It's easier to get forgiveness if you don't die. So. How about this? You take them till we're out of here, hand them over when we go, and then spend all day tomorrow apologizing and blaming me for being a horrible influence on you."

"Velvet's going to kill me," she said as she lifted out one minty pink square decorated with little balloons and streamers. She popped it into her mouth, chewed, swallowed... and relaxed. Then she opened her eyes, and suddenly I felt like the

one about to be kissed as she adopted a coy, cute little smile. “Well... worry about that later. Now... how to get inside to speak to Red Eye...” She looked at me and tapped her lips. “That should be easy enough...”

The headquarters for this army consisted of three or four old canvas tents strung together and reinforced with sheet metal. If the large broadcast antenna raised on a pile of rubble behind it was any indication, it would be a good place to contact Red Eye if whoever was in charge locally wouldn’t give LittlePip what she wanted. Of course, before we could even find out the answer to that, we’d have to think of some way to get past the power-armor-clad griffin guards.

“I take the one on the left, you take the one on the right?” I suggested.

“How about we just go in to report a disturbance in the Tenpony subway tunnels?” she replied with a cocky little smile.

“But... they’re in power armor. And I haven’t beaten a griffin in power armor yet.” I wondered if you could fly them as easily as Enclave pegasi. We hid among some nearby supply crates, watching the comings and goings of the headquarters.

“You can do that later,” she said as we watched two ponies approach. The griffin said, “Flange.” The two ponies replied, “Gear.” A minute later, another pair approached. “Strut,” they challenged. “Truss” replied the ponies, and they were admitted. LittlePip seemed to be nodding to herself.

“Yes... that’s it exactly!” the small unicorn said excitedly.

“What. What’s it?” I blinked, but she immediately left the cover and walked casually towards the two armored griffons, leaving me scrambling to catch up.

“Bolt,” one challenged at our approach.

“Crank,” LittlePip drawled in a bored tone.

The pair looked at us, then at each other. “I don’t know you,” one challenged LittlePip.

“And why are you wearing sunglasses?” the other growled at me. “It’s the middle of the night.”

I paused, then grinned. “I’m just that cool.”

“Wanna bet?” He reached out a claw and flicked the black plastic off my face, then

suddenly he stiffened as he saw my cybereyes glowing like two red stars. "You... what..."

"We've got a special report to make. You are wasting our time and delaying our inevitable, glorious future," LittlePip said imperiously as she tapped her hoof with the perfect stomp for indicating irritation rather than annoyance. The pair looked visibly shaken as they carefully handed back the battered sunglasses and waved us through.

"You should have been an actress," I murmured. "Are my eyes really that freaky?"

"No. But Red Eye has that kind of effect on his followers."

The pair that had entered before us were trotting back out again. We followed the sounds of speakers and equipment into a small room with a desk and shelves of papers. Two tired-looking middle-aged mares sat at desks with piles of papers around them. The larger room the communications office opened off of was filled with maps of Manhattan and other cities around the Wasteland. A bunch of symbols had been drawn on them; in particular, the locations of the freaky M.A.S.E.B.S. towers were all outlined in red.

It sure didn't look like Red Eye thought in small terms. "Your report?" a lime green mare asked us as her eyes went from one of us to the other. Then they went really round as Little Macintosh came out. She opened her mouth to yell, but LittlePip's magical glow forced her mouth shut. I leapt on the other and got her in a headlock, effectively wrestling her to the ground. My fingers popped out and I held her mouth shut as well.

"Now what do we do with them?" she asked with a small frown as she looked at the pony with earphones on sitting obliviously at the radio with his back to us.

"Got any Wonderglue?" I asked with a small smile. She smiled back.

The two mares with their hooves glued together and their lips duct taped shut just glared at me as LittlePip talked to the radio operator with the pistol pointed at his head. I really hoped his loyalty to the cause didn't make him realize a gunshot would get us killed pretty quick. A few minutes later, he got to join the glue party as LittlePip put on the headphones. "Keep an eye out," she said as she closed the big canvas flap between the rooms and started talking in a low voice. I looked at the three incapacitated ponies heaped in the corner.

Okay. So... waiting in the middle of an enemy camp. Smart thing to do would be to wait attentively for somepony to approach and intercept them with a story or

plan... delay them outside the reports room. But I had to admit that those were some awfully pretty maps. I looked at the one marked 'Hoofington'. There was the Core. The little districts surrounding it. The Collegiate. Rainbow Dash Skyport. Megamart. Elysium. Arena. Ironmare Naval Base. Grimhoof Army Base, way off to the southeast... that was new. Luna Space Center was next to it. Scrapyard. All four broadcast towers...

Hippocratic Research.

There wasn't anything printed on the map, but there was a bright red circle exactly where my PipBuck said it could be located. I reared up on my hind legs, marveling at how they kept me upright like some kind of freaky zebra. They let me get a good look at the top of the map, though. A green line had been drawn from the circle under the Core and out to the rail lines that lead straight to Fillyadelphia. In contrast, Paradise was simply a yellow sticker.

"Why the hell would Red Eye be working with Sanguine?" I glanced at the leg containing my PipBuck. Brass had said that somepony was holding Sanguine's hooves to the fire. Somepony like Red Eye?

Oh, my mane was inventing all-new creepy sensations now! I thought of Red Eye getting his hooves on EC-1101. If he was a cyberpony, what were the odds he could get it to work for him for his own nasty ends? I'd been so fixated on the Projects; maybe the real threat was something very here and very now.

"Excuse me?" a voice said from the door. A pair of runners stared at me and then at the three prone ponies.

I extended my fingers and slowly pulled the glasses from my face. I stared long and hard down at the two bucks and said, as low and cold as I could manage, "Yes?"

"Ah... ah..." one stammered as he stared up at me. Slowly I walked, step after step on my hindlegs, towards the pair.

"Are you going to trouble me too?" I growled as I looked down at two bucks bigger, stronger, and more heavily armed than I. One reached into his saddlebag and handed over a folded stack of papers. I took them in my freaky metallic fingers. "Thank you," I said in as deep a tone as I could manage. I was somewhat shocked to feel... well... anything. Somehow, the legs conveyed tactile sensation.

Nodding, they staggered back and trotted for the exit as quickly as they could without running. "Was that thing... drunk?" one asked the other.

I rushed to the flap and made a 'hurry up' gesture with my hoof. She waved me

away and then said, "Give it to me and you get what you want... and I get what I want." Then she added, "Of course, you don't trust me." And... "I've seen her. You've seen her. Can you think of another way?"

"Excuse me," a female said behind me. I slowly started to turn as dramatically as I could. Then I saw the red feathers, the tawny flanks, and the wide eyes of a griffin I'd seen a few days back. A griffin who I'd left glued to the side of a boxcar outside Scarpayard. We stared at each other for a moment. "You!" Scarlet shouted, pointing a claw at me. I supposed you'd remember a mare that cemented you to a wall. "Alarm!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Well... time for plan D. I raced and tackled her, and we went flying into the canvas wall behind her so hard that it split. We were rolling, screaming, clawing, and squawking as she scratched at my limbs, and I pummeled and kicked like mad. The chaos was spreading by the second as we snapped one of the poles holding a section of the tent. There was more shouting and scuffling, but thankfully no gunshots yet.

Then we were out in front of the tent and I finally had Scarlet in a headlock. "Okay... no alarms from..." Slowly, I looked up at the dozens of very armed ponies and griffins surrounding the pair of us. Wow... that's a lot of guns!

"HOLD!" boomed a voice that made everypony, including me, jump to their hooves.

Oh... wow. I'd thought, having seen Lacunae, that I understood just what an alicorn was like. Big. Wings. Horn. Pretty standard stuff, really... right?

Wrong.

Fifteen alicorns, purple, blue, and green, hovered around us like a judgment host. They were surrounded in shimmering shields and looked fit to blast me into chunks. Only one thing saved me. The leader of the host pointed her blue hoof at me and boomed in shock, "YOU?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE! THE GODDESS DEMANDS TO KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING HERE!"

I pulled off what shreds remained of my disguise and tossed them away. Then I pulled out one of the last bottles of Wild Pegasus and tugged it free, holding it in my fingers. If I was going to have to deal with Goddess yelling, I needed more alcohol. The alicorns were so stunned that I was able to take a good long pull off the bottle. "Well. Had to get fixed up... new legs... eyes... that sort of—"

She jerked me into the air before her with her magic. "THE GODDESS DEMANDS

TO KNOW! ARE YOU WORKING WITH RED EYE NOW?!"

"Why, is he recruiting?" I asked, seeing the apprehension in her eyes. I reached up and tapped my horn. "Find out for yourself," I said. Honestly, I had no idea if it would really work while my horn wouldn't do anything... but then the probably-compensating-for-some-inherent-shortcoming-sized horn touched mine and I immediately felt that sensation of rummaging in my brain. I thought of what LittlePip had said; hopefully after blasting Red Eye to dust, she could do something about the Goddess.

"GOOD! NOW WE MAY DISPOSE OF YOUR MEDDLING—"

"Red Eye knows about Sanguine," I thought at her, and she froze. "Which means he might know about Project Chimera."

For several seconds I just hung there as she dug through my head. I finally finished drinking the last drop, really wishing I had some more. Whiskey whiskey whiskey whiskey...

"SHUT UP! WHY MUST THE GODDESS SUFFER YOUR MINDLESS WITLESS PRATTLE? WHY AREN'T YOU DEAD YET? WHY CAN'T WE JUST KILL YOU?! WHY?"

Hey, don't look at me. I'd tried to die more than once. "Aww... I thought it was 'cause you liked me," I thought at her and belched. "You wanna prance around my head some more or talk turkey? You want alicorns with cocks. I imagine it'd do you wonders if you got laid. I really want to smash Sanguine into ghouley goo. All of us want Red Eye gone. And I owe you for 99." I smiled as I dangled in front of her. "Or you can just kill me and wonder just what Red Eye is up to... your choice."

Then LittlePip was escorted out of the tent by a buck in a big fancy hat that I supposed put him in charge. The effect was immediate. "NOOOOO! THESE TWO MAY NOT BE TOGETHER! THE GODDESS FORBIDS IT!" She waved me in the air like a rag doll.

"Shut up!" I bellowed up at her. "She's doing what she's doing and I'm doing what I'm doing and... uggh..." A red warning in my vision flashed 'purge' at me.

And then in front of everypony I lost my whiskey. The blue alicorn dropped me to the ground in disgust.

The buck in the fancy hat rubbed his face. "Why can't we just shoot them all... why?" He pointed his hoof back at Tenpony. "Just... go! Go!"

I rose to my hooves. "Oh no. You're not just going to throw us out! Forget it! We're staying put unless we get a proper sendoff!" Everypony stared at me in shock and confusion.

"WHAT... WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

I looked at the wing of alicorns and grinned.

There are... in reflection... many ways to travel the Wasteland. By hoof is most common. Occasionally in vehicles. Sometimes on wings, if you had them. The Goddess had told Lacunae to warn the others of our return, and so they stood on the roof of Tenpony Tower as dawn broke. For a brief moment, the sun peeked through the gap between the distant clouds and the horizon, illuminating us in gold as fifteen alicorns flew in formation around the tower, carrying LittlePip and myself back to our friends. From my PipBuck played the most sweeping and dramatic music of Octavia's concert I could find as inebriation helped me overlook the very splatty distance below.

Maybe the crown of whiskey bottles was a bit much...

The two carrying LittlePip and I set us down next to LittlePip's sky wagon thingy, every jaw dropping as I turned and lifted a hoof to the beasts. "Thank you, noble alicorn, for our safe arrival!"

"GO. AWAY," the blue alicorn said in disgust, and as one the group flew away from the tower. Was it just me, or was Lacunae trying very hard not to grin?

LittlePip looked horrible... I felt pretty horrible too. I was pretty sure I was really pushing things with the amount I'd drunk in the last few hours. As my friends trotted across the landing pad towards us, LittlePip pulled out the tin of Mint-als. I grabbed it; Rover was right, fingers were useful. "Now you keep your promise..."

She looked at me with desperate eyes, and I flung the tin away before she could take another. Her whole body jerked after the tin, but I held her back and she finally slumped against me. "I... I need Helpinghoof... please..."

"Who's that?" P-21 asked.

"Blackjack! Are you... what's... what did you do last night?!" Glory stammered.

"And why didn't you take me along?" Rampage added.

"Did you really drink all of that?!" Scotch pointed at the crown.

“What?” I said as I swayed. So many flashy warnings on my screen... so many many flashy warnings... “I was just celebrating my birthday.... urp...” And then everything went swirly and fell away to black. What a life... but it was mine...

Footnote: Level up! Maximum level reached.

New perk added: Adamantium Bone Lacing – Your bones are now 50% more resistant to breaking. This perk does not stack with Bone Strengthening Brew.

Quest perk added: Cyberpony: +1 Agil, +10% radiation resistance, +10% poison resistance, +10% damage resistance.

35. Learning

“And I saw the most amazing, most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen. I poured myself into learning everything I could about magic.”

I’d died. I’d come back. Now, I suspected that that had been my big mistake. I lay in bed feeling like my brain had been squeezed into a jar two sizes too small. My vision, whether my eyes were open or closed, was filled with glaring flashes warning of toxicity levels, interface conflicts... and I could have sworn that there was an actual ‘user idiocy’ warning going off. My mechanical limbs twitched as I sprawled on my side. All I had to do was crawl out... but my metal legs just twitched and jerked again as I went nowhere.

I could just lie here... yes... lie here in this nice soft bed and wait for sweet oblivion to claim—

“Hey, Blackjack!” Scotch yelled in the perfect filly pitch to make it feel like an icepick had been shoved in my ear canal. I tried to say something about loudness, volume, or killing noisy fillies. I’m fairly certain all of that went right over the olive mare’s head, though, as she screeched, “Glory told me to come in and ask you about hangovers! She said you probably had a doozy of one, so I should talk really loudly!”

“Ngggghhh!” was all I could reply as I flopped around and finally managed to bury my head under the pillows.

“So, Blackjack, are you hungover? Do you need me to talk louder? Hey, Blackjack! Can you hear me now? Blackjack!” she shrieked as she shook me hard, making my stomach-thing lurch and my bladder (Did I still have that?) clench. Urr... I didn’t need to be dealing with this and a hangover at the same time... “Blackjack! Blackjack! Did you really fly around on a wing of alicorns? Did they crown you? Why were there security ponies asking for you? Oh! And this one black unicorn wanted me to say you were a horrible influence. That was mean, but she gave me a whole bag of candy to tell you really loud, and Glory thought it was a good idea too and she gave me three Sparkle-Colas and Blackjack! Can you hear me, Blackjack?”

I could kill them. I could kill them all. No court in the Wasteland would convict me...

A trip to the bathroom and a shower later, I was in a far less murderous mood. The

real fun was trying to mentally bash and thrash my legs into moving. I distinctly remembered walking and trotting around without a problem! Okay, the memory was a bit fuzzy, but still, I'd been walking better drunk than I was sober! Fortunately, Scotch enthusiastically herded me, preventing me from actually falling on my face again.

Once I'd gotten myself clean and flushed out, the alarms died to a few sullen yellow warnings that seemed to be there mostly to remind me not to do anything like last night ever again. I needed food... power... metal... Med-X or something to make my head stop feeling so... ugh... and somepony who could fill me in on what exactly had happened last night... morning... conscious time! A little chronometer in the corner of my eye told me that it was now early afternoon. Hopefully, I'd be able to get my body and brain and everything... and coming out of the bedroom, I tripped on my own feet and tumbled down in a heap.

"Ughhh... walking shouldn't be so hard..." I groaned, face down on the concrete tiles. Hadn't I been kicking ass a short while ago? I was fairly sure I had. Somehow...

"Maybe some more Wild Pegasus?" a mare said in a strange electronic voice. I blinked and looked over at the small collection in the living room. Lacunae was lying on the floor next to Glory on the couch. The gray pegasus was so... neat. So clean and tidy that I had to double check. Next to her, Scotch sat eating one of my birthday cupcakes with a crown of whiskey bottles atop her head. She grinned sheepishly at me. On the coffee table was a large metal drum with a camera on top and a speaker set in the base. There was some sort of generator next to it, along with some strange medical-looking equipment that beeped softly. Sitting on the opposite couch were Homage and a strange buck with a candy-cane-striped mane. P-21 trotted up to help me to my feet. I had to admit, he cleaned up pretty good too.

"I think she's had enough Wild P for one lifetime," Glory said with a somewhat stern smile that told me I was in a bit of trouble. Not that I blamed her, given the condition I'd been in last night.

"Did you really drink all six bottles in four hours? I'm pretty sure that would have killed anypony else," the odd buck said. "When Homage told me that you and LittlePip were being flown here by five wings of alicorns, I had to wonder if she'd been drinking too."

The grey unicorn chuckled and shook her head, then gestured to her companion. "Blackjack? Life Bloom. Life Bloom? This is Blackjack. Also known as 'Security'

around Hoofington.” Her blue eyes focused on me as she said evenly, “Life Bloom here is representing the Twilight Society and wants to speak with you about Professor Zodiac’s theories regarding your lineage.”

“Oh... yeah. That.” I trotted towards the assembly, P-21 more than once keeping me from falling flat on my face... again. “Look, I know she thinks I’m special... but I’m not. Okay? I don’t know why I can open up the cases, but I’m not related to any Ministry Mare, and I’m certainly not related to Twilight Sparkle!”

Life Bloom smiled politely. “Why are you so sure you’re not? There’s much we don’t know about the Ministry Mares. The Ministry of Image did an exceptional job obfuscating and hiding the truth. Applejack was the only mare who was ever publicly confirmed to be in a relationship, but it’s unlikely that she really was the only one.”

Homage gave me a gentle smile. “It’s possible that your relationship is only tangential. You could have some Apple blood in you. That would explain the cases.” She folded her hooves before her.

“It wouldn’t explain Project Steelpony being unsealed perfectly,” buzzed the speaker on the can. “While I agree that being Applejack’s cousin might be enough to open a security case, it would not work for EC-1101. The fact that she’s capable of interfacing with that program tells me that there’s more to Blackjack than meets the eye.”

“There isn’t. Really. I’m not,” I said firmly, shaking my head. I sat down beside the coffee table, and Glory pushed me a bottle of clean water. It might not be whiskey, but it was certainly welcome. “I’m just... me. A security mare from a stable. I’m not special.” I looked from one to the next and felt a stab of irritation at the speculative gazes. “Look, why does all this matter? Why do you want to know so much?”

“Quite honestly, many in my organization don’t want to know,” Life Bloom said calmly. “You must understand that, for two hundred years, the Twilight Society has been responsible for Tenpony Tower and the secrets of the MAS hub. Many of my order believe this building to be the last remaining bastion of old Equestria. As such, they take anything to do with the MAS and its Ministry Mare very seriously.”

“So what does it mean to the Twilight Society if Blackjack is related to Twilight?” P-21 asked pointedly as he looked at Homage and Life Bloom.

“We’re not sure. There’s a great deal of disagreement in the Society about that,” Life Bloom admitted, drawing a surprised look from Homage. “Some believe that, even if Blackjack is related, she has no right or connection to the Society. And on the

other end of the spectrum... there are those saying that, if she is... then she is the legitimate head of the Twilight Society." He looked at me slightly apologetically. "Most don't know what to think and/or are reserving judgement until we can verify if you are or aren't."

I jumped to my hooves. "Now wait a second! You're not turning me into your new Ministry Mare!" Wait, how'd I move like that? I wobbled and fell against the arm of the couch. Lacunae's horn glowed and she steadied me.

"Would it really be so bad?" Glory asked softly as she put her hoof out to touch my shoulder.

I closed my eyes as I tried to think of a way to make her understand. "Glory... she was Twilight Sparkle. She was the element of magic! She was responsible for an entire ministry and programs and... and everything! I'm Blackjack. I think I'm the biggest screwup in the history of Equestria! I can't even do magic, period!" I said as I pointed at my dead horn.

"Neither could Twilight Sparkle," Life Bloom said evenly.

Excuse me? All eyes were on the candy-maned unicorn as he smiled. "Twilight Sparkle didn't pop from the womb using super-powered magic. In fact, not many people knew it, but she was so bad at magic that she flunked out of magic kindergarten. I understand that there were quite a few magical mistakes made when she was young. She likely would have never gotten into magic at all were it not for her witnessing Celestia raising the sun. After that, she worked hard to learn all the spells she could. Even then, when she applied to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, she was by all accounts quite mediocre. It wasn't until the first sonic rainboom incident that her magical potential showed itself. Only then did she receive Celestia's personal attention and tutelage. Even then, though, her magic was the product of a lifetime of hard work more than of her admittedly great natural talent."

"But... I mean... I can't even do the simplest spell. All I can do is shoot things with my horn." Make that could, Blackjack.

"Yes, but did you have Princess Celestia as your teacher?" Life Bloom asked. To be fair, Textbook had been about as interested in me learning as in watching paint dry. Even Mom's endless attempts to remediate me were more embarrassing than instructive. "Twilight Sparkle received the instruction and attention she needed to excel. From Glory's description, it's doubtful Twilight would have learned any magic at all were she forced into your circumstances. And before you ask, neither Twilight's mother nor father were exceptional magic users."

For some reason, his assurances were making me feel more and more panicked. I wasn't Twilight's descendant! I couldn't be. I was nopony. A screwup! If I were related to Twilight, then... then I'd be responsible for fixing the entire Wasteland! I'd have to use EC-1101 to do... something! I couldn't even fix Hoofington yet. Of course, my stupid body felt all calm and still... I needed to get some kind of heartbeat simulator installed.

Homage looked at me with a sympathetic smile. "Why don't we just get it over with, Life Bloom? The door test?"

"Door test?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

"There's a door in the tower enchanted to only open for Twilight, though we think that a direct descendant could also do it," Homage said calmly. "So, all Blackjack has to do is try to open the door."

"Right," I croaked. "Let's get this over with."

"Are you sure you don't want to eat something first?" Glory asked as she looked up at me in worry. "You look even paler than a white pony should." I shook my head firmly. With the way my guts churned, I was certain that I was going to puke if I actually had something in my... wait... those were guts, right? Ugh, I wasn't sure if I needed an owner's manual or an anatomy lesson! In either case, no. Food was not a good idea just now.

"I look forward to hearing all about it when you get back," the Professor said as the camera turned to face me. "Remember, whatever is inside was Twilight's. That means that, if you can get to it, it's yours, Blackjack. Don't let them take it." Life Bloom merely smiled and said nothing.

We trotted out like an execution procession, leaving Lacunae with the professor. I looked around and asked dully, "Where's Rampage?"

"Your friend Rampage is in security till you leave. Somepony pointed out that, since she's a Reaper... technically, she's a raider. Normally that would be a death sentence, but... well..." Life Bloom coughed.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said as we stepped into the gilt-decorated elevator.

"Are you sure you're okay with this, Blackjack?" Homage asked quietly beside me.

I sighed. "No, I'm really not. I just came back from the dead. My body... half the time it works flawlessly, and the other half I'm falling on my face. But the Twilight Society helped bring me back... they could have told Glory and the Professor to

piss off. Then I'd be a tainted cyberpony."

"Being related to Twilight won't change who you are, Blackjack," the blue-maned mare murmured as the car came to a stop and we set off down another corridor.

I slowed my pace, letting the others go ahead. Then I looked at her. "Won't it? You heard the professor and Life Bloom. If ponies find out that I'm Twilight's... I don't know... heir or descendant or something... what is that going to mean? I can barely handle being Blackjack, security mare, reject of Stable 99."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to think that, if I opened that door, things would still be fine. Hey, maybe it would make things easier. Except that my life was never easier. "You're not a reject or a failure, Blackjack. I've seen what you've done."

"Really? Did you see Fallen Arch? Did you see Clover's head explode? Or Glory's wing fall off? Did you kill only Goddesses know how many Rangers to sink a ship? Did you see that?" I asked sharply, my irritation from the morning returning... which made me kick myself even harder. She was trying to help me, and I sighed, lowering my eyes. "I know you told me I did good things, but it all feels like a lie. It feels wrong... like I'm winning some sort of prize I didn't earn." The others had realized I'd stopped and were starting to look back. "I really don't want to do this... but I have to... so let's get it over with." I wanted a drink. A whole bunch of drinks, right now.

Everypony was gathered before two large doors. They were of sturdy light wood and beset with amethysts. I felt nausea welling up from an organ that didn't exist anymore. The gems glowed a faint purple. There were other ponies here, watching with grim expressions. I didn't want introductions. I just wanted this over with. I looked at the doorhandles and sighed.

"So... anypony laying odds?" I asked, swallowing hard.

"It's going to be all right," Glory assured me.

"Please get on with it," drawled one buck, clearly not anticipating anything important happening. I wanted to capture his complete skepticism... but my mind kept going back to that horrible room with that sobbing mare, and the surrogacy spell... I thought back to Twilight saying farewell to Big Macintosh.

"Please... please please please let it be somepony else," I prayed aloud as I walked to the doors. I closed my eyes, suddenly glad I couldn't hyperventilate. Slowly, I reached out with a hoof, the limb jerking around a little before I was finally able to rest it on the latch, feeling the oddly warm metal underhoof. I didn't even have magic

to open it with...

My hoof pressed down on the latch, and...

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

I stared, and then jiggled it with my hoof. My jaw just hung open as I tapped the metal hoof against the door latch. Nothing.

"Probably related to Rarity," one of the mares drawled as she turned away.

"What a drama queen..." agreed another as they trotted off.

"Well. I suppose that is that," Life Bloom said with a sigh and a shrug. I couldn't look away as I tapped the door latch one last time. Still didn't budge. Homage looked at me in concern. For a moment there, I'd been... I'd been absolutely sure!

"Huh... I guess..." I gave a little half smile as I looked back at everypony. "I guess I got all worked up for nothing, huh?" It was like stepping out from beneath an immense weight... and yet... I looked back at the doors. If I was so relieved... why was I feeling so... so disappointed?

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern as she walked up next to me and hugged me with her wing. I closed my eyes, relief mixing with the bittersweet sense of failure. I couldn't tell which was stronger. I should be happy... right?

"I'm good, Glory," I said and smiled as I settled on relief. "I'm just surprised. I mean, I know the odds were against it, but I think that, at the end there, I really was convinced it was true. Heh... such an idiot." I made my synthetic lungs draw a deep breath, despite the little green O2 readout at the bottom of my vision, and looked at the others. "So I guess I'm probably a cousin or something twice removed?"

"I suppose. We may never truly understand the circumstances of your lineage," Life Bloom said with a sigh and a shrug. "Regardless, now that that's out of the way, would you care to see the rest of Tenpony Tower?" I laughed and nodded, feeling much better now that that nightmare was over. Scotch trotted on my other side while Homage and P-21 came up behind, talking softly.

I had to admit, seeing the agricultural chambers designed to grow contamination-free food was somewhat impressive, even if their output didn't come close to supporting even the population of the tower. Glory laughed in delight at the sight of the alicorn fountain in the library atrium, and Scotch burst with dozens of questions

when she saw the DJ's broadcast room. Homage made her apologies for the DJ being out at that moment. Then we reached the... I couldn't even begin to pronounce what the gray unicorn called it, but it was pretty obviously a library. I couldn't imagine anypony being physically able to read all these books in one lifetime. Maybe P-21 or Glory. Me, I doubt I'd read more than ten books in my entire life.

Just another reason why the idea of me being related to Twilight was such an insult to the former Ministry Mare.

"Something on your mind?" Homage asked me quietly, making me jump a little.

"Oh... nothing. I never have anything on my mind. I'm not a smart pony, after all," I said with a grin. "I think you could sum it up as 'booze, guns, and flanks.'" Oddly, she didn't appreciate my joke. She looked sad, and even a little bit angry.

"Why do you always lie to yourself?" she asked me in a low voice. "You say you're stupid, but you've been exposing secrets and conspiracies from two centuries ago. You say you're a failure when you've helped countless ponies and stopped a war. You say you have no magic, but look at what you can accomplish."

"It's not lying, Homage. It's being honest," I replied, and for some reason that comment seemed to shock her more than anything. "Lying would be saying I'm awesome and ignoring the fact that I've gotten ponies killed. That I've murdered... so many... who didn't deserve it. If there were a guidebook for messing up, I'd be the author. And no matter how much I try to tell myself I've paid the price and I'm even, the honest truth is that I'll always be a murderer. The second I forget that or it doesn't matter... that's when I'll be a monster." I looked at her with a half smile. "The truth... no matter how bad it hurts, right?"

I looked at all the books. "That's why I'm so glad I'm not related to Twilight. It was stupid of me to get worked up in the first place. There's no way somepony like her could be related to a pony as messed up as me."

"It's not like she would be your mother, Blackjack. There would be something like ten generations between you and her," Homage said quietly. I turned away; she didn't understand. But the gray unicorn jumped back into my path. "You know what I think? I think that the reason you're so glad Twilight's not a part of you is that it would disrupt this perfect little horrible picture you have of yourself. You're a good pony, Blackjack. You've helped so many. You helped LittlePip! She's so boneheadedly determined to do everything on her own that it's a miracle for anypony to be able to tell her to hush up and accept aid."

I blinked as I looked down at my hooves. She didn't understand... just like I didn't understand what P-21 had been through. I didn't know what to say, and finally she sighed and then hugged me tightly with her hooves. "Someday, you will know the truth. Someday, you'll know what it's like to live without hating yourself."

It was a nice sentiment, but she didn't understand. Some ponies deserved to be hated. Like Goldenblood. Like Sanguine. Like Deus.

Like me.

She sighed as she let me go, then narrowed her eyes at me. "Now... what's this I heard about you kissing my marefriend?"

I blinked. "You're... you mean you and Littlepip are...?" Wait! That actually happened? I jumped back. "I... she... I mean she was... you know... she was looking and I was... you know... and she... we... I..." I waved my hooves before me. "I'd never... had I know... I mean she's cute... and all... but... ah..."

Homage arched a brow coolly, then smiled. "We are and she did and she is. And I'm pretty sure I'll be able to use that kiss for some fun tonight." Then she looked over at Glory as she trotted towards us. "I'm just wondering if she knows about you kissing on my LittlePip?" Glory's purple eyes suddenly turned cold as she looked at me.

Oh shit... "I... merp... jah shek... you... gah..." I struggled as the pair of mares just stared at me.

Then Glory looked at Homage. "There's only one thing to do, isn't there?"

Homage nodded gravely. "There is." This was it. I was gonna die.

Glory and Homage stepped closer... their eyes locked on me... and then both smiled in immense satisfaction and lightly smooched each other on the lips. At which point something in my brain burst and I fell over in a heap, twitching. The pair laughed as they trotted away, talking about evening plans and how silly LittlePip and I were.

Life Bloom trotted up. "She certainly is quite the odd mare, isn't she?"

"Something like that," I said with a sigh, shaking my head. Evil was more my thinking... both of them.

"I love this room," he said with a smile, looking at all the books with a soft gaze. Then he blinked, "Oh! That reminds me. I think I left a book on the desk in the office over there. Could you get it for me, please?" I looked at his perfectly capable legs,

and he added, "It might also give you a chance to lose that flaming red expression on your cheeks." Ahh. Yes. It would, wouldn't it?

I walked towards the door he'd indicated, set off in the back corner of the aet... er... big library room thingy! What was it with smart ponies and ridiculous sounding words? Like everything else in the room, it was decorated with a golden unicorn with an amethyst eye. There was a tiny spark, and a little pink pony in my head gave a little 'ooh'. I glanced back, but Life Bloom was talking with P-21 and Glory was still chatting evilness with Homage. Them kissing each other like that... evil...

I stepped into the study, feeling my cheeks burn. I wasn't exactly in a rush to get back outside, so I looked around a bit. Surprise, surprise... There were even more bookshelves in here, along with several books sitting on the desk (I probably should have asked which book Life Bloom wanted, but...eh, I could do that later) and, oddly enough, a great number of scrolls. They were stored along one wall in a rack like bottles of wine. I levi... fuck... I looked at them like an idiot before I remembered that my horn didn't work and instead pointed my hoof at it. "Fingers... on. Thumbs... function? Freaky digit powers activate!" Finally, I sighed and bit the end of one scroll; it easily opened. I wondered if it was on magic paper or something. Slowly, I unrolled it and looked at the elegant script.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

You know that I value your diligence and that I trust you completely, but you simply must stop reading those dusty old books! My dear Twilight, there is more to a young pony's life than studying, so I am sending you to supervise the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration in this year's location, Ponyville. And I have an even more essential task for you to complete: make some friends!

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I stared at the letter in astonishment, then flushed and wiped away the slobber I'd gotten all over the end of the scroll. I was a little relieved to see that none of it seemed to stick to the surface. Magic paper indeed. This was a royal letter and a historical document! I carefully rolled it back up with my hooves and returned it to its cubby, selecting another scroll. This time, my fingers folded out to nudge it into my hooves.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

I know that there are no words I can adequately express for the loss of your friend,

Big Macintosh. I realize that, in times such as this, words cannot convey any cure for the pain we feel when one of our own dies. I am sorry that he died to protect me from that assassin's bullet and curse myself that there is no way to undo what has happened. All ponies pass, and I know that one day you will be reunited with him. I am here at the school if you should ever need me.

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I sighed, rolling the scroll up and returning it to the rest. I couldn't discern any order or other method of filing; Twilight had probably had each one memorized. I pulled out one more. The dark silver ink and the look of the writing had a slightly cold tone.

My dearest, most faithful subject, Twilight,

We wish to express our profound dismay at the lack of progress towards the war effort. Have we not provided you with every resource of the kingdom to your ministry? Do you not have at your disposal the most brilliant magical minds of our time? Yet when we ask what is being done to counter the development of zebra balefire weaponry, we do not hear of our own weapons being devised but instead talks of ethics and discussions about if it is right to weaponize megaspells. You can be certain our enemies waste no time with such nonsense. We are sure your purification matrices and radiation nullification spells are admirable goals, but they will come to naught under zebra rule. We know your burdens are great, but, while we will do all we can to help you bear them, we must know that you are up to the challenge.

We know that you will not fail us. You never have.

Your benevolent monarch,

Princess Luna

Wow. The contrast was night and day. Not at all what I'd expected from Princess Luna... but then, why had I expected differently? Luna was running an entire kingdom. If she failed, then the whole country would fall. Even if she won the war, there'd probably be a whole lot of ponies pissed off at her for every little thing that went wrong during the fighting. I frowned as I tapped the scroll softly against my lips. Luna... I suddenly realized that I knew almost nothing about what Luna actually did to run the country. The ministries took care of the war effort. The O.I.A. took care of all the dirty business. So what was Luna doing the whole time? I knew more about Goldenblood than I did the monarch of the country!

I sighed and shook my head. A smarter pony might be able to unravel all of this.

I just shot things. Carefully, I put the scroll back in the cubby, walked to the desk, and started looking at the books on it; maybe I could figure out which one was Life Bloom's. Predictions and Prophesies. Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide. And most curious of all was the book on top: Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns. I looked at a penned note sitting atop it.

Dear Marigold,

I'm sorry you've been having problems with Tarot. While most unicorn fillies her age have started using their magic, it's not uncommon for there to be delays. I used to think that my horn was completely useless! Tell her not to be frustrated. This book should provide her with some exercises to get her horn working, as well as a few useful and interesting spells and notes she might find helpful.

Your cousin,

Twilight Sparkle

I sighed. 'I need you to get a book,' Life Bloom had said. Very sneaky, giving me a book on rebuilding my magic rather than letting me kick myself for being a failure... with a note from Twilight to my own ancestor, even. I sighed and slipped the book into my saddlebag. "Okay. I get the message. Stop freaking out, cut out the self hating, and start doing better. I get it."

"About time," the Dealer rasped, and I spun, tripped, and fell on my back looking up at the old pony. His milky eyes stared down at me as he worked his cards.

"I thought they'd cut you out of my brain!" I shouted as I thrust my hoof at him.

"Oh, I reckon there's more than enough left you're not using for me to hide in," he said dryly with a smile.

"Yeah, well, you missed your big chance. I couldn't open the door. I'm not related to Twilight," I said with a smile as I spread my hooves.

"Why should I care if you are or aren't? Makes no difference to me," he said as he turned a card with a picture of Twilight on it and flicked it at me with his hoof. "Twilight. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Rarity. Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie," he said as he flicked one after the next at me. I collected the cards in my hooves. "They've all been gone two hundred years. What do they matter? Why get worked up over corpses?"

I looked at the spread of cards and glared at him. "Because they were good mares! They tried to save the country and do good things! They tried to do better."

"Even though they blew the whole damned world to hell? Well, so long as they tried..." he snorted. I've known ponies whose fuckups killed millions. "Trying doesn't mean shit. Consequences. Those are what matter. Twilight Sparkle and her friends tried, but they ran Equestria into the ground."

"Shut up!" I said as I rose to my hooves. "Trying matters. Even if they failed, there's something in making the effort. It's better than giving up!" The six cards returned to his hooves.

"Pinkie Pie tried to make everypony happy through drugs and eliminating bad memories. Fluttershy modified memories to change other ponies' very selves in the name of taking away pain and suffering. Rainbow Dash killed only Goddesses know how many. Applejack made the weapons of war that killed millions, including her own brother. Rarity spun lies into truth and made deception into a whole new art form. And Twilight pursued one magic trick after the next hoping to find one that would work. A foolproof spell to win." I flinched as he flicked the cards with his hoof again. "And all any one of them had to do was quit!"

"What?" I blinked, staring up at him.

"That's all. One resignation. One. That's all it would have taken. Rainbow Dash quitting would have knocked out the pegasi and forced Luna to surrender. Applejack retiring would have thrown the war production into disarray, the heads of the companies under her fighting tooth and hoof for her position. Fluttershy's resignation would be joined by hundreds of doctors, nurses, and medical staff. And any of those six quitting would have lead to the resignation of the other five." He gave a dismissive snort. "With the Ministry Mares gone, the whole government would have folded like a deck of cards."

"But Equestria would have lost the war!" I protested.

"So what?" he asked softly, but with a tone of such utter contempt that it made me pause. He gestured out the window. "Are you saying that this is better? The zebras had lost so many people that they were forced to use robots, tanks, and missiles because they couldn't continue their traditional way of fighting. A victory for them would have meant them returning home and the abdication of Luna from the throne. All it would take was any one of those six... any one... and Luna would have been unable to continue the war."

"So what are you saying? That they were scum for fighting for what they believed in, or that I should give up?" I asked with a sigh.

"I am saying that you are wrong for thinking they were flawless. I am saying that they made mistakes. They did what they did for all the wrong reasons." He looked around at the office and sighed. "This isn't a bad place, Blackjack. You could make a life for yourself here. You and your friends, away from the Hoof."

"I can't," I said softly. "I sat still for a few hours after coming back from the dead and then went and apparently got myself and LittlePip all shot up. I can't just stay here in Tenpony, assuming I could afford it and they'd let me."

"Get therapy. Helpinghoof will work with you on that. But you need to do this because it's the right thing to do. To fight because it's the right thing to be fighting for." He lifted the card of Twilight Sparkle. "Because, if you're doing this because you feel like you have to, then, related or not, you are exactly like Twilight Sparkle and the rest of her friends."

I sighed as he disappeared, leaving me alone again. Of all the times for him to show up... why now? I carefully removed that note from the book. Was I taking this because of things that happened two centuries ago? Or was it because I wanted to get my horn to work again? Because I wanted to do magic on my own? I read the note three more times and sighed. No. I'm Blackjack, and no matter how lacking I may be, I was supposed to do magic. A unicorn is more than just an earth pony with a horn.

I trotted back out and saw Life Bloom waiting for me. He had the oddest look on his face. I tapped my saddlebag and mouthed 'Thank you.' For a moment, he paused, and then he smiled. Homage was looking at me too, a touch worried. But I smiled back and nodded, and that seemed to put her at a little more ease.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in an unsettlingly relaxed manner. My friends and I got to enjoy the many splendors of Tenpony Tower. I had to admit, I'd never been anywhere quite so clean before that wasn't actually some sort of death trap or house of horrors. The sight of ponies trotting around, talking, and trading was soothing. Whether here or in Flank, trade saved the Wasteland. Since Helpinghoof refused to accept most of the chems provided by Caprice, I sold them to a vendor for a decent amount of caps.

That allowed Glory and I to enjoy a perfectly nice, ridiculously overpriced meal in one of Tenpony's restaurants. I personally found it more than a little bland... but then, so was everything else. My sense of taste was a little off. I wondered if that

had something to do with the whole ‘eating metal’ thing. I bit down on the head of a fork and squeezed my jaws closed. There was that faint tingle, and the metal softened enough for me to chew it. Huh... nope, not much difference at all. The waiter took one look at me holding half an eating utensil between my hooves, and his eyelid twitched. What? It came with the meal!

There was a sizable crowd eating at the moment; I wasn’t very used to that, either. Heck, even back in 99, most of my meals were during curfew. Glory was ruminating on a café very much like this back in Thunderhead, but something at the next table over caught my ear. A little phrase that spilled out of the mouth of a mare a little too dirty to be a full resident but a little too clean to be somepony long in the Wasteland.

“If you want to make caps, get to Hoofington,” she said with the faint slur of somepony who’d had one drink more than they should. “A quick in and out and you’ll solve all your monetary problems.”

Glory had noticed me turning in my seat to look at the mare and her three companions. Laughing... joking... but paying her enough attention to hear what she was saying. “Blackjack?” Glory asked in concern. But I stared at the mare with her greenish-yellow hide and her wide smile, and a pink pony hissed in my ear, ‘She’s a bad pony.’

“Just want to say hello,” I said absently as I rose from my seat and trotted towards the mare and her friends. They were all tower ponies... well dressed and more or less clean. But there was just something off about the yellow-green mare.

“It shouldn’t be that hard to set up an expedition,” mused one of them aloud. “A sizable caravan. Twenty ponies, ten brahmin at least. Soon as this beastly siege lifts...”

“Better to make it thirty. The Hoof isn’t exactly an easy place at times, but once you’ve found a spot, you’ll...” The prospector mare suddenly blinked up at me, then smiled a little too easily. “Oh, hello. You interested in making a fortune out east?”

I grinned as Glory trotted up beside me, frowning in worry. “Yeah, you can say that. You just come from there?”

“Surely did,” she said with a wide grin. “Came back with trunks loaded with mint condition guns, ammo, caps, and a couple crates of food. Felt bad leaving a bunch behind but I just didn’t have any more brahmin!” She laughed, and the other three joined her.

“Well, you could have gotten some more from the Finders in Megamart. Caprice’s

always happy to help for a good price," I said, and immediately drew the curiosity of the three.

The prospector's smile turned a touch sickly. "Well... If you've been there yourself, then you'd know... um... it's sometimes hard dealing with her..."

"No doubt. But, heck, I've had the roughest time with the Finders. You ever get over to Flank up in the north?" I asked, feeling something tightening inside me. I had a target on her face and felt my legs humming faintly.

"Uh... no. I was more... westish..." She rose to her hooves. "If you gentlemen would excuse me..."

"So, by Scarpard?" I asked with a grin as I jumped into her path. "Great place for salvage. One of my favorites."

"Yeah, sure!" she blurted as she tried to dart around me. "Now get the fuck out of my-"

I might not have had a gun or weapon on me, but I certainly knew how to take down a mare. I grabbed a mouthful of the earth pony's greasy mane and jerked hard, pulling back and making her rear up as she yelled in response. I hooked my left leg around her waist and jerked, slamming her back to the table and sending the fancy meals dancing.

"Quick! Call security!" one of the three bucks yelled.

"I'm right here!" I shouted as I glared down into her fearful piss-yellow eyes. "You're lying about coming from Hoofington! I know you are! What I want to know is, why are you lying?"

"Get off me!" she yelled as she struggled. I unfolded my fingers and closed them on her windpipe.

"That place is a deathtrap! Anypony that's been there knows it." I looked at one of the three. "Did she mention anything about Enervation fields sucking the life from you?" I looked at another. "How about a plague that turns you into a cannibal? Or the wars and fighting?" I looked down at her. There were ponies coming who were not in a good mood. I grabbed her in my synthetic hooves and slammed her against the table. "So I want to know why!"

She coughed and gasped. "They paid us!" she yelled, and I released her enough to breathe properly. "They paid us caps... more gear than I could imagine! Gave it to us like it was garbage! Told us... told us to go out. Find ponies and tell them... tell

them to go to Hoofington." I retracted my fingers and she rubbed her throat. "They found us after we fled Gutterville... said... said we could keep everything. Just had to say we came from Hoofington."

"We... there were others?" I asked as Tenpony security arrived.

She coughed as I moved off her. She didn't look well at the moment as she stared at me. "They sent us out... Friendship City... New Appleloosa... here... told us to tell folks Hoofington was rich and safe and... and.." She jerked sharply, whimpering and holding her gut. "Said to tell everypony... Hoofington Rises..."

"They... who are 'they'!?" I asked, but she clenched her eyes shut, shaking in pain as she curled up even more.

"Hurts..." she whimpered as she rolled off the table and suddenly screamed. She rolled in agony, and her mouth puked a bloody foam. Everypony backed away except for me as I looked her over. Her stomach was undulating under her hide. Then there was a pop and her insides burst in a red rain all over us. One of the three lost his very expensive lunch. The rest of the lunch crowd was either screaming and fleeing or looking like their brains were fully tied up trying to explain to their eyes that what they'd just seen could not possibly have actually happened.

I looked at Glory, who was staring with mixed horror and interest. The Dealer had said we could leave the Hoof behind. That we could have a normal life away from that cursed city. Maybe we could, but now it looked like the Hoof was drawing more ponies to it. "We need to get back home," I said grimly. Then I turned and looked at the half dozen security ponies in front of me and dropped my eyes to the dead prospector. "Oh... shoot..."

"So. What are you in for?" Rampage asked me as she stretched out on the bunk in the Tenpony detention cell with her hooves behind her head. Right now, Glory and Homage were trying to clear things up after my little disturbance. The security ponies were trying their hardest to hush up a nasty death before it disturbed the natives' delicate sensitivities. I was fairly sure there would be at least three new patients needing Helpinghoof's therapy. The inside of that prospector hadn't just been blown apart but shredded from the inside. Apparently, that wasn't common in Tenpony...

Damn, was I really this jaded?

"Got in a fight," I muttered.

"Shouldn't do that," Rampage tisked softly. "Puts the locals in a hanging sort of mood."

"Then she exploded," I muttered. Rampage slowly sat up and looked at me for some hint of a joke or sign that I wasn't serious. I glanced at her and sighed. "Really. I'm not kidding. She started talking about 'they' and 'them' and popped like a balloon full of red paint."

"Why do the most interesting things happen around you when I'm not there?" Rampage asked with a chuckle. I wasn't laughing, though. Somepony had sent her here with bags full of caps and loot and a story that she'd gotten them from Hoofington. There were at least two others. And whatever had been done to her, she'd been ignorant of it.

'Them.' Conspiracies. Killings. Elusive plots. And somehow, I couldn't help but think that somepony was pulling together a plan of some sort. With the O.I.A. and Goldenblood and EC-1101. And now it'd just killed that poor clueless mare...

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" I screamed all at once, thrashing my metallic limbs as hard as I could against the hanging bunk. The metal screeched and deformed before the frame snapped and dumped me on the floor. "Stop killing ponies, you fuckers!"

"What's going on?" the security ponies asked as I rose and proceeded to kick and stomp the frame till it snapped off entirely. Then I applebucked it against the bars, making the pair jump back as I smashed what remained into broken steel. I wanted to be out of breath, my heart to pound, my legs to be sore... and the sensation that I'd pounded whoever was behind all this into twisted metal. Instead, I just sat down on the concrete floor feeling like an idiot.

"Saw a radroach," Rampage said calmly. "She can't handle those things."

I looked at the twisted remains of the bunk and sighed, feeling like a royal idiot. "Sorry." I was pretty sure my chances of getting out of here were somehow lower than those of me being related to Twilight Sparkle now.

"Not likely," one pony said to the other with a soft snort. "You won't find those things here."

"Oh, you might. Darn things are all over the Wasteland. Even get into stables, evidently," Rampage drawled. The talk of radroaches was distracting them a little from the fact that I'd just thrashed their bunk.

"Not in Tenpony," one of the security ponies said as he reached over and tapped a small flat metal box on the wall. "Ever hear of a pesticide talisman?"

I looked at his hoof and the flat box. Slowly, I crawled to the bars and stared across at the flat little casing. It was simple, nondescript. Something that had been there two hundred years or more. Just one little piece of equipment like thousands of others bolted to subway walls or in the backs of crumbling houses. I'd probably passed thousands of pieces just like it.

The one thing that drew my attention more than anything, though, was the faded name on the case. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions'.

"Open it," I said as I stared at the little box. I looked up at the guards, who were not unjustly looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "Please. Please open it." The security guards looked extremely skeptical, and I knelt with my hooves clasped before me. "Please, I promise I'll behave myself and not make another peep. Just please open it."

"It's locked," one muttered, tapping the little case. "I doubt anypony knows where the key is."

"Call my friend P-21. Great with locks. Blue earth pony. Probably somewhere scowling. You can't miss him!" I hated this sense of stillness inside me.

"And I thought the striped one was a nutcase," the guard sighed before he scowled and said to one of the others, "Please see if you can find this friend of hers." Then the tan buck looked at me. "And you... behave. Turn off your eye... laser... things."

"Huh?" I looked at my hoof and saw the red pinprick light dancing on it. "Woah... that's new."

The security ponies moved to a healthy distance, talking quietly to each other. I looked at the cot mattress wrapped in twisted metal and glanced hopefully to where Rampage was stretched out. She arched her brow. "Hey, don't even think about it. I'm not dumb enough to wreck my own bunk." I sighed. My butt didn't have enough metal in it for me to ignore how hard the concrete floor was.

After one hour, twenty-two minutes, and thirteen seconds... and I had to find a way to turn that off or I was going to go nuts... P-21 came in escorted by the tan security buck. He looked at the crumpled metal and scowled at Rampage. She sat up and pointed at me. "Hey, she was the one who felt a sudden need to redecorate! Not me."

I pointed with my hoof at the box. "Please. Open that."

"Blackjack... you're acting crazy..." he said in a tired voice.

"I just had a pony explode in front of me, okay? Just... open that box. Then I'll be a nice and quiet mare. Really." I stared at it as he looked at the tan buck for permission. He gestured with a hoof for P-21 to get on with it. He produced his tools from his saddlebags and in three seconds popped open the dull metal case.

"Huh... that's weird. Where's the gem?" the tan security pony asked in surprise. And as P-21 backed away, I felt my mane stand straight up along my spine.

There, sitting quietly in its unsmashed case, was a silver ring about the size of my hoof. Just like in the back room of Silverstar Sporting Supplies and just like the ring that had been tossed at Lacunae during the battle. The enervation rings weren't just in Hoofington. Suddenly, I had the feeling they were in a whole lot more places than just Hoofington.

"It can't be generating Enervation," Helpinghoof said as he stared at the silver ring on his desk. "Enervation is a phenomenon found only in Hoofington." Life Bloom had arranged our release and now my friends and I had gathered in the office.

"And I'm telling you that the ring in the sporting goods store was just like this," I insisted. Life Bloom had taken my concerns seriously, though he looked just as confused as Helpinghoof. "And during the battle, somepony had rigged one of these with a spark battery." Due to her prior experience, Lacunae was staying with Rover. I could only imagine what they were spending their time doing.

"Well, while I'm not sure what this ring does, it's not killing us," P-21 said. Life Bloom rummaged in Helpinghoof's cupboards, came back with a battery and two wires, and carefully attached them to the ring. Again... nothing.

Now everypony was looking at me like I was a madmare. "Blackjack, it's just a coincidence," Glory said softly as she nuzzled me.

"You didn't see the ring, Glory. It was exactly like this. Same shape and size," I said with a huff, feeling let down.

"You've been through a lot, Blackjack," P-21 said, trying to comfort me. He was really lousy at it.

"You're welcome to stay another week," Life Bloom said, then paused and amended,

"You will be welcome after I tell everypony that what happened in the café wasn't your fault." I scowled as I stepped away and walked over to the gurney the dead mare lay upon. He gave a sigh of frustration; clearly, me relaxing and calming down was in the script.

"What about her?" I asked as I pointed with a hoof at the dead mare. There was a look passed between everypony, and finally, with a reluctant sigh, Helpinghoof trotted to the gurney.

"Rusty. We confirmed she was in Gutterville before it was destroyed," Helpinghoof said. I was glad he didn't show the body. "Whatever happened to her... it was like a grenade went off inside her. But her major internal organs were all destroyed... it was as if she was torn apart from within before detonation."

The Tenpony bucks looked spooked, but I shared a look with my friends. This wasn't even a bad day in the Hoof. Still, there was no missing the concerned looks being traded. Blackjack was now half synthetic. Blackjack had spent three days brain-dead. Blackjack was attacking strange mares who exploded! These were not signs that Blackjack was okay.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and paused briefly to mentally thank whoever had left me the ability to do that. "I know... I know I've been a little off since I've come back. I mean, the whole drinking thing, and then the test and the fight. But... there's something bad going on in Hoofington, and I can't shake the feeling that it's other places, too. So we have to get back. I can't spend a week just recovering here. I'll be climbing the walls in no time."

"You might have to," Glory said with a little frown. "Captain Thrush nearly burned out her engine getting us here."

Oh, wonderful... wait. "Where is Thrush?" I asked, realizing that I hadn't seen her since we arrived.

"Friendship City," P-21 said. "She sort of fell under the same rule as Rampage. 'Raider activities.'" And who knew how far away that was? The idea of being stuck here was starting to creep up on me. I hated waiting. I needed to do. To act. To get things done. Otherwise, I was going to start thinking.

"I thought they called that looting and pillaging," Scotch Tape commented as she fooled around with Helpinghoof's little ear light thingy. The filly had gotten her hooves on a lot of loot and plunder herself, no surprise when you come from a stable where ninety percent of the property is communal and then go into the Wasteland

where you owned whatever you found.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Glory asked.

"School?" I frowned in confusion.

"Boring pony thinks I'm a kid, so she enrolled me in some stupid school thing they have here."

Glory nodded primly. "It's important every young filly get a quality education."

"Education..." Scotch Tape snorted. "It's boring and stupid. I told them how to strip and rebuild a steam gauge assembly. They were making sand art. Art... from colored sand...." Her tone left no confusion at all about how she felt regarding that little enterprise. "I told them the only sand I ever played with was in a high pressure nozzle stripping rust and old paint from parts."

"So, no colored sand cutie mark then?" I asked with a smile. Her green glare informed me that rusty parts weren't the only thing she could sandblast. I grinned. "We could call you Sandy." Scotch growled and tried to tackle me.

"She goes from a warning about an Enervation device to insisting on getting back to Hoofington to teasing a foal about her cutie mark..." Life Bloom murmured. The fact was that teasing Scotch... who was finding out that biting mechanical legs wasn't very effective... let me think on the other two. The discovery of a silver ring here in Tenpony had panicked me, but now there wasn't much I could do. Why it wasn't causing the eye-bleeding mind screams was beyond me. But if they were in Tenpony, then I knew they had to be elsewhere, too, and the fact that they weren't projecting Enervation now didn't mean that they couldn't start.

Getting back to Hoofington, though, was in the short term a more troublesome problem. As I kept my hoof on Scotch's head, pushing her back as she swung her front hooves wildly at me, I thought of our options. One... going on the Seahorse, which would be delayed for many days due to the damage. Walking would be even slower, and I didn't relish the idea of hoofing it clear across Equestria with a Reaper and a purple alicorn anyway. I had no idea how to contact Ditz to go by air...

Hmmm.... Maybe...

Then that thought was lost as Scotch Tape pulled away and I fell flat on my face... not because my brain didn't know how to work my legs, but because one of my legs wasn't there! The filly was trotting away with my right foreleg in her mouth; how the heck had she taken the thing off?! I scrambled back up on my three remaining limbs. "You bring that back!" I yelled as I staggered after her.

“Come and get it, Queen Stubby!”

“It may be possible,” Lacunae informed me after I was whole once more. I tried to see how she’d taken it off with just a little wrench; the idea that my foreleg was attached by three pins and a half dozen nuts and some cables was more than a little concerning. “We are outside Hoofington’s Enervation field; we can bring more resources to bear. And in return, you will go to Hippocratic Research and get Chimera for us.” I didn’t know if it was being outside the city that gave her the ‘Goddess’ talk or if the hive mind was once more connecting to her.

“Yeah. I won’t trade EC-1101 for it, but I think it’s time I took that Project out of Sanguine’s hooves,” I said, popping a ruby into my mouth. As soon as I closed my jaws, there was a tingle and the sweet, slightly spicy flavor trickled down my throat as it was liquefied. I washed it down with a Sparkle-Cola. Rubies were spicy, emeralds tasted like spearmint, sapphires like peppermint, amethysts were fruity, citrines tangy... aside from your local dragon, who knew? Oh... and rocks tasted like mud.

“Thank you,” Lacunae said quietly.

I looked at her and thought about what LittlePip had said about mind-reading monsters. “Can I ask you something? What’s it actually like to read a mind? I mean, do you look at a pony and just know everything they know?”

She looked at me curiously and with a touch of amusement. “Oh, no. It is like... staring into a pool of water. The most immediate and active thoughts are on the surface. They flash and flicker before our eyes. This morning, your thoughts were all of inebriation. Deeper thoughts are like fish far within the pool. We may see them, but we do not immediately truly understand their meaning. It takes a great deal of time and effort to extract a memory and understand it.”

Like she’d done when I was asleep weeks back. I shivered a little. “Sorry, but that’s just creepy, Lacunae.”

The purple alicorn smiled sadly. “We are quite used to that sentiment, Blackjack... it is because of that that there are so very few capable and willing to help us freely.”

I sat sucking on the ruby for a while. “Is this coming from the Goddess or Lacunae?”

“Yes,” she replied with a small smile. “We wish only what is best for Equestria. We understand that few others can accept this. Equestria is as it is, and it is foalish to

deny it. Talk and dreams of fixing and restoring Equestria to as it was before the war are a waste of time.”

“So?” I replied with a smile. “If you break it down, anything that’s not putting food in your stomach or breeding is a waste of time. Reading books. Doing magic. Fixing things. If we only did things that mattered to our survival, it would be a really boring world.” I reached out with my fingers, grabbed an opal, and tossed it in my mouth. Mmmm, milky! “Let me ask ya this... say the world were fixed... could you... all of you... exist in it?”

“Of course. We can adapt to any environmental condition,” the purple alicorn said primly. “But we thrive in a world that is rich in ambient arcane magic.” Aka, the radiation that killed anypony not a ghoul or alicorn.

“So you’re saying that, even with wings and a horn and the intellect and souls of who knows how many ponies, you still have to have the deck stacked in your favor?”

“Ponies who join in Unity will survive forever in us,” she insisted. Personally, I was a little skeptical of ‘forever’.

“No doubt... but why not coexist?”

There was a long pause at that. “Have you heard of something called Gardens of Equestria?” she asked politely.

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine and prayed that my mane wasn’t standing on end. I looked Lacunae and the Goddess in the eye and hoped she wasn’t reading my mind right now as I lied through my teeth. “Gardens of what?”

“Like Chimera, it was one of the O.I.A.’s secret projects. Somehow, Goldenblood stole staggering amounts of materials, equipment, and arcane supplies for an unknown and unapproved project. Several sub-projects were carried out right under Twilight’s nose, some in this very tower, under the pretext of purifying magical waste or nullifying magical radiation; she had no memory of approving their development. When it was discovered, Luna was furious beyond compare. For Goldenblood to work on such a thing rather than pursue the war effort... well... she sentenced him to be executed for his crimes.”

“She... what?!” I stared at the alicorn in shock.

“Oh, yes. Apparently, it was designed to restore Equestria in the event of magical catastrophe. The mere implication of such a catastrophe was intolerable to Princess Luna. How dare her subject suggest imminent destruction would claim the kingdom? More to the point, his unwillingness to say what Gardens did... where

it was... how it worked... these were all a fundamental betrayal of the Princess's trust." Lacunae sighed. "Ironically, the very next day, the bombs fell."

"So... why would the Goddess care about this Gardens thing?" I asked as casually as I dared.

"We doubt it was ever completed or worked; else, why hasn't it been used? But if it was capable of a tenth of what was predicted, then why would it have to revert the environment? Could it not be tasked with expanding and enriching the Wasteland with more radiation?" She asked it very matter-of-factly, but suddenly I realized why ponies dedicated themselves to fighting alicorns.

"You want to use this Gardens thing to make everything worse?" I asked in a horrified voice.

"From your current perspective, yes." I suddenly imagined radioactive fields as far as the eye could see. Surface ponies would be wiped out. Ghouls would thrive, but against immortal and permanently regenerating alicorns, how long before they were blown to pieces? Eventually, radioactive clouds would poison even the Enclave.

"Yeah... that would make coexistence pretty tough," I muttered softly.

"We are otherwise occupied with our defense and the biological problem. But some-day, we would seek out what became of the Gardens." Well, great, another apocalyptic threat. At least this one wasn't urgent, though. Maybe I could find another Silver Bullet and pay the Goddess a visit... but... what would that do to Lacunae? And did I still even have Folly? Should I use it if I did? But if nopony stopped the Goddess... urrrrghh! My brain was not meant for dilemmas like this!

I sat back and stared at her for a long moment... something was different here. Who exactly was I talking to? "You don't really talk to non-alicorns like this, do you?"

"In truth, only one other. He was brilliant, but ultimately we could not risk his inclusion in Unity. He swore to aid us in solving our biological issue in return for our power, but I suspect that he simply wishes our annihilation." She sighed. "The rest of the Wasteland is filled with cowardly, craven, cruel ponies who fear our potential or slavishly worship us for our power. They do not respect us. They cannot! And you ask why we cannot coexist with them when they are unable to accept us!" I had to admit, I'd never thought of it like that before.

"So... why me now? Especially after that stunt I pulled this morning." To my amazement though, she smiled. I guess I really couldn't imagine the Goddess as having fun.

Then she looked out the window. "You kept our secret." I blinked in surprise. "About the silver ring. You could have told others how horribly it hurt us... tearing our souls out through the connection. You could have informed the tower... they would have been far more interested had you shared that fact. Or told your friends. Or that.... diminutive little..." she snorted sharply. "But you didn't. Nopony realizes just how terribly that hurt us, save you."

To be honest, it had slipped my mind. "You might have noticed I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"Oh, we have. Indeed, it is unmistakable and somewhat terrifying how unintelligent you are." Well... thanks! "And yet, you did us a favor and may do yet more. You do not hate us. Do not kill us. And, while we may quibble about certain things, we feel you are... decent. You do not care if a pony is surfacer or pegasus, alicorn or ghoul. That is... commendable."

Well, if there'd been alicorns all over Hoofington fighting me, perhaps I'd have been different about it. Lacunae had made things easier. Really, the Goddess couldn't have asked for a better ambassador than her. Helpful, polite, quiet, elegant and dignified... and... "This isn't the Goddess I'm talking to, is it?" I said softly, looking up at her with a little smile.

She looked wistful as she turned away. "No. It's not. But wouldn't it be wonderful if it were?"

The invitation to Homage's dinner party came soon to both my and LittlePip's friends. I'd been warned to stay in my room by Tenpony security; at this point, I think Glory was the only one they wanted trotting around, and they were even nervous about her. Still, she was out, I was in...and I was bored. I lay down and tried to go into another memory orb. Nothing. Zip. Tossing it back into my bags, I rolled onto my back. Should I even try and regain my magic? I was never good at it, anyway. I was a cyberpony now. I needed to learn how to get my body to work and focus of that. And heck, I hadn't come across many decent orbs to spend time in.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could make up my mind? What did I need magic for?

I summed it up in a word: Goldenblood.

As infuriating as he was, as much as I hated seeing him slime around the corners of Equestria, he was the key to what was happening in Hoofington... and now, maybe,

all across the Wasteland. Something had happened to him. Treason? Taking credit for Gardens? Being sentenced to execution? I just didn't understand it. If he was a monstrous shit, then fine, I could have dismissed it. But he'd apparently protected Twilight from Luna. Why? He'd hit her for making alicorns! He'd taken her memories! And, apparently, gone to the block rather than betray her.

Most infuriating of all, I was the only pony who seemed to know about him at all. The O.I.A. had gotten Image to cover their tracks. I found the O.I.A. 'office' in Tenpony converted into a cheese shop; the only indication that it had ever been something else were the faded rings and cutie marks next to the door. The emblem had been painted over and only barely bled through the white layer. Only Professor Zodiac had any direct knowledge at all.

The three most important things are love, loyalty, and secrets. Who had he loved? What was he loyal to? Why so many secrets? All this thinking was making my brain hurt. But I'd learned the most through memory orbs. To make orbs work, I needed magic.

Though... maybe not.

I might not be allowed to trot through the shops below, but I'd been shown where there was a dandy library up above...

Reading was hard. I'd snuck... well... technically, I doubted that I would be kicked out if I got caught, but why take the chance? Anyway, I'd reached the aerthithingy place, but once I'd gotten in... I was completely screwed. I figured that a library was a place where you just looked at book titles and find 'Goldenblood: a memoir' or something. It never occurred to me that, with thousands and thousands of book titles to look at, I could spend years searching and never find a thing!

"Uggh... damn it. There has to be something in here on Goldenblood. He can't have just disappeared!"

"I'm afraid that most references to Goldenblood were removed by the 'Intellectual Reorganization Command' of Princess Luna's third year," a mechanical, feminine voice hooted from up above, making me jump and bite down on a book, readying it for throwing. From the roof descended a golden owl that landed on the rail and blinked at me with bright purple eyes. "Need I remind you that biting books is not good for the preservation of the covers, Mistress?"

I spat out the book. "Who are you? What are you?"

"I am Nyctimene, Mistress. I am the keeper of these books," she replied. I slowly walked around the golden machine, and its head slowly rotated and remained focused upon me. "I am Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle's personal assistant within Tenpony Tower; second to her number one assistant, of course."

"So you are a robot?" Robotic owls. Who knew?

"That is a fair assessment," Nyctimene said with a nod of her head. "You desire texts on the first O.I.A. director, Goldenblood?"

"Yes!" I said, glad that I'd finally hit a break. "Tell me you have a biography or something on him."

"I'm afraid not, Mistress. As you know, most texts referring to him were purged following the establishment of the Ministries."

"You must have something."

The owl stared at me for a long moment. Then, suddenly, she winged away to one of the upper shelves. She hovered in front of the bookcase and carefully pulled out a book with her claws, then flew back to a reading desk and set down the slim gray tome. 'Luna's Academy for Young Unicorns: Get Sent to the Moon!' I flipped it open and was astonished by a picture spread over two pages. Luna was standing in the middle, looking like she was struggling not to cry. The faculty flanked her, and a hundred or so unicorn foals smiled at the camera... save one who was levitating up the pigtails of the filly beside her and a pair of colts down in the front row poking each other with sticks.

And there, right beside Princess Luna, was Goldenblood giving a stern look at the two disobedient colts in the front.

I flipped through the pictures. There was an article on the academy being in a remote location, keeping it safe from the war. A short little comment from the Princess about how she'd always had a fondness for young ponies, but she could never gobble more than one. So many pictures of young ponies learning... everything. Unicorns learning magic. Studying. Meeting in clubs. And in the middle of it all was Luna. Luna smiling. Luna teaching. Luna looking happy and useful and loved.

The photographs of Goldenblood were much more difficult to find. The pale buck might not have been ravaged by poison, but he was still more homely than handsome. Most of the pictures caught him while he was asleep in an empty classroom or staring out of one of the stained glass windows. 'Professor Goldenblood: History,

Culture, Literature, and Psychological Studies' read the caption. There was one picture of him surrounded by a half dozen colts and fillies. The desk in front of him was covered with rocks of all types. 'Littlehorn Rock Club' read the caption.

A rock club? Really? What did they talk about? The merits of igneous rocks? Which rock was stripier than the others? I looked at his hoof resting on a strange fossilized bug. Next to it was a strange twisty stone. 'Hoofington Meteorite' read a tiny tag beside it. A unicorn filly and, most curiously, a pegasus colt, both looking far too alike to be a coincidence, held up an enormous geode filled with gems.

But more than that. Goldenblood looked happy. Tired. Guarded. Older than he probably was, but still happy. From the few other pictures, I gathered he'd been the 'strict' teacher. I noticed at a young black unicorn mare, a teacher's aid, it looked like, behind him and stared for the longest time. She might not have been in a uniform, but there was no denying that that mare was none other than Psalm! I flipped through a second time, picking her out in the background. Again and again. She was almost more elusive than Goldenblood!

There were pictures of him with the princess, the pair talking and laughing. A picture of him lecturing a filly with a mask cutie mark who was trying her hardest not to laugh as Luna made faces behind his back. A picture of the princess drawing a mustache on his face in black marker as he slept. 'I need you,' she'd said to him as he lay dying in the hospital. He'd been more than just Luna's political advisor.... He was Princess Luna's friend.

And then, a dozen years later... she was ordering his execution.

Loyalty, love, and secrets.

Goldenblood might have been a bastard, but he hadn't always been that way. He'd been a teacher. Brilliant. Intelligent. From the look of the students around him, though, he'd been respected as well. Had it been Littlehorn that changed him?

I looked up for a moment and noticed that three more books were on the table in front of me; Nyctimene must have brought them down while I was looking through the first one. Setting 'Littlehorn' aside for now, I pulled the book on the left over.

I opened 'Dancing with Stripes' to a number of grainy black and white pictures of a zebra metropolis with marble pillars and white temples. In the front of one of the pictures were a unicorn mare in a frilly, fancy dress that was right up the Overmare's mother's alley standing beside a young colt wearing an explorer's cap. Even as a colt, he seemed a solemn and guarded kid. 'Sundancer and Goldenblood' read the

caption. My eyes moved to the text beside it.

...from our many adventures in Roam and other zebra lands, we have found this a strange and enchanting place. For many ponies, zebras are hut dwelling primitives practicing strange shamanistic magic. It is unthinkable that zebras should have cultural and historical accomplishments that rival, even exceed, those of even Ponyville, much less the greater Equestrian cities. My son and I have explored the vast empty Savannahs, crossed blistering deserts, and explored strange jungles only to be dazzled and amazed by these genial folks and their strange but not unwholesome ways.

While ponies can easily separate ourselves into groups of earth pony, unicorn, and pegasus, zebra affiliation is far more tribal and fragmented into herds and bloodlines stretching back to antiquity. Some, like the Zencori, wander far and wide collecting lore and stories to bring back to their ancestral lands. Others are far more cerebral and mystic like the elusive Achu, who blend hoof fighting with meditation and spiritualistic behavior. The Propoli are every bit as urban as the most sophisticated Canterlotian pony, placing great stock on lore and education. Indeed, a traveler can find as much difference between an Atori and a Eschatik zebra as a pegasus from a unicorn!

While most zebra tribes are friendly, if odd, one must take care to avoid 'star touched' tribes. The term describes tribes that have dabbled in dark and forbidden magic or performed horrible crimes. The most infamous, of course, are the Starkatteri, or 'Eaters of the Stars', tribe, whose dark tales of ritual sacrifice, flaying the skin off still living prisoners, profane rituals, and other dark deeds have become the stuff of trashy adventure tales back home. Others, like the Carnilala, engage in disturbing sexual practices and self-mutilation. These 'star touched' tribes are shunned by zebra society as a whole, but sadly they are the first thing many ponies latch onto when thinking of our striped neighbors.

I flipped to the next page and looked at pictures of zebras. Some were wearing fancy clothes and dancing on their rear hooves. Another balanced on a pole... upside down. Four calmly discussed things in a library that looked almost identical to the one I was in... only somehow even bigger. Two zebra mares struggled in brutal hoof to hoof combat. A pair of zebra males stared out with dark eyes from a shadow doorway, their faces branded with a swirling star and other ritualistic scars.

Still... there wasn't much I could see about Goldenblood.

I sighed and pulled the next book over as Nyctimene flew down to put away the

ones I'd finished with. This one was about the Hoofington reconstruction and had a picture of Goldenblood dramatically speaking before a crowd of thousands as blood ran from his mouth. He looked flayed, the scars barely bandaged and stained pink and red. Other photos showed him talking with Rover, who looked really strange without his mechanical limbs.

The sole book on the O.I.A. was barely fifty pages long and sounded like it'd been written for children. It didn't tell me anything new. The O.I.A. hub was in Hoofington. It worked to keep the Ministries going. No mention of secret projects. No mention of creating monsters or cyberponies. Just that it was the hard-working glue and oil that kept the Ministries working together and smoothly and reported directly to Princess Luna herself. Damn thing didn't even mention Goldenblood. . . . Oh, wait. There he was: 'The O.I.A.'s director resides outside Hoofington near Black Pony Mountain.' Not even mentioned by name! No wonder everypony else thought I was going crazy.

I closed my eyes and I leaned back, letting the golden owl take the last book away. I wondered if, two centuries from now, somepony (or alicorn, if the Goddess succeeded in her plans for unity after all) would discover little snippets of my life and wonder 'who was this crazy mare, and why didn't she just write an autobiography telling everypony about herself?' More and more I kept feeling. . . . trapped. Things that happened centuries ago kept creeping through things I felt now. Like I was caught up in a great current and I was helpless to escape it. Heck, I was glad I didn't have to face crushing waterfalls along the way.

"Hey, Blackjack?" LittlePip said, making me jump and fall over. I hit my head on the leg of the reading desk and hissed, rubbing my skull. Why hadn't they thought to armor that, huh? The little unicorn looked at me in sympathy. "You okay? I didn't expect to find you here."

"I'm trying a new thing. . . . thinking. Seems to be all the rage among wandering Wasteland heroines these days," I said as she lifted me to my hooves easily. "I heard the Stable Dweller is a master at it."

"Um, I don't know about that," she said with a little flush and smile. "Homage sent me to look for you. Her dinner party's about to start. She doesn't get to entertain much, and she wanted to make sure you didn't miss it."

I blinked in shock as I looked out the windows. There were only the dark purples of twilight left in the sky. How long had. . . . I checked the chronometer. Three hours looking at books? At this rate I was going to turn into an egghead! They'd have to start calling me Professor Blackjack or something. "Wow. Time flies with a good

book...” I said with a sheepish smile, shaking myself as we walked together towards the door. “So... you figure out how you’re going to deal with your mindreading nemesis?”

“Already did,” she said with a little, uneasy smile. “I’ve taken out my memories regarding the plan. What I don’t know, she can’t use against me.”

“So you don’t remember us–” I started, and she raised her hoof in alarm.

“Don’t tell me! My brain’s already scrambled enough as is. I don’t want them to have to go in and take the information out all over again!” She sighed. I stared at her, thinking about Doc Oct’s warnings and about what had happened to Scotch. Would ripping holes in her own memory cause reactions and mistakes? Cause her brain to scramble or drive her crazy? She noticed my look and bowed her head. “The only way to do this... the only way for me to be sure... is if I know there’s nothing in there for her to pick out.”

I looked at her for the longest time. I couldn’t imagine her going through what she had, facing what she did. Actually sabotaging her own brain to thwart a mind-reader? All I did was shoot, get shot at, and have mysteries thrown in my face. I’d never have it as hard as LittlePip did. “LittlePip...” I began, but she shook her head, cutting me off.

“As is, I’m probably going to have to drop a few more memories before I’m sure everything’s set,” she said with a little sigh and roll of her eyes, as if it wasn’t a big deal at all, and the look on her face said that she didn’t want me to treat it as if it was. Wow... she might actually have been able to give the Stable Dweller a run for her money.

“So,” I asked, “you don’t remember anything about our adventure?”

“I know it involved me taking a PTM,” she said, her eyes falling. “Again...” Ooooh, I knew that ‘kicking myself’ look. I was a master of that look! And on my watch, I was going to be the only one of the two of us wearing that look.

I frowned and stopped. “Listen... I was there.” I put a hoof on her shoulder. “I know why you took it. You had to. There was no other way. It wasn’t because you had an excuse to take them. Okay?”

LittlePip brightened a little and nodded. “Thanks...” Still... she wasn’t quite letting go of the self kicking... I could see it in her eyes. Well... hell if I was going to let her do that! There was only room for one grade A self-recriminist in this tower.

I chuckled as I stepped closer, and instantly her ears perked in alarm. “It’s too bad

though. I know I'll never forget discovering such a wonderful kisser," I said, giving her flank a nudge with my own as I trotted past and out the door, looking back at a little unicorn inventing whole new shades of red to blush.

When we arrived at the dinner party, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised to find most of my crew chatting amiably with most of LittlePip's crew. And since we were arriving late, there was nopony in the way between me and the buffet table! I was feeling positively snacky!

I was trotting towards it when my ear twitched at the sound of Glory talking to Calamity. "So... you're absolutely positive you didn't kill off your entire squad in a rampage of death and destruction and flee to the surface to avoid lawful prosecution by the authorities?" she asked as she balanced a cup of punch on her outstretched wing.

"Let me think on that..." the brown pegasus drawled as he rolled his eyes in mock reflection. "Mmmm... nope! Fraid not. Said my piece and went on my way, though it weren't like they were keen on makin' it easy."

"I'll say you did," she said with a little frown. "You know, you completely undermined what we were trying to do in Thunderhead with that display."

He gave a little shrug. "You Thunderheaders. Always with the great big ideas and stuff. So long as Neighvarro's got the guns, not much you can do."

"Well somepony's got to have the big ideas," she replied firmly. "Besides, I thought you were all about helping the surface."

"Ah ahm," he replied. "But sendin' down some healin' supplies and takin' some food back ain't helpin'. It's flirtin'. There's no way yer gonna do more than that."

"It takes time. You can't just do it all at once," Glory protested.

"Sure. Been two hundred years. What's another two hundred more?" he countered, then saw her ears droop. The brown buck sighed. "And if it were Neighvarro, it'd probably be two thousand years before they sent so much as spit. I just ain't one fer itty bitty steps."

"You sound just like my father," she said. His expression turned a touch more curious. "Sky Striker."

"He's your father?!" he blurted, then stared at me, then at Glory's missing wing, then

back at me. “Landsakes! He’s gonna take off your head when he finds out you broke her!”

“He already knows,” I said with a flush as I trotted away, and the two began to talk about the legendary Sky Striker. Anyway, if he wanted to kick my tail, he’d have to come down here and get it. No way I’d ever be heading to Thunderhead any time soon.

Moving around, I spotted Scotch Tape seated next to a giant green flaming bird. Given that nopony in the room was alarmed at this, I assumed it was some sort of pet. It seemed the two were locked in a staring contest of sorts, only from the expression on Scotch’s face she clearly expected to be eaten if she lost. The crackling avian seemed to be having quite a bit of fun with the petrified filly. Both our PipBucks clicked softly.

“Pour Rad-Away on her,” I suggested, drawing the look of Velvet Remedy away from P-21.

“Don’t you dare! You’ll make her all sticky!” Velvet protested.

“Oh, we do that just standing here,” Homage said as she trotted up and glanced back at where LittlePip was taking a drink of punch, her eyes locked on all our rumps. She gasped, choked, and fell over coughing and sputtering.

“You are evil,” I said in blind admiration, chuckling.

Then there was a loud sizzling squawk, and the three of us turned back to see Scotch with a ripped open Rad-Away pouch in her mouth and a smoldering, not-quite-flaming bird dripping orange fluid. The olive filly looked at us and then at the glaring avian and pointed a hoof at me. “She told me to do it! It was her idea!”

“Not sure you noticed, Scotchy, but my ideas tend to get my rump thumped more often than not.” The reigniting bird thing screeched, and the olive mare dove underneath the buffet table as the animal stalked atop it, glaring down as only a very grumpy bird of prey can for any sign of the filly emerging.

I trotted around a bit more. I talked with Calamity about the finer points of Wasteland cuisine. My eyes were a little glazed over after listening to Glory and Velvet make medicine talk, and I made my way over towards Xenith. The zebra mare looked over at Glory. “So, you are with a mare as well?” When I nodded, she simply shook her head. “And you two, do you try for the record as well?”

“Record? What record?” I asked with a little frown of confusion. Calamity trotted up and Glory looked over, her ears twitching.

The zebra looked coolly over at the littlest unicorn present and said, "I believe the number is thirty three?" LittlePip's eyes went round and she immediately blushed.

"Thirty three...?" I asked in confusion.

"In a single night," Homage said with a smug smile. Thirty three... Oh!

"One night?" Glory asked with a flush. "I'm not sure that that's medically possible..."

"Hmmmm... that could be a challenge! Hey, we could turn it into a contest!" I said, and Homage grinned in delight. I looked at the gray pegasus. "What do you say, Glory? I've got an itch in my nethers, a non-stick hoof, and these things!" I said, popping out my fingers and wiggling them.

Glory and LittlePip stared at us, perfect copies of one another, jaws dropped and cheeks flaming.

"Sweet Celestia, there's two of 'em," Calamity muttered, pointing his hoof at one and then the other as P-21 stared at us in disbelief, "Which one's Lil'pip again?"

"It's like looking in a mirror," Velvet murmured.

The pair looked at each other, looked back at us with a scowl, and shouted in perfect unison. "S- Shut up!"

As folks were enjoying themselves nibbling on the repast prepared, Homage trotted up to me. I nearly jumped out of my hooves at her approach. I might like teasing Glory, but the gray unicorn just oozed this sexy confidence that made me... alert. "Are they back to normal yet?" she asked as she looked across the room to where Glory and LittlePip were still fuming.

"Definitely pinkish still. They keep sneaking looks at each other and then going red again," I said with a soft chuckle.

"Mmmm... they're adorable," she said with a shake of her head, then looked at me with an arched brow. "You seem to handle it a little better."

"Told you about 99, right? Five hundred mares. Forty bucks. A mare that didn't like sex with other mares was in for a pretty lonely life."

"LittlePip would have loved it there," Homage said softly, but I sighed as I watched her. I knew better.

"No, she wouldn't. Daisy would have picked on her. Marmalade would have helped. I would have turned a blind eye." I sighed, closing my eyes. "She would have been stuck in her role, whether it suited her or not. She'd never have left and she'd have been miserable. Nopony was happy in 99. Happiness? That was just a delusion."

Homage sighed softly. "On that happy note... Hoofington's gone dark." I looked at her sharply. "Four days ago, right after the Celestia. I'm not getting any signal from the towers there. Actually, I'm not getting transmissions of any kind from there."

"I've got to get back..." I murmured. There were things happening, and I was having dinner and laughing and teasing and... I yipped as a tail spanked my ass hard. "What was that for?" I asked as I rubbed my stinging derriere with a forehoof, blushing hard myself.

"You were getting that whole 'kicking yourself for having fun' look going," she replied with a smile. "You can't run off this very second and you aren't a bad pony for enjoying yourself. Just letting you know."

I nodded; she was right. That had been exactly what I'd been about to do. "I just..."

"You want to help ponies. That's commendable. It's what I love about LittlePip," she said with a laugh. "But you don't have to go charging east just because I give you some troubling news."

"But I thought that that was what heroes are supposed to do? We charge off into the fray so other ponies can get away," I said with a touch of sarcasm. I glanced over at Homage, but the gray unicorn wasn't smiling as she looked across the room at LittlePip talking with Rampage. "Homage?"

"I hope she knows I don't want her to go," Homage murmured softly. "I know I tease her... sometimes I think I'm absolutely horrible to her. But it's only because the alternative is crying and begging her not to leave. I know she has to. She's just like you; she has to do things. Save Tenpony. Save the Wasteland. Save me. I'm just scared that I'm going to lose her. Sometimes I wish I could go with her... so that if something bad happens, then I'll be right there with her. I'm so jealous of you and Glory."

I closed my eyes. "I wish I could leave her here. I saw her die right before my eyes, Homage. Just a few days back. She was inches from my face, and then she fell. One of my enemies saved her life, but for a while there... It crushed me. And I'm always afraid that some decision I make is going to kill her."

"I'm just scared something's going to happen to LittlePip," Homage said and I looked

at her. "Every time I see her, she's slipped a little further from me. It's not so much her dying... as terrible as that would be. I've had somepony I loved killed before. You live through it, as much as it hurts. I'm afraid that something will happen... something like... like what you had to do in Stable 99. She'll have to make a choice... or she'll go too far... or something. I keep telling her to fight the good fight... and she will. She'll fight till it destroys her."

I knew something of the blame game. "I haven't really known LittlePip all that long, but I think she'd do this whether you told her to fight or to stay. She's like me like that. Dumb, huh?"

"Mmmm, but it's what I love about her. She really, truly, will do whatever she has to to help other ponies," Homage said softly, sniffing and rubbing her eyes. Of course, at that moment LittlePip was trotting over with Xenith and Glory.

"I can't believe she survived being put through a wood chipper," LittlePip murmured. "Is Hoofington like Freakytown Central or something?" But then she spotted Homage and started to look concerned. "Homage? Are you okay?"

"Sure. Absolutely," I said with a wide grin.

Homage nodded and smiled. "Mhmm."

"Hey LittlePip..." I gave my slyest grin. "I just couldn't help but notice that Homage likes mares... and Glory likes mares... and you like mares... and me, well I think the three of you are the cutiest darn trio of fillies collected in the Wasteland. And, as I recall, Twilight once owned a book called the Zebra Sutra. Not suggesting anything. Just saying..." I grinned as lecherously as possible.

Xenith looked at little unicorn and one-winged pegasus and observed curiously, "I did not know pony hooves could blush."

Things smoothed out a bit after that. There was one little inescapable hitch, though: the alicorn in the corner. She sat quietly, her purple eyes observing us all. LittlePip had done her utmost to ignore her presence completely. I'd explained she couldn't read anything if she didn't touch horns, but the little unicorn just grunted sourly and kept her distance. Still, as the night wore on, LittlePip kept looking over at the far corner where the purple alicorn sat silently.

"Are you absolutely sure she's safe?" LittlePip asked softly.

"Oh yeah, Lacunae's an angel as long as the Goddess isn't possessing her," I said with a casual smile.

The little unicorn balked. "Wait. She can just take over at any time?" I nodded and got that 'you are crazy' look again. "Aren't you afraid she's just going to take over and kill you?"

"Kill me? Do you realize how much I owe the Goddess?" I said with a snort. "I'm in debt to her up to my horn. She's not going to just throw all that away." Velvet stared in shock as P-21 sighed and shook his head. I continued, "Besides, all my friends have tried to kill me at one time or another. You get used to it." I shrugged, and LittlePip looked at my friends in shock.

"I haven't!" Scotch protested as she peeked out at the balefire phoenix stalking above her.

"Oh, right. Scotch hasn't," I amended with a shrug.

LittlePip rubbed her chin. "Now that I think about it, most of my friends have tried to kill me, too..."

Rampage laughed. "Hey! We could make a 'Tried to kill our leaders' club!"

"Could I get in on that?" I wondered.

The striped mare nodded. "Sure, Blackjack! You've tried to kill you more than anyone!"

LittlePip, Rampage, and I laughed as the black unicorn stammered, "This... this isn't healthy!" She looked at the blue buck as she pointed at me and LittlePip.

P-21 just nodded and deadpanned, "Yes, Velvet. Everyone from the Hoof is like this." He lead her off. "It helps if you think of her as a foal dropped on her head... repeatedly."

"Don't forget the lead paint!" I called after them, getting a look from LittlePip. "What? That stuff's good."

LittlePip shook her head. "Blackjack, you are just so... random!" I grinned as we approached Lacunae, Rampage trotting away to talk to Velvet. The purple alicorn looked at her calmly as LittlePip forced a small, tense smile. "Hi."

"Hello," she said telepathically, making LittlePip's mane stand on end.

"Well so nice to meet you! Goodbye!" she said as she turned, and I caught her.

"She's not going to gobble you up," I said firmly.

"Well, duh. I know that," she said, as if she were trying to convince herself. She slowly turned back around and took a deep breath. "Hi. Lacunae... right? That is your name?"

"It suffices..." Lacunae said quietly. "Lacunae is what I am. Something missing."

LittlePip frowned in confusion. "Something missing from you?"

"Things missing from others," she said cryptically. I rolled my eyes.

"Lacunae's where the Goddess shoves all the memories and thoughts she doesn't want to deal with in Unity. Apparently, there's a whole lot of guilt and angst when you blend together the minds and souls of thousands of ponies. Rather than deal with it, it all gets repressed."

"All in one pony?" LittlePip asked with a note of concern. "How do you... I mean... I would have thought..."

"That I'd be a complete monster?" Lacunae said quietly. "Like how you see all alicorns you've encountered?"

LittlePip winced. "Well, you've been helping Red Eye and trying to kill me..."

"Red Eye was the first to ever come to us with an offer to help. You were in Appleloosa to interfere with his operations. Were we supposed to abandon that allegiance and betray him?" she replied calmly as she stared down at LittlePip.

"Well... yes?" LittlePip said with a sheepish smile. "I mean... all the things he's done..."

"He was the first power in the Wasteland to work with us. We have no desire to perpetuate slavery. We are trying to save all of ponykind through Unity. We tried to send out priests and converts, but they were assaulted and killed by all manner of perils. We were attacked on sight by so many settlements."

"You don't... you can't just sit there and try and tell me you're the victims here! You force ponies to join Unity!"

"Would you allow somepony you care for to die because they refuse to take medicine that will cure them?" she replied calmly, making LittlePip balk. "You kill enemies and threats to survivors in the Wasteland, but do you remain to make certain they do not starve next month? Die of thirst next week? In Unity, we transform ponies into a form that does not hunger or weaken in this world. We protect their souls in us. Can you do the same?"

“In you?” LittlePip murmured in shock. “You mean... you trap their souls inside you?”

“In us, we endure. They are not hurt. They are safe from death forever,” Lacunae murmured softly, then closed her eyes.

LittlePip frowned, looking confused and a little guilty. “I think I liked it better when you were just trying to kill me.”

“You are helping us,” Lacunae said calmly, and that seemed to make her squirm. “Reluctantly. Unwillingly, perhaps. But helping us. With your help, we will stop Red Eye, end slavery, and halt the suffering of all ponies in the Wasteland.”

But as she spoke, our friends gathered around us, “And what about others?” Homage asked as she trotted up with a small frown.

“Others?” Lacunae said in confusion.

“Yes, others. It’s not like it’s just ponies out there! What about zebras?” Xenith looked at Lacunae with that steady, imperturbable gaze.

“They are... not us. We cannot... We do not know...” the purple alicorn started to stammer.

“And griffins?” suggested Calamity. Doubt flickered in Lacunae’s eyes. “You just gonna kill ‘em?”

“We would rather... it is not... you don’t understand...”

“And hellhounds?” Velvet Remedy asked as she joined in as well. I blinked at that and Calamity groaned softly. Weren’t hellhounds some kind of monster? But then, weren’t alicorns?

“And dragons?” asked Rampage. “I’m pretty sure there’s still a few of those around. You gonna be able dip them into Unity as well?”

“And ghouls!” piped up Scotch Tape with the phoenix standing on her rump. I looked at her with a smile, and she flushed. “What? Harpica and those other ghoul kids were nice!”

LittlePip looked at all of us backing her and smiled before she looked back at Lacunae. “That’s why Unity’s just not enough. It’s not enough to save just ponies by turning us all into alicorns. We have to fix this world.”

“We have to do better,” I said quietly. “No one person... no one goddess... can do it all themselves.”

Then Lacunae sighed as well. "We liked it better when you were dropping boxcars on us too." Then her eyes turned hard. "WE WILL SAVE WHAT WE CAN, HOW BEST WE CAN. WE SHALL THRIVE IN THIS WORLD. REMEMBER OUR ACCORD, AND THEN YOU WILL LEARN THE PEACE THAT COMES THOUGH UNITY!" she thundered at all of us. LittlePip drew Little Macintosh, but I shook my head hard. Lacunae shuddered and sighed. "My apologies for... that."

LittlePip put the revolver away, looking on in concern, "Are you all right?"

"She hoped to convince you. To truly convince you. She did not expect... that..." she said as she slumped against the wall. "Now she's feeling shame... and doubt... and questioning herself."

"She is?" Velvet asked in astonishment. "Then maybe..." but Lacunae sniffed softly and shook her head.

"She's stuffing it all into you, isn't she?" I asked as I knelt beside her. Lacunae nodded silently and I cursed the coward.

"You mean... anything that might convince her to change her mind is being put into you?" Velvet asked softly.

"All that remains is the certainty of the correctness of her course," Lacunae said as she looked at LittlePip. "You know she plans to force you into Unity when you uphold your end of the bargain?"

The little unicorn swallowed hard and then gave a grudging little nod. "I figured she'd do something like that."

"And you have a plan to stop her?" Lacunae asked as I saw, for the first time, tears in my friend's eyes. LittlePip stood there for the longest time and then gave a single jerky nod. Lacunae gave a small smile as she closed her eyes. "Good."

The party was pretty well done after that. Calamity and Velvet trotted out. I wasn't tired... but then, my body didn't do tired anymore. I wondered if this was how Harpica and Ditz felt all the time, this stillness within. I wasn't hungry. Wasn't thirsty. Couldn't detect myself breathing. No heartbeat. Was I really still alive at all? I trotted to the window and looked out at the darkness. Red Eye's forces had withdrawn; whatever LittlePip had said on the radio had convinced him.

"Quite a party," LittlePip said as she trotted up beside me and looked out as well.

"Looks like it worked... whatever we did," she said with a small expression of confusion.

"You did it. I was just backing you up," I said softly as we both stared out at the night. "Your mind-reading enemy is the Goddess, isn't she?" LittlePip looked down at her hooves and sighed, then nodded. See... the Blackjack express would arrive... eventually.

I closed my eyes. Should I tell her about the enervation ring? Should I try and talk her out of it? Help her? Warn Lacunae? I tapped my head against the thick glass window. I couldn't deal with this now. Why couldn't it all be simple? It was never... ever... simple!

"I wasn't sure I could tell you earlier. Now I'm not sure what I had planned exactly. It's all... muddled up." I sighed, wishing I could tweak my own memories as well. Simple ponies like me were not meant for brain-perplexing problems!

"Be careful with that memory manipulation stuff. Tried it on Scotch to remove some horrors. Didn't work too well," I warned as I looked out at the night and the few lights that filled it, distant and dark like the black beyond the stars. I sighed. "And I know you're not going to like this... but the Goddess knows about Gardens."

"What?" she asked as she stared at me in horror. "How? I thought..."

"She knows it exists, but not where it is or what it does. Spike's safe. And I'm so brain damaged Lacunae will never pick it up. But you should know the Goddess thinks that it might be able to be... well... repurposed."

"Repurposed? How?" Then her eyes went wide. "You mean instead of purifying... she could use it to contaminate everything?"

"Mhmmm..." I said with a nod. "That's about how I felt when Lacunae let it slip. The Goddess could use Gardens to pick up where the bombs left off." LittlePip groaned as she buried her face in her hooves. "Well... bombs plus taint, I suppose," I amended as I patted her shoulder.

"Everything alright?" Homage asked as she walked up to us.

"Oh, just talking about fun stuff. Radiation. Taint. The end of the world," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Lots of fun," Homage murmured as she looked at the little unicorn.

"Personally, I just wish I knew what Taint is... I mean, I had a gun filled with the stuff!"

"It's a potion that was developed by Twilight Sparkle in the years before the ending of the war," LittlePip murmured dejectedly. "Twilight Sparkle used it to create alicorns. It was her last act before the bombs fell. There were huge vats full of it in Maripony, and the diamond dog warrens underneath Pleasant Valley were full of rejected batches."

I blinked as I stared at LittlePip. "Well... that doesn't make any sense."

"Huh?" LittlePip slowly lifted her head to look at me.

"Well... I mean, it couldn't be just the potion. Because taint is all over the place, right?" I asked, looking at Homage.

The gray unicorn frowned, but then nodded. "Well... yes... but the contamination is strongest around Maripony." She rubbed her nose, her brows knitting. "But... you can find taint from Hoofington to Trottingham and all over the place in between."

"So did the potion magically teleport itself halfway across Equestria from Pleasant Valley?" I asked as I looked at them, and now LittlePip was looking confused as well.

"Look, the potion causes massive magical mutation. I don't know how it got so... so scattered... but it must have somehow," LittlePip said with a frown.

But the old Blackjack express was wheeling along for once. "Except... Twilight made a spell to neutralize taint before she completed the potion, right? Why would she create a neutralizer spell for her own potion she hadn't even completed?" LittlePip's frown faded as she nodded. I felt a five watt bulb alight in my brain. "So... whatever taint is... it can't be the potion... or rather... it can't be just the potion."

"Maybe... I don't know," LittlePip said with a frown. "It doesn't quite add up..."

"Twilight must have had some hint though as to what taint was and how to stop it before she made the potion. Some... something. And so she made a spell to remove it. Then she used that something to make her alicorns." I clopped my hooves together.

"Maybe..." LittlePip said with a sigh as she rubbed her chin. Then she frowned. "Ugh... I hate mysteries."

"You're telling me?" I laughed, and got a smile in return. Glory trotted up as well with a smile.

Everypony was starting to head for the elevators. P-21 carried Scotch on his back, and I felt a warm and fuzzy feeling in my.... magical blood pump thing. We started

to drift over as well. “You know what sucks? I’m probably going to have to erase everything that happened tonight in the morning,” LittlePip said with a sigh as the four of us filed into the elevator.

“Well...” Homage said with a mysterious little smile as she pushed the button and the doors slid shut. “Best make it a night worth forgetting.”

It was very late... or really early... when I pulled myself from the sweaty sheets, listening to the snores, marveling in the simple music of unregulated breathing. I felt good... not just content or pain free... but good. And as I walked to the window and saw the faintest glow to the east, I was glad that Glory had saved me. Glad that I’d met LittlePip and Homage. There were good ponies out here... ponies who wanted to help and be friends.

“Ponies worth fighting for,” the Dealer said quietly as he sat on the windowsill. I glanced at him. He looked younger; I didn’t know what that meant. He nudged back his battered, wide-brimmed hat as he looked to the east. “So you’re going, then.”

“You knew I would,” I replied quietly.

“I knew you would,” he rasped as he shuffled his cards. “But somepony needed to give you a choice... even if it’s one you could never make.”

“Thanks,” I replied, sincerely. I heard steps behind me, and he disappeared from view.

“Who were you talking to?” Glory asked softly as she hugged me from behind, snuggling her legs against my body and sheltering us both with her wing.

“Just my crazy,” I said as I leaned back against her, thankful for every inch of my hide that wasn’t metallic. I still smelled her in my nostrils and tasted her on my lips, and when we kissed it was the sweetest flavor ever. Finally, I pulled away. “Thank you for last night.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to do it... not after... not after what happened on the boat,” Glory said in a soft, scared little voice.

“You mean when I was raped?” It was a curious word. I would have thought that I’d flinch or something. But it was more like a lead weight on my mind, compressing my feelings under its subtle, heavy load.

She nodded. “I wouldn’t think you’d want... you know... at all.”

I smiled and kissed her again. "They didn't beat me, Glory. If they had found Scotch... if they'd touched her... I would have been destroyed. That would have been it for me. So they fucked me good and hard... slimed me up and tore me raw... that didn't matter. Hurting me didn't matter. Long as they didn't hurt anypony else... I didn't matter." The whole memory was just one ugly cloud. I couldn't get rid of it... I didn't deserve to be rid of it. So I'd just carry it along with all the others.

She started shaking behind me, hugging me even tighter. I heard her sniff and give a little sob as she tried to remain as silent as possible. Hot tears trickled down the side of my neck. "Glory... why... why are you crying?" I asked, feeling baffled. I'd just told her it was okay...

"Because you won't!" she said in my ear, muffling herself with her mane. "You matter to me, Blackjack. You matter... you matter to so many ponies and you... you died! You were hurt! You... sweet Celestia, why are you so convinced you deserve to suffer? You paid for 99, okay? You've paid for everything. So why can't you accept that you matter and it's as wrong for you to be hurt as it is for Scotch or me or anypony else to be?"

I closed my eyes and marveled at the silk of her mane, the wet trickle of her tears, the sound of her ragged breathing and the beat of her heart. The most beautiful sound in the world. "I don't know... like I said. Crazy..." She broke into more sobs as she held me close, shedding tears I couldn't. I wished I knew a way to make her stop, or a way for me to join her. "Anyway... thank you for last night," I said softly as I was held by her. "Oddly... I think I understand why Deus acted like he did..." She silenced, and I peeked back at her with a little smile.

"You understand him?" There was something in her face; a look both repelled and curious at the same time. I supposed it was the doctor in her. "That's.... I don't... um... wow..."

"Sorry for the awkward," I said with a rueful smile.

"You don't... I mean... do you want... like he..." She was babbling, and I smiled and kissed her.

"You didn't turn me into a cyberpony sexfiend rapist." At least... I really really hoped she hadn't. "I just mean that, now that half of me is mechanical, I think I know why he acted like he did."

Glory relaxed a little, and her curiosity seemed to be overcoming the part of her that

was horrified that I might empathize with a rapist... having been both a victim and perpetrator myself... honestly, I was getting a little turned around trying to come to terms with it. "What do you mean, then?"

"The professor said they had to let him retain his penis. Seems kinda stupid, given what he did..." I murmured softly. "But Glory... what we did together... it was the first thing I've really done that made me feel like... like a pony. Like I was more than a machine. And making you feel good... making you happy... it made me feel like I'm more than just a source of misery and pain for you. I know that he was a monster for what he did... but given how he felt... I know how important it was to him."

I thought of the professor, stuck in her jar with only a vague hope of getting her body back. Would she last years like that? Months? Weeks? Until I'd had sex, I hadn't realized what a fundamental need it was for me. It was the last little bit of my flesh and blood equinity. I wouldn't have survived as a brain in a jar. Nopony could... not with their sanity intact.

I sighed as I felt her reach down and felt her touch a warm and tender part of me. I groaned, a little part of my mind telling me that this was stupid and wasteful and indulgent and... and I took that part and mentally beat the shit out of it and leaned back and let her help me feel like a flesh and blood mare again.

My bardings were buckled, the usually simple task now... interesting with no magic and my new fingers. The battle saddle that Calamity had rigged for me yesterday was in place, Taurus's rifle on one side and a new twelve gauge shotgun on the other. Vigilance was polished to a gleam and set in a foreleg holster. Lacunae had sewn my Crusader filly onto the Reaper hoofball uniform. My saddlebags were in place with an ammo feed to each gun. I was still getting used to the control bit.

"How do you keep from shooting by accident when you talk?" I asked as I looked back at Glory. This whole setup was weird... and just a touch kinky.

"Practice," she said as she nudged me with a smile. She then looked a little concerned as I worked my tongue and reached up to tap a little tab on the side of my mouth. "Also, safeties." Oh, yeah. That'd probably be smart.

We made our way up onto the roof where the three wings of alicorns awaited, six greens along with three purples. The green alicorns, according to Lacunae, had the ability to boost the purples' teleport ranges. Rover grumbled nearby as he gave

sullen looks and kept his exact opinion of alicorns to himself. LittlePip was staying out of sight, having decided to erase every memory of me and my friends she possessed. And I'd just have to make sure the Goddess didn't suck my brains out when I was asleep.

Homage trotted up to me and gave me a nuzzle. "Be careful. I hear Hoofington's a dangerous place."

"Be careful yourself," I replied with a smile.

"Please. I live in Tenpony. What could possibly happen to me here?" she countered with a grin. "But really. Be careful. Whatever took down the MASEBS in the valley wasn't just some overeager scavenger pulling a plug. It was cut off by somepony who knew precisely what they were doing. So watch out."

I nodded again and looked at Helpinghoof. He cleared his throat, then said softly, "I'll keep an eye on your little metal ring. We'll have the DJ let you know if it comes to anything. We'll have him call it 'Blackjack's science project' or something." I thanked him for taking my concern seriously.

Life Bloom gave a cool, if slightly curious, look at the alicorns before looking back to me. "Hope this is a safe mode of travel."

"The Goddess still wants to use me. Till then..." I gave a little shrug. Then I sighed. "Sorry I didn't turn out to be Twilight Sparkle's kid." Homage's smile faded as she looked over at P-21. I tried to ignore the pink pony going 'oooooooh' in the back of my brain as I focused on Life Bloom. And... was it just me, or were the purple alicorns now glancing at each other?

"You've given the society and myself a lot to think about, Blackjack," he said with a smile. "Thank you."

"No problem. And thank you for the book." I smiled at him, and he blinked as if he didn't know what I was talking about. "Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns?" I said, giving him a sly wink.

He hesitated, then smiled. "Oh... yes. Of course. You're welcome." He really should have gone into acting. He had me almost convinced! Then he trotted away with Homage and Helpinghoof.

The purple alicorn beside me projected into my mind, "WE CERTAINLY HOPE YOU DO NOT EXPECT TO MAKE A HABIT OF THIS! WHERE DO YOU WISH TO GO IN THAT MISERABLE CITY?"

I looked at all my friends, new and old, and smiled. "Home."

The world disappeared in a purple flash.

Footnote: Max level reached.

36. Victims

“Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my—ARRRGH!”

“Okay, when I said ‘home’, I was really thinking of something along the lines of Chapel, or the Star House specifically,” I muttered as we trudged along the railroad towards Hoofington; from here, even the dark, roiling clouds over the city somehow looked darker and more...roiling-y... than the clouds everywhere else in the Wasteland. “Heck, even being teleported inside a chlorine-choked stable seemed more likely to me.” The eight metal rails stretched as far ahead and behind us as we could see. Clearly, somepony had gone to great lengths to clear these tracks. The least pitted and rusted lengths from all over the Wasteland, it looked like, had been selected to repair a single line, and the ties that were too badly rotted had been replaced.

“The Goddess will not risk any more of her children in that place. Not until the Enervation dilemma is solved,” Lacunae said softly. “You know how multiple alicorns cause the resonation effect. And technically, we are within the old Equestrian territorial province of Hoofington.”

“Technically, the Goddess can kiss my dock,” Rampage muttered as we passed a rusted switching station with a sign that read ‘Hoofington, twenty-two miles.’

“Whine whine whine,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “A few days in Tenpony and you all go soft.” I didn’t feel tired at all! ...Though, of course, I was kinda cheating.

“Ponies is always whining,” Rover agreed with a snort.

“What we really need is a form of transportation like LittlePip’s,” P-21 said. Glory lowered her ears, and he glanced over. “Not necessarily a skywagon. But some way to get around that doesn’t involve all of us being worn out by walking.” He stopped and looked speculatively at a simple little hoofcar sitting on a covered spur behind the switching station. He rubbed his chin. “Hey, Scotch. Are you pondering what I’m pondering?”

Scotch blinked at the hoofcar and then at the scrubland around us. “I think so, P-21, but where are we going to find a dozen rockets out here?” P-21 looked back at her flatly. “What?” the filly said defensively.

A little bit later, Scotch had checked over the car and found it good to go. I smiled as

they pushed it out and onto the repaired track. "Well, I suppose it's an improvement, but now you're going to get all worn out working those levers." P-21 turned to look at me, and then a small smile grew on his face. "What?" Glory glanced at me apologetically. Rampage grinned, and even Scotch was smirking. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked as I took a step back. "What?!"

"You know, I'm supposed to be the hero... leader... thingy!" I said as I trotted along. "LittlePip's friends wouldn't make her do this!"

"P-21! It's making that whining noise again," Scotch Tape said as I hauled the hoof-car along the tracks, the wheels squealing softly despite the grease the filly had pumped into the bearings. In addition to the grease gun, P-21 had found a dozen or so caps, some bits, and some scrap metal while searching the switch house and maintenance shed.

"Because it is pony engine," Rover said with a snort.

"Well, work the reins a bit till it stops," the buck said as he lay back with his saddle-bags pillowng his head. The filly snapped the ropes against my non-metallic ass, making me jump, blush, and glare back at my friends. "See? Pretty responsive, actually."

"You all suck..." I muttered darkly.

"It's just till we get to Hoofington," Glory assured me as we rolled along. Then she rubbed her chin. "Though... really, we might be able to find a wagon with intact wheels and tires. It'd certainly save us a whole lot of walking."

"I thought you said you weren't going to turn this into a regular thing!" I protested as I tugged against the harness and received another smack from the reins.

"Yeah, but that was before we found out how sweet it is not to walk our hooves to the nub," Rampage said with a laugh as she deftly sharpened her horn blade on the spinning rear wheel.

I looked at Lacunae gliding effortlessly beside me with a small smile on her lips. "What?"

"Oh... nothing." The alicorn's amusement was nearly palpable. "I just thought I'd mention that there's a train coming this way."

I looked ahead and spotted the dark shape on the tracks ahead of me. Lacunae

lifted the hoofcar onto some neighboring spurs as it grew closer and closer and...

"What the hell is that?" I gasped. Clearly, the idea of having a pony pulling a cart wasn't new, but I'd never imagined a pony like this before. He was colossal. Twice as big –no, ten times as big!– as Big Macintosh! His bright blue hide dripped with sweat as he walked along on hooves almost as big as my entire body! Bright yellow eyes looked down at us, and he gave a great snort at the sight of me hooked to the push cart.

"Wuss..." the giant pony muttered as they rolled past.

"Goliath! Don't you be talkin' to no riff raff!" shrieked a bony yellow unicorn mare from a little platform atop his back. "You let me handle this, ya'hear? You just keep on walkin' till ya hit the Everfree Spur!"

"Yes Momma," he sighed. He pulled three enormous rusty tankers and two flatbeds loaded with hundreds of stacked barrels. Scraggly ponies with hunting rifles watched us sullenly as they rolled by.

There was a bright flash, and the bony unicorn mare appeared before me. "Whatcher-business on my here railway?" she asked as she glared at... well... everypony. She twitched in aggravation. "And land sakes, which o yer is the pony in charge?"

"That would be me," I said. She took one look at me in the harness and summed up my failed management skills in one look.

"Right... really, which o yer's in charge?" she said, then looked up at Lacunae. "Yer with Red Eye?"

"What if we are?" P-21 said coolly.

"Well, then I'd say ya better have my pay ready! Express don't work for no fancy talk of glorious futures. We work on pay per load, ya hear?" she snapped. I noticed she had a huge scar across her belly. Landmine? My own stomach muscles twitched in sympathy. I wasn't exactly sure I had guts anymore...

Glory looked back at the immense pony. "What... happened?!"

She scowled at Glory. "T'aint none o yer beeswax, that's what happened!"

"But... he's huge!" Glory stammered, her jaw hanging open.

"He's blue too," Scotch said dryly. "Just in case you missed that, Glory."

The yellow unicorn snorted but gave a little smirk at the olive filly. "My boy is the damnedest biggest, strongest, dumbest, hungriest heap o' pony to ever tangle with

the blue weed. Eats a whole damn tree every time we get back around the Everfree!"

"Ah... Killing Joke," Lacunae said calmly. The yellow mare glared at the unicorn but didn't deny it. "You're the Goliath Express then?"

"Haulin' anything from FillyDee to Trots to the Hoof to any damn place in between if the pay is right!" the crotchety old unicorn said proudly. Then she looked at Glory and pointed behind us at her son. "He's Goliath, case ya missed that."

"But what is that stuff?" P-21 asked as he looked at the receding train cars. She glared at him sourly and suspiciously.

"Wern't paid ta chat," she snapped. "Got better things ta do than flap my lips at six idjits and a half-metal dog."

I frowned, wondering if I'd have to thump her to get my answers, then reconsidered. Really, she was just trying to make a living. Be kind... "Scotch?" I said as I looked at the filly. "Can you get me... say... a hundred caps?" The filly dug through my bag, found the painted bits of metal, and held them out to the sour mare. "Now you are." She took the caps in her magic, separated one to look at it sharply, bit it, then shrugged and slipped them into her saddlebags.

"You fail bribery one oh one?" she snorted, "Kinda blatant, don'tcha think?"

"You want caps and I want answers. You'd prefer alternative methods?" I asked, getting a few looks from my friends. Was I really threatening this scrawny yellow mare? Even I wasn't sure. For some reason, I felt my annoyance growing faster than usual.

She seemed to pick up my mood and relented, nodding toward the train. "Barrels are full of some flamer fuel Red Eye wants. Burner Boys been mixin' it up special in the refinery fer weeks now. The tankers? Dunno and don't wanna know. Got a whole nother load waitin' fer us after this one," she said with a shrug.

"And have you been doing this long?" Rampage asked. "Working for Red Eye, I mean?"

She twisted her mouth in a scowl before shrugging. "Naw. Red Eye was using Usury to provide the materials. When she couldn't, Red Eye sent in his boys. Then, rather than do a couple dozen loads, he paid us to move it all fer him in five." She looked me in the eyes with a frown, but then shrugged. "Anywho... you tell that glowy-eyed son of a bitch I want my caps and no funny bizz'noss when this is over, ya hear? Or else my boy'll turn that there fancy buildin' inta his next outhouse!"

"Momma!" bawled the immense blue pony, his voice echoing across the scubland.

"Your train is leaving without you," Glory said. The bony mare rolled her eyes in scorn.

"Goddesses' sake, anythin' else profound ya wanna say? Point out it's a cloudy day? Tell me water's wet? One winged idjit." The bony yellow unicorn snorted and with a bright yellow flash disappeared. I could barely make the corresponding flash on the back of the enormous pony.

I closed my mouth, open to ask her about what had been happening in the Hoof, and then huffed softly. I guess I'd have to find out what was happening in the hoof the hard way.

"You want to stop them? A few good blasts into those barrels should make a pretty impressive show," Rampage said as Lacunae lifted the hoofcar back onto the tracks.

I sighed. "I'm probably going to regret this, but no. They didn't attack us, and I really don't want to know what Goliath can do in a fight. Let's get home. I want to find out just what's going on there." I lowered my head. "Let's see if I can't get a little more speed out of these things!" I yelled as I started to run instead of walk. The sooner I got back, the better.

It was weird. My back ached, my sides hurt, my ass throbbed, and my neck felt stiff as a board, but my legs were fine and dandy! I'd need to chow down on some gems soon, though; there was a little blinking message in the corner of my eye telling me that my main energy storage was getting low. The cart was squealing, too; something was burning up inside it. Scotch had used up all her grease already, and it smelled like any second the cart was either going to lock up or catch fire, maybe both. We were drawing close to Brimstone's Fall, though; I could see the outbuildings and the perimeter fence. It looked fine and dandy. Quiet...

Shit...

"Unhook me. Something's wrong," I muttered. Where was the cloud of rock dust? Where were the sentries? I shifted impatiently in the harness, my teeth working the battle saddle bit. Looking up to the north, I could see the Roosehoof Academy; it was smoldering, and the reinforced buildings were now streaked and blackened with soot. Once I was loose, I ran around through the railway gate and into the yard. The doors to the admin office and barracks were open and there were sounds

of banging, whooping, and hollering. A small mob of scavengers was picking the buildings clean, tossing anything not easily edible or easily converted into caps aside.

Then one, a rancid-looking ghoul if ever I saw one, noticed me. His eyes popped wide and he croaked, "Reapers!" You know... right now, I felt like that term was pretty applicable. As the scavengers grabbed what they could and scampered, I chased him down in three leaps and pinned him outside the barracks as the rest ran with whatever knicknacks they could carry.

"What happened here? Where is everypony? Where's Dusty Trails?" I yelled into his face, beating him with my hooves. All my friends ran up to support me save Lacunae, who hung back.

"I don't know! I don't know anything!" the boiled-looking pony pled as he curled up defensively.

"Blackjack," Glory said sharply, snapping me out of the momentary rage. I looked down at his bent forelegs; I'd snapped both in my tackle and hadn't even realized it. Hadn't heard or felt a thing. I backed off, and she fished out one of our Tenpony healing potions. I noticed it was already losing some of its vibrant color. It was potent enough to heal the ghoul enough to hobble, though; some radiation and he'd be right as rain, right?

"Came here this morning, what with all the attacks. Heard there'd be top notch salvage," he croaked. "Please don't kill me."

"Then tell me about the attacks," I said evenly as I backed off enough for him to sit up.

"Just that they started a few days back. Right after that whole Celestia explosion that killed Security and half the Rangers. Expert merc band hit Megamart hard. I mean hard. Then they scragged the group at the Fluttershy clinic. Then Stockyard, marched the whole village into a radioactive hole and just waited for 'em to die. Cold... man... cold. Still, might mean for a few new ghoulies," he chuckled with a wan smile. "Hope some of 'em are cute."

That got some hard looks from me, and his grin sickened as his milky eyes darted away. "Anyway, that place was picked clean, and there was already a crew up at the school thing, so we came here. Just been an hour or so."

"Then the academy. Then here," I murmured. I scowled at him. "But where is everypony?" I demanded.

"I dunno! There was like nopeny here! Honest! You think I can take a whole town of ponies with my bare hooves and swinging cock?" he retorted.

"What cock?" Scotch murmured scornfully.

"Oh shit! Did that fall off again?" he said as he looked around under him.

I closed my eyes and shuddered with the effort to not buck him into pieces then and there. "Get lost," P-21 said flatly. The ghoul nodded so fast it looked like his head would come off, little flakes of hide sloughing off in a cloud.

"Right. Yeah. Getting lost! Sooo lost! Where am I now? Heh..." he said as he staggered away from us. "Um... Hoofington Rises and shit..."

I turned and glared right at him. "What did you just say?"

He froze, clearly torn between running for his life and cowering for mercy. Slowly, I rose to my hooves, my tightening jaw making Taurus' rifle cock. "Me, say? Fuck! I didn't say anything... nothing at all..."

"What you just said: Hoofington Rises. Why did you say that?" Glory asked as she stepped into my line of fire.

The ghoul blinked in confusion. "Well... I don't fucking know. It's just shit folks say now days. Like 'Sweet Celestia' or 'Luna fuck my ass with a frosty strap on.' You know?" He looked at each of us desperately. "It's just what people fuckin' say!" I chewed the saddle bit. One jerk of my head and I could try out firing it.

Be kind, a little yellow pegasus reminded me. Do better... Glory looked back at me, spooked at my anger. She seemed to be asking how I could pardon those four but be so ready to smash some ghoul into paint. I had to admit, it bothered me too. Why was I so angry at him?

"Go," P-21 said darkly.

"Can I..." He pointed at his looted goods.

"Take them and go!" I snapped. That was as kind as I was going to get right now. I knew that, for a scavenger like him, it'd mean the difference between life and death... but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. When he was gone I stomped my hooves. "Any evidence probably got taken with the scavengers. Who—"

"Blackjack," Rampage said in a dark and even tone. I looked at her, then saw her pointing towards the metal doors with her armored hoof. I looked and froze. I'd been so occupied with the scavengers and the ghoul that I'd missed the letters painted

six feet tall in a maroon paint that wasn't paint.

SECURITY.

Slowly, I trotted forward, looking at the bloody slop drying in a rusty bucket beside the door and the paintbrush shoved within. I pushed the door open, and a stench rolled over my nose and skin. I didn't know words to describe that metallic reek. All I knew was that it was bad. I didn't have a real stomach anymore, but if I did I'd be puking like the rest of my friends.

Lacunae groaned as she slumped. I looked at her sharply. "Enervation?" She nodded. Suddenly, my friends were looking at each other. They all seemed tired and drawn all of a sudden. "It wasn't like this before," I said softly, looking at P-21 and Glory for confirmation.

"But... aren't you feeling it?" P-21 asked me in concern.

That surprised me. No, actually. I didn't feel the lethargy or pain or anything. I felt just... me. "No. I guess the cybernetics are resistant or something." I frowned; that didn't seem right... "I'll... check inside. You folks see if you can find anything not picked over yet."

"She throttles a scavenger and then tells us to scavenge. Inconsistent much?" Ram-page muttered, but our eyes met. I was pissed, and she knew this wasn't the time.

I took two steps in and nearly walked right into the recorder hanging from a rope in front of me. I looked at it for the longest moment before remembering that my horn didn't work... damn it! Slowly, I reached out with my hooves and tried to tug it free. Finally, I just downloaded the contents from the device and gave it a shove, sending it swinging in the darkness. The air was thick and heavy and silent as I selected the audio file.

I looked around. One blue bar on my E.F.S. If this was a trap, and it probably was, then they were probably using stealthbucks or zebra stealth cloaks.

For several seconds there was nothing but the sound of machinery and the movement of ponies. Then a male rasped in a familiar booted voice, "They say the third time's the charm."

Sanguine's words filled the dank tunnel as if he stood beside me. "I always wondered where that came from? What, is twice 'not trying hard enough' and four times 'give up 'cause you're fucked'? Always wondered that."

I found myself trotting faster, my augmented eyes picking out the gray rails of the

tunnels and avoiding pitfalls as I looked for mines, tripwires, or other traps. The air felt wrong. It felt wet.

There was another long pause. “I guess it’s not true, though. We’ve been waiting for hours, Security... and you still haven’t shown up. No words from that DJ fuck either. But I know you, Security. I know that you didn’t die with that ship. I don’t care what they fucking say. You’re alive, because if you’re dead then I’m fucked anyway. And if you’re alive, then you’re following me. You’re just taking your fucking time.”

I sped up, trotting past the little security station halfway in. Now I was tripping every now and then as I raced forward.

“Well... let me give you some more incentive to hurry your ass along. I want that program. My time is fucking up. I can’t stay here anymore. That thing in the Core is awake thanks to you. The shit is going to happen, all because of you. Red Eye might... MIGHT... be able to stop it. Who the fuck knows? But I need a bargaining chip if he’s going to keep me safe and sound. I need Chimera. For that, I need EC-1101.”

There was a horrible moment of silence, then the grinding of machinery and the terrified sniffling and sobbing of ponies. “Do it.”

Psychoshy’s voice broke in. “Sanguine... You can’t be serious. Stockyard was fucked up enough!”

“Throw ‘em in! Now!” he snarled. “All of them. Save her for last!”

“Whatever,” muttered an unfamiliar voice. “Toss ‘em.”

And then the screams began... just like Gorgon had screamed. The gnashing metal noise became muted. Pulp. I didn’t think, I simply ran. I ran as if I could somehow magically sprint back in time. I raced faster and faster, propelled by the screams of those ponies that I was already too late to save.

And then, suddenly, I was in the round cavern, the ledge ending abruptly behind me as I tried to stop. Momentum carried me onwards. It flipped me forward into that dark and still void. My hooves flailed at the air as I twisted, hoping there was some magical telescopic leg thing that would let me grab the edge. But there wasn’t. And I fell as horrified screams played out of my leg.

The pool below broke my fall. It wasn’t very big... wasn’t very deep... but it was deep enough. My metal legs sent me straight to the bottom as I struggled and flailed. I opened my mouth, and then I tasted it. I screamed into the thick soup and tasted blood.

He'd put them all through the crusher.

I flailed and struggled, trying to find footing beneath me. A little O2 gauge began to drop. I might have been cybernetic, but I still needed to breathe. I could see nothing. Hear nothing. I felt bits bobbing and brushing against me as my hooves flailed and kicked out under me. I was going to drown in the crushed-up remains of dozens of pony workers.

Then I felt hooves grab my neck and pull. My head broke the surface, then my mouth. I automatically took a breath; a reeking, coppery, iron breath. I wanted to be sick at this. I wanted to wake up. "Stop it, Blackjack! Stand up!" P-21 shouted in my ear.

The interruption took only a moment or two, but it was just enough for me to calm down. I got my hooves under me and stood. My muscles shook; my legs remained steady. The foul mixture of pony and rainwater was little more than chest high at the base of the crusher. The small blue buck carefully helped me along to where the ramp led up to the ledge, my superior weight threatening to drag me down and make me slip. I'd been lucky to fall where I had and not get speared by the many spires of rock and broken bone.

Right. I was lucky. Brimstone's Fall... wasn't.

"You came in after me?" I asked, feeling the fetid mixture coating me slowly dripping off. I was so glad my low light vision was in black and white. I could imagine the grey tones as just mud.

"Nothing good ever comes from you going alone, Blackjack," P-21 said with a small smile. Then he looked over at the...remains. I guessed there was enough light coming in from above for him to get a good enough look. "How could anypony do this?"

I stared at the gory pool; there was no way to tell how many ponies had been put through the machine. Dozens? A hundred? How many ponies had been working here? One thing was clear, though: Sanguine knew exactly how to get my attention. He'd known there was one sure-fire way to bring me to him. This was it. Then my ears twitched just a little bit.

"Blackjack."

I stared at P-21, and the mare's voice croaked out again. "Blackjack."

I turned and saw the blue bar on my EFS align with the hopper bin of the rock crusher. A chill ran through me a moment, and then I was scrambling up to the lip

of the bin. Thickened blood smeared the side; a small heap of limbs and burst flesh lay in the bottom. And then part of the heap moved. Eyes opened in the gloom. "Hey, Blackjack," croaked Dusty Trails.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the gruesome hopper and slid down beside the sand-colored earth pony. "Dusty! You're alive...?" I couldn't believe it.

"Take more than a rock crusher ta kill me." She looked at my legs and smiled a little more. "See you got yerself some fancy new legs."

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to smile. "Yeah. They've even got a radio built in." I looked at P-21 as he pulled the torn gobbets of flesh away with his hooves so we could see how she was trapped. He looked even more ill as he examined the area.

She gave a weak little smile. "He stopped the feeder when I was halfway through the jaws." I looked down at her hips. "Cast... cast some healing magic on me. Made sure I survived," she said, and I reached out and held her. She was burning up with fever. "Told me... give you a message. Told me yesterday... if I hung on... you might kill him. Fucking... bastard..." She coughed. "He was right... I hung on... knew you'd come. Knew... Glory would... save you..."

"Right. Now you hang on, and we'll find a way for Glory to save you. Just... hang on," I said with a sniff... but I couldn't see how. Her waist was trapped in a jagged three-inch-wide hole. Celestia only knew what condition her legs were in. I didn't have a second life support jar for her head.

"Don't be an idjit..." she murmured with a frown. "You ain't got time ta waste on me. He's going ta Flank next."

"How'd he take you out?" P-21 asked.

"Snipers. Armed with beam rifles. Took a few hours, but two of 'em picked off everypony with a gun. Then griffins dropped stun grenades. Rounded us up with a bunch o' freaks. After that, they marched us down here. Said they were waiting for you. Ghoul was half out of his mind. Kept waitin' for you to show. Talkin' to himself. Jumpin' at his own shadow. Finally he got sick o' waitin' and... started tossin' folk in. Saved me for last."

"Griffins. Red Eye," I muttered.

"Mebbe... if so, the way they were looking at him... if you don't kill him, they will. They're powerful ticked off at the moment." She coughed again.

"Funny. I'm powerfully ticked off at him too," I said with a sniff.

She rubbed her face with a gory hoof and looked at me. "Think you can get something for me? Doubt they found it. Weren't much interested in lootin'?" She pointed towards the exit tunnel. "It's that way."

I jumped and clambered out of the hopper, spotting the wooden crate in the direction she'd pointed. Inside was a large clay jug. I recognized it from the Arena and carefully cradled it as I walked back to the hopper. She looked up at me with a lazy smile. "That sure is some funny zebra trottin' yer doin' on them fancy legs of yours."

"The original owner was half zebra," I replied as I pulled out the stopper and was assaulted by the potent alcohol fumes. It actually cut through the stench of the room. I brought the opening to her lips, and she steadied it with her forehooves and took a long drink.

Finally, she sighed. "Muther's milk..." She sniffed and looked up at P-21 and me. "Promise me you'll drink the rest over his damn corpse." I couldn't trust myself to speak; I jerked my head in some spastic imitation of a nod. "Can you send me on muh way?"

It was Flank and Mini all over again. She was dead; we all knew it. It was just a question of how long it would take her to die. Do it, Blackjack. Do it! Draw that fucking gun and give her peace! Yet I just sat there like an idiot. I couldn't move, couldn't draw Vigilance and give her the peace she deserved so much. "I'm sorry..." I murmured as I hung my head. "I... I wish I could. After everything... everything I've been though... I still can't grant you that..."

"Taint yer fault yer a decent mare," she replied. Then she looked at P-21 calmly, and he didn't hesitate.

"Med-X?" P-21 asked softly as he opened his saddlebag. "Five doses?"

"Five doses? Mare can really end her pain with that much," she said softly as he took out the syringes. As if it were no matter at all, she began to inject herself with the chems. "Oh... Blackjack. Can you do me one last thing?"

I slipped the moonshine into my saddlebag as I looked at her. "Name it."

"On yer way out, there's this button..." she said, her voice growing softer as more of the potent painkiller entered her system. "Red... key is in my hat..." She sighed. "Was gonna use it... but... got stunned before I could."

"I'll take care of it," I promised. I could do that at least.

"Take care of things... better than I did." She sniffed as tears started to run down

her cheeks. "It... it was a good mine... Blackjack. I did right... didn't I?" she begged as foam gathered at the corner of her lip. "Celestia'll... be proud... won't she...?"

"She will. I know she will," I said as I held her, listening to her raspy breathing becoming more and more broken. "Thank you... thank you for your help."

"Twernt nothing..." She smiled slackly, pulled her battered hat off, and set it atop P-21's head. "Fer tha... chems... best ta... settle... debts..."

He nodded, and then said softly, "Ayep."

She slowly curled forward, pressing her face into my metallic limbs. Then she let out her breath in one slow rasp. Her blue bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

And that was that.

It took me a few minutes to pull myself away and crawl out of the hopper again. I reached down and hooked my hoof to his and pulled him up after me. I sat there, hanging my head. "This was-

He kicked me so hard that I was knocked on my side. I blinked up at him in astonishment as he glared down at me, his breathing taut and hot. My head spun from the impact, and all I could do was gawk up at him as he sat on my chest.

"If you say the words 'my fault', I will hit you again," he said sharply, then gritted his teeth and spoke slowly, his voice tense. "This wasn't your fault. None of this. You didn't know this was going to happen." He stared down at me. "And if you start with that 'I'm scum' or 'I fucked up' or anything, I will beat it out of you!"

"I should've dealt with Sanguine sooner," I said. "If I'd—" Again his hooves thumped down against my face. Hard. "I didn't—" Another thump. "I coulda—" Thump. Finally we just lay there, him panting and me feeling blood trickle from my swelling lip and nostril.

We just stared into each others' eyes, angry tears dancing in his. "I won't let you hate yourself for this." Damnit...

He was right. As much as my instinct wanted to pin this all on myself, I couldn't. This was one burden that wasn't mine to bear. I smiled. "Then let's get the sonovabitch that did this." He helped me to my hooves and then tugged Dusty's wide brimmed hat more square atop his brushy mane.

We headed out, and he murmured, "I'm going to tell Scotch. About me. Her mom. Everything." He sighed softly, rolling his eyes a little. "I guess we messed with her

memories for nothing then, huh?"

"We wanted to protect her and keep her happy," I replied as we made our way up. I kept a careful eye on him. He looked horrid and exhausted from the Enervation, but I didn't think he was in flesh melting territory yet. The field wasn't quite that strong. Still, it'd make the mine a deathtrap for anyone working here. One nick that wouldn't heal and a pony would be finished. And there were still a lot of gems in these rocks and tunnels...

I spotted the red button she'd mentioned and grinned, rubbing my metal hooves together. Then I reached for the shiny, candy like button— and P-21 bumped my hoof aside. "You ever think you should find out what a button does before you push it?" he asked as he lay on his back and looked at the gap between the button and the wall. "Case in point... dynamite."

I blinked and grunted. "Why would Dusty want to blow us up...?"

"She didn't. She wanted to blow up anypony stupid enough to push a button," he said as he cradled the hat in his hooves and pulled a metal key out of the brim. He slipped it into something on the backside of the button and turned it.

I reached for it once more... and once more he smacked my hooves away. "But... key!"

"I promise you can press the button..." He looked a little more and then nodded. "Looks like the key activates a delay and a fuse." He whistled softly. "She rigged the mine to blow. Guess the idea would be get down here, get folks out through a tunnel or something, and blow the mine behind them. Smart." He sighed as he looked back the way we'd come. "Too bad the stun grenades ruined the getaway plan."

"Sooo... button?" I asked with a grin.

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Wait fifteen minutes for us to finish searching up top and get cleared out. Push it, then run for your life. Outside." Then he trotted out, mumbling to himself about babysitting. I sighed as I waited, tapping my hoof against the wall beside the shiny button and sucking on chips and chunks of tasty gems. Each one gave me an invigorating rush, which in turn gave me inspiration for new and interesting ways to handle the job before me. Should I push it slowly and deliberately? Mash it with enthusiasm? A rear hoof jump push? It wasn't everyday a girl got to push a button rigged to a bunch of explosives.

"You sure are one twigged mare," the Dealer murmured. I glanced over my shoulder at him. "You have a friend die in your hooves, and now you're giddy with glee at

pushing a button while soaked in the blood of murdered ponies.”

“And talking to you,” I added, refusing to let him interrupt my contemplation of buttons and the pushing of them. “P-21 already convinced me not to kick myself for not being able to stop this. Soon as I push this, we’ll head to Flank and I’ll try to think up exciting and creative ways to kill Sanguine.”

“Why do you think Sanguine hit Stockyard?” Dealer asked softly.

“Huh?” I blinked as I looked back at him. “Because he’s a murderous asshole?”

“Think about it for a second. He attacks Megamart. Why?”

I frowned. “To draw me out.”

“But why Megamart? Why not... say... Toll? Or Flotsam?” he asked calmly.

“They’re closer to him. Instead he went all the way over to Megamart. Why?”

I sighed and set aside my contemplation of button-ness. “Probably because they helped me?”

“But how would he know that?” he asked softly. “And after that he hit the clinic. And then Stockyard. Why Stockyard? They never helped you. Then they burned the academy. There’s not even anypony there, but he burned it. Why?”

I frowned as I rubbed my nose. “Because... because that was the next place I visited. And then here!” The blood drained from my face. “But how would he know where I’ve been? I mean he...” Then I blinked as my eyes locked with his. “He’d need my PipBuck navigation information...”

“Which was copied onto Marmalade’s PipBuck,” he murmured softly.

“Which I gave to him...” I looked back towards the chamber. “He told Dusty he was going to Flank!”

“Then count yourself lucky. He’s following the road rather than going strictly in order,” Dealer didn’t take his eyes off mine as he asked, “But where is he going when he’s done in Flank?”

I smashed the button and heard an electric fizz, then immediately turned and raced for the exit. I hit the door out with all four hooves and rolled out as it flew open, screaming to my friends to run.

“Fifteen minutes, Blackjack! I said fifteen minutes!” P-21 yelled crossly as he came out of the bunk house.

"He's going to Chapel, P-21! After Flank, he's going to Chapel!" The blue buck shut up immediately, and all six of us ran off through the rain away from the mine.

Moments later, the muddy ground thudded under our hooves as the charges below went off. We were outside the fence when the administration building blew apart in a cloud of wood and reinforcing sheets. The flipping ends didn't even reach the ground before the bunk house blew as well. There was a rumble beneath our hooves and a massive gust of wind as the chamber below collapsed. I watched as pits opened in the earth where we'd been standing. I hadn't appreciated just how big that chamber had been until I saw the wide depression before me.

"What is pony thinking? Pony runs out and blowing everything up!" Rover snorted.
"Why does everything explode around pony?"

"Listen Rover, you need to get to Riverside and your people. Sanguine's hitting every place I stopped since leaving Stable 99. We might have caught a break with Chapel, but if we didn't..." I didn't want to think that far ahead. Instead, I pulled the harness on. "Come on!" I grunted as I pulled, but the wheels of the hoofcar squealed as they locked up entirely.

"The bearings are burned out!" Scotch said. "We'll have to repack 'em and I don't even think we got parts and I know we're out of grease. Even if we had all the stuff, it'd take hours." I gave the car a kick. Of all the times to break down!

"Dog will return to den and send warning to the river ponies. River ponies whine, but have good fish," Rover said as he scratched behind his ear.

"Will you be able to make it safely?" Glory asked in concern.

Rover snorted and lifted his robotic hand, showing the razor claws. "Is good for more than digging through rock, pony. Old dog know many tricks. Dog be fine. Ponies take care of ponies. Is what pony is good at," he said, but for the first time there wasn't the usual bitterness in his voice. "Pony stay safe."

"We can just hoof it straight to Chapel," Scotch Tape piped up.

"It'd take all day, and we'd be crossing unexplored territory," P-21 countered.

Rampage nodded. "There's the Halfhearts headquarters in this area and a crashed skywagon that's a feral ghoul nest. We can follow the rail and cut over to Chapel, but that's even farther. Same problem if we hoof it to Flank."

"Maybe Lacunae can go to Miramare, soak up some radiation, and teleport us all there?" Glory asked.

"It would take many hours," Lacunae replied, the frustration clear in her thoughts.

"What if Blackjack went alone? She can move faster now and she doesn't get tired with these legs of hers," Scotch offered as she rapped her hoof on my enameled foreleg.

"That'd leave her outnumbered by a lot," Rampage said with a frown. "Personally, that's fine for me, but I can't die. Blackjack doesn't have that advantage."

Glory was looking in the direction of the strip mall. "Blackjack... when we came by here the first time, we set a bunch of supplies and stuff on fire. Remember?"

"Yeah," I replied. It was a little bit fuzzy. I was pretty sure there'd been some buck lobbing dynamite at me or something.

"Well, that was a lot of supplies. I doubt they carried it all on their backs from Flank," the gray pegasus pointed out.

"You think they might have had a working wagon?" I asked. She flushed and nodded. I seized her in my hooves and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. "I love smart ponies! Let's go." We started towards the nearby strip mall, and I blinked back at Glory still sitting there in a daze. "Hey, Glory!" She shook her head hard, losing her befuddled smile and running to catch up.

For once, I was glad for the Hoofington rain. It was pouring down in full force by the time we reached the strip mall, and the bloody gore coating me was more or less washed off. For a minute, I was afraid we'd struck out and would be left trying to run all the way to Chapel. Then Rampage checked behind the strip mall and found a wagon that was only marginally rusty. One tire was flat and one axle squealed when Rampage pulled it out, but Scotch just rubbed her hooves together.

"I'm gonna need Lacunae to levitate it up. Gonna need some wonderglue, some turpentine, a hunk of innertube, and some grease... any grease or oil you can get your hooves on!" With that, she got out her wrench, and we were scrambling. Fortunately, P-21 found an oil can in the back of the bar, and Glory found the innertube and helped Scotch work.

And me? I put four bits into the jukebox, selected a song, and kicked the side of the machine with my hoof. The lights flickered, and then the machine gave a dry hum. I dug behind the bar, and hidden by dozens of empty glass bottles I found a flask of Wild Pegasus. I trotted to the table Dusty and I'd sat at so long ago and

practiced with my fingers, setting up the two least-grimy shotglasses I could find. The machine clicked, and the music began to play. Out of habit, I started to record as I sat back and looked at all the cards scattered around the table.

I chewed through another mouthful of gems, then looked at one of the face-down cards on the table in front of me and stared. I tried to imagine the magic reaching out. Try to imagine it like a wind brushing against it, the book had said, like blowing on it without using your lungs. I closed my eyes, trying to focus even though my temples throbbed and my useless stub of a horn ached. I tried imagining a blowing the card over. I felt the faintest magic buzz and tingle in my horn. Then I chanced a look down.

Queen of spades; Princess Luna, smiling up at me. It wasn't much at all... but it was a start.

I leaned back, extended my fingers, and picked up the shot glass as the song came to an end. I lifted my glass to the empty chair across from me. Who was I lifting it to? Dusty Trails? Sure. But I was also raising it to Rivets and Midnight. To those ponies in Stockyard killed simply because of a blip on my PipBuck. In a perverse way, I was lifting it to Deus as well, one monster to another in a silent pledge. Sanguine had been around for way too long. It was time to finish the bastard.

The jukebox crackled and finally died. I rose to my hooves and trotted out the door. My friends looked at me, and I must have been wearing the most damned shootiest look that had ever been worn by a mare because they didn't say a word. Scotch and Lacunae hitched me up to the wagon. I took the bit in my mouth and glanced back to make sure everypony was aboard. Glory climbed up onto the seat at the front of the wagon and took my reins. I looked back at her and grinned.

"Um... giddy-up?" she asked, giving them a little shake. No no, Glory. Not Giddy-up. Ante up.

I wasn't the strongest pony in the Wasteland, but as I leaned into the harness between the covered wagon's shafts I felt an unfamiliar but welcome orange pony pulling right along with me. Be strong, she told me. And right beside her was a blue pegasus telling me that I was going to pull it off and that it was going to be so awesome! With those two pulling alongside me, I couldn't just run. I could practically fly!

With an eep from my pilot, my four mechanical legs lunged forward and we raced down towards the east. Sanguine wanted to find me. He'd found a perfect way. I'm coming, Sanguine, and I'm bringing a whole lot of hurt along with me.

Pulling a wagon had the most startling effect of focusing my world; every bit of my energy was put into moving forward. While my legs weren't all that bothered, I had plenty of flesh and blood bits that were stressed and sweaty. I pushed through the pain. Atrocity takes time. The bastard wanted me to catch up to him. I just had to do it before anypony else died.

Glory and Scotch guided me. With all my attention on running, I had no time to look for washed-out sections of road, abandoned wagons left as barricades, or bars on the E.F.S. I was too busy running! Since DJ Pon3 was off the air temporarily, my PipBuck played some of Mixers's finest and time slowed down to just the present. I didn't have time to think about the future. I didn't have the energy to think about the past. I just had the pull of the reins and the thudding of my hooves and the rattle of the cart to tell me what to do next.

Then I felt the reins pull back and the squeal of the wagon's brakes. Obstinate, I wanted to keep running! But then sense settled in; there was a good reason to stop. We were here. Glory hopped down beside me as I looked at the wall of rubble that had been erected around the town. There was smoke and fire, but not a whole lot of shooting. I still couldn't feel myself breathing, but my vision was flashing warnings about dehydration, caloric intake, and power reserves again. Why'd my insides have to be written in egghead?

Glory hopped out and immediately cracked open a bottle of filtered water with her teeth and hooves and held it to my mouth. I slugged it down as Scotch released me from the harness. My body... hurt wasn't the accurate term. I wasn't in pain so much as a full-body ache spread through my organic parts. Was that because I'd just never really put myself to moving like this before, or something else?

Once I'd finished the bottle of water and was unhooked, I trotted my way clear a bit and looked around. Flank had seen better times, but it looked, surprisingly, that Caprice had followed through on my suggestions. Two of the turrets Glory had made were still functional atop their buildings. The single gate had been blown open, but, judging by the dead ponies scattered around it, the assault had cost the attackers dearly.

"Is it just me, or does the Enervation feel... worse?" Glory asked, looking at the pained expression on Lacunae's face.

"I don't know. I can't feel it just yet," I said as I trotted towards the main gate, alert

for red bars. Maybe something was turning up the Enervation across the whole valley? Wasn't that a pleasant thought! I still couldn't feel the tearing sensation or the fatigue, though. Was I just not being affected by the draining energies, or were my synthetic parts resistant to the field's power?

Trotting towards the settlement, I looked around. I remembered the addicts and half-starved ponies lingering outside in the marshy ruins of the town, but they were nowhere to be seen now. Instead, there was a cluster of tents and banners (three black vertical bars on a green field), and a couple dozen ponies standing around watching us head into Flank. They weren't shooting at us, and I didn't see any monsterponies, so for the moment my curiosity was sated. Still... I'd have to check them out... soon.

I made my way inside, looking at the metal wagons turned on their sides and braced together to form a secondary security wall. From the scorching on the inside, they'd been attacked by some sort of flamer so intense it'd slagged the metal. Rooms was on fire still, and from the four dead manticores it was clear that at least one monsterpony had been here as well. Still, Flank had clearly put up a tougher fight than Brimstone's Fall. I could imagine the beam rifle snipers picking ponies off through the chain link that had protected the settlement before, the defenders split in two guarding both entrances.

Then, from out of nowhere, a red bar appeared, a mare in pink bardings racing at me faster than I'd ever imagined a pony could move. In a flash she was in my face, and so was the revolver in her jaws. I rolled away just in time to avoid a bullet to the forehead. Still, her next three shots bit through my bardings, barely slowing. Her pupils were tiny points in her pink eyes, and she was on top of me before I could recover. The mare was smaller than me, but her hooves slammed into me with more force than I'd thought possible.

Rampage tackled her off me, the pair rolling across the rain-slick street. Another frenzied mare charged Glory, a pair of metal batons glowing as the pegasus turned and hosed her attacker with green beams of magic. Astonishingly, the mare didn't seem fazed at all as the bolts burned at her flesh. Glory raised her hooves as the batons smashed into her face and legs.

Lacunae's magic glow wrapped the frenzied mare and threw her back. She rolled, tried to rise, and failed, but two more ponies raced to their fallen ally and jabbed her with hypodermics. In an instant, she was back on her hooves again. I aimed some suppressive fire at the three and they took cover... at least for the moment.

"Stay down!" Rampage roared as she raised her hooves and smashed them down on the thrashing mare. The earth pony kicked out furiously, denting her armor. "Stay down!" she repeated with another stomp of her forelegs, the kick making the mare bounce. Still she kept trying to get back up. "Stay down!" Rampage yelled. The mare rose to her hooves, bleeding and broken and still on the attack. One more stomp and the mare's head crunched like a nut. She trembled and went still. Rampage's pink eyes met my own, and she gave a shrug. "Told her to stay down."

There were a lot more red bars on my E.F.S. now, the ponies matching them fighting with incredible ferocity and resilience. They were all coming out of Mixers. I had no idea where P-21 was in all this, but I hoped he could hear me. "P-21! Kill the robot in the club!" I had a distinct worry that this was what 'everything' did to a mare.

I moved around as quick as I could. One downside of the battle saddle was that it made me less effective in melee combat. Pumped up with Stampede and Buck, these mares' kicks and blows hurt! I almost preferred getting shot to some of the applebuck kicks that connected. I moved away, clenching my jaw on the left trigger and blasting buckshot. The lead was more irritating to the mare it hit, but I didn't know how to swap out ammo without my horn and I lacked earth pony tenacity and resilience. Scotch tried to keep behind me as the two circled.

"Scotch! I need green shells!" I said, tossing her on my back.

"Got it! Use the rifle," she yelled, and I twisted the right side of my jaw. I didn't have a chance to hit; the mares were so jazzed up on Dash that I don't think they could physically stop moving at this point. I heard the sounds of the olive filly attaching a belt of green shells to the shotgun; not a real Ironpony, but a semi-automatic IF-84. "You're loaded!"

The green toxic rounds weren't much more fatal than the lead, but the chemicals slowed the ponies' movements enough that I was able to plant a few solid shots in their torsos. Still, under the effects of Stampede and Med-X, and probably Hydra too, they just weren't dropping! Worse, they had plenty of fresh healing potions on hand and weren't shy about using them.

Suddenly, there was a loud whistle, and P-21 emerged from Mixers with a familiar pinched-looking medical pony in tow. One of the frenzied mares moved back, shaking with the effort not to attack. The unicorn lifted a strange tube with her magic, loaded some sort of dart, and shot it at one of the mares harrying me. She took three steps, staggered to the side, and fell on her face. Another dart, and the next one went down. The mares were frothing at the mouth as I moved back, letting the

Flank security mares see to... their dosed comrades? They were all wearing the same uniform!

Scalpel looked at us and said sourly, "Sorry. Didn't recognize you. Thought you might have been those mercs come back for another round or those nutjobs across the way." She looked at the lucid mares in their pink security barding. "Come on! Get them back in my office before their hearts stop!"

"What did you shoot them with?" I asked.

"Fixer and a Moon Dust solution," the doctor replied smoothly.

Now that the fight was over, ponies were coming back onto the street. Lacunae was seeing to Glory, her horn glowing as she healed the pegasus's injuries. I, if I was right about what the glowing messages in my vision correctly, needed something entirely different to fix my damage. I looked around, gave the melted barricade a second look, and then eyed a spur of metal. I bit down, trying to close my mouth enough to activate the softening spell. Finally, the rusty metal peeled off, and I chewed it with a disapproving face. Needed salt.

"I suppose that after three Prices, I shouldn't be surprised by what you can eat," said a familiar voice. Caprice didn't look well. Some of her softness had worn thin, and her quiet humor was now silent worry. The peach mare looked at me in concern with a shaky smile. "I'm glad Glory was able to fix you up. She said... she said you were pretty bad."

"I was," I said as I looked around at Flank while the rain fell upon us. Thick black smoke billowed from the first and second floors of Rooms. "You got hit pretty hard too."

"No thanks to you," snapped an orange unicorn mare as four of her fellows glared at me.

"Citrine..." Caprice said in a tired tone. "If Blackjack hadn't made us step up our defenses, none of us would have made it into 69 or gotten into Mixers. We would have been completely at their mercy."

"And considering the people who hit you put everypony in Brimstone's Fall through their own rock crusher, I doubt that would have been very pretty," P-21 added as he stepped up beside me.

"And if you'd just given Sanguine what he wanted weeks ago, then hundreds of ponies would still be alive," Citrine retorted with a sweep of her hoof. "I heard the DJ talking about you. Your noble sacrifices for other ponies. Well, how many ponies

have died because you've hung on to whatever he wants? Hundreds? Or are you up to thousands now?"

"He's a monster," Glory objected.

"And what is she?" Citrine demanded as she pointed a hoof at me. "Since she showed up around the Hoof, everything's gone from bad to worse! We didn't have griffin mercs, monsterponies, and bounty hunters attacking us every other week till she turned up. If she hasn't killed folks on her own, then she's gotten everything stirred up!"

"Citrine, that's enough," Caprice said, now with an edge in her voice. "Blackjack didn't ask for any of this to happen!"

"No, but she's sure willing to shed rivers of blood to keep it going!" the orange mare said. And worse, more of the ponies listening in looked angry. "What is so damned special that he wants that you can't give it up?" I hung my head, her words echoing in my ears. Was all of this really my fault? If I'd just handed it over at the beginning, could I have prevented all this? "Why don't you just give it up?"

"Do you know what she's been through trying to help everypony in the Hoof?" Glory demanded. "Can you even imagine?"

"Oh shut up, Turkey. Go back to your clouds. You can't imagine what she's done to life here in the Hoof!" Citrine countered. "Dozens of Halfhearts dead in a war she started. The Fillies are gone! Because of her. The Rangers blown to pieces! So I want to know what the hell she has that's worth more than all those lives!"

"It's the key to Equestria!" I shouted over the din, and even Citrine went silent. "It's the key to firing every megaspell still charged. It unlocks every dirty secret weapon of two centuries ago. It'd let Sanguine make an army of monsterponies... and that's just Sanguine." My voice fell as I sat down hard. "For all I know, it's the key to getting into the Core. Or something even worse," I said as I closed my eyes.

"Blackjack," P-21 said as he put a hoof on my shoulder.

"No, P-21. She's got a point," I said, and I looked at Citrine out of the corner of my eye. "Holding onto this has cost me every pony in my stable, save two. It's forced me to kill dozens due to a stupid bounty. It's thrown one of the deadliest ponies I've ever known against me." Then I looked at her and snapped, "You think I haven't thought of just giving it up? Handing it over? Maybe I would have, if you'd told me a month ago I'd lose both eyes and all four legs over it! Or lose almost everypony I knew! But I didn't. And once I found out what it could do..." I shook my head and rose to

my hooves, stepping towards the orange mare and staring into her yellow eyes. “Do you want Sanguine to have that kind of power? Or Red Eye? Or somepony even worse than both of them? Because that’s what’s at stake.”

I’ll give Citrine credit, she kept her eyes locked to mine for half a minute before she said slowly, “That might be true. All I know is that I lost a mother when Deus came for you, a brother when the Halfhearts fought the Rangers, and a little sister when...” She stopped and looked at the burning Rooms building before sniffing. “And, sorry... any one of them was worth a thousand keys to Equestria.” With that, she turned and walked to join the mares watching Rooms burn.

Caprice trotted up beside me. “You should probably go.” I looked at her and saw the apology in her eyes.

“Yeah. Did they go north?” I asked as all of us trotted out the melted gate. I knew the answer, and I pretended I could feel my heart rise in my chest. I found a tin can in the gutter and bit down, trying to get my teeth to soften it so I could chew. Caprice made a face. Clearly, the sight of the fingers on the end of my limb and me eating tin were turning my visit a little surreal.

“Three or four hours ago,” Caprice said. “We’d killed off about twenty or thirty of their foot soldiers before the monsters got into the fray. They had a pony who breathed fire and another who exploded! After that, we were falling back. But by then the griffins in power armor were getting pretty impatient. They looked ready to waste Sanguine themselves. Nasty bastards.”

“Red Eye’s got a couple in his employ,” I said as we trotted back outside. I felt Citrine’s eyes on my back, but when I glanced back the last I saw was her yellow eyes turned towards the burning building. “Psychoshy said Sanguine was in deep shit...”

Caprice nodded. “He is. If you do nothing, I think they’ll waste him.”

“I can’t wait. They’re going to Chapel,” I said softly. Fighting griffins and monster-ponies? I needed... something. A plan... some sort... Then I looked at her a long moment. “Will you help me?”

Caprice returned my gaze. “If you promise me you’ll kill the son of a mule...”

“I do. You’re not the first I’ve made that promise to,” I answered. I told her what I’d need, and she nodded. It was going to cost us a serious chunk of caps, and that was with our discount. When she finished taking down my order, I nodded my head towards the small encampment. “What’s their story? Is that where Sanguine’s guys

made camp?"

"No. They're followers of the Prophet," Caprice replied with clear distaste. "Bunch of wackos thinking they're going to find some sort of paradise in the Core."

"Do they? I think I'll go have a chat with them," I said, then looked at the peach pony as she turned away. "Caprice?" She looked back in concern. "I'm sorry." I only hoped I imagined P-21 grinding his teeth like that. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you back when we were trying to make Flank more secure."

"I really thought you were just pretending not to know who I was," she said with a little half smile.

"Yeah, well... this whole 'thinking' thing is really challenging for me," I said with a rueful smile. She looked sad and regretful as she smiled back.

"I'll talk to Scalpel and get what you need. Shouldn't even be half an hour," Caprice said in a polite tone of deference, then stopped. "Blackjack..." She looked evasive for a moment. "About Deus..."

"It's old news, Caprice. He's dead. Usury is scraping up brahmin turds. There's nothing else to say," I said with a smile.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her eyes slid away. "Yeah... sure... sorry..." She gave a little smile. "I'll get your stuff."

"Oh! And if you've got any grease lying around, we could use it!" Scotch piped up, pointing at the wagon. "Damn thing wobbles and whines worse than Blackjack after a crate of Wild Pegasus."

"I do not wobble and whine when drunk. I have it on good authority that I am undefeatable while drunk out of my gourd," I said with a prim nod. Of course, once it all metabolized...

"Don't ask about the bathtub," P-21 said with a shudder.

"And I'll be saying hi to your new neighbors," I said with a glance over at the collection of tents.

"Please don't tell me you're going to make enemies with a new bunch of ponies," Glory said with a sigh.

"I'm just going to talk!" I snorted. "I don't make enemies with every group of ponies I cross in the Hoof."

“Fallen Arch?” Rampage said with a small roll of her eyes, “The Flashers. Burners. Technically the Reapers, too, though that’s our typical audition.”

“You certainly didn’t make a good impression with Enclave Intelligence when you ran across them,” Glory pointed out.

“And you nearly speared Triage through the throat after she saved you at the Collegiate,” P-21 added.

“I think it would be better if I did not add how the Goddess feels about you,” Lacunae murmured.

I felt something winding up in my brain, like a wire drawn too taut that was about to snap. I was trying to do better! Really! It wasn’t my fault I made enemies as easily as sneezing. “Okay! Fine! I am going to walk over there, say hi, and probably meet another group of ponies wanting to kill me!” I said with an indignant snort, lowering my head as I grumbled to myself. “Okay?”

“Good enough for me,” Rampage said as she trotted up next to me and grinned back at my friends look. “What? I don’t mind ponies shooting at her. Lot less boring than all that negotiating stuff.”

The two of us trotted towards the tents, and Rampage asked quietly, “How’s Scotch holding up?”

“I... don’t know?” I asked as I looked over at her. “She seemed fine in Tenpony.”

“She was a mess in Tenpony. When you died... I had to go out and pick a fight with some alicorns and what they call raiders there just to get away from her,” Rampage said with a worried look. “She’s trying to put on a brave face now that you’re back, but I think she still blames herself. She’s also scared to death of male ponies now.”

“Huh?” I frowned. “They didn’t touch her...” The thought froze me down to my hooves. “Did they?” Had I missed one and didn’t hear it?

Rampage snorted. “Blackjack, she didn’t have to be raped. They worked you over for an hour, and she heard it all. I think the only buck she can be around at the moment is P-21.” Rampage looked back at where Scotch, Glory, and Lacunae were fixing the wagon. “Pretty sure she wets the bed.”

I sighed, ears drooping. “Great. Another thing I need to address.”

“Or you could have P-21 talk to her about it. I would talk to her myself. I’ve gone through a ploughing more than a few times. But if she starts bawling...” The striped pony gave a sickly smile before shrugging.

"You've been raped?" I blinked and received another 'you're being stupid again, Blackjack' look. Was this something from Twist or... something else? I couldn't imagine anypony raping Rampage.

"I told you I had," she said, and I wanted to kick myself for forgetting. How do you forget that? She snorted and shook her head at my lapse. "Lots of ponies in the Wasteland have been raped. Mostly mares, but bucks too. Flashers were notorious for it." She sighed and looked in the direction of the air station. "When I was pried out of the wreckage at Miramare, I was a blank slate. I was also a hole. The ghouls who kept me pimped my ass out to every buck with a twitchy ball sack. Celestia only knows how I didn't get knocked up. Maybe I did and I just killed the foal... like Hope," she said in that horrible, fragile voice.

"One day, those two ghouls got bored and sold me to the folks that got Paradise started. After a while, though, I figured out that explosive collars aren't much of a deterrent when you can regrow your head. I busted out, and I was on my own again. Bonesaw and Scalpel were kind enough to win me over, the first two who didn't try to inseminate me for caps."

"Then how are you so normal? I mean..." I stammered as she looked at me like I was a idiot again... which, to be fair...

"Normal? What makes you think I'm normal, Blackjack? I have nightmares. The old flashbacks. Every time I came to 69, I paid a mare to let me sob into her chest for an hour or two and call her Mommy. Then I'd pay twice as much just to keep her quiet. Crybaby Reapers are a liability," she said with a grin, but I saw past it into her eyes. "Sometimes, I'll go into a place and I can just see the looks. The 'I can fuck you if I want' look. I wear jagged steel armor and am as strong as three ponies, and I still get that look. So what I really want to know is, how are you so normal?"

"Huh?"

"I heard from P-21 and Glory. You were a glazed donut by her account. I smelled the blood and spunk. Probably still can on the Seahorse. So why aren't you a cringing ball of terror around males?"

I looked at her flatly. "I think we should hurry up and get going."

But she jumped in front of me. "No, really. What's your secret? I mean, you probably had four different cocks in your ass and your mouth..."

"Look, we don't have time..." I muttered, going red.

"I mean, did you choke or swallow fast enough--"

"Rampage. I don't want to fucking talk about it. It happened. It's over. Fucking drop it."

"I mean, to get that ploughed and be perfectly fine... "

"Shut the fuck up, Rampage!"

"Or did you like it a litt—"

I smashed my hooves into her face. "Shut up!" And suddenly, I couldn't stop. I had to kick and kick and kick again. Her blood splashed over me as a dark rage suddenly flowed out of my brain like boiling acidic blood. I hated her. I hated her for picking open the wound. I hated her for being wounded in the first place. I thought that I could just ignore it. That I'd gotten lucky and it hadn't affected me. That somehow I'd owned that dreadful hour back on the Seahorse. I wanted to smash her to pieces. I wanted to hurt as badly as I'd been hurt.

My fingers found a brand new function as they locked on her throat and squeezed with every bit of force I could muster. She'd never ever hurt me again. Never. I'd tear her head off before I let her! I squeezed harder, feeling the cartilage give and listening to it crackle...

And then I looked down at her battered face and crushed neck and jerked my hooves back. Pink light flashed as her injuries healed before me. Any other pony... I imagined Glory or P-21... Scotch... I sat down, glad for the rain. So glad for it. She looked up at me with a sure smile as she healed. "Sure... you're just fine... aren't you?" she rasped with soft sarcasm.

I'd been raped. I wasn't okay with it. I was so damned angry I wanted to kill somepony. I was scared that it'd happen again. And I was ashamed. No matter how I tried to rationalize it... no matter how I tried to make it sound like it'd been preferable... the fact was that I'd been hurt. Hurt bad... maybe forever. I wanted to shake, but everything was a damn calm inside me, aching.

Rampage groaned and rolled onto her belly. "Ow... Therapy isn't supposed to hurt this much."

"Rampage... I..." I stammered in horror.

She sighed as she looked at me. "You didn't do anything that any mare or buck who's been put through what we have wouldn't do." Slowly, she rose to her hooves and shook herself. "You have a nasty tendency to repress stuff. So do I. So does P-21. But you need to know those landmines are there now, because otherwise somepony is going to come along and step on them, and it's going to be ugly."

"Right..." I murmured softly. Victim... I was used to thinking of other ponies as the victims; they were the ones hurt, and I was the one dealing with addressing it. Victims were weak and helpless, like Dusty Trails caught in the crusher. Ponies to be saved by ponies bigger and stronger and nicer, like me. Was all my supposed heroism just an excuse to feel superior?

I couldn't say for certain... but the thought had me shivering in my synthetic legs.

I looked at the blood speckling my hooves and imagined it coming from one certain pegasus. That night in Tenpony had been wonderful... no question... but sitting here now in the rain, I thought back. One wrong touch... one reckless moment... and I could have hurt Glory just as badly as I had Rampage. The thought nearly floored me, and I looked back at Glory way over by the wagon, barely visible through the rain at this distance. Thank Celestia none of them seemed to realize what I'd done. "That's why you were able to talk to P-21..."

"And you couldn't. And it's why I can talk to you like this and about this, and Glory can't," she said quietly as we continued towards the tents.

"No offense... but couldn't you have waited till after we pulped Sanguine? I've got to say your timing stinks."

"Why'd you let Citrine spout off at you like that?" she asked with a nod over her shoulder back at Flank.

"She was right," I muttered.

"She was hurt, and you knew it. And you know hurt, Blackjack. But there's a difference between hurt and right. Her pain didn't make her right. If pain were all it took to be right, then every half baked raider in the Wasteland would be right in doing whatever they wanted. We're all victims, Blackjack. The only difference is what we do with our hurt." She nudged my rump with her own. "That'll be fifty caps for one three minute Wasteland therapy session."

I couldn't help myself, laughing softly. "So there is a therapist in the Wasteland."

"You bet. Helping you makes it easier for me to repress and ignore all my own fucked-up issues," she laughed.

I shook my head as we reached the little encampment and several things struck me at once. There were only about twenty or so ponies sitting around the fires. At once, I took in their grubby and gaunt appearances; it didn't match their clothes. Those looked practically new! And their weapons still had the sheen of manufacturer's

oil. Boxes of pre-war food were stacked in heaps. But for the overabundance, the ponies just sat in circles around their fires, humming one... continuous... tone...

A tone I'd heard before...

I sat down with a sensation of horror creeping over me. I glanced beside me at Rampage and imagined her covered in foal cadavers. P-21 as a bloody tyrant, his own daughter a 'breeder'. And Glory... Glory made a thing. I wanted my heart to pound. I wanted to gasp for air. I wanted to scream! Rampage was saying something as I fell on my face, hugging it, trying to black the thoughts out. Trying to stop that noise! I'd seen exactly this. Heard exactly that. It had been a dream, hadn't it? Or had it been some kind of vision? Had it even been my dream, given how mutated my body was by that time?

Then I heard the faintest voice. A tiny chime, quiet and pure, filling my ears. Slowly, I lifted my face and looked around for the source, but I could see none. Rampage knelt next to me, shaking me. "Hey! Hey, are you okay? Should I get Glory? Should I start with the mayhem?" I struggled to clear my mind and think as those two tones fought inside it. Gradually, thankfully, both faded and I pulled my wits together. I looked at Rampage and slowly shook my head. A part of me really wanted to open fire; there was something fundamentally wrong in that note. But I couldn't kill ponies just sitting there...

"No... no..." I said. "I'm... fine. It's all... just a little creepy."

From the look on Rampage's face, she didn't believe for a moment that I was telling even half the story; this was maybe the most worried I'd ever seen her.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Let's just... go talk to them. I need answers."

"Well, okay. Just let me know when to start the rampaging!" she said with a familiar wide grin and only a fading hint that her worry had far from gone away. I steeled myself, faced the encampment again, and stepped forward.

A brown earth pony approached, all welcoming smiles and apparently paying no attention to my episode. Something ugly growled in the back of my mind. He was too clean. Too well fed. "Welcome. I am Auger. Have you come to join the faithful?" I looked at the corkscrew cutie mark drilling through a heart; I supposed that this was a step up from his old life.

"Faithful?" I asked, looking at the humming ponies. "What, them?"

His smile faded a touch. "The faithful have come to this city of wonders to be saved from the horrors of the Wasteland. Soon, the doors shall open, and we will return to a world of plenty and paradise." He immediately reached over and scooped up a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. "Please accept this blessing of plenty from the Hoof."

I took the box in a hand and looked at it skeptically. On the one hoof, I was really leery of accepting anything from these ponies. On the other, the box looked unopened, I could eat rocks and rusty old cans...and I was hungry and they were Sugar Apple Bombs. Well...the hum probably wasn't contagious through food. I shook the cereal into my mouth and chewed. My eyes popped wide; even for Sugar Apple Bombs, these were good! "Where did you find this?"

"The city guided me to an old recharging station in which we found that treasure."

"Treasure? You have no idea," I said around a mouthful. This was the best of the best cereal ever, and it was hitting my snacky perfectly! I licked the powder off my lips and then frowned. I looked at the box. Something was off. "You said this was in a recharging station?"

"Indeed. The city will always provide for the faithful," Auger proclaimed. "Food for the hungry. Ammunition, weapons, and barding for our protection. Even potions unravaged by Enervation."

"This box is new," I said softly. Rampage frowned and leaned towards it. "No fading. No dust. No warping. And the cereal inside tastes new too."

"A miracle of the city, a bounty for the faithful."

"You know, in my old stable, we had machines that could make food like this. Oh, sure, not as good or as varied, but yeah. Food from machines." I shook the box between my hooves. "What I want to know is where the machines are."

Clearly not the way he wanted my line of questioning to go. "The glories of the Hoof are not for us to question or to ponder," he said in faintly hurt tones. "If you are not prepared to join us, then I suggest you take our gift and leave. But I would suggest you not begrudge those that have so very little and have suffered so much."

"I don't. But I do question where such plenty comes from and who is pulling the levers and why," I said as I stood. "Thanks for the cereal." I picked up the box in my mouth. He hadn't sounded like he'd been hiding something. A true believer, I guessed.

We started back, but then Auger trotted up after us. "One last moment. You two seem formidable. There is a mare that has something we desire greatly. She is the

murderess called Security. She wears a black device on her right hoof. If you find this mare... if you bring us what she wears, we will provide you with riches beyond compare."

I stared at him for the longest time. I swore I heard my right foreleg rattle like a hundred thousand bottlecaps. "Good to know. What do you want it for?"

"It is the key to our entry to the Hoof," he said with a broad smile. "We have seen it in a dream." You're not the only one... "When we have it, the doors shall open wide, and we will be permitted to enter the Core." He bowed his head to us. "Hoofington Rises."

As he left, I gave one look at Rampage. All we needed was for this guy to talk to Citrine, and I was going to have a whole lot more trouble. But what could I do? It wasn't like I could just kill... him... actually, I could. In fact, I was with the one mare who'd probably be just fine with it. Just slip into S.A.T.S. and use my hooves and...

I shook my head hard. Killing a buck just to make my life easier? That wasn't me. Yet as I glanced back, that one ugly voice in my head told me I should do it anyway, just to be safe. Just in case. One less pony after my head, one step farther from that dream... I glanced at Rampage and saw the sympathy in her pink eyes, the acknowledgement of what was in my head. "Let's go," I said with a sigh, doubting I would ever get to be so open ever again.

Back at the wagon... we needed a name for it. Road Bandit? Huh... something. Anyway, once we were back, we saw that Caprice had brought my order. I shoudered into the harness once more, tore two holes in the cardboard box and slipped my ears through, burying my muzzle in the sugary goodness. Well... at least I'd got a box of my favorite cereal out of it.

New bonus to having a piece of machinery for a stomach: no cramps after eating. Actually, I wasn't exactly sure what I was feeling, but I don't think that 'cramp' quite described it. It was more like a strange whirring sensation where my stomach used to be. Whatever it was, though, it didn't seem to be having any effect on my pace. I pulled us as fast and steady as I could, sucking down on a sapphire and some water every now and then to keep my energy supplies topped off.

Yeah. I had energy supplies now instead of rumbling stomach pains!

That was good, because, every minute that passed by, I was moving a little faster

and a little faster. I thought of Chapel and the fillies being force marched across the bridge and the colts tossed into the churning river. The rain was getting heavier and thunder began to growl overhead. Little flickers of lightning danced between the dark clouds. I hoped Thunderhead was just feeling bored or something. I did not need to spend a few hours unconscious again!

We passed Blueblood Manor and finally spotted the village. No smoke. No fires. No bodies littering the street, and there were lights in the post office and little church. For the briefest of moments, I could have pretended that everything was okay. Sanguine was dead in a ditch somewhere. We could have dinner in Star House. Everything was going to be fine and peaceful.

That illusion was destroyed in a yellow flash that sent my head reeling and me crashing into the asphalt. Glory jerked the brake, but I was still ground along the broken road and left a few square inches of my face on the tarmac.

Psychoshy twisted so hard I thought she'd snap in two and came at me once more, but Glory's stream of emerald beams made her veer off and instead fly by the wagon. There was a flash and crack as her powerhooves discharged and smashed Glory clear off the seat. I rose to my hooves and at once slipped into S.A.T.S., then gaped at the low hit probability. Was she really moving that damned fast? Three shotgun blasts fired in slow motion and not one hit her.

Then time sped back up, and she curled in and dove again. "Unhook me!" I shouted, firing wildly to force her off to the side. I felt Scotch scrabble at the pins holding me to the cart. P-21 had Persuasion out, but he'd need her to land before he'd have a chance of blowing her wings off.

That left Lacunae. The purple alicorn was large, glorious, and magical. She was also, unfortunately, slow; her magic arrows streaked in a deadly barrage that Psychoshy left in the dust. Lacunae's shield flared with each connection of those power hooves, all four of them striking precisely to maximize force; without the cage to constrain her, Psychoshy could move ridiculously fast, and the alicorn was getting more than a little worn out by the powerful and precise flyby attacks.

Then I was free and stepped ahead. "Lacunae! Try and grab her!"

"We are trying, but she is... infuriatingly... swift!" the alicorn said into my mind.

"Not happening!" Psychoshy shouted as she reversed with a powerful snap of her wings and corkscrewed straight at Lacunae. With an explosive crack, the yellow pegasus blasted right through her shield and smashed both forehooves against her

skull. Lacunae dropped from the sky into a heap on the dead, wet grass.

Hoping she'd take a second to brag, I tried for a S.A.T.S.-assisted rifle shot, but she didn't slow after knocking Lacunae out and instead dove for me once again. I saw her wide, murderous grin, her yellow eyes wide in glee as her power hooves crackled. Worse, I realized why her strokes were striking with such precision: on her left foreleg was a PipBuck of her very own.

Then a red-striped wall of steel hopped in front of me, and Psychoshy slammed all four hooves into Rampage's side. I heard ribs snapping like dry branches, but, while Rampage grunted and bent a little, she didn't go down. "My turn," she hissed through her pain, and then she reared up and slammed her hoofclaws into Psychoshy's face. Six bloody furrows opened in the pegasus's hide as she snapped her wings hard to get away.

Rampage wasn't going to give her the chance, though; she leapt and landed on top of Psychoshy like a falling house. The yellow pegasus screamed as those claws dug into her shoulders and haunches. "Well... too bad I don't have a wood chipper. But..." She grinned ear to ear. "Make a wish."

"Rampage!" I shouted, stopping her from tearing the yellow pony in two. Something was wrong with this. I slowly approached while Glory and Scotch worked to revive Lacunae. Psychoshy's eyes were wide... and terrified. Slowly, I walked in front of her and she gave a sniff. "Hey Psychoshy."

"Flutters—" she began, then flinched away when she saw my face. "You have to help him. You have... you have to give him the program. Please!"

"He's tried force, bribery, and coercion, and now he sends you to beg for him?" I asked as I took a seat.

"He didn't send me!" She tried to heave Rampage off her, but my friend wasn't budging. "They're going to kill him!"

"Funny. I'm going to kill him," I said, smiling slowly. "Sounds like he's fucked."

She sniffed as she looked up at me. "You have to save him. You have to! Somepony has to!" she said as she struggled again. "Give me the program!" she screamed in mad desperation, her hooves clawing at me.

"Girl, you have completely smashed your apple," I said with just a touch of amusement. "You really think... after everything he's done, not to mention you... I'm just going to save him?" She looked up at me and nodded. And then, like that, the amusement was torn away, and I shouted at her, "He threw a whole settlement of

miners into a rock crusher and left the last one alive to tell me where he was going next! He marched a town into a radioactive crater and watched them die! He sent Deus into my stable! And I don't even want to imagine what he may have done that I haven't heard about yet!"

She finally went limp, sobbing as she hid her face in her hooves. "I know... but he's all I have. Nopony else is going to save him. So I have to," she sobbed brokenly as she lay there in the mud. I stared down, and P-21 emerged from the rain to sit beside me.

"You can't be seriously considering this, Blackjack," he said quietly. I couldn't answer him. It was insane, and we both knew it. "This is the pony responsible for making our lives a living hell. That fucker exposed 99 to that damned virus! You promised Dusty Trails!" he shouted.

"I know!" I shouted back, making him balk. I knew that Sanguine was a monster. A complete fiend who deserved to die. I knew it. But I never imagined having a pony beg for the life of such a creature. And that introduced the insidious thought into my head. Could forgiving Sanguine actually be... better? I had a very similar yellow pegasus in my mind begging me to do just that.

"Please. He's all I have," she whimpered. "If he doesn't get that program, he'll kill everypony in Chapel. And then Vermilion will kill him. Or something worse in the Core will. Or you will!"

I sighed and ignored P-21's glare. "Who is he, Psychoshy? Why should I forgive a monster like him? Who is he to you?"

She trembled as she closed her eyes. "My momma was killed by raiders while I was still in the womb. He cut me out... used his machines to keep me alive. He... he raised me. Named me. Taught me how to read. Made sure I was better and stronger than anypony," she said, giving a little heave against Rampage, without result.

"And you two are... ah... intimate?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together awkwardly. All of us stared at her a moment, and she blurted, "That's what Mallet said!"

"What? No! That's disgusting!" Psychoshy said in disbelief.

Rampage blinked in surprise. "Seriously? You're not riding his jerky stick?" The yellow pegasus went bright red, looking away. "Oh... so you want to..."

"He's the only pony who's ever been nice to me..." she murmured as she closed her eyes. "But... he calls me his little filly..."

I sighed as I looked at Rampage. Why wasn't anything ever easy? "Well, Doctor Rampage?"

"Well... she... I think... is batshit crazy," Rampage said softly. Then she looked right at me. "You, however, have a nasty case of bleeding heart. Worst in the history of the Wasteland. You just can't kill a pony in cold blood, can you? You can kill just fine if somepony is shooting at you, but the moment... the second... you have to face the thought of deliberately killing somepony... then your guts get all squirmly."

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered. I thought of Brimstone's Fall. Of Flank. Of 99. So many ponies deserved revenge.

"If you can't do it, let us," P-21 said softly.

"Yeah! P-21 and I can make a game of it," Rampage said with a chuckle. Psychoshy sobbed foalishly beneath her.

I sighed. P-21 groaned and covered his face. "Not the frigging sigh. I know that sigh. That's the 'you don't want to kill somepony who deserves it' sigh."

I smiled a tiny bit, then looked down at Psychoshy. "I'm sorry Psychoshy. I can't make any promises to spare him. Not after what he's done. Especially after Brimstone's Fall and what he did to Dusty. I'm sorry."

Psychoshy sniffed and sobbed wretchedly, pressing her face into the mud. Rampage rolled her eyes. "I'm guessing you don't want me to accidentally sneeze and tear her in two?" I shook my head, and she groaned. "Softest damn heart in the Wasteland. You can push a button or pull a plug, but face to face, good and ugly..."

"I'm not an executioner," I repeated softly as I looked down at Psychoshy. "Wonder-glue her wings to a tree. She'll work herself free eventually." She glared up at me with a teary sniff. "Then she'll come after me... and next time, Rampage will get her wish. But I am sorry. I can't promise you that."

Rampage got off her roughly, bit one of her wings, and dragged her off to the trees beside the manor while Lacunae took off her power hooves. She screamed over and over again how she was going to kill me before Lacunae silenced her with a mouthful of her own yellow feathers. P-21 just looked at me, and I looked out at Chapel. "Don't look at me like that. I know I'm an idiot for sparing her."

"I don't think you're an idiot," he lied, but then our eyes met and he sighed himself, rolled his eyes, and said with a half smile, "Okay, you're an idiot. But... you're an admirable idiot. I just hope that nopony dies because you keep giving ponies second chances."

I smiled too and looked at Chapel. Hours ago I'd been so sure. Now I was fighting myself. I closed my eyes, remembering the promise I'd made to Dusty and all the other ponies who were owed some revenge. Thinking of all the ponies who were in danger. For the longest time, I'd wanted somepony... the Dealer... the little mares in my imagination... the stars themselves... to give me a nudge one way or the other. Nothing. This was my call...

I thought of the little figurine in my saddlebags, the mare smiling in the atrium of the Fluttershy clinic. The mare to be a mother so long ago. Sorry...

Sanguine would have to die.

We looked down at the town from the road. "So... let me guess. You just trot right down there, and then we make it up as we go?" Glory asked with a half smile.

"I love this plan," Rampage said, stomping her hooves in glee.

"No." I wasn't going to have another Fallen Arch. Not here. "First, P-21 and I are going to go down there and get a good look at the place. I do not want a bloodbath." I dug into my bags and took out the first of the tricks I'd purchased in Flank: a brand new StealthBuck. "Sit tight. We'll be back soon."

"Okay," I said as I extended a finger and started to draw in the dirt behind the wagon. The StealthBucks had lasted long enough to get me in and out. Since we'd gotten back, the blue buck had been wearing an undeniably smug look on his face. "Here is the situation. We've got an hour or so, tops, before things get ugly. They've noticed Sunshine here is missing and think we're coming soon."

I glanced over at Psychoshy. "Sanguine's trying to get Vermilion, the griffin in charge, to send the other fliers to check the road. Vermilion just wants to dust the whole town. I really want to hit them before they come for us."

"Do we have a plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"We actually do."

I drew a snaking path in the dirt, then drew squares at the approximate locations of the buildings. "Two snipers are hidden in the chapel's bell tower," I said, putting down two bottle caps in the appropriate spot. Nopony could hide from E.F.S. after... Well,

okay, they could, but these two hadn't. "They're ponies, so they're yours, Lacunae. Zap them. Use mind control. Drop a boat on them. Whatever."

The purple alicorn nodded once. "I will endeavor to neutralize them appropriately."

I put down a bottle cap outside the chapel, in Sekashi's house, and in the post office. "Here are the positions for the three monster ponies. The Dragonpony is here." I touched the first. "Then the exploding one." I touched the second. "And the manticore." I pointed at the third. "She's got three more of her pets in there."

I looked at Glory. "The manticores are all yours. Keep strafing them. If they hide or run, fine. If not... do what you have to do."

"Right," she said with a little nod. Scotch Tape had divested Psychoshy of Marmalade's PipBuck and placed it on Glory's hoof; she was still occasionally trying to reach out and touch the E.F.S. bars in her vision.

"P-21 is going to neutralize Fury and then join me at the chapel." He just nodded once, not looking happy.

"And the dragon monsterpony is mine, right?" Rampage said in glee and started dancing. "I get to fight a dragon. I get to fight a dragon!"

"Her name is Precious," Scotch said firmly, and I smiled.

Time to burst Rampage's bubble. "Nope," I said, and immediately she sat down hard and glowered at me. I put four bottle caps down in one of the small residences. "There're two griffins and two ponies in here." I sighed and smiled. "Do what you do best."

Inside the chapel, I put down four bottle caps. "Two more ponies are in here, along with Vermilion and Sanguine. P-21 and I will handle that. When you've taken care of your targets, meet us there. They have most of the children in this corner." I put a Sparkle-Cola there and looked at Lacunae. "I would be really happy if you could get in there and keep a shield as long as you can."

Scotch frowned and then chewed her lip nervously. "You... you didn't say what I'm doing. Please, I really want to help! Don't leave me behind again!"

I smiled at her. "Don't worry Scotch. Not this time," I assured her, then took out a little tin of mints. "You get the most important job of all."

The streets of Chapel stood silent and empty, looking abandoned to anypony who

didn't notice the occasional pairs of eyes peeking out into the street through boarded-up windows. A pair of beam rifles poked out at the drizzly night from the belltower, panning back and forth. Outside the large white building sat a very dejected-looking filly. At first glance, she was simply a purple unicorn filly with a slightly odd-looking green mane. Then you saw her spade-tipped reptilian tail, her clawed limbs, and that her 'mane' was in fact a row of green spines.

Then there was a shimmer, and an olive filly appeared at the corner of the building. She gave a perfect warm smile and gestured for the dragonpony to come closer. The suspicious filly stepped towards the corner, and my heart was in my chest as I watched. I had the bit in my teeth... but then the pair disappeared around the corner with no sign of violence. Slowly I let out my breath. One cap down...

I looked up at the rifles, then up further at Lacunae flying over the belltower as silently as a purple ghost. There was a bright purple flash with a twin above the river, and the three bars vanished from my EFS. Two more caps down, but that flash wasn't inconspicuous...

I moved over to the door to the building the griffin mercs were behind and set an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle upright beside it. From out in the rain came the clatter of hooves on asphalt. I looked at the door to the house, waiting.... waiting... Then I knocked hard on it.

The door creaked open and a metal-covered head peaked out. "Huh?" He had just a second to do the right thing; instead, he stood there gaping at the glittering form charging him.

"Reapers!" she screamed as she slammed into him like an armored freight train. Me on Stampede had been ugly... Rampage on the stuff... well, at least she was happy.

At the racket, the manticore mare Brass stepped out of the post office just in time to receive a blinding burst of green gatling beam fire to her face as Glory stepped into view. The monsterpony ducked back, but the next manticore that tried to leave the post office exploded in crackling light and collapsed in a heap of emerald dust.

Fury raced out of her building and at once started to run towards Glory... but as she charged, there was a soft 'Pfft' from the gap between the houses. A metal dart appeared in her flank; she started to glow in shock, then dimmed, took a staggering step, and fell over on her side as the solution of Med-X and Moon Dust filled her veins. I turned back towards the door of the chapel. Two bucks in combat armor, one floating a sniper rifle and the other with two marksman carbines on his battle

saddle, were stepping out and taking aim at Glory.

I supposed that a mare appearing right in front of you was more than a little bit cheating. Appearing and using S.A.T.S. to blast your face with explosive rounds was a lot cheating. To the unicorn stallion's credit, though, it still wasn't enough to take him down. He staggered to the side, injecting himself immediately with Stampede and a healing potion as he fired the rifle at me point blank. One downside of being able to feel my cyberpony parts was that it really hurt when that round punched clean through a forelimb.

The other merc mare raced to my side and strafed me; I drank a healing potion, but the process was horribly slow. I just had to grit my teeth as I turned and fired both rifle and shotgun blasts at the earth pony mare. She kept pouring on fire, definitely not going down easily.

Then a little apple with a green band arched out of the darkness behind her and landed at her hooves. She leapt aside at once and was midair when the magic grenade went off in a green sphere of energy. The magic transformed her into so much green sludge splashing across the cracked pavement.

Unfortunately, I'd taken my eyes off the sniper unicorn, and he reminded me of his presence by putting a round into my chest. My E.F.S. lit up with flashing warnings and diagrams telling me how badly I was injured, and the burning pain was another clue that even I couldn't miss! I looked at him, seeing right down the barrel of the gun and knowing he'd put the next round through my brain.

Then there was a resounding clang, and fragments of wet, rusty metal flew past me as a dark hulk landed atop the sniper. It rocked twice, and I gaped at the rusty keel. Lacunae landed neatly atop the hulk and thought simply, "I found a boat."

One of the griffins leapt out the window of the house of Rampage. He whirled, wildly firing a pair of multi-disintegration-bolt guns that rained destructive magic in a cone of annihilation sweeping towards P-21, Lacunae, and myself. Like a rain of destructive death, the bolts, any one of which could turn us into matching pink slime, began to strike us; Lacunae's shield spell was immediately rocked by the onslaught.

Then the griffin opened his eyes wide as green magic crept over his body. He glanced back, his face twisting in one brief moment of agony, and then collapsed into glowing dust.

Unfortunately, turning her gun on the griffin meant that Glory had given an opening to Brass. Like a thunderbolt, she launched herself out the double doors of the

post office and into the sky. “Fuck this!” she screamed as she dove, scooped the unconscious Fury in her hooves... claws?... and started climbing, flying north as fast as her scorched wings could carry her.

“Hey, get back here!” Glory yelled after her.

“We’ll turn you into a Reaper yet,” Rampage muttered as she limped out. She had an entire foreleg missing. The pink light was creeping out her shoulder as the limb slowly regenerated before our eyes. Glory flushed, not entirely convinced that that was a good thing.

Then a voice croaked out from the chapel. “Well then... time to finish this little drama of ours.”

I winced, watching the red damage bar slowly creeping upward towards stable conditions. And this was going to take awhile... I looked around, spotted some tin cans, smashed them underhoof, and popped them into my mouth. The rusty metal had the consistency of paste and didn’t taste much better. Three more cans and some scrap metal later, though, and I was getting in the yellow territory.

“Blackjack, are you going to be able to take care of him?” P-21 asked in concern.

I looked at him and smirked. “If he takes a hostage, he is one dead ghoul.” There was just the issue of saving his hostage...

“Only Blackjack, please,” called Sanguine.

“You’re crazy if you think—“ Rampage began. Then there was a gunshot, and the Crusaders inside began to yell and shout as a filly cried out in pain.

I looked at Lacunae. “Get Glory and P-21 in the bell tower and teleport in once I have them distracted. Rampage, he doesn’t leave out this door. Got it?”

Everypony nodded. I took a deep breath; my injuries were mostly regenerated. Slowly, I walked into the chapel. The pews were all smashed and stacked in a pen or barricade that had most of the Crusaders inside. I was afraid they might have been moved or mixed up when the attack started, but they were mostly all together. Harpica, the ghoul pegasus, was softly humming to keep them all as calm as possible. Sekashi sat bleeding in the corner cradling Majina; somepony had worked her over good the last hour.

There were... however... three who were not penned up: Priest, Sonata and a bleeding Charity. The yellow filly clutched her stomach as Sonata tried to staunch the bleeding with her hooves.

"So glad to see you again," Sanguine said from behind Priest. The boiled-looking ghoul watched me over Priest's black back with a half lidded gaze and a smile. A glowing revolver appeared, freshly reloaded, from his saddlebags, and then he nodded over to the pen where a glowing grenade hovered over the collected children. "I really do apologize for all this. I really would have rather settled this some other way." Then he paused. "Is Fluttershy still alive?"

"We didn't shoot her in the gut, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Sanguine had the audacity to look relieved at that! "Yes. Good. Well, lose the weapons, and I will heal her."

"This is taking too much time," growled a dark form lurking in corner opposite the pen. A big, dark something... Vermilion was one of the most impressive griffins I'd ever seen... and, on top of that, I wasn't entirely sure what was armor and what was augmentation. His black armor was edged in stylish red that matched his dark red wings. The glowing eyes in his helmet narrowed slightly. "Just kill her. I've wasted enough time with this shit."

"Shut up, Vermilion!" Sanguine snapped, pink vapor trickling out his nostrils. "Security has taken out Deus and the Steel Rangers' battleship. She is ridiculously dangerous. But she also doesn't want to risk her filly friend here bleeding out."

"Don't count on that, asshole," Charity hissed despite her agony. "Blackjack owes me a ton of caps. She doesn't have to pay if I'm dead." Shut up, Charity. I'd much rather pay you back...

"Please. You don't have to involve the children. I'm hostage enough for you," Priest said calmly.

"Yeah. You're a martyr waiting to happen." Sanguine said, then looked at the little Sonata. "But there are advantages to having spares." The glowing gun whirled and pressed itself to the side of the little filly's head. There was a click as the hammer was drawn back.

"Okay!" I shouted. His eyes were narrow and desperate. Slowly, I began to remove the battlesaddle.

"I didn't want it to be this way. I wanted things simple. I wanted them simple!" he shouted as he stamped the gun on Sonata's head. The weapon was shaking as his focus wavered, and I could imagine it going off by accident. "Red Eye needs male alicorns to keep the Goddess in line. I can make male alicorns... or fuse a unicorn and pegasus together and make one convincing enough for her. I can make myself

useful to him, get him the materials he needs... but the one... single... thing I'm missing is the key to Chimera."

"So you found out where EC-1101 got stuck and found a painkiller-addicted Deus to send after it," I said as I carefully shed the weapons and tossed them back out behind me. "I lost the guns, now heal her."

"In just a second," he replied as he kept the gun pressed to Sonata's head. "EC-1101 was all I needed. Simple, really. But then... then... you had to go and fire a megaspell at Miramare! Do you have any clue how many alarms and sensors you set off all across the Hoof when you fired that thing? And sure enough, you woke up that thing in the Core, and now it's taking over one system after the next."

"Sanguine. You're rambling," Vermilion said in contempt as he looked at the ghoul. I had a suspicion that Sanguine was dead either way.

"And now this murder spree... all to get my attention," I scowled.

"You left me no other choice!" he snapped. "I tried force. I tried bribery. I tried letting Fluttershy fight you for it. I even offered to restore your body to normal. In the names of sweet Celestia and Luna, why the fuck didn't you just give it up?" he yelled in complete exasperation. "I have been forced to cartoonish levels of monsterdom simply to get what I need!"

Priest carefully lowered his horn and started to heal the wound to Charity's gut as Sanguine raved. The ghoul spotted the glow, however, and shoved his head back. "Next time you try that spell, you can see how well it works on a head wound."

I wanted answers, and to splatter his head across the wall... but Charity didn't have a lot of time left. I tossed my weapons all the way out the door, and then my saddlebags too. I hissed in frustration, "I disarmed! Now heal her!"

"Give me the program!" he snapped.

"Heal her first, and I will," I countered. The filly clenched both eyes and jaw in pain. Sanguine looked half mad as his eyes darted between Vermilion and myself.

"To hell with this," Vermilion muttered. A missile launcher popped out of the back of his power armor and fired straight at the pen. Then Lacunae, with impeccable timing, appeared in a glorious flash of purple light and raised a shield. The missile exploded against it. She turned her head to the floating grenade, and her own glow subsumed the light surrounding it. There was a thump, and Persuasion's projectile arched down from the narrow stairs to the belltower and exploded in Vermilion's

face. Green bolts raked the griffin as he dodged to the side and readied another missile.

At once, Priest's white glow surrounded the revolver against Sonata's head and sent the weapon flying as he turned and slammed Sanguine against the back wall. "You won't lay a hoof on another—"

But Sanguine simply drew a deep breath and blew a bright and colorful plume of pink vapor over Priest's face. On contact with the vapors, the black unicorn's flesh seemed to turn runny. He didn't cry out. He just jerked and spasmed and then collapsed. I stared in horror at Priest's boiled, melted face...

A pair of Vermilion's missiles blasted up, and only by jumping and falling to the floor were P-21 and Glory able to get clear as the explosions blew the upper corner of the building apart. The delicate stained glass windows shattered into clouds of shards, and the paintings of the Ministry Mares split apart as the entire front of the building peeled away into the street. Heavy timbers fell upon Glory, pinning her.

There was a flicker as Lacunae pushed the grenade through the shield, pulled the pin, and lobbed it at Vermilion. The armored griffin leapt out into the street. I charged at Sanguine as Priest fell to the side and the ghoul threw Sonata at me.

"Priest! Priest!" P-21 screamed as he scrambled across towards the fallen stallion. Glory was still trying to work her way free. Sanguine bit down on Charity's mane and hauled the bleeding filly out through the hole. I set the sobbing Sonata aside to curl up beside Priest.

I looked back at Glory. "Go! Get her!" she cried as she struggled to free herself.

Outside, Rampage was tearing into the armored griffin, who was tearing back and trying to shake off the mare. I spotted Sanguine making for the bridge, slowed by the injured filly. I raced after them, closing the gap. Finally, he turned, clutching the bleeding and battered Charity. "Give me the fucking program!" he shouted as he backed towards the edge.

"Don't give him shit," Charity countered, struggling weakly. "He doesn't deserve it."

"Shut up, Charity," I said, my eyes darting from him to her and back again. I stared at her and heard Citrine's voice: 'How many have died for this?'

I jumped into S.A.T.S. to think. No weapon. No healing potion. She was bleeding out... but Sanguine was here! Right here in front of me! I knew his pink breath trick. I could beat and smash him back and let the city defenses turn him into ash. I'd promised Dusty and Caprice! I owed so many ponies his head!

All it would cost me was Charity's life. I stared at her, at the blood streaking her yellow stomach. I wanted to talk to somepony... anypony. Talk me into this. Convince me that I could kill him and get her to safety!

"Your life isn't that easy, Blackjack," the dealer rasped softly as he trotted into that still scene. He looked at the filly and the ghoul with equal dispassion. "Looks like you have two choices. Kill him, let her die, keep the program. Give up the program, and she lives. Decisions, decisions..." I wanted to smack that smug smile he wore off his face. Don't mock me with the choice. Tell me the better thing to do.

He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back and smirked at me. "Well... look at it this way... you give up the program, you can always take it back. You know a way to bring her back if she dies?" he said with a smile. I mentally groaned, and he laughed at me. "Oh. And if you're trying to think of a third option, don't bother. You're not clever enough for that. So... is keeping EC-1101 worth the filly's life?"

I slipped out of S.A.T.S. as the Dealer vanished again. Shit...

Security saves ponies...

"Here!" I said as I lifted my leg and opened the panel hiding the PipBuck screen.

His eyes widened, and from his saddlebags emerged a ripper. The chain whirred, and I grit my teeth. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream. A few surprisingly careful passes of the weapon later, he tore out the Delta out, leaving me with an ugly new cavity in my leg and making my E.F.S. vanish, and stared at it. "Finally. I can finally save them... I can..."

"Heal! Her!" I yelled as I pointed at Charity, the lightning flashing overhead. His lips curled in amusement.

"Heal her? Why would I do that?" he said as he tucked the Delta into his bag. "Better get her to your alicorn friend quickly and not waste time with me."

"Fucker!" I shouted, ...but he was right about Charity; I grabbed her and put her across my shoulders, then turned and raced back through the rain towards Chapel. The hole in my left foreleg made some unpleasant noises and twinges of pain, but the limb held. As I ran into town, I saw a dark shape overhead; Vermilion was airborne, but he was winging his way away towards the southeast.

"You... you shouldn't... have given it up. Bad trade," Charity muttered weakly in my ear.

"Shut up and don't die. You hear me?" I shouted as I scrambled into the blasted

church. Lacunae was seeing to the injured, but winged over and immediately pressed her horn to Charity's belly when she saw us, using her magic to heal the injury. Glory knelt beside Priest, who breathed slow laborious breaths though a tube inserted into his throat through his neck. His entire head was a smooth pink bullet. His eyes, nose, and mouth had melted closed from the pink vapor.

"Did you kill him?" P-21 said in a shaky voice.

"No. I had to bring Charity back... before she bled out." I muttered softly.

"Of course you did," P-21 said with a sniff. "That's what you do. You save ponies."

I looked at Priest and his side moving slowly. "Can we do... anything?" I asked Glory.

The gray pegasus looked at me and shook her head slowly. "We... we can't even move him." she whispered in horror. Then I looked at where she was pointing and gasped. The melted flesh had somehow fused to the floor beneath him.

P-21 made a choking sound. "Well, I'm glad you didn't kill him, Blackjack. I'm glad. Because when I find him... when I find him he's going to wish that it was you he was facing! I am going to get creative when I find him! You hear me... I'm gonna... gonna..."

I touched him, knowing what it was like to be ready to explode. To want to lash out at the world. Rampage had said it; we're all victims in the Wasteland. All of us. He tensed under my touch, so rigid I thought he'd shatter. "Shhh... I understand..." I said sincerely, remembering Mom's head on a stick.

He gave one broken sob... then another... then another. And like that all his hard anger softened to tears as he curled against me, and I held him in my embrace. "Not again... not again..." he whispered softly between sobs.

"No... not again. This time, you have friends with you," I said quietly.

He nodded and pulled away. Glory trotted closer to him and gave a tiny smile. She wanted to help; she knew what it was like, too. And she touched P-21's shoulder. For the longest time he sat there, and then he slowly turned into her embrace as well. Priest coughed; even with the tube, he couldn't last much longer.

Slowly, I knelt down and spoke softly into the hole beneath the melted nub of his ear. "You saved her, Priest. You saved Sonata. They're going to be okay." I brushed his white mane gently, closing my eyes. "I... They said I died. Maybe I did... I can't remember for sure. But I think that Celestia and Luna are waiting for you. Just..."

just follow the music."

I couldn't tell for sure, but I hoped his boiled lips curled a little. His chest rose... fell... rose... fell... ...rose... fell... and then that was it. Priest was off on his own final pilgrimage. I hoped he'd find his way.

It was getting late. We'd dug the grave next to Thorn and Roses. Rampage had watched from afar, still as a statue as Lacunae lowered him into the ground. I didn't want to imagine how Glory had freed him from the floor of the broken building. We'd found a sheet to wrap him. Scotch had rejoined us, the bemused-looking dragon filly sitting beside her. I tried to think of something to say, but no matter how hard I tried, it kept coming back to one fact:

Sanguine had won.

He'd gotten EC-1101 from me after so many had suffered and died. He had my Pipbuck, and I now had an empty hoof. Every step was a little reminder it was gone. But right now, even with my fears, EC-1101 was nothing compared to the loss of Priest. It wasn't over, though; not at all. I'd almost taken off after him then and there, but the thought of coming across him with Brass and Fury and maybe Vermillion too didn't sit well with me; not even I was stupid enough to run into those odds unprepared. I'd track him down, though; he couldn't escape us. Scotch Tape had my PipBuck tag.

"Blackjack?" Glory murmured, and I turned and looked at her. "I... I found some music back at the mine when I was searching Dusty's room... I was thinking... could I play it? He... he was a nice pony."

I swallowed, then nodded once. "Sure. Go ahead." She nodded and fiddled with her PipBuck, and a moment later a guitar began to play slow and simple notes. For once, it seemed, even the Hoof gave a little reprieve as the cold rain slackened off. Then a buck began to sing in a soft, rusty voice...

*Some roads are straight and narrow, some paths are high and steep
Some ways are slow and heavy, Some tracks are dark and deep
But this trail is the one I follow, no matter where it leads
And I know I'll never wander as long as I heed*

*No matter where or how far it goes;
I'll walk it without fail*

*Because I know that no matter what
I will lay my burdens down at the end of the trail.
My load is mine to carry along, I packed it all myself
I chose what to leave behind on that old and dusty shelf
And though memories follow my tail, I'll pay them not a care
My troubles are all my own, my treasures I will share*

*No matter how sore my hooves, I know that I'll go on
So though I am weary I will continue along
Because no journey lasts forever, there's an end to this tale
And I will lay my sorrows down at the end of the trail.*

*Though rocks may trip and slow me
Though rain may lash my mane
Though love may call out to me
Though pain may cause me shame
Though mud may bog my passage
Though snow may chill me through
Though dust and wind may blind me
There's one thing I must do.*

*I look ahead and find myself at the journey's end
And finally I see again both family and friend
And to those that still walk along, please don't weep and wail
For I have laid my troubles down at the end of the trail.*

*Yes to those who still love me, please don't weep and wail
I'll be waiting for you when you're through at the end of the trail.*

There wasn't much else to say past that as the last of the music faded. Not much at all. And as we moved to fill the grave, Charity came up. The yellow pony kept her eyes down as she carried something on her back. "Um... Blackjack?"

"Hmmm?" I couldn't manage more than that right now. I looked at the green-outlined towers of the Core. 'Welcome home, Blackjack' they seemed to say.

"I just... I... um... I know you didn't want to give that thing up. And... I know... I know if you'd let me die, you probably would have gotten revenge and stuff." Charity closed her eyes as she pulled off a bundle the size of a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. "I found it in the manor and... I just... here." And she shoved it into my hooves, then turned and trotted over to where Sonata was being comforted by Allegro, Adagio, and Medley.

I slowly unwrapped the dirty cloth with my hooves. It was the wrong shape for a bottle of soda... or Wild Pegasus. Then a flash of purple and white met my eyes. The cloth fell away, and I looked at the startling figurine: a white unicorn mare with a stunning purple mane and three gems for a cutie mark. I stared at her in shock and then looked down at the little plaque at the base.

Be Unwavering

I stared at it and sighed softly, closing my eyes and holding it to my chest so that I could feel it better. "I'm trying, Rarity... I'm trying..."

Footnote: Maximum level reached

37. Winning and Losing

“Clock is ticking, Twilight! Clock! Is! TICKING!”

Sanguine grabbed the bleeding Charity by her mane and leapt out through the hole in the wall. I looked over at the struggling Glory and shouted over the din, “Lacunae! Get those off her!” Five words. Five little words. Then I was off, racing through the rainy night towards the bridge as fast as my cyberpony legs would carry me. I didn’t slow, even as he did ahead of me; he turned to face me, but I didn’t let him get one word out before I tackled him away from the prone filly. Smashing and kicking with my metallic limbs, I drove him back.

Pink vapor erupted from his mouth, but I knew that trick now. I held my breath and leaned my head away; it burned. Burned like nothing I’d ever felt before. But I couldn’t worry about that as I kept focusing on moving him back and away from his hostage. Glory landed and immediately put a healing potion to the filly’s lips.

“You fool! Give me the program!” he screamed in maddened fury.

“Only thing you get... is... mercy!” I shouted as I gave him one final applebuck that sent him flying across the word painted on the bridge. There was a red glow from the wall, then a blinding flash, and Sanguine was reduced to so much ash and washed into the river. “And you don’t even deserve that, you undead fuck.”

I limped back to where Glory was getting Charity to her hooves. “Took you long enough,” the filly said, still a bit weakly. “I should be chargin’ you a hero fine for taking so long.”

“I... I came as fast as I could!”

“Yeah, yeah... sorry, not buying it. Five hundred caps.”

“Oh, come on!” I whined. Glory smiled and we trotted back towards Chapel together.

Yeah... why hadn't I done that?

I lay on my back on Marigold’s bed, staring at the stars painted on her roof as I held the Rarity figurine to my chest. Right this second, Sanguine was doing whatever nefarious thing he’d been planning. Some horrible monster in the Hoof had woken

up, and it was apparently my fault. Priest was rotting. Scotch was way more traumatized than she showed. P-21 was in shock. Glory was trying to hold us all together like a great big dysfunctional surrogate family. Even Rampage was hurt badly by the loss of Priest.

What does it mean when the sanest one of us is the alicorn who's the depository for Celestia-knows-how-many-ponies' unhappy memories?

I knew I shouldn't do this. I knew that I should be talking with my friends... or working towards something... or... something... but not this. I couldn't help myself. I closed my eyes and sighed.

I'd failed.

That in itself wasn't anything new. In fact, I was quite the expert at screwups, fuck-ups, and various associated mistakes. But something about what had happened on that bridge bothered me in ways that failing to get out of hoofcuffs didn't. It was sticking with me, and I couldn't just shake it off. I lay there, knowing what I needed to do. It was just me having to get off this mattress and do it.

But I couldn't.

I needed to chase down Sanguine. I needed to be there for P-21 and Rampage. I needed to make sure Scotch was okay. I needed to take some of the weight off Glory's shoulders. I was drowning in all the things I needed to do. And all I did was shift on to my side and curl up. I wanted the Dealer to appear and say whatever I needed to hear to get moving again.

I had to get moving again. Because, as I lay there, I felt my mind sinking into memories. Scoodle torn in two... why hadn't I listened to her? Why hadn't I been more cautious? Going into the tunnels and ignoring the risk... why didn't we try and go around? Wait for Lacunae to fly or teleport us across? Convince Rivets... stop the Overmare...

Failure was my special talent, and I was doing it right now.

"Blackjack?" Glory said in her tiny voice. Brittle. I slowly lifted my head and saw her with a plate of blackened food. "I made you something... in case you were hungry." She trotted over slowly and put the charred Sugar Apple Bombs and Sparkle-Cola RAD cakes on the mattress beside me. I suspected that the four forks were part of the meal. I closed my eyes and lay my head back down.

"I'm sorry," Glory said softly behind me. "If I hadn't broken my rifle... you can't really snipe with a gatling weapon... and he had the gun to her head..." She finally went

silent. "If I'd jumped when P-21 did... gone left instead of right... I wouldn't have gotten pinned. It's my fault."

Don't let her do this. Don't let her hurt herself. Hug her. Hold her. Tell her it was your fault. Try to make her laugh. Do something other than lie here! Move your ass and do something. Anything! But I couldn't. Sanguine had won. I'd lost. I might have saved Charity, but somehow I'd lost what I'd been fighting for. Somehow, it'd torn all the guts from me and left me hollow.

"I'm sorry..." she repeated, then trotted from the room. I clenched my eyes shut. I knew I wouldn't sleep. I couldn't use my horn to get away into a memory orb. Every second, Sanguine was getting further and further away and I was just lying here! Move, you worthless piece of shit! People need you. People believe in you! Do it!

I moved. I carefully pushed the plate into the garbage bin beside the bed and then curled back up. I looked at the Rarity figurine. She seemed to understand wallowing in... whatever ponies swallowed in. She had wanted a different life; had things been different, would she have wed Vanity? Become a mother? Been known for her fashion rather than for being a Ministry Mare? But she had done what she had to do. She'd toughed it out. I closed my eyes again, pressing my face into my pillow.

What was I doing? Moping in my room. I wanted P-21 and Rampage to come in here and kick my ass. Get me off this bed. Get me moving again. Something. And then, as if reading my mind, I heard a soft knock, followed by, "Blackjack?" Rampage's voice. I didn't even take a look at her.

Things I should be doing right now: not lying here. Helping my friends. Hunting down that murderous son of a bitch. Something! Every second I lay here, he was getting further away... making new monsters... about to flee to Red Eye... something. Get me up, Rampage. Get me drunk. Something. Anything!

Instead, she stood there for the longest time, and then she closed the door again. I guess there were some things Rampage couldn't do after all. I curled up till my nose touched my hind knees. I felt like I had at Star Point, only not capable of blowing my brains out any longer. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to get off this bed and go do what I had to do.

The Hoofington rain was pouring on the roof again. I was warm and dry, thanks to this gift from Priest. And here I was, moping and letting his killer get away. I thought of Dusty dying in my hooves and how disgusted she would have been. What is wrong with me, I thought as I clenched my eyes shut. Get up! Move your legs, you fucking loser! You fucking reject! You couldn't save Scoodle! You couldn't save 99!

You can't save anypony lying in bed, you dumbass! Move! Move! Go! Do what you have to do! Do it!

Instead, I started to cry.

It'd been too much. Too much too fast... Not just my arrival back in the Hoof... but in Tenpony. And before that... on the boat... and then when I was trying to stop a war because I only had a few weeks to live. And the tunnel... P-21's suicide attempt... Star Point... For the last month, I'd been hit again and again, but no matter how horrible it was, I'd always felt like I was keeping on my hooves.

Of all the things I'd been through... this was what broke me? A bed?

Then the door opened a third time, and I felt his eyes on me. I knew they were hard and scornful. Hateful, even. I'd killed his first lover and now lay here crying when I should be going after the pony who'd killed his second. Do whatever you have to do, P-21. Anything. Yell at me. Hit me. Shoot me.

"Blackjack... we're going after Sanguine in the morning," he said in a voice infinitely softer than I deserved.

I just sniffled like a loser. "I'm sorry. I keep thinking about what I should have done."

I wanted him to hurt me. I knew the perfect line: 'Gee, Blackjack, I keep thinking about what you should have done too. Maybe... I dunno... not gotten the pony I loved killed? Again. That might have been a good idea.' Perfect zinger right now.

"We all are," was what he actually said. He sat on the edge of the bed. Maybe he'd shove me off and beat me while he was at it. I hated myself so much that I'd beat myself if I could figure out how to move. Instead, he simply rested his hoof on my shoulder. "You don't have to come with us."

I froze, my eyes opening to stare at the wall. What?

"Scotch has your Delta's PipBuck tag. Lacunae's going over to the manor to soak up enough radiation to teleport us to Zenith Bridge to try and cut him off, and as soon as we get there, she's going to find Stronghoof while Rampage rounds up whatever Reapers she can. We'll get it back." He patted my shoulder. "Rest. We'll be back in no time."

I shook under his hoof; I didn't think I could tighten up any further. "I'm sorry, P-21." Come on, P-21. 'I'm sorry too. Sorry you're a failure. Sorry I didn't realize how weak you are. Sorry I never appreciated what a fuckup you are. Sorry you keep killing ponies I care about.' Come on, P-21! Say it.

"Don't worry about it," he said as he patted my shoulder again. "Rest up. We can take care of one ghoul."

Rest? Hadn't that been what Tenpony had been for? Or was that just an opportunity for me to make a jackass of myself? Talk to him! Speak, Blackjack! Tell him to drag you along. Tell him to beat you with a stick. Get out of that bed!

Instead, I closed my eyes. "Sure." Damn it, P-21. You promised...

He left, closing the door behind him. Maybe he was right. Maybe without me charging in all the time, they'd be better off. Zodiac had given her organs to the wrong pony. My mental paralysis fed my hate and my hate fed my paralysis. I had to move. I had to act... but I'd just get them killed. Hurt.

Because I was a fuckup.

A failure.

I had no idea how long I lay there. I had no clock; my eyes were empty, familiar E.F.S. and annoying alert boxes alike gone. Scotch had tried to wire Marmalade's PipBuck into my leg, but it'd produced some sort of feedback that felt like a drill was going through my skull. Glory could make better use of it anyway. But, eventually, all my hating and loathing was boiling down to one simple, fundamental truth:

I had to go pee.

And that caused me to lift my head and slowly step off the bed and drove me... one step after the next... downstairs. The living room was empty save for Scotch and the strange dragon filly Precious curled up on the couch together. The dragon hybrid opened her purple slit-pupiled eyes and looked at me with cool detachment. I looked back a moment, and then she shrugged and lowered her head again.

I stepped out into the drizzly, wet night and trotted away to do my business. The cold air was sharp on my skin, and I had to admit that I found the chill refreshing. It didn't do much to get my mind off my problem, but as I looked up at the clouds over the city, their bottoms lit in that sickly green glow, I felt some of the weight on my mind shift. I didn't feel any better, but at least for the moment I'd beaten myself up so much that I'd worn myself out.

Stepping back inside a moment later, I looked at the strange unicorn filly. She looked back at me. "Can't sleep either?" I whispered, glancing at Scotch. The hybrid gave a little shrug. "Don't talk much?" She resumed staring at me. I couldn't help myself

as I gave a little half smile and said, "Got some zebra in you?" That gave me a sullen half-lidded look. A little tongue of green flame was snorted in my direction. "Right. Good talk." She lowered her head back down next to Scotch's.

I trotted back up to the room. There was the mattress. It seemed to be pulling me towards it. Lie down, give up, give in... and I wanted to. I'd failed Dusty, Priest, and myself by letting Sanguine get away. Why hadn't I tried to drag P-21 along? Why hadn't I simply gone back for my bags? Said something to get him to take the gun off Sonata? The questions kept piling up and piling up; they made me want to scream. I looked at the mirror in the corner. At myself.

I felt such an absolute loathing just then. Not of myself, oddly enough, but of my cutie mark. An ace and a queen. What did that mean? That I was three cards short of a winning hand? That I was better off with card tricks? Was that my special talent? I should have a cutie mark of a dead pony... no... a dead filly torn in two. That would sum me up perfectly. ...Actually, no, this worked: even my cutie mark was a complete failure. I didn't deserve it. It was all wrong for me and I hated it.

There was a soft thump in the corner, making me jump a little. I looked at Octavia's contrabass for the longest time; I supposed that, when I'd shut the door, it'd shifted and thumped against the wall. I walked towards it with hesitant steps and gently plucked the strings. I could almost imagine my heart, or whatever lump of machinery I now possessed in place of a heart, twanging in response. Another string. And another. I wasn't really playing anything as I looked at the gleaming wires. Slowly, I stood it upright and reached over with my hoof to pick up the black-haired bow, still holding it as I had when I was all pony. I rested my cheek upon the knob of wood at the top for one moment, then started to play.

I didn't have a particular song in mind, just letting the deep notes rise and fall however seemed natural at the time. It was sad music, but that seemed appropriate. I imagined that Octavia had always been a serious pony. Fussy. Like Velvet Remedy and P-21 combined. I imagined her practicing just like this; had she loved it? Hated it? No... I smiled a little to myself. She might have hated making music into a career, but she'd never hated the music itself.

Closing my eyes, I could imagine myself on a stage in front of thousands. Sometimes alone, where every note was criticized and analyzed. Sometimes with others, where the whole became so much more vital than the individual. I thought that Octavia would have preferred playing alongside others; I remembered how rich and how beautiful the instrument had sounded with Lacunae, Medley, and... Priest.

For a moment, I stopped and just held the contrabass as if it were all that kept me upright. Right now, it probably was. The smooth wood was warm against my cheek. I hurt so damn much. I'd done worse than failed... I'd lost. But the cost of winning would have been two lives, not one. Couldn't I take solace in that? Shouldn't I? I felt an overwhelming urge then and there to put the instrument away forever. Give it to the Crusaders, who could appreciate it. Not me. Not now. Not ever...

My hoof must have slipped, because the contrabass gave another sour thrum as my hoof brushed it. I sniffed and, stilling a little, I straightened and lifted the bow once more. Again I played, and I imagined Octavia playing later in her life, after her peace concert ruined her career. I imagined her playing to smaller and smaller audiences. Dingier and plainer theatres. Then, one day, she was alone in her tiny apartment above Mixers.

Had she looked at herself then, seen her own cutie mark and felt the same sense of failure? So much work, time, and suffering, now all for nothing? I suspected she had. I suspected that she'd looked at her musical cutie mark and felt the same disgust I did. Had she raged? Had she wept? Or did she simply, silently, quit inside? Like me?

I wondered if that was when Rarity had found her. Lost and alone and at her worst, Octavia had probably been thankful for any help that could be extended to her. I imagined her leaving with Rarity and, when she returned, struggling to make her music work. Hoofing it back and forth from Flank to the manor in the rain, taking the bus wagon whenever she could. Not giving up. Because as long as she was playing, there was hope. She was still Octavia.

In those final minutes in her apartment in Flank, with radiation poisoning her, what had she played? I tried to imagine it, and my hoof moved accordingly. Regret came off the strings. Frustration marred the notes. But finally... finally... peace. Even as her body sickened and failed... peace. And then she'd neatly put her instrument away, sealed it up, laid down, and died. The last note seemed to echo forever in my heart long after my ears stopped hearing it.

"It's not time to give up," I whispered, not sure where the words were coming from as I rested my cheek on the strings. "You've come so far, and you have so much farther to go." I stared at my reflection, at my cutie mark. "Priest wouldn't want you like this. He knew you shouldn't be here, alone, hating yourself. You know what you need to do... so... get off your rump and do it," I said to my own reflection as I held the contrabass in my hooves.

The question was... how? I set the instrument in the corner and sighed. I wanted to just grab a bag of gems, climb up on the bed again, and munch on them till I didn't feel anything anymore. I was a little snacky... then, as I started to suckle on a cinammonny ruby, I wondered if Spike liked rubies as well.

I spat out the gooey, half-dissolved gem and stared at it a moment. Then I looked back over my shoulder at the door. What if... no, it was stupid. It wouldn't help... wouldn't work... but...

I trotted back downstairs, my bag of gems tossed over my shoulder. Carefully, I fished out an amethyst and extended the purple gem towards Precious. She looked at it skeptically, her horn glowed, and the purple filly floated it to her. She looked confused. I hoped this would work. I lifted my half-ingested ruby and popped it into my mouth. For a moment, she looked at me like I were crazy, then put the purple gem in her mouth. At once her eyes popped wide in shock.

Apparently, giving fillies mildly addictive substances was really effective! In another life, I must have been a Dash dealer or something. Two more gems later and she followed me back up into my room. "So... Precious... can we talk?" She gave me that confused and slightly guarded look. "I mean, can you talk? You seem to be understanding me so..."

She swallowed the emerald she'd been chewing on, then replied in a surprisingly soft voice. "Yes. I talk."

"So... how'd Sanguine turn you into... this?" I asked as I gestured to her. She drew back, frowning. I raised my hooves. "Not that there's anything wrong with you. I'm just wondering how it happened." That mollified her enough that she relaxed.

"Born sick. Bad bones. Doc made me part dragon to make me better. Ponies thought I was a freak. I am. Got in a fight. Doc put me to sleep." She looked to the window. "Woke up... told me I had to help him... said no... he said he'd make me normal pony again."

"Well... that was nice of him," I said, but she looked sour once again. "Saving you, I mean..."

"The pretty yellow pony lady talked him into it. I guess ponies and dragons don't mix." She looked at her spade-tipped tail. "When I got into fights with some ponies that teased me, I got put to sleep with the others."

"How'd you get to Chapel? Did you walk or fly or..."

"We went through tunnels. Bad scary tunnels. When we got outside, we met those

kitty birds." Tunnels. Crap. "We were walking a long time, though. Had to hide lots." If my friends planned on tracking my PipBuck, then it would mean going back underground. Nothing good came from going underground in this place. Knowing Sanguine, he'd be setting up all sorts of traps and nasty things.

Theoretically, I knew where Hippocratic Research was from the tag the Professor had given me. Between Zenith Bridge and Toll on the east side of the river. Realistically, there were several square miles it could be in, and who knew what we'd face in that bombed out and blasted ruin? If Sanguine was taking tunnels, then they wouldn't be able to cut him off at the bridge. It could take another day of searching to find more Reapers or Rangers....

"Precious, do you have a lot of memories of the building and stuff?" She scowled, but nodded. I felt a little surge of triumph! If this worked, then when Sanguine got back home, we'd be waiting for him!

"Yes, some." Clearly not happy memories. "I was normally kept in my room. I wanted to go around outside, but Mister Sanguine told me I wasn't allowed to go 'cause the trees were bad."

"The trees were bad?" I echoed with a frown. "How so?"

"They try and eat you." She gave a shrug, then blew a little tongue of green flame. "Can I have another?" she asked as she pointed at my stash of gems. I pushed the bag at her, and she picked out another amethyst.

"So the trees are bad. Anything else?" I wanted to take notes.

"Monsters," she said simply.

"Erm... what kind of monsters?" Given what I'd seen so far, that really didn't narrow things down.

"Just monsters. The bad kind all over the place. Bugs. Plants. Doggies," she said simply, as if I were stupid for thinking there were any other kinds. "There's also the fatties... they look like ponies, but they're all big and dumb. Lots of fatties working for the Doc. Cora always likes killing them. She's creepy." I'd noticed. The filly rubbed her chin again before adding absently, "And there's the poison stuff."

"Poison?"

"Well, there're two kinds." One wasn't enough? "One is all rainbow goopiness... doesn't do much to ponies like me and Cora, though. Sometimes the fatties get in it and it makes 'em even weirder. Those red ponies once fell in some and got

all mutated up. Doc put ‘em down with his poison breath. That’s this nasty pink gas... There’s clouds of it way down in the bottom. Only Doc goes down there.” She smirked, her pointed teeth glittering. “Doc said I wasn’t supposed to wander around, but I did anyway. Broke a bunch o’ stuff, too.” She gave a little shrug. It seemed to be the filly’s default gesture.

I actually laughed a little at that. Then I thought a little more about what Psychoshy had said. “Hey, Precious? Psychoshy said that there was something bad after Sanguine... and he said that I’d woken something in the Core.”

“Oh... well, yeah, he was screaming about that. I dunno what started it. I was asleep then. But I guess when some big ship blew up... well, he went crazy. He said that if some program thingy was blowed up, then nothing would stop some bad thing in the city from coming out and eating everypony or something. I didn’t really pay attention, though. A whole lotta ponies wanted to hurt him.”

I wonder why. “Did he ever say anything about why he wanted the program?”

“Just that he needed it to fix things. I dunno what, though... nothing I broke, I think.” I frowned... that sounded a lot different from what I’d heard before: making monsters and using the Wasteland as his own personal laboratory. Or selling Chimera to Red Eye.

I took a stab in the dark. “Did he mention a pony named Goldenblood or any special secret project?”

“Oh yeah! He called him every name I knew and a whole lot of other really bad things. He was going on and on about that Goldie pony screwin’ everything up ‘cause of something he did. Said it was gonna kill us all.” She looked out the window again towards the city. “Dunno how bad it is. Good strong fart would kill most of this place.”

I nodded and sat there. I was still feeling that lethargy, but now that I was moving, it began to fall behind. I’d blown a hand, but I wasn’t busted yet. Almost... but not quite yet. I was ready to ante up once again. “Thanks for talking to me, Precious.”

“Sure,” Precious murmured. “You sure you’re not going to do anything?”

“Mhmmm...” I said with a nod, then walked her back downstairs. Scotch Tape blinked owlishly at our arrival.

“Oh, you were talking to Blackjack,” she said softly as she rubbed her eyes with her hoof. “Hey... Blackjack? Do you have any more of those mint candies? They were really good.”

"Ah... no. Sorry Scotch. Afraid we'd have to go back to Tenpony to get some more. Or you can try and take Rampage's," I suggested with a smile. She didn't return it.

"I was just hoping... if I took it... maybe P-21'd talk to me," she said. "They made me feel like... I knew... like... just what to say. Now I just feel like one big lump of stupid."

I sighed and sat beside her. "You're not allowed to think of yourself as a big lump of stupid till you get somepony who doesn't deserve it killed, okay young lady?" I asked in mock sternness. She still wasn't smiling, and I shook. A part of me... a big part... wanted to just curl back up on that bed. I was just going to screw her up even more. I mean, I'd given her drugs to try and win... and sure, it'd worked, but now she was paying the price for luring Precious away from Sanguine. Paying the price for my mistake.

I felt it; it was almost like gravity pulling me down, but it was all inside my brain. And it would be so easy just to give in and let it sweep me away. But Scotch was here, and she needed help. I could give her that. "Come here, Scotch," I said as I pulled her into a hug and patted her mane. Precious just looked on silently, wistfully. I lifted Scotch's chin and looked into her green eyes. "It's not you, okay? It's not. It's not that you're not smart enough or nice enough."

"But I don't understand why he won't talk to me about it. About Momma. About anything!" She sniffed as she looked away.

"Listen," I murmured softly. "When a pony gets hurt really badly... it changes them. The flesh and blood heal... but some things we experience stay with us. And we stay hurt. It makes us angry... and scared. Makes us hate ourselves for being weak. You remember what happened on the boat?"

She cringed. "I... I heard what they were doing. I wanted to help but you told me to hide and you were screaming and... and... they nailed you to the floor!" She looked anguished. "You were doing all that to... to save me. To keep them from doing that. I heard the noise and what they called you and you screaming. And then they were beating you and all I could do was cry... I was useless."

"No, Scotch. No," I said as I held her in my hooves. "You weren't useless. You kept me going. As long as you were okay, what they did to me didn't really matter. It hurt... hurt a damned lot... and I think it'll always hurt. But so long as you were okay, I was able to take it. If something... anything... had happened to you, then I wouldn't have been able to go on." I brushed her mane gently. "You're the one I saved, Scotch."

"Twice," she murmured. Then she looked over at P-21's room. "So... he was once hurt like you were?"

"Something like that," I said softly. "But where I was only hurt for an hour or so, he was hurt his entire life. It's hard. That hurt doesn't go away. He has to carry it wherever he goes. But he wants to talk to you, Scotch Tape. I know he does. He's just scared... and that makes him angry. It's easier to push everypony away and bottle up what he feels inside. It's not you, Scotch. It just isn't."

"I guess..." she said, still not convinced. "Are you sure you don't have more of those Mint-al thingies though?" She flushed at my look, then stammered, "For him! Not me... though... I really liked them."

"Like I said. You want more? Get them from Rampage," I said, and I just hoped that the Reaper had the sense not to give her any!

"Awww... okay..." She nodded and started back towards the couch, but I cleared my throat. She looked back at me, and I nodded to the front door. She looked from me to the door, then blushed bright red, nodded, and trotted out.

I turned and walked quietly to the door to P-21's room, knocking with a hoof before I pushed it open. I knew he'd be awake; after what had happened to Priest, who could sleep? He lay on his bed with Priest's sketches spread out before him. At the sight of me, he gave a look of surprise followed by the smallest of smiles. "Hey, you're back." I was surprised to see Rampage with him; but then, she'd loved Priest too.

"I went somewhere?" I said as I trotted towards him.

"For a while, you were back on that mattress right after Scoodle died," he murmured softly. "Less shit and vomit and radiation poisoning... but still back there, all the same."

"Yeah. Had to go pee," I murmured.

"I thought you wet the bed," Rampage teased with a little smirk. It didn't reach her eyes. Her cutie mark was that strange amorphous roiling blob.

"These days I don't even want to imagine what comes out my rear end. Think it might be somewhere between magical waste and flamer fuel," I said as I glanced back at my rump. Then I saw the concern in his eyes and sighed. "It's been a crazy month, hasn't it? Who knew life outside the stable would be like this?"

"Sometimes it doesn't really seem so different," he replied.

"You should have been here thirty years or so back. You think it's a mess now? Imagine every block being held by a different gang or tribe. You couldn't piss without somepony blowing your flank off," Rampage replied. "No Finders. No Reapers. No Eggheads. Just ponies killing ponies for a few more blocks to scavenge."

"It must have been a trick to start Chapel in the middle of all that," I murmured softly. "Just the two of you."

"Originally it was just Priest, this scrawny little black unicorn looking to avoid being pressed into the Halfhearts. He was actually trying to fix that ratty church up; it seemed crazy to me. Why build in a wasteland where everything was dead and falling apart? The world was pain and blood and hatred, yet there he was trying to help me. I didn't get it... couldn't understand it. I thought, when he brought me home to Star House, that he was going to just fuck my ass like every other stallion. But he wanted to help. He really did. Like Scalpel and Bonesaw, the wandering miracle doctors." She sighed and shook her head. "I fell in love with him, and he was young enough and good enough to think he was in love with me. Had to get him drunk our first time, though. It was nice for a few months... but he was faking it. And so was I. But by then I was pregnant." She sighed and gave me a sad, regretful smile. "I wouldn't recommend it, personally. Threw a whole world of awkward into an already weird thing."

"And then what happened?" P-21 asked in quiet, polite tones. I winced, but she simply smiled; maybe a little sadder.

"When we realized that it wasn't working out, I thought of leaving, but... even if I hadn't been pregnant, we already had a dozen fillies and colts living in the post office. Pilgrims came to off themselves at the bridge, and they'd give Priest their caps and supplies. He'd give them a friendly ear. Halfhearts tried to take the town, but I convinced them not to. I think it was Priest they respected, though. They really go for the whole stoic thing." She nudged P-21. "They'd love you."

He flushed and looked away. "I just... wish we could have been more."

I sighed softly. "I'm sorry about Priest. I thought when I trotted in that I'd see Sanguine and just... blam. Or that I'd get the ghoul talking and jump him... or insult his mother and get him to shoot me instead. Or something." I closed my eyes. "I just kept seeing him blowing Sonata's brains out... Charity dying... him hiding behind Priest so I couldn't get a good shot. And then Vermilion was there threatening to blow everypony up." I shivered, continuing, "I was so certain that he was going to kill her. I was positive that, any second, I'd see her die. That the price

to beat him was her death.”

“I think Priest saw it too,” P-21 said quietly. “He knew that, if he didn’t act, somepony would die, and so he had to stop him. It was the kind of thing he’d do...”

I patted his shoulder. “Sorry I fell apart like that.”

“Why did you?” Rampage asked softly. “You’ve been through more in a month than... anypony, I think. Was it Priest dying? Losing EC-1101? What I did?” That got a look from P-21.

“Ugh. You want me to be introspective?” I groaned, but they kept looking at me, expecting an answer. I looked away, to the drawings that Priest had made. Why did he have the cutie mark he did and not a pencil or sketch or something? Was it because his talent was believing in Celestia? In acting as kind and understanding as she had been? “I don’t know. It was like... like suddenly, all I could think about was that I’d screwed up. That I’d blown everything. And I felt like I was absolutely the worst pony for trying to help anypony.” I shook my head. “It was Scoodle and 99 all over again.”

“It’s just a setback,” Rampage said with a smirk and a shrug. “The important thing is that we keep going. Right?”

“Right,” I said. Then I looked at P-21 and smiled. “By the way... when are you going to talk to Scotch Tape about... everything?”

He sighed, his smile sliding away. “Eventually. Not right now. Not with everything. But soon.”

“She’s kinda already figured it out. She’s a smart kid like that,” I said with a smile. “Gets it from her parents.”

“Ughhh...” He looked at me with his grumpy frown. “Parent. I hate that word.”

“Why?” Rampage asked in amusement.

He looked at his hooves. “Because, back in 99, we weren’t allowed to be parents. I was told I impregnated twenty-nine mares in ten years, but I was never told which ones. Sometimes I’d be walking to an assignment and pass by a filly or see a new colt brought in and wonder... is that mine? Did I help make that? We were never ‘daddies’ or ‘fathers’ or anything like that. We never got to be part of our children’s lives... We were...”

“Studs?” Rampage suggested with a grin.

"I hate you, you know that?" he muttered.

"No you don't," she replied. "You don't like that I don't take what happened to you as seriously as you do." I covered my snicker behind a hoof, and she thumped my head with her own. "And don't you think you're off the hook, either. I swear, the three of you..."

"We're from Stable 99," he said with a little shrug.

I sighed and I looked at him. "You know what I think? I think that you're just like me." He leaned away from me looking vaguely insulted and suspicious. "I think that you've got something no stallion in 99 had: a chance at knowing your own children. And you are terrified of fucking it up. And as one expert on fuckups to another... you are fucking it up. She's a smart girl. She knows you're her father, and she wants you in her life. But a few more months... maybe even a few more weeks of you ignoring it... and she won't want you anymore."

He looked at his hooves, ears drooping. Rampage sighed sympathetically and patted his shoulder. "Not easy, either way."

I stood and shook myself. "Anyway... I have a mare I need to apologize to. Think it over, P-21. And if you want my advice... and I can understand if you don't, but... don't wait."

I left them to talk and trotted back upstairs. Nopony was getting any sleep tonight. I knocked on Glory's door. She opened it almost at once, her eyes wide and fearful. She mirrored my apologetic smile. "I hope my playing didn't wake you up."

"No... not at all," she murmured softly.

"May I come in?" I asked, hoping my sheepish smile overcame the immense awkwardness I was feeling. She stepped back from the door, and I stepped in. I was guessing that this had been Tarot's bedroom once upon a time; there were still quite a few boxes of old toys and the like.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked as she led me over and we sat on her bed. She looked at me curiously, cocking her head. "You look a little better."

"Yes." I looked at her a moment. "Kinda..." Another moment, and then I sighed and looked away. "Not really... but I'm moving again. And as long as I'm moving, there's hope. So, kinda better..."

"You're sure?" She stroked my cheek in concern. "Really really sure?"

I nodded. "Yup."

"Good. Then I don't feel quite so bad for this," she said as she looked me in the eyes with a loving smile, pulled back a little, and hit me so hard upside the head that I went flopping clear off the other side of the bed. "What in Equestria were you thinking? Giving highly addictive mind-altering chemicals to a filly like that? You know, there was a time when I thought that Med-X was bad. And I squirmed... squirmed... at administering a dose of Hydra. Now it's chems chems chems! And I actually sat by and let you! What in Equestria was I thinking? I'd be stripped of any medical license for the rest of my life if anypony back in Thunderhead found out!"

I blinked up at her and couldn't help laughing as she looked down at me. "And now I'm hitting you! And you're laughing!" She looked down at me sternly. "No more chems unless the pony at least has his or her cutie mark! I mean it!"

I reached up and pulled her off the bed and onto me for some snugglage. I knew that what she wanted was the right thing to do, but a nasty little part of me muttered in the back of my mind, insisting that giving Scotch the PTM was also the right thing to do. And no matter how much I tried, I couldn't quite shut it up.

Contrary to what some might expect, we didn't engage in lecherous activities. Neither of our hearts were in it. We lay together, cuddling, till she nodded off. Since my body didn't really have to sleep, I got the primer and went through the magic exercises. They talked about imagining your magic as a breath pushing against a leaf; I was at least not a complete failure at that one. Then as your magic like a mouth closing on something to move it. I had to admit, even this old book with its cute little pictures and bold print was better than weeks of listening to Textbook drone on about simply 'doing it right'. I'd never thought of magic as something I could do. It was always something somepony else could do better.

By the time morning arrived, I was able to turn the pages of the book consistently... half the time. Hey, it was still progress.

Glory was quite happy to discover that Precious was every bit as appreciative of her cooking as I was. Only Glory would be considerate and determined enough to smash up an emerald and mix it into an omelet. I wondered where she'd gotten the eggs for it, then decided against asking her. Rampage chipped a tooth and promptly went back to her raw bloatsprite; an acquired taste, to be sure.

P-21 and Scotch Tape were playing the look, look away game. One would look. See the other. Both would look away. It was all I could do not to scream... but,

considering how I'd been last night, I supposed that I was the last person to have a right to criticize anypony needing time and space to themselves. Still, both of them got put on washing the dishes; quite a chore after Glory's cooking. Maybe that'd help P-21 overcome his reticence.

Talking with Precious, it was clear that she didn't know where she should go, only that returning to Sanguine with us was last on her list of interests. "You know, Precious... I can't say for sure, but I know that the Crusaders could certainly use your fwoosh around here." The purple dragon filly blinked at me in confusion, and I looked over at Scotch. "And I think that you should stay too, Scotch. Just so nothing goes wrong."

"You want me to leave?" she gasped, her bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs forgotten as she stood on her seat.

"No, I think it'll be better for Precious and Charity if you stick around and help out," I tried to say as reasonably and casually as possible. I looked over at Glory and P-21 for help.

Of course, Rampage didn't help any as she gave a bloatsprite-flavored belch and said, "Eh, let her come if she wants. She's a tough kid."

Glory smiled at Scotch. "Don't you want to try see if you can make that toilet idea of yours work?" I blinked at the two of them in surprise. "It'll be a big improvement for the town over... using the ditch beside the road." She actually shuddered! Huh? What was wrong with the ditch? I mean, I loved plumbing as much as the next mare but... wait... suddenly, that thought led to the question of how Thunderhead handled its sewage. Now I was shuddering... I'd never look at the rain the same way again.

"Sure... after I get my cutie mark!" Scotch said very matter-of-factly. "Face it, nopony wants a toilet cutie mark. I mean the only thing worse would be like a pile of poop cutie mark. That's about it."

"I think any cutie mark is fine, as long as its yours," Glory said quietly as she glanced back at her flank and the scarred patch where once she'd sported a sunrise. Then she sighed and pushed on. "In any case, Precious has told us about the numerous threats around and under Hippocratic Research." Scotch had confirmed that my Pipbuck tag was still north of us.

"Monsters. Poison. Long as none of them are machinery, I'm fine," Scotch said dismissively as she pinched the bowl in her hooves and lifted it to her lips to slurp

down the sugary sludge left at the bottom. When she finished, she smirked at me with a milky mustache. The source of the milk was another thing I'd decided I might not want to know. "In fact... Precious actually gave me an idea of how to take care of it. Both the rainbow stuff and the pink stuff can get washed out with rain."

"That's a trick underground," Rampage murmured. "Not a lot of rain clouds down there."

"No, but if it's anything like a stable, it'll have fire prevention systems. If you set those off, then it'll wash the rainbow junk down the drain and clear the pink junk out of the air," Scotch said with a smug grin. "You know how to do that?"

"Provided they work and you can get to the control system, I'd test purge the whole system," Glory replied coolly.

"Oh yeah? And if the controls don't work? What then?" Scotch asked with a challenging frown.

"Use incendiary rounds to set them off one by one or zone by zone," Glory retorted.

"And if they've been manually shut off?"

"Look for big red valves, naturally. Standard colorization for fire systems."

"And if they're corroded shut?"

"Oil, a wrench, and a good hard knock," Glory countered without missing a beat.

"Can you tell me how to set up an IV drip system into the subclavian vein?"

The filly blinked. "That's not plumbing!"

"Pipes are pipes, in a stable or in the body."

Scotch was silent a moment, pursing her lips, and then said grudgingly, "Yeah, well... you're still boring."

"Just because I've—"

Scotch folded her forelegs on the table. "Nope. Boring! Putting me to sleep." She started to snore loudly.

"Look, Scotch, I'm not saying—"

"Bor....snnnnrrrgg.... ing.... Skrrrrkkk..."

"Blackjack! She's from your stable. Tell her I'm not boring," Glory whined as she batted her eyes at me.

I put my hooves around the gray pegasus's waist and tugged her close. "Honestly, considering what's happened to me so far... I'm glad you're on the calm and rational side of things." I pressed my lips to hers, and she made a delightful little murr in the back of her throat.

"Ewww!" Precious wrinkled her nose in disgust, then looked at Scotch, who blinked at her in confusion. "Aren't you grossed out?"

"Huh? What's gross about that? I always saw mares kissing mares back in the stable." She crossed her hooves. "Now kissin' stallions... that's gross."

"Oh, it isn't so bad," P-21 murmured idly. Then he blinked and looked at Rampage grinning ear to ear at him. "No... no no..." She pounced at him kissing wildly, and he barely leapt onto the table and off the other side in time. Rampage made the whole table bounce as she dove beneath it and chased after him. He dove to his bag and dug out a magic grenade. "Back! Back I say..." He waved it at her.

"Shouldn't we all be really alarmed by this?" Glory asked with a concerned little frown.

"Bor... ing..." Scotch sang out. But the two fillies took cover under the table all the same.

"I swear to Celestia, if you try and kiss me, I will give you a second childhood! Or fifth... or whatever childhood you're on!" he said as he kept the grenade outthrust in a hoof. But, more than anything, he was smiling. Maybe it was a little manic... maybe his eyes looked a touch sad... but he was smiling.

Rampage rubbed her chin. "Probably be worth it..." She leaned towards him, kissing the air, and he pressed the grenade to her lips.

Then the door opened and Lacunae walked in. Her purple eyes widened at the mess on the table, the girls peeking out at him, Glory and I cuddling, and Rampage kissing the green-banded apple. She nearly glowed with power... strike that... she was glowing with power. I heard the clicking going off on the PipBucks on both Glory and Scotch's hooves. "Am I interrupting?" Her purple magic surrounded the grenade, plucked it from P-21's hooves, and gently put it back into his saddlebag.

"Yes, and it's probably a good thing you are," I replied.

She looked right at me and smiled, her voice speaking softly in my mind. "I knew you only needed a little time and you'd be back. You never lose."

"I did this time. Look, I talked with Precious, and Sanguine is using the tunnels to

travel.” Then I looked at the little dragon filly and smiled. “But Precious here has been all over Hippocratic Research. So if you take a peek inside her noggin, we can teleport straight there! We might show up before he has a chance to do anything bad!”

“You want her to do what?” Precious said as she jumped to her hooves, a plume of green flame flashing out of her mouth. “Forget it! I don’t want anypony poking around in my head. That’s what the doctors did after I got in fights!”

Lacunae looked at me and I felt a stab of irritation. “Precious, we really need this—”
“Don’t care,” the filly said. “That’s what the nurses did! Kept messing with my head to make me happy and feel better. Tried to make me think everypony was my friend. Well, they’re not. And you’re not either!”

“Look!” I smacked the table with my hoof. “You were working for our enemy, but we took you in. I even shared some gems with you. All I’m asking for is enough memories of that place so that Lacunae can teleport us there. We don’t care about what happened to you two hundred years ago!”

A strange silence filled the room, and I suddenly became aware that everypony was staring... at me. “Blackjack...” Glory said in soft concern. “It matters to her.”

A part of me wanted to scream. This was what we had to do to win! I knew that Sanguine was probably rigging as many traps and perils as he could in the tunnels. Maybe if we gave her some Moon Dust or something we could make her tractable enough that she’d cooperate. I really didn’t want to have to pin her down while Lacunae dug around in her head for... what we...

What the fuck was wrong with me? Seriously... what the fuck?

I had to close my eyes. What part of my brain contemplated pinning a filly down or drugging her and forcing her to give up memories... traumatize her to get what I wanted? Was any wrong permissible so long as, in the end, I won? If that were true, then there wasn’t a difference between me and Deus or Sanguine, now was there? He’d taken fillies hostage... killed Priest! Was all that okay simply because he wanted to win? Should I have taken Psychoshy hostage? Killed her just to beat him?

But Sanguine had won... and I’d lost. It was like a splinter in my mind. I needed to win so badly... to make all those deaths matter. To make everything I’d sacrificed matter. If I couldn’t...

“Precious, I’m sorry I said that,” I said softly. “We want to stop Sanguine and get

back what he took from me. I was hoping we could teleport straight there and be waiting for him. I shouldn't have tried to use you like that."

The purple dragon hybrid glared at me hard. Clearly, I wasn't going to be on her 'Friends' list any time soon.

"Precious... can you give us a memory that will put us close?" Scotch Tape asked. Precious gave the concerned filly the same steely stare for a moment, then softened and dropped her gaze.

"I remember a park. I wouldn't mind remembering that place," she said softly as she looked up at the large alicorn. "Can you just look at that one memory? I don't want people to see... see anything else." Lacunae gave a gracious nod, and together they trotted outside.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked me. "I don't care'? Since when do you not care?" Rampage seemed equally shocked. Glory simply looked concerned. "You cared about Psychoshy, for Luna's sake! How could you care about her and not what's happened to Precious?"

I closed my eyes. "I want to beat Sanguine. Pay him back for all the shit he's done." I needed to win! Didn't they understand that?

"Well, not much point in beating him if you turn into him," Rampage muttered as she trotted away to her room. "I better go get into my armor. I can just tell it's gonna be another shitty day in Hoofington."

"Blackjack, Priest wouldn't want you to hurt Precious just to get Sanguine. Please... try to keep it together," P-21 said as he returned to his room as well.

Keep it together, he says. Wasn't he supposed to be the angry one? The one who wanted revenge? I shook my head. I didn't want to mess with foals and the like. I just wanted to win.

Once Lacunae had the memory of the park, I'd introduced Precious to the Crusaders. The interview consisted of the question 'got any folks or anypony else you can stay with?' After that, Charity suggested that Precious help out cleaning up some of the mess from the fight. We didn't really need any more supplies yet, but I bought a Sparkle-Cola anyway. Charity looked at me a moment, rubbing her chin. "Twenty percent, I think..."

"A twenty percent discount?" I grinned in response. I should have saved Charity's life ages ago!

She smirked as I took a drink. "Naw. Twenty percent Chapel reconstruction tax. Twenty-four caps. Pay up!" she said as she held out a hoof.

Every single cap would be hers someday. Every... single... cap...

A flash later, we were back on the north end of the Hoof in the middle of a rusted and smashed playground. I was glad there weren't a lot of little pony skeletons lying around; I guessed everypony here had cleared out at the sirens. The park was little more than a dead square of trees and benches overlooked by a large billboard of a Pinkie Pie. 'Come on, everypony! Smile! Smile! Smile!' read the caption beneath her huge grinning head. Her eyes seemed to add 'or else'.

Looking north, I could see the bow of the Celestia pointed out of the water. It was still smouldering; I had to wonder what was left of it days later. The Applejack was nowhere to be seen; had it returned to Trottingham? The naval base still smoked as well. I borrowed P-21's binoculars and I looked more closely; sure enough, there were scavengers picking through the remains of the base. Worse, I spotted two groups with those black and green tower banners.

Something I'd have to nip in the bud later. Looking west, I could see a thick tangle of dead, gnarled trees. Briars and brambles snaked between the hard, cracked branches. I didn't have an E.F.S.— I wanted Glory and Scotch to have the advantages the PipBuck offered, even ignoring the feedback from trying to wire another PipBuck into me— but I knew that, if I still had one, these woods would be one nasty mess of red bars. Something inside the forest let out a screech. I could make out, on the other side of the trees, the distant, and intact, roof of a single large building. It had a far more classical look than the rest of the Hoof, with a central peak that rose far above the treeline. It had to be three stories at least. From the way the trees burst through the thick, rusty bars surrounding the property, I suspected that the woods had been one of the few places to grow despite the radiation.

"Right! So, Lacunae flies us over onto the roof! Good plan!" I said as I clapped my hooves together.

"Not so fast," Glory said as she peered at the sky. "We're a lot higher up than usual. I don't think Lacunae should fly anywhere." I looked at her flatly, and she pointed up at the sky. Nothing... clouds... She tapped my binoculars, and I had a second

look. Through them I could see a black, tapering spike. She pointed out a second... and a third. "I really don't think we should take the risk."

I sighed. "Okay. So, then, Lacunae teleports us all onto the roof."

"That is a possibility," Lacunae said, and I wanted to give a little cheer. "However, it will utterly exhaust my magical reserves. We won't be able to teleport out if something goes wrong."

Urrrgh... "Maybe a tunnel?" They all looked at me like I was crazy. We'd have to go underground anyway... ugh, but they were right. There wasn't anything good to be gained from going underground unless we absolutely had to. "Okay... Scotch, on my back. Rampage, up front. P-21, watch our backs. Lacunae on the left and Glory on the right. Let's try to get through this without anypony dying."

"Yeah, that'd be a good thing," the olive filly said with a pleased smile.

I looked up over my shoulder at her. "Seriously, Scotch. I know you really want to come with us, and I know you want to show how tough you are, but I can still have Lacunae poof you back to Star House."

She sat up. "I solemnly swear that I will do everything in my power to not die." She crossed her chest with her hoof before dropping the serious look and smiling again.

I sighed, muttering, "Better not. You do and you're grounded." After Dusty and Priest, I didn't want to think of anything happening to her.

"Don't worry. I'm tough, just like Security!" she said with a grin as she looked down at me, "Now, let's get going!" she said brightly. Great... now I was a role model!

Glory checked to see P-21 talking about something with Rampage before she looked at me with a smile. "She wants to prove herself to him. You know that's why she's here," she said keeping her voice down. Scotch pointedly ignored both of us at that.

"I know, Glory. I just don't want her ending up a corpse in the process." One day I'd grow enough of a spine to tell her 'no' despite her big, tear-filled green eyes.

We found the front gate. The trees had bent and twisted the metal bars as they'd grown around them, and the road had been reduced to a single crumbled asphalt track. A large concrete slab stood beside it, a thick thorny root splitting it right down the middle. 'Hippocratic Research: Bringing new discoveries effectively, efficiently, and ethically to you.' At the bottom: 'M.W.T. Subsidiary.' On a hunch, I stomped down the weeds and brambles at the base. There, stamped in letters almost obliterated by the passage of time, were the words 'O.I.A. Afilliate.'

Yeah. This place looked right up Goldenblood's alley.

"Come on," I murmured as we moved into the dead trees. The forest appeared to cover only a square mile or so... not that far to walk to the center, right? As we slowly walked along the trail, the normal Hoofington gloom was cut down to a hazy twilight. In the distance there were crunches and pops and a strange growl. "How much is red, Scotch?"

"Everything..." she murmured softly. "Everything's red." And from the slow tick of radiation, unhealthy too.

The trees cut right across the road. The branches didn't just intertwine; they looked as if they had stabbed right through one another; splitting the trunks and branches of their neighbors. Any gap between them was occupied by the twisted brambles that corkscrewed their way into the trunks. I heard a wooden groan and saw something move in the distance. "These trees are dead, right?" I asked as I looked at the leafless branches. From the way they curled up, it looked almost as if they were ready to stab us.

"Well, they appear... I mean... they..." Glory stammered as she stared at one trunk. "I think so."

"Well, if they're wood, then they burn," P-21 said. He pulled out an apple with a red band, tugged out the stem, and tossed it into the trees blocking our path. There was a loud 'fwoosh' as a ten foot patch of tree burst into flame. The wood popped and crackled... and smouldered... smoked... and not much else. The smoke blew back in our faces, the gray cloud stinging my throat fiercely. The woods around us crackled even more loudly.

Then I saw one of the thick branches above me slowly turn. It pointed its jagged tip right at P-21. "Look out!" I shouted as the entire branch stabbed down, and only my warning and his agile hooves kept him from getting speared. Another chorus of creaks erupted as the trees stabbed hoof-thick branches at us. Lacunae was able to deflect one with her shield and teleport a few feet out of the path of another. Glory leapt in time to avoid being skewered by one shooting in from the side, landing neatly on the still-quivering branch. Scotch held on for dear life as I made like a zebra and reared on my back legs, barely deflecting one branch with my forelegs. Rampage's armor rang like a bell as she was knocked off her hooves by an impact.

As abruptly as it started, the attack stopped. We were frozen with a dozen branches all around us. Touching them didn't provoke any kind of response, thank goodness. We looked at one another. "Right. No trying to burn the nice not dead trees." If you

could even call these things trees...

Since we couldn't follow the road, we had to squeeze through gaps between the splintered trunks. More than once, Lacunae had to teleport through. Twice, Rampage had to hook her hoofclaws into the hard, waxy bark and force a gap wide enough to pass through. The trees had other peculiarities, strange cysts and growths that put out a sickly green and yellow light. I'd accidentally brushed against one, and it had popped, spurting a foul fluid that smoked on contact with my foreleg and blackened the enamel.

Wow... out of all the sucky places in the Hoof, I think we'd found the suckiest. From the depths of the woods came a long, low howl that made my mane crawl.

There were also rusted metal drums all over the place; most had split open long ago, but more than a few were still oozing rainbow-colored gunk. We tried to avoid any tree that had the rainbow gunk on it; it seemed to create even larger and more bizarre versions of the strange leafless plants. One actually appeared to have slices of cake hanging from the ends of the limbs. From the number of waxy and warped bones lying at the base of the tree, I suspected that the cake was a lie.

"How'd they even get this far?" P-21 murmured in confusion.

"I... don't know," I said just as quietly. We looked at each other and at the creaking forest around us, the creepiness jumping up another notch. Nopony wanted to speculate very much on how they'd gotten just far enough to die.

We reached a track of sorts, running back along a retaining wall that, while buckled, still provided chunks of concrete above the leafless brambles. Suddenly, there was a crackle overhead, and I stared in shock as a lumpy, rainbow-colored apple appeared on the end of a branch overhead. More crackles and flashes signaled the appearance of dozens more above us.

"Oh... this can't be good," I murmured as I watched the rainbows start to squirm and glow brightly. "Shit... look out!" I yelled, then started running as the first apple fell towards me. It hit the ground with an explosive flash and sprayed stinging bits of seed at us. Lacunae's shield spell blocked four detonations, but collapsed as three more exploded simultaneously. She screamed as two more exploded along her spine, tearing her flesh and singeing her wings and tail. Rampage, her armor blackened, leapt upon the alicorn's back and started to swipe at the falling apples. Any injuries the detonations gave her started to heal almost immediately, allowing Lacunae to recover enough to restore her shield.

Then, as abruptly as they appeared, the exploding apples vanished. Once more the trees resumed their slow groaning and popping noises. I stared as I saw one trunk split in two by the branch of a larger tree, the smaller tree being torn apart.

I really hated this place. We let Lacunae heal herself and then tend to us... and suddenly Glory screamed. A gray wooden shoot was growing out of her foreleg! Scotch wasted no time, jumping off me and racing to where it was sprouting. She bit down, set her forelegs, and pulled as hard as she could. There was a horrible wet noise as the bloody seed was ripped out. As she spat it aside, I watched in sick horror as another waxy tree began to grow before our eyes in the dirt beside us. P-21 and Scotch also had pieces of apple seed shrapnel that had to be dug out even as they started to sprout. Lacunae had the easiest time; though she'd been hit by more seeds than any of us, none of them were sprouting. Maybe it was the radiation... or just more of her freaky unicorn cheating powers.

"What kind of apples appear from nowhere and then blow up?" Scotch asked after yanking the last sprout from her flank.

"Hoofington apples," I muttered as I glared at the tangled mess of wood and tree.

After healing the gouges left by ripping out the seeds, we set off again. If it hadn't been for Scotch pointing out north and Glory's sharp eyes spotting the steeple of the building through the gloom, I'd have had no idea where we were heading. We passed several rusted wagons that made Scotch Tape cringe, and even I balked at the sight of the twisted, rusted metal and grotesque plant life growing amid the toxic sludge. The splintered trunks resembled gaping maws... and for all I knew, they were mouths!

"There's too much red. Everywhere I look is red!" Glory whimpered as she looked around.

"Don't focus on the red bars. Keep your eyes open for anything else," I murmured as I kicked an ugly log with my rear hoof.

The log's eyes opened and it lunged, biting my ass hard and driving splintered fangs deep into my haunch. It snarled like some sort of maddened canine. It was a good thing that my hide was tougher than the usual mare's— otherwise it probably would have torn my flank clean off. Another of the things tore itself off a gnarled tree and leaped at Glory, while a third sprang from a thicket at P-21.

Glory turned, pointed her gun unerringly at the plunging log, and unloaded a stream of energy that transformed the entire beast into a flaming torch. It slammed into the

gray pegasus, but she kicked it away before it could do more than singe her bardings. Then there was a loud crack as four tree limbs speared out at once and crushed the flaming wolf log into pieces.

As smoothly as if he still wore his PipBuck, P-21 brought Persuasion up in his jaws and fired a clean forty millimeter grenade right into the gaping maw of the one bearing down on him. As it slammed into him, he rolled smoothly onto his back and kicked it over and away. The wooden creature scrambled up, and then the grenade exploded and blew the snarling head into so many toothpicks.

One burst half-buried from the ground and sunk its fangs into Lacunae's belly, tearing a jagged wound. Alicorns could bleed just like anypony else, and they could scream, too. As the wolf-log readied a second bite, Rampage launched herself underneath the purple unicorn and grabbed the beast. Its jagged edges tore at her striped hide, but she simply kept bending until the log split in two.

As for me, I was a bit in a predicament, as the one attached to my ass was doing everything it could to tear said area off and was about to accomplish exactly that. I drew Vigilance, but with the monster almost directly behind me, I couldn't draw a bead on it. I spat Vigilance into the air. "Scotch!" I yelled, and the perceptive girl spotted the weapon and caught it in her hooves. She aimed right at my butt, and I shouted, "S.A.T.S.!"

She snorted and sent three bullets into its head, blowing it into pulpy pieces of wood.

Lacunae groaned as she fell over, giving us a really good look at the grievous bite to her gut. Glory raced to her, and P-21 fished out a healing potion. "Hold still! Let me get your insides... inside."

"And if you hold still," Scotch chuckled, "I'll get the splinters out of your butt!" She bit the largest and tugged it free; I winced, closing my eyes as it was yanked out and spat aside. "Funny, I would have expected Glory to be the one with a stick up her—"

"Just pull them out please, Scotch," I groaned. I'd have to wait to regenerate, like Rampage. More healing potions for the rest of my friends.

"We're going in circles," Rampage declared. It'd been more than an hour, and we'd been bombed once more, nearly speared when I tried incendiary bullets, and suffered two more attacks by the timber wolves. We'd encountered other weirdness too, like a tree with drooping branches that cried rainbow gunk. And a— was it a

pine tree?— covered in steel pins! One tree looked perfectly fine and leafy but made P-21 violently ill when we approached. Another had watched us with dozens of eyes that looked oddly just like P-21's... weird. Glory came across an apple tree, but at her approach the luscious red apples revealed themselves to be red chitinous monsters that scuttled after us, snapping pincers. Then there were some thorny branches that barely scratched Scotch. . . . but once she started bleeding, she didn't stop! The filly's blood had soaked my pack before Lacunae could administer healing spells.

I might have hated the Hoof in general, but I really loathed this place.

Rampage was pointing at some spatters of blood in the dirt. "Unless we're not the only dumb ponies in this place, we've been here before."

"We can't! We've been going north pretty consistently. . . ." Glory said as she looked over at the spire. "But there was that time we had to double back. And then we went southeast for a time and. . . have we been here before?"

"We have," P-21 confirmed gravely. He picked up one of my shotgun hulls in his mouth and passed it to me. "Twelve gauge explosive. That's what you've been using on those wolf things, right?"

It was. They didn't have any vitals, per se. You just had to blast them apart. I looked around, spotted the remains of one timber wolf, and scowled. "I remember this place. But there was a gap to the north!" I said as I pointed at the solid barrier. "It was the thorny one that got Scotch scratched up!"

"It appears that this maze is cheating," Lacunae observed softly. The alicorn was clearly exhausted; being the largest, she'd received more attacks than any of the rest of us. "The trees are moving to keep us trapped."

"Are you telling me these things are intelligent?" Rampage asked as she pointed a hoof at the trunks.

"Perhaps in a feral, primitive sense. It would explain their cat and mouse antics," Glory said as she glared at the twisted wood.

I sighed. It was a setback, but only a setback. As galling as it was, I wasn't going to let it drag me down. Not back to the mattress. "Alright. Get us out of here, Lacunae. Maybe you and Glory can teleport up and disable the lightning rods or—"

There was a resounding creaking sound, and I got ready to blast again. All of a sudden, a dozen thick branches curled around two trunks. The trees sounded like they were screaming as the branches twisted against them and pulled the trunks

wide with a resounding wooden crunch. Then another pair was ripped apart. And another. Another. A path, straight as an arrow, lead directly towards the building. P-21 looked at the stunned Glory. "Pretty smart cat."

Scotch gulped. "Well... well I'm not afraid! So let's go," the filly said as she pointed down the path that had been opened. "Um... after you?" she asked Rampage.

"Buc- buc- bukaw!" Rampage clucked as she trotted ahead.

"Of course, you know this is a trap," Glory asked, looking over at me as we walked along after the striped Reaper.

"Course. It wouldn't be Hoofington otherwise," I answered, looking through the gaps between the trunks. I saw gray trees that seemed to bear apples and oranges and other fruits, but sprawled beneath them were more and more jumbled bones. It was another Silverstar Sporting Supplies... just a more vicious version.

The trees were closing the path behind us with the grinding creaks and groans of tortured wood. And then the foliage ended abruptly, the transition as sharp as if there was some invisible line. Spread out before us was a huge lawn of blue-green grass. It was covered with strange train-like engines and wagons, and heaps of barrels loomed like oozing encrustations, slowly dripping their congealed contents like colorful pus. Most bizarre of all were the statues. One showed three foals frolicking, another was a mare looking impressive, rearing with a flag clutched between her forehooves... There were dozens of them scattered across the strange grass. A few had tumbled over and others were covered in creeping blue vines, but most of them were just...there.

Scotch leaped from my back onto Lacunae and stared at one of the strange engines. "It's gonna eat me. It's gonna gobble me up!" I had to admit, with its rusted grill and the two domed lamps beside the massive drum on the front, I half thought it was going to eat me!

"I'll keep you safe, Scotch," Lacunae promised softly, lifting her wings to shield the filly from the sight.

We started to walk between the vine-covered hulks, and then I saw the blue vines start to creep. My mane started to do the freakiest things as the plants rasped faintly against the hulls of the machines. I'd already seen trees rip a path in front of me, though, so...this shouldn't be that frightening, in comparison. Rampage scowled at the vines. "Huh... this can't be..." Then her eyes popped wide. "No way! We're nowhere near the Everfree Forest!"

"Can't be what?" I asked as I saw her pupils contract in terror.

"Run!" she screamed, "Killing Joke!"

As if waiting for just that, the ground around us exploded with snaking blue vines. They slithered out of every hole, seeming to make a horrible chuckling noise as they moved lightning quick. One popped up in front of me and tapped my nose. The vine made the creepiest hissing laugh as I felt a tingle run through me. And then, just as suddenly as they'd attacked, the vines pulled themselves back. I felt a strange wooziness running through my body.

"What just happened?" Rampage asked, and I reached out a hoof to her to steady myself. And just like that, Rampage exploded. The striped mare blew apart in a cloud of shrapnel, her metal bardings smashing into me and sending me flying into one of the tractors. Which exploded, showering us all with debris. A large chunk of rusty metal fell upon me and I heaved it away... only to have it explode as well. I staggered to the side, my body battered and my legs wobbling beneath me. I fell, and the ground beneath me exploded like a landmine. I finally just curled up into a ball, feeling battered and broken and terrified to take another step.

Then a glow surrounded me and lifted me into the air. I looked weakly at Lacunae levitating me through the air towards the building. "I... hate... blowing up..." I moaned. But then I looked down; P-21 and Glory had grabbed the regenerating chunk of Rampage and were struggling to keep up as the slithering blue vines pursued them. P-21 now tossed incendiary apples every way he could to try and drive back patches of the noxious blue plant.

The ground heaved beneath P-21, and he dropped the filly Rampage in a heap as Lacunae landed on the vine-free concrete steps. She set me down... and the stone exploded under my hooves! At least this time the blast was a little less energetic. I was gonna have to chow down on some serious scrap metal soon or start losing legs. Lacunae frowned in concern as she looked at me, then at our friends. She couldn't set me down and get the others without the ground exploding underhoof, but she couldn't manage me and pick them up at the same time either.

Suddenly, Rampage screamed as the ground beneath her opened up into a deep pit of earth. Her hooves scrambled at the edge of the hole as it filled with wiggling blue vines and gnarled roots. It was as if the earth itself was creeping away under her hooves to dump her into the depths. P-21 reached in and bit her mane, hauling the thrashing, muddy filly back up over the edge.

A blue vine darted towards the distracted buck. Green beams sliced the vine into

quivering lengths as Glory leapt in place behind him, covering him as he hauled Rampage out. Then I saw it. It was just a moment when she took her eyes off the vines to look at the pair. In that moment, the vines struck. They shot out and coiled around her. "No!" I screamed as a blue flash engulfed her body.

Then I blinked as I stared in shock. "Oh my..." Lacunae murmured in my mind. What the heck...

"Come on! Move!" Glory shouted as she strafed the vines with her gatling beam gun. But P-21 and Rampage gaped at her. "What are you staring at? Move!" Finally, the pair began to run towards us, leaving the vines hissing and rubbing together. Glory turned and shouted, "Aw yeah!" And then she froze. She touched her throat with a bright blue hoof, then turned to stare at a stunning rainbow-colored tail. Where once she'd had a brand, now she had a vivid rainbow lightning bolt and cloud on her flank.

The killing joke had turned her into Rainbow Dash.

"Ah... what? No... no no no... they turned me into a dashite.... a dashite! Not a Dash!" she said in her higher, squeakier voice. "This is impossible. There must be some kind of mistake!" She sat down hard and wailed, "My life is ruined!"

"Wasn't it ruined already?" Rampage said as she stepped on to the concrete and winced, then said in relief, "Okay... no burying alive... good..."

"It's better than blowing up," I murmured weakly.

"You don't understand! It would have been better if I'd blown up. You remember how some of the Tenpony ponies acted when they thought you were related to Twilight? Well multiply that by a thousand and that's the Enclave's reaction!" Glory began to pace back and forth. "Even if my family could somehow be okay with it... there's no way Thunderhead would... I mean... I look just like her! The most infamous pegasus in history!"

"Glory... calm down," I said, taking a little step. There was another loud bang that left me sprawling and put a large crack in the concrete. "At least... you're not... a walking bomb..."

"Yeah. You actually look kinda cool like this," Scotch said as she hopped off Lacunae's back. "Not nearly so boring!" Rampage looked out at where she'd exploded and sighed. Lacunae flew over to retrieve the new filly's saddlebags.

Glory pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. "Oh my gosh, what if the change isn't just physical? What if there's some kind of mental contamination? I was slated

for a fast track medical career! Rainbow Dash was an idiot!" She clenched her eyes closed. "Hydrogen. Helium. Lithium. Beryllium. Boron. Carbon. Oxygen... wait... no... I forgot nitrogen!" she gasped. "I forgot nitrogen!" She grabbed P-21 and shook him in panic. "How could I forget nitrogen? Any second now I'm going to be obsessed with racing and the Wonderbolts!" she cried as she hovered in the air.

"At least you're flying again!" Scotch said with a grin. Lacunae returned with Ram-page's blasted bags; the little striped filly dug through them for a moment, pulled out Psychoshy's power hooves, and started to strap them onto her little legs.

"I'm flying?" She looked back over her shoulder at her restored wings. Sure, they were bright blue now, but they were also holding her aloft. She grinned. "I'm flying! Flying! Woohoo! So awesome!" she cheered in glee as she looped and whirled above the steps. Then, suddenly, she got a haunted look and landed. "No, Glory. You are an Egghead. Egg! Head! I mean... an intellectual!"

"Relax. I think any pegasus would be glad to get her wings back," I said as I walked gingerly, like I was treading on a bed of landmines, towards the door. Every third step resulted in a sharp detonation underhoof that knocked me about. Still, I couldn't stop now. I just needed to get inside. Generally you could tell how important a place was by how trashed it looked. Hippocratic Research was one reinforced building. I couldn't see a single broken pane of glass or missing tile off the roof. It might have looked like an old, classy style building, but it clearly had to be built like a fortress.

There was no way I was going to open these doors. "P-21... I think we're going to need your..." I started to say as I looked back and saw a blue vine snaking out of the crack split in the concrete slab and creeping towards Scotch Tape. "Look out!" I shouted, but all that did was make her look at me.

The vine curled around her rear hoof.

Scotch immediately shuddered, her eyes clenching shut as Glory severed the tendril with a precise blast of S.A.T.S.-assisted gatling fire. "Burns..." she whimpered, and then she fell over as a jet of yellow-green gas sprayed from her mouth. She started to thrash wildly, a horrible noise coming from her throat as she flopped and fell to her side. But worse of all was the smell. It was a smell I could smell in my sleep, and it came to me now in horrible freshness: the acrid stench of chlorine.

Rainbo- Glory! Glory fanned her wings to blow the clouds back and landed next to her, pressing an ear to Scotch Tape's chest. Her rose-colored eyes were wide in fear as more chlorine gas trickled from the filly's lips. "Lacunae!" The purple alicorn touched Scotch's side with her glowing horn as Glory scrambled for a healing

potion... but then she dropped it. "No! We don't need healing now. The joke is making the gas inside her lungs!" She grabbed Lacunae, "You've got BJ's memories and stuff, right, and still a lot of radiation energy?" The alicorn nodded warily. "Teleport us to the Fluttershy Medical Center! The surgical room! Now!"

"Wait!" P-21 started.

"What—" Rampage began.

"Didn't—" I started to say.

"Now!" Glory shouted, grabbing Lacunae and shaking her.

There was a purple flash, and all three vanished. I sat down hard in shock. Then there was a bang under my backside and I leaped to my hooves, looking back at my blackened and frayed tail. P-21 also sat down with a shocked expression but without, fortunately, an explosion. I looked blown half to hell, he looked like he'd been smacked between the eyes with a plank, and the freshly re-foaled Rampage was trotting along on the power hooves, wearing the one saddlebag like a school knapsack.

"So... all in all, pretty good day in the Hoof, huh?" the striped filly said with a smirk.

"So... is this shit permanent?" I asked as I sat by while P-21 worked on the lock. I was absent-mindedly chewing on bloody pieces of shrapnel that I'd plucked from my hide.

"It's Killing Joke. Who the fuck knows?" Rampage responded. "Normally it's found around the Everfree Forest, but you hear rumors about it in other nasty tainted parts of Equestria. Usually fatal, always inconvenient." She looked out at the rusty drums and trailers covered by the faintly snickering weed. "Who knows how there's so much here?"

In one fell swoop, we'd lost our medic, our teleportation escape plan, our magic support, and our moral support. All in all, I thought Glory getting turned into Rainbow Dash was pretty... weird. A little light. But given what it could have done... I supposed that it was far more preferable to... say... killing her outright. I guessed that there wasn't much fun in just killing her outright.

The ninth bobby pin snapped in P-21's hooves. "Oh, come on!" he shouted spitting his screwdriver to the ground. "What, did they put the most expensive lock in all of

Equestria on this place?"

I scowled. "Stand back."

He sighed. "If I can't pick it, I don't see how you're going to."

"Didn't say I was going to pick it," I said as I gave the door a shooty look, furrowing my brows as I backed away from the entrance.

"Oh..." he muttered, his eyes getting wide as I charged the double doors. He jumped aside as I slammed into them. A moment later there was another throaty blast that nearly knocked me back out into the squirming blue vines. I lay there on my back, closing my eyes. Oh sweet Celestia, was I sore.

"Hey, nice job!" Rampage cheered.

P-21 didn't look quite so enthusiastic, dragging me to safety before the vines had even more 'fun'. "Well, if you ask me, that was cheating." He gathered up his things and then looked back at me. "You coming?"

"I just need a second. Collect my thoughts..." I groaned as I closed my eyes. Yup... there it was. Laying on top of my jumbled thoughts was the certainty that if there was a nexus for suckitude... it was Hoofington.

The front doors, still mostly closed even with a charred hole where the lock was, creaked open at my push. We had no idea when Glory and Lacunae would return, no idea if Scotch would be okay. The blue stallion clearly looked concerned, glancing back repeatedly. Rampage's power hooves made little click-clack noises on the tiles as she trotted along beside me. I was in such a need for scrap metal to repair myself that I was raiding the garbage cans by the entrance for tin cans to chew on. I even tried gnawing on the lid, but the metal softening spell didn't activate.

That left me slowly regenerating as I walked carefully inside. The detonations were becoming fewer and weaker now. I supposed the joke just wasn't funny anymore, not since I'd used it to my advantage. Looking around the two storey foyer of the building, it was clear something nasty had happened here. There were bloodstains on the wall... but surprisingly little damage. Then again, maybe not so surprisingly, if the inside of this place was as hardened as the outside. In the center of the arched entry was a golden statue covered in cobwebs. Two unicorn bucks grinned out as they lifted an apple in seeming tribute. 'Hippocratic Research,' read the plaque on the base. 'A trusted friend in science!'

I scowled at the pair, then trotted to the base of the statue and rubbed away the grime at the base. It was a tiny stamp, but I could see the O.I.A. symbol at the bottom. I looked around at the dusty walls and scattered papers and junk and imagined I could smell Goldenblood in the musty reek in the air. No bodies, and lots of bloodstains... "Stay close. No E.F.S., but I just know that there's something nasty in here."

Sanguine's lair was probably somewhere underneath the building. I walked as silently as possible, wishing we had rags to make Rampage booties once again. From somewhere... above... behind... there came a snarl that echoed in the halls. "Ooooh, I hate it when I'm right," I murmured as we moved towards an elevator. After mashing the buttons several times, we finally forced the doors open to reveal a half dozen bony ponies curled up in the corners. Somepony had scraped 'Dear Celestia, let us out!' in the wood paneling.

The lights flickered to life, and a slurring music began to play. "... opportunity... ery community..." Then the speakers crackled once more and went silent. The snarl sounded again... along with a dry rattling noise. And was it just me, or did it sound a lot closer?

We moved into the offices with me nervously chewing my bit...okay, whoa; had to be careful with that, or I'd be eating it!— while keeping an eye out. Oh how I missed my PipBuck right now. EC-1101 aside, it was an advantage I really could have used. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?" P-21 said softly as he tapped at the keyboard of a desk terminal I blinked and glanced back at him as Rampage went through file cabinets for errant trash and potential valuables. "The Fluttershy clinic?"

I grunted my response. Why did he have to bring that up now? I frowned... had I just seen movement down the hall? No... just empty hallway. He tapped away and swallowed, "Lets hope this turns out as well as that did."

"Well?" I blinked in shock. "I was strapped to a table with my guts hanging out and had to pull the plug on forty foals. If that was 'well,' I'd hate to imagine lousy!" He gave a sheepish little smile as the terminal beeped, but he frowned when he looked back at it. "Garbage... garbage... garbage... no mention of anything, except... Twilight Sparkle visited a week before the bombs fell."

Really? I backed past the desk till I could see the terminal without losing sight of the door, and there was the date, just before the bombs fell.

Internal Memo: 10-16-11: Twilight Sparkle's visit> Thankfully, we got warning of the Ministry Mare's 'surprise' inspection. Now I want all of us on our very tippy toppest best behavior while she's here. Give

her the tour, stretch things out, and hope to Luna that she runs out of time before she gets too nosy. If all else fails, have the show ready. F&F.

I tapped a little further down. Apparently, Twilight's inspection had not gone well. The memos were all about being swamped with returned and contaminated products.

Internal memo: 10-21-11: Storage> For Celestia's sake, we have to do something with all these returns! I don't care if you have to dump it down the drain, do something with all this extra flux before something bad happens. I don't like how gidgy things have been. Who the hell is in charge of the O.I.A. now? They need to do something! F&F.

And the last:

Internal memo: 10-23-11: Goodbye> Well, dust off your resumes, because you're all fired effective tomorrow! That's right. Let Applejack or whoever the hell is director now deal with this mess. My brother and I are off to sunny Porca Porca where the beaches are warm, the local swine friendly, and the extradition treaties nonexistent. So long, suckers! F&F.

Funny... hope they had an early flight.

We left the blood-spattered offices and carefully made our way into the first few labs. At least, I thought they were labs. After seeing Horizon Labs, I expected to see more in the way of terminals and equipment. In one room were a half dozen chalk boards covered with "_____ X _____" with every critter I could imagine written in the blanks. Most of the combinations were crossed out, but a few were circled, like 'Cake X Tree' with 'Genius!' written next to it.

Okay. I guessed that that was a type of genius...

Carefully, we threaded our way into another lab with more chalkboards and one large bare gray tree in a reinforced box. As we passed by it, the rainbow apples appeared on the branches and fell against the box's walls. Seeds ricocheted wildly inside. "Zapapple Bombs! Plant these around your property, and not only will you be safe from intruders, you can make your own Zapapple Jam! Problems: Uncontrollable and inconsistent appearances. Explosive Jelly. Solution: drop explosive PBnJ behind enemy lines! Profit!"

I shook my head and walked to the door, pushing it open and stepping into the hall.

The only warning I had was the shimmer in front of me. My jaw tightened reflexively, guns blasting at the air and knocking back a creature that seemed like a strange fusion of dog and snake. It started to shimmer back into invisibility as it fell back, but I didn't waste any time blasting it again, then again until it finally collapsed in a bloody heap and stopped blending in. I looked at the rattlesnake tail and four legs and once again wished for a time machine so I could smack whoever made such a

thing!

Of course, I should have been keeping an eye out for more shimmers.

The snake-dog thing crashed into me from the side, nearly knocking me off my hooves as it sank its fangs through the leather armor and into the meat of my withers with a shriek. I really did not get how anypony was supposed to fight in a battle saddle as I thrashed to shove the shimmery abomination back. Rampage leapt atop it with an electric crackle, the power hooves discharging and scorching its shimmery scales. She bit into its ear to anchor herself as her hoof smashed against its skull again and again. Finally, it let me go, and I kicked it away enough to turn and blast it with two shotgun rounds.

"Ouch! Don't shoot fillies!" Rampage protested as it went down from the buckshot.

"You're an immortal death filly! Don't tell me you can't take a little lead," I laughed.

Once more... I should have been keeping an eye out for shimmers.

The pair of us were slammed not by one but a whole pack of the hissing, snapping creatures. I went down, thrashing as I rolled onto my back, and kicked my metal legs as hard and as wildly as I could. Most of them tried to bite my legs, to little effect. Then one got clever and chomped down hard on my belly. I might not have been strictly biological anymore, but I did not want my guts, such as they were, ripped out and strewn all over the place! I heard Rampage scream and smelled blood.

From the office behind me came a firm 'Thump'.

Did I mention that I was really tired of getting blown up today?

The grenade's shrapnel tore into the abominations swarming us, and the group milled back in pain and confusion. P-21 poked his head into the hall and fired a second grenade right into the mass of shimmery dog-snake things. The blast sent body parts flying, and those creatures still able to run did so. I hugged the jagged wound in my gut as I sat up, looking around and making sure there weren't any more shimmers. "Rampage?" I asked as I looked where the filly had fallen.

She sat up and then pointed to the mangled hole in her throat. "Thank goodness for regeneration, huh?" I said with a wince.

When her throat closed, she croaked, "Still fucking hurts!"

We stood, Rampage helped herself to a high protein diet, I helped myself to a high iron diet of office scrap and a few gemstones, and P-21 kept an eye on the hall and

pointedly ignored both of us. Just in case, he popped a grenade in the direction the abominations had fled.

"Think Sanguine knows we're here?" Rampage asked with a frown once we started moving again. It'd been half an hour, and there'd been no sign of anypony.

"No idea," I admitted. I really didn't see Sanguine working in this place. Aside from those things patrolling the halls, none of the labs looked... well... lab-ish. We went into another room half filled with smashed open cages and a blackboard that read: 'Dog X Rattlesnake. All the loyalty of a dog. All the viciousness of a snake.' Pro: loyaltyishness. Con: Ugly as sin. Pro: Natural camouflage makes ugliness moot. Con: Name?' And beneath that was a list: 'Sogs. Dakes. Hissypups. Nightstalkers.' The last had been circled and 'Genius!' written beside it.

A little board next to the cages read 'Feeding Duty'. There was a list of pony names, each one crossed out. The last one had 'I fucking quit' scrawled next to it. Smart pony.

"We need to find a working elevator or stairs down or something. I just know that if Chimera is here, it's somewhere down below." All the nasty projects had to be down below.

We left the cages and found some stairs down. They led to a heavy, substantial steel door. No lock, and no matter how I jerked the handle or beat my hooves against it, it wouldn't open. "Powered door. Probably need a passcard or something to open it," P-21 said. I glared at the door a moment, then tried to bite it. Maybe I could gnaw my way through! After several seconds of scraping paint with my teeth I coughed and gave up.

"Okay. Passcard, then." I muttered as I stared at the door.

That meant going back up. On the second floor we entered a large, long room half filled with machinery. "Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 9000" had been written on one side, but the metal plaque had been scratched out and a sign reading "Super Speedy Flux Mixer 9000 X Turbo" had been painted above it. There was a hopper on one end that was half filled with glittering gems and a keg marked 'Biomagical Delux Flux' on the far side.

As I dug out the gemstones with my hooves, Rampage fiddled with a projector on a small table in the middle of the other half of the room. Suddenly, the lens lit up and crackling music filled the room. A flickering square appeared on the wall, and two unicorn stallions trotted into view. If one hadn't been sporting a mustache, I'd never

have been able to tell them apart.

"Well, how do you do? How do you do!" the smooth-lipped one said with a cheery grin. "I'm Flim!"

"I'm Flam!" said the other.

"And we're the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers, welcoming you to Hippocratic Research. A place where science is pursued effectively..."

"Efficiently!" piped the twin.

"And Ethically," they said in unison with a solemn nod of their heads.

Flim gestured to a cartoon drawing of the building. "I'm sure that you're familiar with a great many of our products."

"What kind of world would we be living in without Sparkle-Cola?" Flam asked, pressing the back of his hoof to his eyes. A little note popped up in the bottom of the screen, barely caught by the pink pony in my head. 'Not affiliated in any way shape or form with the Ministry of Arcane Science or its Employees. Any resemblance is strictly coincidence.'

"And how could we get though life without Wonderglue?" Flim asked as he held up a tube in his hooves.

"Well, you need not wonder any longer, dear consumer, because these are just a few of the many products brought to you by the hardworking ponies at Hippocratic Research!" Flam said as the other pony shook hard to free himself from the bottle of glue. Then he looked out, smiled sheepishly, and stepped back as the mustached pony gestured to his side. "While dozens of our end user products like Abronco Detergent and Sugar Apple Bombs cereal are familiar to you, our most important product is a material you may not be very familiar with."

"Or maybe you are, in which case, what are you doing wasting time watching this?" Flim interjected as he reappeared beside his brother. "So, by now you're probably wondering 'What is this amazing mystery product that brings so much joy and wonder into my life?!"'

"Flux!" they declared proudly as a smiling cartoon barrel filled to the brim with rainbow goo appeared between them.

"Now, if you're a clever pony, you're asking yourself: 'What is Flux and just what can it do?'" Flim said as he nodded his head.

"And if you're not asking that because you already know, then why aren't you working for us?" asked Flam with a cheeky grin.

Flim put a pair of thick, nerdy glasses on. "Flux is the simple term for Bio-Arcano-Chemo Flux. You might also hear it referred to as 'biomagical flux' or 'metacatalyst', but those are just simple terms for the wonder substance of our time," he said with a nod as the barrel was replaced with a tree. "What does it do? Why, what doesn't it do?! You see, think of Flux as raw magical goo. You can use it to make all kinds of magical effects!"

The barrel moved on top of a machine. "Take an example of our good friends at Robroco. All you need is the proper equipment and some scrap metal..." Flam crowed. A heap of scrap metal moved into the machine. The smiling barrel dripped one rainbow colored drop into it. There was a flash, and a smiling toaster rolled out. "Amazing! Science!"

I had to admit, I was impressed. P-21, not so much.

Flim appeared with a wide grin. "So, where does this magical mystery substance come from? Well, the exact mixture is a closely guarded secret."

Flam frowned sternly. "Very closely guarded. We wouldn't want any nasty stripes getting their hooves on it." Then he suddenly grinned, "At least not for less than a bajillion bits!"

Then they said in unison, "Just kidding!"

Flim pointed to a cartoon copy of the machine occupying the room. "Well, wonder no longer! Here at Hippocratic Research, we put science and technology to good use!" A stack of gemstones appeared over the hopper end and poured in. "With our own special blend of quality Equestrian gemstones..."

Six bottles of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple poured into the middle as Flam went on, "And our own domestic rainbow colorant..."

"And our own special patented super spell!" they proclaimed together, and shot cartoon lightning at the cartoon machinery from their horns. The machine began to flash and flicker, and suddenly a rainbow sludge poured out the far end and into a drum. "We create our one-of-a-kind, cannot be duplicated, manipulated, copied, or knocked off Flux!"

The image then showed the building and, leaving it, wagons being pulled by train tractors heaped with smiling barrels. "And where does it go when its done? Well, where doesn't it go?! Flux is used in everything from abdominal braces to zippers

and everything in between. Hundreds of products you use every day either were made from, with, or by Flux!" Flim said offscreen.

Flam then appeared looking sad. "Now, we want to caution you that something as super amazing, one of a kind as Flux is not something you should play around with."

Flim appeared next to him and gave a solemn nod. "Absolutely." They vanished as Flim's voice went on, "No doubt you've heard about some poor pony playing around with a barrel of unauthorized, tampered, or used Flux and suffering some horrible accident." A smiling pony wearing a bow trotted along and inexplicably tripped and fell into an open frowning barrel. She popped back out, but a wing sprung from her left side and a cow's horn sprouted out of the right side of her head. She looked like quite the sad pony.

"For which Hippocratic research denies any and all liability," Flam muttered softly.

Flim continued, "We want to assure you that, used properly, Flux is a valuable... nay... an essential part of our modern world!"

"So we wish to thank you for your interest in coming to tour Hippocratic Research," Flim said with a grin. "Talk to your parents about taking one of our patented Night-stalkers home; at last, a pet you can count on to keep you safe from nasty stripe infiltrators! Bred and trained to attack any and all zebras at first sight."

"Or perhaps you're more interested in our scorposprites! If you have a sibling or neighborhood bully you want to get even with, then there's nothing better!" Flam proclaimed.

"And if you're looking for our legal department, they're located on the fourth floor... office hours eleven fifty eight to eleven fifty nine, griffon standard time!" Flim added with a wide grin.

The pair then sang out, "So we've got opportunity in each and every community! He's Flim! He's Flam! We're the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers!"

Then the projector flickered and died. The three of us stared blankly at the wall and I murmured softly, "Well, now I have a better idea why the world blew up like it did."

"What hair-brained idiot would think of taking a scorpion and putting wings on it?!" I yelled before yanking the bit in my jaw and sending up another cone of lead, shredding a buzzy, filmy wing and sending the insect scuttling along towards us,

oozing green goo.

"To be fair, it's more like they gave a bloatsprite a stinger!" Rampage squealed as she pounced atop the maimed bug, her four power hooves flashing and splattering me with its sludge.

"I don't care!" I yelled as more of the gray spherical bugs came flying out after us. Was there any end to the things? We'd found a lab with the walls and ceiling covered in their nests. One had stung P-21 right away, and now the rest were looking to finish the job. "It's stupid... stupid... stupid!" I shouted, punctuating each 'stupid' with another blast of buckshot. I didn't even have to aim; I just fired as quickly as I could down the hall and hoped enough shot hit.

"I'm more interested in if you have any of that antivenom Glory made..." P-21 said weakly. "Really really really interested."

I ripped off another half dozen shots as rapidly as I could, and Rampage squished the fallen bugs with the enthusiasm only a filly could muster. "Reload!" I bellowed, knowing the belt was almost spent. Rampage scrambled back, grabbed another belt of shotgun shells, and slammed it home. "One condition!"

"Condition?" he said weakly. "I'm dying of poison and you're giving me conditions?"

"Loaded!" Rampage yelled, immediately sprang back to squashing the scorposprites.

I ripped out three more shots. "When we're done... you're going to Scotch... and you are going to tell her you're her daddy. And you're going to say nice things about her mom. And you're going to hug her!" Another five swarmed out and I jerked the bit as rapidly as I could. The blasts shredded their flapping wings, and a few were pulped outright by the impacts.

"And if I say no?" he panted as I backed towards him.

"Then I'll give it to you, but with a huge guilt trip attached," I countered. One arched high above its fellows and plunged towards me, its stinger oozing venom as it drove the poisonous spur at my eye. I swung my foreleg and knocked the head-sized bug aside. Rampage pounced upon it and popped it under her power hooves.

He didn't answer, and I looked back at him lying there unconscious. "Cheater..." I muttered. "Rampage! Antivenom!" She leapt on my back and dug through my saddlebags again for one of the vials of antivenom that Glory had mixed ages ago. She poured it into his mouth as I blasted at the swarm.

He stirred as consciousness returned just as the last few bugs were blasted and

stomped. I blew the smoke away from my shotgun and trotted to him, kneeling and helping him sit up. “You’ll do anything you can to get out of talking with her, won’t you?”

He looked at me, then dropped his gaze. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh no. That might have worked a month ago when I was fresh and new to the Wasteland, but now I am a grizzled Wasteland veteran and I will not wait for—”

There was a flash and I was knocked sprawling on my side, my head spinning. Rampage grinned down at me. “Whoopsie. Sorry. Thought I saw another scorposprite, but it was just a big swelled head.” She trotted over to P-21. “Of course, a grizzled veteran of the Wasteland would have seen that one coming.”

Once P-21 was back on his hooves and the building stopped spinning, we found a large office with two identical desks, an enormous portrait of one of the brothers behind each. A counter along the far wall held dozens of different products made by the brothers, including a tiny model of the Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 9000. Two skeletons wearing fancy business suits lay huddled together surrounded by four suitcases. One had split open, spilling countless gold bits across the floor of the office.

I saw a pair of tickets clutched into one brothers’ hooves and flipped them open. “Hoofington to Porca Porca... departure time, 2 PM.” I patted the skull sympathetically. “Should have gotten a morning flight.”

Rampage pointed at Flim’s desk as P-21 started to work on Flam’s terminal. “Hey, Blackjack. Isn’t that one of those figurine thingies you collect?” For an instant, I imagined I heard five little ponies in my head gasp in excitement... or maybe it was just me!

I blinked and stared. There, smiling brightly at me, was the vivid purple figure of Twilight Sparkle. Slowly, I approached with a smile. Could it be? Was it possible? I carefully scooped it up in my hooves and hugged it to my chest. “At last! It’s Twi—” I frowned and pulled it away, looking down. A wide, cheesy grin met my eyes; her pupils were different sizes and pointed in opposite directions. ‘I’m an egghead,’ read the plaque. My eyes narrowed as I tapped the figurine’s head, making it wobble and bobble around wildly. It wasn’t a statuette, just a cheap plastic knockoff.

With a sour grunt, I chucked it into the garbage bin.

P-21 looked up from the terminal. “Well, bad news. Looks like they erased everything on their computers, filewise... but I also have some good news.” He tapped a

button, and part of the wall opened up to reveal an elevator car. “What do you want to bet this elevator goes somewhere special?”

I grinned. “I love smart ponies.” Then I frowned. “But you’re still going to talk to Scotch... I mean it.”

He sighed. “I know... I know. I’ve been trying not to think about it. About... about everything I might have missed if she’s dead. I’ve been a royal ass putting it off for so long.”

We trotted to the elevator. Rampage put a hoof down, and the car gave a soft groan. “Whoa... what corners did they cut installing this thing?” I had to admit; it looked like the elevator was definitely not built to the same code as the rest of the building.

I snorted and stepped in. Okay, it was a little wobbly, but I needed to go down had no doubt it would take me where I needed to go. “It’s fine.”

“I’m not sure it was even fine two centuries ago,” P-21 said sourly. He dug around in the desk and pulled out a yellow card. “Look. We can just walk back down to the door.”

I rolled my eyes and started jumping. “Look! It’s fine! Just fine! Nothing’s happ—”

With a roar, the floor exploded beneath me, tossing me into the ceiling... which also exploded! I plummeted down the dark elevator shaft, and with a shriek of twisted metal the elevator broke loose and plunged down after me.

Ha... ha... ha...

Footnote: Maximum level reached.

38. Blood

"You should see the looks on your faces! Priceless!"

I'd heard that you see your whole life flash before your eyes just before you die. Personally, I doubted it. I'd already died once and was quite thankful that I hadn't had to relive every embarrassing moment in 99. Then again, they also say practice makes perfect, so I suppose that it shouldn't have been a surprise that after getting blown up I'd see it... except that perfect apparently required more practice than I'd gotten so far, since the life I was seeing wasn't mine.

Figures.

I could see and hear, but that was all. It was almost like being in a memory orb, but I couldn't tell who or even what my host was. Flim and Flam paced back and forth nervously, plucking at their business suits. The middle-aged stallions looking like they were visibly aging from stress as I watched. "I can't believe she's coming here! Why here? Why now, of all times?!" wailed the mustachioed Flam.

"I don't know. I don't know! She simply demanded to see us in person about one of our products," Flim muttered in worry.

"It can't be the Sparkle-Cola FLASH line, can it? Maybe she found out about some of the side effects?" Flam gasped. "You don't think she's here for a share of the profits? I thought she signed off on that!"

"Well, there is some question as to if she actually signed it or not, but legal assures us it should stand up in court... probably. Sixty percent chance," Flim said. The yellow unicorn rubbed his nose and then yelled, "Where is he? He's supposed to prevent this, right? That was part of our deal!"

"He'd better!" said Flam, who then sat hard and wrung his hooves together. "I can't believe it. Everything was going so well! Sure, the nightstalkers could show a better overhead, but we've been making a mint dropping their eggs in zebra population areas! We've got a whole new line of Poison Joke products starting next month! And the scorposprites have been working like a charm behind the lines. Maybe we can get through to Rainbow Dash to talk to her and..."

Suddenly, there was a purple flash, and Twilight Sparkle appeared. I had to admit, though I'd seen her several times, I'd never before seen her looking so... scary.

Her mane had streaks of gray, and wrinkles had set in around her eyes and mouth. Worst of all, though, was the hard look in her eyes; it made me wonder if she was going to just turn the pair into stone or something just with that glare.

“Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle! So nice to see you! We were just talking about how happy we are to have such an intellect as yourself visit us!” Flim grinned widely. “Let us formally welcome you to Hippocratic Research, where we conduct science effectively!”

“Efficiently!” piped up Flam.

“And ethically,” they finished in unison. Twilight’s lips didn’t budge in the slightest. You could almost see the nervous sweat popping out of their foreheads. Flam’s telekinesis pushed a button on his terminal, and music began to play.

“If either of you start to sing, I’m sending you to Pinkie Pie,” she said without missing a beat, and the two bucks froze. Twilight’s horn glowed as she pressed the same button and silenced the music. A pair of glasses and a clipboard appeared, the former settling on her muzzle as she examined the latter. “I’ve sent six letters, four polite inquiries and five formal requests, and now I am here in person to get my questions answered: what is Flux, and how is it made?”

The two bucks went from looking nervous to looking sick. Flim tapped his hooves together. “Well, you see. First we take a very precise assortment of gems and liquefy them in our proprietary super flux recombobulator matrix, which—“

“Does nothing,” Twilight interrupted. “I’ve examined all the formal documents you’ve submitted on Flux over the last decade. Every single one. And I’ve concluded that I’ve never seen a larger collection of gibberish in my life.”

“Oh... you couldn’t have really read...” Flam began, and then he met Twilight’s flat gaze. His mustache drooped so much that I thought it would simply drop off. “Every... single... one?”

“Yes. Every one. I’ve gone over all your submissions and patents and formulas trying to duplicate your process for producing Flux. I’ve studied your product in minute detail and come to the conclusion that it doesn’t matter how many gems you liquefy or rainbows you mix together; there is no way that you can produce a substance like Flux from those raw materials.” The clipboard disappeared as she looked at the twin brothers over the top of her glasses. “So I am here, gentlecolts, in person, to find out exactly what Flux is and how you make it.”

The pair gave her a sickly smile. “Ah, if we may ask... by any chance, have you

spoken with the director about this?" Flim asked weakly.

"I don't need to involve Horse, thank you very much. I am quite capable of handling this on my own." The two shared a look.

"No no. Not him? I mean the other Director?" Flam winced as her gaze sharpened. A golden flash came from beneath the door to the hall.

"Goldenblood is no longer director of anything! And any day now, I expect him to be thrown into a dungeon, exiled, or thrown into a dungeon wherever he's exiled!" she shouted as her mane bristled.

"Oh, I doubt I'll get off so lightly," rasped a familiar bastard. It was slightly mollifying to see that Goldenblood looked every bit as battered and exhausted as Twilight. His golden mane was disheveled, and his suit looked as though it'd been slept in. "My apologies for being late."

"You," Twilight said with more outright loathing than I'd ever heard before. "You're not late. You don't need to be here at all!" she snapped. "You can take your sneaky bag of tricks and go, Goldenblood."

He stared into her hard gaze, and then his lip curled slowly. "Luna didn't tell you, did she?" The question seemed to shock and unsettle her. He looked at her with an odd amused expression that made me want to kick the scarred unicorn stallion, then chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Let me guess, she said that she had no idea how Hippocratic Research produced Flux, but that she would have Horse forward the information to you?" Anger knit the mare's brows as she glared back at him.

"He did, and it was all garbage. The same garbage that I've gotten from you for over a year!" she said as she pointed her hoof at him. "You were supposed to give me everything about Chimera, Goldenblood. Everything means everything!" She swung the hoof dramatically. "Your obstruction is why you were removed!"

His smile didn't change. It was the most poisonous smile I'd ever seen. "And yet, even with me gone, you're still having problems with making alicorns." The look was like a poisoned dagger in her chest.

"I've examined every aspect of the project as it pertains to transformations and fusions. Even improved on some aspects. We don't need the megaspell for the transformation, just for the creation of the metamorphic potion. But I've broken down every ingredient of the potion, adjusted and examined and readjusted my findings, and tracked down every one of its constituent elements. All but one. 'Metamagical Flux', which is identical to 'Biomagical Flux', and 'Transmogrifical Flux.' You just put

on different colored labels,” she said with a glare at the twins.

“Ah... it was a marketing decision, I think....” Flim muttered weakly.

“And the more I’ve worked with this stuff, the more I’ve come to realize how dangerous it is. Do you have any idea what happens to ponies exposed to it? The mutations? Do you know what it did to Sunny Days? I had to waste time and resources devising a spell just to try and negate its effects. And it’s used everywhere, Goldenblood! Manufacturing. Energy production. Medicine. Food.” She paused and fixed the twins with her glare. “Sparkle-Cola.” The pair looked as if they wanted the floor to swallow them up, but then her glare returned to Goldenblood. “I’ve been using it myself for all these years and only now realized that I don’t have a clue what it is or how it works. But that ends today.” She stomped her hoof. “If all of you don’t tell me exactly what the big secret is, then my next stop is a meeting with Luna and Pinkie Pie. We’ll find out whatever it is you’re hiding here.”

Goldenblood looked at her, then said quietly, “Twilight, go back to Canterlot. You’re making great progress on your stealth suit. Focus on that. Relax and forget all about Hippocratic Research and Flux. You don’t want to know, and you don’t want to force this.”

“How... how can you know that?” She gaped at him. “You’re not the director anymore, Goldenblood! You have no authority in Equestria anymore.” But he didn’t move. He didn’t even blink. If anything, his eyes were pitying rather than hard. And slowly, she took a step back. “No. I have to know. The I.M.P. project has to work. It simply has to. There’s nothing else that will end this war! I’ll get all my friends, and we’ll put this place under a microscope if we have to. I’ll get Princess Luna to...”

“Give it up, Twilight,” Goldenblood said softly. It may have been just me, but for a moment it sounded as if he were pleading with her. “You’ve done great and incredible things, Twilight.” It might have been a kind statement, but it seemed to strike her like a blow.

“Great and incredible?” She suddenly laughed, her mane frizzing even more. “I’ve done nothing... nothing... for five years now. Nothing since Big Macintosh died! My friends have accomplished more to help protect Equestria than I have. It’s my responsibility to come up with magic that will save Equestria! That’s what I promised Luna when I established the Ministry of Arcane Science. But even after everything she’s done for me, I’m no closer to giving Luna what she needs to end this war. Don’t you understand? I’m a failure.” I knew that look on her face; she might not have been on a mattress, but she was fighting hard to stay off it.

Goldenblood gave the brothers a single look that promised them a trip down an elevator shaft. I saw the two unicorns share a glance, one magically sliding the Twilight bobblehead out of sight, and then they started to study the ceiling as if it was the most fascinating thing they'd ever laid eyes on. Only then did Goldenblood look back at the mare fighting so damned hard for everypony else.

He stared at her for another long moment. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I really am." He closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking of something. I'd never seen a buck look more... old. Goldenblood looked tired, not just in body, but in spirit too. "We're all doing what we can to save Equestria, even if some of us have become monsters in the process." Then he looked at the brothers. "Show her."

Twilight lifted her head, staring at him in confusion. The brothers shuffled nervously. "I'm not sure that's..." Flim began, but Goldenblood silenced him with a look. "...that we should delay a second longer! We can use our own private elevator to speed the process along! Yes, the sooner we're done here, the better." The brother tapped the keys of his terminal and opened the elevator door.

"But... why?" Twilight asked in quiet disbelief, looking at him in amazement. "Why are you showing me this now?"

"Because... I owe you," he replied quietly as he walked to the elevator door. "And I'm sorry."

I awoke feeling some scrap metal half tangled in my mane and shook my head, tossing it away and receiving a sting of pain as it cut the side of my face. I sighed. Great. More crazy? Dream? Enclave mind control device finally kicking in? Possession? What kind of commentary was it on my life when I couldn't count out any of those?

"You know, all things considered, in light of the last day or two, I think I might have made a mistake in coming back to Hoofington," I said as I dangled in the middle of a pitch black shaft by one of my forelegs. It'd gotten caught in a tangle of cable as I plummeted past. The elevator car had gotten jammed above me and was letting out groans every time I wiggled around too much. I had no idea how far I'd fallen, or how far there was left to fall, or what exactly awaited me at the bottom. I thought for a moment that I'd heard P-21 and Rampage yelling my name, but now everything was silent.

...Of course, I could have answered at least one of those questions by timing how

long it took that scrap to fall. If I'd been paying attention. ...It had actually hit bottom, right? Oh, idea! I sniffed and snorted and coughed and hacked and finally worked up a nice wad of phlegm, then turned my head and spat, letting it fall. My ears strained, and I heard a very distant 'plat' far below. The elevator let out a protesting noise as I twisted, trying to see anything in the blackness that the dim red light from my eyes was, if anything, just highlighting. Lasers made lousy flashlights.

Then the cable suddenly slipped along my leg. I waved my other limbs wildly in the dark, looking for something to hold on to, and then, just as the leg came free, extended my fingers, seizing the cable and holding it fast with both forelegs. There was a tense moment as I hung there, looking up at the place where my brain saw the faintest suggestion of a dark red leg, but the metallic digits held. "Okay, Rover, wherever you are... you're right. Thumbs are better." I swung my hindlegs until one hooked the cable to better support my weight. Then the elevator gave another groan and jerk. "Now, how to use freaky thumb powers to get out of here?"

From somewhere below came a number of mechanical bangs. "Okay... thumb powers expended... maybe..." I couldn't do more than turn a page with my horn. I tried to remember the magic primer as I swung there under the groaning elevator. Magic is internal, not a bunch of magical words, chants, and incantations. And all unicorn horns glowed when we did magic; I just needed mine to glow more! I closed my eyes and imagined a little star shedding light like a candle. That's what I needed... light... lighty light light... the electric crackle grew in my horn as it tingled. I opened an eye.

Nothing. I clenched my eyes shut and twisted my face into ridiculous expressions. Still nothing. Finally... it might not have been the most 'magical' of methods, but I just made like I had the worst case of constipation ever, grit my teeth, and pushed!

Then there was a pop and a discharge like when I fired a magic bullet, followed by a zap and an immense sense of relief. I stared at the tiny mote of light hanging in front of me. "I did it..." I murmured weakly in shock as I stared at it. Then it sank in. "I did it!" I cheered in glee, whooping. Suddenly the elevator car lurched as it dropped a foot, making me gulp... but then I looked at my little spell... my compact spell... and grinned and silently cheered.

The feeling of euphoria quickly faded as I looked around and saw nothing but four walls and the elevator's two guide rails. I gingerly stretched one of my forehooves towards the nearest rail but was still short. I closed my eyes and forced a grin, shaking my head. I didn't like it... not one bit. But it wasn't as if I had any better ideas. I swung my hind end one way, then the other. Back and forth. The elevator

car overhead began to squeal in time with my swings. Just stay up there a little bit longer...

I let out a cry as I let go of the cable and smacked into the rail, all four limbs hugging it tight. Okay! This was progress. Now all I had to do was slide down the rail to a door. Easy as pie.... See? I was already sliding. Sliding really fast! What exactly was the speed difference between sliding down a rail and falling down alongside one? My enameled limbs were squealing, and my chest was getting pretty damn toasty rubbing against the metal. Wait! Was this thing oiled or something?! "Ooooo.... Shit!" I yelled as I fell away from the rail.

I fell to my death for a few seconds before I slammed my back against a curved metal surface that gave beneath me, slowing my fall with a growing hum. "Whoa there, little lady!" a robotic male drawled. I slid along the metal, my hooves banging and scratching the hovering orb before I dropped... and fell into a tangle of robotic limbs. The three cameras that apparently served as its eyes turned to focus on me. "Always told 'em this elevator was unsafe fer pony travel, but does anypony listen to old Hank? Nooo."

"Please don't explode! Please don't explode!" I really really hoped that the joke had finally run its course as I clung to the levitating robot.

"I ain't gonna explode. Ol' Hank's the finest Handy you ever seen! Oooof... you sure are a healthy girl, aintcha?" the robot crackled as we dropped down the shaft. "Need to maximize my levitation repulsor drive!"

"I... um... have more metal in me than most mares." No shooting the lifesaving robot over a weight joke, Blackjack. I looked around the elevator shaft.

"Is that so? Sheee-oot, and here Ol' Hank was convinced my sensor talismans were fritzed fer good! Looked at you and couldn't tell if you were a mechanical or biological. Good thing I kept my access probe to myself. Wouldn't want to get fresh."

We finally reached the bottom of the shaft; two tunnels led off in different directions. I slipped out of Hank's limbs and onto the concrete floor, very, very glad to be back on something solid again. "I don't suppose that you know where I can find Sanguine, do you?" The spidery robot floated there a moment, and I added, "Er, I think his name is Trueblood?"

"The doc? Oh, he's probably somewhere in the facility over yonder. Been making a mess o' things. I keep on putting out repair citations and notifications and the like, but nopony's gotten back to poor Ol' Hank since we got the call fer the big sleep."

“Big sleep?” I frowned.

“Oh, it was a long time back. Big order went out to power down and wait fer further commands. So most of us done went quiet like the rest o’ the city. ‘Course, Maintenance Quad B was left out. The four of us tried to keep everythin’ neat and tidy, but after a while things break down and wear out. Ol’ Hank’s all that’s left to keep things workin’.” He sighed. “Seemed like a damned shame. We had so much work we need to do. Floors to polish. Hinges to oil. And I haven’t gotten round to fixing Ms. Moonstar’s desk drawer. Hope she’s not too cross.”

I frowned; I’d never thought of the bombs falling from a machine’s point of view. I tried to imagine having a life and then suddenly being told to go to sleep, then waking up to find that everything that was important to me was gone. Did Ol’ Hank realize that Moonstar had probably been dead for two centuries? That the world beyond this facility was smashed and broken? Could it imagine that?

“What did you mean when you said that Trueblood’s breaking things?” I asked.

“Well, he ain’t much of an engineer,” Ol’ Hank muttered, “He’s trying to wake the machines down below up. Snooty things, never really talked to us much. All kinds of medical stuff that make a powerful mess when they leak. Dunno why he bothers, but lately it seems everypony’s yelling all at once fer us to wake up again.”

“Yelling at you?”

“Started a few weeks back. General alarm went out to the Hoofington region: zebra megaspell attack. Woke up some emergency systems, and those woke up some communication systems and those woke up some command systems and now none of them have a clue what we’re supposed to do. But there’s some folk like the doc who keep saying we’re suppose to do what he says, and at the same time we’re suppose to do what the Core Command says and at the same time we’re getting Core commands to not do what Core Command says! It’s enough to make a poor ol’ maintenance bot like me pop his processor gems!” He gave a huff. “If you don’t mind my saying so, you biologicals sure do like to cross your wires.”

I thought about that with a frown. “So you’re telling me that somepony out there is giving you commands to wake up and do things, but somepony else is telling you not to do them?”

“Mmhmm! Between when the alert went out and now, there’ve been four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thousand, one hundred and twelve commands issued and four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thou-

sand, and sixty seven countermands issued. Makes it a mite tricky fer a bot to get his job done." Wait, I might not have Glory's head for numbers, but even I knew that those didn't add up!

"Why fewer countermands?" I asked.

"Well I don't rightly know. I just clean things up," Ol' Hank replied in faint exasperation. "Course, even Ol' Hank got the order to apply my rotary saw to the doctor's head. Don't rightly know why. But then that got countermanded a millisecond later and I just went back to cleaning. But personally, I reckon whoever's making the commands is a mite faster or cleverer than whoever is canceling 'em." And whoever was making the commands was trying to kill Sanguine. Suddenly, all his talk of running out of time was starting to make more sense. Eventually, one of those commands would get through.

But... it still didn't make sense, really. Why didn't he just go? Lots of ponies had trouble leaving Hoofington, but it was hard for me to imagine a pony like him not being able to set up shop somewhere else. He'd been trying to get Chimera for Red Eye, and he'd given me the evil villain 'experiment on the Wasteland' speech. Either would have been good enough motivation, but something didn't quite fit. When he'd heard that I'd died he'd carved a trail of butchery to flush me out because something in the Core was woken up and after him. Why not simply leave? A ghoul of Sanguine's capacity had options. Something had kept him here. Chimera? Was that something so important to him that he would risk his life, risk everything for it? I just didn't see it. He'd lived well enough without Chimera for two centuries.

There was something else. "Can you tell me what Sangui- I mean, the doc needs with Chimera?"

"No idea. Not sure what yer referring to. 'Fraid Doc doesn't have much respect for the maintenance staff. Guess he doesn't put much stock in clean floors," Ol' Hank muttered.

I nodded, then tried to think of who might want to countermand orders to kill Sanguine. Who would know about Chimera and want to keep him alive? A chill ran through me. "Ol' Hank. Does the name Goldenblood mean anything to you?" The robot just stared at me for the longest time, and I frowned. "Hank?"

The robot's buzz saw whirred as it seized me by my throat with a pincer and plunged the rotating blade straight at my face! I brought up my forelegs and the saw teeth sputtered and sparked off the enamel. This thing had me outnumbered on fighting limbs and was way too close for me to bring my battle saddle guns to bear. Its

cutting torch flared to life as a metallic scream sounded from its speakers.

I had only one thing going for me: traction. I blocked the saw and torch as best I could and powered forward with my hind legs. The robot's levitation talisman didn't slow it at all as I powered it into the far wall, pulled back, and slammed it again and again. Finally, something inside the robot popped and crackled, and the levitation talisman went dark. The robot fell to the ground, the shriek dwindling to a soft crackle and then falling silent.

I pulled my throat out of its pincer grip and sighed. "Guess so," I murmured, looking up the shaft. There was no sign of my friends; I supposed they were going to find another way down to me. I sighed, looking at my hooves and weapons. I really missed my telekinesis; as solid a rig as the battle saddle was, I simply wasn't as good with it as Glory. I kept getting in fights where I just couldn't shift my body as I needed to. I carefully removed it, sticking it in my bags, and bundled up Taurus' rifle and the shotgun. Scotch still had Vigilance. The sword would probably be too long and ungainly if wielded in my mouth. How the heck did ponies without magic fight with those things? "Well... I guess it's just me and my own four hooves for now."

As silently as I could, I picked a tunnel at random and made my way down it. I tried not to think of Glory and Scotch. I tried not to imagine... I stopped and thumped my head hard on the concrete wall. "No. No. No. No. You are not doing this now. Priest was bad enough," I muttered, then winced and rubbed my head. "And now I'm talking to myself! Ugggh!"

Okay. So I wasn't at my finest right then.

The tunnels were all Hoofington standar— wait. Strike that. The blue line subway tunnels had at least showed signs of damage, rust, and overall decay. These walls were crack-free. A product of Ol' Hank's work, or was it because they were even more overengineered than the rest of the underground? I supposed it really didn't matter. I travelled further along and reached some sort of security station in front of a heavy door; there were bones behind the bulletproof glass... and a sidearm. An IF-38 Cornhusker revolver. Not the most powerful gun, but it had a mouthgrip I could use comfortably without the battle saddle.

In the break room behind the station was a fold-out cot and some lockers that I cleared out... and a terminal. I chewed on my lip; this really was more P-21's thing. Still, I knew the basics... go to the login prompt, hold down those two keys there to get the debug and look for words that might be the password. Fail too often and it'd lock up permanently.

Ten minutes later, I felt a surge of glee as I picked out the password from the junk: 'Cider'. There wasn't much in the terminal. Duty roster and a complaint filed against one security buck for being scared of the lower levels. Then there was an option to open the door. I bit my lip and toggled it.

The door lifted up, revealing a little shack practically invisible behind a concrete slip nestled right up against a cliff face. I heard the river flowing by and carefully poked my head out. There was the Zenith bridge off to my left. I barely suppressed a scream of frustration; this whole time, there was a back door to this place?! Ugh... without a way to tell Lacunae, there wasn't a reason to leave it open and invite trouble inside.

I closed it up and retraced my steps, picking my way along the other tunnel. Conduits and pipes ran along the walls and ceiling; I suspected that this was a maintenance access of some sort. I ran across a little alcove with a workbench and shelves of engineering supplies, as well as some ammo containers. I chowed down on some nice juicy steel nuts and bolts as I practiced my telekinesis on a bobby pin in the lock of one of the ammo boxes, the most I could manage at the moment. The first one snapped after a few fumbles, but I felt an odd little surge of pride as the second popped the lock.

Bleugh, all magic gem cartridges and spark drums. Then I pursed my lips and placed one of the cartridges in the workbench vise. After a bit of determined twisting, the plastic lid popped off cartridge's base. I carefully shook some of the rainbow dust within onto my tongue, and the crystalline specks popped and crackled delightfully. Not exactly the same as a whole gemstone, but sti—

A low snuffling and rumble filled the air, making my eyes widen. Something was walking nearby, with slow, dragging, heavy steps. I slowly poked my head back into the tunnel in time to spot the dark hindquarters of... something... moving out of sight. Very carefully, I moved down after it as the scrap metal and gem dust restored my damaged limbs. The passageway I was in was opening up into some kind of storeroom; clearly, Ol' Hank's cleaning routine ended here. The floor was strewn with crushed and scattered drums. Rainbow goop was spattered all over the place.

And the... thing... was moving somewhere inside. I slipped slowly out into the room and worked my way around, keeping opposite the thing and moving as quietly as possible. My rear hoof stepped in some of the goop, and I felt a momentary spike of concern as I looked back... but other than feeling like I'd just stepped in something foul, nothing was happening. Okay, another point for cyberlimbs. I just

had to keep it off my hide. Maybe it was time to bust out the...

Wasn't there a thing in here that I was supposed to be keeping an eye on?

The bellow nearly shook me off my hooves as I turned and looked down between the battered, tottery shelving at what I assumed was once a pony. Four hooves, head, and tail; that was a pony, right? It was as if somepony had started there and then suffered some sort of psychotic vision of massive twisted knots of flesh and barely restrained bulk. The pale form's bloodshot eyes glared around wet leather straps that seemed to be holding most of its body together. However, all that was secondary to the size of its mouth, which was filled with broken stone-like teeth.

With shocking speed, the ungainly thing spun and kicked an intact drum down the aisle at me, and I barely ducked as it struck the rack behind me and burst. Quick as I could, I was running from the rain of droplets. Really. Hazardous material suit! Sounded great. Especially having doffed the battle saddle! Really, I could have done with having something a little higher caliber at my disposal, too! When this was over, I was going to take a few days to try and get my horn back in order.

The pony behemoth, which I suspected was one of Precious's 'fatties', came charging around the end of the next row. Its broad hooves smashed and scattered the barrels that had fallen. Big I could handle, but big and fast... I slipped into S.A.T.S. to—

No, I didn't! Instead, I realized that S.A.T.S. was gone just in time to dive to the side as the colossal hooves plunged towards me. Don't roll. Don't slide on your belly. Put some damn distance between you and it. An instinctive part of me wanted to flee back down the tunnel, but, big as this thing was, I knew it would fit. I had to do something else...

I had to go up.

I leapt up to the second tier of shelving and extended my freaky fingers to grab the edge of the third. I clambered up, then on to the fourth. Beneath me, the behemoth howled and smashed the base of the shelves again and again; I was nearly knocked free as the whole structure swayed. I reached the very top, though, and looked down at the glaring beast beneath me. Okay, Rover was really right. Thumbs were saving my life more than guns.

The thing howled and kicked the shelves again, bending steel with each powerful blow, and the shelves gave another ominous sway. "Hey! Knock it off!" I shouted, looking at the heavy barrels stacked around me and then at the floor way, way below

me. A little light lit in my brain as I grinned down. "Hey! Don't knock it off!" A little blue pony in my head had come up with an idea, and it was gonna be awesome! I shoved a barrel over the edge, barely missing the pony creature. It bellowed in rage and slammed the shelves again. Then the metal groaned, and there was a loud ping as something gave, and then more pings, and at once the shelves stopped swaying and began a steady movement that was building momentum.

The pony creature realized its peril, trying to move its bulk as the shelves tumbled over and dumped thousands of pounds of drums in a cascade of steel and chemical that pounded down on top of it. The shelves were coming apart, dumping steel beams and shelving atop it as I felt the sideways motion start to become a downward motion. I leapt for the next set of shelves as the collapsing set smashed into it, scrambling to keep the leaking rainbow goo off my hide. I looked down at the pile. If it wasn't dead, then I gave up.

Carefully, I scrambled my way down and trotted back to the workroom. I busted out the hazardous materials suit... but having discovered the joy of thumbs, I hesitated, then broke out the sword. Somewhere, I was sure, a hazardous materials specialist was weeping as I cut off the ends of the suit's forelegs and stuck my limbs through. Then I wiggled the rest of the way into the yellow suit, leaving my bardings on under it, used a whole roll of duct tape to seal the gaps around my legs, and tugged the saddlebags around my waist. I balked at the helmet. Without my EFS, I'd need to rely on my eyes and ears more, and my mouth was the only way I was going to be able to use the revolver at all.

I returned to the storeroom and stalked past the oozing rainbow heap. I paused for the longest time, my ears straining for any sign that that thing was going to get back up and come after me. Small favors; it was so much goo beneath the steel. Now, as long as I didn't meet a similar fate, I was happy.

Trotting past it, I moved into a hall... and looked at the translucent starburst flanks of Twilight Sparkle and the scarred hide of Goldenblood. The hallway was a mess of rainbow gunk and ooze. Ponies in lab coats and hazardous material suits trotted past, appearing and disappearing as they moved. I sat down hard, immobilized by the sight. "It really is an impressive facility, but I can't help but notice some similarities in the layout," she said as she looked dryly at the exhausted buck. "What, did you simply steal Maripony's design and bury it underground?"

"Steal? Of course not," he said in a faintly hurt tone. "Stealing implies removal. We steal from Stable-Tec. We copy from the M.A.S..." He took a misstep and fell to his knees with a groan.

"Goldenblood? Are you alright?" She knelt beside him and helped nudge him to his feet. "You look... well... worse than usual."

"No, I'm not alright. But you needn't concern yourself with me. I've learned some... unpleasant things myself lately," he rasped as he stood with a groan.

"I'm sorry I pressed Luna to remove you. I wanted to work with you, Goldenblood. I thought that was the whole point of your office," she said as she looked at him sternly. He blinked at her, as if not even comprehending what she'd said, before he smiled tiredly.

"Oh. That. No, that's hardly a bother at this point. My removal was inevitable, though I hadn't realized how much more of a trial protecting others from my mistakes would be," he said with a sigh. "Regardless, if everything turns out as it should, it won't matter much."

"What are you talking about?" Twilight asked in worry.

"Don't worry, Twilight," he said quietly as he lifted himself to his hooves. "We've taken care of everything. And even if it doesn't work out... everything comes out clean one way... or the other." They faded from sight, as did the rest of the ponies I'd seen.

No. Not all of them. I gaped as two ghostly ponies trotted by and then faded into nothing.

I blinked, shook my head, and looked down the trashed hallway, now empty and strewn with garbage and detritus. I stared at it in confusion. "What the hell..." I muttered with a groan, rubbing my temples as I felt a doozy of a headache start. Was this some weird Hoofington Enervation thing? Was I going crazy... er? "Do not tell me I have to choose between crazy and ghosts."

I just wanted to find Sanguine and kill him. Why did that have to be so hard?

Moving along, I encountered something nice and familiar: automated turrets blasting at me from the ceiling. I took cover behind two barrels, almost relieved at something as reassuring as a machine firing low caliber ammunition at me. Twelve rounds later, the turrets mounted in the ceiling blew apart. That left me to see the other fun little addition to the latest house of horrors: bloody bones and viscera were heaped among piles of pale white hide. The stench made me gag as I stepped past.

I was liking this less and less with every minute. I was finding quarters now, bunks for the staff that had worked here. I really couldn't see ponies commuting to and from this place. The bunks were just as trashed as the rest, most of the metal

smashed to scrap; I munched on a few pieces and shoved some more into my bag for the next time I felt snacky. I searched everything, though, and found some more ammo, some bobby pins, and some ‘Sugar Tails’ porn magazines stuffed in a fire hose box. More bloody pony parts. I made my way to the cafeteria and found a cupboard with some Fancy Buck Cakes and cans of Cram. Really, what pony ate that stuff before the bombs?

Well, I was in a house of horrors, but the reek of decay didn’t put me off my appetite. I munched down on a can of meaty stuff, and then ate the can. As I chewed, I leaned against the counter. No explosions. No screaming. Had P-21 and Rampage made it down here? Were they okay? I did my best not to worry. P-21 was sneaky enough to avoid detection, and Rampage hadn’t met anything that could kill her yet. I popped the pullring into my mouth and chewed...

Then I jumped completely out of my hooves at the sight of the mare standing right beside me. I probably would have shot her if it wasn’t clear that she wasn’t a threat to me. Unarmed and unarmored, the white earth pony with the white mane had eyes so pale that it was hard to tell where the irises ended and the sclera began. The only reason I didn’t think she might be some kind of ghost was that I couldn’t see through her. All ghosts were transparent... right?

“Hi,” I said as she stared at me. “Hello?” More staring. “Are you okay?” More stares. I moved, and she moved. I waved my hoof in front of her eyes and she shrank back. Her ribs showed through her hide. “Hungry?” Nothing. Even more disturbing was the lack of a cutie mark on her flank. I nudged one of the Fancy Buck Cakes at her, and she pressed her nose to it, sniffing, and then started to chew on the wrapper. “Um... need some help?” I took the cake from her, unwrapped it, and then handed it to her. She munched it down, orange carrot filling smearing her lips. Then she took another and started to chew on that wrapper.

Okay... ghosts, body parts, monsterponies, and now a brain-damaged mare. “Can you tell me about Sanguine? Where is he? What’s going on? Hello?” But all she did was try her best to chew through the wrapper. “Great,” I muttered sullenly. Then I turned to leave the barracks and heard hoofsteps approaching.

“One of the tubbies knocks over a whole shelf of cans, and I’m the one who has to trot up here and check it out?” a mare muttered as she trotted by the doorway. I saw a flash of yellow and orange; Fury, or whatever it was she called herself. I was just about to sneak out and head the way she’d come when there was a clatter. I looked back at the white mare, who’d knocked over a stack of plates trying to reach one of the snack cakes. And then I looked back to find myself face to face with Fury. Her

orange eyes widened in shock, “You? Fuck! You can’t be here! How the fuck are you here?”

By the first ‘here’ I had the revolver out. By the second, I’d put a bullet between her eyes. She began to glow even before her body hit the ground, and I scrambled back as quickly as possible. The explosion launched a wave of stinging debris at me, and as I staggered back I saw her settle into a heap of ash and then glow once more and reform into a mare. “Fuck. Jerky Boy was sure we’d have a day or two to get back and get out of here before you fuckers caught up,” she said as she trotted forward. The barracks were a dead end, and that end was trotting forward in a leisurely stroll.

I couldn’t waste time with bantering. I put two more rounds in her head even as she heaved a scrap of bunk onto her back. I hit the deck as she exploded once again, settling into glowing ash even as I barely avoided the flying scrap metal. The heap of dust started to glow and then reformed. She glared at me in irritation. “Fuck! Still don’t get it, do you?”

I spat the gun between my hooves, shook out the shells, tossed a hoofful of bullets into the air, caught them in my mouth, and shoved them into the empty cylinder with my lips and tongue. How the hell did earth ponies use guns at all? “Trying for Deus’ spot in the foul mouth brigade?” I asked as I snapped the gun shut and looked around; it was like fighting Rampage. I’d run out of bullets, or she’d get close enough that one of her blasts would take me out. The pale mare let out a bawling cry that drew the yellow mare’s glare. “Stay away from her!” I shouted; I bit the gun and put another bullet in her head. This time, I got lucky; the scrap metal deflected off my lifted forelegs rather than biting into my throat.

“Stay away from her? She’s a fucking blank,” she said, snorting in contempt. I pointed the gun at her. “Yeah. Keep trying that. Fucking idiot.” I fired again, and the concussion wave smacked me into the fire hose box. I looked at the heap of ashes as she reformed and glared at me. “Fuck! Still not dead yet?” I shot her again, more junk peppering me as she blew once more. And just like before, the heap of ashes reformed. How the fuck could I beat her? It was worse than Rampage; it was like fighting Gemini again.

Wait... would that work?

She reformed, glaring at me in clear annoyance. “Give it up! You can’t beat me.”

“Sorry about this,” I said as I put the bullet into her head yet again. But as she glowed, I turned my back to her and threw open the fire box. The explosion slammed me into the coiled hose even as I gripped the valve handle and pulled, praying to

Luna and Celestia that the water was still on. The hose hissed and immediately swelled. I turned back around, holding the fire hose, and pointed the nozzle at the glowing ashes.

As they began to rise, I blasted them into the heap of twisted bunks with a jet of water. The yellow mare took shape again, then gasped and stared at me in confusion a moment. Then she looked down at the half a bunk lodged in her torso. Slowly, she reached down and tapped it with a hoof. “F... fuck...” she gasped, and then glowed bright yellow. The explosion threw more debris at me, but I didn’t flinch away. As soon as she disintegrated, I focused the stream of water on the ashes. She reformed again, and this time there were pieces of her that seemed to be missing. Pieces of mane, an ear, patches of hide... Again, she blew, and again... and again...

Finally, she reformed and I turned off the hose. There was no way she was going to move at me again... not with her lower body stuck in the drain in the middle of the barracks floor. She looked at me a daze. “Fuck... fucking... poetic...” she said as she looked at herself, half trapped like Dusty Trails had been, her hide pale and her voice weak. The water sloshed and pooled around her.

“Like I said... sorry,” I muttered as I backed away towards the terrified white mare.

“Didn’t think it could happen... fuck...” And then she stiffened before slumping over. She glowed one final time, exploding in a spray of dirty water, and when I next looked back there was nothing but the gurgle of ashy liquid flowing down into the shattered drain.

I slumped down, staring at the hole and then at the spooked mare. I really would have liked my heart pounding right about now. Some gasping for air, some relief. Slowly, the white pony stepped closer, then nuzzled one of the Fancy Buck Cakes laying in a pool of the nasty water. I tugged the wax paper wrapper away and held it out to her. She hesitated, caught it in her mouth, and trotted away to munch it down. I tapped the back of my head against the counter, watching her eat. “My life just keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

An hour later, Boo and I were getting closer to where the activity was going on. I’d named her Boo because at the slightest noise she would go scampering away for a hiding place. This proved quite a useful warning system, as her hearing seemed much better than my own. I wondered if the Professor had done something with

my ears, too; she hadn't said anything, and I didn't think my ears were worse, but whenever Boo's eyes went round and she backed away, I'd find some little niche to hide in with her. There was more than just the big and ugly pony things down here. There were manticores and nightstalkers creeping about, too. I'd nearly walked into a knot of the shimmery snakedog things, but then I'd seen her backing up; fortunately, the beasts either hadn't noticed us or weren't interested. A scratch between the ears and an occasional snack cake kept her going. She didn't speak and didn't seem to understand when I spoke to her. She simply reacted to things, her eyes wide and empty. Even the name I'd given her was more for my comfort than anything the mare seemed to recognize as a name.

And she wasn't alone. While the big pony things were the most common, there were also plenty more like her. Pale stallions and mares that stood in corners or were torn to pieces by the facility's hungry occupants. They weren't nearly as gaunt as Boo was, but they also didn't seem to have her sense of survival. I watched in shock as one stallion simply trotted forward and was torn to pieces by a trio of satisfied nightstalkers. Boo's mane was longer, her body thinner. I suspected that might mean she'd been around this place longer.

We'd come to a room that looked like some kind of zoo or something. Dozens of cages were stacked three high, and the open cages had been transformed into dens for the manticores. Right beside it was another room with large metal tables, hoists, and chains. Smashed equipment and droppings littered the floor, and Boo balked. I saw two manticores lounging within.

"Who's a good kitty for Mommy? Who is?" crooned a voice near the cages. I peeked forward and spotted Brass ruffling a third manticore's mane. This one looked particularly large and nasty. "Did baby like his din-din? Huh? Did baby like his meaty weetie nubkins?" the mare asked before picking up a pale haunch and tearing off a hunk of meat. "About damn time that ass got the machines to crank out more than just one at a time. I swear, this whole damn place is falling apart."

Since Fury had gone boom, I needed some answers, but I didn't want to fight Brass and three manticores at the same time. There was the problem of getting Boo to follow though. She lay there, trembling behind me, and wouldn't follow me away. A nasty little part of me coldly thought of leaving her; I needed to win. I couldn't stay here till we were discovered. I couldn't drag her kicking after me. But as I looked back at her, I took that thought and smashed it with a mental hammer till it retreated.

Softest heart in the Wasteland? Maybe, but I couldn't do better by leaving her behind.

I shrugged off my saddlebags and emptied one out. I wondered how they managed to hold so dang much, but hardly had time to waste on that. I took a snack cake and broke it in two, placing it in the bottom of the empty bag. Then I gently slipped it over her face. Boo jerked back several times, but I hushed her and petted her mane. It felt strange treating a pony like an animal, but that was what I had to do to get her past this obstacle. Finally, I got the bag over her head, and she went still. She trembled, but didn't struggle as I put her on my back and crept through the room.

I froze as one of the beasts looked up at me. Then it closed its yellow eyes and gave a belch. I supposed that there was a downside to being well fed. I got clear of the room, moving down a much larger hall. I'd kill for a map! 'You are here. Project Chimera here! Evil ghoul son of a mule here!' How nice that would be!

Boo started to wiggle, so I set her down and took the bag off her head. She blinked, sniffed, and rubbed some smeared cherry filling off her face with her hoof before snorting and looking around fearfully. She was almost like my second shadow. Up ahead came numerous screams and bellows, as well as the rattle of automatic weapons and the snap of a whip. "Get that batch into the tunnel! Move it! We need to get them cleared out or we're not going anywhere!"

I peeked into another large room split by two rail lines. One line was occupied by three more tanker cars like the ones I'd seen before, and the concrete docks were occupied by a dozen ponies wearing red bardings and four griffins in power armor. They were herding four of the big fatties into the rail tunnel with whips and sparking metal poles, driving them towards the sounds of battle; there were a whole lot of smashed sentry robots in sight. I wondered why the ponies and griffins didn't simply close the massive metal doors to the room. The place looked like it was under siege!

On the far rail dock, a pipe on an arm extended over the rails. Bright rainbow sludge poured from the tube into the openings on top of the cars with diarrhea-like noises. Lovely. Other ponies, not white 'blanks' but ragged wastelanders wrapped in dirty clothes, handled the filling process. From their mottled hides the knotty tumors popping from their bodies, I suspected that they'd been exposed to too much Flux as well. Unfortunately, I couldn't see any way to get past them.

Hello? I spotted a flickering, ghostly Twilight and Goldenblood trotting towards a side door. Then a ghost door opened and... arrgggh! I was not smart enough to deal with this! Still, it was a better possibility than trying to storm across the rails and fight my way through a dozen guards and four power-armored griffins. I moved

to the side with Boo at my heels and carefully tried the door. Locked. I fished out a bobby pin and carefully began to work the lock. P-21 could have done it without a second thought, but I was scraping and tapping and any second we'd be spotted.

Then a bullet smacked through the hazmat suit and into the barding over my flank, making me jump and grimace in pain. I spotted a griffin coming to do something presumably messy and quite probably deadly to me; the others were pointing and shouting over the noise the robot battle was making, and very soon they'd all be shooting as well. I pulled the pin out and twisted the lock with all the meager strength my horn allowed. The drum popped free and rotated, clicking open. Guess I still had a little luck left in me. I threw it wide and stepped into a stairwell going up... a stairwell dripping with Flux.

There was no way I was going to leave Boo behind, so before she could balk and run, I scooped her up onto my back and carefully stepped into the slimy substance, closing the door behind me. Boo was no Scotch Tape. I had to focus, be strong, be enduring, and be awesome all at once. If I brushed the Flux-spattered walls; if I slipped and dropped her... I remembered the screaming room all too vividly. "Don't wiggle... please don't wiggle," I groaned as I made my way up the steps. Skinny or not, she was fully grown, and she'd recently eaten a lot of snack cakes!

I made it up the first flight, reaching a barrel smeared in the faintly glowing goop. I felt the hazmat suit covering my belly brush against it as I carefully climbed over. One tear and I'd be back on the road to having screaming guts. I was halfway up the second flight when I froze just in time to avoid having a dollop of goop fall right in my face. I stared at the stringy streamer it left behind. Another drip. Down below me, the door opened. "Here pony pony," grated a male griffin through a power armor helmet. No time. I waited for the next fat drop and scrambled up to the next landing.

"You're one crazy meatwagon, coming in here," he drawled, starting up behind me.

I started up the third flight, weaving my way around barrels that had tumbled down the stairs around me. "I am so going to eat your hindquarters first for making this annoying," he grumbled. I reached the third landing just as he came around the corner behind me. I took one glance back and then shoved a barrel hard down the stairs at him. The rusty container flung rainbow Flux everywhere and burst like a blister when it struck him, coating his faceplate in goop. He fired wildly, blinded by the sludge as I disappeared around the corner.

"I don't know how you're not jelly yet, but I swear I am gonna smear you on a cracker!" he swore, now moving much quicker after me. Okay, that was a new one.

His armor had to have some sort of protective covering for his wings; just my luck. Every barrel I could send rolling down to slow him went. Finally, I saw the top of the stairs and, past that, a Flux-free hallway. A half-full pallet of barrels was stacked there; I set Boo down in a clear area, then turned and shoved the remainder of the pallet down the stairs after him. A half-dozen drums smashed down into him, soaking him in rainbow goop. I needed something substantial, more than my pistol.

Fortunately I had something more substantial.

The griffin pushed the last barrel off his face in time to see me standing there, making like Lancer and pointing Taurus' rifle down at him (well, not quite like Lancer; I was once again proving Rover right about thumbs). If I'd had S.A.T.S., I might have had a chance to kill him outright, but, even with armor piercing .308 rounds, I doubted I could finish him off before he brought his weapons to bear. And he probably knew it too... but I didn't need to kill him.

I just had to make a hole.

I fired as rapidly as possible, the bullets biting deep into his armor as he shoved his way clear of the barrels. I went through the entire magazine before he started shooting at me with a machinegun and I ducked back. "Cunt... whore... meat-wagon..." he growled as he crawled up the stairs after me. The hallway behind me was a shooting gallery, a hundred feet at least without any cover at all. I ducked down as he struggled up the stairs, shoving a new magazine in and then making like a zebra again. As he stepped over the lip, I opened fire once more. It still wasn't enough, and I was out of barrels.

"Die!" he gasped; was it just me, or did his armor look... tight? He leveled his machineguns at us.

Well, I might have been out of barrels, but I still had a pallet. I knelt and kicked the heavy wooden platform at him with all my strength. Bullets started to shred it in midair, but it was still solid enough when it crashed into him to send him slipping and sliding down the stairs into the puddle of rainbow goop. Down below, he started to yell and then scream... and then suddenly there was a loud crunching noise and it all went silent. I stared down at armor that bulged at every seal. Red meat now oozed out the holes. I shuddered as I stepped back. Again, I really really hoped he was dead after that... and that he didn't turn into something worse.

I returned to the shaking Boo and, with some effort, magically wiped the sludge off my hooves using the dirty papers that littered the floor. I looked at my hooves critically. I'd hoped that the metal was resistant to the corrosive or magical influence

of the Flux, but... was it just me, or did they look a little more blueish? I sighed and looked at my silent companion; what this place really needed was a balefire bomb or something.

She just stared back at me. And I'd thought P-21 was a lousy conversationalist...

We trotted along the hallway. Windows on one side looked down at the loading docks. There were more robots coming, sentries and something else: smaller, more spidery-looking robots that hopped, skittered, and jumped around the sentries. The power-armored griffins and the fatties they shoved into the line of fire were keeping them at bay for now.

It appeared that all of Sanguine's shit had finally come back to bite him in the ass. Looked like I'd have some competition for taking my own chomp.

"You!" yelled a voice beside me, and I turned to see a ghostly stallion pointing his hoof at me. Then I looked behind me at Goldenblood, the brothers, and Twilight Sparkle. It took me a moment to place the familiar buck: Doctor Trueblood. "You're not supposed to be here anymore! You're not supposed to be anywhere near here!"

I stepped aside as Trueblood stomped towards the four. Goldenblood smiled thinly. "Hello, Trueblood. How's the family?"

Trueblood stormed right up to him, not seeming to notice Twilight standing right behind the brothers. "Princess Luna stripped you of your directorship, Goldenblood! This is a capital offense, you being here!"

"Kids still feeling under the weather, then?" Goldenblood replied smoothly, and the doctor's eyelid twitched in shock. "Well, that's too bad. I know Sunflower will take care of things." The complete lack of acknowledgement made the doctor's eyes pop in rage.

Then Twilight stepped in front of Goldenblood, and the doctor's jaw dropped. "He's here with me. Assisting me with a little fact-finding mission, Trueblood." The doctor sat down hard, his mouth working as he stammered.

"But... But you can't be here! Horse should be here if you're... The director... I mean... you're supposed to be in Tenpony right now! How can you be here?" He gaped at her, and Twilight frowned, her brows knitting together as she trotted towards him.

"I am sick..." she thumped her hoof against his chest firmly, "and tired of being told where I am supposed to be and what I am supposed to do. I am tired of secrets! I am sick and tired of directors of the O.I.A. telling me what I should do!" She shot an

angry look at Goldenblood. “Honestly, what is with your office? Your office is like... like... the office of sneaky shenanigans!”

Goldenblood laughed, and that seemed to spook the twins and Trueblood even more. “It’s a very long story. Hopefully, someday you’ll hear it.” He shook his head with a smile as he looked at Trueblood. “Well, then. Care to accompany us, Trueblood? The Ministry Mare is curious about where Flux comes from. We’re showing her.”

His mouth moved again. “I... I... I need to contact Horse. Excuse me.” He started to turn away.

“No,” Twilight said firmly. “I think I’d like you to come along too, Trueblood. It appears that when you brought Project Chimera to my attention, you failed to mention several key aspects of it. I’d like you here to explain anything you might have missed... without a director telling me what I should and shouldn’t know.” Trueblood just stared at her with a mortified expression. Goldenblood smiled and shook his head. She looked at him sharply. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just nice to see you like this again,” he murmured softly as together the five continued flickering down the hall. I couldn’t help myself; I trotted along behind them with Boo at my heels. Personally, I was just dying to find out more of Goldenblood’s secrets myself.

The group disappeared and reappeared as we walked together. Three more times, Trueblood tried to excuse himself, and every time Twilight refused to let him scurry off. The windows looked down at another large room; this was full of dozens of pods similar to the ones that had held the foals in the Fluttershy clinic. Many of them had clearly been damaged or tampered with, and several held bones inside.

Twilight looked down with obvious disgust. “What are those?”

“Hazardous biological samples,” Goldenblood explained. “Combinations where either the host was dangerous or the combination unstable. Some combinations... phoenixes, dragons, manticores... produced a pony hybrid that was too aggressive to field safely.”

“We store other unique biological samples as well,” Trueblood muttered. “You never know when you might find them useful.”

“You’d better not have any samples from me in there!” Twilight said in shock.

“Luna expressly forbade any biological samples from herself, Celestia, the Ministry Mares, or myself,” Goldenblood replied, looking over at Trueblood. “She was rightly

concerned that some ponies might try some inappropriate meddling.”

“I don’t like your implication,” Trueblood retorted.

“You weren’t supposed to,” Goldenblood said pointedly.

The next set of windows opened up to a room that resembled an abattoir, and I was so glad that I couldn’t smell the contents. There were four steel tables in a row with four machines hanging overhead that reminded me of Ol’ Hank’s limbs. One wall was covered with steel hatches, like dozens of refrigerators, and there were dirty white containers scattered everywhere.

“This is our organ harvesting operation,” Goldenblood said smoothly. “It’s fairly new, only been in operation a year or so. The system automatically removes any and all viable organs from any subject placed on the table. They’re then loaded into the stasis containers for delivery all across Equestria,” he said as he pointed down at the white boxes with a hoof.

“Organ... what?” Twilight’s mane frizzed at once. “Does Fluttershy know about this?” she asked as she pointed down at the room.

“In a general sense,” Trueblood muttered. “She understood the crippling need for ponies all across Equestria to have compatible organs. She might be somewhat ignorant as to the specifics. All she needs to know is that when a little colt or filly needs a heart transplant, her ministry can provide it. And if not, she can keep them alive till proper organs are arranged. She doesn’t need to know how it works.”

Twilight covered her mouth and shook her head before stepping back. “I can’t believe you would do this.”

Flim coughed. “Well, there was quite a market incentive for it.”

Flam tapped his hooves together. “The Ministry of Peace has quite a lovely operating budget, and we thought it’d be a shame to be left out.”

Twilight looked at the pair. “You’re disgusting.”

“Oh?” Goldenblood arched a brow as he trotted in front of her. “Would you rather have ponies die when we have the magic and technology to save them? If so, make the command. We’ll shut that room down forever.” Twilight looked horrified, and he shook his head. “This is why we keep you and your friends in the dark. So that you don’t have to know these things.”

“I... I didn’t come here for this, Goldenblood!” Twilight stammered.

"No, you came here for secrets," Goldenblood retorted evenly. "And I am giving them to you, Twilight. Horrible, bloody, terrible secrets in all their raw glory." He stared into her eyes. "If you can't handle something as simple as this... if the knowing of a little secret is too much for you to bear... then stop now and go home."

That returned some iron to her, and she glared back at him. "I'm not giving up, Goldenblood. But..." Her eyes turned to the window.

"Then let us continue. It's time you met Chimera as more than just notes on paper," Goldenblood said quietly. I copied Twilight's expression perfectly; this wasn't going to be good.

Why was Boo cowering like that? Oh crap...

Brass swooped up and smashed through the glass, showering me with shards that I barely deflected with my upraised hooves. "There you are!" she shouted in glee as she pounced at me. "They said they spotted a pony with a black and red mane, but you wouldn't believe how glad I am that I'm the one who found you!"

Somepony talked way too much. I brought the revolver up, but unlike Fury, Brass didn't just let me blast her in the face. In a flash, the mare was on me, clawing and stomping and biting and stinging. Had any of my limbs been flesh and blood, they would have been torn away; as it was, the hazmat suit and Reaper barding beneath it still didn't stop the stinger from plunging into my side. I instantly started to feel woozy as the venom began to work through my system.

"You have no idea how much I've wanted to finish you!" She knocked the gun from my mouth, cackling. "I just wish you were the gray cunt. I'm looking forward to ramming that gatling beam gun right up he—"

I interrupted her by grabbing her neck and ramming my horn deep into her throat. The piercing headbutt made her choke and gag. I only wished that I had three magic bullets to follow it up with and S.A.T.S. to insta-cast them with. She jerked back, my horn coming out with a small burst of blood, trying to leap back out the window, but I couldn't have her getting away and finding help or circling back around for another attack. No matter how sickly I felt with her poison in me, I couldn't let her go. As she perched on the edge, I rolled forward and launched myself at her, wrapping my legs around her throat as we tumbled through the window together and down into a heap of garbage and old remains.

I kept up the pressure on her throat as we landed; she choked as she thrashed against the ground. If I died now, would my legs keep choking until she went after

me, I wondered. Except... simply killing her wouldn't be winning. Finally, I had to shove her away as hard as I could and dig through my bags for a healing potion and some antivenom. As she fought for breath, I slugged down one and then the other. The healing potion wasn't all that effective, but Glory's antidote counteracted a lot of the woozy sensation immediately.

I had all of six seconds before she was upon me. She was deadly in close combat, but she was too damn fast for me to keep out of close combat! Her tail made grappling a risky proposition, though it was becoming my best bet. Watching her closely while trying to dodge, I noticed her wounds weren't regenerating. I could take her down if I could just get her down. High caliber shot would do it; but that would require a big rifle and a pony capable of using it. Explosives? I didn't see anything that would otherwise go boom in here. Revolver was up there. No magic bullets....

Shit.

"You've killed so damn many of my lovers and pets. I'm going to feed you to them, clone you, and feed you to them again," she swore as her lips spread wide, showing her dozens of sharp and pointy teeth. How could it be that the undying cyberpony who blows up was easier to kill than the idiot who screwed beasts? "Mmmm... the Blackjack diet. Somehow, that'll make this all better."

"Be careful. I bet I taste like regret and failure," I muttered as I looked around. "You know, I have to wonder just what has to break in a mare to fuck her up as much as you." Think, Blackjack, think!

"Ohhh... I could make up some sort of sob story for you, but the fact is that this is the way I am, and I like it. Now quit stalling and start dying!" she growled, baring her fangs.

Oh well, thinking wasn't my *forté* anyway. I had barely enough time to draw my sword before she was upon me. The silvery steel sang with a single deadly note that made me grin even as I felt a twinge inside at the sound. The wild swing was enough to make her draw up. I thought I was supposed to clench as hard as possible on the handle and swing as fast as I could, but as I held the slim weapon, I realized I had to relax my jaw. Increase the arc of my swing.

The manticore hybrid leaned back and sprang forward with a snap, and I thought for sure I had her... but the bite stopped short. Instead of snapping her fangs at me, her tail thrust over my horizontal swing and tagged me hard in the side of my neck. The pointed shank withdrew with a spurt of blood that made me sway; I really hoped

that there was enough antivenom still in me to counteract the poison. I reversed my swing, but she jerked her tail back.

I made a lunge to try and spear her face but she ducked low, launched forward, and dragged her claws along my exposed throat. I nicked her ear in my counterattack, but again she was too fast for me to do anything substantial. If I'd been flesh and blood, I'd probably be bleeding out right about now. Only my body's automatic regeneration had slowed the bleeding from my neck. I suspected that if I had my PipBuck, the health monitoring system would be informing me that I was all kinds of fucked up in the head and torso regions.

She seemed quite happy to slowly rip me to pieces bit by bit, though, and my regeneration certainly wouldn't be enough to recover from that. And from the distant sounds of yelling coming from beyond one of the room's doorways, I suspected that soon I was going to be quite thoroughly screwed... oh, great, why'd I have to think of that?!

Suddenly, there was a click and the whirr of fans. The lights overhead flickered and came on, and the vents began to blast cold air and rattle loudly. The mechanical limbs suspended above one of the tables jerked to life and started to swing and whirl and beep. Most importantly, the doors leading towards the shouts hissed closed and locked. I looked at Brass, but she was looking around in bafflement. Finally, I shrugged and tried several sudden slashes, barely jumping away from a bite that probably would have finished me.

The manticore pony snarled as she circled to my side, but I moved back, keeping the table with its flailing arms between us as I struggled to use my brain. I wasn't going to be able to outfight her at this rate. She'd have killed me by now if I hadn't been augmented. If I attacked first, chances were she was going to dodge and nail me with her stinger. I needed to make her attack first if I wanted a chance at hitting her. ...How to do that, though?

Well... when in a fight to the death with a monsterpony about to tear you to pieces... I raised my forehooves in the shape of a T, then rested the blade on the edge of the table as she gaped in amazement that I would do something so... foolish. I kept the handle inches from my mouth as I smiled at her. "Listen, Brass, before you kill me and eat me and stuff... there's one thing I just got to know: did you do this whole manticore transformation thing because you couldn't find any of your own species to fuck?"

That did it. With a manticore's roar she lunged, all bestial rage and fury. She

pounced forward as I took the sword and swung, the blade humming in the air as it connected with her leading foreleg and cleaved the limb off completely. She flapped her wings to keep from falling flat on her face, and I feinted with a cut to her head... wait, when had I learned to feint? Sure enough, she pulled her snarling maw back and stabbed with her venomous tail. The sword reversed and sliced the bulbous tip away. She screamed, taking to the air as her stumps dribbled blood.

She let out a pained roar as she flew out of range, a roar that was echoed from above. Three manticores flew into the room through the broken window and immediately spread out as Brass found a perch and licked her wounds to slow the bleeding. The monsters began to circle me. Okay, sword, what am I supposed to do now? I gave ground, using the tables to try and keep myself in front of them. I might have pulled it off with two manticores, but with three I was going to get penned in.

Not good.

“Death Filly!” screamed Rampage as she dropped from an overhead vent and onto the back of the nearest beast. She might not have had much weight, but she didn’t need it with all four power hooves discharging simultaneously. The manticore gave a furious roar as it immediately tried to shake the Reaper off its back, but Rampage bit down and tangled her left hoof in its mane, and then proceeded to smash her right hoof against the back of its head.

I grinned. Now if only there were two more of her...

Then I heard a dull thump over the whirr of the machinery and backpedaled fast as Persuasion’s grenade blasted the other two manticores, though the big one was so tough it didn’t seem too deterred. “About time we found you,” P-21 shouted from the hole in the observation window as he cracked open the launcher with his hooves, then pulled out the spent shell, spat it aside, and smoothly loaded a fresh grenade from his bags.

The larger manticore stayed with me as the smaller soared across the room towards him. Biting the grenade launcher in his teeth, he fired it almost straight up at the ceiling! The projectile ponged off a metal strut, bounced off a vent, dropped down right behind the smaller beast, and exploded. That finished pulping the manticore, sending it crashing into a heap. He looked right at me and actually smirked! When had he learned that badass smirk? Maybe it was the hat.

The remaining manticore spared me such difficult contemplations by nearly biting my muzzle off! I managed to lift a forehoof and let him mangle that in his jaws instead of my face. It might have been metal, but it still hurt. Rather how I imagined

it would feel to shove my hoof into an electric blender. I jerked to the side to stop the descending tail spike from finishing me in one stab, then swung the blade in a slash that cut across the side of the manticore's face, taking an eye. The creature removed its fangs from my mangled metal limb, backing off warily; I really hoped that my cyberlegs could recover from this degree of damage!

From the side, Rampage's power hoof made rhythmic flashes as she smashed it against the monster's head. Finally the beast's skull could take it no longer, shattering with a meaty crunch. The corpse collapsed on its face, and Rampage crawled off with a clear wobble. Pale foam dripped from her mouth. "Hey, Blackjack? Got any more of that antidote stuff?"

P-21 scrambled down towards her, and I grinned. As soon as Rampage was back on her hooves, the three of us could tear this creature down and then finish off Brass. And Brass knew it too.

She let out a roar, and the huge manticore immediately turned to attack my friends. Rampage had barely downed the antivenom from P-21 when that heavy tail swung into her body with a meaty crack. She flew across the room, smashing into the wall, and lay there limply. Alone, P-21 slung Persuasion and began to back away, tossing out mines as fast as he could push the buttons. The huge beast set one off and jerked back in pain. Its long, low growl wiped any trace of a smirk off the blue stallion's face.

I moved to go to his aid when Brass launched herself from her perch and slammed into me as a hissing, clawing missile. As P-21 and the huge manticore circled one another, she threw herself on me. The sword pierced through the shoulder of her severed limb, emerging out the far side before her thrashing body tore the weapon from my mouth. Her jaws closed on my throat, grating on something in my...skin? Something else the Professor hadn't told me about, I guessed. At least it stopped her from ripping out my neck and taking the vital plumbing to my brain with it. Instinctively, I swung our bodies as hard as I could, throwing us both off balance and onto the metal table behind us.

The machine overhead whirled, pincers snapping and saws whirring as we wrestled. I couldn't get a breath through my crushed throat. She screamed into my neck as the machine opened up her flank with a scalpel, her thrashing tail knocking the metallic limb aside. A mechanical claw gripped my head, saw blade trying to cut around my eye socket as I jerked and thrashed. This was not how I wanted to fight! I glanced down into her furious, blazing eye. An eye that swore evisceration for me and then P-21, then all-you-can-eat buffet status for Rampage. I'd killed her pets

and her lovers, and that frenzied glare promised to do the same to me and mine.

So I extended my fingers, grabbed the side of her head, and shoved my metallic thumb into her eye socket till I felt it grind against the bottom. She disengaged her jaws enough for an agonised roar, thrashing wildly as I pushed and shoved her away. I grabbed the edge of the metal table, pulling as hard as I could. Bloody strips were torn from my ears and cheek as I pulled myself out of the machine's grip and flopped on to the filthy floor. My throat was a ruin, my face was coated in blood, which I'd lost far more of than could be healthy, implants or no, and I wasn't sure if I was breathing through my mouth or through the hole left by her fangs.

And, looking back at Brass, I realized that I'd gotten lucky. The mechanical pincers seized her thrashing limbs and flopped her on to her back. She screamed in terror, and had I been able to move, to stop what I knew was coming, I would have. As it was, I was too battered to even look away as her limbs were pulled taut. A sickle on the end of a thin beam swung down and stroked from crotch to throat almost like a lover's caress. It hesitated for a moment at her chest, but then hummed and vibrated as it tore through her sternum.

I looked away then, but nothing spared me from the sound of the bone cracking or the scream she let out as the metal hands opened her wide.

The huge manticore forgot all about P-21 at that point and roared, flying over the table with such incredible ferocity that the harvesting machine was torn from the ceiling in a shower of sparks, the bloody mechanical claws releasing as the limbs and equipment were scrapped. Stumbling to my hooves, I looked at the mess that was left of Brass and pulled the sword out of her. She stared at me, and I did all I could not to look at her failing organs. This was way beyond a healing potion or ten. This was more than even Hydra could heal.

"Sanguine... can fix... please... don't wanna die..." she whimpered at me and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry I've been a bad pony," she gasped as she shook on the table.

I couldn't say a word, given my throat was still slowly knitting back together. At least I could breathe... kinda. The huge manticore returned, and I backed away as it gave a low snarl. Rampage was back on her hooves, but she still looked like half the bones in her body were in the process of healing. The immense beast scooped up Brass in his paws with incredible care, cradling her in his forelegs as he gave a soft chirring sound and nudged her with his broad leonine nose.

She lifted her remaining forelimb and stroked his uninjured cheek. "You big baby..."

she rasped as the manticore started to lick her wounded face and mane. She licked back once, then finally closed her eye and went still.

"Let's go, Blackjack," P-21 said as he heaved my bloody body across his back and struggled to carry me up the heap of debris to the shattered observation window. The lights began to turn off, and the clicking machines stilled. Boo shook as she followed, keeping her distance from all of us; I couldn't blame her, with me in this state.

We were well down the hall when the huge manticore let out a long and mournful cry I wouldn't ever forget.

We found a large office where I could collapse and munch down on some Sugar Apple Bombs and three cans of Cram, along with a box of paperclips that had been left long ago on the desk. "So, we circled around like you said to go down to that sealed door. We got inside, but then we ran into turrets and those huge white ponies—" P-21 began before I waved my hooves to interrupt him. Boo was in a corner munching down on some more snack cakes and making a mess of herself.

"Wait wait wait. I told you what?" I frowned, pink crumbly meaty... stuff... stuck to my lips. I didn't remember any of that! I frowned, chewing the can thoughtfully as I looked at the pair.

"Remember? We called down for five or six minutes; the elevator was only ten or twenty feet down before it jammed. You finally said you were all right and that we should go through the door and meet you down here. Warned us to watch out for the turrets too," P-21 said, sharing a look with Rampage; that 'Is she going crazy, or does she just not remember?' look.

"Well, the first thing I remember after falling was hanging under the wreck. If there hadn't been a robot in the elevator shaft, I would have been goop at the bottom." I shook my head, trying to recall anything between the explosion and waking up. "You're sure it was me? And I told you to watch out for turrets?"

Rampage nodded as she looked up at me. "Yeah. I thought you were just telling us to be careful, but we came to this one hall and there were like... four popup turrets. If Blue over here hadn't been on his hooves with a grenade ready, I think I would have been dusted and he would have been toast."

P-21 frowned at her but looked back at me. "It wasn't like we were just trotting along,

but yeah, your warning had my eyes open for the turret casings in the floor. Anyway, soon as we started running into those huge things, we tried sneaking into the vents to move around.”

“Yeah, they’re always doing that in the books,” Rampage said with a grin that faded as she considered. “Though it was a little bit tight, and there were nightstalkers. And there was the whole ‘getting lost’ thing.” I winced as my mangled metal hoof began to ping and pop, the repair talisman’s pink glow slowly pulling it back together. Cram with rubies; the perfect choice of regenerative snack for cyberponies. Who knew? Once I was ‘digesting’ the can and some stones, I lay back and let my body mend itself.

I was ready to take a break for an hour or two, but then again I had no idea how much time we had. My eyes scanned over the old photos scattered on the desk. A smiling mare and two colts beamed out of the grainy black and white photographs. There were a few pictures that had been clearly damaged; any with a stallion had been cut to omit his face.

I took a little more interest in the office and noticed the terminal. For once, P-21 wasn’t all over it with his mad arcane science skills! Yet. After much harassment, he got up and started to hack into it. There was something here. Something! I just knew it. After several attempts, he finally got in. I was right; there was a whole ton of medical and scientific gibberish I couldn’t begin to understand. Finally, though, I found something I could: the message box.

O.I.A. Internal Message #345-01-92> Look, I know you can’t access any of the systems with them on lockdown, but you can keep extracting Flux from the source. Right now, your job is to find any dirt on Goldenblood you can, particularly related to ‘Project Redoubt’ and ‘Project Horizons’. I swear, we’re finding more skeletons than I ever imagined possible. We’ve got to keep the Ministry Mares from knowing the truth. If they found out... well, just keep your eyes open. I wish that Trottenheimer and Silver Stripe were cooperating, but that halfbreed is dragging her hooves and I haven’t been even been able to find out where Trottenheimer was transferred! Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message #349-01-92> I understand your concerns about Twilight Sparkle’s pursuit of the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. Please understand that it is not in Equestria’s best interests for her to succeed. In this, I am in agreement with that bastard. Do not attempt to contact Princess Luna directly about this potion. You won’t like where it lands you. Just make like Flim and Flam and send her the usual garbage. Oh, and remind them who’s buttering their bread now. I’ll cut them off from the Flux if they forget again. Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message: Forwarded #351-20-01> Honey, please come home again soon. I know you’re under a lot of stress with things happening at work. I know that you can’t tell me what you’re doing, but remember that I love you. We love you. I hope you make it back in time for the Gala. I know some time off will do wonders for my very special pony.

Huh... nothing shattering. Still, it made me wonder about the cut up photographs.

Jealous coworker? Guilty spouse? I turned to get P-21 and Rampage's opinions, but then I spotted him tossing an empty Med-X syringe into the trash and frowned. "Did you get hurt?" Rampage glanced at him, and immediately her smile sickened.

"Haven't we all?" he replied without meeting my eyes.

I frowned as I looked at him. I'd gotten hurt. In fact, I could have done with a shot of the painkiller myself, if I didn't know my body was repairing the damage. But despite all that fighting, I didn't recall him getting scratched. "Uh, no. Actually. No. I don't think you got hit since we entered the woods."

"Well then, my leg hurts, alright?" He scowled, leaning back with a sigh. "I'm just worn out. I hate this place. With everything that's happened, I just need it to keep me steady." He closed his shadowed eyes a moment and then looked at me; I didn't think I'd ever seen him looking so... tired.

"Okay. Just... take it easy on that stuff, okay?" I said with a small frown. He didn't answer as he lowered his eyes on his leg. I looked over at Rampage, but she simply shrugged.

"So... what's her story?" the filly asked as she pointed at Boo sitting nervously in the corner. I'd been so coated with blood that she hadn't come any closer to me; I was a little worried that she might try and run off.

"I don't know. I've seen at least a dozen; all earth ponies, same color, eyes and everything. The only ones that are different are the big, aggressive ones. Otherwise, the only difference is gender." I gave a little shrug and looked at Boo again. "I think she's been around longer than the rest. She was hungrier than the others and knew to hide to stay safe."

"Yeah, but the others? We saw two just stand there when some of Red Eye's ponies were playing target practice. They didn't get what guns were, didn't try and fight them off or anything. They just stood there, and when one died, the other just looked at her. It's like they're animals or something," Rampage said with a frown. "Stupid animals at that."

I sighed and shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine." I looked out the door; this place was hazardous and a whole lot bigger than I anticipated. "The only question... okay, the big question is: where's Sanguine?"

Rampage replied, "One of Red Eye's ponies said they were dicking around with Chimera. Apparently, they got back and are trying to get EC-1101 to work while they finish loading something." That would be the tanker cars, I suspected. "They

say this place is too damned dangerous.”

“They’re under attack.” By something; the thing in the Core? I sighed and rubbed my nose. Then I remembered something else. “Have you two been seeing ghosts too?” Predictably, both of them looked at me like I was crazy. I sighed, waving my mangled limb, wincing as the repair magic pulled and pushed and remolded the leg back into its original form. It felt like the whole thing was made of wax. “Okay, okay. Not ghosts, but images? Transparent things that are there one moment and then gone the next?”

“You’re our expert on seeing things that aren’t there,” P-21 said with a sigh. “What is it this time?”

“Twilight Sparkle, Goldenblood, Sanguine, and the two brothers. When she came here to find out about how Flux was made; apparently it was a big stink. Goldenblood first told her to go, but something changed his mind. Then they were touring this place.” I rubbed the back of my neck with my good foreleg. “Then I got tackled by Brass, so I dunno if they said anything after that.”

P-21 looked at me for several seconds before he finally shrugged. I looked at Rampage, but the striped filly just deadpanned, “Don’t look at me. I got as much clue about stuff like that as she does!” She gestured over at the oblivious Boo.

I sighed, rubbing my head. “I’d just be glad if I had a map.”

“Oh, we found one,” Rampage said as she looked at P-21. Okay, Blackjack. Don’t facehoof. I looked at him, but he simply gave me a flat stare in return. Ugh, what was wrong with him? He dug into his bag after several seconds of me staring and pulled out a folded piece of paper. I focused on it, then finally got it levitated and unfolded.

“Hey, not bad!” Rampage said with a confident smile.

“I figure I’ll be able to use a gun again in a year or ten,” I replied dryly, trying not to flush at the compliment. I could count the number of times somepony had complimented me on my magic on zero hooves.

“Yeah. I figure you’ll have that whole magic thing licked in no time. Dunno if it’s worth it, though. Seems overrated. All those prancy unicorns with their magic and wine and cheese. And don’t you have to sparkle and shimmer?” she asked with a snort.

“It’s a steep price, I won’t lie,” I said as I scanned the page and the crude drawing, then glanced at P-21. He wasn’t having any of it. I shook my head and looked back

down at the page.

'I know you keep getting lost down here, but don't let security catch you with this' was mouth-scrawled at the top of the page on the back of a some sort of spreadsheet. There were six circles on a ring around a larger central circle. The circle at the top was marked 'Security / Barracks'. The upper left and lower left circles were 'Storage / Pens' and 'Distribution / Receiving' respectively. The bottom circle was marked 'Organs / Live Storage / Refrigeration', the lower right circle was 'Fusion' and the upper right 'Copyroom'. In the middle was 'Production'.

There were halls connecting to the center, but the note was finished with a warning. 'No matter how late you are, never try to cut through production. Those security ponies do not accept 'I'm late' as an excuse. If you absolutely have to cut through, you can follow the elevated pipes to get from the copyroom to distribution, but you'll have to shell out at least fifty bits at each end. And remember the golden rule: never go down below into production. It's practically all red tunnel down there.'

I didn't see anything marked 'Chimera' or 'Control,' so I had so assume it was either in the middle or somewhere down below. I suspected it would be in the most secure area of the facility. Still, something about the layout made my eyes linger. I frowned; why did it look... familiar? Then it hit me: it looked almost exactly like the symbol used by the O.I.A. Somehow, I didn't believe that could be a coincidence.

"So... we can just go straight to production?" I asked with a frown, looking at Rampage.

P-21 sighed and muttered, "Blackjack, when has it ever been as simple as 'go straight there?'" Of course... silly me.

"There're big doors that are closed up tight. Heck, even the vents are barred," Rampage said with a frown. "We'll have to find another way around."

I looked at the map, then tapped the the circle marked 'Copyroom'. If there was a way to get to production undetected from there...

"So we just continue around past fusion to here, and look for pipes," I said, smiling at the others. Rampage nodded, but P-21 just stared off into space. I trotted up next to him. "Hey, you with me?"

"Yeah. Just tired," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Can't stop thinking about Priest. How he died. Right there, just like that."

Rampage frowned. "No offense, but aren't you taking this just a little bit hard? You knew him... what... two days? Not exactly a long time." He glared sharply at the

striped filly, but she didn't balk. "Don't get me wrong. He was a good pony, but it wasn't like you two were making adorable sweaty buck lovin', right?"

"I don't have to justify my feelings to you, Rampage!" he snapped. "I liked him!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. So did everypony else. He was the nicest damned pony in the Wasteland. Really. I think he had an allergy to being mean or something," Rampage said as she trotted towards him, looking evenly into his eyes. "But it's takes a lot more to make a relationship than a few days of cuddling. You have more of a relationship with Blackjack than you did with Priest."

"Rampage, that's enough!" I snapped, then looked at the miserable-looking blue stallion.

He sighed and shook his head. "I just hope that when we kill Sanguine... some of these things I'm feeling die too. I'm so sick of this place." I sighed too, looking at Rampage. The filly just snorted softly and turned away, muttering about him needing to lose an extremity before being allowed to be sick of Hoofington.

I forced a smile, nudging his shoulder. "Come on, P-21. Let's get this done so we can go catch up to Glory and Scotch. Then you can tell her everything she needs to hear."

He didn't open his eyes. "What if she's dead, Blackjack? I waited so damned long... what if she's gone?" He hissed sharply and smacked the floor beside him, gritting his teeth and thumping the back of his head against the wall.

"Then you tell her anyway." I was the equestrian grand champion of kicking myself. I knew the signs, but I'd never have expected them in my stoic blue friend. "But no matter what, we've got to get through this first. All that stuff comes later." I nudged his shoulder. "We'll be there when you do, either way."

He relaxed a little, nodding. It's not all about me; I had to remember that. I had to. P-21 had his problems too, problems he bore silently and with dignity. I smiled at him and spread my forelegs wide. "Hug?"

He looked at me, then sighed and pulled himself to his hooves with a groan. "Let's get going."

I blinked at him as he stepped back out of the office, my legs still spread wide. Then I slumped. "What's the matter with him?" I said after a minute. "Did I do something, or..." Not all about you, Blackjack. Remember?

"It's probably just me... but he's using an awful lot of Med-X," Rampage said quietly.

"So?" I asked as I looked back at the filly. She facehoofed.

"Hello, Blackjack, weren't you ever taught about drug addiction?" she asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Sure. We watched a movie about a pony hoarding stable supplies because she, like, needed healing potions or something. But P-21 isn't anything like her. I mean, she had sores and huge hollows under her eyes and I think there was some foaming at the mouth. Like, she was crazy without them." I frowned at her incredulous look and added, defensively, "I know that Scalpel mentioned something about chem damage over time way back when."

Rampage looked at me in shock. "Okay... wow. You really should know this... everypony should. A lot of chems like Med-X, Mint-als, even booze... they all carry the risk of dependency. You get hooked on a chem, and pretty soon your body doesn't know how to function when off it."

I rolled my eyes. "I've seen addicts. Remember Flank? He's not an addict," I said as I looked at the closed door. It seemed so stupid. He didn't have that gaunt look or anything. Look at what he'd done with the grenade in that last fight! Could an addict do that?

"Not all addictions are grossly physical, Blackjack. There're all kinds of mental side effects to a lot of drugs!"

"Yeah, and then you pop a Fixer and everything is okay... well, except for the damage," I countered with a small frown. "Glory kinda explained this when she was going on about chems being bad. Sure Fixer's like temporary and stuff, but all we've got to do is get him some. I'll keep an eye out."

"Blackjack, if P-21 is hooked, he's going to need a lot more than just Fixer. Doctors can take care of the physical conditions. If he's using it because of something in his head—" But I whirled on her at that.

"There is nothing wrong with his head. Okay? He's not an addict. If he says he needs it, then he needs it. And who are you to talk, Rampage? You eat Mint-als like they're candy! You loaded yourself up with 'everything' back in Flank, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah! And if I wasn't eternally regenerating, I'd have died long ago," she snorted, pointing a hoof at me. "And don't you deflect this onto me, Blackjack. This is about his problem."

"You're sounding like Glory," I muttered, and I didn't like it because Glory was usually right. I always thought the whole 'chems are bad for you' line to just be her thing.

Chems had saved my life more than once and saved her eyes in the sand dog tunnels. I remembered those hollow-eyed, slat-sided wretches outside Flank, and P-21 wasn't like that. Those were addicts. He wasn't like that, so he couldn't be an addict.

Back in 99, nopony had problems with chems because they were strictly controlled out of medical. Anypony stealing chems for whatever reason could be flogged for possession or use. Even possession of an empty syringe could be construed as guilt. I admitted, since coming out of 99 I'd had brushes with chems, particularly the effects of too much Buck and Hydra. There'd even been times I'd felt like I absolutely had to have them to win and overcome. But they were a tool. I never took them just to take them.

Of course, Hydra had effectively rotted my heart with all the taint that had contaminated me... I met Rampage's hard glare and said firmly, "He's not an addict, okay? He's just not. We'll get him talking with Scotch and work out his problems and you'll see." I didn't know how I could convince her... I wasn't precisely sure if I was convincing myself.

We picked our way through the next area, 'Fusion', with few problems. Aside from the occasional white pony just standing around and one or two of the huge fatties, there wasn't anypony about. There were a lot more ghosts, though; I saw Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood as flickering images, but the moment I moved they faded away. Other times, if I walked just right, they'd linger and persist. Occasionally, I heard distant words and other strange noises.

More than once, P-21 and Rampage assured me that they couldn't perceive any signs of the ghosts... if that was what they were. I couldn't explain it; at times like this, I really wished Lacunae was around. If she didn't know outright, perhaps the Goddess did.

I spotted the fusion megaspell chamber but felt no desire to explore inside. I still had creepy memories of a cockatrice fusing with me.

The closer we got to the Copyroom, the more white ponies there were, as well as the occasional fatty. The three of us took one down, though P-21 blasted a grenade a little too close to me for my comfort. Still, I could take it, and we killed the creature without too much hassle. Beneath the straps lashed to the thing were three Rage injectors and a sensor module. I assumed that this might account for the aggression

their smaller and less mutated cousins didn't display.

Finally we reached the 'Copyroom.' Like the fusion megaspell chamber, it was a large round room, but it held a strange piece of equipment that resembled a large tree of metal, the golden bark spattered with old blood and filth. Fat white nodules hung from the branches like swollen fruit. The rest of the room was decorated like a forest, as if the architect had tried to ease the creepiness. It really hadn't worked. Large pipes dropped down from catwalks over the metal tree in the center of the room, and a whole herd of ghostly white earth ponies stood quietly in clumps. There were more than a few dead bodies, too, and pits full of Flux. I imagined the blanks being shoved into them until they mutated into the hulking fatties.

"What is that?" Twilight asked at my side, and I jumped in shock, looking at the ghostly mare's floating head. Slowly, I moved till she came fully into view. Goldenblood appeared as well; Trueblood and the twins had departed.

"This? Come now, Twilight. You read about everything Project Chimera developed. Or did you only pay attention to the fusion aspect?"

"Don't lecture me, Goldenblood," she said irritably, her ears folding back. "What is this?"

"This is one of the many heads of Chimera," he replied as he gestured to the machine. "The biomagical replication system. We simply call it the copy machine. Mix a biological sample with the Flux, and it can produce a perfect biological copy of that pony. A clone, if you will."

"A clone?" Twilight Sparkle murmured, her eyes widening. "But... I thought Chimera was all about fusing ponies with other beings!"

He looked almost disappointed. "Chimera's goal was to prevent ponies from coming to harm. That was my promise to Fluttershy: to make certain nopony was hurt as badly as I hurt her," he said with a firm frown before turning back to the machine. "Strengthening ponies was simply the beginning. How could we stop there? The organ extraction and preservation technology was used to save thousands of ponies all across Equestria. But we needed a source for those organs. And that source is this machine."

I stared at the machine. Sanguine had said he could replace my failing body's organs, but by using this? "You're butchering ponies for... for body parts?" Twilight said, aghast. "Does Fluttershy know about this? Does Luna?" she added a moment later.

"Perhaps... but that depends," he said as he walked to a terminal. I started to walk too, but it made them all fade out again. In the time it took to move back to where I was, I missed whatever he did. There was a hissing noise, followed by a pop. A ghostly white pony stallion appeared, standing before Twilight. "Is this a pony?"

"What is that?" Twilight murmured in faint curiosity. "Who is he?"

"This is what we call a blank. Normally I'd show you a complete copy, but with Chimera sealed, all we can do is produce blanks by cycling the systems," Goldenblood said as he circled around the white pony. "Every single organ and body part found in the pony body, all the components perfectly assembled. No less... and nothing more than that."

"Nothing more? You mean... there's no mind?" Twilight asked as she took a closer look. The blank's eyes didn't even follow her as it stood there.

"None. Less than an infant. And no soul, either, or at least none we've ever been able to detect. A body made of pure biomagical flux." He gestured to the blank. "Is this a pony? It has no parents, no magic, no spark. It has enough instinct to sleep when it gets tired or eat when it gets hungry, but it otherwise will die without care."

"It's fascinating, but... Goldenblood, this is wrong. Luna could never—" Twilight began, but was cut off as her eyes met the scarred stallion's gaze. "She doesn't know about this. She can't."

"She can and does. She sees nothing wrong with using Chimera to help the lives of thousands of actual thinking, feeling ponies." He looked at the blank standing there. "And think. If we could somehow give blanks intellect, we wouldn't need ponies to fight anymore. We could produce whole armies of blanks, suit them up in power armor or fuse them with dragons, manticores, and phoenixes and send them against our enemies. With Chimera, we could conquer the entire world, if Luna willed it!" he said with a grand wave of his hoof, before he dropped it and stared into her eyes. "And she will. Maybe not today, or tomorrow... but she will. The temptation is inescapable," he finished in a dreadfully quiet voice; I couldn't tell if he was talking to Twilight or to himself.

Twilight stared at the blank in horror. Goldenblood stared into her eyes, then asked in a voice soft as a lover's whisper, "Twilight... have you given a thought... just a thought... about what Equestria will be like if we win this war?"

She swallowed, staring at the simple ghostly pony. "I've been... occupied." He glanced at her, then shook his head with a faint sigh. She looked back at him and

asked quietly, "Have you?"

He frowned at her before speaking as if confessing a horrid crime. "Lately? I've been incapable of thinking about anything else."

They moved away, flickering out. Rampage looked at me expectantly while P-21 just sat there looking sullen, as usual. "Okay, so this is the source of the blanks," I said, spotting Boo peeking out from behind some trash bins. I pointed at the pipes overhead disappearing into the golden tree. "The Flux stuff flows in, but with Chimera sealed, all it does is put out these generic copies."

"Pretty clever," Rampage muttered. "I mean, given all the experiments these guys were doing, they needed somepony to try them out on. They couldn't have only experimented on us." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. "Wonder what this shit is worth."

Wait... us? I looked at her sharply and saw a heart-shaped loop of barbed wire cutie mark. Somepony else? But then she caught my eye. "Rampage? Is that you?"

She scowled at me. "Fuck... I think..." She shook her head hard. "Fuck... what's the matter with me?"

"Can we just cut to the chase and shoot her in the head?" P-21 muttered sourly.

"Experiments. You were talking about ponies experimenting on you?" The question seemed to draw the barbed wire out of the tangled mess on her flank. Her expression hardened and became more insolent. I'd drawn them out... whoever was inside her. "What's your name?" I asked gently.

"Razorwire, Pink. You want my real name, you can check my motherfucking file."

"Pink?" I asked, glancing at P-21. He was clearly of the 'shoot her in the head' attitude.

She rolled her eyes and sneered, "Fine. Officer." She said the word like I might say 'Overmare.'

She thought I was some sort of guardpony? And from her attitude... she was some sort of ganger? I had to keep her out; if she realized she wasn't Razorwire anymore, she'd fade away again. Or freak out. I was sure glad she wasn't full grown. Still, I had to be careful with my questions. "What are you in for?"

"Trying to make friends with the prisoners, Pink? Fuck you. I've been to Shattered Hoof twice. Twice. They couldn't break me. Hightower won't either." Hightower jail... Rampage rolled her eyes, tapping her lips. "Let's see; civil disobedience,

trespassing, defiance of royal edict, theft, larceny, burglary, curfew violations, trafficking stolen goods, distribution of controlled substances, lewd misconduct, and fraternization with the enemy.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “So, you going to take me upstairs? My turn in the attic? Fucking Pinks.” She spat in my face.

“Maybe,” I said, trying to think fast as I wiped it away. There was a narrow window before her personalities became aware and freaked out. “What happens in the attic?”

“Oh, you don’t want to ask that, Pink. Big trouble to ask that. You ask that and they’ll throw you in the cell. Cut you open.” Then she looked at P-21. “Shoot you in the fucking head.” Then she blinked. “Shoot you in the fucking head?” She started looking around and hugged her head as her pupils contracted. “Shit... shit shit shit...” she stammered as she started to shake, “They shot me in the fucking head!”

I grabbed her shoulders, staring into her eyes as she started to cry. “Razorwire! Focus. Who did? Why?”

“They shot me! They fucking shot me! Fucking shot me!” she screamed louder and louder before she looked at me. “I’m dead! I’m dead! They fucking shot me and I’m dead!” She wrapped her little forelegs around mine. “You killed me! You fucking killed me, you Pink!”

Even as a filly, she was damned strong, but I just held her. I wasn’t going to snap her out of it the easy way. “Yes, you were killed, Razorwire. But not by me. I didn’t kill you.” She screamed and fought with me in a thrashing frenzy, her power hooves sparking as they kicked my legs. “I didn’t kill you!” I told her again and again. Her rage slackened off, her struggles growing weaker and weaker before she finally stared at me with a forlorn, wide-eyed expression.

“Blackjack?” she whimpered, her bottom lip shaking.

“Yes... Rampage?” I asked softly as she slowly bowed her head.

She fell against me, sobbing, “They killed her, Blackjack. She was so mad. Why did they kill her?”

“You remember her?” I asked as I held her firmly in my hooves.

“Like... like reading a book a long time ago,” she sniffed. “She was a criminal, a thief. She boasted that stealing was her special talent. Thought of herself as Daring Do.” She sighed, holding her head as she sniffed and shook. Daring who? “Really loved the bucks. Partied hard, did special favors for Pinkie Pie. Scared to fucking death of her...” She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “Got caught in a raid selling to

zebra refugees. Got sent to Hightower. She thought Pinkie Pie would bail her out again, but... she didn't. Left her to rot."

"And the guards killed her?" I asked softly, stroking her mane. She pushed me away, though, then sniffed and rubbed her nose.

"Yeah. They cut her open and put something inside. Then... bang." She shook her head. "Wow... this is the first time I actually..." Then she frowned a little. In fact, she looked a bit spooked.

"What? First time what?" I prompted.

"Don't worry about it," she replied with a sigh, looking up at the catwalks over the mechanical tree. "There's got to be a way up there. Lets find it, finish jerky pony off, and go."

"Yeah. I'm worried about Scotch," I said with a frown as we trotted to a stairwell on the far side of the room. The pale blanks moved out of our way, staring dully. A few seemed to be dying of hunger. A part of me wanted badly to give them food; maybe with enough time, they might become more like Boo. Or maybe she'd stepped in some Flux and it'd done something to her. As we reached the top of the stairs, I put my forehooves on the rail, looking at the strange tree.

"What are you thinking?" Rampage asked.

"Sanguine said he could clone me new organs. Even a whole new body, if he had Chimera." I frowned, knitting my brows together. "What if we could use Chimera to help Scotch?"

"Do you have a clue how to? I'm pretty sure none of us have a mad scientist's certification. I mean, I know I don't," Rampage retorted. Then she knit her brows together. "At least, I hope I don't!"

I gave a little half smile, but it faded as I looked back at the golden tree and watched as one of the pods popped open and dropped a drippy, goopy blank mare to the ground. She blinked and just sat there, looking around... well... blankly. Okay... I hated the thought, but I had to say it. "We'd need Sanguine's help," I said quietly. Suddenly, a harsh snarl sounded from P-21 that made all three of us stare, Boo included. He glared at me disgust.

"Well, I'm so glad Priest, Dusty Trails, and countless more died for nothing," he growled in a low, harsh voice. It'd been a long time since he'd ever spoken to me like we'd just left 99. "Bravo, Blackjack. I think you're the only pony in the Wasteland capable of brushing all that off." I'd rather he'd hit me than have said that.

"I'm not saying we let him win. I'm saying we get EC-1101 and make him use Chimera to help your daughter," I said sharply, and he jerked as if I'd kicked him. I looked at P-21 and Rampage. "There's something that Sanguine wants; I think it's more than just 'this building'. Maybe... maybe we can work out a deal?" P-21 snorted in disgust.

"I'm pretty sure that, even if we get really lucky, any deal we make with him is going to include 'let me go,'" Rampage pointed out.

"So we promise him whatever he wants, get Scotch's clone, and then kill him," P-21 said so matter-of-factly that it chilled me. Worse, a part of me agreed with him. Kill him afterwards. That sounded so neat. So pat. So...

So exactly what Sanguine would do.

When I'd lost EC-1101, it was like losing Stable 99 and Scoodle. They were moments where my actions had lead to complete failure and terrible consequences for others. I wanted to win so badly that I could taste it. He'd probably believe me if I told him we'd let him go; I had that whole 'noble idiot' thing going. P-21 could rig something to go boom. We could do it. I could not only win, but also get vengeance on the bloody monster.

And I wanted to, as well. I had to admit that. I wanted to win; after being chased, shot up, and raped... I wanted to be on the giving end. I wanted to be the one who trotted away with everything because I was the sneaky pony who got away with it. All I had to do was get EC-1101, promise him whatever he wanted, get it, and then kill him.

Then a little orange pony bucked me right upside the head. Was that what I wanted? Deep down? Vengeance on my enemies? Lie. Cheat. Steal. Destroy. Was that what security was all about now?

I didn't know anymore. I felt myself slipping away. I wanted to win and I wanted to be a good pony... to do better... couldn't I do both? Was that too much to ask?

In the Wasteland... yes.

"Well, we're putting the cart in front of the pony," I muttered. Sanguine might not even give us a choice. I'd kill him rather than let him just escape or kill P-21. With me taking the lead, we walked along till we met up with the pipes. A narrow catwalk just wide enough for one pony lead gradually uphill.

Towards Sanguine and EC-1101.

The pipes emerged into an enormous hexagonal room, a room I'd seen before. Twilight had accused him of copying Maripony; I didn't know how accurate that was, but in this place I saw almost exactly what I'd seen in Spike's cave. It was a cruder design; the ceiling was held up by six massive pillars instead of being freestanding under a volcanic chimney, and instead of computer equipment these walls were covered with pipes and mechanisms. Flickering lights blinked on and off over a massive lake of pink mist that undulated and swirled around massive heaps of machinery barely visible through the fog. The air tasted foul and poisonous.

And there were warning signs everywhere. Some were almost as large as the Hoofington Arena's scoreboard. 'Warning: absolutely no eating or drinking on the floor, no matter how good it smells.' 'Warning: absolutely no sneezing.' 'Warning: report any and all instances of music and/or singing; do not participate in any musical numbers.' 'Warning: anything and everything can explode when thrown, even you.' 'Warning: report to medical if you find your body drastically different when you wake up tomorrow. Blue spots = bad spots.' 'Warning: be on alert for unusual weather shifts.' 'In the event of catastrophic Flux spill, please think of your fellow workers and activate the water flush system; we will remember your sacrifice.' 'Only you can prevent a horrible fate worse than death.'

Of course, they were slightly better than the other signs. 'We're not just mixing chems and dangerous substances here: we're mixing science!' 'When in doubt, throw science against the wall. See what sticks.' 'You are a trusted friend in science!' 'Not never but NOW!' 'Your right to work, no matter how hazardous, horrible, or harmful that work may be.' 'Three bit work; aren't you glad you're being paid four?' 'Donkeys: doing your part for Equestria!'

Then, on each pillar, I saw a red box about the size of a pony. The warning on these was far more straightforward. 'Warning: high explosives.' I had a sneaking suspicion that most of the employees here had been illiterate, desperate, or suicidal.

In the very center was a large metal pillar. Pipes of all sorts sprang from it, some coming up to meet the pipes running underneath the catwalk I was on while most dropped down to the strange machines. A metal catwalk ring surrounded the pillar about twenty or so feet from it. Carefully, the four of us made our way over that poisoned expanse towards the pillar. A guard lounged where the catwalk we were on joined the ring surrounding the silver spire; she might not have been taking her job seriously, though, given that she was smoking and looking out at the mist, but I couldn't think of any way we could get close enough to take her out without giving her a chance to get off a warning. And shooting in here... even I could tell that that

would be a bad idea.

Then I looked back at P-21, who was staring out into space with that sour expression. I nudged him and pointed up the ramp at the guard. He frowned and lifted Persuasion in his hooves with a questioning look. I rolled my eyes and then shook my head, mimicking lifting something with my hooves and puckering my lips. He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, then blinked and nodded. Silently, he moved closer and pulled Scalpel's blowgun from his bags. He raised it to his lips and fired without a sound. The dart pinged off the rail next to her, and I felt my mane stand on end as she bent over to examine it. Fortunately, the second dart buried itself right in her rump. The Med-X and Moon Dust mix shot into her, and she swayed on her hooves before flopping on her face.

I just gave him a look, smiling and arching a brow inquisitively as he looked back defensively. We trotted up to the ring, and he collected the missed dart. Fortunately there were drums and crates to hide behind as we moved around towards the far side, where pieces of equipment sparked and whirred. Barely audible over the noise from this distance were several voices. As we moved around towards the front, I saw a generator surrounded by dozens of spent spark batteries. It was connected to one of the machines hooked to the exterior of the pillar. 'Raw Flux Draw Site #26' was written on the casing.

"Try it again!" came Sanguine's shout. "It should work for you! What are you doing wrong?"

"It's not. It won't work!" Psychoshy sobbed. "It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill me. It won't open the casing."

"It must! EC-1101 was designed to work for only a select few ponies or their offspring. It must work for you, Fluttershy! That's what it was designed to do!" Sanguine hissed, and then I got far enough around the column to spot the guards, then him, and then the sobbing yellow pegasus. She looked like hell; great wads of yellow feathers had been torn from her wings, her mane was ripped and torn, and her yellow hide was bruised. "Stop screwing around and just open it!"

"I can't!" she sobbed, hanging her head as her hoof rubbed the Delta PipBuck that had been ripped out of my leg and duct taped to hers. It was rubbing her limb raw.

The half-dozen guards snickered to each other, watching the pair. I didn't know if they were protecting them or trying to prevent them from escaping. Sanguine looked at her and said, in a low voice I barely picked out over the pump, "The last tanker is almost full. Goliath and his mother have already teleported back! As soon as it's full,

they're leaving, and either they are going kill us or that thing is going to completely occupy this facility! You can do it."

"I can't. It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill us. You didn't say anything about a dead pony talking to me!" she suddenly wailed.

What was that? Was she talking about... Dealer? But... but he was my crazy! Wasn't he?

"I'm a dead pony talking to you, and I'm telling you this is our last chance. If we fail now... or if Glue cracks Twilight's work... there won't be another! I won't leave them down there!" the ragged ghoul said as he pointed down at the pink mist.

Now I really wanted to have a nice long chat with the bastard.

Should I act or should I wait, though? Even if the guards weren't on Sanguine's side, I doubted they would just let me trot right up and take him. I looked over at P-21 to see if he had any ideas. He did...

He was pointing Persuasion right at Sanguine and Psychoshy.

I knocked the barrel up, either just in time to prevent him from firing straight or accidentally triggering it. The launcher made its soft thump, the grenade pinged off the side of the pillar, and then exploded overhead. From the glare he gave me, I wondered if I was back on his shooty list.

Okay... time for Plan D.

"Security!? Get her!" Sanguine shouted as he grabbed Psychoshy's tattered wing and dragged her behind cover. The six began to spread out and open fire with SMGs and battle saddle mounted light machine guns while two more circled around. 'Get her?' Really? He was hitting the villain clichés hard!

Of course, he'd be laughing last if they did manage to get us. "Rampage!" I pointed behind us, and the filly gave a salute and scampered in that direction.

A few seconds later, I heard her yell, "Tag! You're it!" Followed by the crack of her power hoof.

That left the three of us being shot at by four ponies, and Sanguine was somewhere with his poison breath. Boo immediately took cover behind a barrel, curling up as tightly as she could. P-21 pulled out a frag grenade, bit off the stem, and threw it over towards the guards. He wasn't the only pony with that idea, as an apple grenade bounced off the crate behind me and landed in my lap. I jerked, tossing it

over the edge, where it detonated a fraction of a second later in midair just below us.

P-21 leaned to the side to get a better look as he readied another grenade while I fired with the revolver. Really, right now, I was just grateful for the lack of griffins. My aim was a lot more careful, but with automatic machinegun fire you didn't need skill, just luck, time, and a large enough supply of bullets. P-21 rolled a grenade across the catwalk to the base of their cover. "Get ready," he said.

"For wh—" But the what was answered when a cloud of thick white smoke billowed up, cutting us off from them. I sure wasn't wasting any time! The gunfire slackened somewhat, and I sprinted across the gap, launching myself over their cover. Now was my chance to administer a beatdown on somepony else in a battle saddle! I hooked my metallic forehooves around one light machine gun and pulled back. The mare it was strapped to clenched down on the trigger as I swung her around. Screams and shouts filled the air as the guards fired wildly back at her.

Finally, the pins holding the machinegun came loose and I yanked it free. Several rounds smacked into the mare as I swung the gun up and rested it across her back. I looped my hoof around the cable trailing from the trigger to the bridle and jerked it taut, bracing the gun against her body as I fired every round in the magazine in the direction of her comrades.

One came out of the dissipating smoke and slammed me against the catwalk rail, the gun falling silent as the mare I'd used for cover went down. The bulky earth pony struggled to simply toss me completely over the edge and into that vast swirlly death below. And she was doing it, too! I wrapped my hooves around her neck as she shoved me over, halting my plummet. I grit my teeth and hooked my hind legs through the railing, then extended my fingers and grabbed her own shoving forelegs. With a yank, I pulled her over the edge after me, dangling there upside down as she screamed and landed on some equipment below us.

The fall hadn't killed her. As she started to howl and choke, I suspected she wished it had.

There was another grenade explosion as I hauled myself up the side of the catwalk rail with my robofingers and finally flopped over on the safe side. Then Sanguine emerged from the thinning smoke and took a deep breath. I covered my face with my hooves as his thick pink poison washed over me. I might have held my breath, but it did me little good. Every inch of exposed skin burned horribly as the concentrated gas touched it. I felt my hide grow... sticky. When I rolled to the side to get out of

the spray, I felt my skin tear; a second longer and I'd have been fused to my bardings and the floor! As it was, I'd left a few square inches of hide glued to my forelegs and the metal beneath me.

I could only hope I'd regenerate... provided I survived. If I hadn't been half synthetic, I think I'd have been permanently glued down by that toxic plume.

I reached for the revolver, but it'd fallen out somewhere. Sanguine drew in another breath as I stared up at him; I needed a magic bullet. I needed it now! I focused... imagined... concentrated... Oh, this was so much easier in S.A.T.S.! Then the white ball of light flashed out and struck him in the face! It wasn't full power, but it was enough to knock him back and halt a second dose of the pink cloud.

Psychoshy had kissed him? How did she still have a tongue?

Unfortunately, lying there made me prime target for one of the guardponies. I didn't have a gun, and my horn still ached horribly from one half-strength magic bullet. The bloodied guard levitated an SMG with a look of pleasured satisfaction in my imminent demise.

Then there was a chatter of rapid fire directly behind me; shooting wild and uncontrolled. But with machineguns, you just needed one or two lucky shots. The unicorn mare jerked as two bullets pulverized her face, ripping out her eyes and the top of her head, her own fire going wild before she dropped and lay still. I rolled to my hooves, expecting to see P-21. Instead, my eyes popped wide as I stared at Boo gripping the mouth trigger of one of the guns. Her blank eyes stared back, and she swallowed. The gun went off again, spraying me briefly and punching a whole slew of holes in my limbs as I raised them reflexively. I'd just regenerated those! The terrified mare let the gun fall out of her mouth as she curled up into a trembling ball again.

I didn't have any time to be indignant though, as a second blast of poisoned breath washed over me. I jumped away, my body quivering from the toxic spew, and I turned to face him. One side of his face had fallen away, uncovering bone from mouth to ear and letting tendrils of pink ooze out the side of his mouth. "Now I see. EC-1101 must be... be locked onto you or something. When you die, it'll work. I'll be able to save them."

"You couldn't save a bottlecap by gluing it to your face," I countered.

"I can save them!" he shouted, his eyes going wide. I wondered if he was going to go feral right in front of me. "I'm a doctor! That's what I do! I save ponies!"

"You're a murderer, Sanguine!"

"You made me one!" he screamed. "I didn't want to kill them. I didn't want to kill anypony! I just needed Chimera to save them. If you'd just given it to me, then we'd all have been better off. Red Eye would have his I.M.P.! I would have a comfortable life in Fillyadelphia! My family would be safe! Everything promised to me by Goldenblood and Horse would be mine!" He started to pace. "I wasn't supposed to become this. My family wasn't supposed to die. I was going to be Equestria's greatest biological researcher!" He pointed a hoof at me and yelled, "It's not fucking fair!" A cloud of pink rose up from his mouth.

"Your family?" I blinked as I stared at him. "You have a family?"

"Is it that much of a surprise?" His horn glowed, and from his pocket he pulled out cut up little pictures like the ones I'd seen in the office and flung them to me. My pathetic magic only managed to catch one, and I stared. The buck whose face was cut out had been kissing a pretty, blushing orange unicorn. I could see the ghoul's charcoal face through the void before I let the photo drop. He hissed, the pink cloud spraying out between his rotten teeth. "Yes. My family. We were supposed to be safe in Stable One. The finest and safest stable in all of Equestria. But the poison... we couldn't reach it." He shook his head. "I got them here, but we were sick. Oh so sick. There was nowhere safe. Here they'd be safe. Where I could heal them. Clone them new bodies... transplant organs... they'd live! They'd have to. All I needed was Chimera!"

"You were doing all this to save your family?" I gaped at him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He snorted angrily. "Are you saying you'd believe me after what I did to your stable?" He had a point. I'd taken one heck of a pounding since then. I'd needed to see that office first. Read that message from a loving wife. "The sick fact is that what I am... this... this walking corpse... doesn't deserve them. But their memory is the only thing keeping me from becoming a mindless feral. Saving them gives me purpose."

I scowled at him. "Why'd you feed me that grand vision experiment on the wasteland crap?"

"Do you really think Red Eye is big on sentimentalism? Or reapers? Or monster-ponies? I needed Red Eye's help, he needed Flux and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. He'd be able to care for my family! Give them the life and safety they deserved. I wouldn't have my wife raped by raiders or my sons turned into savages. Red Eye is creating schools. Civilization! And he doesn't care if you're a ghoul..."

unlike Tenpony."

"You put them in stasis pods, like the others," I said as I stared at him.

"Yes... but once activated, I couldn't open them! I can't even monitor their status. Chimera would have to be activated first. I tried tampering with them from time to time, but it was risky. Killed the occupants of some by accident, woke up some of the others. Told them I could fix them, or give them whatever they wanted and needed. Set up some with the Reapers." He glanced at Psychoshy before he resumed pacing back and forth. "I learned that the stasis pods had a flaw: not all ponies put in stayed unconscious. Some were trapped and went insane." He shuddered, hanging his head. "I couldn't wait after that. Not knowing if my family was trapped in their pods, trapped in their heads, screaming. Sent Deus after your stable... last place Silver Stripe traced it. And then..."

He looked at me and screamed, "Then you fucked everything up!"

He launched himself at me in a frenzy, a toxic cloud pouring out of every gap and hole in him. I kept backing away, using my fingers to throw crates and barrels in his face whenever he started to exhale. It was different than fighting an enemy with a gun, though. The vapors burned, even without a direct hit. Holding my breath did no good; the toxins were entering through my hide. Finally, I trod on one of the corpses and my leg slipped out from under me.

I rolled onto my back once more, and he stood over me. Pink vapors burned my cheek; I felt the flesh bubbling from the contact. He drew a long, slow wet breath. Then I looked above him...

Glory?

The crate dropped on Sanguine's back with a resounding crunch, and he collapsed beneath its weight. A pink spray poured down through the catwalk grate into the sea of noxious vapor beneath us. I rolled away, feeling my flesh drip. Oh, I really, really hoped I could regenerate this! Then I stared in shock as Psychoshy landed beside him, tears streaking her cheeks.

"You said it was going to be you and me, Sanguine. That it'd be us in our life with Red Eye," the yellow mare sobbed. "Were you going to kill me once you had Chimera? Or were you just going to dump me and run off with your family?"

"Stupid... ungrateful... wretched... traitorous... meat. I should have thrown you away when I had the chance," he hissed beneath the crate. Then his lips curled. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore."

"Oh yeah? Why?" I asked with a snort, then a wince. I really hoped I still had the left side of my face! At least I could still blink that eye.

"Ahem," coughed a voice behind me. I turned and stared at three hovering griffins in power armor and a dozen more guardponies, similarly equipped. One pressed a gun to P-21's head as he pinned the struggling stallion. The lead griffin, pointing a high caliber precision rifle at my head, said, "We wanted to tell you that we've got the Flux loaded and are ready to leave." He looked at the pinned ghoul. "Do you have Chimera?"

"Almost!" he rasped, his broken hooves scraping at the catwalk grate. "I'm so close. Just kill her... and... I just need a little more time!"

"I see," the griffin replied as the guards trotted past us and Sanguine gave a growing smile. But then they simply collected their fallen comrades and their wounded, doing nothing against me or to help free him. His glassy eyes popped wide when they started to trot back out the way they came.

"No. What are you doing? No. No no no... you can't! You need me!" Sanguine shouted after them.

The griffin just snorted. "Glue cracked Twilight's notes three days ago. We don't need you for anything. Red Eye thanks you for your offer of prewar aid but says he can't extend any more time or resources for Chimera. In addition, for your crimes against the mining settlement at Brimstone's Fall, Red Eye wishes for me to personally inform you that you will be shot on sight if you are seen anywhere in the vicinity of the Cathedral or Fillyadelphia."

I stared as they released P-21 and started to go. "Wait... you're just leaving him?" I asked. The griffin looked amused. "You're not going to kill us?" Somehow, I felt a little... surprised... that somepony else was showing us mercy rather than just killing us for the fun of it. That it was coming from one of Red Eye's people was a touch more disturbing.

"You're welcome. Near as I can tell, leaving you alive in this hellhole is worse punishment than killing you. Besides, the robots in the tunnels will probably do that. As for us, our contract is done. We have the Flux needed, and we'll deduct his payment," he said with a wave at the pinned ghoul, "to cover the extra costs and loss of life." The griffin gave a snide grin. "Be glad I'm not Vermilion, Sanguine. After the annoyance you caused him... well, I'm pretty sure he'd take the time to get creative." He flew off towards the others. I watched them go and sat down hard. "Come on. Let's get out of here. I've had enough of pony freaks, ghouls, and killer

robots in general. Hoofington can kiss my tail.”

When they’d disappeared down the catwalk I turned back to look at Sanguine trapped beneath the crate, saying, “Well that was interes—”

P-21 had jammed a grenade in his mouth.

“Stop!” I yelled. Psychoshy looked shocked, Rampage sighed, Boo flinched, and P-21 scowled. Sanguine stared back at me, his pink breath trickling around the apple.

“No, Blackjack. Fuck no!” P-21 yelled, hoof poised over the stem. “This bastard needs to die. He needs to die in the worst possible way.”

“I’m not arguing that,” I said as I stepped closer to him. This was it. Get the PipBuck back... kill him. Or was I going to go for the triple win and lie to him to help Scotch? Kill him. Finish him off. Or let somepony else kill him. My hooves would be clean then... right? I sighed as I sat down, looking at the ghoul. “Why didn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“Damn it, Blackjack! You swore to kill him! You swore to Dusty Trails as she was dying!” P-21 yelled at me. I knew I had. I did, but... “You can’t just let him live! I’ll kill him if you won’t! I’ll do it.”

“No. You won’t,” I said evenly, looking him in the eye. “Because I know that you’re a good pony, P-21, and good ponies don’t kill in cold blood.” He shook, his hoof tapping against the metal case of the grenade in Sanguine’s mouth. “Besides, I want to hear his answer.”

P-21 gave a ragged, exacerbated laugh. “Who cares what his reason was! Does it matter? Is there anything he could possibly say that could excuse what he did in the mine? What he did to Priest?” he demanded, his eyes drilling into me. “Sweet Celestia, Blackjack! Just kill him!”

“Your call,” Rampage said with a little shrug. Psychoshy simply kept her head turned away as she wept. Boo stared, wide-eyed.

“I’ll do it. I will. I will!” P-21 yelled as he shook, gritting his teeth. One flick. Just one. I moved even closer to him. I wanted to win. Wanted to avenge Dusty and Priest. Wanted to do all of that. And so did he. Then I put my hooves around him and held him close.

“He’s not the Overmare,” I whispered softly. P-21 froze and then leaned against me as he sniffed. “Killing him won’t be killing her. And it won’t bring Priest back.” He let

out a soft sob, muffled by my mane as I held him close. "I wish I could follow through on that promise to Dusty... I do... maybe I still will. But not like this."

He ever so slowly pulled his hoof away and murmured, "Maybe... but he should be killed. He's done horrible things... he deserves to die for them." And I couldn't argue with that. He was right. Sanguine should die. It would be a win. The right thing to do.

But I'm not an executioner.

P-21 moved aside, and Rampage sighed, "Softest damned heart in the Wasteland, I swear." The filly shook her head and carefully tugged the grenade out. Then she narrowed her eyes. "I don't have a soft heart, so if you so much a sneeze at her, I'm going to do a power hoof tapdance on your skull. Understand?"

"Sure," he replied quietly. He hadn't taken his eyes off me. I heaved the crate off him, and he rose slowly, staring. "Your friend is right. I do deserve to die."

"Ponies keep telling me that." I stared back. "What I don't understand is, if you know what you're doing is so wrong, why do you keep on being bad? I know what it's like to screw up. All I can try and do is do better."

"Well, some of us weren't so good even before we became monsters," he replied. "So. What now? As soon as those tankers leave, this place will be overrun."

"I'd love to know by who, how, and why, but I don't have time for that. When I was dying, you said you could replace organs for me using Chimera. Well, now I have a friend who breathed a whole lungful of chlorine gas, and if she's not dead now, she may be soon," I said as I stared into his eyes. "So I'll unlock Chimera if you'll do what you have to do to make a clone for her."

"You'll just give me Chimera for that?" he stammered in disbelief.

"No. I'm not giving it to you. Sorry, I don't trust you or Red Eye with it. But I will let you help your family. And if this is an O.I.A. facility, then I can't believe it doesn't have some kind of automated defenses."

"It does..." he murmured, then lowered his eyes. "You asked me why I didn't tell you about my family. Why I talked like some sort of mad scientist from a bad pulp novel? The answer is simple... I'm ashamed. Being a mad scientist ghoul was better... easier... than being a father unable to beg for help. And because I never imagined you'd believe me or help me if I did."

Rampage ripped my PipBuck off Psychoshy's leg. The Pegasus with the ratty wings

couldn't look at anypony. Sanguine glanced back at the golden-maned mare. "I'm sorry I used you, Fluttershy. Only a pony descended from a Ministry Mare could use EC-1101."

"Is she a clone or something?" Rampage asked as she passed me my PipBuck.

"No," Sanguine said simply. "She's Fluttershy's daughter."

Sanguine and Psychoshy weren't talking much about the details of that little bomb. P-21 wasn't talking to anypony. And Rampage was duct taping my PipBuck to my limb until Scotch could wire it up properly. And now my vision was filling with all kinds of fancy little images, displays, and pictures. I winced and said, "Okay, did you mess with all my settings or something?" Had my E.F.S. always flashed and twitched like this? It was making my head hurt a little... no... strike that. It was making my head hurt bad.

Then, just like that, it all stopped. Everything did. The pain, the flashes... everything. I felt like I'd just entered S.A.T.S. and was frozen in the moment of calm consideration.

And the Dealer was there before me. The cards shuffled repeatedly in his hooves... and with each shuffle I saw numbers in the margins of my vision shifting and randomizing and disappearing again. His pale eyes stared into mine from under the brim of that dark hat. "So... what are you? You're not my crazy, are you?"

"Let's play that game when we've got a little more time to spare," he rasped as he turned over the deck of cards. "You've got enough on your plate as it is." He had a point, not that I liked it.

"You know. I thought for a moment that, when I left here, I'd have fewer questions than when I arrived." I added a mental stomp of my hoof. "I wonder if LittlePip wants to trade? I'll go fight brainreading monsters, and she can deal with all this mystery horseshit!" Not like there was much in my brain worth reading.

"You ought to know better," he muttered, tilting his hat up. "You sure you want to do this, Blackjack? That ghoul doesn't deserve your spit, let alone your mercy."

Was I sure? "What happens if I unlock Chimera?" I remembered Ol' Hank talking about machines waking up and getting conflicting orders. "It'll stop the conflicting orders here and wake up the systems, won't it?" He smiled, seeming impressed.

"Sure. Here and everywhere. Word will go out to let Chimera be accessible along the networks and allow anypony with the right access codes to use the files. I have no idea how far and wide those networks stretch," he admitted with a shrug of his shoulders, and then he frowned. "Funny..."

"Funny... what?"

"Nothing. Just something familiar," he said as he stared into my eyes. I almost would have blushed if I could move. "Just be careful. Once you open something, you can't always close it again."

I wasn't very sure about that, but I needed to help Scotch. This didn't sit well with me, though. Once I unlocked it, then it would stay unlocked. What would stop Sanguine from coming back in ten years and starting all this back up again? I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and looked at Sanguine sitting there. He looked like a corpse. Not just the boiled appearance, with his face half torn off. He looked dead. I wondered just where the line was between a sane ghoul like Harpica and the many ferals I'd seen elsewhere, and just how close was Sanguine to crossing it.

"Sanguine. Those explosives?" I pointed at the really big bombs on the pillars.
"What are they for?"

It took him a while to shake out of his fugue. "If we ever lost containment, they would detonate, collapse this space and focus the force of the primary explosion," he replied tiredly. Wait? Those big explosives weren't for the primary explosion? "Not sure if it would do any good, but it was preferable to letting it loose."

"It?" I asked with a frown. He gestured towards the round pillar in the center of the catwalk ring. I approached a short extension that stretched halfway across the void and looked up at the smooth face of the pillar. At the chimera carved into the face. Goat... lion... snake... all mixed and jumbled together. Written at the bottom of the strange mish-mash creature were the words: 'Project Chimera.'

Suddenly, I stiffened and felt as if a powerful hoof had suddenly pressed down on my mind. My hooves moved to walk me up to the very edge of the catwalk. The flickering numbers became even harsher, flashes and glares disrupting my sight. Suddenly, the room lit up; the pink mist had vanished, and below me whirred and clanked dozens of strange machines filling up thousands of barrels with rainbow Flux. My friends all disappeared, and I couldn't move or speak as Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood walked up to stand together on the edge before the immense polished cylinder. Twilight wore a look of horror on her face as she looked at the carving.

"No..." she whispered softly. "It can't be."

"You can turn back now, Twilight," Goldenblood murmured.

"Open it," she hissed. "Right now."

"Twilight..."

"Open it!"

Goldenblood sighed and spoke formally, and I felt my lips move with him as I spoke his words. "Project Chimera containment open. Password: A wonderful, wonderful thing."

The immense pillar rumbled as motors within jerked into life. A moment later, there came a hiss and crack. The top of the pillar slowly peeled open, unleashing a rainbow glare. I'd have shielded my eyes if I were capable of movement. Two panels swung wide while a third expanded downwards to form a bridge. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw it came from orbs embedded in the interior. I'd seen orbs like these before. A hoofful had utterly annihilated the Hoofington museum. Here, a grid of dozens, perhaps hundreds, were evenly spaced out in a foot by foot grid covering the inner surface of the cylinder. Metallic hoses connected the pumps outside to the object in the center.

Mounted on a small pedestal in the middle was a glittering silver statue of the strange creature I'd seen on the outside of the cylinder. It wore an expression of absolute terror, twisted as if it had frozen in this state. The detail was such that I almost swore it was alive. "This is the basis of Project Chimera; the source of Flux. This is what your I.M.P. research is ultimately based upon. What causes the contaminations and mutations you've encountered time and time again. This is the secret you wanted to know so badly!" Goldenblood proclaimed as he gestured up at the silver statue.

"Discord," Twilight Sparkle whispered in horror, her eyes wide as she pressed her hooves to her mouth.

Then a low, snide, nasal-sounding voice croaked in a condescending tone, "Hello, Twilight Sparkle. Long time no see."

Footnote: Maximum level reached.

39. Wages of Sin

"I hope you're happy! Both of you! You've ruined my very first slumber party. The makeover, the smores, the truth or dare, the pillow fight! I mean, is there anything else that could possibly go wrong?!"

Twilight stared up at the massive silver statue, her eyes wide in horror, then turned to Goldenblood and pointed a hoof back at the strange amalgam creature. "This is Project Chimera?!"

"I know, I know," drawled the nasal, sarcastic voice. "But I suppose 'Project Discord' or 'Project Draconequeus' would have been too much of a giveaway."

Twilight's eyes went flat as she looked over her shoulder at the statue, then back at Goldenblood. "What is Discord doing here, Goldenblood? How could you put those two in charge of... of this! Luna will be informed..." she began when she was cut off by the low snicker of the statue.

"Oh, I wish I could see your face right now, Twilight. I really do," Discord cackled. "Well, actually, I really wish I was out of this damned silvery suit Goldie dressed me up in. Oh the fun we could have, Twilight. Fun..." He hissed the word long and low.

"Luna knows. Celestia knows." Goldenblood slowly trotted up towards the statue, and now Twilight didn't look certain of anything anymore. "When the war began, Celestia knew that Discord would be the greatest threat to Equestria. If three squabbling fillies could break him loose, even though that was long after the sealing spell was cast and after the Elements changed hooves, how long would the magic hold when ponies and zebras were killing each other on such unprecedented scales?" He gazed at the statue with a long, baleful look as he added, "Worse, zebra lore knows of Discord... trickster of the stars."

"It does?" Twilight asked in shock.

"I try not to boast," Discord said in feigned modesty.

I trotted closer towards the statue, getting out of her way, and was suddenly seized by an incredible vertigo that ended abruptly with a sharp pain in my tail. I felt distinctly nauseous, but then moments later it passed. Okay. I didn't know what that just was, but no more trying to move. My poor tail was one of the few original bits of me I had!

"Indeed. Ponies aren't the only people he's manipulated, tormented, and hurt," Goldenblood replied evenly. "Spirits of chaos like him are well known in their culture, and of them all, Discord is the strongest and worst."

"Thank you for the compliment," Discord interjected with mock sincerity, "But really, I must admit that I'm nothing compared to you, Goldie, when it comes to manipulating, tormenting, and hurting others. How's Fluttershy?" Goldenblood's face didn't change a bit, but his horn flared, pushing a button and turning a dial. The metal began to hum, and the hum became a scream. Discord's manic laughter grew into a manic scream as well.

"Goldenblood! Stop!" Twilight shouted, her horn lighting and turning the dial back the other way.

Discord panted, chuckling a low, slow, pained laugh. "Too soon?"

Goldenblood glared up at the statue as calm reasserted itself. "Even before Luna assumed the throne, zebra agents attempted to capture Discord. After what you and Celestia did to him, everypony fairly assumed he'd focus mostly on us if he got free, and that made the zebras think that they might be able to use him as a bargaining chip or deterrent. Celestia's original solution was to have him buried here; there's a special ore underneath Hoofington that counteracts his powers. But as the war escalated, we knew the enchantment wouldn't last even there. His size had already increased fifty percent in just over ten years, and the petrifaction spell was already in doubt."

"Well, when you have a steady diet of war, chaos, and uncertainty with zero exercise, you tend to pack on the pounds," Discord murmured.

"It's hard to believe our efforts were so weak," Twilight murmured, hanging her head a little. "What he did to my friends, and bringing them back together... Now it looks like it was all for nothing."

Goldenblood stared at her for a few inscrutable seconds, then looked back at the statue. "It's not your fault, Twilight. Celestia had many centuries of relative peace after Discord was trapped; the closest he came to release was during Nightmare Moon's bid for power, and that still wasn't enough. Had things remained as they were, he likely would have stayed in stone for at least another millenium. But this war...so much confusion and hatred, widespread violence and turbulent emotions, and for nearly twenty straight years now... It was the perfect diet to set Discord loose."

"And given how exciting everything is, can you blame me for wanting to get involved? I was so looking forward to seeing how much more interesting I could make things for everybody! Being a statue is so boring, you know... oh, wait, you don't. You have no idea what that's like, do you?" Discord sneered. "And you called me a villain."

"We had to contain him quickly. Fortunately, Luna recommended utilizing the ore we were excavating in the reconstruction, and it has indeed proven quite effective in keeping him trapped," Goldenblood explained, not taking his eyes off the statue.

"Funny how she suggested it," Discord said in a faintly hurt tone. "And I'd always had a soft spot for little Luna. I never appreciated how much potential she had."

"How does this metal work? Why can't Discord just teleport out of it or turn it into cheese?" Twilight asked with a frown.

"This metal," Goldenblood replied, "Unique in all our experience, resonates at only one magical frequency. Not 'effectively' one like some of the experimental materials we've developed, but truly only one single pure tone; it fully ignores all other magical effects. Discord, being a creature of chaos, can't focus his power to such a narrow degree."

"And I'm not stupid enough to try and play that note," Discord muttered, and my ears perked. There was a definite undercurrent of deadly seriousness in his voice.

Twilight sighed softly. "All right. I can understand containing him, but how did you go from that to... pulling flux out of him?"

Goldenblood smiled that humorless little smirk. "Do you really want to know, Twilight?" She glared back at him, and for a moment their eyes remained locked. Then Goldenblood gave a little shrug. "It was my idea. The raw magical essence of Discord was simply sitting there, unused, gaining power all the time, and the potential for his magic was mindboggling. Once the research was begun, it actually didn't take that long for a method to drain it in a usable form to be developed." Goldenblood pointed at the hoses with his hoof. "Needles were drilled into the stone and hooked up to extraction lines; to create base flux, the metal is resonated, liquefying portions of his essence."

"You drilled into him?" Twilight gaped. "You drilled holes in him?!"

"Don't worry. It's exactly as painful as it sounds," Discord said in a sarcastic mutter.

"Yes." Goldenblood said without taking his eyes off hers. "And we suck out his magical essence, mix it with gems to stabilize it, and ship it all across Equestria. A portion

of the sales goes to covering the O.I.A. operating budget, which is substantial. The rest is given to the ministries.”

Twilight shook her head. “Torturing him... sucking his essence out... and you sell it to fund all this? I thought your funding was through the kingdom!” she said, looking startled and disgusted.

“Not exclusively. The O.I.A. goes through a lot of bits in a year,” he said as he gestured down at the production room with his hoof. “Even with our secondary and tertiary sources of income, projects like Chimera are horrifically expensive. And it benefits us to keep some expenditures off the books.”

“How much money could you possibly need?” Twilight asked with a scowl.

“Our budget exceeds those of the M.A.S. and M.o.A. combined,” he countered, and that set her back a step. “Possibly even the M.o.P. as well.” I had no idea just how much money that was, but I thought of all the money Goldenblood had bilked from the nobility for Project Redoubt. Add in the proceeds from side projects like selling flux... and, actually, I still had no idea just how much money that was; I wasn’t sure I could count that high. Twilight’s jaw dropped as Goldenblood said softly, “Of course, as I’m not the director anymore, that information is strictly hush hush.”

“I’ll have to remember that next time I approach Luna for a budget increase,” Twilight murmured as she stared up at the statue. “So, why in Equestria did you put those two in charge of him?”

“To be fair, this is an O.I.A. facility. They are simply the face company, selling and distributing flux and a sizeable number of spinoff products. But really, can you think of anypony better? The pair are natural obfuscationists, entrepreneurial in the extreme, and unscrupulous but cowardly. They embezzle wherever they can, and I let them get away with a certain amount to keep them working. Their utter lack of political ambition combined with their goal to excel makes them diligent in their complicity. After all, they delayed you for more than a year while you were trying to make your alicorn potion work.”

“They weren’t the only ones,” Twilight said, frowning again. “Remember, your stonewalling cost you your position.”

But Goldenblood didn’t look upset about that. If anything, he looked sad and so very tired. “Well, we do what we must for love.”

“Excuse me? Doth mine ears deceive me, or did you say ‘alicorn potion?’” Discord chuckled. “Oh... Twilight... you’re making an alicorn potion? As in a potion to

create alicorns?" The silver statue began to laugh. "Oh I just bet the royal duo absolutely love that idea!"

Twilight scowled up at him. "I have the full support of Luna!" If anything, that made Discord laugh even harder. "Shut up!"

Goldenblood twisted the knob once more, and the statue began to hum. The laughter rose higher and higher until it became a scream of agony, and then the knob was turned back down. "Oh, I do so love all you little ponies. Even when I'm sure you're all going to be so boring, you find ways to surprise me..." Discord said with another quiet chuckle. Goldenblood looked away, sitting on the edge of that narrow bridge. "Well, I do hope that works out well for you, Twilight. A step up in the world."

"It will make us win this war," Twilight answered, but I could see she was shaken. She looked at all those hoses snaking out of the silver statue. "I'll talk with Luna. She'll put a stop to this. She can't know exactly what's been done to you, Discord. You're imprisoned. There's no point to torture as well."

"Oh, Twilight. You always were such a good little pony. Always surrounded by loyalty, honesty, kindness, generosity, and laughter," Discord said in a voice that was almost pitying. "What are you surrounded by now?"

Twilight stepped off the bridge, back onto the catwalk, and a moment later Goldenblood's horn flashed and the bridge slowly rose back up. A moment later, the central pillar's doors swung back into place and sealed with a faint hiss. The purple unicorn adjusted the glasses she wore as her magic brushed her mane back into place, but her face was troubled and haunted. "So... that's why my potion wasn't working. Why it kept going unstable. It'll likely need that magical resonance to stabilize it... possibly a pinch of that metal as well."

"Possibly," Goldenblood replied. He turned and started to trot away, but then he paused. "So, you mean to continue?"

She looked at him in confusion. "Of course. This is why the M.A.S. was established. I swore to Princess Luna that I would find her a magical solution to the war, and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion will do it. We'll be able to turn hundreds of ponies into alicorns. Earth ponies will be able to do magic and fly for the first time. We could make thousands. End this war once and for all!"

"Even given the cost? You'll use flux, knowing where it comes from?" Goldenblood asked. She looked away, and he sighed. "I see."

"I have to do this. I promised Luna that my friends and I would win this war," Twilight

Sparkle said quietly, keeping her eyes away. She stood and started away, but then she too paused. "You promised something similar, if I recall." She started off without looking back, steps slow and heavy with the burden of knowledge.

"Something like that," he said softly, then he looked around a moment, and his eyes suddenly locked on mine. The side of his lip curled in an expression of mixed annoyance and amusement. "Cute." His horn flashed.

Suddenly, the world darkened and my head spun; my... dream-delusion-hallucination-thing faded away, and the room returned to the normal grime and spotty emergency lightning. The machinery below stopped humming, and pink fog swirled around it. I swayed on the edge of the platform, then shook my head as the vertigo passed. "Huh? What just happened?"

"You're back?" Rampage asked.

"I went somewhere?" I replied, rubbing my head.

"You walked right off the edge," the striped pony said, then nodded over at the brooding yellow mare. "Psycho caught you."

"She did?" I asked, not able to hide the surprise in my voice. "Why?"

Psychoshy snorted. "In case you forgot while you were out of it, we need you to open up this Chimera thing. Since I can't..." she added bitterly as she lowered her head.

"You're still helping him?" I asked sharply as I looked at Sanguine sitting away from the rest of us. His face had pulled itself together, and the rest of his injuries were rapidly healing. Was this a ghoul thing? ...Maybe he hadn't really been hurt at all? A ploy to trick gullible, softhearted Blackjack? I snorted hard. Maybe P-21 was right all along, and I should just smash him now to make sure he couldn't stab me in the back.

Be kind, a little pegasus begged me. Uggghhh... easy for Fluttershy... But Scotch needed help, and if he did have an innocent family...

"No!" Psychoshy snapped, then grit her teeth. "I mean... not once we're done here. I'll help him here, and then we're done." She looked over at the undead pony and slumped a little. "I mean... he still needs my help... if I help you, that is." She tried to sound tough, but she looked listless and confused, her eyes glancing every which way save at me and Sanguine.

"You don't need him," I said, trying to give her an encouraging smile. "I mean,

you're a kickass Reaper pony, yeah? You sure kicked my flank all over that cage, remember?"

"Don't try and make me feel better," she retorted bitterly. "Just... do whatever you're going to do. We need to get out of here."

Good point. I had no idea how long we had. "Right." I looked up at the metal cylinder with its engraving. "Right... so... Chimera. How long would it take for you to make a copy of my friend, Sanguine?"

Sanguine blinked a moment, then answered slowly, "An hour or so to grow a healthy blank. The process can be rushed, but the results of that are...substandard." Ugh, did we have that much time?

"Does this place have some more automated defenses like those turrets we ran into earlier?" Rampage asked.

I looked sharply at Sanguine, my eyes trying to pick out some sign of betrayal. He'd been beaten, but that didn't mean he'd given up, and automated defenses could be turned against us. The ghoul stared off for several seconds before answering, "It does, but they're only active in a few places. Besides, with what's trying to get in here, I doubt that they'd be much help."

"What is trying to get in here?" P-21 asked in a low, even tone. He hadn't moved from where he'd been when I'd gone out. "What's behind those robots?"

"Hoofington was a crown jewel of technological development. It was designed to be the perfect city. A city that could, and did, house hundreds of thousands of ponies. It was the dream of visionaries like Horse and Apple Bloom to create a city that could manage and police itself. Automated systems are in place to handle security and defense, even two centuries after the bombs. Those systems are effectively responding to an intrusion."

"So you're saying that there's a crazy computer in Hoofington fighting us?" I asked, perking up. I imagined a rogue Crusader maneframe, or something like it. "Well, that's not so bad. I can smash a computer."

"Unless it has some tragic sob story about how its vacuum tubes were molested or it just wants to save its motherboard," Rampage snickered. I glared at her; I wasn't that bad, was I? Rampage wasn't having any of it. She tapped my chest. "Softest. Heart. In. The. Wasteland."

"I don't have a heart. I have a cold machine of steel running inside me," I huffed indignantly. Everypony looked at me with expressions ranging from scorn to pity;

Boo was the only one looking around in baffled confusion. I snorted. "Okay, my heart aside, how do we turn on those defenses?"

"You need to turn on all the systems. You need to unseal Chimera," Sanguine replied in a low, distracted voice. He pointed at the central pillar. "The access point is there."

I looked up at the massive pillar. I could just leave it sealed up; presumably, Discord was still alive, or at least alive enough to suck a few tanker trucks out of him over a few weeks. If I talked to him, he'd try and trick me. He was dangerous; I'd seen the look on Twilight's face. I looked at my PipBuck with a small frown. "Dealer?"

"Dealer? Is that what you call that thing?" Psychoshy muttered.

"I know you're not my crazy, Dealer. I want to talk to you," I said. Then, as I slowly turned my head, I spotted him shuffling his cards. He kept his eyes hidden behind the brim of his hat. "I need to unseal Project Chimera."

"So? Unseal it," he muttered, his eyes locked on the cards. He turned over a Joker, showing me in a clown suit. "You don't need me for that."

Huh? "I don't? But then why couldn't Psychoshy do it?" My question set the yellow pegasus's teeth on edge.

"Because she's as thick as you are, Blackjack," Dealer muttered, rolling his eyes. "I'm not EC-1101." He spoke the words like a guilty confession.

"But you're also not my crazy," I replied firmly. "There's way too many lapses, times you should be there when you're not. Times you do show up when you shouldn't. You're something outside me." I frowned at him, narrowing my eyes. "Who are you, Dealer?"

"Somepony who never mattered. I'm just a ghost along for the ride, seeing that EC-1101 gets where it needs to go. That's all." He nodded towards Psychoshy. "She did the same thing you did. Yelled, threatened, growled, begged, and finally cried to try and get me to open it. And I just told her 'no, not going to happen', and described all the ways you were going to kill her when you caught up with her."

I thought about that a moment. "Dealer? Are you Goldenblood?"

He looked at me pityingly. "Did you miss what I said? 'Never mattered.' Not before the bombs dropped and not now. Trust me. Don't worry about Goldenblood. He's dead as a doornail."

"Why do I have trouble believing that?" I muttered, glaring hard at him. "You've been screwing with me from the start, Dealer. When did it all begin? When I found out

what EC-1101 was? Back in Stable 90? Miramare?" Then I frowned. "The first time I fired Folly."

"Folly?" Sanguine asked, and I glared at him. No no, mister nasty ghoul. You do not get any more toys to play with! Heck, even I shouldn't have a weapon like that!

The pale image gave the slightest little twitch of the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. Before that, you were just another mare, as far as I could tell. One stupid and reckless enough to keep getting ponies killed with your good intentions. That kid. Those zebra. You spared a slaver... I honestly didn't know what to make of you. But when you fired that weapon, I knew there was something more to you."

"Because I have Ministry Mare blood in me," I said, and he gave a slow nod. "Even if it's not Twilight Sparkle, that meant I could access EC-1101."

"Might," he countered, looking angry, "And that meant that I might be necessary after all. When you fired that weapon, systems from Trottingham to Fillyadelphia to Hoofington lit up like a Hearths Warming log. Nopony was listening, of course. There's maybe a half dozen ponies left across the Wasteland with the access capability and a clue as to what those systems actually do and how to make them work; maybe a dozen with the Enclave. And since meeting you, I've bumped into others who could get access. That mare Velvet Remedy might have gotten the program to work. Psychoshy would have figured it out, too, if she'd had enough time."

"But why does it matter?"

"Something I've been asking all month," P-21 said under his breath.

"Look at this place, Blackjack!" He gestured around us. "Mass cloning facilities! Biological fusion. Even flux production. Discord! Sanguine's own knowledge and expertise. This is perhaps the greatest treasure trove of wartime biological technology in all the world! Do you have a clue what a pony could do if they really applied themselves to it? Monsterponies by the thousands! Possibly even an alicorn assembly line, if a pony knew what they were doing. You're lucky Red Eye or the Enclave doesn't really know what's going on here, or they'd actually be applying themselves to get you to unlock it."

"How do you know all about Chimera if you're not Goldenblood? Who are you, and why should I trust anything you say?" I asked with a scowl.

"Goldenblood. Every time she says that name, I want to kick somepony," Rampage said.

He pressed his lips together, then finally said, "What choice do you have? You don't

exactly have time for twenty questions. I can help you, Blackjack, but I want to make sure that this place isn't used by anypony else."

Urrrgh... he had a point. "I don't want Chimera to be used by anypony. Not by Sanguine. If I can save Scotch, I'm happy. If I save Sanguine's family to do that, that's good too." It wasn't their fault that they were related to this... this thing. Speaking of which, it would have been nice if said thing would gasp or something, give some sign that he was going to work with me on this. Instead, he just stared off into space. Was he trying to work out how to best cooperate or how to best betray us?

"And letting him trot back here ten, twenty, or a hundred years from now?" Dealer asked firmly. He shook his head. "I'm not going to turn this place over to just anyone who walks in once you leave. Watching you unseal Steelpony was hard enough. I only let you have that because you needed it, and if the Enclave hadn't already been in possession of the raw data, I would have tried to keep it from you."

"Wait, I thought you said I didn't need you to open the Project?" I looked over at the yellow pegasus, but she was simply passing time. Sanguine looked over too, a feverish kind of hope dancing in his eyes.

"You don't... if you know the proper place to access. Otherwise, you can have fun trying to figure out how to make it work all on your own," he replied with a smug smile.

That would take time I didn't have. "So... what do you want?"

"Less Blackjack talking to herself would be nice," P-21 muttered.

"I want this place destroyed," he replied evenly.

"You want what?" I gasped, making Boo jump away.

Rampage winced. "Oh, that can't be good."

"You heard me. I don't care about what you use it for right now, but I want this place gone when you're done. No more flux. No more fusion megaspells. No more hybrids. Nothing. I want this mistake reduced to a crater," he said with a wave of his hoof.

"And Discord?" I asked with a frown.

He laughed briefly. "Discord? He can be buried along with the rest of this place. Discord was an enemy to ponykind centuries back, and he'd be our enemy today." Dealer looked down the catwalk. "I think Red Eye's forces are clear now. They'll be coming in soon, if they're not here now. So... do you agree or not?"

I imagined that I could hear them, too. The clicking-clanking hoofsteps of protectaponies, the rolling treads of sentries, the levitation talismans of Mr. Handys... “Fine. You help, I’ll destroy this place.”

I probably shouldn’t have said that last bit aloud...

“What? Destroy what?” Sanguine shouted, pink cloud spurting out his nostrils. “I’ll not see this place destroyed for any reason!”

“Of course...” P-21 groaned. “The mine was just a warmup...”

Psychoshy gaped at me. “You’re insane!”

Rampage just fell back laughing. “Oh Luna, I fucking love you, Blackjack!”

And Boo blinked in confusion.

I whirled on Sanguine. “Your family, or this place? Choose!” If I was going to have to figure this out without him, then best find out now. I couldn’t keep working with him like this; not with the worry that he could backstab me at any moment.

His cloudy eyes popped as they looked at me and then out at production. Then back at me. “I... my work... my family... Blackjack, I can’t. Don’t you understand? This place was the culmination of my entire life’s work! Years of research and study. I can’t just throw it all away!”

“You’re going to have to,” I replied. “Your family or this place, Sanguine. If your family really is all that matters to you, I’ll help you save them. But for me to pull this off, I’m going to have to destroy this place so nopony can use it. Otherwise, you better just kill me now.” I took a gamble, hoping he truly meant it. And I got ready to jump aside from a plume of pink poison.

Sanguine closed his eyes and stepped away. He stood there for a few seconds, and then nodded once. “Very well... if you must.”

I let out my breath, surprised. I wasn’t the only one, either. “Right.” I turned to the Dealer. “So, how do I unseal Chimera?”

“The access is inside Discord’s chamber. To open it, you say ‘Project Chimera containment open. Password—’

“A wonderful, wonderful thing,” I finished for him, and was rewarded by his momentarily stunned expression. I tried not to act too smug as he recovered. “Surprised?”

“Apparently you don’t need my help as much as I thought,” he murmured.

I stood at the edge of the catwalk and said the phrase and password from the vision, and the pillar gave a massive groan and shudder. The mechanics squealed as it slowly ground open; two centuries of little to no maintenance hadn't done it any favors. The drawbridge slowly dropped down in front of me... revealing Discord.

Or something that had once been Discord.

The statue of the immense hybrid creature now appeared shrunken and crumpled. The serpentine body was now twisted in a spiral, his limbs twisted and pinched. The wrinkled silver casing had formed creases and spiny ridges. The expression of fear was now one of agony. The hoses that once connected to the walls had stretched and deformed, pinching off or becoming jagged wires. Only a few still resembled tubes. The interior of the chamber was warped and melted, the smooth surface forming countless spikes all pointing in on the distorted form. The array of dark rainbow balefire eggs had been reduced to a flickering dozen. Instantly, my PipBuck began clicking like mad from the magical radiation.

"Discord," I breathed, and the others backed away. Even the Dealer looked horrified at the sight.

"The one and only," rasped a low, hollow voice.

"The internal failsafes went off?" Sanguine gaped at the contents.

"And off... and off... and off... and off. Never enough to kill, but always enough to hurt." Discord laughed softly. "It's been a long time since I had anypony to talk to. So fill me in? I've got two centuries of hoofball seasons to catch up on. Have the Canterlot Cavaliers finally won the playoffs? Are stripes still a fashion faux pas? Oh, and are you people all a bunch of little monsters still?" We just looked at each other as he laughed. "I imagine you want to do something horrific to me too..."

"Why would you think that?" I asked as I took a few cautious steps forward.

"Because that's what ponies do," he muttered in that pained, hollow voice. "To diamond dogs, to buffalo, to dragons... griffins... minotaurs... Oh, I know you all look so cutesie wootsie, but deep down you're all monsters. Turned me into stone... twice. Locked me up... drilled into me... You have to admit, that's a little excessive for a couple of bad jokes and some screwing around with folks." He sighed. "You make it rain chocolate milk once or twice and turn a few roads to soap, and suddenly you've crossed a line."

"You did more than that, Discord," Sanguine rasped as he stood and approached the statue. "Your antics nearly overthrew the kingdom. You targeted Twilight and her

friends; turned them against her." Honestly, I wasn't hearing the part about Discord throwing ponies through a rock crusher.

"Oh yes, and Twilight and her friends didn't harm Equestria in the slightest," Discord drawled softly. "You know, even at my absolute worst, I never killed anyone. Toyed with... manipulated... teased... oh yes. But kill? There's few things more boring than a corpse."

Dealer looked at me and tugged his hat down over his features. I realized it was the exact same style as P-21 now wore. I wondered if, eight or nine generations removed, the bucks could possibly be related. "The Project's main interface is there. I'll make sure your PipBuck connects straight to it." He then frowned at me. "Remember, Blackjack. Crater."

"Yeah, yeah..." I muttered as my vision began to scroll funky data. I started to hear a rhythmic banging from the direction of distribution. I looked at the terminal and the dial and buttons that Goldenblood manipulated. I gaped at the knob twisted all the way over. "You... he... two centuries in agony?" I asked, gaping at the dial and then at the crumpled statue. At once I twisted it to zero. I heard him let out a long groan of relief.

"I think you could summarize that as 'Oopsie,'" Discord snickered. "The more the metal resonates, the more flux one can slurp out of me. Of course, even I have limits."

"What with the fighting and all you must be feeling better, though..." Rampage said as she stared at the statue.

"Right. Murder, rape, and mass mayhem... yawn. You know, eventually, even wanton slaughter and war gets boring. Not that it matters much. It won't be long before there's nothing left of me but metal... As Goldenblood intended, I suspect. A permanent end to a threat to the kingdom. Oh so practical and useful. Such a dull pony." Discord snickered sarcastically. "How about you, Trueblood? What do you think; what makes ponies do monstrous things?"

"Losing the things we love tends to strip away reluctance," the ghoul murmured.

Crimson beams flashed up the catwalk towards us, one passing so close to my head that I felt the heat from it! Okay, Discord or Sanguine or—no. The robots were here. The protectaponies clomped slowly and inexorably along the metal walkway towards us, and down below I caught sight of a sentry rolling through the pink fog. "Intruders detected. Surrender yourselves immediately and face disintegration."

My friends jumped into action, and Psychoshy snapped her wings once and launched herself into the air. The yellow pegasus arched high along the domed ceiling, nipping behind the warning signs as six protectaponies blasted away with their crimson beams. Then, suddenly, she dove and corkscrewed down at the robots, hooking up at the very end and smashing into the row of robotic ponies. Metal bits went flying as she climbed back to the ceiling.

Before the still-functional robots could rise and resume attacking, Rampage was dancing on top of them, hooves flashing and blasting the machines to pieces. Then the sentry below began to spray the catwalk wildly with its gatling gun. Persuasion thumped, and suddenly a section of the pink cloud geysered. The trail of gatling fire swung wildly around as P-21 shook out the spent shell, calmly slapped a fresh grenade in the breech, clapped it shut, and patiently aimed once more. The spray chewed along the catwalk towards him. The grenade launcher ‘pomf’ed once again and lobbed the explosive in a perfect arc into the mist. The cloud geysered again, and the robot went silent.

I looked around, but that seemed to be all of them. For the moment. But if that group had found a way in and radioed it to the others... I tapped the terminal a few times, then smacked the monitor with my hoof, and the screen slowly glowed to life.

Project Chimera Primary Interface

Project Chimera sealed per Equestrian Royal Command.

I looked down at my PipBuck, and the arcane device mirrored the terminal. However, there was an additional box at the bottom of the PipBuck screen.

Unseal Project Chimera per EC-1101 authority: Y/N?

I glanced at the Dealer, then hit Y.

More data flashed across my vision. Now that I had my PipBuck again, I had to admit that it was refreshing to have those images. Reassuring to see the radiation meter crawling upwards in my sight. Finally, the screen flashed up a number of menu options. I ignored the files and records and the like; unlike Twilight, I had no interest in reading bajillions of pages of information. Instead, I went to ‘Facility Status.’

The Dealer suddenly frowned. “Shit.”

“Huh? What?” I asked, looking at the not-so-figment-of-my-imagination pony.

“Somepony’s accessing this place now that it’s unsealed... and somepony else is trying to cut off that access,” he said with a scowl, his eyes staring off into space.

“You can interface with the facility?”

“Your PipBuck is in command of every functional machine on this place’s network now, so yeah.” A diagram popped up in my vision full of flashing green and red lights. Orange lines kept trying to creep into the diagram... they had consumed the hexagon marked ‘Distribution’ and were spreading into the rest of the facility. A green line was wiggling in from the security hub. I couldn’t make heads or hooves of it, but he seemed to understand what it meant.

I nodded. “Okay. Your job is to cut off that outside access, then get us locked down and close the doors. Just don’t blow the facility up till we’re out of here.”

“She says it so casually,” Discord murmured.

Dealer looked at me, then nodded. Blue lines radiated out from production, intercepting the orange and green intruding into the facility. They cut off the creeping orange lines and drove them back, stabbing into distribution. The green line snaked around, as if evading the Dealer’s efforts to push it out. “I can’t seal off the doors to distribution. Looks like they cut through the drive systems to get them open. I can seal off the other sections, though, and activate what turrets I can. But they’re going to get in eventually.” From throughout the facility came the distant booming of mechanised doors closing.

“Right,” I nodded, waving my hoof in front of my face to try and banish the diagram. One way or another, it disappeared, and then I looked at the remaining glowing balefire eggs. “P-21, Psychoshy, Rampage... you three are on our defense. P-21, can you use those balefire eggs? Let Psycho do some bombing runs when they get close?”

“Maybe,” he replied as he looked at them skeptically.

“My name is Fluttershy,” the yellow pegasus said with a scowl.

“Fooled me,” Discord chuckled. “But you never can be too sure of the quiet ones.”

“You’re not Fluttershy,” I retorted. “You’re not quiet and nice like her, or scared of your own shadow. But you can kick flank a lot better than she could. That’s what we need right now.” That seemed to mollify her a bit. “Now, help P-21 get those bombs down... without blowing yourself to pieces.”

The mare grimaced, then finally nodded. “Are you going to kill Sanguine?”

I frowned, not sure of that answer myself. “Only if he forces me to.” Psychoshy looked at me the same way Rampage did when she talked about my softhearted-

ness. "You think I should?"

"I know he still plans on killing you. Just because you spared him... don't think he's planning on sparing you." She scowled, looking at the ghoul who was standing apart, looking impatient. "Part of me wants to kill him myself. I let him use me... but... I didn't expect him to throw me away."

"And the other part?"

"Wants to tear your head off and hope that's enough for him to... to care about me," she admitted as she frowned and shook her head. "Just... do whatever it is you're going to do." The yellow pegasus started to pace. "I need to kill some things. A whole lot of things. I just wish I had something a little more meaty than robots to crush." Then she pointed at Rampage and snarled, "And I want my power hooves back!"

"Yeah, yeah. And I want a lifetime supply of Party Time Mint-als. Forget it!" the striped filly said as she admired the devices on the ends of her legs. "These things are great! I can kill things as a kid with 'em!"

"Can we shut up and get these bombs out?" P-21 grumbled as he dug out a tablet of Rad-X. "I just want to blast this place to the moon and get out of here."

The silver statue sighed. "Sure, Discord. Mess around with the little ponies. They're so cute and cuddly. What trouble could they possibly be?"

I stepped back from the alcove, letting them work. The Dealer frowned as he looked at Sanguine. "How long do you think we have till we're overrun?" I asked before he could start questioning my decision to help the ghoul.

"An hour or two," Dealer replied. "Blackjack, about Sanguine... the things he's done...."

"Damn it, I get enough of this from P-21!" I hissed in frustration. "I know he's done messed-up things. I get it! And I wish that I could be the Stable Dweller and just shoot him dead for doing it! But I need him to help Scotch, he needs me to help his family, and you need me if you want this place blown up. So just drop it already."

He finally sighed and nodded. "Very well. Then hurry. They're in the loading docks and are shooting their way through the hatches. It'll take them a while to get into production; this place had the thickest doors installed."

"Right." I trotted to Sanguine. "Let's go. I need a Scotch copied, and you need your family saved."

He stared at me for the longest time, as if he couldn't exactly believe this was happening, and then nodded once. "I'll meet you in the copyroom. I hope you have a blood sample of the pony you want copied. Otherwise, this is all academic."

I frowned, then nodded in return. "Scotch got cut out in that wood. She bled pretty badly on my barding a few hours ago. Will that work?" Hopefully putting the environmental suit on over it had preserved the blood.

"It should," he said as we walked along the catwalk, him leading the way. One sign of a trick, and I'd be into S.A.T.S. and ready to see how hard my cyberlegs could kick. He turned his head to glance over his shoulder at me. "I am sorry, Blackjack. For what I did to you."

"Sorry?" I gaped at him a moment. "You killed everypony in Brimstone's Fall and left Dusty Trails alive in a crusher and you're sorry?"

"I am. If you'd died... if EC-1101 was destroyed..." He shook his head. "We'd all be doomed."

"Why?" I asked with a small frown. "You mentioned something about Horizons back in the arena. Fill me in now?"

"We really haven't the time for details," he said with a huff, paused, then answered, "When Twilight Sparkle thought that Goldenblood was impeding her research, Luna had him stripped of his directorship. To be honest, I felt the Princess' response was somewhat... lacking. It was a slap on the hoof, really. Still, she appointed Horse as director of the O.I.A., and I supported him."

"It got you put back on Project Chimera," I replied.

"Yes. But in the weeks after he was appointed, Horse discovered disturbing things about Goldenblood. Very disturbing things. There were projects in place that the Princess hadn't authorized. Projects like Chimera, Steelpony, and Starfall were clearly for war usage, and projects like Eternity were old news. Other projects like Partypoooper and Redoubt were highly classified, but Luna approved of them... or at least she didn't disapprove of them. But Horse found two projects that directly challenged her rule. One was a project called 'Gardens of Equestria,' which seemed to be designed to restore the country in the event of a truly overwhelming defeat. The suggestion that such a thing could happen and the waste of resources creating it were bad enough. But Horizons..." I leaned forward, nearly salivating. "Horse said it was a weapon of some kind, capable of utterly destroying the zebras in their entirety. I suppose it was some sort of super megaspell."

I blinked... that was it? Fun. As if regular megaspells weren't enough! "And it's tied into EC-1101?"

"Luna couldn't even find Horizons or Gardens... so she closed every O.I.A. project she could, hoping that that would work. Goldenblood refused to help, of course..." He shook his head. "Really, I think the fact that he was keeping secrets from Luna angered her far more than the projects themselves."

"She trusted him that much?"

"Yes. I think she finally realized just how far Goldenblood had strayed in his loyalty. She was infuriated that he would waste staggering resources on those two projects without her knowledge and approval. She insisted he disclose everything he knew on Horizons and Gardens. He refused." The ghoul hesitated, then laughed mirthlessly. "Luna did not take it well."

"What happened?"

"He was sentenced to execution... after being mentally rendered by MoM's finest interrogators, of course. That was when he finally cracked. He screamed and railed about conspiracies and deception as he was dragged away. I wasn't there, but I heard that he was ranting about Horse and the Ministry Mares and ancient zebra plots and Nightmare Moon. Completely spit his bit. I would have given a hoof to see it myself," Sanguine chuckled, grinning at the memory before he sighed and added, "Unfortunately, the very next day, the bombs fell and the pink cloud consumed Canterlot."

That was some interesting timing... and I wasn't capable of believing in coincidence anymore; not with anything involving Goldenblood. Sanguine reached some stairs dropping down into the pink cloud. "I have blood samples in my lab downstairs. I'll be right back."

I waited, wondering if this was some sort of deception; maybe he was getting a gun? Maybe. If this place was working, then he could just shoot me now and get what he wanted. He had to know that he couldn't hold the complex against all those robots, though... but just in case, I kept my gun loose in its holster and practiced trying to control it. My magic was getting stronger, but I was still a long way from wielding a shotgun again.

The left side of my face was all twitchy; I frowned and reached up, feeling the rough and jagged edges of melted hide. Did I... no. I couldn't look that bad. I just needed more time to regenerate. Somepony would have said something... I swallowed

hard; nothing I could do now. I just had to hope that, whatever Sanguine's breath had done, my body could heal it. Dealer had vanished again; was he watching me now or supervising the facility?

Sanguine returned wearing a pair of saddlebags. "You keep your stuff down in that pink cloud?"

"Can you think of a more secure location?" he retorted. "You've seen how effective it is."

I scowled. Don't smash the ghoul, Blackjack. He's going to grow you another Scotch Tape. You need him, Blackjack. "Yeah. Look what it did to my face," I said as we trotted back towards the copyroom. A door had closed across the pipes, but as we approached it hissed open again.

"Yes... well... I was trying to win," he said defensively. We entered the room with the golden tree, and he shrugged off his saddlebags and levitated out four small glass ampules filled with a dark maroon substance. The blanks just milled about. Even a fatty just stood by. I supposed that, when not loaded up with Rage, they were just as docile as the rest. Boo found a seat and watched us both.

"You're making four?" I said with a frown.

"Yes. Four healthy bodies. I'll fuse my family to them... and then myself." he said as we trotted down the stairs. With Chimera active, it was now studded with tiny lights and hummed faintly.

"A ghoul fused with a blank?" My mind tried to wrap my head around that one. "Would that even work?"

Sanguine laughed. "Blackjack, I am so far into hypothetical guesses that I might as well just be throwing reagents against the wall and hoping for a beneficial reaction." He lifted the ampule to a hollow in the tree's trunk. There was a soft hum, and a red vein crept along the bark to the branches overhead. Instantly, a small growth began to slowly swell. Unlike the others, it was a rich orange. The next was a light beige, and the one after that a deep red. Finally, a tan pony began to grow.

Then I reached down to peel away the tatters of the hazmat suit and froze. "Come on... get off..." I muttered, scraping at the tape. Funny... my hoof couldn't find an edge. Not... not anywhere. It was like the tape wasn't simply stuck to me but rather was fused to my legs! I grit my teeth, frowning as tugged... and tugged...

"Ah... yes. That can happen on exposure to Pink Cloud," Sanguine said delicately as I jerked at the suit's neck connection and felt the exact same thing!

"Get it off! Get it off! What the heck did you do?" I gasped as I tugged... The suit felt loose on most of my body, but at the seams...

"Your pegasus friend can handle a scalpel, yes? My sources suggested she had some medical background. Ah, and something stronger for your enhancements?" Sanguine asked. I swallowed and nodded. "Good. She's going to have to cut the suit off your hide. I'm afraid that, otherwise, it's a permanent addition."

There wasn't much to do for a bit. I wanted to talk to him... but it was all just one great big thorny mess in my head and he was fussing with the pods as they grew. One of them 'popped' early on and he'd gone into a rage for five minutes before adding more blood and starting over. Rampage, Psychoshy, and P-21 were taking care of our momentary defenses. I was doing all I could to not pick at where the suit had fused with me. My legs I could probably free with a belt sander and scrap metal, but my skin? The itchy sensation was driving me right up the wall. Sanguine had cut a hole in the hazmat suit and scraped enough of Scotch's congealed blood off my leather barding to set an olive pod growing.... and a milky white pod next to it. That'd better have just been a coincidence! ...Well, there were a lot of white ones... calm down, Blackjack. At least for now.

Finally he seemed to calm enough that I could ask a question. "So... how'd you hook up with Goldenblood in the first place? I mean, I know that Silver Stripe faced all kinds of flak for being half zebra, but you were full pony."

"I... made a mistake," he admitted after a moment. "I was just out of medical school and was drafted. I got sent east of Hoofington, near the Zanzebra Strait. The zebras had a number of forward positions and were digging in, so the army was called in to blast them out again. This was... five years after the start? Cannons were a big new addition, and firearms were issued for the first time ever. New wounds and injuries required whole new medical procedures on the battlefield."

"So what happened?"

"It was a mess. Twenty-four hour surgical sessions. Amputations were common. Unicorn medics like myself were constantly burning out our horns trying to heal; there were so many! Surgery on gunshot or heavy shrapnel wounds was untried and suspect. An officer came in with a bloodied flank... superficial injury. He could have waited, but he insisted. I should have made him wait... but he was an officer and promised me a rotation back to Manehattan. So I helped him. When I was

done, I was burned out. Couldn't even lift a scalpel." He sighed and shook his head, staring off into space. "A dozen ponies died while I was dicking around with a stupid flesh wound.

"He honored his word and put in a commendation for me, but it didn't matter. My superiors had faulted me for violating triage procedures. When I was pulled off the line, my record came with me. I had skills, but the word in the profession was that I was a opportunist, willing to let a dozen ponies die just to get what I wanted. I finally got a position, but I faced that attitude. So... finally, I embraced it. Anything to get ahead. To get what I deserved."

"So when Goldenblood came along with an offer, you jumped at it," I replied.

"Yes. He played me perfectly with an alternative route to advancement. I should have known better, but it seemed too good to pass up. The precise mix of an opportunity to prove myself and all but guaranteed personal advancement and prestige. I should have realized what a thorough manipulator he was," the ghoul said bitterly, and I had to remind myself that he was just as guilty as others. "All I had to do was keep my mouth shut and take care of Fluttershy's pregnancy."

"But something went wrong."

He nodded and sighed. "Some mares are ill-suited for pregnancy. Fluttershy's was... difficult. The pressures of being the Ministry of Peace's leader and mascot were coupled with a real sense of responsibility for injured ponies, not to mention the secrecy of the pregnancy itself. I recommended she take a leave of absence, but apparently that was unacceptable." He paced back and forth slowly. "There were a number of small alarms, and I was tasked with coming up with contingencies. Stasis was one such contingency, and we investigated technological methods of saving premature foals. Rarity and Goldenblood squashed rumors right and left, kept the truth concealed from the public and most of her friends. Finally, one night, she was brought in in a hysterical state. Something had happened and she was in premature labor. There was nothing we could do to halt it."

I pressed my hooves to my mouth as I listened. That it happened at all was horrible, but it happening to Fluttershy of all ponies was almost too terrible to contemplate. "What happened?"

"At first, we thought the foal stillborn. No heartbeat. No breathing. Fluttershy was inconsolable. She was taken out, and I rechecked for a heartbeat. To my shock and amazement, it was there. I put the foal in stasis. It was such a fragile life, barely there at all. I couldn't risk telling Fluttershy only to have the infant die. It would have

devastated her. No matter my differences with Goldenblood, I couldn't do that to her. I kept it secret from everypony. Reported the foal as being born to an unknown mother who died in an accident."

"And you never told Goldenblood?"

He snorted. "Why would I? Goldenblood was no friend of mine; he should have died at Littlehorn."

I stared at him a moment. Didn't he know? "Sanguine... Goldenblood was her father."

"What...?" He stared at me, then blinked once, in a perfect imitation of Boo. "They told me her father had been a patient injured in an attack. Are you telling me..." And then he started to laugh, the boiled, wet noise sounding like he was choking to death. "That... would have been good to know two centuries ago. I'd never have had to go to Twilight Sparkle with the potential of alicorns if I'd known that!"

"So... you just kept her in stasis for years?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yes. I built the first stasis pod prototype myself, in my garage actually, just as Chimera was set up for Fluttershy... so that nopony would ever have to go through what she did. I don't know what happened between them; he was always so cool around her that it never occurred to me they were in a relationship. We perfected the stasis pods, so we thought; I should have been rich from the invention... but ah well. Then came fusion spells to improve on ponies. Blanks were introduced last as a source of organs and test material. I was able to fuse the infant with a healthy pegasus blank of her own body, and that stabilized her enough to survive."

Then Sanguine groaned. "Suddenly, I had a treasure that I dared not use! Fluttershy's child... yet it had been years since her miscarriage. Fluttershy was up to her wings in duties and responsibilities. I couldn't add to that. Plus, as much as it shames me to admit it, I liked having her child as an ace in my pocket. Goldenblood was on his way out. Horse became director... why take her out of stasis? I could just hold onto her until the opportunity presented itself. Wait until the opportune moment... perhaps when an opening at the Helpinghoof clinic presented itself. Or even... perhaps if Fluttershy wanted to retire and had to name a successor?" He licked his lips, making my mane creep. Right, wanting to use a foal to blackmail a position. Nothing off about that! "So I put her back in stasis... the only life she'd known."

"And then the bombs fell and she was left in there." Just like at the Fluttershy Medical

Center.

"Yes. I have to admit, with my own problems and preoccupations after the apocalypse, I forgot about her. I tried to use this place and my limited access to ensure my own survival. Once that was established, it was a constant struggle to keep my sanity intact. Saving my family... Project Chimera... they were anchors. I experimented with the stasis pods from time to time, but my meddling usually resulted in the death of the occupant. Then, quite by accident, I successfully opened one, and the occupant survived."

"Let me guess. Psychoshy?"

"Yes," he replied. "But... I discovered something about stasis... while it does preserve the body, it does not always preserve the mind. She'd been a foal when she was put in. She didn't have any life experiences; that endless stability was simply the world as she knew it. Her emergence into the real world, on the other hoof, was terribly traumatic." He closed his eyes. "But a colt or filly, trapped in place for centuries..."

I saw 'PLAY' painted on the walls.

"So... when you realized that, it lit a fire under your ass to get your family restored?"

He nodded slowly. "Perhaps not exactly like that, but yes. You have the crux of it." Suddenly there was a sharp detonation that I felt through the floor. One of P-21's balefire eggs going off. I really hoped that that wouldn't set off other things before we were ready. Once we had our stuff, we were going to be out the tunnel to the river. Then I'd wish him the best of luck... he'd need it, given how many ponies wanted him dead. The ghoul seemed to read my nervousness. "Relax. The only way this place blows is if Discord breaks free. And even you aren't dumb enough to do that."

Oh, he really didn't know me that well, did he?

"So... Discord. How'd he get tied into Chimera? What's his story?" I asked softly.

"He's some sort of manifested spirit of chaos, but his magic... his ability to do wild and unpredictable magic at will... was the cornerstone of Chimera. By extracting his magical potential and stabilizing it, we were able to create persistent magical effects that would have otherwise required an army of unicorns to perform. Few ponies realized or appreciated how flux advanced the war effort."

I nodded. "But is he dangerous?"

"Incredibly," Sanguine replied, but then he frowned. "Or... at least he was. Seeing him like that..." Then he shook his head. "No. It must be some kind of trick. He's the sort to try and deceive others for his own benefit." I gave him a flat look; he was one to talk. Unfortunately, he couldn't take his eyes off the swelling 'fruit' of the copy machine.

"But can he die?" I asked tentatively. He could hurt. That was for sure.

"I'm not sure. Not in the conventional sense, certainly. Shoot him full of holes, turn him to stone, or cut his head off, and he'd simply pop out from behind the friend you just killed by accident to have a good laugh at your frustration. The only substance we ever encountered that could stop him was a special meteoric iron found beneath the city. Indeed, its very nature seems almost hostile to Discord. Goldenblood used it to trap him, and Horse discovered how to resonate it, increasing the flux yield by ten times."

"But why... I don't understand." He looked at me flatly, and I said, "I shoot things, remember?"

"Clearly Stable-Tec was terribly negligent in your education," he muttered, then sighed. "Arcane science 101, then... magic resonates at a wide variety of frequencies. Everything in the universe has its own set of wavelengths. In nature, most of these waves harmlessly clash with each other... like static, if you will, but intelligent beings and certain magical organisms can focus this magic to specific effects. Unicorn craft, dragon fire, pegasus flight, earth pony mudloving, diamond dog digging, and so on. Races have similar frequency patterns, and every individual has their own unique spectrum. Your soul, some might say. These unique frequencies become more or less fixed as you age and, in ponies, manifest as a cutie mark." He paused, his lip twitching as if wondering if I knew what a cutie mark was.

"Signifying our special talents. That much I know," I said with a huff. "So, everything in the universe vibrates, then?"

"A simplification, but yes. Normally little happens; the waves cancel out one another in nature. But when intelligent creatures start to work together, then the frequencies can align on large scales. The magical potential of one pony is amplified by the magical potential of others. They build and support each other. Conversely, they can interfere with each other, leading to aggravation and anger. That interference releases energy, usually in very small amounts, that feeds and empowers Discord. But the meteoric iron beneath Hoofington has a far more potent effect on the resonances of others: it destroys them."

"What? But didn't you say that that's what happens in nature?" I frowned, feeling like I was back in school. Being taught by a murderous mad undead pony was, at least, a step up from my old teacher.

"Cancellation is not destruction. The waves are still there, they're just not expressed. But the meteoric iron doesn't cancel; it somehow eliminates the waves of others. You can cast every spell you want at it and it will simply destroy the magic, releasing great amounts of energy as it does so. The only way to affect it at all is to use magic that vibrates at exactly the same frequency as the metal. I could never do it. . ." he said with a small frown. "It felt. . . wrong." Coming from Sanguine, that sounded significant.

"That's the only way?"

"Well. . . the only way that I know of. I know Tottenheimer experimented with the metal quite extensively for Project Starfall. Trying to make a mostly nonmagical means of mass destruction more powerful than our greatest megaspell or the enemy's balefire bombs. Quite outside my field of expertise. I always wondered what happened to him; he disappeared quite abruptly. Goldenblood probably had him killed." He caught my confused look. "Our wives were friends."

"He was working at Ironshod R&D, making a gun," I said. Sanguine looked like I'd just told him that Tottenheimer had been cleaning sewer pipes.

"A gun?" Sanguine asked flatly, as if he couldn't quite believe it. "Goldenblood had Equestria's finest megaspell researcher. . . making a gun?"

"Yep, but it's a hell of a gun. Actually, it's. . . not really a gun, you know. It's more like some kind of super bomb or something that points the blast in one direction. I mean, it should blow me or itself apart with that much force, but it uses magic fields to keep me from becoming a missile." He looked at me in confusion. "What, just because I don't know squat about magical junk doesn't mean I can't comprehend something like recoil?" I rubbed my chin. "What was Project Starfall? That's another one I don't know anything about."

"In a nutshell, weaponizing megaspells. The specifics were all grossly classified, of course."

I frowned. "Why wasn't that done by the M.A.S.? Why'd the O.I.A. have to do it?"

Sanguine blinked. "I really have no idea. The M.A.S. debated megaspell weapons use for years. Fluttershy, of course, was adamantly against it. She constantly implored Twilight not to pursue the research. I suppose that's why the Impelled Meta-

morphosis Potion was so appealing to Twilight.”

“Too bad the zebras made balefire bombs with them,” I muttered sullenly.

“Yes. One of the greatest failures of counter-intelligence in history. Nopony knows how the information got into their filthy hooves, but once it was, balefire bombs were inevitable. And thus so was Project Starfall. I understand that there was a standing execution order for the pony responsible for the information being stolen. Goldenblood of all ponies publicly called for a ceasefire when it was revealed, saying the war had become too dangerous. Almost cost him his directorship.” Sanguine shook his head. “Luna wanted to win the war. The zebras wanted to win. Everypony simply was too focused on victory to care about ‘impossible hypotheticals’ like balefire bomb armageddon.”

“You don’t think that Goldenblood leaked them, do you?”

Sanguine shook his head. “Why would he? With megaspells under our control, we would have been able to systematically blast the zebras to pieces. Handing them over simply prolonged the war.” He sighed and shook his head. “Zebras excelled at espionage. Robronco robots turned into zebra battle machines. They even had operatives magically transformed into ponies as deep moles towards the end of the war. It was a nightmare for Image and Morale.”

“Image? Why would Rarity care about zebra infiltration?” I frowned. “Wasn’t that Pinkie Pie’s thing?”

“Oh, she wasn’t nearly as blatant as Pinkie Pie, but Image were masters at surveillance and information management. Nopony knew more about what was happening in Equestria than Rarity... except perhaps Goldenblood. Image constantly filtered publications, spun stories, sponsored works to keep everypony working together and on message. When there was a disruption, she usually had it managed by the time Ministry of Morale arrived to deal with the perpetrators.”

I frowned at that thought, remembering Goldenblood threatening Rarity to get her to cover up the projects. Why? What leverage could you possibly have on a pony like her? I shook my head. Secrets and lies. Closing my eyes, I imagined Equestria as a tangled knot with more and more stress and tension, pulling tighter and tighter. Then something snapped... Goldenblood going crazy? Had that been it? Or had something else come along that blasted everything apart?

What in Equestria did Goldenblood need a gun like Folly for? He wasn’t a soldier. Why would he need something that could pack the punch of a megaspell?

No, not just a megaspell. A portable megaspell. A single pony megaspell, one that would kill the shooter. Goldenblood had shown Twilight the origin of flux to try and convince her to abandon her research... but had he needed to? Twilight had been honestly shocked to discover the source; had he wanted to, Goldenblood might have stalled her for months. Years, maybe. If he'd died, would Twilight have ever found out, or would Discord have been buried under O.I.A. bureaucracy? He'd chosen to show her. Had it been because he wanted to stop the alicorn project and couldn't think of any other way to do it, out of guilt for Gardens, or something else altogether?

Maybe he'd planned on doing something that resulted in his own death... only he'd been arrested and sentenced to execution first?

What would you need a gun like Folly for? Luna? Celestia? Discord? A dragon, maybe? Spike?

"Ugh... why can't a smart pony figure all this stuff out?" I whined as I thumped the side of my head with a hoof. "It's simple... smart ponies work out this mystery crap and tell me where to shoot, I shoot, we win! A round of Wild Pegasus to celebrate afterwards. This should not be so complicated!"

Boo bumped her head against my side, then looked at me with her wide, vacuous stare and a small smile. I blinked in confusion, and she bumped me again. "Wha... what do you want, Boo? Are you hungry?" I started to dig out another snack cake, but she just nudged me again. Finally, I sighed. "Sorry, I dunno what you want..." I reached down to rub her ragged milky white mane, and she closed her eyes, smiling and sighing. I caught Sanguine staring at me. "What?" I asked, a touch defensively as I scratched her ears.

"Nothing. I'm trying to hypothesize why she is so different from the other blanks." He rubbed his chin, narrowing his gaze. "She might have stepped in some flux, I suppose, though that tends to create gross physical changes. She looks a few weeks older than most blanks, too."

"You don't have to talk about her like she's an animal," I said as kept scratching. She lay down beside me, resting her head against my shoulder. "Maybe she just figured out how to survive?"

"She is an animal, Blackjack. And a stupid one at that. Blanks will starve to death if you don't feed them." He sighed and shook his head. "Now, speaking of blanks... it looks like ours are almost done. If you don't mind, I'd suggest letting me harvest the organs you need here and then treat them for preservation during transport. As I recall, your filly has been exposed to chlorine? That means new lungs and

replacement eyes. Potentially hide for skin grafts if the exposure is severe. It'd be far simpler to transport the parts rather than hauling around three blanks."

"Three?"

"Yes. Your friend there, your filly, and yourself." He pointed up at the sac hanging next to the olive bag. It... did look a little different from the rest of the white ones; it might have been a little dingier and pinkish than the others. "It looks like blood contamination has provided you with a spare."

"A spare? You made a copy of me?" I gaped. "I don't need any spare parts!" I looked at him, about to begin the smashing. Did he really expect me to believe that making a spare of me had been an accident?

"You might want to look into a mirror before you say that," he rasped. "I know you probably have some sort of regeneration talisman built in, but the scars I'm looking at... and with what she's going to have to cut off you to get that barding off... well... trust me. You'll need a few spare strips of hide."

I also thought of Glory having to harvest organs from a filly... it wouldn't be pretty. "...Okay. Pack in there whatever you think she'll need." I frowned. "Is it hard to do transplants?"

"With the proper healing facilities and an auto-doc, not at all."

"Did you leave proper healing facilities when you trashed the Fluttershy Medical Center?" I asked in return.

"Please... I might be a monster, but I had nothing but respect for Fluttershy. We shot up the guards at the entrance and then moved on," he replied. Oh, was that all? Suddenly, the orange sac ripped open and deposited a slimy orange mare onto the grimy floor. The ooze covering her rapidly evaporated off the mare's body, leaving her sitting there dully.

Sanguine froze, and Boo and I were completely forgotten as he slowly approached her. "Sunflower..." he murmured as he stretched out one of his boiled-looking, split hooves towards her pumpkin mane, brushing it out of her face. The limb trembled as he pressed it to his lips and let out a choking noise. Then he made it again and again, bowing his head.

Sanguine was crying, as much as he could cry. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I didn't fix this sooner... I'm sorry I couldn't save you..." he croaked as he reached forward to hold her as his entire body shook. "I'm sorry, my love. So very sorry." There was no

forgiveness from the orange unicorn though. No smile of reassurance. No returning that gesture. He might as well have been apologizing to a doll.

There was another detonation... and another. They sounded closer. A moment later, the olive pod ruptured and dropped Scotch Tape on to the floor. I trotted over towards her, but she didn't even look at me. Then the white pod popped open and my copy fell in front of me, landing on her head. She sat there, blinking but not looking around.

I stared at her a moment, watching the magic goop covering her vanish. She looked... healthy. Complete. I sure hoped I didn't share that expression, though. No taint mutations, no cybernetics, no scars, no bardings fused to her hide... Sweet Celestia, in another month, would there be anything left of me? I tore my eyes from her, trying to crush down those worries and fears.

"We'll go to Friendship City... maybe even Tenpony if I can pass for mortal again! You'll be safe. You'll be healthy. I promise, Sunflower. I promise," the ghoul rasped as he pressed his face into her chest. "Promise..." he hissed softly. There was another detonation.

"Um... Sanguine... maybe you should... um... go do what you said you were going to do?" I asked, not looking at the copies of myself and Scotch. Did I really want to imagine what he could be doing with them when he was harvesting the 'parts' we needed? Calm down, Blackjack. A copy of you wouldn't do much good for Sanguine. He'd had a pony with Ministry Mare blood, purer than mine, and she hadn't been able to get EC-1101 to work. A blank wouldn't either.

"Ah... Ah, yes. I'll go and take care of that. The preservation talismans will keep the tissues viable for a day or two. It's the same technology as used in the stasis pods. Just don't take too long before getting back to your friend," he muttered as he tugged at the copies of myself and Scotch's manes. Obediently, 'I' was led off to slaughter.

I really, really didn't like this place.

There was another explosion I felt through my hooves. "Dealer? Dealer? Can you hear me?" I asked, looking around. Nothing. Ugh, I hated waiting! I wanted to go find P-21 and the others, wanted to make sure Sanguine wasn't trying anything funny with my body. Instead, I just sighed and stroked Boo's ears as an army of robots slowly chewed their way through this place.

The remaining three blanks plopped out one after the next. I found an extension

cord in a maintenance closet and led them slowly into the fusion room. They simply stood by, blinking and looking around dully.

"Blackjack!" Rampage squealed as she ran in, her hide marred and powerhooves blackened. "We got big trouble. Tell me you're almost done." P-21 and Psychoshy followed after her. "We're down to one balefire egg, and they've brought a robot that's just sawing its way through everything in front of it. They're chewing through the doors that've dropped."

"How long do we have?" I asked.

"Before everything's overrun? Twenty minutes... maybe?" P-21 replied as he looked the way he'd come. "We decoyed them into the security wing. They're picking it over now. The distribution area is completely gone. They're probably carving their way into the harvesting area now."

"They're what?" I gasped, and turned to race after Sanguine. I didn't have time to explain things as I backtracked to the room with the bloody tables. Acrid smoke filled the room from the far door, where a prismatic beam was slicing a circle through the thick metal. I saw still forms on the bloody tables... mostly still forms... one flayed-looking unicorn still drew breath. Okay... suddenly the whole spare parts thing went from 'stuff I needed' to 'what the fuck!' He'd skinned my copy alive! I tried to think of some way to kill 'myself'... Psychoshy would take care of it, right? First things first, though. There were two blood-smeared white crates at the feet of the tables. "Get those, P-21!" I yelled, pointing at the white crates. They had straps that would go around his neck. Not ideal, but I'd rather he had them than Psychoshy.

"Where's Sanguine?" Psychoshy yelled as she flew into the center of the room. I was glad the massive manticore had departed.

"Getting his family," I yelled back, pointing a hoof through a door at all the pony sized stasis pods. Now would be the time to tell her to... maybe Rampage could do it? Then we heard a mare scream, shared a look, and darted inside.

"Sunflower! It's me! Trueblood! I'm here to save you! To save you!" the ghoul cried desperately as he tried to hold the thrashing mare. She didn't look that far from a ghoul herself, her orange hide mottled and burned-looking. Near the pods were three yellow hazmat suits, long ago discarded. In two other pods, one unicorn colt was curled up in a fetal position, his eyes wide and staring. The other cried and screamed for his mommy and daddy. They weren't much better off.

"Get away from me! Get away!" she screamed as she beat on him with her hooves.

"Trueblood!" she wailed. What had she experienced, waiting for two centuries?

"Ma'am! Please! He's trying to help you!" I yelled. She took one look at me and let out another scream of horror. All four hooves kicked out at once, knocking him away as she jumped out of the pod. She was coughing and choking, but hysteria had given her the strength to fight and to run for safety.

Too bad we were the safest things in this place.

She levitated up the fetal foal who trembled in shock and the other jumped to her side. Together they ran for the door, yelling for Trueblood and their daddy. Then they caught sight of Rampage and P-21 lugging two bloody boxes and skidded to a stop.

"Hi," Rampage said, waving a sparking power hoof. P-21 nodded, tugging the brim of his hat. Sunflower just gasped as she slowly moved around them. Her breathing was becoming even more ragged, bloody froth creeping down from the corner of her mouth.

"Sunflower! We're here to help you! Please!" wailed Sanguine, plaintively. "I love you! Please!" he begged. Psychoshy just turned away as she hovered there, clenching her eyes shut as her hooves shook.

"P-21, dart them!" I said; we had no time to waste. But the blue buck looked at the bulky containers and his saddlebags and then gave me a look asking exactly how he was supposed to do that. Then the trio scampered past him into the organ collection room.

"Oh for the love of..." I growled as we raced after them. We didn't have time for this. I had no idea if we'd have the time to fuse even one of his family at this rate. From my memory it didn't take long to combine a cockatrice with a pony, but wouldn't we need more unicorns? Or maybe they'd streamlined the fusion process? I spilled out into the harvesting room and the mare just sat there, staring in shock at the bloody tables. "Look, you need to calm down..."

"Stay back!" Sunflower sobbed as she hugged her colts close. "Trueblood! Where are you, True?!" she wailed. I glanced at the door... that prismatic beam was almost through.

Suddenly the glass separating the pods from the harvesting room shattered as Psychoshy flew through and pounced on the sobbing Sunflower. "You stupid cunt!" the yellow mare snarled. "There is your Trueblood! There!" she said as she pointed a hoof at the ghoul. She grit her teeth as she trembled, clenching her eyes shut as tears ran down her cheeks. "He's fought for two centuries to bring you back and

heal you and you are fucking it up! He loves you that damned much! More than anypony else! So calm the fuck down... let him help you... and... and... have your family."

Sunflower stared at Psychoshy a few seconds, blinking and then coughing before she looked at the ghoul. "True? Is it... it is you... isn't it?"

Psychoshy flew away, turning her back to the scene. I couldn't blame her.

"Sunflower..." Sanguine breathed... and for a moment he wasn't a monster. He was just a pony; a old and tired and desperate pony whose long nightmare was about to be over. Maybe he didn't deserve it; maybe he'd bought that happiness with misery and blood... but he had it.

Then the door gave way; the slab of steel fell into the room with a deafening clang that made us all freeze and in rolled a four-legged, rainbow-painted behemoth. It was almost as big as the tank we'd faced earlier! A beam cannon pointed at us, glittering and flashing, while on its other side whirred a gatling gun that looked more sized to firing grenades than bullets.

When you see an Ultra-Sentinel you'll know it... and then you'll die.

The prismatic beam sliced diagonally towards Sanguine, and I magically yanked him back to prevent him from turning into magical vapor. I had no clue how my horn had just managed that without popping like a five watt bulb, but I didn't have time to contemplate it. I was running on little but panic now. "Out! Out! Get back to the fusion room!" I screamed. Rampage and P-21 wasted no time running for safety. "Get to storage! There's a tunnel out of this place there!"

Sunflower was another story. She stared at the machine in horror, holding her children to her in terror. I tried to hold Sanguine back, but he thrashed free. The ghoul raced forward towards his family as the Ultra tracked his motion with the gatling grenade launcher. I extended a hoof in a futile gesture, as if I could somehow magically pull them all to safely. But I couldn't. I couldn't do anything.

The grenade launcher began to boom; firing a burst less than a second. I swore time seemed to enter S.A.T.S. as Sanguine held Sunflower. At least they had this moment to go together.

Then a yellow flash dropped down and grabbed him tight. Wings lifted and pulled and tore him away as the microgrenades struck the family. In an instant, just an instant, they exploded in a cloud of shrapnel and transformed into three bloody lumps.

Sanguine stared down as she hovered there, then let out a scream only an undead throat could make. It wasn't a word; it was a single jagged note of utter despair. I'd never seen a ghoul go feral before, but I was pretty sure it was just like this.

Psychoshy and I raced back, the pegasus struggling with the wildly thrashing ghoul. I saw the Dealer standing beside the door that led to the fusion chamber and yelled, "Close the door!" as we passed through. The door immediately hissed, the two sides sliding horizontally towards each other in the middle as the Ultra rolled after us. It fired its prismatic beam into the wall where the door emerged, and there was a mechanical squeal of tortured metal. The door halted, leaving a hoof wide gap in the middle. The Ultra proceeded to slowly cut and bend the metal away.

"Sanguine, please!" Psychoshy begged as she faced off with the deadly undead monster. He spewed noxious pink streams at her that she barely dodged. "You don't need them! You can start a new life with me! Please!" she begged as she backed off. The ghoul simply hissed as he drew in his breath... She closed her eyes, her yellow hide blotchy in places where his breath had burned her.

But Sanguine wasn't looking at her any more. The ghoul stared at the four copies; himself and his family. Psychoshy was forgotten as he stepped towards them, his eyes wide and cloudy. He sat down, staring at the four. Boo left them, rejoining me as she looked on in confusion and bumped my shoulder with her head.

Slowly, I approached Sanguine and swallowed. "Sanguine..." But he didn't answer. He simply looked at the four copies, a pony who had lost everything. Another pony sucked dry by this horrible place. As much as I hated him, I felt sorry for him too.

"Blackjack!" Rampage shouted as she raced in from the copyroom. "We're screwed! The storage room is filled with robots. Hundreds of them! I've never seen so many before."

And there went our way out of this place...

The door to harvesting was slowly peeling open as the Ultra carved its way inside. I looked at Sanguine staring at the copies, ignoring Psychoshy as she sobbed brokenly. "Trueblood..." I spoke softly.

"We were such a nice family. Don't we look nice?" he whispered. "Sandalwood..." He pointed at the tan colt, then the brown one. "And Mahogany... Sunflower wouldn't let me name them anything with blood in it." He sniffed, shaking his head. "They're such strong, clever boys."

"Just like their father," I replied.

He shook his head firmly. "No. Better than their father. Much better..."

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," I said quietly.

"I should have talked to you... told you why. I shouldn't have... done what I did. Not that..." he said in a hoarse whisper, like a ghost.

"I should have given you a chance to tell me," I replied. "Trueblood... we have to get out of here. The rail line is cut off. So is the way through security and Flim and Flam's escape tunnel. Is there another way out?"

He didn't answer. Then he said softly, "In production, there's a shaft going down. There was a pipeline for flux... it went to a red tunnel. There's a lift... You can get out that way... I suppose." He paused and murmured quietly, "Such a nice family."

I stared at him as he gazed at the copies of his lost family. If I forced him to go, like Psychoshy had, all I'd have left was a thrashing, feral ghoul. At this point, there was only one thing left to say. "Goodbye, Trueblood." But he didn't respond. I suspected he would never say another word ever again. It'd taken two centuries, but the Hoof had finally caught him.

I turned to the others as the Ultra peeled open the door like a lid off a can of Cram. I grabbed Psychoshy by her mane, employing the wonders of fingers, and dragged her out as she started to thrash. "No! No! Bring him with us! Don't just leave him! He's all the family I have! Please!" she screamed as she fought me. We entered the copyroom as the Ultra squeezed its way into the fusion room. I nodded to the Dealer once we were clear of the door. A prismatic flash cut through the gap before it sealed and locked down.

Psychoshy's mane tore free of my grip as she hammered on the sealed door with her hoof. "Sanguine! Sanguine!" she wailed over and over again, sinking down sobbing as she pressed her cheek to the door. "Please..."

Then there was a cherry red glow followed by a prismatic sparkle as the Ultra-Sentinel resumed its pursuit. Clearly it wasn't going to be satisfied till we were all dead.

"Come on," I said. "Sanguine said there's a way out through production."

"Leave me," Psychoshy said quietly.

"Nope," I replied. "I am through leaving ponies behind to die." I meant it, too. Sanguine's family hadn't deserved to die... not like that... not after two centuries trapped in a nightmare they couldn't escape. "Security saves ponies."

"Shut your mouth, you stupid, self-righteous little cunt. You didn't save him! I am going to—" she began, when there was a soft 'pfft' and a dart appeared in her flank. Her yellow eyes widened as she began to sway. "Fucking... cunt..." And then she went limp.

I looked over at Rampage holding the blowgun in her mouth. P-21 rolled his eyes as he said, "I know you probably wanted some kind of teary heart to heart before you won her over and convinced her to live, but we've really got to go!"

I tossed Psychoshy onto my back, and we retraced our way back up onto the catwalk. I stared down at the blanks still standing around in dull obliviousness. My instinct was to save them... but I couldn't. Boo, at least, was clever enough to follow me. I'd have to lead the rest, and I couldn't see any way I could lead around a herd of mindless ponies. I tore myself away, trotting along the catwalk back into production. All we had to do was get down the shaft and escape this...

Pink cloud.

I stared down at the swirling gas as it was mixed by the robots moving slowly through it. My E.F.S. could make out dozens of bars, and occasionally I could see the flash of lights from their domes or eyes as they moved through the toxic cloud beneath us. We found ourselves back in front of the central pillar, the twisted statue of Discord behind us. There was nowhere left to run. I looked down into the swirling pink cloud but couldn't see any kind of shaft.

"Not good," I muttered.

"I'll say. I'm completely out of popcorn," Discord murmured. "I mean, if this is that last show I get to watch before I die, I'd at least like to enjoy it properly."

I stared at the statue, a terrible desperate feeling inside me. "Can you do something?"

Discord was silent a moment. "Well... I don't know. In better times, I'd turn the robots into mechanical wind up toys and inhale the cloud through one nostril and get high off it... but now, I really don't know." His tone turned contemptuous. "I really shouldn't be surprised, though. Ponies freeing me because they need me to save their cutesie-wootsie butts."

"So you're saying you'd rather stay trapped and die than help us?" P-21 asked grimly.

"No. I'd rather you set me free. Then I'd turn you into stone, put you outside, and let you enjoy the pigeons crapping on your head for a thousand years," Discord muttered.

"Pretty sure that pigeons are extinct," Rampage said.

"Oh. Well. That's one small improvement. I'll probably have to bring them back, though. You can't get the whole 'turned to stone' experience without birds pooping all over you," he said.

"We can't free him, anyway," P-21 said as he pointed at the explosives on the pillars. "Soon as he's loose, those things blow up."

"I suppose I could try and eat them like hot tamales, but spicy food gives me gas," Discord offered grudgingly.

I looked at the cloud, and then looked over at the signs again. One blurb stood out. 'Activate the water flush system'. I peered up at the dim roof and made out the hundreds of sprinklers covering the surface. "Dealer! How do I activate the water flush system?" Ugh, no sign of him again. I knew he wasn't my crazy, so why was he hiding now?

I'd have to find it myself.

"I'm going down there. Get ready; soon as the cloud washes away, those robots will be able to see us," I said as I dropped the doped Psychoshy next to P-21. Then I frowned... when I did find it, I'd have to move fast. P-21 was carrying the crates. Rampage couldn't carry Psychoshy or Boo in her diminutive form. I looked at the blank mare and sighed. I really hoped this worked. "Boo... I need you to listen. I have to go down there for a bit. You need to follow Rampage and carry Psychoshy. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

She blinked once, cocking her head curiously, and burped. I groaned. We were doomed.

"Don't worry, BJ. I'll try and explain it to her," Rampage said and then frowned. "Are you absolutely sure that you don't want us to try and come with you? I could..."

"Rampage, that pink stuff turns your flesh into goo. Do you want to risk being reduced to a blob of pink bubblegum stuck to the floor? We don't have any way to vaporize you quickly. I'm the one already stuck to my bardings, and I've got the metal legs." I turned and dug through my saddlebag, though, pulling out the clear helmet. How things like this fit in my bag, I couldn't imagine. I put the helmet on. The air talisman looked broken, though... I'd have to be quick. "Be ready to move soon as you see the tunnel."

"We'll be ready. But Blackjack, what about the Enervation down there?" P-21 asked grimly.

"Slow, probable death from Enervation or fast, certain death by robot?" I replied rhetorically, trotting quickly back to the stairs down into the pink cloud. Instantly, my hide started to prickle from the holes in the environmental suit as the gas got in. Oh, right, those. I'd be lucky if air became an issue. My telekinesis was barely able to lift the revolver. I was left with my own four hooves.

The pink mist swirled around me as I moved through the narrow gaps between the machinery. Was something generating this, or was all this mist the result of years of Sanguine living down here? I guessed it really didn't matter in the long run.

"Unauthorized zebra intruder," crackled a voice behind me, and I turned as crimson beams scoured my backside. I could barely see the glowing eyes, but it looked close enough. I set my forehooves and kicked back with such force that the protectapony's head exploded in a shower of scrap and sparks. As it fell on its side, more crimson beams flashed over me. I fell the other way, already feeling woozy from the poisons seeping in.

I needed to find a valve, a lever, a button... something that would be used to flush away flux. I couldn't even tell which way the walls were. Barrels of flux were stacked in precarious leaking columns and pillars around and atop the equipment. Some seemed to have absorbed the poison, changing from rainbow sludge to an almost bloody pink fluid. I really did not want to find out what it would do to me.

"Halt and be vaporized!" boomed a voice as I darted atop a still conveyor belt. A missile rocketed through the fog, and I leapt away out of reflex. I was quite impressed that I managed to complete the backflip and stick the landing, facing the sentry robot as the missile exploded behind me. Three barrels tumbled down towards me, spilling noxious magical waste. I stood on my hind legs, lifting my forelegs to catch the barrel, and heaved it towards the large machine. The gatling gun purred and the drum exploded, showering the robot in pink goo. Instantly, it began to liquefy into a rusty sludge.

Okay. I really, really, really didn't want to get that stuff on me!

Four more protectaponies came trotting out of the fog, walking through the sludge, heedless of the rust that crept up their metal legs as they sprayed beams of magic incineration at me. I rolled back under the conveyor and kicked three more barrels at the robots as they advanced, the moving objects drawing their fire as I ran the other way.

My back burned terribly. I was fairly sure that, if I was completely natural, I would have been pink bubblegum by now. The robots were closing in, and I still hadn't

found any method of setting off the sprinklers! I had no clue where the stairs out of this fog were, and my breathing was getting slow and heavy.

"Unauthorized presence. Exterminate!" buzzed a sentry bot out in the pink fog, sending another missile flying towards me. I barely hit the ground in time for it to miss and explode, showering me with chips of concrete. I looked back at the crater the missile had blown out of the wall... and then at the large pipe and wheel next to the hole. 'Emergency Water Flush System' read a sign over the valve, and I whooped as I rushed up to it, set my hooves, and started to turn.

Nothing. I grunted and strained as I heard the robot approaching behind me. Then I noticed a little sign hung on the wheel.

'Out of Order.'

"I am going to kill them!" I bellowed at the little yellow sign. Okay, so technically I'd probably have to invent time travel if I wanted to do that, but it would be worth it! The robot fired another missile, and I dove aside in time for it to blow another chunk out of the concrete wall.

I'd seen Rampage take a sentry down with her hooves, but she had super strength and the ability to not die. I raced through the gloom towards the robot, its gatling gun purring as it swept a line of metallic death towards me. As the robot came more and more into view, I left it to my body and leapt up onto a conveyor belt, continuing to close the distance. It fired another missile as my legs sprang onto a barrel and vaulted over the streaking projectile to land on its back.

"I have dealt with enough shit today!" I screamed as I rammed my hooves into its metal head. The robot responded by lurching to the left and ramming into the machinery, nearly knocking me off. Then it reversed and slammed into the machinery on the right. I was only just hanging on. I needed something more substantial....

Oh, this was going to suck...

I took a deep breath and my horn flared, popping the helmet off once again. A sane pony would hold her breath, but I really needed to get that sprinkler to work. "P-21! Grenades!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, and threw the helmet up as hard as I could with my free hand as the other held on with dear life.

Funny, if I'd had P-21's hat on, wasn't surrounded by toxic gas, and didn't have an army of killer robots after me, this'd be pretty fun!

One second, nothing. Two seconds... nothing. Three seconds... I was fucked... and then I heard the clatter of metal pinging beside me and threw myself over the

machinery to my left, using the robot's momentum to carry me over. There were three explosions as P-21's grenades went off, and I knew the robot was scrap. Well, it at least wasn't doing more than crackling feebly. It wasn't going to be getting up soon...

And neither was I... I felt my ear stick to the floor, then felt it stretch like taffy as I rose to my hooves. I staggered towards the wall and that pipe and that damned valve. I gripped it with my fingers and began to heave. My lips felt runny and I dared not close my eyes; I wasn't sure I'd be able to open them again. Harder! Twist harder! Do it! Be strong! Be unwavering! I felt a little orange pony in me that wouldn't let some stupid valve stop me from saving my friends.

I felt my mechanical parts and my fleshy parts start to move, like the latter were simply going to slide off the former. Don't inhale, Blackjack. Whatever you do... don't do that! Just turn the damned wheel. Even a dumb shit pony like you can do that without fucking up... right?

There was a grinding noise beneath my hooves, and then the valve suddenly popped. Immediately, I heard a great gurgle within the pipe and from overhead there came a loud hissing of air that was soon replaced by that of water. A deluge poured down upon me, and I drew in a painful breath through my nose as I stood in the flow. The water was tainted pink as the countless sprinklers hosed down that section of the factory floor.

I tried to open my mouth... but I couldn't. I rubbed a hoof over my lips, but felt only a single, smooth flap of skin.

Shit... shit shit shit...

There was only one thing to do. I levitated out my sword, and slowly drew the razor edge along my mouth. Fortunately, I was able to hold off the screaming till after the cut finished. For several moments, I could only stand there in the flow, breathe, and bleed.

Unfortunately, the robots weren't going to give me much more than that. There were sprinklers washing the pink cloud out of the air, but that was simply making it easier for the robots to see me. I looked up at the shocked faces of P-21 and Rampage and followed the catwalk with my eyes till I saw where the stairs dropped down. How the heck did I get all the way over here? I backtracked through the deluge, still feeling lousy as the toxic water surged around my legs, running along the rows of conveyors as a trio of protectapony's spraying crimson beams around me.

"Okay, this is a little too much," I muttered. I struggled to keep myself low... and above the surging poisonous pink water. I peeked over the edge at the robot standing on the far side. I heaved a barrel and bathed the machine in rainbow sludge.

The protectapony sparked and flashed, then looked around. It touched a hoof to its cheek. "My goodness! I have suddenly achieved sentience! I have hopes! Dreams! A destiny!"

The other two robotic ponies turned towards the dosed machine. "Error!" And then they proceeded to hose it down with their scarlet beams.

It waved its metallic hooves dramatically. "Egads, I am undone!" Then it exploded. Well... it wasn't exactly what I'd expected, but it did provide me enough of a distraction to reach the stairs!

"Good throw," I said to P-21, but he just stared at me. "Does anypony see the shaft down?" I rasped; oh, sweet Celestia, my mouth hurt! They stared at me in horror, and I hissed, "Yes, I look like shit! I feel like shit! Do you see a way down?!"

"Over there, I think." Rampage said as she pointed through the deluge to a square stairway dropping down near the base of the cylinder. Right now, the shaft was functioning much like a drain. Already the sprinklers had washed enough of the pink cloud out that I could see the far side of the production floor.

That meant that the small army of robots over there could see me.

We ducked low as minigun rounds and crimson beams lanced up at us. Even Boo knew to hit the deck. I saw that Rampage had put my battle saddle on the pale mare and was holding the wires connected to the bit like a leash. Psychoshy was tied to the blank's back. I looked at P-21. "Okay. Tell me you still have that balefire egg bomb."

He dug in his bag and pulled out the flashing dark rainbow orb. He'd duct taped it to a block of plastic explosives. I was barely able to lift the detonator with my magic as I held the block with my hooves and scanned the machinery. Where was it?

A prismatic rainbow beam sliced through the air and nearly cut the catwalk in two. It sparked off the starmetal cylinder as I scrambled back and jumped inside next to the twisted statue. I peeked out, and a rain of gatling grenades detonated in deafening thunder.

"I have to admit, this is quality entertainment," Discord laughed as I rubbed my ear... and tried to ignore the fact that it wasn't the right shape any more.

"Shut up," I said as I peeked out again... and saw the Ultra-Sentinel driving through the conveyor belts as it circled around to fire into the space I occupied. I didn't have long. I poked my head out and screamed at my friends, "Get down the shaft! Hurry!"

I kept the block in my hooves as I watched the Ultra Sentinel rolling around, tearing up whatever passed under its heavy wheels as it got into place. "That's quite a throw. Even for metal legs..." Discord observed as I lifted the block of explosives.

"Shut up," I hissed, watching my friends. They were at the stairs. The robots all seemed occupied with me. "Celestia is dead," I said as I watched for my opportunity.

"So I gathered..." he began.

"Shut up," I snapped. "Luna is dead. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood are both dead. There's enough chaos and discord in the Wasteland to choke a thousand spirits like you. Chaos is boring in the wastelands right now, Discord. Death is fucking boring. It's routine."

There was a pause, and the voice inside the statue muttered, "I don't understand what you're saying..."

"I'm saying that this is your chance, Discord." And it was my chance, too. "Do better." And I stepped out and heaved the explosive as the Ultra-Sentinel turned to point that prismatic cannon at me. My throw was true. The balefire egg landed exactly where I needed it.

Right against 'Flux Extraction Pump #26.'

I dove inside Discord's alcove as the prismatic beam flashed, and as it swept back and forth inside the space, I pressed down on the detonator. Instantly, my world became light and sound and a roar that was broken only by the crackling PipBuck. The starmetal shielded me from the direct force of the explosion, but it couldn't protect me from the ample radiation. But all that was secondary. The pillar was untouched, but the pump was vaporized. I stepped out in time to see a rolling glowing green mushroom cloud dissipating in the rain.

Now a spray of rainbow gunk spurted out into the production floor. The catwalk was so much twisted scrap and the Ultra-Sentinel was right below me now. Any second, it'd lob grenades in. I could close the hatch, but that would probably seal me in here forever.

So I did what I did best... something stupid.

I launched myself into the air, twisting as it tried to adjust its aim fast enough to

vaporize me. Gravity was faster. I landed right atop its rounded back, my legs scraping against its smooth rainbow paint job. If I'd had bones, my legs probably would have snapped from the fall. I still felt as if I'd wrencheded something inside as I rolled over and over again, falling off its rear and landing with a splash in the frothy, filthy water.

It turned as I struggled to lift myself to my hooves. I needed five pounds of scrap metal, ten pounds of aspirin, and a few days to rest and recover at this point. I had about five seconds as the robot wheeled itself around and pointed that prismatic cannon at my face. I stared at the pretty rainbow light about to annihilate me. At least it would be quick.

Suddenly, the massive machine lurched as blue foamy water exploded up beside it. The explosion twisted and congealed into a bluish blobby form of the mishmash creature on the cylinder. Discord stood next to the robot as it turned towards the greater threat. For some inexplicable reason, Discord had a large 'S' on his chest and a wavy red cape billowing in the rain. "For truth, justice, and chocolate milk rain!" he declared boldly.

The gatling grenades purred, blowing the mass apart as I struggled to my feet. But Discord just reformed, pulling himself into the shape of a giant lizard... dragon... thing... and breathed rainbow flames on the machine. The prismatic beam sliced the lizard in two; Discord hadn't been lying after all. Two centuries of being encased had weakened him badly.

But all that was secondary. Above me, the pony-sized explosive charges were suddenly blinking bright red lights.

Containment had failed.

I staggered through the sloshing water as Discord kept the Ultra occupied. Then a blue carpet lifted me up and wooshed me across the production floor to where my friends had been pinned by the robots. It batted the machines aside, then scooped up my friends and deposited us at the top of a diagonal shaft sloping down. The lift was awash as water poured down around it; I hoped it still worked. Two large pipes ran along the ceiling down into the depths. The end of the carpet became a tiny, wan, Discord. "Why?" he asked as he looked up at me. "I never agreed to help you."

I just stared at him a moment, then shrugged, "It's just what I do. I believe in second chances."

"No matter how stupid they are," P-21 muttered, half annoyed... and half smile-

ing at the same time. Rampage held Boo's leash as the water continued to pour down. The little blank pony didn't like this at all, her ears drooping as the toxic water splashed around her. Still, she seemed to know that staying close to the striped filly was better than being alone.

"Ah, your friends?" he said, perking a little as he hopped up on Rampage, then looked at the suspicious blue stallion and adopted his scowl perfectly. I couldn't help but smile. Then he appeared next to Boo's head. "Hello!" he called into her ear, an echo sounding over the splashing water. He stuck half his body in her ear, and looked out at us from her clear pale eyes, waving. The blank scrunched up her face and rubbed at her ear with a hoof.

"Hey," I said with a small frown, and he pulled himself out with a soft pop.

"So very sorry," he said immediately. "Nice girl, but not too bright." Then klaxons began to sound, and Flim and Flam's voices warned me not to panic and to run for my life... calmly.

The Ultra was rolling towards us... no... towards the shaft. "Hurry," Discord panted as he looked back at the machine. "This thing is no fun. While I'd love to turn it into tapioca pudding, right now I'll be lucky to slow it down enough to get it buried down here."

"Will you be okay?" I asked, and the tiny draconequus blinked and actually blushed.

"You really do care! How... interesting. I never thought it possible. Well, being buried alive in rock is a huge step up from being buried alive in metal that's slowly killing me with drills stuck through me," he said as a dozen holes appeared in his tiny body. "But I should be okay... ish... though I think I'll need a nice long vacation before I'm even close to my old self. But still..." Then he grabbed my head, held it firmly, and pressed his lips to mine with a loud 'Mmmmmmmwah!' Finally breaking it, he grinned. "Thanks."

The tiny Discord disappeared in a pop of glowing white, and I was left sitting there for a few seconds. The only thing I could think at the moment was how surprisingly long his tongue was.

And then a giant, fat Discord rose up from the sudsy water wearing a strange diaper. "Ooooyyl!" he said as he stomped one fat leg, then the other, setting himself in as squatting position. "Domo arigato, Mister Robotto!" he roared as the Ultra slammed into the huge draconequus. The Ultra gave an electronic squawk as its wheels spun in futility, while Discord slapped it repeatedly with his lion paw and eagle claw while

screaming, “Baka! Baka! Baka! Baka!”

This was our cue to get out of here. There was a lever at the top of the lift. I struck it, and immediately the platform began to descend the steep shaft. A row of red emergency lights were the only illumination as we dropped. Before he disappeared from sight, I caught Discord’s eye as he was slowly pushed back by the Ultra. He grinned widely, winking at me.

Then he gave one last mighty cry, “Banzai!” and the entire lift shook as an immense explosion went off above us. A great wind blasted past, carrying water and dust and chemicals as a roar began to rumble. I had an image of the entire Hippocratic Research building collapsing into an immense hole right above me as the lift plunged down into the earth.

Of course, there was a saying about frying pans and fires; personally, I’d never used much of either, but I could appreciate the sentiment. Especially now, as my chest began to burn painfully. Instantly, my friends started to sway and droop. Enervation. Lots of it. We were getting into depths comparable to our previous jaunt under the city. The one that had almost killed all of us...

Fortunately, despite the pain in my chest, I didn’t feel the draining lethargy I had before. It hurt, but it was a distant hurt, and instead of passing out I felt a faint ringing in my ears. The rumbling roar overhead quickly drowned it out as the pressure grew and grew above us, the flow slackening off.

Then a prismatic beam sliced down the center of the shaft, bathing it in glaring light. From the top of the inclined tunnel two glaring lights flashed down at us. Discord hadn’t succeeded it burying the Ultra-Sentinel with him. It was coming down, and fast!

“This thing is really starting to piss me off!” I screamed as I looked around the platform. Nothing we could use to hide behind; that beam could cut through anything anyway! There was only one thing I could think of... something stupid. Again. “Jump!” I shouted as I ran and grabbed Boo. The mare just stared as if even she couldn’t imagine I’d do something so crazy. I leapt off the edge of the lip, landing on my back on the water-slicked concrete.

“That’s lemming talk!” Rampage shouted as she leapt after me.

“I should have gone with Glory!” P-21 agreed as the five of us plunged down the shaft together while the Ultra crashed into the lift. Its prismatic beam flashed down again and again over the edge as we flew down the shaft, evading death for a few

more seconds however we could. P-21 slammed into me, Boo, and Psychoshy. "Is this part of the plan?" he screamed as we slid.

"Yes!" I yelled back.

"Your plans suck!" he bellowed at me as we gained speed.

Couldn't argue with that one. "You bet!" I agreed, moving faster and faster, leaving the lift behind. Then one of the prismatic beams flashed and illuminated three unavoidable facts: the bottom of the shaft had been closed, it was now full of toxic water, and half my body was made of metal. "Oh shi—" was as far as I got before we plunged in together. Boo and Psychoshy floated. Me? I sank like a rock, my eyes barely picking out anything in the red gloom of the submerged lights. This water burned; maybe not as much as the cloud had, but between the poisonous water, the lift dropping a mechanical death machine down on my friends, and the Enervation sapping everypony's strength... it really did not look good.

I had to wonder if LittlePip or the Stable Dweller ever had days like mine.

As I dropped into the toxic liquid, I dimly made out the doors framed in hazy red light. I spotted a lever beside them and tried to flail my way towards it. I wasn't a good swimmer even before I got metal limbs. Worse, there was some kind of pit beneath the doors filled with machinery; to run the lift I supposed. If I missed the landing... ugh... don't think about it, Blackjack. Just move sideways more than down. Sideways! That way! I watched the lip of the landing drift past my outstretched hooves.

I screamed in a fury of sudsy bubbles and flailed wildly, wanting to beat the shit out of the world. I supposed it might have counted as swimming; it was enough to get my forehooves over the lip, and I extended my fingers around the lever. I really wanted to breathe right now... really... was a little oxygen too much to ask? Maybe I could breathe poisoned water? Ugh, why was I thinking about poisoned water when my friends were about to get crushed? I had to be like a certain white pony and just hold on a little longer!

I pulled the lever as hard as I could. It popped, crawling inch by inch as I struggled. The door groaned from the pressure against it. I tried to brace my hooves and pull again. Really... just a little air? Maybe the Professor had given me special lungs to breathe water and hadn't told me? Maybe?

Stop thinking and pull, Blackjack.

Then there was another resounding 'pong' and suddenly the sound of an endless

toilet flushing. The doors opened partially, and I was suddenly pushed into the gap. It wasn't quite wide enough for me, though, and I braced my back against the metal and pushed with all four hooves. Come on.... Come on! Cut me some frigging slack here! There was one final bang, and with it the doors popped wide and I was launched out into the red passageway beyond. A torrent poured after me, knocking me end over end. My chest burned and my ears rang and I really wished I was capable of throwing up.

With a yell my friends were flushed out after me. Boo snorted and coughed, P-21 retched, and Rampage spit a stream like a fountain. Of course, then the groaning began. This was the kind of Enervation that killed in minutes rather than hours. The red tunnel was completely undamaged and was dominated by two large subway tracks and a broad concrete road. A few wagons and a lot of crates were stacked where they'd last been left two centuries ago.

"Okay... so... plan is... we trot along and take the first exit out of here. Right? Good plan." I coughed and rubbed my cheek... then blinked. Okay. I wanted a mirror right— never mind. I didn't want a mirror. Maybe a paper bag for now and a mirror for later, when we weren't in a tunnel of magical death. I trotted over to a wagon and wiggled into the harness. I was the only one not being reduced to groaning weakness at the moment. "Did I forget anything?"

Then I heard the groan of the lift in the shaft as it reached the landing. The rainbow Ultra-Sentinel hissed softly a moment as it turned the little turret head to look right at me. "Oh. Yeah. Right," I muttered. Its prismatic cannon lit up, and I raced over to my friends as the beam sliced where I'd just been standing.

It was running time again! "Get in! Get in now!" I yelled as they crawled into the back of the wagon. "Faster. Faster!" It was cutting its way through the doors! "Come on, everypony in? Right!" I tore off along the concrete road as it burst into the passage behind us. The four-legged mech hopped onto the subway rails and started to roll after me. "Okay... at least we're moving. Could be worse!" I yelled, focusing on speed as the four-wheeled metal wagon rattled on behind me.

Then its gatling gun whirred and a line of explosions crawled along the red concrete walls above me, slowly working their way back and forth as it pursued. "Ahh... I mean... It can't get any worse!" I yelled. Its prismatic beam then lit up and swept horizontally behind me. The munitions crates exploded with shockwaves that threatened to dump me off my metal hooves! "I mean..."

"Shut up and run!" P-21 bellowed at me, then gasped at the exertion.

I doubled down. I was the one with the cybernetic legs and not getting the life sucked out of me and... oh... look at that little bar with a flashing E beside it.

I knew I had forgotten something. I was barely able to fish out a spicy little ruby to try and suck on... just to keep my power going long enough to live.

I saw a pair of doors that read 'MASEBS #14' sealed up tight. I slowed for just a second, and that row of explosions from the gatling grenade launcher almost passed right over us. There was no way I could slow down for it! I could only grit my teeth and go faster. Then I looked back at my riders digging through the crates and yelled, "Is there anything in there we can use!?"

A second later, P-21 popped into view, his forelegs hugging a portable missile launcher. Then Rampage sat up hugging two legfuls of grenades. Finally, Boo sat up gnawing idly on a missile. I grinned. There was nothing quite as good as being able to shoot back!

The missile launcher thumped and hissed as fast as P-21 could load it, and Rampage lobbed magic disintegration grenades as fast as Boo could dig them out. I didn't think she knew precisely what they were, but she knew that Rampage was glad to throw them. The Ultra now had to slow down, bob, and weave to avoid our return fire. I slowly started to gain ground. Then a pair of lights flashed on the rails ahead, and a train roared by, brakes shrieking as sparks sprayed from its wheels! The Ultra-Sentinel leapt onto the other set of tracks to avoid being scrapped by it.

Even I couldn't keep this up forever. We were approaching another set of double doors. 'MASEBS #13', it read. Still, no time to get in. Right now, all I could do was run as fast as I could and swerve to avoid the crates of munitions littering the tunnel. Rampage and P-21 were failing fast, too. They were firing wildly now, just trying to get lucky. P-21 was bleeding out his nose. I couldn't even see Boo.

Then a pair of headlights lit up the other track. The electric train had reversed and begun to pull even with the wagon. I glanced back at the flatbed cars, piled high with crates marked "Danger: Explosives". The Ultra Sentinel began to drop back.

Oh crap. "It's going to blow the train!" Where could I go? What could I do... stop? That'd just make us a sitting target! Go faster? I was going as fast as I could! I looked at the racks of missiles loaded on the back as the train pulled even. What did the city even need that much ordinance for, anyway?

Then P-21 hefted the missile launcher and aimed it very deliberately, but not at the robot chasing us or the trainload of explosives... because, unlike me, he was a

smart pony who didn't do stupid, impulsive things.

No, he aimed it at the train's wheels.

The missile hissed down and exploded, and there was an earsplitting squeal as the front wheels locked up and popped off the rails. The car twisted sideways and flipped, dragging the next car over with it and spilling munition crates across the entire tunnel. With a muffled "whump", a missile rack exploded as the Ultra's beam gatling tagged it. The explosions rapidly built, and suddenly I felt a pressure wave shoving the cart along the tunnel, my hooves leaving the floor for several seconds as the firestorm set off explosion after explosion. I remembered the elevator and prayed, 'Don't blow up. Don't blow up. Don't blow up,' to the crates in the wagon behind me.

Fortunately, there was another pair of doors ahead, marked 'Miramare'.

I dug in my hooves, wincing as they screeched along the concrete, trying to slow without crashing completely. My hide felt gross underneath the barding and hazmat suit; I just wanted to scrape it all away. I sweated and panted and gasped and sagged in the harness. I'd reached my cyberpony limits. I'd been shot, stabbed, blown up, poisoned, and drowned. I was done.

Then there was a metallic grating noise, and a flaming chunk of train car was pushed aside. The blackened Ultra-Sentinel with busted gatling grenade launcher and prismatic cannon looked at me with its little cameras and gave a low rumble as it charged after us, trailing a cloud of smoking and flaming debris.

"Oh, come on!" I shouted, looking at the heavy doors. How in Equestria had we lost the war with machines as tenacious as this? There were two more sets of levers by the door. I pushed one, throwing my whole body against it, while P-21 and Rampage shoved themselves against the other. Motors whirred, and without the pressure of thousands of gallons of water against them the doors opened quite easily. 'Please be at the bottom. Please be at the bottom,' I prayed silently as I pulled the wagon through.

It was at the bottom. I felt like I could fly. We piled onto the platform and pulled the lever and immediately the lift crawled up the diagonal slope. Finally, I relaxed and tried to take a nice deep breath.

The doors squealed as the Ultra rammed its way through and off the landing, onto the slope. Its four wheels screamed as they fought for purchase, and then it started to crawl its way up the ramp after us. The busted prismatic gun unleashed a

shotgun-like spray of wild magic beams that made us all take cover.

"Oh, that is it!" I shouted, slamming the elevator's control lever into reverse.

"What are you doing?" P-21 gaped at me, holding the white stasis boxes, as I wiggled out of the wagon's harness.

"I am through playing around!" I shouted as I shoved the wagon over the edge. The munitions crates tumbled into the wildly spraying energy and blew. I didn't even flinch from the shrapnel as I drove the lift straight into the flaming bot. It raised its burning front wheels before the lift collided and knocked it end over end down the slope. I didn't stop though, driving the elevator all the way down till it crunched the Ultra-Sentinel like a bug. I raised the lift and lowered it several times, listening to it crunch a little bit more. Finally, as we started back up again, I took the missile launcher from P-21, trotted to the edge, and fired it into the sparking wreckage. As the lift rose, I tossed the spent launcher down after it.

I huffed, sitting in the middle of the lift, and dug out a ruby to suck on. P-21 stared at me as I sat back against the lift controls. "So... go to Hippocratic Research, get EC-1101 back, stop Sanguine, and get out," I murmured as I looked at the confused buck. I slowly smiled... or... tried to smile... I really did not want to know how bad the damage was. "I think this counts as one of my plans actually working!" And I glowed with pride as he was rendered speechless in wonder.

We had to stop the lift and shift aside some rubble to wiggle out into the balefire crater at the airbase. We were exhausted, drained, shot up, poisoned, and mutilated. All of us needed a short break. We broke back into the command center and flopped down in the barracks. I made sure Boo had a snack cake and stroked her mane; she'd shaken for nearly an hour after we got free. Oddly, I think that was the natural reaction for anypony that went into the tunnels. Then I chowed down on a half dozen gems and felt my insides twisting around as the magic went to work. After everything I'd been through, I felt like I could do with a week of downtime.

I'd be lucky to get a few hours. I had bardings fused to me and robots after me and had just set loose a spirit of chaos that was only slightly amicable to me... but a hell of a kisser. I had organs to deliver to the Fluttershy Medical Center, hopefully to save Scotch's life. And then I needed to have a nice long chat with my crazy. We had to work out something with Psychoshy... but for now she was just quiet and sullen, really like a more moody P-21. But first, I had something more pressing to

do.

"I need to find a mirror," I groaned as I rose to my hooves. P-21, Psychoshy, and Rampage all looked at me in alarm. The first frowned in worry, the second grinned, and the third looked pitying.

"Oh yeah, I got to see this," Psychoshy chuckled, rising to her hooves.

"Get down," P-21 told her sharply, then looked at me. "Maybe you should wait."

"Wait?" I knew it was bad, but wasn't he taking this a little too far? I slowly gave a nervous smile; they were taking this joke a bit far! "Come on, I want to see how bad it is."

But Rampage shook her head too. "Trust me. Regen. Let Glory try and help. Then look in a mirror." I looked from one friend to the other for some sign that they were kidding, but the only one taking amusement from this was the yellow pegasus.

"How... how bad... ?" I muttered, touching my face with a hoof again. "How bad is it?"

Psychoshy cackled. "Half your face is gone!" Gone? What did she mean... gone?

Rampage snarled and leapt onto her. "Then we can give her half of yours. Oh, wait! She doesn't want to look like half a tailhole!"

But I rose and trotted quickly to the locker room, moving back towards the toilets, Rampage yelling after me. I saw the grimy mirror, wet my hoof in radioactive water, and slowly wiped the filth away. What looked back at me through the brown droplets couldn't have been me. That wasn't my face. That was... somepony else. Something else.

Call it vanity, but I always liked to imagine I looked... decent. Maybe not as cute as Glory, but easy on the eyes.

What I saw now... was not easy on the eyes. It wasn't just injury... I had pieces of my face missing. Gone. What remained was... wrong. Was that metal under my skin? Like a honeycomb of steel woven under my flesh? There were cables. Metal pins in my flesh... oh sweet Celestia... I wanted my heart to pound and my pulse to race, something to prove I was more pony than machine. The Professor hadn't mentioned any of this! Glory hadn't mentioned any of this!

...the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps

of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine...

I couldn't help myself; I closed my eyes as my organic bits started to shake. "Glory can fix it. Glory can fix it. I'll regenerate. I will." I just wished that my words sounded less like a prayer. Really, I'd sacrificed my flesh and blood and orifices to doing the right thing before. What was a face?

Just... me. I couldn't help myself; I felt tears trickling down my raw features. At least I still had half my face... glossy and burned...

Then I felt a bump against me and looked down at Boo, staring up with her big pale eyes. I sniffed. She bumped her head against me again. And again. "I don't have any snack cakes for you right now, Boo." She looked a moment, then bumped me again. I frowned. "Stop it, Boo... I don't... I can't..." Bump. She looked into my eyes, so sad and serious. And then she curled the corners of her mouth just a little.

She didn't care what I looked like. I let out a little sob... and a little laugh too. "You're smarter than you look, Boo," I said, and she bumped me again. I held her in my hooves, rubbing her ears. She only cared about the important things.

"Blackjack?" Rampage said softly as she trotted in after me.

"Psychoshy wasn't exaggerating, was she?" I muttered, bowing my head.

The striped filly growled, "I am going to burn her face off with a blow torch."

"No..." I said, shaking my head. "It'll be okay. I can wear a mask or something. That's like a badass Reaper, right?"

She snorted softly. "Yeah. Totally badass..."

Before we left, I made my way to the Marauders' lockers. I tried guessing a few passwords for each of them: putting in every personality we'd met in Rampage, trying Maripony and Twilight for Big Mac, and messing around with Psalm's. I entered in 'Rarity' for Vanity's locker, and nothing happened. Then I huffed... and remembered his last memory orb. I closed my eyes... what summed up the noble pony more than anything?

I typed in 'Regret'.

The locker door hissed open. I didn't see any pictures or photographs. There were simply some files, two memory orbs, and a strange metal crown thingy with a large black opal in the front. There was also a pair of revolvers with their handles decorated in intricate mother of pearl. Vigilance would always be my firearm of choice,

but I had to admit that there were something tempting about the long-barreled revolvers. They were of an even larger caliber than Vigilance's 12.7, and I was glad I had three full boxes of ammunition.

'Duty' was written on one in elegant flowing script. 'Sacrifice' was inscribed on the other.

I packed the locker's contents away and closed the door with a quiet click.

The sign over the entrance read 'Emergency.' I certainly looked the part as the five of us limped our way inside. The beam turrets by the door were scrapped, and there were a few fresh bullet holes and scorch marks, but it looked as if the Fluttershy clinic had gotten off lightly compared to Brimstone's Fall. The blue bars in my vision immediately stirred as we stepped through the door, and a half dozen bucks and mares pointed a variety of firearms at me as I stood there in the doorway. "Get out of here. We're closed for business," a jet black unicorn buck warned.

"You might want to rethink that," P-21 said firmly as he pushed back his wide-brimmed hat. "We've had a really long day."

"Get out of here!" the leader repeated as he stared at me in horror. I sat down. Was I going to have to beat my way in here? Kill them if they turned hostile? I sighed and started to turn away; P-21 could sneak past later or we'd have Psychoshy rap on a window up there or something. I just wanted to get in and rest and get my face put back together.

"You sodding wankers! If you pissants would pull your head out of your arses, you'd see she's no threat to you!" a mare growled mechanically, and I stared as a power-armored pony trotted into view. The apples painted on her rump weren't familiar, but the automatic shotguns were a dead giveaway. I never forgot a gun.

"Hey Crumpets," I said with relief as the half dozen moved aside.

"Ello girl. You look like you've taken a pretty rough shagging right upside the face," the Steel Ranger said with a tilt of her head. "Is there bloody requirement that to save ponies around this place you got ta look shot halfway to hell?"

"It's pretty standard. Like with how the more ragtag and bizarre the group you have, the better your odds are of winning," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, after you blew the Celestia... congratulations on that, by the way. Cottage

Cheese says whatever pony gets their hooves on your gun becomes a star paladin, no questions asked. Wanker," she snorted. "Anyway, after that the bloody traditionalists took the Applejack and ran back to Manehattan. So we needed someplace safe to hole up. This looked like a right sturdy fortification... reminds me of home, actually... and so I stopped by just in time to prevent some raiders from finishing the job."

"And we're grateful to you for driving them off, but we're not interested in becoming a base for your order," the unicorn that had turned me away said testily. "This place is being run by the Collegiate and Society."

"You should be lucky we're asking. Steel Rain's lot wouldn't bother," the mare snorted. "Eh... doesn't have near the facilities we need anyhow."

"Steel Rain's alive?" Fuck! What did it take to kill ponies around this place? Now I'd have to face him again and there'd be some heartbreaking reason he was such a prick and I'd.... arrrgh! Was drowning simply too much to ask?!

She nodded. "That's the story we hear. Found somewhere to go to ground. Not sure what his plan is, but he's got sixty or seventy folks with him. Without the Applejack, we're not getting back to Trottingham anytime soon. So we're looking for a safe place to hole up. We're scattered all over this damned valley. What with the schism in the Rangers, who knows how things are going to turn out?"

"Schism?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Eh... it's not something most folks would know. Most folks know the Rangers for being great soddin' gits taking whatever tech they trot across and having bloody great sticks up their arses. Fact is, there's more than a few of us who think these guns aren't just for show and that we should use 'em like Applejack intended... to protect folks." She snorted. "It's the way things are in Trottingham, mostly; without us, the beasties would have eaten everypony a long time ago. Nearly all of the other groups are mixed or devoted to the 'traditional' outlook, though. Except now, the waste recycler's finally burst, because Steelhooves is finally facing down Cottage Cheese. Soon as we heard it, we painted our colors. Probably get my head blown off, but they can pike Luna's horn up their arses if they don't like it."

I looked at P-21 and then back to her. "What sort of facilities do you need?"

"Eh, some place defensible, but with decent power supply and environmental supports. I heard there's an airbase south of here that might do. If we can pull together thirty or forty ponies, then we should have a decent shot at things." I thought of Mira-

mare; it was true that they might be able to hole up in there for a while, but it wasn't ideal unless they could get all the systems working.

"How about a stable?" I asked idly. P-21 looked at me sharply.

She snorted. "Well, sure. A functional stable'd be just fine. But they're a tad hard to come by in mint condition."

I looked back at him, then nodded to the side. He said in a low voice, "What are you thinking? Are you seriously thinking about telling them where 99 is?"

"I was thinking about it before the chaos at the Celestia. I blew up their base, P-21. If we give them 99, then they can organize again and do some good around here," I said softly. He frowned, his eyes darting aside. "It might make up for how Goddesses-damned terrible that place was. And it might be nice if Scotch Tape can one day go home again."

"That place will never be home," he muttered. "No place will."

"It is for her. Think about it. As is, it's a glorified crypt. Let them put it to some good use. And maybe we'll have a group of armored friends to back us up some day," I added. "Maybe they'll teach you how to use their fancy armor, too."

He snorted, but smiled just a little. "If we ever need a stable full of Steel Rangers for anything, then I think it'll be time to retire." Finally he looked away. "Fine. If they can clean it out and make it safe... I'm fine with it. Just don't ever ask me to go back there again."

"I doubt I ever could, either," I replied. The guilt alone would kill me. We trotted back to Crumpets. "So... how about a stable, slightly used?"

"I never knew you could kiss people through power armor," Rampage remarked as we trotted up the many flights of stairs, Psychoshy flying up slowly beside us.

"You can't, but that didn't stop her from trying," I grumbled. Even with my warnings about the chlorine gas and the contaminated food recycling system, she'd been more than ecstatic at the news.

"I can't believe you didn't try and get caps or anything from her." Psychoshy said as she hovered effortlessly. I could tell she'd looked forward to rubbing her flight in our faces, but my legs were mechanical, Rampage couldn't get tired, Boo probably wasn't smart enough to care, and P-21 would sooner have kissed the abrasive mare

than complain his legs were tired. "The very least you should have gotten was a suit of that power armor for yourself."

"I'm already half power armor. I want to be less power armor," I muttered. At least power armor you could take off!

"Really? Being a cyberpony really was an advantage down in those tunnels," Rampage replied. "If you were flesh and blood, we probably wouldn't have gotten out alive."

I balked a moment. "It's... it's not like that. Sure, having the metal limbs was helpful, but... I don't know. It's like... the more metal I am, the less me I am."

"Bitch bitch bitch..." Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes. "All I'm saying is that you should be more grateful about what you are than more down on yourself for not being what you think you should be." We finally reached the sealed ward, and I pushed the door open. I noticed that somepony had cleaned the walls; there were still stains, though.

We trotted in, and then my ears twitched. "I know we should wait, but you saw that explosion. We can't just sit around here..." The voice was oddly squeaky, not the soft smoothness I remembered so fondly.

"Blackjack will come here if she is alive. If she is not, somepony will have to look after Scotch Tape until a regeneration talisman is found," Lacunae replied smoothly from one of the hospital rooms. I stepped in and saw the alicorn looking into the bathroom.

"Yeah. Fortunately, I'm too dumb to die," I said brazenly as I stepped in.

"Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!" blurted Glory from inside. "Don't come in, Blackjack! You can't see me like this."

"Trust me, you look a lot better than I—" I said as I stepped into the bathroom doorway. What I beheld was neither my normal single-winged beauty nor the blue pegasus with a rainbow mane, but a creature covered in black sludge standing next to several beakers mixed with tar-like concoctions reeking of ammonia. Her rose eyes popped wide at the same time as mine, and we pointed at each other in unison.

"What the heck happened to you?!" we shouted together.

Fifteen minutes later, after I'd explained what'd happened, Rampage had stopped

laughing and taken Psychoshy out to... do something. P-21 skulked out with Lacunae as well, off to deliver the crates and talk to his daughter. He'd better be doing that! Boo lay on a hospital bed with Fancy Buck Cake crumbs all over her mouth. That left the two of us together. "So this time you're dying your coat black? What, why not just shave your mane or call yourself 'Fallen Rainbow'?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Because smart ponies can learn when something doesn't work the first time," she said before stepping into the shower. "Since I doubt there's a box of mane treatment anywhere in the Wasteland, I simply mixed some up. It's basic organic chemistry. Lacunae helped fill in the gaps, and one of the bucks downstairs showed it was effective when we tested it on him."

"Right," I said as I carefully lifted one of the beakers. "Is being Rainbow Dash so bad?"

Glory shuddered. "Blackjack... you remember how upset my sister was when she thought I was a traitor?" I nodded. "Imagine how every Enclave pegasus will feel if they see me. We're all educated that Rainbow Dash betrayed her own people when she left us. That's just the simple propaganda. I don't even want to imagine how somepony like Lighthooves will take it. Rainbow Dash is gone, and I do not want to be the new Rainbow Dash."

"Well, you do what you have to do," I muttered as I turned on the shower.

"Ah, cold!" She jumped. "I wish this place had enough power for hot water!" she complained as she scrubbed her mane.

"Bitch bitch bitch," I replied, in perfect copy of the striped filly. "I got bardings fused to me and half my face melted off... but that's nothing compared to a cold shower."

"Sorry," Glory said sheepishly, hanging her head a little.

I sighed. "Yeah. Me too. Because if it was a hot shower, then nothing would stop me from hopping in there with you," I said as I examined the beakers and bottles. "So how's Scotch?"

"Critical but stable. We arrived with barely enough time to turn the power back on and put her in stasis," Glory said softly. "Her lungs are destroyed, and her eyes and hide were severely burned by the chemicals." She lifted her face directly into the stream. I had to admit that as much as I loved Glory, there was something a little more... trim... about Rainbow Dash. Lean. Firm. Athletic. I watched the dye slowly run off her body in rivulets and...

"Glory... are you sure that that stuff works?" I asked with a frown.

"Please, Blackjack. I've been working on it for hours. I've tested it. Make sure you don't get any on your coat," she said with just a touch of indignation. "The sooner I can stop worrying about some lightning rod spy camera spotting me like this, the better!" I stared as she washed the chemicals away, then covered my mouth. Oh, this wasn't funny. Do not laugh, Blackjack. Laughter is the swift and sure path to grief and angst. But I had to say something!

"Uh... Glory... are you sure you're sure it works?"

"Yes, Blackjack. Still, soon as this joke wears off and I can stop looking like Rainbow Dash... ugh, I swear, I feel my intelligence leaking out my ears every time I see her face." She snorted softly in irritation before sighing, slumping her head as the dye pooled like ink around her hooves. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be complaining about seeing her face when you've been hurt so badly. I just hate looking at a reflection that isn't mine!"

"No no, that's not a problem..." I muttered. "Glory... I'm afraid..." I had to tell her!

"I know, but don't worry," she said as she sat in the shower with her eyes closed, scrubbing her coat briskly. "I know that your damage looks severe, but the surgical robot here should be able to... well... patch you up. Lacunae's recharged several healing potions, so even if they're not as effective as they could be, they should help with the skin grafts and reconstruction. Granted, I'm not an expert, but I've read books on the subject," she said as she reached over for a towel and began to dry off her mane and face. The cloth instantly stained soot black from the chemicals.

"Well that's great to hear, but..."

"Scotch'll be fine too... I think. I'm not an expert on transplants, but if the organs really are cloned from her own body, then I don't think there's any possibility of rejection," she said as she stepped in front of the mirror, scrubbing her mane with the blackened towel.

"Um, Glory..." Do not laugh. Do... not...

"Yes, what is it Black—" But her mane wasn't black. Nor was her coat. A few wet streaks of black dye smeared her prismatic mane. Her hide was the exact same cyan as my statuette. Her rose-colored eyes bulged, pupils shrinking to magenta dots, locked on her reflection as her hooves trembled on the porcelain.

"I'm afraid the joke's still working," I snirked, my eyes watering from repressed laughter.

They probably heard her obscenity clear in Manehattan.

Maximum level reached!

Quest Perk added: Kissed by Discord - Do you really want to know?

40. Recovery

“Nice work, Rainbow Dash!”

Ponies are thoughtful, compassionate, reasonable creatures. We might sometimes be driven to violence, but most ponies most of the time are simply trying to do the best that they can. However, now and then, ponies can go a bit... off. I don't think that Twilight would have left Discord in that place if she hadn't been obsessed with finding a final solution to the war. I think that, in better times, she would have demanded that Luna and Goldenblood stop tormenting and using him. Likewise, in certain circumstances, I take defeat particularly hard, far more than my usual screw-ups. These sorts of things happen.

Like right now.

“Clippers,” Glory muttered, holding out her hoof.

I pulled the electric clippers off the shelf. Apparently this was a heavy-duty model for preparing patients for surgery. “Glory. Are you sure you need to do this now?”

“Clippers!”

I sighed and set them in her hoof. She tapped the button, and the blades started to buzz. Without another word, a shower of rainbow mane cascaded around her shoulders, ending up in a gloopy mess in the dye on the floor as she shaved away with a wide grin on her face. “Heh... you won’t change color, huh? Well then, that means I’m just gonna have to get rid of you!”

Okay, this was getting just a little bit scary. I put a hoof on her shoulder. “Glory.”

“Just a minute, Blackjack!” she hissed as she moved the clippers along her mane. Finally, she set them down and stood, staring at Rainbow Dash’s reflection in the mirror. She pointed her hoof at it. “Ha! Can’t be Rainbow Dash without the rainbow, can you?” the bald blue pony shouted.

“Glory...” I groaned, covering what was left of my face with my hoof. I knew that somewhere, if it still existed, there was a little blue weed that was laughing its roots off. “Scotch... my face...?”

But she wasn’t listening. “Let me just get my tail and...” She paused and closed her eyes, rubbing her nostrils. “Ah... ah... choool!” she sneezed, and at once her entire mane popped back into existence on top of her head. She stared, her

pupils pinpricks, then she screamed and threw the clippers with all her strength at the mirror. “Goddesses damn it! Why won’t you go away?” she cried as the clippers broke and the mirror shattered, pieces tumbling into the sink basin. Her forehooves seized one of the larger shards of broken mirror. “I’ll cut you away!”

That’s it. It was fun while it lasted. My metal hoof smacked the broken shard out of her grasp, and I scooped her away as she started thrashing. “No! No! I can’t look like this. I can’t! Being a dashite was better than being a Dash!” she screamed, and I had to admit that Rainbow sure was a fighter. But I had cyberlimbs. I tossed her onto her back and pinned her. “I have to get my face back! I have to be me! I could take it as long as I’m me!”

I could relate. I wanted my face back too, and I could imagine what she was feeling right now. It would be like me waking up and finding myself Deus, or P-21 turning into the Overmare. Granted, I didn’t see why being Rainbow Dash was so bad, but clearly it wasn’t a good thing. “You are still you!” I said as I stared down into her tear-streaked face. “All your memories and things are still yours, right? Do you have memories of living in Ponyville?” If the answer was yes... well... hopefully Lacunae could do something!

“I...” She sniffed and closed her eyes. “I... last night... I... I dreamed I was in Cloudsdale. I... it was the second time she’d done the Sonic Rainboom! I dreamed it! I’m turning into Rainbow Dash. I just know it! That damned weed might as well have killed me outright!” She sobbed as she pressed her face into the unmangled side of my neck. Well, it looked like I would need to have a chat with our resident mystic alicorn for some answers.

I sighed and held her tight. Okay... if I started dreaming I was somepony else, I’d be freaked out too. ...Of course, that had actually already happened to me... but by that point I’d been a lot more used to the whole freaky wasteland thing. “You’re Morning Glory. Not Rainbow Dash. Morning Glory is a doctor, a smart pony, and the mare I love. Okay?” I said quietly as I looked into her terrified and upset eyes. “Right now, there’re two ponies who need Morning Glory’s help. Not Rainbow Dash’s.”

For some reason, my words didn’t seem to comfort her. “I don’t want to fade away,” she sniffed. “I don’t even know if it’s safe for me to use the auto-doc any more. Not now. Not when I don’t know what’s me and what isn’t.”

“You have to. Please,” I said softly, stroking her rainbow mane and looking down into a stranger’s eyes. “You need to prove you’re Morning Glory... to yourself. I don’t know what that stupid weed did, but I know that Morning Glory is tough enough to

overcome it.”

She sniffed, not looking convinced at all as I moved off her. She sat up slowly. “I know... it’s just... it’s waking up and finding you’ve turned into the most hated pony in the skies.” She curled her wings around her. “I haven’t even been able to fly since we got here. I was resigned to being on the ground. Happy, even... as long as I was with you. But now I’m scared to death that if I do fly somewhere, I’ll be more Rainbow Dash and less Morning Glory.”

“I didn’t think you hated her. I thought pegasi thought she was a hero,” I replied as I sat next to her.

She shook her head. “It’s much more complicated than that. Yes, Rainbow Dash was one of the greatest pegasi in history. She’s right up there with Commander Hurricane: nigh-mythic status. But pegasi... well... some of us have a way of tearing down our heroes, too. Rainbow Dash might have been awesome, but she also got tens of thousands of pegasi killed. Some Enclave speculate that the first strike at Cloudsdale was an attempt to kill her personally, not just a strike to destroy our capital. Then there was her turning her back on the Enclave to help the surface. As a historical figure, yeah, you can tolerate her. But as a person...” She trembled and sniffed. “Look at me. First thing I did was call her an idiot!”

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m sorry. I had no idea. At Tenpony, they were just mildly curious if I was related to Twilight or not. I can’t imagine what they might have done if I magically became Twilight Sparkle.”

“Thunderhead is a little better than most about her. We were completely tied in with the Ministry of Awesome, and so in a way she made us awesome too. But if Thunderhead found out about me... I don’t know what they’d do.” She shuddered. “And the rest of the Enclave... Neighvarro especially... it would be ugly. They tried Rainbow Dash in absentia a century ago and found her guilty of crimes against the pegasi race. They disintegrated her in effigy.”

“Well, good thing you’re not Rainbow Dash,” I replied firmly, staring into her eyes and daring her to disagree. Maybe not the best way to handle an identity crisis, but she didn’t argue. I smiled. “Now... can you transplant lungs and reconstruct faces, Morning Glory?” I felt a little cheesy trying to channel Mom’s ‘buck up’ speech, but she was head of security and had to be able to get through to people.

She gave a little smile. “Yeah.... I think so. It should be easy with the auto-doc and compatible organs... but where did you get them? Did you have Sanguine grow them for you?” she asked as she shook off bits of rainbow mane that clung to her.

I looked away. "Something like that. Doesn't matter now, though. It's gone and buried."

"Too bad," she sighed. "That kind of technology would have been incredibly useful. A pity it had to be under the control of that monster."

I thought of the flux being sucked out of Discord. "There were other drawbacks to it, too. Suffice to say that it's better to not think about it." Hopefully she'd leave it at that. She looked curiously at Boo, who was curled up on the hospital room bed and watching with her quiet, dull expression. "This is... well, I'm calling her Boo. She was living in the tunnels under Hippocratic Research."

"She doesn't have a cutie mark," Glory said as she peeked at the white pony's flank. "I've heard of late bloomers, but she's our age, Blackjack. And I thought I took forever getting mine." Then she glanced at the rainbow lightning bolt and sighed. I wondered if it was an illusion... or a sign that something deeper had changed in Glory.

"I don't think you ever told me how you got yours," I said as Boo crawled off the bed and shook herself. Together we walked towards the operating room.

She smiled awkwardly. "It's silly... I was studying for my graduation finals; I had to get a top score for advanced placement at Thunderhead's medical program. Every-pony expected me to get a perfect grade, but it was just... not happening. I was making mistakes, getting things mixed up in my head. I was tired and exhausted trying to study."

"Being a smart pony sounds hard," I said with a smirk, and she smiled along with me. I was glad to see that some attempt had been made to clean up the blood. As freaky as the neatness was, it belonged in this place. Still, I wouldn't have minded a little litter... maybe some water-stained tiles...

"Maybe, but we also tend to get shot up less, too, so there's a plus side," she said with a smile. "I was at the end of my limits, about to just quit and go into the basic courses. It would have meant three, maybe four more years of study before I got into medical school. But then I realized that I didn't have to memorize three hundred isolated facts. If I started with the heart... I'd memorize the facts of the heart... then the blood vessels it was connected to... what organ systems were connected in which order... It was like a sunrise that drove out all the confusing darkness, and suddenly I could see everything." She flushed a little, hanging her head. "I guess you'd have to see one to really know."

"Eh, I've seen the sun." Granted, it was in memories and the like rather than with my own eyes. "But I guess I can understand that. It explains you."

"Better than this thing does..." she muttered, looking at the lightning bolt.

"Isn't it similar, though? I mean, you were confused, and then... BAM! You figured it out." My shout made Boo jump behind Glory. The blue pegasus smiled sympathetically, and we paused long enough for the pale mare to relax. "So your epiphany came like a bolt out of the blue. And you're good at connections, so the rainbow color is how that's all related. I mean, I just shoot things, but you know all about repairing and medicine and energy weapons and stuff."

"I think you're stretching it now," she murmured, but looked a little more at ease. She might not like her body or the cutie mark she was borrowing, but she didn't have to hate it. "So, tell me everything that happened after Lacunae teleported us away."

I started to talk, but then I closed my mouth again and reconsidered. The Goddess needed to know as well. I owed her. "I'd like Lacunae to hear it too. And Scotch as well. Why don't you tell me what I missed here?"

"A very frantic five minutes," Glory replied. "Scotch had stopped breathing, her eyes were terribly damaged, and she was going into shock. We were lucky; when we arrived, Archibald was in the room trying to determine how to get the pods moved to Elysium for his father. They had one all wired up and everything. They started to argue, but Lacunae was very persuasive."

"Shouted telepathic insults can have that effect," came her smooth voice in my mind. Then she asked, in a more formal, imperious tone, "What did you learn at Hippocratic Research? Was Chimera intact?"

Hello Goddess. "The facility was a wreck. We got enough of it to work to make some spare parts for myself and Scotch. Unfortunately, the security systems were attacking us. I had to destroy what was left to get away."

"Hmmmph," the purple alicorn snorted. "Very well. I expect the other will be in Canterlot soon if she's finished mucking about with Rangers. Hopefully she'll have better results." She started to turn away.

"I freed Discord."

That made her freeze in her tracks. Then she slowly turned to look at me in shock. "You. Did. What?!"

"I freed him," I replied firmly as I trotted up towards her. "It was the least I could do

after Twilight left him there, trapped in that starmetal coffin.” Her shock gave way to anger, but I didn’t let up. “You knew what was being done to him. You knew! But all you cared about was figuring out how to make alicorns.”

“Don’t you presume to lecture me; you don’t know what he did to me, my friends, and the kingdom!” I looked right into the eyes of Twilight Sparkle.

“Really? Did he turn any of you into stone? Did he drill holes in your body? Did he torture any of you? Suck out your blood for his magic?” I asked as I advanced. I pointed a hoof at her. “Two hundred years in agony. I don’t care what he did, Twilight, no one deserves that!”

“Discord was a monster that fed on misery and strife!” Lacunae shouted.

“And how was what ponies did to him any less monstrous?” I said, not giving an inch. “What if it’d been done to another pony? The fact that it was Discord doesn’t change how wrong it was!”

“That... I... that was... I meant to speak to Luna. I forced a recall of the flux, once I knew how dangerous it was. Discord... it was a very busy time, Blackjack!” she stammered, then shuddered. The alicorn swayed, then whimpered as she curled up. “I’m sorry...”

“Twilight?” I asked as I knelt. She looked up at me with teary eyes, and I hissed softly, “I’m sorry, Lacunae.”

“So is Twilight... please... understand she is sorry. She just... forgot...” She closed her purple eyes once more and shivered, and I reached down to stroke her mane. “The Goddess put her shame in me. Her guilt. She was ashamed of so much... so sorry for what she had done. Please, believe that. Please...” She pressed her face into my chest and whimpered softly, “Pinkie...”

“I... I do. I do, Lacunae,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry. I just... that place was really messed up. You know what happened there. Copies. Fusion. Flux. Discord.”

“You know that you doomed us all by setting him loose,” Lacunae sniffed. “His power is... immeasurable.”

I sighed. “Yeah. And if I have to, I’ll deal with him later. But he’s chaos, right?” The purple alicorn looked at me with a troubled frown, then nodded once. “So if everypony expects him to act one way... then the chaotic thing is if he does the opposite. Right?” I asked with a hopeful smile.

“Unless doing what is unexpected is expected so he does the expected to be un-

expected,” Glory offered. “Or he might unexpectedly be unexpected by doing the expected... I’m not exactly sure how the math works out. Do two unexpecteds become expected?”

“No, I’m pretty sure they’re squared,” Lacunae replied. She wiped her eyes and even gave a thankful little smile to my rainbow-maned love.

I clapped my hooves over my ears. “Ahhh! Stop! All this egghead talk is starting to educate me!”

The pair just looked at each other, then launched into a discussion of theoretical Discord unexpectosity states. I felt a migraine coming on. Evil ponies... evil smart ponies...

But at least I gave them both a reason to smile.

I filled them in on what had occurred at the complex, glossing over the specifics of the source of the organs. Thankfully, Lacunae didn’t get into those specifics either. The mare seemed to be trying to deal with the emotions shoved into her by the Goddess. It seemed to physically weaken her; how much mental anguish and trauma could a pony take before they just... couldn’t anymore? If something happened to the Goddess, would Lacunae be affected? Would she be free, or would she crumble, or explode?

I really didn’t like these unknowns. I was also glad I didn’t know whatever LittlePip was up to. As we walked along, Glory remarked on Boo several times. She seemed unconvinced that the white pony following me around didn’t know how to talk. I suppose the idea of fully grown ponies popping from nowhere was a little hard to swallow. It wasn’t until Boo relieved herself right in front of us that Glory concluded that... yes... she wasn’t quite right. And guess who it was they looked at to clean up after her?

Ah well; I was the one who brought her up here. And it wasn’t the dirtiest job I’d had. I tossed the mess and the rag down the garbage chute at the nurse’s station.

As we approached the doors to the operating room, I balked. How could I set hoof into the room where I’d decided the fate of forty foals?

“Wait, what is that?” I asked as my ear picked up a noise from within. A sharp ‘Beee... dooo... beee... dooo...’ playing over and over.

Glory went pale, jumped into the air, and streaked down the rest of the hall, slamming through the double doors so hard one was knocked off its hinges. "Lacunae!" came her scream, and a second later, the world disappeared in a purple flash. When the world returned I was back in the middle of the operating room beside the very table where my insides became my outside. The robotic arms looked particularly sharp at this moment. "Power fault! The stasis is unstable. We have to transplant her lungs now! I don't know if we'll be able to stabilize the pod!"

Fortunately, the crates Sanguine had filled were right beside the operating table. "Where is P-21?" I asked as Glory rushed to the terminal podium in the middle of the room. Boo hung back at the smashed-open door, blinking with fright and confusion.

"I don't know. I also don't know how long the pod's been malfunctioning!" Glory said as she tapped the keys with her hooves. "There's a reason you don't fiddle with these things. Once something is in stasis, you leave it alone! I have no idea what parts of her body might have undergone cell death if the field strength was uneven."

The mechanical arms lifted. "Lacunae. Teleport her onto the table, then get all the healing potions you prepared. This is going to be a messy transplant at best. She's going to need an IV feed as soon as we replace her lungs and eyes." Glory swallowed, her hooves tapping. "I have no idea if this system is a hundred percent either. I was hoping P-21 would spend few hours helping me check for bugs." She licked her lips nervously as there was a flash in the beeping pod, and suddenly Scotch appeared on the table. "Why didn't I focus on that rather than changing my mane?!"

"You thought you had the time. You didn't know the pod would malfunction," I replied.

Scotch looked... dead. She reeked of chlorine, and her eyes were swollen shut. Patches of her hide were raw and discolored, as if she'd been burned. That smell hit me like a hammer. Only the tiny rise and fall of her side gave any hint that she was alive at all. She whimpered, starting to shake.

"Black..." she said weakly. "Hurts."

I rushed to her side. "It's okay. We're going to fix you up, Scotch."

"He didn't... talk..." was all she said before I was being brushed aside.

"Roll her onto her back, Lacunae," Glory instructed. "I'm breaking about thirty or forty rules for hygiene and postoperative infection prevention," the mare muttered as the arms began to whirr and hum. Glory then rushed to a cart beside the operating

table and opened a bottle. "Dribble this along her chest," the mare instructed as she grabbed a hoofful of gauze. I smelled the sharp tang of alcohol. Glory then wiped down the filly's chest. "Okay. Med-X will have to do. I—"

She froze as she stared into the drawer. "Where's the Med-X? There were three doses here ready!" She looked around the cart. "I can't crack a chest without some kind of anesthetic!" She looked at me, her eyes frantic. "Do you have some?"

My inventory function said no.

"The Society and Eggheads cleared out the storeroom. Lacunae, maybe there's some more at the nurse's station?"

"That's where I found those three," Lacunae replied.

I took my saddlebags and upended them, dumping every bit of trash and salvage I'd trotted across. I had to have something! The metal crown thingy I'd found in Miramare bounced twice on the tile floor and rolled away. Guns and bullets were useless here. I was useless here!

Then Lacunae swept up the crown with her magic. "A recollector! Perfect! Blackjack, give me a memory orb," the alicorn instructed. I looked at the scattered orbs. Well... eenie... meenie... that one! I picked it up with my mouth and trotted it over to the table; I didn't want to risk getting sucked in, what with my wonky horn and all. The alicorn put the crown on Scotch's head and then slotted the orb into the spot where the black opal had been; it must have fallen out somewhere. At once the filly went limp.

"I hope that's the Gala..." I murmured... wait, did I even have that orb? Ugh, I needed to catalogue and label these damned things!

"Okay. Get clear," Glory said as pink talisman lit up over the operating table. "That should stabilize her long enough to get finished now that she's under." I heard the purr of electric clippers, then saw a familiar vibrating blade move down towards the filly. I swept up my things with hooves and magic and dumped them into the bags, letting the inventory spell take care of the packing. "Good... it's cutting nicely... all her internal organs seem to be functioning as well as can be expected... heartbeat is weak... we need to get this done fast."

I heard a wet noise fill the air and looked away. I did not like operating rooms... no thank you! I looked over at the malfunctioning pod and trotted closer. A pink pony in my head put on a brown cap and lifted a magnifying glass; there was dirt smudged on the control panel next to the pod.

"I need to find P-21..." I said sharply as I turned and ran for the hall, Boo scrambling out of my way. I needed to find him. Now!

Missing Med-X, and he'd done something to the pod. He could hide from my eyes, but not my Eyes Forward Sparkle! I spotted a blue bar all by itself and homed in. I found him lying in a bathtub nearby, Dusty's hat pulled over his face. The three empty syringes were on the lip of the sink beside him. I felt a rage and fear like I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Interesting place for a nap," I said sharply.

"G'way..." he muttered thickly.

"Scotch is in surgery now. She might be dying. Somepony messed with her stasis pod," I said as I looked at the dirt on his hooves. He just lay there, twitching a little.

"Go away," he repeated, putting a little more effort into it. I pulled the hat away and stared down at his contracted pupils as he looked up at me. His spasming limbs were relaxing bit by bit as he closed his eyes.

"You took the chems for your daughter's operation to use yourself. How could you? And what did you do to her pod? Did you try and open it?" I said lowly, and my eyes threw up a targeting reticule on his head. For once, I wasn't disturbed by that. I was way too angry. "Did you try and kill her?"

He just lay there. "I'm sick of hurting..."

"Your leg is fine!" I yelled at him, feeling sick myself. "It's been fine for more than a week! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He covered his face with his hooves. "Hurts. I don't want to hurt any more."

"What do you mean?" I asked with a frown. "What hurts?" Maybe there was something actually wrong with him.

"Everything," he muttered. "Everything always hurts. And when you're hurt, if you're a good pony, you get a shot. And then it doesn't hurt any more. Or if you struggle and fight, you get a shot, and then it doesn't hurt, either." He closed his eyes again. "Go away, Blackjack. I tried to tell her, but I couldn't say a word. I just... I just leaned against it and couldn't say a thing. I needed a shot so bad. Everything hurts."

Okay... don't think about that just now... If you were a bad pony, medical would give you a shot to help you perform. "Are you saying... do you mean that back in medical... in 99... they kept you dosed up on Med-X?"

"After what the Overmare did to my ass on a regular basis, what do you think?" he said with a grumble, glaring up at me before staring away into the side of the tub. "I was so glad Daisy busted my leg. It was an excuse to have a shot whenever I wanted. When we were in Flank, I stocked up. I could just... not hurt... but then I ran out..."

"When?" I asked softly.

"The arena. Reapers aren't big on painkillers, I guess. And Megamart had run out. I was only able to get one shot from Bonesaw. And... I kept thinking about 99... and how we'd failed... and it hurt so damn much. Everything hurt so damn much. I just wanted it all to stop."

"But then I saved you," I murmured. "Why didn't you tell me you hurt so much?"

"Because you don't. You get shot, stabbed, blown up and raped, and I never once hear you say 'Oh it hurts too much. We have to stop.' He let out a little sob. "I just want everything to stop hurting! I thought the arena would be perfect... but then you stopped me... so I'd just stay close to you till something... something... killed me. But I just kept on living, and now even one shot isn't enough. Now it takes two or three. And they were just lying there and I hurt so damn bad but I'm not dead yet!"

I touched his shoulder, but he jerked away. I sighed. "And Priest... made you hurt less..."

"Yes... but he's gone." He screwed up his eyes and hissed softly in pain. "I thought... I don't know what I thought. I thought for a while, maybe I could do some good. Get through it... be like you." He turned his face away. "When we went to Hippocratic... I wanted revenge. But... I also wanted to stop hurting."

"You were staying with me because you thought I'd get you killed?" I murmured softly, feeling cold and hollow once more. I hadn't felt like this in a long time.

He sniffed and nodded. "With all the shit you attract? I figured something would get us sooner or later. But you kept on throwing yourself into the meat grinder over and over... they nailed your legs to the floor and we cut them off and still you... Goddess, Blackjack, how do you keep going?!" he asked as he looked up at me in anguish. "And then you died and... and I was alive... and all I wanted was to swap places with you!" He laughed brokenly. "You know what I thought when I saw Dusty die? Damn... lucky mare..."

I sighed, leaning down and stroking his mane gently. "Everything hurts, Blackjack.

Everything. I was so sure that the hurting would stop in that damned laboratory. A shot. A turret. That goop. I just wanted something to kill me so that you could go on and save everypony. Something. But... somehow you saved us all. Again... because that is what you do..."

He closed his eyes again. "Please don't save me. Please just leave me here. I'm so sick of hurting. So damned sick of everything." I looked down at my friend and stroked his mane. I had no idea what to do. No idea at all... except...

Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head...

No! I save ponies. I don't kill them.

But... how do I save P-21?

"I'm sorry, P-21. I don't know how I can take the pain away," I said quietly. "I... don't hurt. I'm not exactly sure if I'm a pony anymore. Maybe... maybe somewhere back in Tenpony, whatever part of me was a pony got cut away and replaced by a talisman or a pump or something. I don't know how a pony is supposed to feel anymore. I get shot and it... it doesn't feel the same anymore. I remember the first time I got shot. Now, nothing feels right," I murmured quietly. "I eat metal and rocks now. I have little bars telling me how much energy I have left." I closed my eyes. "Maybe... maybe the reason I'm not affected by Enervation is because I'm really a robot... just one with more fleshy bits than your average Ultra-Sentinel."

He shifted to look up at me. "But right now... Glory is doing the transplant to try and save Scotch Tape's life. And even with the organs, she might not pull through." I sighed, stroking his mane. "I know what it's like to hate yourself. I know what it's like to want to end the pain. I do... I know how it feels to be violated and to just want it over. I'm sorry I couldn't help you." I'd been on the mattress before, the very place he was now.

I took a deep breath. "If you lie here like this, and don't go to her, and she lives then... she isn't your daughter. One way or another, she'll get past this. Maybe you won't. But I guarantee that if you stay here like this right now, and she dies, then you'll be just as dead as if I had left you back at the Arena. There are some things you never forgive yourself for." I closed my eyes. "Either way, I'm not going to leave you here just waiting for the pain to come back. Because it will... lying here causes the pain."

He lay there with his eyes closed for the longest time. I knew the chems and his own self loathing were keeping him there. I could have dragged him out easily...

but it didn't matter. The mattress he was stuck on would have been any place I took him. Only he could get off it... and I didn't know what we'd do if he didn't.

Then he shifted a little, rolling over to put his hooves beneath him. Slowly he rose, and I put a hoof out to steady him. I sniffed as he took one step out of tub, then another, then stepped free. "Why do I keep on following you, Blackjack?" he murmured as he slumped against me. "Why do you think I can be a better pony? More than just a trick pony?"

"Because you can. I can see it. Duct Tape could, too," I replied with a small smile. "Now, I think there's a waiting room thingy near the operating room. We can go there and... um... wait." He missed the obvious opportunity to point out my obviosity, just ducking his head and focusing on walking without falling down.

When we reached the waiting room, he took a seat and closed his eyes. I dug out my magic primer and stretched out on the couch. Concentrating on turning the page took my mind off Scotch... but not off P-21. I didn't know anything about drug addiction! Glory had tried to talk to me about it, but to me it was more a 'chems do damage to your body so they're bad' type deal. I never thought of them changing the way a pony thought and acted. They were supposed to be... pop some Fixer, and you were good.

Had P-21 really been in pain for so long? Was it real pain like from an injury, or something in his head? This sounded a whole lot too serious for just a Fixer or two.

Boo slowly crept into view. I smiled and talked softly till she came over to get a mane rub. I fished out a slightly smooshed Fancy Buck Cake, and she ate it happily.

I tried to keep my mind off the question I couldn't answer by flipping through the primer. I was getting through the basic telekinesis practice spells. I practiced lifting and lowering Duty and Sacrifice. The revolvers were heavier than Vigilance. Theoretically, I should have been able to use a half dozen pistols with my magic, but in reality it was far easier to float an object than to aim and fire. Your brain literally had to juggle from one weapon to the next to use them all if you were going to do more than simply fire blindly. Duty and Sacrifice were different, though. I lifted and aimed them both with little difficulty. The intricate scrollwork on the five-shot cylinders depicted magical flames. I practiced working them in unison, pulling the triggers simultaneously at an imaginary target.

Then I practiced my little light spell... because for the first time in my life, I could actually do magic. Boo watched the little floating mote warily, then when it came near, tried to eat it. I smiled as she made an icky face. Before, magic was something

other unicorns did. Other unicorns were better than me, and I always assumed that that was that. I was a screw-up unable to perform the most basic magic spell beyond simple telekinesis. My magic bullet spell had been the first time I'd done more, and even that was sort of still telekinesis. But now a light spell... it made me wonder what other magic I was capable of.

I thought of Lacunae's shield spell. Wouldn't that be useful, given the amount of fire I saw regularly? Or healing spell... okay, maybe that was a bit much. I wasn't sure if a healing spell would even work on me. Maybe I needed a repair spell... or both?

"Hey, P-21... wanna throw some books at me?" He blinked, frowning a little in confusion. "Come on! I want to see if I can figure out how to do Lacunae's barrier thingy." I grinned and gestured right at the end of my snout. "Come on. You can't make my face any worse than it already is. So give it your best shot."

You know, for having three doses of Med-X in him, he could throw the waiting room magazines and books really hard!

After two dozen, I had a bloody nose and a ringing headache and wasn't any closer to making a magic barrier. Maybe I could talk to Lacunae about it. Before, though, I just would have given up. 'Blackjack is screw-up; Blackjack can't learn, durr...' But now I knew magic was more than just my inability. Of course I had to get pummeled with a half dozen more books before I finally got P-21 to stop throwing them.

"Okay, clearly the whole 'magic shield' thing is a little more complicated than just... imagining a wall or something," I said as I rubbed my horn.

"Well, if you ever need more books thrown at your head, I'm sure you won't have any lack of volunteers," he replied with a small smile.

"You know... I've got to wonder, how do you make those shots with your grenade launcher?" I asked as I looked at Persuasion on his hip. "I mean, I know a lot of it is skill."

"I don't know. I suppose it's an earth pony thing," he replied with a shrug, looking at the door to the operating room. "I can't do magic or fly, but say I need to get something somewhere, I know just how and how hard I need to kick it to get it where it needs to go."

"Oh yeah? Prove it. Put a magazine on each of those three seats there," I said as I pointed across the waiting room. He looked at me flatly and reached over, bit three magazines, and tossed one after the next onto all three seats. I frowned sourly. "Okay... do it again." And so he did. "With bo—" And three prewar books landed

each stack. "Yeah, well, I can do magic."

He stood, walked slowly towards a garbage can in the corner, and pulled out a tin can. Then he looked at me and kicked the can hard. It bounced off the wall, and I ducked as it whizzed by my head. "Ha!" I laughed, pointing a hoof at him. Then I heard a ping behind me and a ting above me... and felt the odd sensation of the can landing squarely on my horn. I looked at him and his sad little smile, levitated it off my horn, pulled it to my mouth, and started to chew without taking my eyes off him.

"Touché," he replied as he took a seat. He closed his eyes for a moment. "How do you do it, Blackjack? How do you... how do you keep on being you?"

"Nopony else is dumb enough to take the job," I replied with a chuckle and a shrug. "I mean, really, the uniform is nice, don't get me wrong, but I think I have something explode on me or near me on a daily basis. Anypony with two brain cells knows that that's not worth it." I grinned at him. "I expect I'll figure it out in a month or two." If I was still alive, that is.

"That's what I mean." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You... helped Sanguine. Even after everything he did, you helped him." I opened my mouth, but he quickly added, "I'm not saying you were wrong... even if I think you were. It's just... you do things that are amazing. You laugh and joke and you just keep coming back for more."

"Not always," I said, feeling myself... wait, was I blushing?

"Thank goodness," he replied as he closed his eyes. "You know... after Priest... when you were on your bed like that... I have to admit, a part of me was relieved."

"Relieved I screwed up?" I asked with a frown.

"Relieved you could mess up. ... Following you hasn't been easy at all, but it's been a heck of a show. You're so... good. You are. You try so hard to be good that..."

"I'm not a good pony," I replied firmly, looking away. Wow... maybe my face was too cooked to blush. "I want to be... I try..."

"And that's what makes you good." He laughed softly, mirthlessly. He looked at me long and low. "Sometimes, I can't believe the things you do. I mean... I really can't. You keep going when other ponies would break. You try and give everypony a second chance... a third chance... a fourth chance."

"Stop," I said firmly, frowning. "I'm not perfect. I fucked up... I fucked up big, remember?"

"I do. But in spite of that, you keep on going. You keep on being good." For some reason, his praise was starting to annoy me. "You never give up, even when anypony else would. I sometimes wonder what it would take to stop yo—"

I rose to my hooves, and Boo raised her head in alarm. "Damnit... do you want to know why I keep going? It's because, if I actually stop for two seconds to think about things, I want to blow my head off. I'm not a good pony. I'm a pony trying to make up for all the fucked-up things I've done! What I did in and to 99. What I did to those foals. What I did to you. The fact I'm probably going to need an oil change before I have my period. That I have a crazy ghost pony living in my PipBuck who comes and goes as he pleases. I only keep going because I'll die if I don't. Not because I'm good." I sighed and looked away. "I'll drag myself forward into a meat grinder because it's less painful than thinking about what I've done. I can give second chances... because after my mistakes... I'd want a few hundred myself."

"Maybe... but you haven't quit yet. Not on anypony," he said quietly as he stared away. He took a slow breath. "I keep thinking about good ponies... you... Priest... even Glory. And no matter how I try... I don't fit in. I'm not as good as the rest of you."

"You're fine," I said as I trotted over to him and put my leg around his shoulders. "It's not about being good. It's about trying to do better. If you quit trying, then you'll just get torn down bit by bit till there's nothing left." I sat and stroked Boo's ears till she lowered her head and started to snooze.

He watched me, then sighed. "You make being a good pony look so easy."

"No, LittlePip, Fluttershy, and Homage make it look easy," I snorted. "And don't get me started on the Stable Dweller. I mean, she can at least save her stable... in which she dwells, I assume." From whence she plotted her eventual salvation of all the Wasteland. ...You know, I didn't exactly know what the Stable Dweller did to help ponies. LittlePip faced down mind reading monsters and slaver armies.

Ah well, she had to do something. Otherwise, why would Homage talk about her like that?

Then the door pushed open, and we both rose to our hooves. Lacunae looked at the pair of us.

She wasn't smiling. "You should come." He suddenly staggered against me, and I was barely able to keep us both upright.

"Scotch... is she...? She's alright? Right?" I asked as I held P-21.

"You should come," Lacunae said in our minds, and then pulled back. We stared at the swinging door in shocked silence. I'd been so sure... he'd... had it been because... no. Don't think that. Don't let him think it. Just...

"Come on. Let's go," I said as I nudged him towards the door.

The oxygen talisman sent up a slow stream of bubbles from its bottle, the tubes running to a mask covering Scotch's face. Gauze covered her eyes and several patches of her hide, and bandages ran from her throat down to disappear under the sheets. A monitor beeped slowly as it magically read her vitals. Glory adjusted the machine, her lips pressed together and her eyes angry.

P-21 took one look at her lying there. "Is she... is..."

"Honestly, I have no idea," Glory said as P-21's hind legs gave out. She glared at him. "Somepony hit delicate equipment. Somepony took drugs I'd prepared for the procedure. Everything was rushed transplanting the lungs. We could have kept her stabilized through the prep. The robot could have swapped the lungs in three minutes if everything had been perfect. This was far from perfect. So really... I don't know." She closed her eyes. "The eyes went smoothly enough... and the skin grafts. But really, I can't tell you if she's going to live or not."

"Glory..." was all I could say. She just shook her mane and stepped past us as she headed for the door.

"It's night now. If she pulls through till morning, it'll be a miracle," she said in cold anger as she stepped out. "Come on, Blackjack. I need to get you prepped. Make sure he doesn't cough on her monitor or something," she said to Lacunae. The purple alicorn simply nodded.

P-21 didn't look like he was going to cough. He looked like Sanguine sitting there before the four copies. In a way, I suppose he was.

"Is it that..." I muttered in shock as I followed her into the hall.

"I've never operated that fast or sloppily before. If it wasn't for Lacunae, she'd be dead right now!" Glory said sharply. "What was he doing with her stasis pod? Why did he take the Med-X?"

"He's... got a problem. A..." I hung my head. "I'm sorry, Glory. I'm sorry I gave

those Mint-als to Scotch. I..."

She looked confused for only a few seconds before her glare softened a little. "He's addicted, isn't he?" I closed my eyes and nodded. She sighed and reached out to pat my shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"Isn't it? You tried to say something. Heck, Rampage tried to tell me!" I stood and started pacing. "I just... he's always been so strong. I never thought of him..." I shook my head. "He'd needed it since before we left Stable 99."

"You mean for his leg?" She frowned as we started to walk towards the operating room.

"No. I mean the medical ponies gave it to the males, either to calm them down or deal with the aftereffects of... rough sex." I shook my head; I'd never thought of it. A shot to put them to sleep. A shot to calm them down when they were hysterical. Shots to help them perform. It wasn't just his leg; his whole life he'd been under the influence. "So... you have to... you know... do the medicine thing. Make him not addicted anymore. You can do that, right?"

"Theoretically, but the fact is that addiction isn't as simple as that. Addiction is more than just chemical. It's psychological as well. He might not be able to control himself."

I answered at once, "Well then, I'll control him and..." Oh... yeah, that might not work so well.

"Are you prepared to give up your hunt for a few months while you do? Med-X addiction is a doozy. Going cold turkey could easily kill him without the proper medical help." Wait? Did she actually mean that stopping taking the drug that was messing him up could kill him? My mane went all clammy. "Well, I'll keep him... I'll..." The thought of Scotch Tape dying... of P-21 dying... "Damnit, Glory, there must be something I can do! I know he's got the problem now. I'll watch him close. I won't let him get messed up again."

"Blackjack... there are some things you can't do," she said in a low voice as we walked.

"I just dealt with a ghoul who wanted to kill me and got out of a deathtrap alive. There's nothing I can't do," I insisted stubbornly. Hadn't he followed me into that deathtrap for the whole 'death' thing, though? "We'll just have to keep an eye on him." I looked at her hanging her head and nudged her. "How about you? How are you doing?"

She sighed. "I'm trying to compartmentalize what happened. She was critically ill; I had to cut as quickly as possible. She might have been braindead even before we got her out of the pod. Death happens." She glanced at me and my startled expression. "One of the first things they teach you in medical school. Death happens; you can't save all of them." She sighed. "I just hope I didn't make a mistake. Rainbow Dash was no surgeon."

"Sanguine said the surgery was simple," I said with a frown. He'd lied to me... I should have dragged him along... wait, no, there was a fusion spell we hadn't had time for and his panicking half crazy family had been freaking out and...

"I'm sure that, for a two-century-old doctor, it is. For somepony who's only read about the procedure and witnessed a few transplants, it's a lot more tricky. Essentially, it's 'activate the stabilization field, get the patient unconscious, crack them open, remove the bad organ, put in the transplant, sew and anchor it in place, and flood everything with healing potion. Close up and hope for the best.'" She closed her eyes.

"What are her odds?" I asked with a gulp. Boo bumped my flank with her head, making me jump. My jump made her jump as well, and she ducked behind the counter, peeking at me.

"I still can't believe there were dozens of ponies like her in that place," Glory said softly, shaking her head. "Anyway, I don't do odds, Blackjack. You're the one who knows gambling. We'll know by morning if she's going to pull through or not. There's no chance of organ rejection, but infection... having something rupture... internal bleeding..." She hissed softly in frustration. "If he'd just not touched the pod or taken those chems... if I could have had more time!"

"You did the best with what you had," I said as I bumped my head against her. Ahah! Now I knew where Boo had picked it up.

She gave a wan smile. "I know... it's just, at this point, I feel helpless."

"We all do," I murmured softly. We walked along together with our heads held a little bit lower.

Glory got over it first. "Well! Before morning arrives and my confidence is shattered forever, let's see if I can't get you free from that hazmat suit!" she said brightly.

Fifteen minutes later, I was discovering just what Glory could do with a scalpel. I doubted I would ever feel the same way about her as she held the razor sharp blade in her lips and sliced away the yellow rubber and the barding beneath. No sooner

was the yellow rubber cut before a reeking pong of pony sweat, blood, and leather struck my nostrils. Glory backed away, coughing and gagging as the blue pegasus turned decidedly green.

Okay... that couldn't be healthy.

"You're lucky. With that healing talisman inside you, you'll regenerate all of this relatively quickly," she said matter-of-factly as she freed my tail from its rubbery sack. I swished it a few times, letting it air out. Oh, I could really do with a good brushing. "He included a few ounces of muscle tissue and fat so I can build you up."

"That's good, but... Glory, I look like a robot. How much..." Was there a pony left in me?

"You are not a robot," Glory replied as she tossed the sack away. "Yes, we had to replace a lot of compromised bone and reinforce your epidermis. The alternative was something like Deus, with external supports poking out of your hide." That still didn't make me feel much better. She sighed and stroked my mane. "Look at it this way. Would you feel better if you saw only bone sticking out of those injuries?"

"Gah, no!" I said with a shiver.

"Then you shouldn't feel bad about the metal," Glory replied. "You're injured, not damaged. And we're going to heal you, not repair you," she said firmly. Then she took up the scalpel and finished cutting away as many scraps as she could. The only pieces that remained were rings where bullet holes had allowed the barding and hazardous materials suit to bond with my hide. It didn't hurt... but it didn't feel natural, either.

'Natural'. Was that a term that could be legally applied to me anymore?

"Okay. Now the fun time. I'm out of Med-X, so we're going to have to use a memory orb. Hopefully it won't wear off till I'm finished. Do you have a preference?" Glory asked with a small smile. Given how jumbled up they were... I really needed a case or something that let me label them. I sighed. Really, most of my orbs weren't all that pleasant to begin with. I really didn't want to relive Stonewing getting a cockatrice squished into him.

Besides... now that I was out of the suit... I had something else to take care of.

"Um... give me a second, okay?" I said with a flush.

"Why? Is something the matter?"

"Um..." How to put this delicately? "I need to use the little filly's room."

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I really hoped that I hadn't just ruined the toilet. They were something precious in the Wasteland, and what I'd tried to flush... well... lets just say I wasn't sure it could handle what I'd just put into it. I made my way back towards the operating room, but then paused. There was Doctor Tenderheart's office. I smiled as I stepped inside, looking at the terminal P-21 had hacked and at the safe he'd left open. He'd been so brave going on his own to try and find some way to stop the mad children. I'd thought Glory had died.

I closed my eyes. I really couldn't say if I'd made progress since then.

I looked at Marigold's file on the desktop and slowly turned it over, looking at obscure medical wordings. Then the stack of files slipped and fell on to the floor in a clatter, sliding in a fan of papers and folders. Great, Blackjack, just great. I knelt down and started to gather them up with my hooves and horn. I knew it was irrational. This wasn't my office; heck, the pony who had worked in here had been gone for two centuries. Still. It was her space.

As I picked up the last, I spotted a faint golden glow from the open safe. Slowly, I pushed it open and looked down at the little yellow glass orb. I hesitated, then stretched out my hoof and carefully rolled it out. My fingers extended as I stared down at it. "You're not supposed to be in there."

"Interesting," rasped the Dealer's voice, making me jump, and I looked aside with a scowl to see him staring out the window.

"Oh, that just about sums up my entire life," I said with a little frown. "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought I'd comment on the vagaries of life and the oddities of luck. Random chance. All that," he said as he spread out five cards showing a royal flush. "One second you get exactly what you need... the next..." He tapped one card, and it went from an ace of spades to a two of clubs. "Nothing. How do you think that memory orb came to be there? Something you missed first time through? What are the odds that you'd find that?"

"No idea. I'm still waiting to find the memory orb that explains who the hell you are," I replied sharply as I stood on my hind legs and approached him. He smiled up at me, his hooves working the cards better than I could with magic.

"I told you. I'm nopoly special. Just along for the ride."

"Horseapples. Who are you? What are you?" I asked as I looked him over.

"Nopony special at all," he murmured softly. "Is it so hard to believe?"

"Yes," I replied flatly. "My life is too interesting just to allow a random ghost pony to be living in my PipBuck along with a key to Equestria's darkest secrets. I mean, I'm used to some pretty odd shit, but that's just a little much. Call me crazy."

"No. You're not crazy..." he said in a dangerous, low voice loaded with rage as he stared out the window at the distant green glow of the city. I saw his jaw work, his muscles flexing under the coat. He sighed. "How did it come to this?"

"You tell me, Goldenblood," I said as I crossed my hooves, sitting on the desk all upright; oddly, my body had no problem balancing, so long as I actually didn't try and balance.

"I'm not Goldenblood," he said quietly.

I doubted that, but there was no point in lapsing into the whole cycle of accusing and denying. "But you knew him," I challenged.

He didn't answer for several seconds. "Nopony knew him. None of us. We all thought we had him figured out. Luna thought he was her loyal evil chancellor working behind the scenes. Fluttershy thought he was a helpless little lamb, till he showed his fangs. Horse thought he was an idiot. Twilight thought he was a friend... then an enemy... then a friend... then an enemy.... Then who knew? And Spike thought he was a father..."

"And who did you think he was?" I asked. If I had to play games to get answers, I'd play and hope he slipped and revealed something.

"Me?" He arched a brow and then looked out the window again. "He was the pony who blew up the world." He shoved himself away from the window, turning towards me with a scowl. "Oh, he didn't do it by himself. Don't get the idea that he twirled his mustache one day, gave an evil laugh, and set out to kill everypony. No, the Ministry Mares, Celestia, Luna... everypony was guilty. Everypony facilitated it. Everypony gleefully raced towards the edge, and anypony who didn't like it and thought it was wrong... stayed silent. Goldenblood was just the architect who set it all up. If he'd just shut his mouth and died and let Luna fail, the world would have been a better place."

"So why'd he do it?" I asked. The fury returned on his face as he glared at me a moment, but then he cast his eyes away.

“Don’t know. Fluttershy? Twilight? Luna? He always did have a weak spot for assertive mares. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe the power and the secrets and lies wormed their way inside him till he snapped. Till one day he was so sick of it that he stopped playing the game,” he said as he leaned towards me and clopped his hooves together in front of my face, making me jump. “And then he found out you don’t stop playing this game. You can’t just change the rules. You can’t suddenly make things right again.” He snorted softly as I picked myself up. “He would have loved you. Probably have killed you about the time you found out what EC-1101 did, but loved you.”

I sighed and shook my head. “So... why not spill?”

“Not my job and not my place,” he sniffed.

I grunted and rolled my eyes. “Oh, come on. Just disclose the details already, Dealer or whoever you are! Why do you insist on all this mystery crap?”

“Because I’m not playing the game anymore. Not like Sanguine was, or like you are. DJ Pon3. That stable dweller.” He laughed, long and thin. “What, you think this is all a coincidence? I don’t believe in coincidence. All of you start wiggling around like a kicked-over anthill all at once? You start discovering the O.I.A.’s secrets? Wars and death and chaos? It’s two hundred years ago all over again. The same fucking game’s still being played.”

“What game? What are you talking about?” I asked, backing away a little. Maybe I wasn’t the crazy one. “I’m not playing a fucking game here!”

“No? Why are you trying to find out about the projects?” he asked as he licked his lips. “Why are you trying to find where EC-1101 is getting to? Because you think it’ll lead you to the answers, don’t you? Why do you care about this shithole of a city? Why do you keep on fighting, day after day?” He pulled out a card and threw it in my face. Its surface was a mirror and I stared at my tattered reflection. “Look at you! You’re half metal, Blackjack!” Another card of me nailed over a crate landed in my hooves, my hide painted white and red. “Look at the shit you go through.” Another card showing the atrium full of still ponies. One of a mine’s bloody rock crusher. One of forty stasis pods. “Look at the shit you cause!”

“Shut up,” I screamed, the cards fluttering away like dead insects as I backed away into the corner. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to stop playing the game. The same stupid game everypony’s been playing for years. Stop pretending it’s all for something. Stop imagining you can fix

it. You can't save the Wasteland. You can't save ponies. You can't save your friends. You can't even save yourself," he said as he took his cards and tossed them into his cowboy hat. "Don't be like Twilight and her friends. You'll just get everypony killed if you do," he said as he put it back on top of his head. He pointed to the memory orb in my mechanical grip. "Put that orb back where you found it, get the help you need, take your friends, and go. Leave this damned place and find some peaceful patch. Forget about Goldenblood and Equestria. They're dead and gone."

"I don't... I can't..." I said as I clenched my eyes shut. "He did something. Caused something. And I have to stop it. I can't give up." Yet I could still see him there, looking down at me in disgust and judgement. Then nothing. Slowly, I cracked my eyes open and looked at the empty room.

Nothing. Just an empty room.

"Are you okay?" Glory asked with a little frown as I returned to the operating room. "I'm pretty sure I couldn't see okay with a set of binoculars. But I'm ready to let you get to work," I said hoarsely as I tried not to look at the glass trays full of wet fleshy tissue.

"Do you have a memory orb you want to look at?" Glory asked as she turned towards the podium that controlled the surgical robot.

I carefully lifted the golden orb that had mysteriously appeared in the office safe. "Yeah. I guess so."

She frowned. "Without Lacunae, it should take an hour or two. So if you wake up in the middle, try to go back in." I hopped up onto the operating table. Oh, I really didn't want to be here. Lying here brought forth all kinds of memories of snip snip snip. In fact, I could see those little scissors on the end of a steel shaft.

"Okay... okay. Just... work quick." I bit my lip as I tapped the orb against my horn, trying to make the connection happen. "Come on... come on..." There was a tiny spark from my horn, and I looked over at the Dealer watching me coldly. Then the world spun away.

oooOOOooo

There was only one pony that felt like this. My chest burned and bubbled with every breath. My legs ached and my head throbbed. This body was utterly exhausted.

Yet Goldenblood walked across a plaza. Great black buildings loomed from every direction around us. The ponies scurrying around them seemed almost like afterthoughts. What had Hoofington looked like before it was burned to the ground? I couldn't imagine this as an improvement.

It was night, but lights on the black facades lit up everything in garish colors. Two other ponies flanked him, but he paid them no mind. Really, feeling like this, I expected him to be looking for some bed to curl up in. If I'd felt like he did, I'd want to sleep for a couple of years. He walked slowly ahead, weaving slightly on unsteady hooves. He kept his eyes low, save for occasional glances around him or over his shoulder. The cold, wet air felt good on his burning lungs.

"Mister Goldenblood...? Are you sure he'll be available at this hour?" one of the bucks following him asked.

"Ponies like him don't keep normal hours," Goldenblood replied. He looked up at the blue neon sign over the front door. 'Robronco.'

The three walked into the large foyer... and right into the sights of an immense Ultra-Sentinel. Its guns pointed right down at us as it boomed, "Prepare to be destroyed!" And then a buck's voice followed it up with, "That's the last thing our striped nemesis will hear when they face off against the Robronco Ultra-Sentinel! Robronco, putting technology to the test for a better and brighter tomorrow." More sentinel robots stood on podiums around the massive rainbow machine. Protec-taponies just stomped their hooves weakly on the fringes.

Clearly, Goldenblood wasn't a pony who startled easy. "That's a hell of a demonstration model," one of his escorts muttered.

Goldenblood pressed the elevator button with his horn before he asked exactly what I was thinking; "What makes you think it's for demonstrations?" He smiled just a little as the two bucks shuffled nervously behind him. In the polished steel doors, I saw the Ultra-Sentinel watching the three of us.

What indeed?

Going up, Sweetie Belle crooned a tune softly through a speaker. Goldenblood hummed along in his rusty way. The bucks following him coughed once the entire trip. Not exactly the friendliest bunch. Were they protecting him or guarding him?

The door chimed and opened wide, and I heard a mare say, "How about Neigh-ponese? I could really go with some Kung Pow Yeow Dum." Three mares trotted into view: an orange pegasus, a familiar-looking earth pony wearing a bow, and a

unicorn with a poofy lilac mane.

"Oooh! Or there's a Fancee restaurant down by the river!" squeaked the white unicorn mare. Funny, but I could have sworn I'd heard that voice before.

"I really should get back to Fillyadelphia. We're behind on almost a dozen stable inspections, and if I hear about one more delay in the Everfree, I'm gonna spit my bit," the crème earth pony drawled.

Then the three noticed Goldenblood and stopped short. The earth pony looked vaguely curious and the unicorn confused, but there was a deep loathing in the purple eyes of the pegasus. And there was fear, too. "Goldenblood," the pegasus murmured.

"Scootaloo," he replied in a rusty purr.

The earth pony blinked in surprise. "Oh, you're Director Goldenblood? Nice to meetcha." There was some hesitance on that last part. I could understand; Goldenblood was hardly a pony you applied 'nice' to easily. "Scoots tried to forward me the O.I.A. gobbledegook, but I'd rather design a tripod with two legs than understand all that fancy legalese."

"Quite understandable, Apple Bloom. Wise ponies let others handle those trivialities while they focus on getting important things done. I must commend you on Stable One. Very... impressive. I'm sure Canterlot's finest were quite taken with it."

"Well, now that Hoofington's not hoggin' all the good steel, we're getting the stables done lickity split." She gave a serious little smile. "I mean, not that Hoofington's not a nice city. Just... not exactly what I'd design."

"Yes, well. Certain considerations had to be taken into account. Still, Scootaloo's been able to work wonders with your financing. One has to wonder where she finds all the bits." Scootaloo wasn't taking her eyes off the scarred buck. "After all, Stable-Tec is a fully private company. If this were owned and controlled by the M.W.T., I might be able to understand where the money comes from."

"And Luna'd close us down," Apple Bloom said with a frown. "I swear, her majesty can get her feathers in a bunch when you start talkin' about the dangers of balefire bombs targeting cities."

"It would rather be like somepony suggesting selling hydraulic lifts on the possibility that your stables might collapse," Goldenblood rasped in his low, hissing whisper.

Apple Bloom frowned. "Are you suggestin' my stables aren't built up to snuff?"

"I don't know. Are you suggesting that Princess Luna will somehow fail to preserve Equestria from the zebra megaweapon threat?" Goldenblood countered.

"Reckon not," the red-maned mare muttered, then sighed. "Can't see the harm in taking a few precautions, though. Just in case."

"Yes. In this day and age, precautions are wise," Goldenblood murmured as he looked away.

"Speaking of precautions, Goldie. I've made sure there's a spot reserved for you in Stable One, right alongside their majesties," Scootaloo said with a little smirk. "You'll have your own room and everything."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," Goldenblood rasped. Then he turned his eyes to the unicorn and smiled. "Sweetie Belle. Please, let me say what an honor it is to meet you. I'm quite the fan of your songs."

The unicorn smiled back warmly. "Oh, why thank you," she said as she blinked in confusion. "But... ah... you're not what I expected at all. From the way Rarity and Scootaloo talk about you, I thought you were some kind of blood-drinking monster."

Goldenblood looked at the flushing pegasus for a moment. "Oh no, Miss Belle. I'm afraid I'm quite an ordinary monster." The three mares looked at each other with weak smiles, and he shook his head. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have business with the great and powerful Mr. Horse. Ladies." He gave a slight bow and walked down the hall.

"Well, he was nice... in a creepy, doesn't-ever-blink kind of way," Sweetie Belle said behind them.

"So, you wanted to get some Neighponese, Scoots?" Apple Bloom asked.

The pegasus grumbled, "I've lost my appetite." Then the elevator doors slid closed.

Goldenblood chuckled to himself as he entered an elaborate waiting room. Tiny ponies frolicked on the table, and only the faint clicking gave hints that they were robots. In the corner was a primitive protectapony with a placard reading 'Model #0.' Paintings of deserts and fanciful moons rising hung on the walls, magically enchanted to twinkle softly. A brown earth pony wearing a large, elaborate PipBuck trotted over to a little table where there were fresh apples, various berries, and a golden drink dispenser of some sort.

Clearly, Robronco wasn't hurting for bits either.

The receptionist behind the table was a pretty young thing about my age. After

assuring Goldenblood that Mr. Horse would be with him momentarily, she said into her headset, "No, I love you more. Mmmm... no... I love you more."

Ah, love.

Goldenblood just sat quietly, not glancing at the clock on the wall nor at his companions. He simply sat there. I was nearly crawling up the mental walls as he waited. Then Goldenblood started counting down from ten. "Three... two... one..."

The receptionist looked up. "Mister Horse is ready to see you now." He just rose and trotted around the desk and down the hall. "He's in room... um..." the mare called after him, but Goldenblood kept going without looking back. "Freak," muttered the mare, before going back to gushing, "No, not you! I love you more!"

Goldenblood seemed to know his way around well as he walked straight past several offices to a conference room. The yellow stallion waiting inside looked at Goldenblood with a cheeky grin. "Hey, it's moldy Goldie. How's it going?" he asked as he sat upright on the edge of the table, without the help of robotic legs. He slid a bowl of orange squares towards him. "Cheese squares?"

Goldenblood didn't say anything for a moment, and then he trotted around towards the brown-maned buck. "So, meeting with Stable-Tec go well?"

The yellow stallion shook his head with a suffering sigh. "Eh. It's not fair. I mean, throw a fat Stinkin' Rich at me, and I'll have him eating out of my hoof by the end of the meeting. But what am I supposed to do with three hotties like those? And Sweetie Belle! Sweet Celestia, it just ain't fair to bring flanks like hers to a business meeting."

"Well, I think it's a calculated move by Scootaloo to counteract your urge to digress on tech ideas with Apple Bloom by exploiting your penchant for lechery," Goldenblood replied. "Or she's planning on Rarity killing you when she finds out you're drooling over her little sister."

"You think?" Horse mused, scratching his chin. "Yeah. I could see that. A highly elaborate plot to make Rarity snap my head off... Scoots is clever like that." He sighed and shrugged. "Eh, well, if you gotta go, I can think of worse ways." He lifted the bowl and tapped the bottom, knocking three of the bite-sized chunks into the air, and twisted his head to catch them in his mouth. Chewing loudly, he looked at Goldenblood. "So, where have you been? I've been trying to touch hooves with you for months."

"Occupied," he said quietly.

"Yeah yeah. Super secret stuff," he snorted, rocking off the table. "So... I got it."

Goldenblood lifted a cheese square and popped it into his mouth. It tasted like bitter paste as he chewed slowly. "Show me what you've discovered."

The yellow buck grinned as he nodded his head and walked towards the wall. He reached out with a hoof to press against the beige padding, and then there was a click accompanied by the wall panel sliding up. "Really? Secret passages, Horse?" Goldenblood said with a sigh as he followed him inside.

"Hey, what's the point of designing an entire city and not having fun secret passages and the like?" He grinned as he led Goldenblood through some metal hallways. "It's come in handy a few times when the M.o.M.'s come to call."

"Pinkie Pie's targeted you?" Goldenblood asked with a frown.

"I'm a bad bad pony," Horse laughed. "Well, not me personally, as far as they know, but I do business with them so, by extension, I must be bad. But somehow, when the Pinks come to call, I'm always miraculously out of the office." He gave Goldenblood a wink, and I felt the scarred stallion actually smile. They trotted into a large lab space of some type with a number of tools laid out on a table. Robotic horses were arranged along the walls or hanging half-finished from hooks. Now Goldenblood was looking around... not simply at random, either. His head panned across the room as if he were scanning everything in sight.

"I see your work on the next generation of Protectaponies is coming along nicely. I'm glad to see you haven't given up on them in favor of bigger, better, and more expensive glorified tanks," Goldenblood said as he looked at a magical hologram of the city. The core of Hoofington was arranged in three vague circles stacked one atop the other and running north and south. The green bars representing buildings occasionally flickered and flashed.

"Hey, what can I say. Someday there'll be a big demand for robots that are more than killing machines. Apple Bloom got a kick out my microponies. Think I'll send her a holopony just for her to tinker with," he grinned.

"Helping a competitor?" I arched a brow.

"Pffft. Stable-Tec isn't a competitor. We both have visions of the future. Hippocampus... now they're competitors. 'More coal-fired plants, now.' Bleugh. They treat anything that doesn't involve burning rocks as a joke. A hoofful of dams and biomass plants, a few solar projects, and a bajillion coal plants." He snorted scornfully. "Once the Tokomare is working, Equestria won't need coal any more." He

rubbed his hooves together as he chuckled. “Ohhh, I can imagine their wailing and gnashing teeth when we get the system online and suddenly their entire business model becomes as obsolete as pony-pulled trains.”

Goldenblood nodded. “If you can get it to work.” He cocked a brow. “Is that why I’m here?”

“Maybe.” Horse grinned, then walked to the table. “Care to stroll with me down concept avenue?” He clapped his hooves together. “Sweetie Bot!”

A copy of the mare I’d met at the elevator strolled into the lab... only Sweetie Belle hadn’t been wearing a frilly black lace uniform. She floated a tray holding two mugs of steaming beverage beside her. Smiling demurely, she put the tray down and fluttered her eyes at the pair. Goldenblood covered his face with a hoof. “Really, Horse?”

“What? A guy has needs. And once I can convince Sweetie Belle to sign off on using her likeness... Whooo... these are going to sell like hotcakes!” The yellow buck nickered, raised the mug in his hooves and took a drink, leaving chocolaty foam dripping off his mustache. “I could get you one. I’m thinking of running a whole line based on the Ministry Mares, as well as some more generic versions.”

“I’d question the wisdom of that, long term,” Goldenblood muttered before taking a drink. The beverage tasted like rancid piss. He set the cup aside and focused on Horse.

“Okay! To business.” Horse sat upright on the table next to the tools, then picked up a rock that had been tied to a stick and held it between his hooves. “What is this and how does it work?”

Goldenblood looked at it flatly. “A hammer. You swing it.”

“More accurately, it’s a lever that multiplies the force applied to swinging it,” Horse said as he set down the primitive tool and picked up a ball peen hammer. “And this?”

“Same thing,” Goldenblood said, now with a tone suggesting that this had better be going somewhere.

“But, I think you’ll agree, more efficient, yes? Easier to swing. Smaller, but focuses more force with its smaller striking area. Better control than that?” He gestured to the rock on a stick, and Goldenblood nodded with a frown.

Horse set it down and picked up a small hammer. It was made of some kind of shiny

metal. "This is a titanium-magnesium alloy hammer." He gestured to the tapered head that came to a flat little striking surface. "Perfectly balanced to maximize the force applied. You can tap a needle into a plank or drive a ten penny nail through a two by four in two hits with it. I can bang robots all day." He snickered at Goldenblood. "After all, it's not the size that counts, but how you use it."

"I'm fairly sure that you didn't call me here to make innuendo about your hammer," Goldenblood replied with a larger hint of annoyance.

Horse chuckled. "Nope, my good sir. Not without a few mugs of cider in me, at least." He picked up the next tool in his mouth and tossed it to Goldenblood. It was a tiny crystalline hammer the size of my hoof. "That is a force talisman used by my horned assistants. It can apply up to ten kilomacs of force in an area ranging from a decimeter in diameter down to one millimeter."

"Why do you insist on using Fancee units?" he groaned. "What's wrong with the Equestrian Standard?"

"You tell me why we have twelve inches in a foot instead of thirteen and why there are sixteen ounces in a pound instead of fifteen and I'll get back to you on that," Horse replied. Goldenblood set the talisman down in the row. "You can see the pattern?" Horse asked as he gestured at the tools.

"Yes. Each one is more efficient than the last. More power, greater ease, less mass..." Goldenblood replied.

"Bingo. I love working with smart ponies," he laughed, then grinned as he tapped the empty table next to the talisman. "So, Goldenblood. What do you imagine belongs here?"

Goldenblood stared at the empty table, then looked at the grinning buck. "Whatever you're about to show me."

"Goldie, you know me too well," Horse chuckled as he reached under the table and lifted a tiny silver cube in his mouth. He set it on the table at the place where he'd gestured. "Ta-da."

"That's a hammer?"

"Indeedily it is," he said as he took out a spark battery and a weird device with light bulb thingies attached. "You know how this starmetal stuff only reacts to one specific frequency? Well, watch what it does when we apply just a little bit of magic power at that frequency, but modify the amplitude..." He turned a few knobs.

Goldenblood winced. "I hate that noise." Funny, I wasn't hearing anything at all.

Then there was a ping, and the quarter inch thick metal plate next to the cube indented. Then it indented again. Then again. And then it struck so hard it knocked out a perfectly round chunk of the quarter-inch steel. Horse grinned like a kid with a toy. "See? Hammer." Then he looked at the dials. "Or saw. Drill. Cutting torch. Really, it's a lot of hit and miss trying to find out the precise amplitude patterns to get the metal to react... but it does. Energy in, amplitude to decide what effect you want, and energy out."

"Interesting," Goldenblood breathed softly. "Most interesting. And how do you explain this phenomenon? Any theories about where it came from?"

"This metal isn't precisely a metal." He lifted it with a grin. "It's a solid state tool that can do whatever you want it to do, if you know how to interact with the stuff. We're just figuring that part out. As for where it came from... ancient zebrafkind might have somehow developed this level of wonder technology... but personally I doubt it. This kind of tech would have left some kind of record or something. Nope. I posit that it had to come from somewhere else." He grinned broadly. "Have you ever heard of the zebra myth of the Eater of the Stars?"

"Eater of Souls," Goldenblood corrected. "And yes, I have. As the myth goes—"

Horse chuckled as he started to juggle the ball peen hammer, the titanium hammer, and the little silver cube. "Yeah, yeah... Big nasty creatures from the stars... blah blah blah... death warning gloom and doom... blah blah blah... stars are bad, evil, wicked things... blah blah blah. Only I think that in at least one of those cases, what hit the ground wasn't just some rock from the heavens but a device from an unknown world. A device from a race thousands, no, millions of years more advanced than us."

"Corroboration?" Goldenblood asked. The yellow earth pony grinned immediately. Then he reached under the table and pulled out a strange sleek metal weapon. I wondered if the tingling mane sensation was mine or his. "A star blaster! How on Equestria did you get your hooves on a star blaster? I couldn't get Luna or Rainbow Dash to turn one over to me! The one used for Starfall has been under the M.o.A.'s strict control."

"I know a pony who knows a pony..." Horse said, rubbing his nose. "You'll note the similarities in the metal. The way they both feel... of course, the star blaster is a lot more primitive in function. Pull the trigger and watch it go. But the similarities are astounding. The starmetal seems to be able to create magical fields of power

and then use magic and natural energy to do... whatever it does." He tapped the weapon. "Clearly, both of these devices are non-terrestrial in origin. The zebra myth just explains the impact of the original device."

"It may explain more than that," Goldenblood frowned as he rose. "Well. Clearly this was quite a breakthrough. You have my thanks."

"Thanks? Goldie goldie goldie... Thanks is nice... really. You're a great pony to get thanks from. But as much as I love thanks... and I do... I really do... I need something more... substantial. I mean, I invested a great deal of personal time, effort, and resources into this silvery beauty. I can't do little off-the-books side projects if there's not going to be at least a cookie out of it for me."

"You want money?"

"Money. Pbbbbbt! You sound like those Hippocratic jerkoffs. Fuck money. I have money. I have all the toys the money can buy. I have a Sweetie Bot! I have a piece of very very naughty weaponry from the stars. Money's nice, but I really don't care about it. Nope." He grinned. "What I want is what you want. I want a backstage pass to the concert. I want to play the game and see just how well I can play it. I want you to deal me in."

Goldenblood smiled slowly. "I'll see what I can do."

"Ooooh," Horse shivered. "I can just imagine what you can do." Then he grinned. "Oh. And don't worry. If some nasty zebra baddie whacks me, or something major happens to me, like I fall down an elevator shaft, I've made sure all my findings go straight to the Ministries." His grin widened even more as Goldenblood stared at him. Horse trotted over and tapped some keys on a terminal. A grainy video appeared showing Goldenblood slowly backing a pony towards the shaft. The railing swung wide, and the mare staggered over the edge as Goldenblood stood there. A moment later, her hooves disappeared. "Really? An elevator shaft? What... were you struck by the urge to become a Daring Do villain?"

Goldenblood stared at him for almost a minute. Finally, the scarred pony smiled. "Like I said, I'll see what I can do."

Suddenly, Sweetie Bot perked up. "Oh great and wonderful master, the stallions accompanying Director Goldenblood have received an urgent message for him. They are quite insistent."

Horse frowned and pushed a button, showing the foyer and the two bucks yelling at the flustered receptionist. "Huh... looks like you are the stud in demand, Goldie."

Together they trotted out, Goldenblood giving the star blaster a wistful look as they left the hidden lab and emerged in the conference room. Quickly, Goldenblood headed in the direction of the shouting. A yellow stallion held his earbloom and nodded his head as the brown buck traded glares with the receptionist. As they spotted the director, the two sat up. "Sir, there's been an incident in Manehattan. Applejack is dead." The receptionist gasped. Goldenblood looked at her, there was a flare from his horn, and she suddenly went glassy eyed and slumped out of sight behind the desk.

"What?" Horse gasped. "That is... oh... so not cool..." Goldenblood stared at him, and for a moment I was certain he was next.

"Stop standing there and get that confirmed," Goldenblood snapped at the brown buck. Then he looked at the yellow escort. "Luna's been informed?"

The stallion nodded. "She's asking for a temporary replacement until Applejack's status is confirmed."

"There is no replacement for Applejack! I need all six of them," Goldenblood said sharply... then he turned and looked back at the stunned stallion. He seemed to be making a decision. "You want in on the game, Horse?"

"I... wha... me? Ministry Mare... er... Stallion?" he stammered.

"On a temporary basis. If Applejack really is dead, then there will have to be... adjustments," he said as he looked away.

Horse just grinned. "Alright, Goldie. You got yourself a deal."

Goldenblood looked back at Horse. "Oh, I certainly did. And if you're so keen on playing, Horse, I'd clean out your records when you get back." He turned for the doors and snapped at the yellow escort, "I need a skywagon. Now. We need to get in place before news gets out. The ministries are going to be shaken and the O.I.A. needs to be ready. Come on, Horse. We're going to Canterlot."

"Cool," Horse grinned as they stepped into the elevator together. "Hope Applejack is okay, though. She is one cool mare."

"You better hope so as well. If she really is dead, I'll have to find out who is responsible and remove them just to be safe. Odds are I'll have to include you as well," he said grimly. Horse's smile disappeared. The world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory feeling all... oogly. A Goldenblood memory, planted in a

safe where I would probably come across it. And if I hadn't, odds were that one of my friends would. I lay there on the bed, trying to ignore the burny, itchy sensation on my face. It made me feel like I had radroaches wiggling under my skin. I felt the pull of gauze and listened to the beeping of the monitors.

Dealer freaks out just as I find it and tells me to stop and quit, as if that were even an option anymore. Horse talks about the starmetal as some sort of uber technology from aliens or something. I didn't believe in coincidence anymore. Somepony had wanted me to see that. Dealer hadn't. How had he known... Really, how did Dealer know anything? The golden color of the memory orb, maybe? Maybe.

Unfortunately, since I couldn't buck the dealer while lying all woogly on a bed, I did my best to look around. Funny, my E.F.S. was doing freaky things. There were scrolling lines of data, as if it was doing the technopokie. I wished, yet again, that I had Midnight nearby to explain just what my PipBuck was doing. It flashed through the data. Then a prompt appeared.

>EC-1101 navigational data updated.

>Next waypoint: Hightower Transmitter: Hoofington.

I'd been put in a hospital bed; one with musty smelling sheets. Next to the bed was a table loaded with heavy books. 'Equestian Legal Statutes', 'History of the Law', and a dozen files were stacked there them. This had to have been Chief Justice Fairheart's room. I glanced around and spotted a security camera in the corner of the room, up against the ceiling.

Had EC-1101 found the camera, checked the footage, and determined he was dead? Could it do that? Had Dealer been involved? I groaned and clenched my eyes shut. "Too many fucking questions!" I snarled into my pillow.

I leaned over and levitated the top file, wondering what the Chief Justice of Equestria was up to right before the bombs made everything moot. My eyes scanned the front page, and then I looked at the title.

Legal review for the removal of the Ministry Mares from power for crimes against Equestria.

What... the... fuck...

I couldn't understand more than the basics. It might have been talking about law, or it might have been giving me directions on PipBuck applications. The core of the report seemed to be listing crimes the Ministry Mares had committed in the last ten years in the name of ending the war and the prosecution of these crimes when

the war was concluded. I looked at the second file: articles of treason brought up against Goldenblood. The third one was investigating the legal option of forcing Luna from the throne and restoring Celestia to power. There was a file asking the question of whether the power and authority of the princesses ought to be absolute. The potential legality of pegasus secession. Accusations of cronyism and nepotism against Applejack. Abuses of power against Twilight Sparkle. The charges against Pinkie Pie were practically a book!

If the bombs hadn't fallen... if Equestria had won the war... what would have happened afterwards? Would Luna have remained in power? Would the Ministry Mares? I thought of the things Twilight had done... Fluttershy... Rarity... would I have wanted them punished for what they did to win the war?

As much as I hated myself thinking it... yes. At least out on their rumps... but I'd want a whole slew of them punished as well. Yes, they were at war, but some of the things that had been done were simply evil.

Twenty years of war... over... but peace? That was a long ways off.

Glory probably wanted me to stay in bed, but honestly I didn't hurt enough for that. I slipped out and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't touch my face; that would probably take the longest to heal. Instead, I used my horn to magically peel away the gauze from my neck where I could get a good view. The hide beneath was... well... white. It had a strange diamond pattern dotted all across it, and I could see the red mark where it bonded with my dingy hide.

"How are you feeling?" Lacunae asked from the doorway. She looked at my shoulder and sighed. "Blackjack. Glory didn't wrap you up in gauze simply for the fun of it."

"It itches," I said, reaching up to scratch it. A glow around my hoof halted me. Okay. I was the big bad Security pony. I could handle a little itching. "Listen, Lacunae. About what I said..."

"You didn't say anything that wasn't the truth," she replied calmly. "Twilight Sparkle has had two centuries to think about her mistakes. To dwell on them, in fact. Many of the memories in me come from her regret. The sad fact is... as good a pony as she was... she was not perfect. As good as her intentions were, they did not always have the results she intended. She did things that were wrong because she believed that, in the big picture, they would be vindicated."

"The ends justify the means?" I asked, looking at the folders.

"There was a war to win," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Sorry..."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I'm nopony to judge, Lacunae. Even if I do... I shouldn't." I'd felt that urge to win at any cost. Even if it was wrong, it was something I couldn't escape. "If the Goddess is listening to you... tell Twilight that I'm sorry."

"Discord was still a mistake," Lacunae said firmly, but then looked away. "But you are right. He should not have been used like that, or left in that condition. We should have done better, but we wanted to give Luna her war-winning potion so terribly badly."

"Is Glory with Scotch and P-21?" I asked, trying to scratch at the gauze. She smacked my hoof away with her own.

"She is. She feels it best not to leave him alone after what he did."

I sighed. "He's got problems. Big problems. But that's okay. We can keep an eye out and help him work through them." I looked at the big alicorn. "And he's not the only one. Did Glory tell you about her dreaming she's Rainbow Dash?"

"Yes. She was quite distraught. Given her appearance, it was understandable," Lacunae replied. "Don't worry about it."

"Hello. Have you seen our group? The only pony I don't worry about is... Boo. I don't worry about Boo." Then I blinked. "Wait, yes, I do. Do you really think she doesn't have a soul? That's she's just a pony animal?"

"I don't know. The evidence is against it, and Twilight never had the opportunity to explore the potential of the blanks any further. In the Chimera files, some blanks were observed for more than a year and never manifested personality or cutie marks. They could be trained to respond to stimuli, but were never more than that. The results confirmed what we wanted to believe; Blanks were a perfect source for needed organs. Otherwise, Scotch's life and your vanity were purchased at the cost of innocent lives."

Okay... that was enough thinking about that. I turned off the monitor... actually, I mashed buttons till it stopped beeping. "What about Glory? Do you think... she isn't really turning into Rainbow Dash, is she?" Speaking of her, I really wanted to check in on Scotch... and scratch. I really really wanted to scratch. And find out where Rampage had gotten to. And figure out how to get to Hightower from here. And... how to treat Med-X addiction.

"I suspect not," Lacunae replied as we walked out into the hall. When I looked at her in confusion, she elaborated. "Her behavior hasn't really changed, and while she may have been dreamed about being Rainbow Dash... her Sonic Rainboom was

well established and is probably well known in pegasus history. If she begins having memories of private things... inconsequential things... that would be a time to worry."

"So then, am I being possessed by a mysterious unicorn in black who's been invading my dreams?" I asked with a cheeky grin. Lacunae just looked at me sadly, and my grin slackened a little. Okay. Not something to joke about anymore.

We came around a corner and spotted Glory slumped against the wall, wearing a blood-splattered doctor's coat. Inside, Scotch lay in a bed almost identical to the one I'd awoken in. Boo was curled up at the foot. P-21 just sat there with that empty, forsaken look. I looked at the bandages wrapped around her eyes, the machine beeping softly. I knelt beside Glory, but she just gave a little snore and curled up.

I smiled and brushed her pretty prismatic mane. A bit short for my taste, but nice. "Can you find her a bed? Then maybe find out where Rampage got to?" I whispered as I looked up at Lacunae. She nodded once, and a glow lifted Glory into the air. Cradling her in her magic, Lacunae walked across the hall to a separate hospital bed. I sighed as I smiled, thankful for the kind, quiet, meek alicorn's assistance, then walked in and over.

"Hey..." I murmured softly as I tapped his shoulder. He didn't move.

"I should have told her," he said quietly.

Yes. You should have. "Tell her now."

"It doesn't matter now," he replied softly, reaching up to stroke her blue mane. Just like her daddy's. "I thought... when I saw her in the pod... if I just touched her... maybe I'd be able to say it. Instead, I killed her."

"Her heart is still beating," I said just as delicately, as if the volume of my voice might finish her off. "It still matters. And in case you missed the chain of events, I'm the one who let her come. I'm the one who got her killed." Call me greedy, but I'd take the blame and damnation on this one. I'd hoped it would give him peace, but instead he gave a low choking sob. "Tell her. Before she goes into the everafter."

"I don't know how any more."

"Do it however you can," I said as I stroked his tangled blue mane. Then I patted his shoulder and stepped back. "Come on, Boo. Let's give them some space." The pale mare sat up, blinked, looked flatly at me, and lowered her head again. "Snack cake..." I said as I reached... okay, nevermind. Where'd Glory put my gear? Back in the operating room.

"She's fine here," P-21 said hoarsely. "Thank you, Blackjack."

I smiled sadly and patted his shoulder one more time, then stepped out. As I started to close the door, I heard him take a deep breath. Maybe it was rude of me and wrong of me, but I didn't shut the door all the way and didn't leave. "I'm sorry. I know I don't have any right to talk to you like this. I know... I know that you knew. I'm your father... Goddesses know I don't deserve to be. I didn't deserve your mother's kindness; I was petty enough to resent it, actually. I never wanted to think of my time in 99 as having any consequence or meaning. That it was all horrible. That it was all better left behind and destroyed."

He sighed quietly. "But that's not true. There were good things. Things I never appreciated. Things worthwhile and... and good. There was good in 99. Your mother... was good. And so were you. Blackjack. Probably lots of mares. It was always easier just to pretend like you were all Overmares. But it was a lie... and it hurts to keep lying to myself that it was otherwise."

"Then you joined us and... and you were such a good girl. Braver than I was when I came outside. You followed us all over the place... even into places no filly was meant to go. And when BJ told you who I was... I couldn't face it. Not because you were a lousy daughter, but because I didn't deserve to be your father. I'm a coward, Scotch Tape. And you deserved better than a worthless pony like me."

I sniffed as I poked my head in and saw him standing beside the bed, stroking her mane. Then he began to sing in soft, low tones.

Together forever...

With each other...

That is the way... I think it should be...

One.. with another...

A friend... just like a daughter...

That is the way... I think it should be...

I looked behind me as a sleepy and confused Glory approached, rubbing her tired eyes. I lifted a hoof to my lips, and she looked past me as her eyes widened.

And if along the way, we find ourselves apart

Know that it's not so... you're here in my heart...

And if as time passes, you find yourself alone and scared...

Remember my feelings and memories of home....

A place called home...

Any home...

His voice quavered and failed. I swallowed hard then stepped in. I couldn't sing... not really... but I could try for him.

Together... forever...

With each other...

That is the way... I hope it will be...

One... with another....

A friend... just like a brother...

That is the way... I think it should be...

He looked me, tears shimmering and threatening to spill as his eyes met mine. Somehow, our words aligned as we felt the same things and put them together. Behind me I heard Lacunae approaching with Psychoshy and an adolescent Rampage. If that yellow featherbrain so much as snickered, I'd buck her into next week.

And if along the way we come across some troubles

I know I'll be able to face them with you beside me

And if as time passes, you find life painful and hard

Remember my friendship and know that I'm here with you.

Right beside you...

Always with you...

We looked down at her still form and sang the phrase over and over again, Glory and Lacunae joining in; even Rampage. *Together Forever... With Each Other...* as our voices grew softer and softer. And then silence save for the slow beeping of the monitor.

Then I saw a tear creeping down Scotch's cheek. P-21 stared as tears of his own flowed freely. Slowly he reached out with a hoof and wiped it away. The little filly sniffed and whispered softly, "Daddy..."

With a sob he leaned over her and held her carefully in his hooves as he began to shake. The green filly pressed her face to his neck, crying beneath the bandages

as she hugged him back. I sniffed, feeling tears spilling down my cheeks and feeling like a pony... a whole and intact pony for the first time in a very long time. And since there wasn't any more room to hug Scotch, I hugged Glory and the very perplexed looking Boo instead.

I looked at Psychoshy, expecting disdain and disgust. Instead, there were tears in her eyes too, and I was shocked to see Rampage embrace her fellow Reaper.

Together forever... with each other...

Maximum level reached!

41. Paths

“Biting off more than you can chew is just what I’m afraid of.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What future?” Psychoshy muttered. The early morning air was oddly hot and still; it made me feel as if the skies were holding their breath. It felt like rain, but the road

east was nearly dry and the skies pressed down upon us as we walked. For once, I wanted the rain to fall; my mane crept of its own accord, giving the sensation of something bad happening.

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

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

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

"And what did..." I began before I saw Psychoshy's glower. "Ah. Sanguine."

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

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

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

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

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

Rampage chuckled. "Weird pony folk. Always been a twigged bunch. They were crazy even before the war. Lived in the eastern mountains, were way too friendly

with goats and sheep, and couldn't care less what Celestia wanted. Nasty in combat, though. Zebras learned that the hard way. Some fighters think it's clever to go after an enemy's crotch in a fight. Highlanders think it's a hoot and will pound each other all day." She snickered softly. "They're the only ponies I know that either were happy the bombs fell or still haven't noticed."

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

"So who won?" I asked with a grin.

"Nopony," Rampage snickered. "The star spawn in Black Pony Mountain came and ate Reaper and Highlander alike. Technically it was a draw. Still, White Lightning called Big Daddy the toughest damn son of a mule that ever walked the Wasteland. That's high praise, coming from her. And the Highlanders have a spot in the Arena and fought the Rangers, so I guess they're a part of the Reapers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

getting my ass blown off? Why why why?" she moaned.

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

"I could take her," Psychoshy muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the fuck? "Rampage! What the... he's my friend!" I gasped. Were my friends

seriously planning to kill each other behind my back?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psychoshy flew sideways in front of me. "Uh... why are we running? I mean, even

four to one we should be able to mop the floor with them. We can even make a game of it."

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

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

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

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

There was a beep, and I peeked at it.

>Access granted.

Huh. That was easy.

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

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

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

The pale pony gave a caroty-filling-scented belch and then smiled at me. "I'll take

that as a no," I said with a grin as I rubbed her ears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

been that bad... okay, maybe it had. But still, it was better than just taking whatever you wanted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inside the broadcast room was the familiar layout of terminals and monitors. On

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

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

In the middle of the floor, in front of the controls, was something that didn't belong here... a terminal like the ones I'd seen Lighthooves using. This terminal, though, bore a slightly different logo. I reached out a hoof and watched as it melted around my limb. I swept my hoof back and forth several times, and each time it just pulled back to its original form.

"Woah," Rampage gasped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The studio lit up, and for a moment I thought it was empty. There was the micro-

phone... the controls... but no Homage. Well, it wasn't like she was there all the time, right? I didn't know of any way I could leave a message... maybe I could write a note and tape it to the wall? Write it on a billboard? Something...

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

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

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

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

I took a deep breath, remembering the serious little unicorn with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Please, don't be dead, LittlePip. "What happened to LittlePip, Homage?"

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

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

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

She touched some keys, and one of the screens next to me swapped from clouds to a huge segment of rusty suspension bridge still hanging from its tower in the middle of a river. The camera zoomed in, and I immediately saw LittlePip in her thrashed utility bardings; wow, she really needed a replacement. There was Calamity and

Velvet... I thought I saw another, but I couldn't be sure from this distance. There were a number of ponies pointing a lot of firepower at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then there was LittlePip in the window facing the other three. I hadn't known LittlePip long or well. She was a good pony. Serious, but true to making the Wasteland a better place. The LittlePip I saw now was not that mare. Fury was etched in every line of her face. She gazed at the three with a look of profound rage that made me watch in horror. The unicorn mare at the table tried to magically fling a knife...

a knife... at LittlePip. Then all three were smashed against the wall by the little mare's incredible telekinesis.

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

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

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

I just watched. No... no no no... she turned and walked out. One of the mares... the younger... still writhed for several seconds, trying to put herself out as the fire spread. Eventually, she too went limp. Then LittlePip left. In the street was a pony... a merchant or something from the look of his gear. She assaulted him, her mouth screaming something. Then he immediately swayed and started vomiting.

And then LittlePip went on a slaughter.

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

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

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

"I don't... I don't think I want to know. I can't tell people what she just did. I can't," Homage said as she shook her head. "I don't want to know the truth. I don't want to imagine a chance that she... Blackjack, she killed everypony! It was just a village.

It'd been there forever, never bothering anypony."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know. Red Eye, or just high-aiming scavengers, I suppose," Homage said,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I fiddled with the button, trying to unstick it. I only caught the very end of the broad-

cast. “Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts,” DJ Pon3 rasped out. I supposed I could have stopped her then and asked what she meant before she got cut off, but she had things to do and so did I.

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

Like... shopping.

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

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

“Desperation. Mother of atrocity,” Rampage remarked.

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

Boo was nearly grafted to my side. Clearly, crowds and her were not a good mix. I’d put another bag over her head and tied the straps to my bardings. I may have gotten a few odd looks, but other ponies had more pressing issues. “Really... I’m astonished they let you in here.”

Then a mottled green mare launched herself out of the crowd to tackle Psychoshy.

The pegasus nimbly flipped backwards in the air, but the green mare clung to her tenaciously. “Murderer!” bellowed Keystone. The shoppers in our immediate area backed away, but immediately there were bets being placed.

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

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

So Bottlecap shot them.

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you saying she’s with you?”

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

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

“But... you mean I got to pay?” Psychoshy scoffed. “Reapers don’t pay.” The sudden cocking of several automatic shotguns gave a pretty convincing counter argument.

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

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

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

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

“Harbingers?” I said with a frown.

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

“I’m just shopping. Was thinking of picking up a few value packs of Mint-als and Med-X. Is there a sale going on?” she asked with a smile. Bottlecap looked at her

a little bit longer, then nodded her head in the direction of the clinic. The young Reaper saluted and trotted away with an angry, confused Psychoshy.

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

“Probably not,” I replied.

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

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

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

“But they’re just... desperate ponies, right?” I asked with a nervous glance at the door.

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

Yick, I sure didn’t like that possibility. “How many? Do they have a leader?”

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

“Doesn’t matter. It doesn’t work without a Ministry Mare’s descendant.” But I frowned.

They weren't looking for one of those, so... did that mean that they already had somepony related to the Ministry Mares?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've met him," I said absently, looking at the map as I rubbed my right temple. My head was running slipshod through memories of that night, my meeting with Usury, and where I needed to go next. "Well, I'll think about it; I have no problem helping the Finders so long as you ban that whole slavery thing." My eyes danced over the east side of the map, drawn more and more to one section. Why was it so hard to focus? My eyes finally locked on a green X north of Paradise marked 'Meatlocker.' It was drawn over a square labeled 'Hoofington General Hospital.' And just north of that? 'Hightower Jail.' "What do you know about this place?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rainbow Dash?" she asked flatly, as if wondering whether I'd completely lost it. It

was fair to say I was rather close to listening to the Dealer, tossing EC-1101 into the river, and trotting out west to help LittlePip or the Stable Dweller.

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

"I should probably get back to the floor. I just wanted to warn you... um... good luck," Bottlecap said with a forced smile, then turned and trotted rapidly from the office. I groaned and buried my face in my crossed hooves on the desk. Again... I was going to have to break into an armored building of death... again... just to find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go.

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

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

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

Ugh... saving the world was hard.

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

bought the best armor I could find: some old combat armor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She flew sideways, keeping pace with me. "That's it? That's your reason for trotting all over the place? You're just going where the program is telling you to go? That's crazy! You're crazy! Has it occurred to you that the program is trying to get you

killed?" she asked, then pointed at Rampage. "And you're actually helping her with this, Rampage?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We were dead if we stayed here. The two teams of four were advancing slowly and carefully, firing wild sprays of automatic rifle fire, the kind of fire of somepony not shy

about sharing five millimeter ammunition. Rampage was a decent decoy, but even she couldn't protect us against that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked at her. "Are you telling me you're going to let somepony else kill me while you just hover there?" The yellow pegasus frowned as she thought about that, and

I turned and clambered up into the steam shovel cabin. I looked down at Boo and tried to give her a comforting smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I pointed the pair of revolvers far more accurately; I didn't even need S.A.T.S. Duty boomed and tore off the left side of his face. He fell to the ground, screaming. I

felt a twinge beneath my bandages. A second later, Sacrifice punched through his bardings and into his chest, silencing him.

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

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

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

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

Then a glowing grenade was tossed around the corner and into the cab. I tried to throw it out the east door as I ignominiously flopped out the west. My magic wasn't able to manage two pistols and the grenade while I spilled out, though, and since I hadn't turned into an alicorn in the last few minutes, gravity had me land square on my head as the grenade went off. I sat up and then flipped over as I tried to pull myself to my hooves.

The flop saved my head, again. Another sizzling incendiary round fizzled against the side of the cab as I struggled to my hooves. I saw two crumpled mares where Rampage had been hard at work, but as I swayed on my hooves, another pony came racing around the corner, carbines blasting. Between the mare in front of me, guns chewing into my armor as her horn levitated another grenade off her

bandoleer, and the AM rifle sniper blasting chunks out of the floor of the gravel pit around me, it wasn't looking pretty. I spotted Rampage far over on the south lip of the pit, smashing a Seeker. Psychoshy hovered over to the west, then divebombed into the trees.

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

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

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

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

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

I was sick of being a good pony.

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

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

The grenade went off next to her face, and she went down in a heap. I stared at her, moving slowly as I looked at the bloody mound. I glanced around, but couldn't

see any more red bars. I lifted the twin revolvers, shook out the spent casings, and reloaded them. I really hoped Psychoshy had taken out all the snipers and that one wasn't lining up a headshot on me as I walked towards the mare. The left side of her face was ground meat, and she gasped for breath as she looked up at me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Slowly, her eye relaxed. The tiny curl in the corner of her mouth remained. My

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After laying her on top, I backed away and floated two grenades over the rock face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blackjack, is everything all right with you and your friends?" he asked calmly as Archie started opening his mouth to speak. The nerdy buck looked sullenly at the handsome stallion. The Eggheads were restocking their supplies and setting up new beam turrets, and I was glad to see that they were going to try and use this place for healing rather than strip it bare. Of course, if they'd restocked it sooner, it

might have saved me a trip to Megamart. From the many strange and sickly ponies hanging around it was clear that there was need. And anything that took recruitment from the Harbingers was good news to me.

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

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

“Didn’t he say ‘no self respecting king rules from a fridge’ or something to that effect?” Archibald asked as he adjusted his glasses.

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

“I believe he also included the words ‘you featherbrained nincompoop’ ” Archibald said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Archibald nodded. "And this facility will someday be vital if the Collegiate is ever able to produce Steelpony implants in sufficient quantity. If we can, then both the Collegiate and the Society will profit from sales. The surgical robot is likewise quite priceless." He put the strange little beaded frame back... wait, where had he put it? Was this some kind of freaky egghead magic or something?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The yellow earth pony inside the bathroom jumped to her hooves and spun around to face me. Her orange mane was a bit straggly, but not really messy. She looked like a pony not long out in the Wasteland. She wore bulky, reinforced leather armor and a respirator, and a camera hung around her neck. She cupped a leather bag

in her hooves. "Don't shoot!" she shouted in a drawling accent as she raised her hooves defensively.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, yeah." I really did not want to introduce anypony to Glory in her current state. "We found her in a hidden pod in the back, but she took off for the clouds. Woosh! She sure can fly." I grinned at the nonplussed mare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blackjack," I replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

in a vain effort to free herself of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I like your face," she replied, and the tired pegasus reached out with her hooves to hold me. Rainbow Dash's lips might not have been quite like Glory's, but at this moment I couldn't care less. Glory's wings popped up behind her; that was new. Was that a Rainbow Dash thing? Finally, she broke the kiss and started to peel off

the rest of my bandages. “Besides, I can’t even take most of the credit. You’ve got a regeneration talisman. All I had to do was replace the missing tissue, and it did the rest.”

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

“Regeneration, not super freaky come-back-from-a-pile-of-mulch regeneration,” Psychohy snorted.

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

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

“I love you too,” she replied, landing beside me, and we shared a second round of smooches. Psychohy made a retching noise as Scotch gave an ‘awww’ of delight.

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

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

“That’s just a postoperative infection. You’ll get over it soon,” Glory said with an unvocalized ‘I hope’ that hung in the air. Then the blue mare gave another yawn and slumped against me. “I haven’t been this tired since allnighters at school.”

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

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

“Sadly, that is quite outside my range,” Lacunae replied.

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

“Why not?” Glory asked, and I pulled away to look at her for some sign that she was

joking. Instead, her eyes were firm, compassionate, and serious. “Are we being chased by somepony at the moment, or need to chase down somepony before they get away?”

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

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

“Why not just stay here?” Rampage asked in confusion.

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

P-21 looked into my eyes as he said, “It’s only a week, Blackjack.”

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

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

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

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

I saw how ragged everypony looked. Even Psychoshy drooped from her recent

experiences. Only Rampage smiled at me and shrugged, ready to fight on. Glory smiled as she moved in front of me and gave a worn smile. “Even I could do with a few days recuperation,” the blue pegasus said softly as she walked up to hug me. “And I think you could too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shit! Just when things were getting good,” Psychoshy said as she put her fore-hooves on her hips. “I was so sure that she was going to snap just then.”

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

The sudden silence was overwhelming. Suddenly I wanted to run. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get to Hightower. I couldn’t stop. Stopping would kill me! Glory slowly walked forward and I backed up till my rump hit the pod behind me. I

sat down and leaned back, trying to will myself to move away. "Blackjack..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's nothing. Nothing," I said as I sat. "Rampage... do you ever need to sleep?"

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

"You do?" I blinked in surprise.

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

"Really? What happened?"

"No idea, but for a while twenty or so years ago, there was an myth about the Bloody Beast of Hoofington that went around slaughtering all kinds of creatures before it mysteriously vanished," she said as she shuffled nervously. "Understand, that was

before I ran into Priest. But yeah, even I occasionally need to calm down and let my thoughts straighten themselves out.”

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

“I just do. I cut out the Mint-als for a few hours. I close my eyes and try and push everything away and imagine a big, tangled knot. Then I slowly unravel it. Eventually, my brain just kicks over.” She sighed and rubbed her mane. “It’s a little bit scary. Sometimes, I have dreams that make no sense... and sometimes I’m scared that when I wake up, I won’t be... me. But the alternative is a bloody beast.” She smiled and shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cyberdemon of Hoofington.

Didn’t matter. Wasn’t sleepy. Had to go. Had to go now. I was halfway down the hall before the thought slammed through: couldn’t go. Couldn’t do that to Glory. Not

again. I trotted back between the rooms. Couldn't stay. Couldn't go. Couldn't sleep. There was only one thing to do.

Check and see if the bar was open.

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

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

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

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

A purple hoof crushed the paper cup.

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

What the fuck is wrong with me?

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

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

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

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

"Unconsciousness isn't sleep, Blackjack," Lacunae said quietly in my ear as she

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was midday when everypony finally started moving out. Glory had all the chems she needed to treat Scotch and P-21. Rampage and Psychoshy were talking about what they'd have to do to keep everypony safe... well, Rampage was talking about that. Psychoshy was talking about looking forward to smashing more ponies. Scotch and P-21 rode Lacunae, who carried them both without too much effort or complaint.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We split up," I said softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For what?" I asked. For the Goddess being a tool? For not being able to help the craziest pony in Equestria? But she just smiled sadly and shook her head.

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

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

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

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

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

Footnote: Maximum level reached!

42. Reaper

“Twenty stalks? Bean or celery?”

The life of a caravaner must be one not that different from that of a security mare: long periods of boredom, tedious but preferred, punctuated by moments of intense excitement that you'd really rather didn't happen. They probably had experienced eyes used to picking out all sorts of threats and had seen more in their travels than I could imagine. Nevertheless, I had a hunch that the image of me tearing down the road straight at them was something of an alarming situation. They shouted and raised guns in hasty brandishing before I leapt and sailed right over one of their pack brahmin.

“Woah,” muttered one head.

“Dude,” agreed the other.

I landed, slid to a halt, and spotted the one who was in charge. At least, I thought he was in charge. He had the hat of a pony in charge. I darted right up to him as he backed away into the side of the brahmin. I grinned nice and friendly and friendly and nice. “Hi! Are you the pony in charge, ‘cause I need to buy some gems. Yes sirree, any and all gems you have on your person. And cans of Cram! Yes sir, I crave me some Cram. Come on, you are a trader, right? I need to trade. I need to trade right now now now!”

“Get off me you mule-brained idjit!” the pony in the fancy ‘I’m in charge’ hat said as he shoved me away. The blue earth pony buck snorted, “What is wrong with you, racing up like that? You’re lucky we didn’t plug you full of holes!” I’d reached the interchange between the Manhattan Highway and the Sunset Highway, standing on the overpass. To the west, I could barely make out a lot of black dots.

That was funny! Very funny, and I laughed to show just how funny it was. “Holes? Holes! Ha ha ha!” I laughed as I turned to the side to show where a few lucky armor piercing AM rounds had caught me since I’d started my run. He gaped at the punctures punching straight through my metal hindlegs. I hadn’t realized there’d been almost twenty Seekers set to raid the hospital until I’d darted through their lines. Now I had twenty unhappy and very-well-armed ponies after me. “Oh I’m so holey, I’m the saint of the Wasteland. You bet. Now!” I bucked two suits of combat armor off the bundle on my back. “I will trade you these for every last gemstone,

can of Cram, and bit of scrap metal you there, my good sir.”

He looked at me warily and took a step back. Come on, the joke wasn’t that bad!

“Woah, Boss, that is some good surplus gear,” one of the ponies said as she trotted up.

“Cram. Gems. Scrap metal. Chop chop,” I said, smacking one hoof against the other. Then I grinned. “Oh, and you might want to hurry. I know I do! I got a whole mob of very-well-armed ponies after me.”

It didn’t take long after that for me to clean him out of a dozen hunks of scrap metal, a small collection of mismatched gemstones, and eight cans of Cram. He also threw in a heap of caps that didn’t begin to cover the value of those two suits, but that didn’t matter. I chowed down on the metal and the cans right in front of them, and the whole caravan started talking about how it’d be smart to get moving south towards Megamart... immediately.

“If we run into a... ah... mob... anytime soon, I’ll be sure to send them towards Withers. Maybe the Boneyard ghouls can eat them,” the blue stallion said as he packed away the armor. Certainly a major score for him. Then he saw me frantically ingesting the can without even eating the contents first, and from the worried look on his face, I was fairly sure he wasn’t going to be telling anypony about this meeting, period. Who’d believe him?

I chewed up the metal and meat stuff all at once and popped in a ruby for good measure as I turned and trotted away, leaving the stunned caravan pony to process what he’d just seen. Now that I’d led the Harbingers well away from the medical center, I could take it a little easier. They’d have to find out which way I went from the overpass, so I cantered to the east at a fair clip rather than an all-out gallop, worrying less about the ponies behind me and more about what might be in front of me.

Case in point, a painted warning on the side of a wagon that read ‘Danger: Raiders’ as I approached a recharging station. Yet there wasn’t a single red bar to be seen. Two zebras in ragged shawls picking through a garbage can looked up nervously at me as I trotted by. I smiled at them, but they quickly trotted out of sight behind the building. Hmm... zebras are strange. What’s wrong with a friendly grin?

I knew from the maps of Hoofington I’d seen that the Sunset Highway went from the Princess bridge in the far south all the way around the city to the Zenith bridge in the north and then turned into the Sunrise Highway all the way around the city till it

met the Princess bridge again. All I had to do was stay on the highway and it would take me right past most of the industrial ruins of Progress and around to Paradise and Hightower. Easy, peasy, Neighponesey!

That made me laugh. It was silly and stupid, but it still made me giggle. Since I'd left the MASEBS, I'd felt a nervous energy pushing me along and lifting me up. Oddly, I felt good. Really really good. I wasn't tired. I had my face back! Honestly, this was almost as good as being back in Tenpony. "Did you see the look on their faces, Ram..." Ugh... that killed some of my buzz. I was alone, and unlike in Hippocratic, I knew they weren't someplace nearby. My friends were going to rest and recover while I was running around because... I couldn't.

I couldn't slow down and stop, or my demons would get me.

The highway was approaching the Zenith bridge, the glorious white arch that ran from bluff to bluff over the Hoofington river looking quite breathtaking as I drew closer. The encampment that the Reapers had set up on this side was now abandoned, the craters and blasted holes a testament to the war with the Steel Rangers. I could still smell the faint tang of cordite. Slowly, I made my way along the stone span, which had clearly been moulded with unicorn magic; the whole thing was virtually seamless.

At the apex of the arc, on a pillar between the lanes, was a statue of Celestia and Luna done in white and black marble. I'd missed it from below. They rose on their rear hooves facing the Core, with Celestia holding a sun and Luna lifting a moon. Their magnificence was slightly marred by bullet craters and the crude graffiti covering the base; clearly some ponies weren't fans of the Princesses. The rain let up to a drizzle, even as the thunder continued to growl every few minutes. And then I noticed something.

"What the..." I blinked as I looked to the north, then clambered onto the pedestal that Celestia and Luna occupied for a better view. Where once there'd been a twisted forest surrounding a building, there was now a massive crescent arc where the entire cliffside had slid into the river (though some trees still did line the upper edge of the great bite in the rock). It had created a great wall of rocks and debris, and muddy water roared over it in spectacular rapids. I hoped Thrush, wherever she was, would be able to get past it. The sides of the slide were peppered with barrels, the tractor things, and specks of blue. Here and there, I thought I could see remains

of the Hippocratic building itself, but, by and large, nothing was left of the reinforced structure but rubble. “Did I do that?”

I had... and beyond, I could see the bow of the Celestia poking from the water. The Ironmare Naval Base was a scorched ruin; the Reapers hadn’t held back in administering a punishment befitting the crime. I’d been responsible for that, too. And over there, past the refineries and industrial buildings, I could see the Flash Industries building where I’d almost lost Glory. I’d done that as well. I stood and looked to the north towards the Arena, but where before there’d been a smooth dome, the eggshell was now cracked, one end crumbled in on itself. Still, if, as I assumed, the Celestia’s gun had done that, it was amazing that the building was still standing at all. I could barely make out Riverside and Fallen Arch, other places I’d been and changed forever...

“Do you get it now?” Dealer muttered, and I jumped... or rather fell... off the pedestal and landed on my head.

“Get what? That lots of shit blows up around me?” I said as I sat up, rubbing my horn. He sat on the stone railing; normally, I’d be worried, but I doubted that a hallucination-or-whatever was in much danger of falling. I pulled out a minty emerald and tossed it in my mouth, enjoying the tingle of energy. “Figured that out a long, long time ago,” I murmured.

“No. That you’re responsible for all this,” he replied over the gusty wind and hiss of rain on the bridge.

I folded my forehooves on the rail next to him, looking out at the Core. I could see the floating platform of Flotsam down there. “It’s your job to officially rain on my parade, isn’t it? I feel remotely good for two seconds, and then bam... here you are with something cryptic to say just to make me feel bad.” From the patterning from the skies, he was getting some help with that. I sighed and looked down at the foamy brown water below. “I know it’s my fault.”

“I didn’t say that it was your fault. I said that you’re responsible for it,” he said as he looked out at the rain pouring down into the black city. I was high enough that I could see over the wall to the empty geometric streets and the broken-off towers leaning but not quite falling. “Fault implies blame. I know that in the case of many of these things you had no choice, but you’re still responsible for them happening.”

“Really? So you’re not pointing out my screwups?” I asked. He snorted softly and shook his head.

"Responsibility isn't not screwing up. It's answering for the consequences of the actions you commit. Accepting the punishment for them." He flipped through the cards and drew one showing LittlePip gunning down three pinned ponies. "Is she responsible?"

"LittlePip? Of course she is! She's... I mean..." I frowned. "She's a good pony!"

"No doubt you feel that way, but is she responsible? Ultimately, who does she answer to? Who punishes her for her misdeeds?" He snorted and tossed the card into the void. "How about her?" he asked, showing me Homage. "Who does she answer to when her comments inspire some stable mare to throw herself into a meat grinder?" The grey unicorn's card went tumbling away. "How about P-21?" he asked as he showed me a card of my friend. "Who does he answer to?"

"Me," I replied firmly. "P-21 answered to me when his problem became too much for him to deal with. Homage must answer to somepony in Tenpony or the Twilight Society. And if Homage is right and LittlePip has gone completely nuts, somepony will put her down or stop her. Her friends... I'll do it myself if I have to... and I'm still around." That was easy to say, though. Just words...

"Really. How generous of you. And here I thought you weren't an executioner," he said, showing the image of the Harbinger in the gravel pit with half her face blown off. Then it went swirling down as well. "And what about you, Blackjack?" he asked as he drew a card and showed me myself. "Who do you answer to?"

"You?" I guessed.

He snorted. "I'm nopony. You don't answer to me." He sighed and tapped the deck against the rail. "The Ministry Mares didn't understand either. Some ponies once told me that, years and years before the war, Pinkie had to babysit two young foals. She said that she was ready to handle the responsibility... but she didn't understand that it was more than making sure that the kids were fed and their diapers were changed. She ended up working things out, but had she failed, she'd have had to answer to the parents." He turned and looked up at the statue of Luna. "Tell me, Blackjack, who did the Ministry Mares answer to?"

"Luna, of course," I said, but I frowned. Something about that felt... lacking.

"Really? You've dug through the O.I.A.'s dirty laundry. You know what was going on, and trust me, there was even more happening that wasn't secret. So where was Luna saying 'Sorry, time out, not doing that'? When did the Princess put on the brakes? Alicorns. Megaspells. Cyberponies. Not one call from Luna trying to

rein them in before the bombs dropped. That means that either she was the most sheltered and incompetent ruler in history, or that everything that the Ministries and O.I.A. did was with her official approval."

Except for Gardens of Equestria and Project Horizons. Two things that Luna hadn't approved. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood pulling something that Luna hadn't okayed. I thought back to Fairheart's files. "Luna must have had a good reason. She was the ruler of Equestria!"

"Really. Well then, Blackjack, who did Luna have to answer to?" he asked as he looked at me, and I just stared at him. "In the end, we all have to be held responsible," he continued, looked up at the statue.

"Hate to break this to you," I said, "but Luna and Celestia are dead. Goldenblood might be dead. The Ministry Mares are all gone. Everypony you want to hold responsible was punished two centuries ago. They're dead and gone. Everything is." But he looked at me for a long moment, then simply turned and looked out at the valley and the black towers of the Core.

"Not everything, Blackjack. The corpse remains. And if it remains, it can be held responsible," he said.

"You want to hold Luna's corpse responsible?" I asked with a shaky, uncertain smile. "Sure. Go ahead. Blame a pile of bones, if you want."

"Not just Luna or Celestia," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Then who?" I blinked, but he just stared out into the rain with hard, hard eyes as his hooves shuffled the cards before him.

At that very moment, I became preoccupied by the bite of a bullet into the armor plate of my rump. I looked right towards the ... ohhh, wasn't that a whole lot of red? Wow, they must have run their hooves off to catch up with me! From the few I could see through the rain and the wan light, these were not happy ponies. I grinned. "Sorry to run, but some ponies who are trying to kill me have just arrived!"

Oh. Red bars on the east side of the bridge, too. Even being crazy and stupid, I wasn't about to try something like jumping. So there was only one thing to do: out came Duty and Sacrifice, and down the east slope raced me. A half dozen or so Harbingers were in the empty Steel Ranger encampment and were just starting to move out onto the highway. "Coming through!" I cried out in glee over the rain, not caring whether they could hear me or not.

Unfortunately, they had other ideas and started bringing their guns out. I spotted an

earth pony stallion swinging an anti-machine rifle on his battle saddle towards me as they yelled and tried to get pointed in my direction. I dove onto my side, sliding on the waterlogged asphalt with my metal legs folded in front of me, and crashed into him with a snapping of bone. As he screamed, I twisted and rolled on my back and threw my forelegs wide to brace myself. My rear legs pistoned into his gut as he started to collapse, turning his cries into a cut off squeak. I shoved him to the side to curl up fatally as I rolled to my hooves.

The others opened up, shooting wildly. They might have the guns, but the five millimeter rounds had to pass through my armor and my synthetic parts to hit something vital. I wasn't about to make that easy for them, and I slammed into the nearest, who sprayed wildly as she turned towards me, and hooked my hooves on the chattering carbine attached to her battle saddle. Heaving, I pivoted her around till she was pointed in the direction I needed. She had her teeth locked on the bit as she glared at me over her shoulder and sprayed down her fellow Harbingers with her gunfire; I don't think she realized that she should stop shooting when her guns were pointed at her allies... friends... heck, did Harbingers even like each other? They might have had nice armor, but they had far less-resilient vitals beneath it. After a few hits, most went down wailing and crying and curling up like the kicked stallion.

"Give up the key to the Core!" she screeched, "Or I'll pluck it from your fucking corpse."

"Damn, and here I was hoping I could convince you to leave me be though my goody good goodness," I said as I shoved her away. Don't turn. Don't... but she was turning. It'd take her two seconds to wheel around. Two seconds to begin to shoot me if I just stood there. "Fuck," I muttered and jumped into S.A.T.S. Two shots... triggered... and Duty and Sacrifice blasted right through the chest plate of her armor. She flopped down into the rain, rapidly cooling meat.

"I don't want to kill you idiots!" I yelled at the still-alive ponies lying and groaning on the bridge as the thunder growled overhead. "Leave me alone and stay out of my way!" I doubted that they'd listen... but maybe one would. Maybe that would be a pony I wouldn't leave dead on the bloody road. As the rest of the small army swarmed over the crest of the bridge, I turned, holstered my guns, and tore off down the road as fast as my hooves could carry me.

I made it about three miles before I had to stop and take cover, choosing some kind

of large, two- or three-story industrial building that had all the aesthetics of a cinder block; a row of busted-out windows near the roof running the length of the north wall, and elevated pipes of all sorts ran out from it to adjoining buildings, but beyond that it was bare, water-streaked concrete. Breaking in was as easy as walking through the broken doors of the tiny, gutted office space. Inside, it was all rusting pipes and corroded vats. Lots of hunks of derelict machinery and potential little hideyholes everywhere I looked. Still, no red bars that I could see yet. This looked as good a place as any to seek shelter.

Regeneration and synthetics might mean that I didn't have to rest for hours on end, but I did need a breather to let my holes close up. I sat in the rusty vault and chowed down on scrap metal and Cram. Rain poured through from the countless pipes and the holes in the roof, but there was more than just water swirling around; drums of chemicals were piled where they had fallen, their contents leaking out and mixing with the rain on the floor. A acrid, rotten egg smell tainted the air.

I heard the sounds of shuffling and movement on the far side of the building. Red bars, but only four. If they were Harbingers, then maybe I could get some info from them. Find this 'Prophet' and learn just what they served and how could I thrash it. I thought of what Sanguine had told me, some defense computer going crazy in the Core. That didn't quite fit, though. I couldn't see a computer, no matter how advanced, inspiring a cult to hunt me down. Everything pointed to a pony behind this. I had my bottlecaps on Goldenblood.

Time for an interrogation. Blackjack has ways of making you talk... Of course, mostly they involved me crying and begging, but still... ways. I moved deeper inside, towards the unsuspecting red bars.

The sound of splashing water covered my approach nicely, and, since I wasn't in much of a hurry at the moment, I munched on a can of Cram as I slowly worked my way around the rust-streaked pipes. As I got closer, I began to make out voices over the hiss and the gurgle of the rain. "Fuckin' Reapers are finished, boyo. They're down to, what, fifteen fighters tops? Ain't seen none o' the top ten save Brutus in days. Rampage, Psycho, Deus, Gorgie... they're all gone."

Not Harbingers but gangers. I moved a little closer as a mare muttered, "Yeah, but Brutus counts for five ponies and Big Daddy ten. You can't turn your back on 'em till they're in the ground."

"Big Daddy ain't all that," drawled a mare.

"Besides, Big Daddy says Security's now one of the top ten, Candle. You want to

fuck with that mare?" the first mare asked. "That mare's a one pony cyclone. Crazier than Fluttershy. She trashed our headquarters and stomped Diamond Flash good. Dropped a fucking floor on her." That wasn't quite how I remembered it. Still...

The first buck snickered, "Oh I'll believe that when I see it for my own eyes, girl. Security turned him down flat the first time, and I hear that she had her own beef with the Reapers. The Halfhearts are ready to walk, and I think the Burners should too. Highlanders got the right idea. We should take care of our own. Fuck Big Daddy."

I sat down, the cold water splashing around my hooves. I didn't like the idea of ponies that glorified killing and fighting, but the Hoof with Big Daddy was better than the Hoof without him. "I'm pretty sure you're not his type," I said as I stepped around the corner. If this went wrong, I'd be in for trouble. Actually, that sort of described my whole day... and quite possibly my entire life. Despite everything, I found myself laughing.

The four turned at once, and for a moment I was certain that I was about to get my flanks toasted off by the battle-saddle-mounted flamer the ghoul pony in red bard-ing reading 'Hoofington Fire Dept.' was sporting. The lavender Flash Filly unicorn levitated a beam rifle at me as she backed away warily. The third was a green earth pony buck with a black mane and using a sniper rifle that had a weird gold charm of a stylized broken heart hanging from the butt by a chain. He immediately braced the gun on a rusty pipe and sighted me with it, then frowned and hesitated. It saved him from S.A.T.S. Only the blue mare in dirty coveralls didn't jump to her hooves, staying sprawled on her side on an upraised block of filthy concrete.

"Somepony's about to be dust!" the purple unicorn said with a grin. Then she took a second look at me, and the look on her face slowly faded as I gave them a grin of my own, the grin of a pony on the cusp of a bloody killing spree. Right now, that look was easy for me. "What the fuck are you smiling at?"

The ghoul with the flamer leaned over and stared at the filly that Lacunae had painted on my flank. "She's got a Crusader's mark... and that tiny horn... oh shit..." I stared right at the ghoul, and a target appeared right between his eyes. He blinked. Funny, his eyes weren't cloudy. I'd never seen a ghoul with eyes like that. "It's Security. Oh, we are so boned!"

"Tiny horn?" I said in acidic tones as I looked at him, then around at the others. The three stared at me nervously. "Since you know me, why don't you introduce yourselves?"

"Erm... I'm Candlewick, with the Burner Boys," the pony with the flamer said as he nodded to the weapon on his side. "These are Dazzle and Busted Heart."

"Filly Flashers and Halfhearts?" I guessed.

Busted Heart nodded and said in a low, somber voice, "May your tears always fall clear." Ohhhkay. I really didn't know what their deal was. I mean, 'Burner Boys' was pretty self explanatory. Flash Fillies made sense when you saw the beam weapons. But 'Halfheart?'

The lavender unicorn with some sort of glitter in her pink mane looked at the remaining pony. "And she's Bluebelle..." Something about the looks the three shared made me wonder.

The reclining sky-blue earth pony slowly rocked up, then grinned as she trotted towards me with lazy strides. The three watched her approach and backed away with smirks of anticipation.

"Ya know, my momma's tits are bigger than that there bump on yer noggin," she drawled as her darker eyes looked at me in scorn. The other three were looking from her to me, clearly unsure of which of us to back. I thought of trying to appeal to the other three, finding some way to convince her to back down without killing her. I didn't see much promise in that, though. Worse, if they were seeing me as a Reaper and I failed to impress... well... I doubted I'd enjoy 'immunity' from the gangs.

I had one group trying to kill me. I really didn't four others against me, too.

"You're a Highlander, right?" I asked. The stallion with the rifle in his hooves whistled a strange little twangy tune with a smirk. The mare just gave him a look, and his little tune became more wandering as he looked away quickly.

"Ayup," she replied. She was one hell of an earth pony. Dirty, but not gaunt or filthy. I doubted her mane had ever been acquainted with soap before. Her cutie mark was a cute cluster of three tiny blue flowers; I hadn't seen any like them before. Her eyes looked over my gear and bardings, lingering on the weapons strapped across my back. Then she spat right in my face. "Pussy," she said as her eyes narrowed.

Okay. This wasn't going to go well. I wiped the spit off my cheek. "Hi, Bluebelle. I just want you to know... I have no wish to fight you," I said, and with those words lost every last bit of respect possible. She rolled her eyes, snorted, and started to turn away.

And then I smashed my metal foreleg upside her head. I'd envisioned a simple

physical chastisement followed by hauling her in line and the other three with her. That involved my sucker punch knocking the fight out of her. I didn't knock the fight out of her. In fact, I did so little knocking that I might as well have patted her dirty mane.

She looked me right in the eyes and smiled. Oh nelly, time for a ride!

The mare wrapped her forelegs around my neck and powered forward with a shriek of glee shouting, "Lets wrassle!" She might as well have been playing "Let's snap Blackjack in half" as she forced me back, trying to overbear me. Damn, she was strong. Rampage strong! And so I wrapped my forelegs around her neck and up we went on our hind legs and she crushed and twisted against me.

I felt my joints grind and whirr as they struggled to keep me upright. The foul water splashed and surged around my hooves. Our bodies slammed into a thick rusty pipe and it boomed like a gong. The fact was that she was stronger than me, even with my mechanical limbs. It was like wrestling Daisy back in security training; the mare would just use her size and strength to crush me to the mat, then bash my skull in. There was one other disadvantage, too: Bluebelle was a biter! She snapped at my neck, trying to grab my ear as we danced about on our hind legs.

She might be stronger, but I had one trick she didn't. I popped out my fingers and grabbed her mane as tight as I could. She squealed, but jerked around even more as she struggled to knock me off my hooves. I just had to wait for... there! She lunged to one side, and instead of fighting her power I pivoted along with her and twisted my hooves around her neck. It didn't take much, and she overbalanced and flipped onto her back in the thrashing, filthy water. I completed the turn to the side and came down on top of her, straddling her belly as her legs kicked wildly into the air.

I got my forelegs inside hers as I sat atop her and clamped down my fingers on her skull, forcing it beneath the water. She thrashed wildly, but I kept my head low and made sure she couldn't clip it with her forehooves as she bucked underneath me. She found one finger and bit hard on it, but she didn't have metal softening talismans built into her mouth like I did.

For a second there I was almost sure I'd won, and then her body gave a tremendous heave beneath me and knocked me off balance. In moments she'd kicked herself to her hooves, and I did the same. She spat and coughed as she wiped her wet mane out of her eyes. I'd hoped maybe this would have been enough. I was damned mistaken.

"I'm gonna scrap you!" she shouted as she charged towards me again. Oddly, I was laughing as she charged. It was so nice not to have somepony after me for my damned PipBuck. Just a mare out to kick my ass because it was there for the kicking!

As she closed in, I jumped right into S.A.T.S. and plotted four blows. The second her face was in range, I pounded it with all my strength. An instant later, I struck again. And again. Again. And while one sucker punch hadn't made much of an impression, four perfect shots to her face brought Bluebelle up short. I didn't waste the opportunity, standing like a zebra and continued to power blows to her face. Now she finally raised her hooves, warding me off, and gave ground.

Or was she? As I reared again, she suddenly lunged and hugged my upright torso in her forehooves. And now I was being lifted completely off my hooves as she hefted me up and arched backwards. I yelled in alarm as she smashed me into the ground; at least the damage wasn't too severe: I landed right on my head.

For several seconds I lay there as my E.F.S. let me know that I was a complete idiot. She lay there as well, gasping for air. Then I couldn't help it... I started to laugh again. Brain damage or fatigue, it didn't seem to matter. And seconds later, she joined me. The other three gangers looked nervously at each other as we lay in the dirty water, unsure if they should join in or not.

"I don't wanna fight you... good one, Security," she said as she sat up. "Ya got me with that one." My head was tumbling like a punted top.

"I mean it. I don't want to fight you, but that doesn't mean I can't." Oooh, but from the ringing in my ears and the way things kept moving when I looked at them, I'd definitely prefer to not fight her again soon. That body slam had really rung my bell! Cool sloshy water felt good on throbbing headache head.

She humphed. "I guess I can respect that." She sat up. Me, I was going to lie here a bit and collect my thoughts and wait for the world to stop jiggling. "So yer saying you're a Reaper? That it ain't just a lot o' hot air from Big Daddy?"

"I might not like fighting ponies, but I'd rather ponies worked together to help each other. Having the Reapers is better than everypony out for themselves," I said honestly as I risked sitting up, and then lay back down again. Yup, this sloshy nasty water was just dandy to lie in.

"Same old story we've been hearin' fer ever," Bluebelle snorted. "But 'work with us' means 'do what we want ya to do'. All we want is to be left to ourselves and our

own."

I slowly sat up, my head aching terribly. "I know the feeling." Bluebelle scowled at me, but I raised a hoof. "No. Really. I do. Stable 99 did a lot of bad things, but even after all I've been through, there's a little part of me that wishes we'd just been left on our own. Solved our own problems and not had Deus come in and start the whole mess. But that's the problem, isn't it? Even if you want to be left alone, you can't guarantee that everypony else is going to respect that." I might not have liked that little part of me, but I couldn't deny that it was there.

The blue mare looked surprised. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting me to agree with her. "Yup. So when a feller like Big Daddy comes along saying we gotta follow his rules, t'aint exactly a new tune. He might be the first, last, and only buck ta go hoof to hoof with Momma, but that still don't mean we like following anypony."

"I can understand that," I said as I closed my eyes. "Well, I don't know what else I can say. These Harbinger ponies, though... if they get their hooves on the Core and 'save' the Wasteland, do you think they'll leave you alone?"

"Why wouldn't they? We don't want nothing to do with the Core," she said with a snort. "They got one of them there priests out saying that, so long as we give them yer head, they'll leave us be."

Ah. Great. More ponies after my head! "And do you really believe that? Do you think that if they actually do get into the Core, they'll just ignore you forever?"

She just frowned, then snorted with a shake of her head, "It don't matter what I think. Matters what Momma thinks." She looked at me speculatively, then shook the water off her coat. Rubbing her nose, she finally said, "Tell you wut. You think these Harbingers ain't no good, tell her yerself."

"Me?" I blinked. "How?"

Bluebelle gave a casual shrug. "Momma don't come down into the valley often, but with the war and all, she's hangin round Bullfrog Springs. You trot northeast of here and you'll find it by the river. Bein' a Reaper, they probably let you in. Jus' tell 'em yer there ta share a drink with Momma."

I looked past them at the other three. "What about the Burner Boys, Halfhearts, and Flashers?"

The ghoul pulled out a cigar, bit off the tip, flipped it into the air, and caught it in his teeth, swiveling the cigar to the edge of his mouth. A jerk of his head sent a ball of fire rolling up over our heads and nearly got him shot for the show. He took a

puff and, then said casually, “If Big Daddy still has fighters like you... well, I guess it can’t hurt to stick with the gnarly old bastard.” The Halfheart stallion nodded his agreement.

“Thanks,” I said as I finally pulled myself to my hooves, water pouring out of my combat armor. I gave a careful shake; oh, ow. Bad movement with a skull fracture. “Oh, I feel like Deus skullfucked me with his guns.”

Candlewick chuckled and put his hoof on my rump. “Heh, somepony should’a told him your other end is more fun.” A shock ran up my spine from the simple contact, my nerves thrumming like a charged wire.

For one moment, I had limbs of flesh and blood. I had a heart that thundered in my ears. Lungs that gasped for breath as my throat was choked. My nethers strained and burned and ached from the force of what had occurred just a week ago. It took every ounce of restraint left in me not to kill Candlewick right there. “Don’t...,” I said in a voice so strained it thrummed. Even when he did remove his hoof, I was still there on the Seahorse. Still hurting. A little souvenir I’d carry forever.

“Aw, come on, Security. Let me light your fire! You got a swee—“ And then he patted my butt again. That was as far as he got before I whirled and leaped upon him, powering him back into the wall. My fingers came out as I hissed in rage, one hand forcing his flamer up and the other crushing his throat. The flamethrower sprayed a plume of fire thirty feet up the side of the wall, the orange licking around the pipes overhead and making the metal hiss with steam. His red eyes bulged as he struggled for breath.

Kill him or he’s going to do it again. Kill him or he’ll hurt you. Crush him and you can crush the pain. My brain hummed like a high-tension wire as I stared into his scarred and mottled face. I ignored Fluttershy and her plea. I could be kind when I thought I was going to die. Right now, my kindness was tapped out.

But I had plenty of rage. I was going to rip his head clean off! The green stallion and the unicorn mare were trying to pull my metallic hands off his throat. I looked at Dazzle, jumped into S.A.T.S. and targeted three magic bullets. Then I felt a sensation like a icepick through my skull as the spell fizzled badly. I felt the sickening crunch all over again. “I won’t let you fuck me again... I won’t...” I hissed at her, even though it made no sense. Her eyes widened in shock.

Then the mare said softly into my ear, “He’s not one of the ones that ploughed you.” I looked over my shoulder at Dazzle as she struggled to pull my robofingers away

and saw the shared look of pain in her eyes. I was about to kill a pony who, while he might be bad, certainly hadn't done what had hurt me so much. A part of me didn't care. A part of me wanted him dead. He'd touched me back there. He'd made me remember it! Made me feel it again! I should rip off his undead head and...

...wait. Ghouls didn't choke, right?

I released his throat, and he coughed and struggled for breath. The flamer cut off and I released it as well, the wall and ceiling above us still burning from the sticky flamer fuel. My fingers were blackened, the tips glowing cherry red. I hadn't even noticed... for once, I didn't feel anything at all. As I backed away, he collapsed in a heap and just concentrating on breathing. He wasn't a ghoul... just a pony who'd somehow been burned badly enough to look like one. I dropped back onto all fours, my hoof hissing as it was quenched in the water.

I turned and looked at Dazzle. I felt ashamed and dirty. Like I really had killed him rather than simply attacked him. Worse, a part of me still growled to finish him off. It wasn't like the Dealer; this was inside me. Something I couldn't escape.

Something that was getting stronger and harder to control.

"You okay, Candlewick?" I asked as he sprawled there.

"Oh, fine," he rasped. "Just... breathing. That's quite a fine thing. I get it now... no touchie."

"Yeah. No touchie," Dazzle agreed.

Busted Heart wasn't watching, though. He looked out at the dark maze of dripping pipes and rusting vats and barrels and said firmly, "You hear that?"

I looked around. I didn't hear it, but I could definitely see it: red bars. I supposed a flamer going off and lighting up the inside of a building would attract some attention.

"Crap. Seekers." I couldn't make an accurate count as the bars kept moving but I assumed it was 'a lot'. "Does this place have a back door? They're only after me. If I run, they shouldn't—"

"Run?" Bluebelle looked at me like I'd said a dirty word. "Yer jokin', right? And here I was just startin' ta get bored."

I looked at the four of them, then at the red bars. The many, many red bars. "You're sure?"

Candlewick clicked something on the flamer several times. Then there was a soft

'pwuuuu' as a tiny blue flame reignited over the muzzle. He picked up his soggy cigar and sighed before he tossed it over his shoulder. "Well, my cigar's toast, so I need to smoke something." Then he grinned. "Besides, these assholes are trotting all over our turf like they own it!"

The lavender mare nodded her agreement. "We'll show these Harbingers that they got to show the gangs proper respect."

Busted Heart simply shrugged. "Alive or dead, no difference to me."

"Well it is to me," I replied. "Don't kill them if they run." Once again, I got that 'Black-jack is saying crazy things' look. "I mean it. If they run, let them." Please, please run.

There was the bang of a door opening. "She's got to be in here somewhere. Find her!" snapped a stallion.

I nodded towards the catwalks above, and Dazzle and Busted Heart immediately made their way to the stairs up. Being that this was a factory of some kind, there were, of course, catwalks. Having those two up there would be some decent precision support. That left me, Candlewick, and Bluebelle down below. There were all sorts of entrances to the building; we couldn't bottleneck them into any one. I didn't even know the layout of the place.

This was going to be up close and messy. I drew the sword, taking a moment to marvel at its edge. Even after all this time, it still wasn't weakened or damaged in the slightest. Then I drew Vigilance and loaded it with armor piercing rounds. Up above, I spotted Busted Heart taking a position behind some drums.

And then I spotted our enemy. They weren't fighters; they looked like Flank refugees given guns and shoved through the door. Some fucker had given them all brand new nine millimeter pistols and not the slightest bit of armor.

I looked at Candlewick between the pipes. "Hold your fire," I shouted over the drizzle, then stepped out. I had no idea which red bars were real threats and which were these wretched and weak things. I jumped up onto a pipe where they could see me and looked down at them all as I brandished my sword and pistol. "I don't want to fight you," I said calmly.

"We... we have to kill you. We have to... or we won't get into the city," a unicorn said, then peeked over her shoulder. "And... I don't think they'll let us out of here alive if you are."

"Sucks to be you," Candlewick said with a grin from behind me.

"Throw down your weapons and find a way out of the other side of the building." I tried to do all I could to will them to give up. The dirty brown unicorn mare met my gaze and tossed her gun away. A few seconds later, the rest did as well. Instantly, a whole knot of bars went from red to blue. And funny, why were there a whole lot of red bars behind a section of solid wall? As the fodder ran back behind us, I pointed at the wall and ducked behind some pipes.

The explosion blew out a ten foot hole in the wall, and before the dust settled, a half dozen ponies in combat armor stormed through. Unlike before, these ponies seemed to know what they were doing as they rushed in intent on blowing my head off.

Then a column of burning flamer fuel gave them something else to worry about. I'd never really heard a pony scream quite like that as they scattered and some tried to put themselves out in the water covering the floor. The chemicals floating on top ignited in eerie pools of blue and green flame. I didn't hesitate to fire now; a bullet was a greater mercy than burning to death. Busted Heart seemed to be of the same sentiment. One managed to get clear only for Bluebelle to applebuck her back into the blazing flame.

If they wanted my head, they'd need to work for it.

From multiple entrances came shots as they penetrated the interior of the building in pairs and trios. Now they were moving from cover to cover, firing bursts with their assault carbines. Clearly these ponies had a lot more experience fighting, and we backed off into the pipes and vats, the tangled web of machinery and metal forcing them to break up. I charged around a corner and slashed the face of a stallion with the blade while placing three S.A.T.S.-guided armor piercing rounds through another mare's helmet. Then the blade arched and stabbed deep into his chest, and I thought I could almost feel it hum as he died and slid off the tip.

The sticky flamer fuel didn't care about obstructions. Candlewick kept them from meeting up and working together as he sent fire licking around the pipes. Even with all the water sloshing around our hooves, he set lakes of burning flames licking around the legs of our opponents.

A round bit into my back, slamming me face down in the muck, and I heard a mare shout out "Bullseye!" Fortunately, there was a ceramic plate there that absorbed most of the force, shattering in the process, and she hadn't thought to load armor piercing rounds. Still, the impact sent an electric tingle throughout my body and smacked me into the pipes in front of me. Last time I'd gotten shot there, it hadn't

worked out nearly so well. I looked back over my shoulder at the earth pony mare with the AM rifle on her saddle, who blinked, realized that I wasn't quite dead, and prepared to rectify that. Then a crimson beam touched her head and a fiery red reaction converted her into a heap of soggy ashes.

"Dusted!" whooped the lavender mare, getting several blasts of gunfire sprayed wildly up at her for her trouble. She scrambled away along the catwalks as fast as she could. I took several precious seconds to give my body a chance to regenerate and recover a bit from that shock to my spine. Whooo, that had been too close!

While their attention was on her, I popped around the corner, carefully sighted, and sent two rounds into the throat of a stallion trying to strafe Dazzle. And as we fought, I began to feel it. We were five very different ponies. I really didn't think we even liked each other that well, and we all had dramatically different styles of combat. But despite all that, we were truly working together. Our enemy was vastly better armed than us and had the numbers, but their imposed uniformity wasn't enough.

We had harmony... and they didn't.

They fell back through the building's entrances, and I made my way to Candlewick. The reek of flamer fuel rose up from him as he pulled a tank from his saddlebag. "Reload me," he said as he jerked his bit and sent the old tank off into the water.

I slapped the new one home in the flamer, and there was a hiss and gurgle. "How are you doing?"

"Making barbecue," he replied with a grin as he adjusted a knob on the weapon. "These little ponies might have lots of bang bangs, but they can't beat a solid twoosh." His scarred hide stretched as he grinned.

"How'd it happen?" I asked as I gestured at him. He looked around a moment, then at me in slight confusion.

"You want to ask this now?" He seemed a little incredulous. Hey, we weren't getting shot at just this second, and I hated waiting. He shrugged. "Not all that much to it. Lived in a little settlement out near a place called Appleloosa. Got hit by raiders. We holed up in the farmhouse. They burned us out. Pa tried to charge 'em and Ma shoved me out the back window. Then she and the rest of my brothers got cooked." He shook his head sadly before looking at the nearest door.

"So how'd you hook up with the Burner Boys?" I asked as I watched the red bars outside. I imagined them talking about how they would go after me next. Most of

the blue bars had disappeared; I really hoped that they'd managed to get clear.

"Natural fit," he said as he spurted a few little arcs of burning flamer fuel. "I look like a half-cooked ghoul. Every Burner Boy does... even the girls." He caught my shocked look and grinned again. "What? We ain't the Halfhearts. We accept any pony that's maimed, burned, or just butt-ass ugly and looking to give back some hurt. That's what burns inside us. Doesn't hurt we got whole tankers of flamer fuel in the refineries around here. So that's our thing."

"Yeah... still amazes me, though, that you use a flamer after what happened to you. I guess you must love fire a little to use it like that," I said as I looked at the burning puddles bobbing on the water.

He scowled at me. "Love it? I fucking hate fire. Scares the piss out of me," he said as he adjusted the knob. "But if I can face it with this, what the fuck is left in the Wasteland that could possibly bother me?" I really couldn't answer that. Besides, the red bars were moving again, only what were they doing? Zigzagging back and forth and going... higher...

"They're going to come in from up above." I scrambled for the stairs to the catwalks. Bad as those AM rifles were down here, I didn't want to imagine them firing down and pinning us. I made my way up the catwalk and saw Busted Heart and Dazzle looking down. "The roof!" I yelled, pointing at a half dozen red bars. Instantly the pair turned their sniper and beam rifles to where I indicated.

A second later, there was another cluster of explosions that filled the air with smoke and dust as four holes in the roof were breached. Then the red bars dropped down. Vigilance and the sword went away, and I pulled out Duty and Sacrifice. There wasn't nearly enough cover for my liking as snipers with AM rifles opened fire; at the moment they were firing blind, but the smoke was clearing fast from the rain pouring in. If these ponies ever got their hooves on some PipBucks, then I'd really be scared.

The sniper rifle 'pfft'ed repeatedly, barely audible over the crack of the beam rifle. I fired in unison at the red bars and was rewarded by the sight of a pony in combat armor tumbling down into the pipes below. More were coming in from down there; I could only hope that Candlewick and Bluebelle were up to taking them out.

When the smoke cleared enough, I saw the unicorns turning their rifles towards us and unloading with heavy fire. I ducked behind a barrel, a bullet punching clean through and peppering me with fragments as the waterlogged container sent up fountains of liquid. Then I leaned out to the side, slipped into S.A.T.S., and put four

bullets into the chest of one of the rifle ponies.

To my amazement, Busted Heart hadn't tried to duck behind cover. He was biting the mouthgrip of the rifle casually, resting it on his foreleg as he leaned against the barrel. The fifty caliber bullets buzzed past us, but he simply sighted down his scope and with a soft 'pfft' dropped one of the unicorns. "Are you crazy?" I shouted at him.

"They're using anti-machine rifles. They're designed to shoot at dragons and war robots, not ponies. They're not even using their scopes," he said in obvious contempt. "They have no discipline. Just big guns."

"What if one of them gets... I don't know... lucky?" I asked as another round blasted the top off the drum I hid behind and drenched me.

He didn't move in the slightest as he sighted again and calmly fired another shot. "Then they kill me, and I've lost nothing. If I kill them, they lose everything."

I popped up and, using S.A.T.S., put four more of the massive bullets into one of the unicorns. "Except that if they kill you, you're dead!"

He didn't blink or look away. "In the fullness of time, we are all dead." A bullet glanced off my helmet, sending me staggering sideways for a moment; okay, Blackjack! Maybe this really wasn't a good time to find out about the Halfhearts!

I stared at Dazzle, but the unicorn simply shrugged. Apparently, this wasn't all that unusual, however incomprehensible it might be. The three of us focused our fire on the remaining unicorns with their heavy rifles. Smaller caliber bullets sparked and chewed around my hooves, fired from below, but a brutal minute later, the fighting was done. We'd killed the ones that had dropped down, and the ones below had pulled back again. Damn, how many were there? According to my E.F.S. the answer was 'lots.' The Harbingers had have no lack of recruits. They could just keep throwing ponies at me till one of them got lucky.

I pressed my head against the cool metal rail, letting a stream of water patter down on my it. It felt nice. My head was aching and I felt... wrong. Not pain so much as something else. I felt a hoof on my shoulder, and I looked up at Glory... no. Not Glory. I blinked my eyes and looked at the lavender unicorn. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." It was a lie, and she knew it, but she nodded and wiped her wet pink mane out of her eyes. I frowned up at her. "How'd you know... I mean... what happened to me?"

"Been there. Done that," she replied as she ejected the spent battery and tossed it away. "Most Flashers have... or something like that."

"Really?" I asked as I shook the spent brass from Duty and Sacrifice.

"Oh sure. Ploughed hard or beaten, or both. It happens. If they don't want it to happen again, they join the Flashers," she said as she slipped a fresh power source into the beam rifle and closed the breech. "My own father ploughed me, then sold me." She gave a little mirthless smile. "I was originally from Fallen Arch."

"You... oh..." I remembered the look on the mare's face before she'd blown into pieces before my eyes.

"Yeah. I heard you finally took it out. A lot of Flashers were glad you did. We'd been planning a stomp sometime after the war settled down, but you beat us to it," she said, giving a little half smile. "And before you start apologizing, don't; I wish that my mom and sister had gotten out of there... but that doesn't matter. What matters is that finally... finally... somepony stopped it. I might wish we got the chance ourselves, but it's better this way. And I know my mom and little sister are happier for it."

"But... what about the whole 'you keeping male slaves for breeding'? How is that any different?" I asked with a little frown, and she snorted.

"Why do people keep spreading those stupid sex slave stories? Honestly!" Dazzle huffed. "We don't. We keep a few males around that we know won't hurt us. A few others we take for a fling and let them go. A few years back we had a stomp with the Long Saddles. Absorbed most of their mares, and, as a joke, enslaved their stallions for a few weeks."

"And then gelded some of them afterwards." Busted Heart kept his eyes on the holes in the roof, but Dazzle flushed. "Sold the rest to the Society."

"Yeah, well, some of them deserved it. Anyway, we got rid of most of the males. Lot of them joined the Burners, and there's been bad blood ever since." Dazzle looked at the Halfheart. "Anyway, I wouldn't say Flashers would never ride a buck, but we don't plough 'em like they did us. We're the best chance for a mare on her own." True, Turnip hadn't exactly been a bloody and bruised mess when we'd saved him... but the rest of what I'd seen and heard at Flash Industries made me think that Dazzle's description might be a bit more rosy than the truth.

I thought of Roses and Thorn. Would she have eventually sought solace with the Flashers? I liked to imagine her turning over a new life in Chapel, but could she have made it a home? Or would she have reverted to slavery soon as I left her behind? Or become a slave herself again? As horrible as what happened to the mare and

her child had been, I couldn't imagine a whole lot of other options for her.

I saw Dazzle looking at me curiously. "I got ploughed when I was in a bad way. After blowing up the Celestia... I was trying to protect a filly from my stable from getting hurt too. So I kept them on me. And they were more than happy to. My friends got back before they were able to kill me off, but... it was bad. Really bad."

"Damn," she murmured, shaking her head. "Well, I never would have thought Security went through things like that. Guess it can happen to any mare at the wrong time and place." 'It can happen to anypony,' I wanted to say. Then she snorted. "I still can't believe you dropped a building on Diamond Flash, though."

"I didn't. Something took over and used the beams in her room and... well... sliced the floor to pieces. I just happened to be there," I said with a sheepish little smile. "Actually, she got vaporized before the floor even fell."

"Seriously? I'm going to have to smack Strobe upside her head. She told me she watched you drop it on her. Liar." She snorted and stood. "Well, with all the fighting going on, we evacuated to the wings. Warehouse and offices were just fine so we moved there. Coulda been a lot worse." She snickered softly. "And you glued Lightstick's hooves to the floor. Priceless!" I joined her laughter.

Two weeks ago, the Fillies had been trying to kill me. Now she was laughing about the time I attacked her base. It seemed a touch surreal. Would I someday be laughing like this with some member of the Harbingers or the Enclave? I didn't know if that was something for me to look forward to or not.

"Funny as this is, shouldn't we be keeping an eye out for their next attack?" Busted Heart asked. Dazzle gave a sour little frown that the taciturn buck ignored. My E.F.S., however, didn't see them massing anywhere. They were all spread out around us in a half circle.

We needed an actual view outside. I looked at the holes that the Harbingers had blown in the roof. "Want a boost up there so you can see what you can see?" He gave a single nod.

I stood beneath the hole and let him clamber onto my back. He jumped and hooked his hooves on the edge of the hole. Then I lifted him up, standing on my hind legs as I pushed him out onto the roof. I jumped and grabbed the edge with my fingers and, kicking and swaying, clambered up next to him. I tried levitating one of the AM rifles, but my magic flickered and died, the weapon falling to the refinery floor. I still wasn't completely recovered. The rain beat down on both of us, but he didn't say a

word of complaint as he crept towards the edge.

They were just standing out in the rain, waiting. For what? There were twenty or thirty down there; more than enough for a good push. Maybe they were out of ideas? Waiting for reinforcements? Pegasi? Oh, that was a nice thought, and I found myself scanning the skies. Nothing but rain and flickers of lightning in the heavy clouds.

"So... what's your story? I mean, I've heard of the Halfhearts, but I don't..." I started, then caught his hard look he gave me before returning to looking through his scope. "Don't want to talk about it, huh?"

"Why do you?" he asked as he scanned the small pairs and trios of Harbingers. "Why do you care? You're not a ganger. You're a meddler. And since you've arrived, you've been nothing but trouble."

Well, I couldn't argue with that. My ears drooped a little. "Cause... I don't know... I never heard about it from the gangs themselves. I never knew anypony in a gang before. Not till I met Dusty Trails. I mean, the whole 'trying to kill me' thing was bad, but when I got to know them... well... things were better."

He sighed softly, then said low and steadily, "Fine. Here is all you need to know. Every Halfheart has lost somepony they loved. A wife. A mother. A sister. Every one of us. And so we stay together to make sure we're not consumed by that pain before it's time. Because every Halfhearter wants to be reunited with the pony they lost. That's my gang in a nutshell. And no, you don't need to know who I lost. That's private. We don't share it. Happy? Understand now?" he asked without taking his eyes off the scope. Wow... an entire gang of P-21's... or at least what P-21 would have become without Scotch Tape.

"I guess so," I said as I looked to the north. I could see why they hadn't surrounded the building yet; the east and south sides were a tangle of rusted pipe and fallen reinforcement. "I just... do you really want to die that badly?" I asked as I picked my way to the edge. There were a few more options for escape; the pipes running from the roof to the next building over; but that narrow walk had no cover from snipers.

He let out a soft hiss of annoyance, but then muttered, "More than you can possibly imagine." Then he looked at me and relaxed his eyes a little bit. "But... if I just checked out, it would break her heart, too." The moment passed, and his teal eyes hardened again as he peered through his scope. I suspected that that was all I was ever going to get from him.

Burner Boys taking in the ugly and disfigured? Flash Fillies as a refuge for mares who'd been victims? Halfhearters dealing with the pain of loss to stave off suicide? Things had been so much simpler when they'd all just been Bad Ponies. But they weren't bad. And they weren't good, either. They were just trying to get by in the deadliest city in the Wasteland. I could respect that.

My magic's strength wasn't sufficient to swing Taurus' rifle around, so I copied his style and braced it with my forelegs and shoulder as I slowly panned across the Harbingers amassed outside. Not a lot of talking... just a whole lot of waiting. For a moment, I rested the crosshairs on the head of an unaware mare. I could kill her right now; take out one of my enemies. I shuddered and pointed the gun away. No, I'd never be a sniper.

"See anything?" I asked, feeling a momentary vertigo that made me lurch.

"There's something up on the road," he said with a frown. "What is that?"

I peered through the hunting rifle's scope... Yeah, there was some kind of dark shape up there that wasn't there before. It was hard to make out through the rain but... it moved.

I felt cold pour down my spine. I'd seen a shape that big move like that. Over the hiss of the rain, I heard the low mechanical growl.

The tank was with the Harbingers.

Busted Heart and I dropped back into the large refinery building, landing on the catwalks. "Out. We need to get out! Right now!" I yelled as I dropped onto the walkway. "Candlewick! Where's the back door?"

"Huh? Why? What's going on? Are they coming again?" the scarred stallion asked.

"They've got a tank!" I yelled as I ran for the stairs nearest him and Bluebelle.

"A tank of what?" he asked back.

"Not a tank of something. A tank!" I yelled down at him.

Then there was a half second whine and a wave of air knocked me on my face as smoke, mist, dust, and steel filled the air. The impact, or something, must have set something off in my PipBuck, because suddenly I couldn't hear a thing. A second blast nearly threw me from the catwalk as I yelled for everypony to get out,

the tongue of metal swaying ominously. I smacked the leg containing my Pipbuck against the walkway to try and fix my hearing.

Instead, it started playing music. Low soft contrabass filled my hearing as the building was blown apart around me and the four ponies that had fought on my behalf. Shells ripped through the north wall trailing dust and smoke, plugging through the pipes and blasting them in expanding balls of fire, steam, and steel. The catwalk gave way over my head as the north wall began to come down completely in blinding smoke and dust and rain. The chemicals that remained in the vats became creeping pools of fire that spread every which way.

I was dumped face down in the water, bouncing as the catwalk tumbled down atop me. I struggled to stand, looking back over my shoulder as pieces of the building were annihilated bite by explosive bite; the shrapnel flying through the clouds of smoke and dust drew lines that lingered in the air. I got to my hooves screaming... something. Names, I hoped. My E.F.S. was full of red and precious little blue.

Lines of gunfire filled the air, drawing back and forth as the tank dropped what was left of the ceiling on top of us. Apparently they were simply going to blast me to pieces and fish my PipBuck out of the rubble. Again I was blown off my hooves, flopping end over end before I came to rest in a crater. Water pooled about my throat as I stared up into the gray Hoofington sky. I couldn't think. Couldn't move. I could only listen to the contrabass' soft, mournful melody as hell exploded around me.

A pony in dark green combat armor climbed up to the lip of the hole I was in. I couldn't tell if it was mare or stallion. I could see the water dripping slowly from the barrels of the assault rifles on their battle saddle. Saw the flare of light reflecting off the watery sheen. Saw the jaw tightening on the bit in their mouth.

Saw a blue mare tackle him from the side and knock him back. Bluebelle looked down at me, her lips moving slightly as she glared down at me.

Then I saw a spray of red erupt out the side of her chest as a bullet punched clean through. Her eyes went wide as she fell to her knees, and a second spray went out. A third. The pony she'd pushed aside slowly twisted around towards her.

There was one more explosion: me. I lunged out of the water, my sword slipping smoothly into my magic's grip as it speared up through the armored collar of the pony's combat bardings and emerged out the far side. I twisted the blade around completely and took their head off. I don't know what I was screaming now. All I could hear was Octavia's music, a piece from her peace concert, if I remembered

correctly. I scrambled up the muck and rubble to the lip where Bluebelle lay dying, bleeding out bright streamers of red. Her bar hadn't disappeared. Not yet.

But there were three ponies approaching through the smoke, dust, and rain aiming to change that. I leapt upon the closest before she could react. Her assault rifles chattered away to either side as I grabbed her battle saddle bridle with my thumbs and stared right into her horrified red eyes. Then I stamped Vigilance to the side of her skull and blew her brains out.

She didn't even completely fall as I whirled toward the next. The unicorn was bringing an AM rifle to bear, but at this point I wasn't thinking that far anymore. I charged straight at the unicorn as she tried to use her remaining seconds to kill me. But I lifted a glob of muck and threw it in her face as she fired. I felt a warm wet sensation in my side, and turned to look at the third trying to pump every bullet into me. There was no pain as he emptied his magazines into my bardings. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and saw the look of horror etched on his face.

Three shots, executed. I watched as that look of horror was transformed into ground meat. I couldn't hear anything but the music; could only feel water and blood and rage. I turned back to the unicorn as she tore her helmet off and I could see her crimson gaze. I charged towards her as she brought the AM rifle tip up. Busted Heart had been right: this wasn't a weapon for fighting ponies. It was slow and heavy.

And right now I moved at the speed of death.

Her lips moved soundlessly as I closed the distance. She wasn't going to be able to bring the weapon up in time... it didn't even look like she was trying. The sword glittered in front of me as I charged. She raised her hooves, her eyes wide. Then I plunged the sword straight into her chest up to the hilt. My forelegs grabbed her, ready for a second stab. And a third if I needed.

My ears crackled, and the music disappeared. I could hear the groan of steel and the chatter of bullets and the fwoosh of a flamer somewhere. "I give up..." the unicorn murmured in my ear. I turned to her, watching the blood flowing out her mouth. I could feel the blade humming in my magical grasp as I slowly pulled it free. I could hear a screaming, distant and constant and unmistakable as I looked down at the bloody blade and saw glowing white wisps of mist slipping off the metal.

Just like the starmetal rod.

I stared at it a moment, listening to its tiny little metallic hum. It seemed to be asking

me, wasn't I happy? Hadn't this been what I wanted?

I dropped it into the muddy water, the little unicorn on the hilt barely poking up above the surface. That was then... this is ten seconds later...

"Damn. You really are a Reaper," I heard Bluebelle cough, trying to lift herself to her hooves. I ducked under her foreleg and supported her as we hobbled to the corner. "You could have killed all four of us if you'd wanted to, couldn't you?"

"I have no wish to fight you," I replied. She was bleeding out her mouth as well, and I dug into her saddlebags. I found some healing potions, but they were clear as piss and just as useful. My own I'd handed over to Glory back in the hospital; after all, only Rampage and I had regeneration talismans. Why hadn't I tried to get Lacunae to teach me that healing spell? Why hadn't I even bothered to try?

"Glad for that, now," she coughed, looking at my rifle, and then her lip curled in a half smile.

Then Dazzle staggered through the mud and muck. "Candlewick's trying to find a way out. The back doors are all covered in rubble." Her lilac eyes widened at the holes in Bluebelle.

"Can you help her?" I asked, and Dazzle balked a moment. "Can you help her, Dazzle?" I yelled.

"Yeah. Sure," she said as she dug in her bags for a dark purple healing potion, floating it to Bluebelle. The mare drank eagerly, and the bleeding cut off immediately. She pulled out a second and offered it to me, but I shook my head.

"Healing magic doesn't work so well on me. I'll be fine with time." Indeed, my own bleeding had already stopped. We hefted her to her hooves as Candlewick came out of the smoke and haze. A fresh cigar was smoking at the corner of his mouth. "Tell me there's a way out of here," I said to him as I looked around the remains of the building.

He looked grim as he pointed up with his hoof. The pipes that had stretched over to the adjoining building now angled down into this one. One tank shell, even some strafing, and we'd be toast. There was no cover up there. I could hear the war machine's engine revving, the deep, ominous noise now much closer. There were more red bars coming towards the largest gap in the building. "We need time. Can you block that with fire?"

He looked thoughtfully at the gap. "Yup." Then he ejected the tank of flamer fuel. I pulled out a fresh cylinder of the potent fuel and started to load it when he shook

his head. "Nope. Pull them all out." I frowned as I did and watched as he handed them to Bluebelle. "Give 'em a toss." And then he turned to me. "Shoot 'em with an armor piercer." I just frowned, but then nodded. The blue mare tossed them with that unerring accuracy that P-21 had demonstrated, and I blasted one with the AP round. Instantly it started to hiss and spurt rainbow fuel wildly. We repeated it three more times before Candlewick nodded. "Light her up," he said to Dazzle as the first Harbingers picked their way into the building.

The unicorn shot the rainbow slick with her beam rifle. Instantly there was a great 'Fwoosh!' as it ignited and created a brilliant wall of flame; already there were a few painful screams of Harbingers caught in the fire. "Ooooh..." I cooed, unable to help myself. Pretty... Then I ducked as the tank and the Harbingers outside began to strafe through the flames with bullets. I just hoped for a few minutes without shells.

"We got around three minutes till that burns down. Maybe less. And we got another big problem..." He started away towards the base of the ramp. Dazzle helped Bluebelle make her way along the unsteady ground. I hung back a moment and looked at the sword poking out of the water. Slowly, I lifted it and stared at the weapon. The water, mud, and blood dripped slowly off as the rain pattered down on it. I stared at the flames dancing along the edge and still imagined that faint scream coming off the metal.

At least, I hoped it was my imagination.

I put it away; I'd have to deal with it later. I followed the others up to the fallen pipes that had once carried fluids into and/or out of the smashed building. There were some kind of metal mesh plates on top of them; a walkway for inspecting the pipes. Only wide enough for one pony at a time. That was definitely a problem...

But, I quickly realized as I saw the green Busted Heart, it wasn't the biggest problem. He reclined amidst a pile of wreckage, eyes closed and lips pressed together in pain as a ton of pipes and metal crushed his hind legs. I scrambled over and started trying to pull the rubble around his limbs away; it was wedged tightly. "Come on! Help me!"

The rest looked at me with a mix of amazement as I struggled to free him.

"Get going," Busted Heart said over the crackle of flame and the popping of bullets against the rock. That engine was getting louder. The others hesitated, but he glared at them. "Go. Now!" Candlewick and Bluebelle started up the pipes.

"Need a flash?" Dazzle asked, lifting her beam rifle. The green pony looked thought-

ful, and I rounded on her.

"We are not killing him! We're saving him! Security saves ponies!" I shouted at her. "I'm not leaving another pony trapped!" I could see Dusty Trails all over again! I shoved against the pipes and scraped at the rocks around his legs with my fingers. Neither moved.

"Security... he's dusted," was all Dazzle said. They knew it. I knew it. The difference was that they could accept it. The lavender mare started up with the rest.

I scabbled at the rock as he looked at me with the smallest smile on his face. "Gamble." I blinked and looked at him in confusion. "That was her name. Gamble. She was a lot like you. We grew up together. Wandered the Wasteland searching for adventure." He sighed. "We were in a mine... lots of ghouls... really unstable. There was a cave in... she was pinned..."

I shook my head and shoved again against the mass of fallen pipes. Was it my imagination, or did it shift? Maybe a little? A hair? "I'm not leaving you to die!"

"And that's exactly what I told her," he said softly as he stretched out his forehoof and hooked the strap on his sniper rifle, pulling it towards him. The grinding became even louder. Something dark began to move through the flames. "And so I'm going to tell you what she told me. You're going to go. You're going to live. Because I want you to."

I beat against the metal with my hooves before I looked down at him and saw the happy look on his face. "I want to save you," I muttered as the end of the tank breached through the flames.

"Sometimes you can't. Sometimes there's nothing left to save. And sometimes, the pony you need to save is yourself." He sighted at the tank with the sniper rifle, bracing it against the metal pinning his limbs. "She bought me time to escape the ghouls. Gave me a chance." He chuckled. "Now I'm gonna give it to you. Take care, Security."

I jumped on the ramp and looked back at him. "My name is Blackjack."

He nodded once. "Lemongrass."

Then I was scampering up the ramp as fast as my hooves could carry me as the tank rolled the rest of the way into the blasted-out refinery. It was as I remembered: a huge trapezoid of steel with a swept-back turret pointing twin heavy cannon barrels. Two smaller machine guns were mounted in smaller turrets at the front, with socketed cameras above them like spider eyes. The black and white zebra stripes

seemed to dance in the flames as it ignored the bonfire. A spotlight on the turret snapped to life and began to sweep along the ruins as little cameras whirred in their tiny sockets. The machineguns started to elevate up towards me.

Then there was a sharp crack, and the spotlight went dark. The engine revved and roared with frustration as the machine fired wildly. The chattering streams of death found the fallen pipes and began to blast along them as the cameras oriented upon me. Then there was another sharp crack, and one of the cameras exploded in a shower of sparks. It reversed the movement of the autoguns and strafed them back along the row of pipes. I was halfway up when I balked and looked back. The green pony had disappeared in a shower of dust.

“No...” I murmured, and then paid for my hesitation. The tank pointed its remaining cameras at me and turned all its weapons up at me, including its two massive main cannons.

Then there was another loud crack, and another of the socketed cameras exploded. The tank fired low, the shells detonating beneath me. The entire ramp lunged up and then collapsed. I popped out my fingers and grabbed the mesh to keep from falling. I was now climbing more than walking as I kicked and pulled my way up, looking back at Lemongrass. His left forehoof was a bloody mess, blood darkening his yellow mane and hiding his left eye as he kept his discipline and focus on the tank.

Another burst raked him, and I clung to the grate. The tank growled, and when the dust cleared I saw the sniper rifle was lying to the side, bent and shredded. I looked and saw his green eye meeting mine. Then I saw him look up at one of the unicorns’ AM rifles, danging by its strap from a twisted bit of steel catwalk. He smiled and then tossed a rock up with his free hoof. It knocked the AM rifle free, and it fell right into his outstretched hoof. The barrel thunked down against the pipes and he braced it, biting hard on the mouthgrip and sighting down the scope.

He and the tank fired as one, and two new flowers of fire bloomed. The base of the right cannon exploded out in a fan of fire and metal. The tank engine squealed as half its turret was peeled open and gushed flame. The massive mechanical monster peeled back through the wall, and I saw a few red bars wink out as it tore into the open. Slowly, finally, I reached where the pipes bridged the gap to the next factory over and looked back.

Nothing remained but a gold broken-heart charm flickering in the fire’s fading glow.

Given the havoc wreaked by the tank on the Seekers, it was no surprise we were able to get clear. Finally, we picked our way back down to ground level and started to go our separate ways. Candlewick would tell the Burners what had happened and that the Harbingers weren't to be trusted. He'd also pass Lemongrass's final act along to the Halfhearts. Something as epic as that needed to be remembered, and I'd buck anypony who said that Security had done it alone. Even if the tank would repair itself eventually, that was still an amazing shot. Dazzle would do the same for the Flash Fillies. I'd go with Bluebelle back to Bullfrog Springs. Even with the two healing potions, she still hadn't recovered from those shots.

Still, there was a little hesitation. For a while, we'd fought together. Maybe not as friends, but at least as comrades. It was hard to let that go. I wanted to return to Chapel and be with Glory and the others again. Let them help me... but I couldn't. I still felt that frantic panic scratching inside my skull like a radroach struggling to escape! The idea of stopping, of slowing down, still terrified me.

"Hope you come by the Flashers again. No dropping buildings on ponies, thouhgh. That's like, totally dust," Dazzle told me with crooked smile. She moved close, then murmured softly, "Don't get ploughed."

"I won't," I promised, and then surprised her with a hug. Apparently, gangers weren't big on impulsive sentimentality. She patted my back awkwardly and then backed away and started southeast, trotting towards the Flash Industries building. Candlewick lit another cigar, gave me a salute with his hoof, and headed further into the tangle of industrial buildings to the southwest. I took one last look towards the smoke rising to the west, the thick black and gray column cutting through the clouds as it rose.

I could still imagine that faint starmetal scream and see twisted pony faces in the distant rising smoke. I might have survived, but the Hoof had killed dozens more. In the end, dead was still dead, and I had done some of its work. I might not have been to blame, but I was still responsible.

"Come on. Let's go. T'aint far ta Yellow River," Bluebelle said as she started off to the northeast.

"Yellow River?" I asked, my ears perking.

"Yeah. Runs out of the highlands," she replied as she looked to the north and pointed with her hoof. We were right at the lip of the Hoofington valley, and to the northeast the land became less gray and more green and brown. There were mists and watery patches here and there like melted glass. There were also more craters glowing

dimly with radiation and more scattered little half-sunken remains of suburbs. Cutting through it was a ribbon of muddy yellow water flowing out of the east. "The mire. Trust me. Nasty place."

"Geee... nasty places around Hoofington. Who'da thunk it?" I sighed as we trotted forward. "And what particular flavor of nasty does this place have?"

"Cannibals," she replied evenly. "Ponies and zebra alike. Scum that looks at anything with four hooves as a meal trotting around. Hydras and hoppers and giant leeches, too. Radiation and taint and worse... the Quickening."

Of course. Something worse. Wouldn't be the Wasteland without something worse. "Quickening?"

"Some sort of zebra curse or talisman or... something. Went off a during a battle a week before the bombs fell. Turned the ground to soup. There's no solid land in that bog, and you can be trotting along thinking you're on firm ground when suddenly you'll be sucked down and turned into a radigator snack." She rubbed her nose. "Lotta meat and the like besides. We hunt the edges every now and then."

I looked out to the east at the mountains and noticed something immediately... they weren't eroded like the ones to the west. There would be a flat topped ridge, then a flat valley, then a flat topped ridge, and then a valley, all very regular. As green as the mire was, the highlands looked a lot more yellowed and bare. To the east of us was a large prewar building of some kind; a long three-story building that looked like a hotel or something. It also looked intact and walled.

And then there was the mountain.

Funny, you'd think a pony would notice a great, big, black plug of stone. The rock seemed glossy and polished despite its rough edges and loomed up a mile separate from the ridges that formed Hoofington's eastern edge. Yet as much as it stood out, I had trouble focusing on any one part. My eyes weren't working too good anyway, though. The radroach was skittering around even more and I was seeing... something... moving in the corners of my vision. Shadows, but in the growing twilight, there really weren't many shadows to cast.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the large building. "It looks important."

"Eh, don't rightly know. Some sort of hospital used by the M.o.P. before the Flutter-shy clinic was finished," she said with a dismissive snort. "Lotta robots, and ponies what go in don't come back out. So we stay out." Hmm, perhaps a hospital where they were making diseases to infect zebras? A hospital Lighthooves might

have picked over? I added it to the bazillion places I needed to visit before I died. Again...

"What about that?" I asked, pointing at the huge black mountain behind the hospital.

"What about what?" She blinked in confusion. I rolled my eyes and pointed at the sheer-sided crag again. She just shrugged. "That there is Black Pony Mountain," she said. "Not much else in this corner of the city. Ya'll know bout Iron-"

"Wait..." I interrupted her. "What about Black Pony Mountain?" She looked at me blankly, and I pressed, "A mountain like that... it's got to have something going for it?" A swampy, soupy bog had some kind of zebra curse on it. The hospital had the ominous 'never leave' thing. There wasn't a prominent landmark in the whole damned city that didn't have some kind of scary, intimidating, or tragic backstory!

"It's big. It's black. It's a mountain. And somepony threw 'pony' in the name. That's about it," she replied flatly, then scratched her head. "A long time ago there used to be a big magic bear or something living in a cave there. I think somepony banished it, though. Or claimed to... I dunno. Some nasty critter lives somewhere around it, though. Best just to stay away." She gave a dismissive shrug, and I glanced back at it. As exceptional as it looked, I really couldn't see much else interesting about it. Just a great big black slug of rock.

"It's never just a rock with you, is it?" P-21 said behind me.

Wait, P-21? I whirled, starting to smile. How had he gotten here? Was he really over the Med-X? Maybe the Goddess had magicked...

Nothing. I stared at the empty yellow grass behind me.

"Are you okay?" Bluebelle asked.

I looked a moment longer, hoping that he'd pop out of thin air. That Glory would swoop out of nowhere and be gray and glorious. That Rampage would be here with a snide comment, or Scotch would say something that made Glory stammer so cutely. I wanted to see that kindly gaze in Lacunae's eyes as she watched silently from the edges. But there was nothing but the soft rustle of grass.

"Yeah. Sure," I lied, before putting mountain and voice out of my head. The radroach was getting sneaky as it crept around inside my skull. Still, I just had to hold it together. To try and take my mind off the scratchy feeling in my head, I asked, "So, why do all the mountains to the east look a bit off?"

"Coal minin'," she replied simply.

Wait. What? "I thought Equestria didn't have any coal!"

"You sure are some funny colors o' stupid," Bluebelle replied with a snort. "Of course Equestria had some coal. Little bit. Enough to run old trains and the like. What kind of idjit invents a coal-fired power plant when the coal's half way around the world? Be like inventing a chocolate milk rain bottling plant when there ain't no chocolate milk rain." I looked at the blue pony. She might be crude, but she sure wasn't stupid.

"So Equestria did have some natural coal deposits?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Yup. And ponies thought it was grand to light up all them great big cities, like magic for all pony folk. 'Course there were a mite bit o confusion on the best way to do that. Hoofington had their dams ta run their power plants, but rivers don't run everywhere in Equestria. So they built a few coal plants. Then a few more... and pretty soon their little old mines were just played out. So they came out east to the highlands."

I frowned. "You mean the highlands weren't a part of Equestria?"

She let out a snort of disgust. "Might have been on some fancy maps in Canterlot, but we've never been a part o' the kingdom. When ponies came over from distant shores to settle Equestria, some earth ponies bucked Puddinhead's idea and landed here instead. This was our land. No horns nor feathers. And fer centuries, that suited the Princess just fine. We had our mountains and valleys and didn't raise too much trouble. But... we had coal."

"So when the coal mines in Equestria got played out, they came to the Highlands?" I asked.

"Course! T'aint no reason to deal with faraway stripes when we were here. And they came with all kinds o' talk 'bout the Highlanders workin' together with the city ponies. Told us they'd give us modern towns and fancy shops and make us all respectable pony folk. Guess that talk turned enough heads, because we let them. Only we found out that the kind of mining they planned wasn't what we imagined. They blasted the tops of the mountains and dumped them into the valleys. Tossed tailings from the mines into the rivers. And they took the coal and built more power plants."

"And your people let it happen?" I asked, aghast.

"Fer a time. And when we tried ta stop it, they dug out that map, told us we were subjects, pulled out fancy lawyerin' words and contracts folks signed with some mighty fine print, and kicked us off our own land. Celestia gave us food so we didn't starve or freeze, but that just made us feel like bums in our own homes. 'Course,

in ten years, even the highlands were played out. They ran out of mountain tops to scrape off, and while there were still seams deep down, twasn't nearly enough to sate their hunger fer coal. More power. More electricity to light them big fancy cities. Not one word of usin' less. Just more more more. 'Progress', they called it." She sighed and shook her head. "Eventually they traded with the zebras. Them stripes have so much coal it's ridiculous. And they gobbled it up right and left. But... then the zebras cut off Equestria."

"And it was war," I concluded as we hopped over a swollen drainage ditch cutting across the hillside. I always thought the idea of an entire nationwide power system rising on a distant resource was hard to believe. It hadn't been the lack of coal that was the problem but the rampant addiction to comforts and excess in distant cities. The problem had built... and grown... until only trade with the zebras could supply the demand. When that broke down...

"War fer us started long before the stripes." She spat to the side. "Didn't have a chance to win, but we fought. Made ourselves a royal pain to tha power companies... Blew up tracks. Stole equipment. When the Ministries started, some of us went to the Hoof for work and jobs. Better than getting 'charity' from Canterlot that only kept us from starving." She rolled her eyes. "'Course, stripes weren't any better during the war. They promised us all kinds of things to get us to help 'em out. Some folks did... damned fools. But stripes killed us no different than ponies did. When the bombs fell, it was the best damned day ever for the Highlands."

I didn't want to argue the cost. Really, I'd always thought of the war as being between the zebras and Equestria. I'd never imagined other parties getting ground up in the fighting. "So how have you survived since?"

"Like we did before the war. 'Course, the highlands ain't the same. We got whole lakes o' black water bunched up in choked valleys, and most of the rest up there is yellow with sulfur and lead. The ridges are flat, chewed stone nothin'll grow on. We live in the shantytowns left behind and keep to ourselves. We've had enough o' being a part of Equestria," she said flatly.

As we walked along down the slope, I looked at her. "So why were you in the Hoof?" The question made her look sour.

"Checkin' in on mah brother. He'd been a Reaper once, but I figger he's dead now," she said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?"

"On account y'all are carryin' his gun," she said as she pointed at the hunting rifle across my back. "Dozer loved that rifle... 'course, he loved anything that'd go boom. We used ta sit up on the ridge, and he'd toss dynamite or pick off hellhounds as they snuck outta the mines. Ornery critters," she said with a sigh. "So I reckon if yeh got it, either ya'll killed him or somepony else did." Oddly, there wasn't any anger in her eyes. Just a sadness, as if she'd expected to find he'd come to such an end.

"Deus. He was a Reaper that was hunting me. Taurus died protecting me and two unicorns he was with," I said, glossing over the fact he was after my head and PipBuck himself. "He got blown up, though... Deus I mean."

"Darn. Woulda liked to take his head back ta Momma. Oh well... Dozer always was interested in trouble. Hellhounds or something else." She shook her head. "Dealin' with the Hoof is bad. Dealin' with anypony other than kin is bad. You can trust kin. Can't trust nopony else."

"You can trust some ponies," I countered, "and you don't always have to do things on your own."

"No?" She arched her brow, looking surprised. "Why're you out here all on yer lonesome then?"

That brought me up short. "You don't understand. My friends... they needed a break. And I..." I started to pace. "I just couldn't. I can't stop and rest like that. I have to keep going."

"So ya ran to deal with it on yer own. Ain't criticizing. It's what all us Highlanders want ta do," Bluebelle replied.

But... I wanted to add... I wasn't exactly doing so good on my own...

Ahead we were approaching a... something. At first glance, I wondered if it were some sort of base... but it didn't look quite right. There was a great rectangle of rusty, double-walled chain link fence topped with razor wire around the perimeter. There were towers every hundred feet with automated turrets on the top. Thankfully, none of them seemed to be moving around. Inside the rectangle was a squat concrete block building beside the front gate; the other structures inside the fence were all identical rusty buildings that looked like giant metal drums laying on their sides, half-buried in the ground. Each was surrounded by a second barbed wire fence. There were eight rows of twenty-five or so each. Further north, I could see more of the rusty rectangle facilities; most were obscured and sunken into the mire.

'Yellow River Detainment Camp,' read the concrete slab outside front gate.

But the thing that was most interesting to me was a battle going on that had absolutely nothing to do with me. On the west side of the camp were a half dozen Enclave ponies in black power armor raking beams and disintegration bolts across the cover of a dozen zebras inside the fence on the east side of the camp. Bluebelle just sat down, cocking her head. "Well, piss on my leg and tell me its raining. First time I ever saw something like this."

"I've seen worse. No manticores this time," I said as I thought back to the battle outside the fire station. I lifted Taurus' hunting rifle and viewed the spectacle. The zebras had snipers who moved like ghosts between the ruined metal arcs, but the pegasi had superior firepower. I didn't see either side gaining an advantage anytime soon. I looked at the large concrete block building. There was a pegasus corpse outside the front door and next to it three heaps of pink glowing residue. I spotted something large and black beside the slain pony: a metal case that had 'Warning: High Explosive' printed on the side.

"Well, best give 'em a wide berth and let 'em shoot it out," Bluebelle said as she rose.

"I need to get in there," I said with a frown as I looked down at the building below me.

"I reckon I smacked your noggin harder than I thought. Whatever for?" she asked with a baffled look.

"If the Enclave want to blow that building up, it's because there's something there worth hiding. If the Zebras want to blow that building up, it's because there's something worth hiding. Either way I want to know what it is. What is this place, anyway?" I asked as I looked at all the rusted huts. They all looked identical, as if they'd been made in a factory or something.

"Some place they stuck all the zebra prisoners of war. Put explodin' collars on 'em. Nothing worth dyin' over, though. Camp's been picked over solid." She frowned at me. "Yer dead set certain on going in there, aren'tcha?"

"Enclave doesn't blow up something worthless," I said with a smile, feeling my mane itch. "I want to take a peek inside there and find out what."

"Well, count me out. Ain't got no nevermind fer turkeys or stripes, and Momma'd spit her bit if I got turned ta a heap of pink goop," she said firmly as she looked past the camp towards the river. "Bullfrog Springs ain't far now. Should be all right by

myself."

I looked at the tough mare with the deceptively gentle cutie mark of delicate blue flowers. "Listen, Bluebelle. I know you just met me. I know that I'm an outsider and you've got nothing but shit for working with outsiders. But please talk to your mother about the Harbingers. They won't leave you alone. I don't think they can leave ponies alone. They've got a need to suck everyone in." I wished I could explain that hum, the feeling of pulling everypony in together. Alien mind control, supernatural mass possession, or just social manipulation, I couldn't tell which anymore. "There's nothing good in the Core. Don't let your mother be tempted by what they offer her."

She frowned, looking at me skeptically. But then I passed the hunting rifle to her, and her eyes widened in shock. "Yer... You don't owe me Dozer's gun. Y'all had it fair, I reckon."

"Maybe. But he was your family. You should have something of his. That gun was never really mine anyway. I never even knew it's name," I said as I looked down at the camp. "I was just carrying it a while till it could get home."

I'd touched her. Maybe she'd convince her mother and maybe not, but hopefully I'd convinced her. If it gave her family some peace and comfort, how could I not give it up? She put the rifle on top of her saddlebags, along her body. "Welp... after that, guess I might as well get my big blue butt in there." When I blinked in confusion, she just chuckled. "Between patching me up after getting shot and giving me Dozer's gun, I owe you enough to help you get out of there alive."

"You don't have to come with me. Honestly, I'm probably going to get shot by one side or the other. Maybe both, actually." Only a mare with a radroach scuttling around in her skull would smile when saying that. And I really, really didn't want her to die like Lemongrass had.

"Nothing doing. I'm comin'."

"But—"

"I done did make up mah mind, Blackjack."

I slumped in defeat. "Okay, but be careful. Don't get killed. And remember, you volunteered," I said, and she grinned like I'd made a joke. I didn't return it.

I was sick to death of getting ponies killed.

Getting to the camp was easier than I expected it to be. There wasn't much cover besides the grass, not even a drainage ditch to skulk along, so I'd expected to start catching zebra bullets and Enclave incineration beams pretty quickly. However, we were able to trot all the way up to the rusty gate without either side taking a shot at us. I supposed the growing darkness and pouring rain had something to do with that, and the fact that they were both busy with each other. Someone had cut a hole in the gate's chainlink, but I suspected that this was recent. Most of the rest of the fences were still intact despite all the rain, though everything metal was almost a uniform reddish color, and everything else except the hut by the entrance was mud-colored.

Everything else except the bones.

They lay everywhere. In heaps and piles and stacks around the half-drum buildings. There were curved ribs and knobby leg bones and chunky vertebrae, though very few skulls. Bones hung on the razor wire surrounding the buildings. Others looked like they'd been perforated by the turrets for trying to escape. Somepony, maybe the prisoners, had painted strange masks and skull-like glyphs on the doors and walls of the buildings with the sticky yellow dirt that lay everywhere. Strips of hide dangled from the razor wire. I felt an ache growing in my chest; Enervation was stronger than usual here.

A bullet pinged off a metal rail nearby, not aimed at us, but there was no telling when one side or the other would stop shooting each other long enough to notice us and change that. We had to get inside quick before some zebra or pegasus decided that a pair of suicidal ponies was a nice bonus target. The explosive package had a strap that I bit and used to tug it onto my back; there was no way I was going to leave a big old bomb lying around for somepony to use while I was inside. Suddenly, I was dancing back as both sides decided that that was foul play!

Bluebelle tried to open the double metal doors leading into the large concrete block structure. They were locked, of course. Then she braced her forelegs and blasted them with four potent kicks that buckled the metal around her rear hooves and showered us both with flakes of rust knocked off the door. Earth pony kicks were damned scary sometimes! On the fifth, there was a ping, and the doors swung inside. "Highlander lockpickin'!" she said as she rolled back into the confines of the room. I scampered inside as another bullet pinged off my helmet.

Why was everything targeting my poor head today? Stop rattling up the radroach, people!

The door banged shut behind us, and at once the speakers crackled and began playing strange, soothing music. The emergency lighting flickered to life, creating tiny pools of light between the regions of shadow. An immense sign hanging from the roof read ‘Processing’ next to a zebra glyph. There were large signs in zebra-writing mounted next to Equestrian translations. White plastic crates lay scattered around the room, many of them smashed or kicked into the corner. ‘Place all your possessions in a white tote,’ read one sign. ‘Proceed down the hall single file,’ read another. There was a large door, but it was heavily reinforced. It didn’t even have a lock, instead having some sort of fancy card reader thing mounted on the wall next to it. No way we’d be picking that, even with Highlander lockpicking skills!

We moved down the hall; it was only wide enough to go single file. I came to a pair of white doors. There was a hiss and squeal as they popped open, revealing a second pair of doors in a space just big enough for a single pony. I stepped in, and a little voice said something in zebra, then crackled, “Please state your name, unit number, tribe, and zebra registration number.”

“Uh... Blackjack. Sixty Nine. Stable Ninety Nine. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten,” I said sarcastically. I looked at the signs, but these were written entirely in zebra. It asked me to repeat myself, and I did. Being a stable pony, claustrophobia wasn’t one of my issues, but I had to admit being stuck in this closet-like space was unnerving.

“I’m sorry. We do not have that unit number or tribe on file. Please remain still and we will take you to special processing,” the voice said. I didn’t know if it was the bugs in my skull or a pink pony shouting a warning, but I ducked down as a metallic claw dropped from the ceiling and tried to put a collar around my neck. “Please remain still,” the calm synthetic voice said, then repeated it in zebra. It gave me a zap from little metal studs in the walls that would have staggered most ponies. I twisted around as the claw dropped and lifted a foreleg. The collar was wrapped around it and clicked closed.

Then everything went white.

I blinked several times as vertigo rattled the radroach and sent it scurrying while I faceplanted onto a heap of corpses. These were bodies that varied from rotten bones and hide to a pegasus that was fairly freshly preserved, minus his head. I appeared to be in a room almost perfectly cubical. Above me was some kind of talisman; teleportation? I looked around at a very sturdy door and a cracked window. ‘Special Processesing,’ I supposed.

Was it a really bad sign that standing in a room filled a third full with bodies really wasn't freaking me out like I thought it should?

Most of the corpses either wore collars and had bullet holes in the temple or back of the head or were missing necks and head entirely. The bodies looked... chewed. Most of them were ponies, one or two zebras; scavengers, from the looks of it. The concrete walls were pitted and chewed with bullet holes. Somepony had written on the walls, in depressingly familiar black paint, 'No way out' and 'Save me, Luna.' More disturbingly, somepony had mutilated the bodies and made a little hut, big enough for one pony to get inside, from assorted body parts. I had a disturbing hunch that some of these carcasses were plagued.

I checked the sturdy door, but it didn't even have a doorknob, let alone a lock. Three solid kicks on the window simply shook it. The glass had some kind of wire mesh inside. "Well... this doesn't look good."

Moments later, there was a flash and Bluebelle appeared above me, landing on me with a crash. "Oooh... that was right unpleasant..." Bluebelle groaned. She climbed off me; I had to admit, this was not going quite as I'd planned. Granted, I hadn't planned anything in particular, but this was sure not something I'd expected. I looked back at Bluebelle, at the explosive bomb collar around her neck. There was a bright red light on the front of it. "It got me, didn't it?" she asked, reaching up with a hoof to nudge the deadly ring.

"Yup. Don't mess with it. These things go off quick and nasty," I said as I shook the one around my foreleg off. Bluebelle at least had the decency to lose her lunch at the contents we stood upon. I sighed, looking at our prison. Given the Enclave pegasus in here, the battle might get resolved and we'd still be trapped. I went through the dead pegasus's pockets and found a key card... not that it did a whole lot of good down here. He also had something that looked like a cheap PipBuck on his hoof. Some sort of primitive computer, at any rate. I transferred the files to my Delta. A beam pistol and expended cartridges; from the burn marks on the door, he'd tried to blast his way out..

"Right. So... got a plan, or do we start kicking like crazy?" she asked as she looked at the solid glass. It might have been cracked, but from the number of bullet pits in it, I doubted we could blast or shoot our way through.

"Sounds like the usual plan, huh Blackjack?" Rampage said from the corner. I didn't look.

"Can't shoot. Can't kick." I looked at the explosive box we'd taken from outside.

Maybe if I was P-21, I might risk cracking it open. We might not have a choice, though... But I still really didn't like the idea of futzing with a great big box of boom. I frowned and tossed the explosive collar in my hoof... then caught Bluebelle's uneasy look as her eyes followed the rising and falling band of explosives. "Oh, don't worry. The bombs don't go off every which way. They blast inward." Not exactly reassuring, but then I'd seen the effect firsthand.

They blast inward. I frowned and twisted the collar a little with my magic. The collars had metal plates held together with springs to allow the whole thing to flex. One side of each plate was covered with half an inch of plastic explosive. A wire ran from one clasp to the other along one side. Break the connection, and boom. I frowned as I slowly levitated it to the glass, and then with my hooves carefully pushed. The outer edge expanded. The inner edge compressed. I kept a careful eye on that wire. A little more... a little more... I bit my lip.

There. It was flat against the glass. My magic lifted a bottle of wonderglue from my bags and set about adhering the bomb collar in place. Finally, I carefully tied a string to the wire. "Here we go," I said as we took cover in the corners. Bluebelle covered her ears and ducked her head as I gave the wire a yank.

If I'd had normal ears they'd be popping and ringing. As it was, the metal plates blew out and ricocheted around the confines of the room. Bluebelle yipped as one of the springs lodged itself in her shoulder. The smoke obscured everything as I carefully extracted it. I remembered how hours under Hoofington had made Glory's wing drop right off. I hoped the Enervation here was weaker, but given most of the bodies were preserved rather than rotten, I didn't have much hope.

...especially since the glass was still intact.

"Damnit!" I screamed, then proceeded to smash my hooves against the scorched window. "I've survived Deus! I've survived Sanguine! I've beaten ridiculously tenacious killer robots! Handled whole flocks of manticores! I've had boats dropped on me! I am not going to be killed by a piece of fucking glass!" I screamed as I hammered my hooves against it. Bluebelle joined me, beating the reinforced ballistic glass with her hooves.

Finally... we busted out a small hole the size of my muzzle. Bluebelle panted, and I just looked at my power reserves being tapped low. I suckled on a ruby and glared. Right now, if the Professor had given me some kind of killer beam eyes and didn't tell me, it'd be the perfect time for them to pop out.

Then I blinked and spat the half-dissolved gem into my hoof. I looked at the metal

wire mesh and the splintered glass and then down at the little red oblong. “Hey... is glass a gem?”

“Uh... I don’t think so,” she said skeptically. She wasn’t looking too good. That injury and the exertion were taking a lot out of her. I remembered the sporting goods store; we’d activated the emergency power when we came inside. As strong as the Enervation was, it was only going to get stronger unless I found that stupid ring and disabled it.

I munched down on the remains of the ruby and a sapphire. “Let’s find out.” I stood on my hind legs and carefully moved my mouth to the hole. “Come on...” I said as the glass cut my cheeks and ground on my teeth. I normally had to get my mouth closed a certain amount before it would activate.

Or else it wouldn’t work on glass and we were completely screwed.

Suddenly, the glass slipped around my mouth and compressed. I got to the internal mesh and there was a momentary pause before that too softened and I was able to chew and swallow. There was some kind of plastic film inside the glass that didn’t agree with my ‘stomach’ at all. The glass itself was flavorless mush, but at least the wire mesh gave it a little caroty hint. Still, my systems were having a hard time of it. I tried spiting the next mouthfull out, but the half-liquefied glass hardened on my lips and hung like glasscicles off my chin. It’d work, though... it’d just take time.

To pass it, I played some of the audio files from the pegasus’s knockoff PipBuck. “Surveyor Team #5. Audiofile of Swiftwing. We’ve found this camp of some sort. Looks like it housed prisoners of war, poor bastards. Not sure we’ll find anything useful left in the camp, but the processing center looks more promising. Just need to get into the interior secure areas. Everything has card readers. Guess they didn’t want to risk conventional locks around stripes.”

I gnawed away, Bluebelle pointedly keeping her eyes on the ceiling as I did so, and I mentally toggled the next. “... Swiftwing. Rain Squall found a card that’ll work on the front door on a skeleton on the roof; only pony remains we found. Pegasus. Dunno if she was a dashite or just got killed by the prisoners before she could get away. Somepony shot her in the head. Anyway, the processing center’s been looted as well. We came across a dirt pony that was completely psychotic. She was eating herself. Bit Rain Squall. We made sure to save the body, just in case.”

“Dirt pony, huh?” Bluebelle snorted. “So much for all their talk of help.” I couldn’t answer as I ate another mouthful. My ‘stomach’ wasn’t feeling so great. I suspected it hadn’t been designed to digest inch-thick reinforced ballistic glass.

I returned my attention to the next entry. "...wing. Bad news. It was some sort of infection. We found two more in the morgue who were trying to get into the lockers. Good news. Rain Squall doesn't seem infected herself. We've notified Enclave intelligence. They're sending somepony to investigate. I'm going to check back through the processing area while we wait. Maybe we'll find something useful."

I stopped there. I knew the rest of the entries would probably involve audio entries of Swiftwing getting trapped in the room and left to starve before yanking off his collar. I had enough issues without having to hear that. Besides, I'd chewed a big enough hole that, with some liberal stomping and shoving, we could squeeze though! The room on the far side was sparse: a metal table bolted to the floor... and a turret that dropped out of the ceiling with a hiss and began to spray us with bullets!

"Unauthorized presence without collar. Please return to processing area immediately!" the voice crackled over the chatter of the turret as Bluebelle dashed across the floor. There was only one turret and two of us, and I kept myself in the open and made myself its target. I raised my hooves to protect my face as the bullets battered me against the splintered ballistic glass. I levitated out Vigilance and jumped into S.A.T.S. to target four shots. Only two hit. The turret sparked but still chewed rounds into me.

The Highlander slipped under the table and then rolled to her hooves. She dashed at the wall, leapt up, and kicked herself away. She wrapped her hooves around the chattering barrels, biting down on the frame. The turret's motors ground and whined as her weight pulled the stream of gunfire off me. I aimed carefully and put two more rounds into the firing mechanism. Finally it sparked and died. I groaned and flopped on my back.

Bluebelle approached with a frown. "What?" I asked. She didn't have any right to frown at me. She volunteered!

"Do y'all like getting shot up?" she asked as she pointed at the holes that had penetrated my armor. I just stared at her as she pointed at the hole in the window. "You coulda hopped through there again, or you coulda taken cover under that there table. Instead, you hung out here and just ate rounds!"

I rose to my hooves. "Look. I'm a cyberpony. Long as I'm not dead and have some gems, scrap metal, and food, I'll regenerate." I looked at the dings in my legs. "Honestly, this isn't really that bad. I get hurt all the time."

"Me too, but I do my best to avoid it." She looked me in the eye. "So do ya like it or something? Cause I can't figger why anypony'd go through that."

Did I? I did tend to get shot up a lot. And cut... and smashed... I bit my lip as I felt some other very disturbing sensations crawling around beneath the ache in my body. Being injured should be a bad thing. Especially the kinds of injuries I dealt with. Instead, I felt... odd. "I... I... um... I..." I felt myself going bright red as I sat and lifted my forehooves and held them an inch apart. "Maybe just a tiny bit?" I said with a sheepish grin.

She groaned and shook her head. "You're nuttier than barrel of acorns..."

"She has no idea, does she?" Scotch Tape said in my ear, a flash of olive in the corner of my vision.

"No... No she doesn't," I murmured as I trotted to the door. And neither did I.

The first floor of the processing center was well tossed, papers scattered underhoof. Lots of bodies, too, signs of ponies who tried to use the structure as shelter. As we searched the desks for something useful, we came across a dozen corpses, some desiccated and others fresh. Many showed signs of having been cut or chewed. Spilled blood filled the dim space with its coppery tang. There were red bars, but I couldn't tell if they were above or below or hiding right out of sight.

I'd've been happy if they just stopped appearing and disappearing, though.

My head felt like it was moving, like my brain had mutated into a pulsating bag of mush. The radroach had laid eggs inside my skull, and now the eggs were squirming. I could see flickers in the corners of my eyes, the vaguest shimmers of zebra stealth cloaks. Then I'd look directly at them and they'd be gone. Twice I flung as much garbage and debris as I could manage at where I'd seen the faint movement, only to discover it was empty.

My behavior was drawing more and more concerned looks from Bluebelle as we moved through the offices. I could hear my friends talking more and more, but their words became harder and harder to understand. I could hear fear and alarm in their voices. Shouts of distress and calls for help... I knew it was in my head, but... but what if it wasn't? What if it Lacunae had done some kind of magic to me? What if the Harbingers were attacking my friends? I'd been so sure, so arrogant and cocky and sure, that they'd come after me!

There wasn't anything worthwhile in here. We made our way up to the second floor. Here there were a few larger offices and a conference room. We passed by a door

marked ‘Emergency Exit’. Funny, where were those back in Hippocratic Research? I heard more voices, but this time Bluebelle’s ears perked too. “Hey. Do you hear that?” I really didn’t want to mention that I’d been hearing things for a while now.

We found the source in the office next door: a still-flickering terminal that had been hacked, but not logged out, and was playing recorded audio files. The speaker was a deep-voiced, mournful-sounding stallion. I looked around the office and spotted a slashed painting in the corner; a bile-yellow pegasus smirked out of the canvas.

“Yellow River Detainment Camp to Ministry of Peace. Camps B, C, and D are one hundred and forty percent over containment. Camp A is a hundred and sixty percent over. I’ve got stripes sleeping on the floors here. We need more food and medicine or we’re going to be looking at a major epidemic. I’ve got some stripes that have started eating each other. The only tribe that behaves itself are those creepy Starkirri, and every other tribe is trying to murder them. We’ve got to get the population down before something explodes.”

There was a click, and the next one played automatically.

“Hey, Shifty. The Ministry of Peace is giving me three hundred more units of healing potions and two thousand pounds of basic food stock. Should turn a mighty profit, huh? Now that Goldenblood’s gone, all those surprise inspections and little impromptu investigations are a thing of the past. Morale couldn’t find their own asshole with a case of diarrhea these days. I got to get me more stripes in the camps. Heck, we’ll put the striped bastards on the roofs if we got to. Oh! And I might have found my retirement: some stripe was ‘accidentally’ shipped here. Rumor is she’s got some kind of super talisman inside her. Experimental. If you can move it, I’ll cut you in for an extra three percent.”

I glanced at the canvas. It really could use some more slashes... and maybe being burned.

“Colonel Cupcake, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Yes, there have been zebras sent to my camp rather to their family in Zebratown. I understand you are upset. We’re merely examining things, and then we’ll release them to their family. I’ll have you know we’ve got a major outbreak of some kind of disease here at Yellow River; I’ve got stripes eating each other. I have to make sure there’s no chance of infection. I’ve had to dismiss all my non-pegasi staff to prevent it spreading. We’ll keep her in the morgue till it can be safely released.” A moment later there was a muttered, “I couldn’t give two shits, Colonel. Where the fuck is it?”

“Fucker,” I growled, feeling shooty and getting a look from Bluebelle. “If he didn’t

want to do the job, he should have quit. Whoever was in charge of this place was the one who deserved to be locked up." I tried to ignore the squirming corners of the room. My 'stomach' was really not happy with all the glass I'd put in it. "Nobody deserved this."

The next recording that played was an automated message in a strange robotic voice. "EMERGENCY MANDORANDUM: ALL PEGASI ARE TO ABANDON ALL GROUND POSITIONS IMMEDIATELY AND RETURN TO THUNDERHEAD. DROP EVERYTHING YOU ARE DOING! COME HOME NOW! LUNA IS DEAD. EQUESTRIA IS FINISHED."

"Fucking turkeys," Bluebelle muttered and spat to the side. I sat down, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the pulsating sensation in my head.

"They didn't all go," I said as I closed my eyes. "I know at least three that stayed down here when everything went to hell. Two of them became ghouls, one died trying to help surface ponies. And Rainbow Dash wanted to help, too." Maybe she lived. Maybe she died. I wondered if I'd ever know for sure.

I used my magic to tap the keys and played the last recording. I looked over at the corner, seeing something move. I brought out Vigilance, tapping it against my knee as I slumped against the wall. The papers on the floor were moving back and forth the longer I stared at them. They seemed to be arranging themselves into the shapes of dead zebras.

Finally, the terminal started playing two voices, they were distant, as if they'd been recorded by accident.

"Director Mephitis, what are you doing?" asked a mare.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Cirrus? Getting the fuck out of here!"

"You can't just leave! There are over five thousand prisoners out there!" Cirrus protested.

"Fuck the prisoners. Fuck every last striped one of them. If they'd just let me shoot them like I asked, then there wouldn't BE a prisoner problem. Now get the hell out of my way! We only have a few hours to get back to Thunderhead!"

"You are not going to just leave them!" Then there was a pause. "Is that money? You're taking bags of money with you?" There was a sound of bags being cinched tightly down

"Of course, you idiot. I'm not going home to be broke! This is my retirement. The

savages are eating each other already. They can take care of it. There were reports of rioting in every prison across Equestria. Hightower's in lockdown. Shattered Hoof let their prisoners free! Not me. Fuck no. Let them rot."

"Just open the gate, deactivate the collars, and turn off the autoguns. Give them a chance!" the mare protested, then said a moment later in a firmer voice, "If you don't, I promise that everypony in Thunderhead will know you left thousands to die! Not even zebras deserve this!"

There was a pause and the buck sighed. "Fine. You care so much? Set a timer to shut everything down. You can use my terminal."

"Thank you, Director. I'll get it set up right awa—"

There was a gunshot. There came the stomping of hooves. I rose and stared at the terminal.

A few seconds later, a buck said, "What the... Director? What happened?"

"Suicide. Just couldn't take it anymore, Gusty," the Director said quickly. "Let's hurry. She set a timer to release the prisoners. They'll have to look after themselves, but at least they'll have a chan—"

"You—" I reared up and brought my forelegs down on the monitor as I screamed, "Fucker!" I tried to hit it so hard that it would somehow magically travel back through space and time and make his head explode like the glass monitor did. Even detonating all those collars would have been more merciful than what I'd just heard. I stared at the sparking terminal, then opened my PipBuck. I was glad to see I could still extract the audio files. Then, after I did so, I stomped the terminal into electric scrap and threw the mess at to the obnoxious portrait.

"They just... he just left them to starve?" Bluebelle asked, the tough Highlander looking sick.

"Why? Why the fuck did the good ponies have to die and fuckers like him live?!" I screamed, seething as I followed it up with kicking the desk over. Then I wanted to knock over the file cabinets. Light the whole floor on fire! No, I wanted the blow the whole camp to the moon. The city! The entire fucking Wasteland! I wanted it all destroyed! "It's not fair! It's not fucking right!" I was sounding like a petulant filly, but at the moment I didn't care. I was just so damned angry, and sick, and tired. I fired Vigilance over and over again at a crawling corner as the Highlander shrank back.

Then the shadows screamed as a bullet hit something far more fleshy.

The corner unfurled into a striped shape in a shimmering cloak that threw something shaped like some kind of egg at us. My magic caught it, and since I didn't have a clue what it might do, I tossed it into the far corner by the door. Three seconds later it exploded, and white sticky webbing went everywhere. Bluebelle pounced upon the zebra, who screamed as she curled up, raising her hooves defensively.

"Bluebelle!" I yelled as she reared up.

"She was spyin' on us!" the Highlander shouted.

"I would have too!" I said as I moved in close. She looked a little younger than me. Her eyes were a soft gold, and they were wide open in terror. "I don't want to hurt you," I said as I lowered my voice. "Do you understand me?" I glanced at her flank where her stripes seemed to make an image of two crossed wrenches. Or bones, but at the moment I was being optimistic. I stared, and her bar went from blue to red to blue again, but I had no idea if that was her hostility or my eyes.

She nodded, then said in slow, accented words, "Please no kill me. I am technician. No hunter. No fighter." If she was acting, she deserved an award. The mare had wet herself in fear. Even Bluebelle seemed disinclined to fight anyone that would do that. The bullet had just grazed her hindquarters, a superficial injury, but still, every injury was serious with enough Enervation.

I looked over at the smashed terminal. "You hacked the terminal, didn't you?" She stared and nodded slowly. "And you heard what happened here?" Now there was a little bit of anger. "Sorry about that." And that anger was replaced by confusion. "For what happened here... to your people. They should have been let go and given a chance."

"Ya'll realize they woulda gone right through the highlands ta get back to their own country, right?" Bluebelle asked me with a snort that made the mare flinch.

Now the zebra looked baffled. "You are the Star Maiden..." she said as she took a few hesitant steps back till her rump met the wall.

"Star what?" I blinked in my own confusion.

"The Star Maiden of the fallen city. The one who brings death, chaos and destruction," she said with a gulp. "The reaper of the lost land."

"Death? Chaos? Destruction? Sounds like a Reaper to me," Bluebelle chuckled.

I gave her a sour look before I examined the zebra. She wore some sort of webbing under that cloak, not even the slightest bit of armor to guard her. The only weapon

I saw was a dagger on her forehoof. She was definitely outgunned by both of us. I gave a wan smile. "I don't mean to hurt anyone if I can help it. I'm Blackjack. What's your name?"

She looked from me to Bluebelle and back again. "Xanthe," she said as she slowly moved onto her hooves. "Please... Kill me quickly..."

I looked at Bluebelle, the scowling mare certainly looking so inclined. Then I looked back at Xanthe in confusion. "Um... why would I kill you?" For some reason, that set her on a fresh crying jag as she bowed her head. "Wait! Hold on. What's the matter?" She sniffed and frowned, rubbing her eyes with a hoof before she frowned at me.

"Please... do no toy with me. Whatever curse you are to bestow, please do so quickly," she said as she rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I... I do no fear your worst, Star Maiden!" She might have looked momentarily fierce save for her eyes, but her shaking knees definitely betrayed her.

I just stared at her for a long moment and then sighed, slowly shaking my head. "I don't have time for this," I said as I turned and started for the door.

"What?" The zebra asked in confusion. "What kind of curse is this?"

"The 'I got better things to do' kind," I replied as I stepped out into the hallway. Nothing much up here. That left down below. I made sure I had the explosive crate nice and secure across my back. "I have no idea who this Star Maiden is or why you seem to think I am her." I expected that to be it, but then she started following us!

"The Star Maiden is she who is born from the cursed soil of the damned city. She will be flesh and steel, touched by the stars and chosen as their champion. Where she travels, chaos and strife will follow," Xanthe said as she trotted in our wake. Why, I couldn't imagine. "It is she that shall bear evil from the ground, usher in the final days of the world, snuff out the sun forever and call down the moon. She shall summon storms, unleash plague, command unholy fire, destroy all in her path and all who follow in her wake. Female shall desire female, male shall desire male, and unholy coupling between the species will commence where she travels."

"Damn..." Bluebelle snickered and leered at the zebra. "I'm getting moist right now just hearing all this." Xanthe gasped as she cringed away and I looked back to see her eyes wide and popping.

"Right. So why are you following us again?" I asked as I started down the stairs.

She blinked, then worked her mouth, and then shrank back, pointing a hoof at me.

"You... you have cursed me! Your foul star magics have ensorcelled me!" I looked back... and my hoof slipped and I rolled down to land on my back in the first floor offices. My glass-filled gut gave an unpleasant lurch as I glared up at the golden-eyed zebra.

"There? See?" I snapped as I looked at her from the floor. "Would the dreaded Star Maiden fall on her ass?"

It saved me from getting my skull crushed. The zebra came out of the shadows like a ghost with a wild kick plunging down at my face. Laying on my back, I was able to get my hooves up in time to block it. "No. Do not fight her. We are all doomed! She has cursed us all!" Xanthe wailed from the stairs, then started jabbering in zebra.

The zebra fighting me, however, wasn't inclined to listen as she backflipped away. I rose to my hooves, drawing and bringing up my sword as the mare charged. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and locked in two attacks, and they still missed. She sidestepped the first swipe, ducked the second, and then did another backflip that smacked me in the face with both her rear hooves. She knocked me standing upright as I staggered back against the wall.

She said something brief in Zebra that I supposed was 'you die now', but it might have been 'eat cream cheese' for all I knew. The she rammed both her forehooves into my gut.

Now, I have no idea just how stomach-like my stomach was, but when you've overeaten, getting kicked like that is no good at all. I gripped her shoulders with my fingers and felt everything working in reverse. There was nothing I could do as I puked liquefied glass and metal in her face. The clear fluid solidified seconds after it left my throat, freezing to her horrified face in a mask. She fell back, flopping and flailing wildly as I spit aside gobs of glass, struggling to keep upright. That blow had done some major damage to my internals, and every bit of watery glass was brought up.

Xanthe stared at me, her eyes even wider if it were possible. Even Bluebelle was starting to look more uneasy about this. Beatdowns with metal hooves were one thing, but clearly vomiting liquid glass was a whole realm of fucked-upness that only cyberponies could obtain. I wanted to try and break the dying zebra's mouth and nose free, but at the moment I was dealing with some internal damage. When I could finally move, the zebra's body had gone limp. I sighed and tried to pull off her stealth cloak, but to my amazement it dissolved in my hooves! The blue gemstone clasp immediately cracked and went dark. No fair sabotaging the loot! I gave the

nervous zebra a glare, and she gulped.

"Mist cloaks are woven of shadow spider silk and disappear like morning dew in summer if taken from their owner," she said as she hugged her own to her form. I wondered why she didn't just go invisible and leave. Really, I wasn't inclined to stop her! I searched the dead zebra, found some sort of dried gourd, and peeked inside. Something milky purple and healing-potion-looking.

"Here. Both of you drink this before the Enervation makes those injuries worse," I said as I passed the gourd to them.

"You wish me whole and healthy to suffer ever more, do you not, Maiden?" Xanthe said as she took it and drank it reluctantly before giving it to Bluebelle who, seeing the graze heal, lost her reluctance to drink for her injured shoulder.

"I wish you'd go back to your own people," I retorted, feeling my insides pulling themselves back into place after that blow.

She gave a sad, twisty little smile. "And carry your curse to them? They would kill me at once. And I would not take it to them in the first place. You have doomed me, Star Maiden, and you may doom the entire world, but I will not do your work for you."

"I'm about to doom you with a buck upside your head," I said as I looked around. The terminal recordings had talked about a morgue. That would be the next place I would check before getting the heck out of here. "What are you zebras doing here in the first place?" I asked as I fired a round into a corner where I'd thought something had moved.

"I can't tell you that! You're the Maiden!" she gasped, and I groaned as we moved through the ground floor processing offices looking for a door or stairs down. "The champion of the stars! The bringer of all things evil! With your left hoof you will bring down the fires of the sun, and with your right you will call down the moon!" Xanthe said all in a rush, gasping for a breath at the end. Then she looked at me and continued, "Even if you will destroy the world, you can still be stopped. The last Maiden was. Three times!"

"The last maiden?" I asked with a smirk over my shoulder. "Who was that? Doesn't sound like she was very good at her job."

"No. It was your 'Princess Luna,'" Xanthe replied. That brought me up short. Slowly, I turned and looked back at her. I must have been giving her quite the shooty look... or maybe it was the 'Maiden of the Stars' look for her.

"Excuse me? Could you elaborate on that, please?" I asked as I turned and stood

before the shrinking zebra. She quivered and began to whimper.

"You knew her as Nightmare Moon," said a familiar voice from the shadows. My mane went all kinds of squirmly as I saw the shadows unwind and expose the zebra from the mine and the museum. Lancer looked at me along the barrel of his gun with his hard, cold eyes. But I just looked right back at him. If he was going to take the shot, then he would have taken it without all the drama. "It was here, in this doomed city, that Nightmare Moon stopped the sun from rising. And it was here, on the ashes of this burned town, that your Princess Luna declared she would take the throne her sister surrendered and lead Equestria to victory."

"So why are you still talking and not blowing my head off?" I asked Lancer as I saw the shadowy depths of the office squirming and creeping. Red bars drifted back and forth in my vision.

"The honor of your death falls to the Legate himself. He yearns to smash your unnatural body with his own hooves," Lancer said as he stood, keeping his rifle aimed right at my head. "When he does so, this ground shall be razed and all within slaughtered like the vermin you are." I stared into his eyes. Cold and hard and certain.

"Right," I said, "well, since he's not here, and you're not going to steal his kill, maybe you can take Xanthe here off my hooves and let me get on my way. I want to find out what the Enclave are up to." I smirked. "Don't worry. I didn't curse her. Unicorn magic doesn't work like that." At least, according to the primer it didn't.

He turned his rifle on Xanthe. I barely got in front of her to catch the bullet with my side. It bit deep, knocking me back against Bluebelle and the zebra, who shrank back with a little shriek. I turned Vigilance on him, but he was already moving. When I jumped into S.A.T.S., he continued to move... everything moved in a slow smear across my vision. I lurched, and by the time I was out of S.A.T.S. he'd vanished. I knew better than to think he was gone, though.

"You don't realize it, Security, but you have cursed her," he said from the shadows... but his voice sounded odd to me. "You have cursed her with kindness. You have infected her with your mercy. And like everything that you touch, she will be destroyed."

"You bloody... murdering... bastard!" I shouted into the shadows. I saw the darkness moving, forming eyes and mouths on the dim and dingy walls. I fired Vigilance again and again into every shadowy corner. My horn threw a storm of papers and rubbish around me, looking to see it bounce off some invisible assailant. When I

ran out of bullets, I drew my sword, swinging wildly as I raced around. "You won't hurt her! You won't!" Shadowy ponies parted with each slice, reforming... laughing at my futile efforts. Darkness spattered my vision as I attacked things that weren't there.

I was grasping at shadows.

Bluebelle and Xanthe both stared at me in alarm and horror. "What?" I shouted, exasperated as I swished the sword in the air and spattered blood across both of them.

Wait...?

Slowly I looked at the blood on the hilt of my sword. Felt the blood that was dripping down my face. I looked down at the decapitated zebra in front of me. Saw another torn open along her side. A sniper lay there with her face a concave hole. Another was dying from three meaty chunks taken out of his chest. I'd killed them and I hadn't even realized it. Hadn't even realized that they were there. Wounds from more than just Lancer's round throbbed and burned, yet I hadn't felt them. The pain was so familiar I hadn't even recognized it. I staggered and grabbed a kicked-over desk. When had I kicked it over? Had I, or had somepony else?

I shook as I dropped the sword. In Xanthe's eyes, I was evil incarnate. And Bluebelle stared at me as if realizing just how deadly I could be when so inclined. I wasn't the mare she'd dropped on her head back in the refinery. My chest ached terribly, like there was a fire digging into whatever now passed for a heart. "Don't look at me like that..." I asked in a low rush. They kept staring. If it had been my friends looking at me that way, I don't know what I would have done. "Don't look at me!" I screamed at them.

I liked it better when I was missing half my face. It was easier than missing half my sanity.

Finally, I found the morgue. It was, predictably, located in the vicinity of 'Medical', which was marked in great big signs written in two different languages. Like everything else, it had been tossed long ago, but it had a sink. I took the opportunity to wash the blood off my face. It didn't seem to come off though, no matter how much I scrubbed. Then I noticed the mirror; there was a nick below my horn that kept bleeding. It was taking its sweet time healing, but with all the Enervation in the room...

"So. Why are you here?" I asked Xanthe as I dabbed at the wound with a roll of dirty gauze; I'd probably make Glory scream in frustration if she saw me, but the blood was getting annoying. She stared at her hooves and said the 'm name'. "I just took a bullet for you! Tell me!" I snapped.

She jumped and lay flat on the ground. "There was a mighty warrior during the war who could not be felled. A magical artifact preserved her on the battlefield. Somehow she was laid low in a battle in the badlands outside the city. Her body was brought here. We learned from a ghoul who had been alive back then that the talisman had never been removed from the body. So we came here to get it for Legate Vitiosus."

"Shifty?" I asked, and she looked nervously confused. "Was that the ghoul's name?"

The nervous confusion became nervous sadness as she nodded. "I believe so. He bemoaned many opportunities missed," she said as she swallowed hard and looked around. "We arrived but found those pegasi here. We did not know why, only that they had explosives. We could not risk the artifact getting destroyed."

"Right. Because talking things out and working out an agreement suiting both sides is a stupid idea." I sighed and stepped away from the sink, a few rads hotter, and looked at the door to the morgue.

"So if this magic thingy was so powerful, how'd this warrior o' yours get killed?" Bluebelle asked.

"No zebra knows," Xanthe replied quietly as she looked around the medical room at the smashed cabinets and slashed Ministry of Peace pictures. Hunks of meat, preserved by Enervation, were scattered everywhere, lying dry and dark on the gurneys and floor. Bloody bonesaws and scalpels showed the butchery that had taken place here. "No bullet could slay her. She would fall, and then rise again."

"Sounds like somepony I know," Bluebelle said as she looked over at me. "Seriously. He just shot you and you treated it like it was nothing!"

"Regeneration talisman, synthetic organs, and artificial legs..." I muttered as I sucked on my last ruby; when had gems become comfort food? "He'd have to shoot me more than just once to kill me. He might get me with a headshot, though," I said as I put my helmet back on. He said this Legate wanted to kill me, sure, but I wasn't going to count on him not taking the honor himself.

I couldn't trust my E.F.S. anymore. There could have been two red bars or twenty in the morgue. They kept shifting around on me. Bluebelle had taken the opportunity to

grab a battered hoofball helmet left in the special processing area; Lancer's promise to spare me didn't extend to anypony with me. I looked at the collar around her throat and then at Xanthe. I wasn't exactly sure where she fell on the smart pony scale.

"Can you do something about her collar?" I asked, trying to ignore the noises that didn't fit. I kept hearing what I imagined to be a dozen exploding collars going off at once. I think bomb collars were my number one most hated device in the Hoof.

"What?" Bluebelle said as she pointed at Xanthe. "I'm not going to let a filthy stripe touch it! Find me some pony who can do the job! I don't need no help from her!"

Xanthe shrank back. "I will not. You may have cursed me, but I owe nothing to ponykind!"

In a flash, I whirled on both of them. "You!" I snapped at Bluebelle, grabbing her shoulders. She suddenly looked like she expected to get a faceful of liquid glass. "The only pony here who isn't disintegrating folks is me! Do you want me to try and get that collar off you? Do you?" She quickly shook her head, and I rounded on Xanthe. She gave an eep and curled up in horror. "And you! Didn't you just tell me that you can't go home now that you're cursed? That means you are stuck here! THAT means that you should put whatever skills you have to use helping ponies and generating good will. Because your alternative is to join the Harbingers, and they really piss me off!"

She backed up and started shaking terribly. Ugh... she'd just been cursed by the most evilest thing her people knew... me... and cut off from said people on pain of death... and here I was shouting at her! I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the distant screaming of my friends. They weren't here. It was just me being crazy. Don't take it out on her. "Look. This sucks for both of you. Neither of you asked to be put in this mess... and that's all that happens around me. I can run into a total stranger and completely fuck their life up just by standing there. But I can't do this all on my own anymore. If you two can help each other... please... help."

I sighed. That was all I could hope for. Then I peeked and saw Bluebelle grudgingly tilt her head to let the zebra examine it. "Just... don't blow my damned head off," the blue mare said as she clenched her eyes closed.

Xanthe examined the collar as I checked the door. Locked, but I had a card. Carefully I opened it and peeked down the short hallway on the other side. Funny... everywhere else was completely disgusting, but the room beyond looked clean. "I... I don't think..." she stammered as she pulled her hooves away.

"If you're not sure, it's okay. Better that then not trying," I said as I looked back through the crack into the morgue. There were gurneys set up like workstations, and along one wall were dozens of steel doors like those in 99's tiny morgue. I always thought they looked like little refrigerators. The flickering lights had been replaced by steadier illumination, and I could see some terminals on a gurney.

I slowly started through the short hallway. "Okay, I know this sounds crazy, but I don't want to fight you," I called out as I moved forward, not sure what was my E.F.S. giving me warnings and what was all in my head. I couldn't believe the morgue would be empty, and after my tirade and the fights above, I doubted that they were ignorant of us being here.

"In a pig's eye," a stallion muttered in return.

"She ain't red," said a mare, weakly.

"Identify yourself!" drawled a familiar-sounding voice.

"Twister?" I asked, then peeked around the corner at three power-armored pegasi. They'd made an impromptu barricade that would have lasted all of three seconds against a concentrated attack. "What are you doing here?" I asked the Neighvarro pegasus I'd met and ridden from Spike's cave.

She popped off her helmet, her lavender coat reminding me of Dazzle. More purplish-blue but no glitter in Twister's mane, though. "Blackjack... is that..." She took in my appearance in one long horrified look. "What in tarnation happened to you, girl? T'aint no decent reason fer any mare anywhere ta have that much iron in their body!"

"Hoofington happened," I replied with a wan smile. "I saw the shooting. Wanted to see what's up."

The stallion with the missiles growled, "You think we're stupid 'nuff ta think yer stupid 'nuff ta just trot down here 'cause yer curious? Ain't nopyony that dumb anywhere!"

"Ya'll don't know Blackjack, Boomer." The lavender pegasus looked at Bluebelle and Xanthe with a mix of suspicion and distaste. "What ya'll doin with that stripe? She looks like one o' them that pinned us in here!"

"She met me and her life got ruined as a result," I said as I stepped a little between Twister and Xanthe. Boomer and Sunset—at least, I thought that was her name—looked at each other immediately. "Oh... I suspect you can relate?" The zebra gave me a look that seemed to say 'see?'.

Twister finally relaxed. She didn't look good at all; rather wan and sickly, in fact. I suspected it had to be the Enervation leeching away their life. "I reckon we can. Command didn't take kindly to us abandonin' our posts. They were lookin' ta make an example o' all three o us. I nearly ended up assigned to the wrong side of a firin' squad. But then I told 'em what you told me, that Operative Lighthooves made a plague. That got the leadership mighty curious. Turns out we've got records of a disease like that."

"Director Mephitis?" I asked.

"Mhmmm. One of the oldest medical families in the Enclave wrote about it." I grit my teeth, wishing I could have castrated him with sheer rage. After what he did to Cirrius in that recording... I tried to tone down the shooty look. Sunset and Boomer didn't know me as well as she did, and she barely knew me at that. As I relaxed, everyone seemed to calm down a bit. "Since the three of us were contaminated, we were sent with a surface team to try and find out just what Thunderhead's been up to."

"Isn't that against the treaty Neighvarro has with Thunderhead?" I asked with a frown.

"Very," Sunset said as she struggled with her helmet. After a bit she finally popped the seal, revealing a rust-colored mare with an orange-and-yellow-striped mane. "Officially, we never came back. We're deserters until we complete our mission." She looked at the other two and then at me. "Doubt them Dunderheads would believe it for a second, but it'll be a handy excuse fer why we're down here."

"I see. And did you find something?" I asked as I looked at the terminals.

Twister nodded. "We did. They found the plague preserved in the bodies in the freezer," she said as she gestured to the shiny metal doors. "Apparently it's a zebra disease that makes them eat the flesh of the dead."

Xanthe's eyes popped wide. "Blood hunger plague is here?!" She immediately started to wipe her hooves. "I... this place... we must all leave it!"

"Relax." It's only a disease that drives you slowly insane till you eat other ponies' legs. "What do you know about it?" I asked the zebra.

"A horrible disease that breaks out during terrible famines. When there is no food, a zebra becomes desperate enough to eat their own kind! Then the hunger takes effect. When they are killed, the starving eat their flesh and are infected themselves. No amount of cooking can kill the disease." And nor could stable digesters.

"Is... is there a cure?" Could I have done something to save my home? As messed up as it had been...

But Xanthe just shook her head. "In my home, any village afflicted with the plague would be quarantined and burned. The disease is not like others. It must be ingested. Only in the stomach does it start to spread. But if some of the disease gets on your hoof and transferred to your meal, you can infect yourself or others. One strip of contaminated flesh in a cookpot, and an entire village can be lost." I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Perhaps I should have done it differently, but knowing that I hadn't messed up... that there wasn't a simple cure like brahmin milk or something... was a great relief to me.

"Since it's a zebra disease anyway, why doesn't it affect pegasi?" I asked, and immediately Twister and Sunset looked at each other uneasily. Great, now what?

Sunset frowned. "Pegasi are ponies the most different from zebra. The disease has a harder time getting established in us. But..." She trotted over to one of the metal doors in the wall. I joined her as she carefully opened the door with her hoof. There was a long metal table. Carefully, the rust colored mare tugged the table out.

There were four dead pegasi on it. All of them had the chewed appearance of a raider making a meal of their limbs. "These are all Neighvarro ponies who've gone missing in the last two weeks. Maybe deserters like us... maybe not." Two weeks was long enough for the disease to run its course. Even more disturbing, the ponies had been carved. Great chunks of flesh had been removed, not wildly, but with care. Only their heads were more or less untouched, though their lips were chewed off in permanent rictus grins.

"Those pegasi outside aren't with you, are they?" I asked with a sinking sensation.

"There are pegasi outside? Fighting the zebra?" Twister asked, looking worried as she glanced at the other two.

I lifted the crate of explosives with my magic. "They had this."

"Whoa!" Boomer rushed over to the long black box and flipped it open with far more eagerness than I would have. Inside were a number of containers filled with strange colored fluids and tubes. "Aw yeah! A four part liquid rainbow explosive with lightning detonation system. Spicy!" The stallion chuckled. "Set this sucker off and get ready for some hell rough weather!"

"Y'all know about explosives?" Bluebelle asked at once.

He pulled off his helmet, revealing a bald brown buck who was surprisingly hand-

some. He had a prominent chin and wide, easy grin. "Well, yeah. Why else do you think they call me 'Boomer'?" He wagged his bushy black eyebrows at the uneasy mare.

"Chili night back at flight school," Sunset said at once with a roll of her eyes.

"Cleared out the barracks for days," Twister added solemnly. "Was mandated by command to never feed him beans, or it'd be a crime against pegasus kind."

"On par with a sonic rainboom," Sunset finished. "From his hindquarters."

"All right! Shut it already," he muttered, ears folding down. He snorted as he trotted away from the box and peered at Bluebelle's collar. Then he reached out, did something with his hooves, and a second later yanked it off. Everypony jumped and Bluebelle gave a shriek. He lifted the collar with a hoof. "Piece a junk." He tossed it into the corner.

"Are you... you could... I..." Bluebelle stammered a moment, pointing a hoof at Boomer.

"Wut?" he asked with a frown. Suddenly she lunged, grabbed his neck in her hooves, and with a heave flipped him over on to his back, power armor and all. She pressed her lips to his in a long, hard kiss that made his hooves kick helplessly in the air. Then, just as swiftly as she grabbed him, she turned him so he was upright once more with a dreamy look on his face. A moment later, his wings stuck straight out on both sides.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile as he went red as a cherry.

"Our little boy's all grown up," Twister said with a smile to Sunset.

However, it was Xanthe that caught my eye. She was staring at a clipboard next to a different refrigerator door. "Are you okay?" I asked with a little smile.

"It's her," Xanthe said quietly. "The warrior..."

I looked at the door and then at the clipboard. Only one thing caught my eye. The name: Shujaa.

Shit. The talisman he was after was inside one of my best friends. I looked at the clipboard.

Field Report: subject (identified as Proditor Shujaa) was found at conflict site 99-1238-J. While no injuries were apparent on the body, subject was deceased. Sergeant Twist, the only survivor of the reconnaissance team, was hysterical and had to be

sedated for transportation to FMC for treatment. O.I.A. Image liaison Glass has requested the body and any and all objects on or within the body to be turned over to the O.I.A. for transfer to the Ministry of Image. Said transfer is being delayed by order of Camp Director Mephitis. Colonel Cupcake has formally requested all remains to be sent to Miramare Air Base for funeral services.

There were maps and pictures attached that made little sense to me. I looked at the door. It was just a look. What could it hurt? I opened it and pulled out the little sliding table...

What was on the table was not a zebra. Not the mare I had seen in a grainy black and white photograph. It was merely so many pieces of zebra heaped around bones. They'd smashed and torn her to pieces; some ghoul had come along and taken some of the remains. Never was I gladder that Rampage was not here to see this; never was I happier to have a really big bomb to give Shujaa the send off she deserved.

"Looks like you wasted your time coming here," I said hoarsely to the horrified, sick-looking zebra.

"Everything's been a waste of time," Rampage said behind the doors. My chest ached terribly as I sat on the floor.

"Set your bomb, Boomer," I said loudly, closing my eyes. "Set it for five minutes. Let Lancer see Shujaa for himself. There is no talisman... so let us go." Was it my imagination, or was that faintest shimmer the zebra himself? I itched to stab the air as it stepped closer. I stared at the distortion. "Going to shoot us in the back now?"

There was no reply. I wasn't even sure he'd been there at all. I could hear the voices of the dead screaming distantly. My friends were among them. I could hear thousands of zebras wailing as they starved and gnashed their teeth, some giving in to hunger, some lunging ahead to be cut down by the turrets, and some blowing their own heads off with their collars. It didn't matter if it was in my head or not. I rose to my hooves and there was nothing but hate in me. Boomer pushed some buttons, and the rainbow fluids began to swirl together and spark magically as a timer counted down.

Slowly I made my way to the door back into medical, then up the stairs. Behind me I could hear the soft hoofsteps of the living and the dead. We were leaving. Celestia help anypony who got in my way. I stepped into the night rain; the lightning blasted overhead and the thunder rolled through my blood as if the elements themselves had finally seen this blight, this sin... and roared against it.

"Get down, on the ground n—" bellowed the pegasus in the sleeker, fancier-looking Thunderhead armor. Five of them, four on the ground and one in the air. Only five? Then I was on him, racing the short distance separating us as if I were in S.A.T.S. and I grabbed the respirator tubes running to his muzzle. My twisting hands flipped him over as he started firing wildly. The sword flashed in the lightning; glistened in the light. It entered his crotch, and moved till it reached his throat in one terrific slash. Then I heaved him, his bloody viscera erupting from the split armor over the face of the second pegasus.

I saw light. Felt heat. Moved. My hooves raced towards the source of those crimson beams. So hot. Very hot. I imagined myself bursting into flame. Exploding from all the rage and hate inside me. I imagined every one of these Enclave to be the camp director. I was screaming something; the words didn't matter any more as I closed the distance like I'd taken a hit of Flash. Out came Duty and Sacrifice. Four shots in slow motion chewed through the fancy visor. The fifth shot blew a red fountain of chunks as his beam rifles went dark.

One of the pegasi took to the air. I leapt up, my mechanical fingers grabbing that scorpion tail as we lifted higher and higher into the flashing sky. This was Lighthooves, the sneaky son of a mule who had seen this atrocity and not destroyed it. Who had used it. Who had killed other pegasi just to make his disease work on his own kind. Glory had once mentioned how tough pegasi wings were...

My sword was tougher.

I stabbed it through the armor covering, and the mare inside screamed. With all the strength I could manage in my horn, I ripped the blade down completely through her wing, and we tumbled together end over end. The airborne pegasus was close... too close. Perhaps he didn't notice her falling wing. Perhaps he was just unlucky. He blasted me with glowing, disintegrating energy, the magic eating into my armor. If I'd been flesh and blood, perhaps I would have died then, transformed into glowing slop.

I wasn't flesh and blood. I was hatred and pain in pony shape.

I leapt the distance and wrapped my forehooves around his neck. He flipped almost completely upside-down, his energy cannons blasting. This close, I could almost imagine I could see his eye through his visor. I had no idea how far up we were. I could hear shouting, but then, I could hear screaming, too. Could hear thunder. Could hear everything except my own heart. Within, I was silent. My fingers gripped his helmet as he shook and shot wildly. My other hoof beat at his face again and

again with all the force I could muster. There was a crack, a pop, and then the left side of the visor popped free. I stared into a wide green eye, saw two pinpricks of red reflected in it.

My horn managed three magical bullets before it burned out. The pegasus' wings went limp, and we tumbled down into the rain and darkness. The bones broke my fall, snapping and scattering as they parted beneath me to deposit me on the muddy ground. I should have stayed down. I should have.

I wasn't done yet. I ignored the flashing lights; the warnings that I was crippled and needed to stay down. I pulled myself to my hooves, walked towards a one-winged pegasus that was trying to turn me to ash even as I approached. I might not have had a working horn, but I had fingers. And I had bones. The mare moved so slowly. Too slowly. I plucked one of the scattered bones, a rib, by the look of it, and sprang upon her. Rover was right... fingers were better. Fingers of one hoof seized her armor, her beam rifle flashing past me by inches. I could feel the warmth of the magic on my hide. Fingers of my other hoof drove the broken end of the rib through the hole of the severed wing. It didn't kill her. That was okay. I had another.

And another. And another.

When she stopped firing, I rose and looked at the others through the rain. The last pegasus had gotten clear of the corpse I'd thrown in her face. She saw me running at her. Took to the air... Flying for her life.

She almost made it. My hands grabbed her stinger tail, and we were aloft. She looked down at me and flew by one of the towers with its rusty turret still pointing guns at the building below. I supposed she intended to scrape me off.

Nopony was scraping me anywhere. My body slammed into the rusty tower, but I had no lungs to crush or puncture and no heart to falter. My rear legs gripped the rusty rails and my fingers locked down on the tail. Suddenly the pegasus went from accelerating forward to a dead stop, snapping like a rubber band. Then she was going backwards once more as I heaved and kicked off the tower. We flipped end over end as we fell, her wings struggling for purchase with my massive weight attached. We landed square on a curved roof and smashed through the rusty metal plating.

Inside, bunk beds stacked five high shattered beneath us. Bones, hide and rags snapped and tore as dust filled the air. The pegasus pulled herself to her hooves, turning to face me as I rose and started forward. Had she run, had she fled, she might have gotten away in those seconds.

Not anymore.

The gatling beam guns flashed, each shot seemed to take a minute as I charged. My body was in agony. So what? I was always in agony. Life was agony. I knew exactly how Deus must have felt when he was dropped on those zebras. Hurt. Violated. Angry. Nothing would stop him. Nothing would stop me now. I tackled her neck and drove her into the stack of bunk beds behind her. The structure collapsed upon us, yet I still didn't stop. My rear legs tore up the ground as I pushed forward. I wanted her to break, wanted my body to fail. Wanted this whole world to shatter.

I wanted to kill in the worst way possible.

We moved through the avalanching wood and bone and finally ran out of building. The thin metal wall ripped through with a shriek and dumped us back in the mud. Her fancy gatling weapons were nothing against my rage; as I smashed her into a tangle of razor wire, both her weapons finally sparked and popped and went dark as she reclined against it. Her wings beat frantically.

She wasn't going anywhere.

I stood before her like a zebra and began to beat and pound and rip at her armor. My hooves could repair themselves. So could her armor, if I gave her the time. I wasn't about to do that. I beat and smashed her visor till it popped open. Wide purple eyes stared as she raised her forelegs defensively. I simply smashed and tore into them along with her face. Finally I gripped her helmet with my fingers and began to pull. My motors hummed, sparked, and smoked. My skin stretched and strained as if I were going to tear myself in two.

Maybe I was. Maybe I wanted to.

Then there was a scream of metal as I ripped her faceplate off. I held her head with one hand and drew back my hoof to smash her face out the back of her skull.

Then the lightning flashed, and I saw Glory's face. Not Rainbow Dash's... Glory. Purple mane peeked out. The lightning flashed again; I looked at the red dripping out of her mouth and nostrils. Her lips were moving, but I couldn't hear a thing. Just thunder and screams. My friends and the others were running at me. I saw the pain in her eyes... darker than the pony I remembered...

Not Glory... Dusk.

I was about to kill Glory's sister.

I looked at the three Neighvarro pegasi. The beating I'd given them was nothing

compared to what I'd meted out this night. I wondered what horrors or ghost stories they had in the Enclave about ponies like me. Xanthe stared at me in mute horror. The Maiden of the Stars. Even the Highlander, her blue eyes wary... even scared... stared at me with one word on her face.

Reaper.

I threw back my head and screamed out all the hate and pain and rage inside me. I had to or I'd kill her. Kill everyone. I felt the bugs in my head chewing their way free. I wanted Lancer to hear me in the night. I wanted Lighthooves to hear me wherever he hid. I wanted whatever pony or machine that guided the Harbingers to know that at this moment I would tear down the towers of the Core itself with my bare hooves to destroy them. And as if in agreement, the concrete block of the processing center erupted in a fountain of rainbow flame and a deafening blast that rolled through the camp. I imagined that I was the pony possessed by Shujaa and let the Wasteland hear her rage one final time.

Then the moment passed, and like that burning ball of rainbow fire, my fury was spent. Literally. My eyes darkened and my limbs stilled. I became as inert as the bones around me.

>Primary power systems exhausted. Emergency power supplies engaged.

All I could do was feel. Feel my burned hide. Feel the cold water pour down. Feel Dusk tremble beneath me.

A hoof touched my shoulder. I tried to speak, but my jaws couldn't move. Then I felt a gem pressed into my mouth, a minty emerald. There was a faint hum, then my eyes flickered to life. I looked at the unconscious Dusk beneath me. At Bluebelle beside me. "Thanks," I said. No rasp. No fatigue. Even blasted, battered and beaten, my body just needed recharging.

Carefully I stepped away, shook out several gems and ate them, followed by cans of Cram. I kept my eyes down. "Help her..." was all I said, and the three pegasi helped the battered Dusk. No one came to help me; could I blame them?

Thousands of zebras watched me. They may have been ghosts and bones and shadows, but I could see them staring.

I looked at the wary Bluebelle. "You'll talk to your mother?" I asked calmly, barely audible over the rain. She nodded. I suspected she'd do everything she could to keep the Highlanders from helping the Harbingers track me down. I nodded and sheathed the sword. My armor and bags were half burned through, but right now all

I needed to do was be able to keep walking.

I walked to Xanthe and looked at her. She curled up, shaking in the mud. She'd said I'd cursed her. I hadn't meant to. I hadn't meant to ruin her life simply by saving her life. But now I had to take care of her.

I was responsible.

"Get Dusk back to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I said low and evenly to the Enclave trio. "If you can't, get her to the Collegiate. Tell Triage to help her. Take Xanthe with you." My eyes moved to the terrified zebra. "Xanthe... talk to Sagittarius and Triage. You're a good, smart zebra... you can have a life there. Understand?" She didn't reply. I couldn't blame her. I ate another gem, waiting for her to nod or voice some kind of acknowledgement. Finally, she gave a little jerk of her head.

I left them, picking the dropped revolvers from the mud on my way. Thousands of eyes watched me. Even the dead were silent as I passed into the thunder and night. At the gate, I paused. I turned and stared up at one of the sentry towers. It was as if a force drew my eyes upwards. There, atop the spire, was the sixth Enclave pony, lit by the flickering flames of the burning processing center rubble. I knew him. It could only be him.

Come down here, I thought at him. *Come down here and let me finish with you what I started with Dusk.*

Soon, I imagined his reply. *Soon*. And then, with that, the armored pegasus launched himself into the dark sky. Alone, I turned as well, walking out into black rain.

Footnote: Maximum level reached!

43. Lucidity

"So... got any problems, troubles, conundrums, or any other sort of issues major or minor that I as a good friend could help you solve?"

I stood in the middle of 99. Blood dripped from the corpses of my slain stable. They lay in heaps and piles all around me as I gasped for air. Daisy had been the hardest to kill, just like last time. But in the end, I'd chewed her back leg apart with shotgun blasts. Then it was two to the head and I was done. And now I trotted down towards the living quarters.

One door lock security override. Two shots. One override. Two shots. One override. Three shots. I was running low on bullets. One override. Two shots. One override... this was getting monotonous. I needed to start mixing it up. I used whatever blunt object I could lift. I tossed Rivets screaming into the recycler. That'd teach her. I finally nailed Midnight. The males I killed quick and clean.

Finally, I found the last PipBuck tag. The little pink filly wept and begged me not to kill her. Really, I shouldn't. I'd saved one, hadn't I?

No. No I hadn't.

I stared at the blood covering them; at my butchered home.

One gun... one shot... no Blackjack.

The sheets were warm and soft; they must have used magic to freshen them up. I stared up at images of pastel pegasus fillies romping and playing together in the clouds. Frozen eyes staring down at me from the ceiling. There were more on the walls, gamboling in picturesque green glades with cute little bunnies, squirrels, and birds. Gentle music was piped in from somewhere, along with the sound of birds chirping. Soft bed. Soft sheets. Soft room.

At least the restraints on my legs were something firm. Something I could jerk rhythmically against to keep myself from drowning in pastel pony fuzziness.

There was a knock, and I halted my tugging. I didn't look towards the door carefully moulded to appear to blend into the space between two trees. I didn't move or breathe as I lay there. The door opened quietly, and in walked the pale teal pegasus

mare with her wings outstretched, a tray balanced on them. “How are we today, Miss Fish? Feeling better, I hope? Feeling lucid?” she asked nervously, licking her lips.

“I’m fine, Harpica,” I said quietly. “Call me Blackjack.”

She swallowed. “You know we’re not supposed to call you that, Miss Fish. Please don’t yell at me...” She shrank back in anticipation. I simply lay there patiently, sighing. They really knew how to pick the perfect guard; a tough one I could resist, but this... She slid the tray onto my lap, not taking her eyes off me. She carefully tied down the tray and then slowly worked levers to lift me into a sitting position. Pudding served in a wax paper bowl. No spoons. Not after the last escape attempt. Harpica had been the only nurse brave enough to feed me after what I’d done to Caprice’s eye. “Can I feed myself?” I asked, trying to resist the urge to pull on my restraints. That made them all nervous.

The pegasus swallowed, looking around. There was a tiny little ping. A ‘yes’ tone. Some of the eyes painted on the walls were more literal than others. “O... okay. Please be good, Miss Fish,” she begged softly.

“I promise. I’ll be good.” No trying to smash heads in with food trays or choke my nurses with lime gelatin. She carefully reached down to unstrap my forehooves with her mouth, never taking her eyes off me. Slowly, she undid the padded cuffs on each, and I pulled them free. I rubbed forelegs—my flesh and blood limbs—a moment before I slowly lifted the bowl to my mouth. Not as neat as I’d hoped, but it was better than being spoonfed. The rice pudding tasted good. Probably laced with chemicals or something.

“The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you’re okay with it,” Harpica said quietly. “There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you’d like to attend.” And if I behave myself during the session. That was always implicit: no escape attempts. No trying to contact my friends. No attacking my captors. It was time to play along.

I didn’t answer. I simply nodded once.

She carefully took the plastic tray and empty bowl away, placing them back on her wings and stepping back from the bed. I simply lay there. See what a nice, polite pony I was? Two earth pony mare orderlies came in, standing by as the teal pegasus quietly undid the straps on my hind legs. None of them dared touch the magic-inhibiting ring on my horn. Smokey and Cuffs watched for the slightest chance I’d try something as Harpica got me out of bed and changed me, washed me, and

then put me in the mobile restraint harness, a tight collection of straps and rings snug enough that I could hobble around while running was still all but impossible, let alone fighting. They locked my forehooves together for extra safety while handling me.

Smokey went and fetched the wheelchair as Bluebelle stepped in from the hall to check the buckles. "Heard ya'll find this kinky..." she snickered. Harpica's eyes popped wide, and she opened her mouth to give a warning. There was a soft 'pong' noise of alarm sounding in the room and the hall, triggered by the unseen watchers. The blue earth pony's eyes popped wide as she staggered back and Smokey rushed in.

I just sat there. "What? It's not like I'd bite her ear off or something." That was so last week. Nevertheless, Smokey and Cuffs put the bit in my mouth and muzzled me. Better safe than sorry.

I sat back in the chair as Harpica pushed me down halls decorated with molded trees sticking branches out overhead. We passed the fountain where I'd almost drowned Lighthooves; the pegasus orderly had made a comment about me liking the taste of pony. There was calm and happy music being piped in as the doctors, nurses, and orderlies took care of the other patients. I was wheeled slowly past the nurses' station where Scalpel, Bonesaw, and Triage conferred with each other in their white lab coats.

Roses watched me with terrified eyes; I saw that they still hadn't finished healing her horn yet. She was talking with the chaplain, and the black unicorn looked at me with worried, soulful golden eyes. I looked away; he tried to visit me as often as possible, but I couldn't handle the guilt. I saw Charity going around selling Cutie Mark Crusader Cookies from a small table by the front door next to a wary-looking Bottlecap. I'd tried talking with them a few days ago; they shrank back as we passed by.

This hospital was built in the shape of an enormous horseshoe, and now Harpica pushed me through the central courtyard. I glanced up at the massive crag of Black Pony Mountain glittering in the noon sun as it loomed overhead. Through the gap in the building I could look out at the Hoofington Core. The dark towers glittered in the bright sunlight; their black surfaces seemed to capture the light and gather it in the sharp corners. It was the first time I'd seen the city as anything other than an ominous collection of broken monoliths. Maybe the imposing obsidian mountain had been inspiration for the design...

High above the city, huge blocks of clouds were being collected and shipped off to the south and west. I saw the round wheel of Thunderhead; the horizontal torus was a buzzing hive of skywagons and other air traffic. From the center of the Core a single dark spire jutted higher and higher into the air. It drew the eye ever upwards towards the dark blob at the apex. Shadowbolt Tower wasn't measured in feet or stories but in miles.

Suddenly there was a loud cry of a siren that rose like a low, mournful wail. The noise made the ponies take cover behind stout curved walls of marble. They didn't run. Many looked more annoyed than scared as patients were pushed behind the walls. "Ugh, again?" Smokey muttered. "Why don't they just vaporize Dawn Bay already?" I looked at a stone squirrel atop the molded stone barrier, its camera eye slowly swivelling to focus on us.

The blue mare shrugged. "You know how it is. We use our megaspells first and they'll fire their missiles and stuff. Hell, I heard that one Marauder say they're hesitatin' ta blast the zebra beachhead 'cause it'll make their rockets fly."

"Well, that and there's mountains in the way," Smokey muttered.

"As if that matters to the Hoof. Heard talk that if they put all the juice from the dams and power plants into the city they could just melt the mountains between here and Dawn Bay. We could cook them right off the coast and back across the strait."

"No way," Smokey countered, "there's not enough juice in all of Equestria for that." Then she paused. "Is there?"

"Pfft. This is the Hoof. There ain't nothin' we can't do," Cuffs drawled as she peeked out around the barrier. "What do you think? Dragon raid? Or think those stripes are pushin' with more tin zebras?"

"Dunno. I mean, last year, the news was talking about zebras on the verge of being wiped out. Now they've got tons," Smokey muttered. "Guess Image got their story wrong."

"Please don't sound an evacuation. Please don't sound an evacuation," Harpica whimpered over and over.

Smokey snorted in soft scorn. "Relax, Feathers. It's only a level one alert. We haven't had to evacuate into the city in years. Hoofington can't fall," the red mare said as she looked towards the Core where an ominous hum was starting. Green lights began to glow atop the towers. Emerald lightning gathered and flickered in the air around the buildings as the sound grew. "Ooooh, we're in for a light sh-"

A crackling buzz popped in the air over and over again. Green light filled the air as magic beams swept out from the tops of the towers out to the southeast, disappearing out of view. For thirty seconds they flickered back and forth. Then they went out. A second later a series of loud beeps sounded.

"All clear. Heh. Dragons, extra crispy," chuckled Cuffs. "Wonder how dragon tastes..."

"Ew..." Harpica said in disgust as she looked towards the city. From the tower streaked a wedge of crackling black lightning clouds heading to the southeast. A single rainbow stripe raced down the middle. "Oh! Look! It's Rainbow Dash!"

"Feathers is a fangirl," Smokey teased, and I looked over at Harpica flushing and lowering her eyes in embarrassment. I heard Smokey move behind me and immediately slammed back in the wheelchair. I didn't know what I hit, but I felt the pushbar on the back connect solidly with something. The wheelchair overbalanced and I smacked onto my back, looking up at the red mare covering the end of her nose, scowling down at me as blood trickled around her hoof.

"Is it broken?" Harpica asked in concern as Smokey glared down at me.

"Excuse me. Do you need any help?" asked a familiar-sounding voice. I looked up at the emerald-maned Marauder, the stallion who'd gone seven rounds with Rarity. Vanity stood by, looking down at me in concern. Behind him was the blue pegasus, Jetstream, and the yellow earth pony buck, Echo. The mare certainly looked like she'd seen much better days as she stared off into space while Echo gently nudged her shoulders. Her eyes were empty things, her purple mane was a complete disheveled mess, and as I watched, tiny blue feathers came off her wings.

"Thank you, Sir. We're fine. This is just one of our more difficult patients," Cuffs said. Vanity's horn glowed as he easily lifted me and set the wheelchair down pat.

"Really? I'm glad to hear it's not Jetstream anymore," Vanity said as he looked back at the blue pegasus.

She looked at Echo beside her. "Echo? Have you radioed in to command yet? We need a search party to find our missing ponies. We just left them out there! They need us!"

The small yellow earth pony looked at her, then at Vanity. He shook his head somberly and forced a sickly smile. "Yeah. Sure. I'm sure they'll scramble a search party any second."

"Good. Can't leave them behind. Damned stripes will kill them," she said as she

stared at nothing, then gestured with her hoof. "Twist, I need you to find Big Macintosh. Applesnack, you and Doof up on the roof. We might need covering fire. Psalm... keep an eye out for our missing. We have to bring him home," she whimpered as she hung her head. Little threads of her mane drifted down atop her shed blue feathers. "We have to find him."

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, trying to ignore the cameras tracking us. Echo moved closer, looking over at Jetstream. "Can't you help, Sir?" he quietly asked Vanity as he fiddled with his PipBuck.

I strained my ears to hear Vanity's tired voice. "We've modified, restored and removed her memories too much already, Echo. She can't tell what's real and what's not anymore. This is her helped."

"Twist! I think there are zebra infiltrators in the bushes. Big Macintosh! Where are you? Applesnack, cover Twist! Find him! Where'd he go? Where is he?" she shouted as she raced to and fro across the courtyard.

Once we'd crossed the courtyard and gone inside, we took an elevator up two floors and reached the offices and therapy rooms where they were trying to 'help' us. I closed my eyes as they wheeled me in, waiting for the doors decorated with four stars to close. I could hear the soft ticks of the clock pendulum in the corner. Glass cover; possible weapons. I could smell the leather-bound books on the bookcase; bludgeons and potential shields. There was a rustle and the sound of an envelope being opened. Letter opener. That's what I needed.

I opened my eyes and looked at Dr. Trueblood. The maroon doctor just smiled at me, his hoof on a tape recorder. He pushed a button, and it made the ripping noise again. "You were just thinking about snatching my letter opener to kill me, weren't you?" he asked as his horn glowed and he removed my bridle. He looked so calm, nice, even, in his sweater vest as he smiled and tapped his hooves before him. I'll give him his perks, he was a handsome stallion. There were pictures of his family on the shelf behind him.

"No. I was thinking what a nice day it is today. And how nice it would be to go to the concert," I said in slow, even and carefully controlled words. See how nice I was being? Nice.

If I moved fast enough, lunged before Smokey and Cuffs grabbed me, I might be able to tear his throat out with my teeth.

He adjusted his glasses and pulled a file out of his desk. "Well. Such lucidity must be rewarded," he said as he opened it up. "You've been with us for a few months, and it's nice to have a civil conversation with you. Since we've started your treatment, you've been responding nicely. No relapses to 'The Wasteland'?"

"No. I've been here," I replied softly. Of course, I had no idea where 'here' was. Holograms? Some sort of incredibly elaborate spell? Robots? Maybe I'd been captured by the Harbingers and taken to some facility for... who knew what? The last thing I remembered was running into a whole band of Seekers out in the rain and then... here. Now they were playing some kind of crazy mind game. It had to be that...

Because the alternative was that I was fucking batshit crazy, and that possibility scared me more than anything else.

"Indeed," he replied quietly as he flipped through the pages. "You're an interesting case, to be sure, given everything that's happened to you, Go Fish. Mother a distinguished captain in the Hoofington City Guard. Father deceased. Mother remarried, then divorced." He turned the pages. "You yourself were an initiate to the city guard until the... incident. Enough said about that at the moment," he said quickly and evenly, but Smokey put her hoof on my shoulder as I tensed. "After the incident, you were brought to us and told us all about how you grew up in a stable... were attacked and chased by some sort of monster... destroyed your own home... and were then wandering around a 'wasteland' wrecked by some horrific disaster."

"Something like that," I muttered.

"Some of the highlights..." he said as he lifted three pieces of paper before him. "There was a government conspiracy at the highest levels called the O.I.A., pieces of cursed 'starmetal' that sucked the souls out of ponies, and some sort of evil lurking at the heart of the city. You were hunted and persecuted by numerous groups. You made friends with Morning Glory, P-21, Rampage, and others... some of whom joined you in your travels. Oh, and I was an undead monster behind most of it." He chuckled as he lowered the papers. "I particularly like that bit."

"You would," I replied, narrowing my eyes as I jerked reflexively against my harness and chair restraints.

He sighed and pressed his hooves together. "Since you've arrived here, you've proven to be the most hostile patient in Happyhorn Gardens' history. Numerous escape attempts. Assaults on the staff. If it weren't for your condition... well, it wouldn't be fair to hold you responsible given your mental state. Still, after what you

did to Nurse Roses, not to mention poor Doof..."

There was an awkward shuffling behind me as I kept my eyes on his. "Well, he was trying to kill me at the time."

"He was your orderly at the time," the maroon stallion countered as he lifted a peppermint candy and slipped it into his mouth, "and he was the one who was willing to climb all the way up onto that ledge to get you down safely." He smiled evenly. "There's quite a few in the Ministry of Peace who think we should simply scour away your mind entirely, a complete magical lobotomy for our protection and so that you could have a second chance. Traditional therapy techniques simply aren't working, and our attempts at modifying your memories only seem to be making things worse." He tapped his hooves together for a few seconds, waiting for my reaction. I didn't give him one.

Finally, he sighed and smiled tiredly. "Fortunately, your growing lucidity these last few weeks has put those plans on hold. You're starting to come to grips with reality. It's our hope you can be made whole again to be a productive, happy, healthy young mare," he said with a sigh and a look of genuine concern. "Hopefully, once you're cured, you'll be able to atone for what you've done."

I closed my eyes, imagining dead ponies I'd killed, who'd died from my mistakes. They weren't just bits of crazy dredged up from my head. I'd killed them.

"Right," I replied flatly, "except I don't believe you. This is obviously a ploy by somepony. Maybe you're with the Harbingers, trying to get me to work along. Or maybe you made a backup of Chimera somewhere and copied yourself and me and are trying to get something out of me. Or the Goddess got bored and finally decided to add a little Blackjack to her Unity. I don't know which."

He arched his brows. "Really? Are those really the only options you'll consider?" I glowered at him, and he sighed again. "Let me ask you this. Which is more likely? That you are the sole survivor of a doomed stable after a horrific apocalypse, carrying a mysterious PipBuck, struggling against impossible odds as you unravel a plot centuries old, or that you're the victim of some psychological trauma that's resulted in the creation of a post-apocalyptic wasteland where you could be the protagonist blasting and shooting everyone who has caused you harm?"

I scowled, not prepared to even entertain the idea that everything I knew was a lie. I remembered Jetstream in the courtyard, thought of me chattering to friends that didn't exist. The problem was that it was such a seductive notion. I might not have understood what was going on, but the idea that all the shit I'd been through was

somewhat a dream was both tempting and insulting. No more EC-1101. No more Harbingers. No more questions and mysteries I wasn't smart enough to unravel. Just... going back to a normal life.

If everything I knew in the stable had been a lie, could I even find normal on a map anymore?

He'd been saying this for days now. No matter how I cursed, insulted, or struggled, he just smiled and repeated his comments that I'd been delusional for more than a month in a psychotic break. But none of that was helping me get out of here. I needed something else. I couldn't fight.

I'd have to engage.

"Not to say I even begin to believe you," I said slowly, "but why don't you tell me who I am and why I'm here?"

He actually looked surprised. "Who you are is fairly simple. Your name is Go Fish. You lived with your mother, Gin Rummy, in the southwest part of Hoofington overlooking the Luna Dam. Your father died when you were just a filly. You went to school at Roosehoof Academy; not a stellar student, though. Worked briefly at Megamart before you also joined the Hoofington Guard. You were stationed in Flankfurt." With each fact, he pulled papers and photographs from the folder and set them before me. Birth records from Hoofington General. Report card and a student ID. My tax return from Megamart. A picture of me, Marmalade, and Daisy in guard barding that looked awfully similar to what I'd worn in Stable 99.

Fabrications? Maybe all of this was some sort of soul dream by the Goddess... except that I didn't imagine the Goddess being this subtle. She wasn't exactly the trickiest pony I'd come across. I closed my eyes as I frowned. I really wished that Morning Glory or P-21 were here. Even if they wouldn't make sense in this place. "So why am I here then?" Then I saw his sad expression and frowned. "What?" He shook his head.

"Never mind. You've made phenomenal progress in the last few minutes. I don't want to undermine that. We can continue this tomorrow?" the maroon unicorn said with a faint, sad smile as he folded his hooves in front of him.

"I'm not a baby." I scowled at him. "Your crazy theory is just a crazy theory. Why would I imagine a world that's even worse than this one? For all I know, if this world is real, this is probably some freaky secret project of the O.I.A. and Goldenblood."

"That would be quite a feat... if this Office of Interministry Affairs existed." He

trotted over to his bookcase and levitated several books, then set them down on his desk. “I’ve looked everywhere I could and consulted both the Ministry Mares and the government. No such office exists, nor does a Director Goldenblood.” He folded his hooves before him. “Like the Wasteland, the O.I.A. is something you created. Something, and somepony, to blame for the wrongness in the world.” He sighed and shook his head. “You aren’t the first one to make up dark conspiracies, but really, don’t you think that if the ministries wanted to do secret projects, they’d just do them? What would be the point of a intermediary?”

I frowned and shook my head hard. It had to be a lie. It had to be, because otherwise... “Why? You still haven’t answered that. Why would I... would anypony... create the Wasteland as an escapist fantasy?”

“It’s an interesting question, to be sure. One driven by a mixture of self-aggrandizement and self-loathing. Only by understanding this dichotomy does your mental illness make sense,” he said, then gave a worried frown. “Are you certain you wish to discuss this, Go Fish?”

“My name is Blackjack,” I said flatly, jerking my forelegs against my restraints and making the orderlies put their hooves on my shoulders. I seethed as I looked up at my captors and then back at Trueblood. “And yeah, I do. Just keep the vocabulary around grade school level, okay?”

He seemed to be contemplating me a moment. “You just demonstrated part of it.” He lifted his left hoof. “On one hoof, you have the incompetent bungler, the failure, the humiliation and embarrassment. You’re the pony that’s not strong enough. The pony who’s not smart enough. The pony who is too reckless.” He lifted his right hoof. “And on the other, you have the paragon. A pony who is a moral, physical, and psychological powerhouse. A pony who can win and succeed at anything. A pony who is unique... exceptional... legendary, even. The dichotomy... the meeting of these two opposites—” He brought his two hooves together. “—results in a pony who believes she must suffer in a world of misery but who is uniquely able to thrive in such an environment.”

I screwed up my face in bafflement. Therapist ponies were crazy; that was the only explanation. “You know, you made more sense when you were trying to kill me. Why don’t you just fall back to that?”

He chuckled and lowered his hooves. “I understand if it’s difficult to understand, but it’s the only diagnosis for your particular mental illness that comes close, approximating the wild swings of manic-depressive tendencies with the extreme personality

disorders of schizophrenia."

"Small words, please?" I begged with a sickly smile. I didn't like how... sure... he was acting.

"This Blackjack persona of yours is an identity that can superimpose these two extremes. Such a struggle exists in everypony, but it achieved such an extreme case in you that a schism from reality was inevitable. Blackjack is weak enough to get raped but strong enough to endure. Blackjack is tough enough to face down the aggression and criticism of others but weak enough not to become a tyrant. Where Go Fish was unable to handle the problems in her life, Blackjack could take them on... and take them on... and take on even more." He sighed and ate another mint. "At least up to a certain point."

"Why?" I asked with a little frown. "What could have been so horrible in this life that the Wasteland would be an escape?" My rear hoof tapped rapidly against the footrest of the wheelchair.

"To start, your father dying of cancer when you were young. As I recall, weren't you dying of cancer at some time in the Wasteland?" he said as he got a piece of paper and cleared his throat before reading aloud. "I smiled at him, and he stood and trotted with me to the hospital. And they gave him a shot, and he went away forever." I stared at him in horror, remembering the faint striped mane of that buck so long ago. But... that'd been in Stable 99. And he'd died because he was retired... right?

The maroon unicorn sighed softly as he took another paper. "Then there was the sexual assault you suffered at the Hoofington Marina. Nothing nearly as dramatic as nailing your hooves to the floor. Just one classmate on a boat trip who thought 'no means yes' and left you feeling humiliated and ashamed. I recall you saying you witnessed a similar event. Blackjack was so gracious to her rapists that she spared them. Go Fish didn't even have the courage to point him out in a lineup."

"Shut up! That's not true!" I shouted at him, feeling the tears running down my cheeks. "I was trying to save Scotch Tape! And I did. I saved her!" I struggled frantically against my bonds.

Trueblood closed the folder. "I'm sorry. Clearly this is too upsetting for you. I apologize."

I clenched my eyes shut. It was all a lie. One big heap of manure. It had to be. "Shut up. I don't want your apologies." I took several deep breaths, feeling the thudding of

my heart; something I hadn't felt in days. Slowly I looked at him; at the pity in his eyes. "Why is it that this place is filled with ponies from the Wasteland, except for my friends?"

"You populated your fantasy with ponies you've known in your life, assigning them motives and facades according to your attitudes. Some were at random, and others are the result of various traumas. Steel Rain's violation of your body cast him in the role of villain... and you destroyed his base and power in your fantasy as you couldn't in the real world. As for your 'friends,'" he said solemnly, "I suspect they represent larger themes and psychological needs." He stood and trotted around closer to me. "Given your dissatisfaction with life in general, I think that you've blanked out or replaced all your memories of the real world with that of the Wasteland. A place where you can simultaneously be both hero and victim. Where you can matter and affect the larger world."

"It's not true. It's not," I said as I closed my eyes, feeling the tears flow. My friends weren't just in my imagination. They weren't simply a dream of what I wished were so. They were real. They were!

Weren't they?

I didn't give in. Not right away, at least. I went to the little musical performances, talked with Trueblood about how messed up my brain was, and spent countless sleepless nights staring up at those painted pegasi fillies on the ceiling of my room. They looked dead to me... all forty-two of them. They still kept me strapped up; still didn't trust me. After what I'd apparently done, I couldn't blame them. The things I could remember... now embarrassed me. I even made a few small apologies to Smokey. It didn't help. And I'd apparently done even more now that I wasn't in the Wasteland any more.

Life in Hoofington revolved around the attacks. There was an alarm for different sections of the city. Missile attacks came every few days. A buzzer meant to get inside shelters. A siren meant to evacuate and board an emergency subway to the Core. Beeps were for general alerts. The news gave constant droning reports of losses suffered by zebra forces. Sometimes I swore they repeated as if the news of the day and last week were interchangeable. There wasn't a real feeling of time in Hoofington. There was today. Today was better than yesterday. Tomorrow would be worse if you didn't work hard. I yearned for a date to pin down when things were.

Had I been here a month? Two? Three?

I really wished I could get a good night's sleep. Trueblood swore that that would come when I could face what I'd done to send me into the Wasteland.

Sweet Celestia, I felt lonely. Nopony here wanted to be my friend. They all looked at me as if they expected me to spring on them and smash their skulls in. Maybe I would. Maybe I had.

I was learning a life that was utterly alien and dreadfully familiar at the same time. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed visited me like they were checking up on a rabid mantis, but they talked to me about school at Roosehoof Academy and my poor test scores and frequent visits to detention and Dean Hardy. I wanted him to visit so that I could see if he really was like the hovering robot I remembered; apparently that wasn't possible, though. Keystone talked to me about working security at Megamart. Daisy and Marmalade were snotty and quiet respectively; the Flankfurt Trio, we'd been called.

Apparently, we'd been rather shitty guards even before I snapped.

Eventually, I was allowed to be around other ponies without being muzzled. Then allowed to walk short distances and to wash myself. The horn ring remained strapped in place, though. Apparently, after what I'd done to Doof, every stallion in the facility insisted on it. Harpica and the other nurses became my constant companions; the staff quickly learned that I wouldn't harm meek ponies. On the other hoof, I still couldn't be left around stallions. I felt... twitchy... when I was around them. Trueblood said I had wartime stress disorder; anxiety was to be expected. I wasn't allowed near any of the young visitor ponies seeing other patients, though.

I was terrified to find out why.

I was also learning about life outside the Wasteland. In the hospital, at least, it wasn't much different from the stable. You did what you were told and life was pleasant. I graduated from gelatin to fresh apples and carrots... after weeks here, the thought of a cannibal plague seemed almost cartoonish. I was surprised at how tasteless the celery was, though, which was odd given how much the other patients liked it. Once or twice I caught myself trying to eat the spoons; of course, nothing happened. Because I wasn't a cyberpony. I wasn't even Blackjack.

I was just Go Fish. A nobody. Not hunted for my PipBuck. Not hated for being the destroyer of Steel Rangers. Not a Reaper. I'd never met a brave pony called LittlePip or her lover Homage. Never found a terrified mare under a floor grill. Never

met a pony who couldn't die. Never saved my best friend from killing himself in a bathroom. Never met an alicorn who connected to the minds and souls of a goddess. Never helped a little filly avoid the embarrassment of wetting the bed.

I lay at night for hours imagining the roof was cracked and stained. Sometimes I could almost see it if I tried hard enough. I'd stare and a brown patch would start in the middle and creep slowly outwards. The pastels would dim and bleed together. Slowly, the cracks would grow and spread, and eventually flakes of plaster would fall and leave holes peering into black spaces above. I'd feel my heart still. My breathing would trail to nothing, and for a moment I'd be Blackjack again.

Then I'd blink, and it all went away. And I'd just curl up and cry, missing my friends and wishing they were with me.

On the other hoof... I got to see Mom again. It was the first thing I'd looked forward to since I got here; if she was alive, then that meant that I hadn't killed my own stable. That I hadn't killed those foals. That as violent and disturbed as I might be, there was some hope for me in the everafter.

I'd been told for three days she'd be coming. I'd prepared myself. We were in his office. I was restrained and sedated. I was given five minutes warning. One minute warning. Was I ready? Was I?

She stepped in. I took one look at her lavender coat and purple and red striped mane and loving pink eyes. She smiled like she had when I'd first taken my oath to protect and serve Stable 99. It was the one and only time I'd seen her cry in public. Our eyes shimmered with tears.

Then I saw her head on a stake. I smelled the chlorine gas. I heard Midnight scream that word, echoing endlessly in my ears.

I screamed, and for an instant I was back in the Wasteland. I was in the corroded and darkened world; his fancy books were rotten rows on crumbling shelves. His desk was smashed and twisted, and that nice clock had frozen forever in rust and decay. Water dripped and splattered through holes in the roof; trickling away through gaps in the floor. I screamed and wailed and thrashed. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be there.

I couldn't be anywhere.

"No, Blackjack. No..." Scotch Tape whimpered as she backed further and further

into the corner of the bedroom in Star House. The thing that had been Glory... pretending to be Glory... lay in a broken, bloody pool. Rampage was out on the stairs, a piece of the banister permanently wedged in her brain. I'd tied it there to make sure her regeneration couldn't push it out. She'd been almost as tough to take down as the real Rampage.

There was just one more. "No, Blackjack! No!" she screamed as she raised her legs in futility.

Hooves came up. Hooves went down. Hooves came up. Hooves went down...

"So. How have you been, Fishie?" Mom asked me, her voice low as she looked down into the teacup on the table in front of her in the courtyard. She didn't drink tea; neither did I. But we could both sit there and watch our respective cups cool. It'd taken four tries before I could finally spend time with her without flipping out.

In Happyhorn, that was called progress.

"Crazy," I replied, dared a glance at her, then back down again. Good, no head on a stake flashback this time. "How much crazy I've been depends on what Sangu... er... what Doctor Trueblood says," I amended quickly, trying to take the sting out of it.

"I'm sorry," Mom said softly, "I shouldn't have asked that."

"It's fine," I said, reaching out a hoof to her. She hesitated, waiting for the ping or pong. A ping, and she reached out and held my hoof between hers. The nurses only trusted me with one hoof out of the restraints. "I just... this... I'm the one who's sorry."

"Oh no, I'm much more sorry than you," Mom quipped, and we shared a little laugh. Very little, quite fragile, and it ended in a sigh. "I shouldn't have made you go into my field. I should have respected what you wanted." She patted my hoof gently. "Your music never seemed... important. Not compared to being a guard."

"Well, considering in Stable 99 none of us got a choice, I guess it doesn't matter now. Honestly... being Security isn't so bad. After all..." I risked another look at her, but she just blinked at me. It was just a few seconds... but for those seconds she seemed completely lost in thought.

And then she wasn't. "After all, Security saves ponies," she said, exactly as I re-

membered. She patted my hoof tenderly. "I hope we get to leave here soon. I'm taking a leave of absence," she said with a smile. "We should go somewhere. Maybe Manehattan? Somewhere there aren't raid sirens every day? Just you and me?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think I'd have been able to have any kind of life like this. Not now. Not ever... I simply wept as I nodded.

She moved around the table and hugged me. There were several 'pong's sounded, along with orderlies moving quickly out into the yard. "Don't worry... we'll make it all right," she promised in my ear. But this was wrong. My mother wouldn't do this. The stable always came first! I was the fuck up! But... I didn't care. I hugged her... tighter... and tighter as my breathing became more and more erratic. But I couldn't let go. I couldn't, even as she struggled. The orderlies were fighting to pull my hoof off from around her neck. But I couldn't let her go.

She'd make everything alright, wouldn't she?

Apparently, the sight of my mother had triggered a relapse. I was back to being locked up and restrained in the timeless room. The nurses talked about my 'instability' in low voices. But fears about me launching into attacks didn't go anywhere... simply because I didn't care. Where before I'd been in the Wasteland, now I was simply back on the mattress staring at the ceiling. Still, I jerked my hooves against the restraints as something to do that was more than lie there like a corpse.

Harpica came in, washing me and caring for me without complaint. The mare didn't do much, or say much about herself. "The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you're okay with it," Harpica said quietly. "There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you'd like to attend."

I really didn't want to. I didn't like this place. The patients staring vacantly out into space or talking to themselves. Recipients of too many memory modifications and horrors of the war. Happyhorn wasn't a place for healing; I suspected that Trueblood went through so much effort with me because I was a long shot chance to actually get better. For everypony else, this was a hospice for the mad, a place to keep them safe and sound and out of sight before they died.

Harpica didn't say anything as she stood there, and I frowned as I glanced over at her. Then she suddenly added, "Octavia is playing." That brought to mind the posters I'd seen in her apartment and the performance she'd given in Blueblood Manor. I could remember her music so well...

Okay. I could get out of bed to hear that.

I let one of the orderlies, Mallet, the caramel colored unicorn, strap me into the wheelchair. Then we were out in the halls again.

Suddenly, I was hit by an explosive pressure wave... and yet, I didn't move. In an instant, everypony disappeared, as did my restraints and wheelchair. I sat there, blinking in shock as I felt my horn bare of the magic suppression ring. The hospital was empty, and every surface flickered in my vision for several seconds. What had just happened?

And why was somepony crying?

I trotted to a door to my left and carefully pushed on the four white stars on its veneer to open it a crack. Inside was a pale red stallion lying on his back staring up at the ceiling like so many others here at the hospital. Shaking him with her little hooves was a young pink filly standing on a chair. "Wake up! Please wake up, big brother! Please! You're... you're too tough for this, Rumble. Remember? You could take any ganger on the east side!" she cried as she shook his limp body. If I hadn't seen his chest rise and fall, I would have thought he was dead. "Brother! Wake up! Please!"

Another flicker, and the filly was gone. I rubbed my eyes and blinked at where she'd just been standing. I was losing it. I was going completely over the edge! It was nighttime now, and Rumble lay there just as he had when his sister had shaken him seconds ago.

Then I saw movement beside me and I leapt to the side. I opened my mouth to apologize to the orderly or nurse, but my apology disappeared as I gaped at the late night visitor slinking in wearing a black veil and fancy dress decorated with sequins. Purple curls spilled from under the veil. She approached the bedside and lifted the translucent cloth aside.

Why would a buck like Rumble warrant a visit from a Ministry Mare? Especially this mare!

Rarity looked down at the limp buck with clear unease. She utterly ignored my presence as she sat beside him. "Number seven," she said quietly as she peeled the sheet back. For a moment, I was certain that she was doing something indecent, but her eyes were drawn to his flank. His blank flank.

"You'd think after seven failures, we would have finally gotten it right..." Rarity said as she lifted a book from her saddlebag. As somepony who'd seen more treated

hide than I had any right to, I could say with authority that it wasn't like any book I could ever imagine Rarity allowing on her person. The cover was bound in black and silver gray in the pattern of a zebra glyphmark. The sight of it sent my mane squirming as I shivered involuntarily. "I'm following the instructions perfectly. So why isn't it working?" she asked as she stroked her hoof over the dark surface. The hiss of her hoof against the leather cover sounded like whispers.

"Rarity?" a mare called softly from the doorway, making both of us jump. The book was whisked behind her poofy-curled purple tail as Rarity turned towards the door. There stood a rather exhausted looking Fluttershy. Her pink mane, shot though with a few strands of premature white, hung in disheveled sheets across her face. Worry lines were making their way slowly but inexorably across her features. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah... yes..." Rarity stammered as she grinned nervously, glancing back at Rumble and then at the concerned yellow pegasus. "Well, I'd gotten a report about mysterious attacks in Hightower Jail, darling. I was in the area, so I decided to see if my editors were getting creative again! That's all," she said with a nervous laugh. It was one that Fluttershy didn't share as she walked to the bed.

"Have you heard anything else about it?" Fluttershy asked quietly before tugging the blanket back in place over Rumble. There was something oddly firm in Fluttershy's question, and it made Rarity strain her smile even more.

"And how would I have heard anything about this? I don't even know what is wrong with the poor dear!" she said as she gestured with her hoof.

"There isn't anything wrong with him. Physically... medically... his body is just fine. Even his mind is intact, with all his memories. Whatever was done to him was completely outside the experience of unicorn magic." She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I've considered bringing Zecora in... or even trying to find medical experts in Yellow River and seeing if we can convince them to help us."

"You wouldn't dare!" Rarity hissed, narrowing her eyes at Fluttershy as her tail tightened. "They're vicious, savage, horrible fiends." Then, when she saw Fluttershy's shocked expression, her words faltered. "They... um... they're so... dirty and... garish..." Finally, she composed herself. "Besides, it's firmly against Luna's rules to associate with zebra mystics."

"If they can help somepony like Rumble or the others..." Fluttershy began to say quietly as she smoothed his sheets, "I'll do what I have to to help."

Rarity sighed. "Fluttershy. Please, as tragic as this is, he wasn't anypony important. Just an east side gang member with a history of assaults and attacks on others..." she said in a subdued voice as she surreptitiously transferred the black book to her bag.

"And how do you know that?" Fluttershy asked in a voice barely above a murmur.

"I... I... read it in the report, of course." Rarity laughed nervously with a guilty grin.

Fluttershy didn't look at her friend as she sat besides Rumble's bed. "No. How do you know he's not important?" Rarity's grin melted as she looked at Fluttershy's back. The pegasus never raised her voice. "I know he probably wasn't the best pony, but he has a sister. Tumble. She's been here almost every day she can. He's her whole world." The soft disappointment in her voice was worse than any accusation. "Everyone is important to someone," she said quietly.

"Fluttershy... I..." Rarity began before her ears folded and she looked away. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. It's just... with everything going on... I didn't mean what I said."

Fluttershy turned and looked at her with that sad, searching expression. "I've got six other patients just like him, Rarity. All from Hightower... all missing their cutie marks. They're not dead, nor have they had their memory erased. They're just broken... and I don't know how to help them." Her teal eyes looked into Rarity's darker eyes with sadness. "Do you?"

"I... I..." Rarity stammered as she glanced at the bag she'd tucked the book into. For a moment, I was certain that she was going to say something, but she slumped. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. I can't. I wish I could, but..."

But she couldn't meet Fluttershy's eyes.

Slowly, the yellow pegasus turned away and looked towards the bed once more. "I understand," Fluttershy almost whispered. "It was good to see you again, Rarity. I hope we can meet again in Ponyville soon. I miss our little meetings at the spa. I miss our friends." She bowed her head slightly as she put a hoof on the bed. "Sometimes... I think we made a big mistake somewhere. Not stopping the war when it started... not getting involved sooner... or getting tangled up in these horrible ministries. I liked being a nurse so much more than being a Ministry Mare." She sniffed and shook her head. "Please... Rarity... when this war is over... can we please... please... go back to Ponyville? Can we make it like it was again? All of us together?"

Rarity's mouth moved silently as she held out a hoof, tears running down her pale

cheeks and sending her eyeliner dripping. “I... I... We will, Fluttershy. Somehow. I’ll find some way we can all be together again. There must be a way,” she said as she looked over her shoulder at the bag containing the black book.

Then there was a flicker, and they were gone. The bed was empty, the corners tucked in. I sank to the floor, hugging my aching head. “What is going on?” I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut.

“Ah. Here you are,” Trueblood said a moment later. “We were wondering where you’d escaped to.”

I stood and pointed at the bed. “I just saw Fluttershy! And Rarity! Explain that in crazy brain doctor talk, Trueblood!” I snapped as I whirled upon him.

He blinked at me slowly, taking in my triumphant smirk. Then he said flatly, “Because two months ago you escaped and eavesdropped on the Ministry Mares while they were looking over a patient. Given the state of your memory, it’s not surprising you forgot until now. Then you saw the room and it brought the memory back. Fairly simple,” he said with a small shrug and smile. “I hope that terrorist bomb didn’t send you back to the Wasteland again. I understand it detonated quite close to the hospital grounds.” Yet he didn’t look concerned at all.

“No. No. I’m fine,” I said with a frown as I looked at the empty bed. “What happened to Rumble?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. It wasn’t like he was scratching his head and searching his memory; it was like a pause where he simply froze. Then he smiled broadly. “Full recovery last week. I understand he’s back with his sister. Never did find out exactly how his mind was cut off from his body, but the spell wore off eventually.”

I sighed and rubbed the magic restraint on my horn, then shook my head. “How’d I get free?” I asked as I looked around.

“When the bomb went off you bolted. Asked why things always blow up around you. You weren’t secured properly and got loose,” he said as he smiled and added, “Don’t worry. You didn’t hurt anypony this time.”

This time? Thank goodness for small favors. I looked at the bed again. “Fluttershy and Rarity were friends, weren’t they?”

“I’m not really in a position to say,” Trueblood replied. Then he paused again, sitting and cocking his head. “You don’t think they are?”

I thought about what I’d seen. It was like two ponies who were friends once and

desperately wanted to be so again, but that silent accusation and that reticence were walls that neither could overcome. I thought of that shy yellow figurine unable to call Rarity on her deception; the glamorous white figurine wanting to give anything except the truth. P-21 and I'd been like that; he'd been more angry than Fluttershy and I'd been more clueless than Rarity, but we'd had that tension keeping us apart.

Had they overcome it?

"Why am I here, Doctor?" I asked in low tones, my body fighting to maintain reasonable volumes.

"To get better," he answered simply. "Why else would anypony come here?" I stared at the maroon unicorn for the longest time as he simply stood there with that stupid smile on his face. "When you no longer flee to the Wasteland... when you can accept what you did... you'll be able to go."

"And what did I do?" My voice was low and tense.

"You know exactly what you did," he answered, equally soft. "You're trying to hide from it in madness. But you can't hide forever, Go Fish. Madness is like nausea; your mind is trying to purge itself of something you've shoved into your subconscious. It invented the Wasteland as a place for you to hide. Sooner or later, one of two things will happen: you will stop attempting to block the memory and face it..."

"Or?"

"Or you'll die," he finished with a small shrug. Then he smiled. "Now, care to go to the concert?"

It was rather hard to enjoy Octavia's performance after that little exchange. The music was as beautiful as I remembered, but it had none of the life or joy I imagined. I may as well have been listening to it on my PipBuck as seeing her perform. The other attendants gave her rapt attention; neither talking nor making disturbances during the hour long show. No sirens. Nopony getting up and going to the bathroom in the middle of one of her pieces. Even the stomping applause was monotonous.

I hated this place. And I was starting to hate everypony in it. That hate wasn't something that transferred perfectly from my memories in the Wasteland. In the Wasteland, I had a complicated relationship with Charity. Here, she simply sat by the front door selling candy. The yellow filly had none of the mercenary mercantile drive of the Crusader I had known. She was simply there. As I was wheeled past

the next day on the way to a session I glared at her and her little downcast eyes.

"Hey. Hey kid!" I said as I was wheeled past. She looked up with that stupid expression. "If I get out of here I'm going to fucking kill you!" I screamed at her as loud as I could. Charity and Bottlecap just looked at me. That's all. Just looked at me. The caramel Mallet put the bridle back on me. I got another lecture from the doctor about 'regressing'.

The next day, there was the filly, sitting behind her little table with her cookies, her eyes downcast. No nurses beside her. No orderlies standing watch. It might as well have been that I'd never said a single word to the filly.

I stared up at the still fillies in my room for hours. I jerked and jerked and jerked against my restraints. I wanted to tear down those painted pegasi and smash down the frolicking kids on the wall. I jerked... and jerked... and jerked...

And with a brittle snap, the pin holding the foreleg restraints to the bed gave way... I lay there, staring at my bound hooves. I should just lie here. They were watching from the cameras anyway. They'd pong an alarm. I'd be restrained again.

Then I looked at the door. It was open.

It was never just open. Something was going on.

I lifted my hooves to my mouth and carefully unbuckled them. When they were free, I undid the belt across my chest, and then my waist. Finally I heaved forward and carefully undid the bindings on my rear hooves. It was hard, but I was able to tug the straps loose and pull my hooves free.

I dropped to my feet and made my way into the hall. It was quiet. Well lit. Empty. There was a shimmer, and a ring of brown rippled down the curved hallway ahead of me. No brain... I need to stay here right now. Here. I trotted forward and then I spotted something teal next to a spatter of blood. I picked up the severed wing in my hooves; looked the blood trail leading to the nurses' station. There lay the body of Harpica.

Next to it was Bottlecap.

Next to that...

The bodies were everywhere. Shot. Stabbed. Sliced. Pink and gray entrails were scattered like glistening rope across the halls. Some had been blown apart, with necks and legs ending in bloody stumps. How could anypony have done this so silently? I hadn't heard a thing. I remembered Lancer's rifle. A silence talisman.

One that allowed a pony to go on a bloody spree that no one could hear. Hot blood stained my hooves, but that hardly mattered. I just wished I could get the magic restraint off my horn. Damn thing must have had a lock or something on the strap.

I needed a weapon. I had my hooves. Not metal, just flesh and bone, but they'd have to do. My mind was whirring; zebra infiltrator? No. There was no point to this butchery. An infiltrator would sneak in and out. Escaped prisoner? Had somepony snapped? Maybe. They'd have to be an exceptional killer though. A real fighter.

And there was just such a fighter who was a patient here.

I started keeping my eyes up towards the vaulted ceiling. If Jetstream was behind this, she'd attack from above. Thank goodness I'd gone through all those days of practice without my horn. Of course, trying to stop a psychopathic Marauder might be more than I could handle on my own...

Or could I handle her at all? I wasn't Security. I wasn't even Blackjack. I was Go Fish. What was I thinking?

I was thinking... somepony needed to stop this.

I might not know exactly who I was... Blackjack or Go Fish... but either way, I'd been a security mare of some kind.

And Security saves ponies. It was the first thought I'd had in a long while that felt solid. I heard the sound of fighting from the front entrance. Maybe... maybe if I could do this... maybe then I could talk about leaving.

I reached the front entrance foyer just in time for a blue streak to fly across my vision. The pony at the head of it smashed into the waterfall fountain with a crunch of bone, a snap of wings, and the heavy crack of shattered concrete before collapsing into the bloody basin with a thud. Jetstream's eyes maintained their distant stare even in death, her head dangling limply over the lip of the fountain bowl.

Rising from a smashed table was a dark form, a familiar form. She wore black riot armor that covered every inch of her. Slowly, her helmeted head turned towards me, looking over her shoulder. I heard the dry, raspy breaths taken in through her black mask's breather. The hollow, soulless chuckle. She cradled something in her hooves... something small and bloody.

I charged the creature. Wild. Stupid. Amateurish. I leapt on her back, throwing my hooves around her neck, and she erupted into a bloody frenzy of kicking and heaving. I couldn't kill her. Couldn't beat her. All I could do was fight until she

inevitably won. The fight was all that mattered. And maybe, if I fought hard enough, I could give that filly a second chance.

There was another lurch, and I went spinning end over end and tumbled into darkness.

I was outside, in the courtyard. How'd I gotten out here? What had happened to the mare in black? Had I beaten her? Driven her off? No. I hadn't. Couldn't.

Then what was I seeing? I perched atop one of the blast walls, looking down at the seat below me. A blue pegasus mare sitting by herself. Her mane had gone prematurely gray, her eyes lost and empty. There were others talking, laughing, enjoying the roses in bloom or taking in the music on the stage. It was the most normal scene I'd seen since I'd watched Rarity and Fluttershy. I couldn't move. I couldn't even blink. I could only watch.

Then a red mare with glittering red-enamelled hooves approached. "Lieutenant Jetstream?"

Her eyes twitched and she bowed her head. "N'more..." she muttered.

"Lieutenant Jetstream?" she asked again, sitting on the bench beside the pegasus. I knew her... from Blueblood's terminal. The O.I.A. pony... but was she really, or was that just a role I'd cooked up for her? "Lieutenant. I've got vital news for you to hear." The mare took a folder out of her saddlebags and pulled out a picture. "We've discovered a critical P.O.W. camp deep in zebra territory."

"What?" she asked as her glassy eyes focused on the picture.

"These are images we smuggled out of the zebra capital," the red mare said as she held up pictures of ponies held in a facility similar to Yellow River... only they didn't look like I'd imagined prisoners to look in such a camp. Too clean. Yet Jetstream looked at them sharply now. "They're prisoners the zebras have concentrated in Roam. And we've identified two particular prisoners. Sergeant Major Big Macintosh and Lance Corporal Stonewing."

"What?" Jetstream gasped. "How? They... they kept telling me they were dead."

The red mare nodded sympathetically. "Easier to bury and mourn a war hero than to hear they were abducted in the chaos of the assassination attempt, Lieutenant," the red mare with the glittery hooves said in low, serious tones. "You were right.

You were right, but the government simply dusted off their hooves and forgot about them.”

“Nooo... how could they?” Jetstream shook, sobbing brokenly as she folded the pictures in her hooves. Tears peppered the folded images. “I knew it... I knew it... they couldn’t be dead...” she whispered, then wiped her eyes before looking at the red mare. “But... why are you coming to me? Who are you?” she asked as she stared in shock.

“You can call me Garnet. I’m just a concerned pony working with the ministries who’s come up with a way to bring our boys home. But to do it, we need a mare who’s exceptionally determined; a flier who won’t let anything stop her from reaching the zebra capital.” She sighed, bowing her head. “We’ve tried approaching the Shadowbolts and the army... neither were willing to take the chance.” She looked at Jetstream with conviction. “You’re our last option, Lieutenant. Otherwise, we may never see them again.”

“Rainbow Dash wouldn’t do it?” Garnet shook her head solemnly. Jetstream narrowed her eyes. “Of course not... what’s one more pegasus?” I could see the gaping holes in Garnet’s story, but Jetstream shook as she smiled in bliss. The joy at being needed to do what her mind demanded she do was almost too much for her to bear.

“What do you need me to do?” Jetstream asked as she stared straight ahead. Garnet smiled in satisfaction as she dug out a small hoof-sized talisman. The glyph within glowed faintly; I’d seen them before. Glory had salvaged a dozen of them from a Robronco store back in Flank. A targeting talisman, but this one seemed far more intricate than those had been.

“Get this to the zebra capital and wait. When everything is ready, it will glow. Tap it twice and we will trigger a mass teleportation megaspell to take every pony within ten miles safely back to Canterlot. You don’t need to find the camp yourself. Just stay within the zebra capital and evade capture by any means. It should be charged and ready in four days. You have that long to reach Roam. Can you do it, Lieutenant Jetstream?”

Jetstream didn’t speak. She didn’t need to. With a few photographs, Garnet had given her redemption. Garnet opened up the saddlebag and put the talisman in place. “Here are seven days of rations and some basic equipment to help you evade their patrols. Stay in the city and be careful. Be safe. Be ready for the talisman’s signal.”

The blue pegasus hugged Garnet tightly. "Thank you," she sobbed. Garnet rolled her eyes and patted her shoulders stiffly. When Jetstream released her, the red mare passed her the saddlebags and then reached down to a small bracelet the pegasus wore on her hoof. It was so small and flush that I nearly missed it; I wondered if it was magically adhered. Garnet touched a talisman to it, and the bracelet popped open. The red mare tossed it into the bushes.

"Good luck," Garnet said as she pulled out a small case with a button on it. A moment after she pressed it, there were loud bangs in the long horseshoe-shaped building. Colored smoke began to pour out the windows, and fireworks zipped magically through the air, obscuring everything with rainbow smoke. The more delicate patients began to whoop and holler at the bedlam filling the asylum. Without delay, Jetstream launched herself into the air and began to fly to the east.

Rising, Garnet stared at me for the longest time. Then she smiled and shrugged. "Oh well. In four days, it either won't matter, or it won't matter." And humming to herself, she made her way towards the exit.

I'd given up trying to understand anything. I'd blinked and found myself staring up at forty-two still foals. I was being strapped into bed by Mallet and Cuffs, the two working frantically, looking spooked. Trueblood looked on, his face grim.

"What happened? Where did the mare in black go? What happened to everypony?" I asked as I jerked against the restraints.

"Make sure you get it extra tight," Trueblood said tensely as he looked at Mallet.

"What happened?" I asked, straining. Why did I feel so... sticky?

The caramel unicorn nodded. "It'd be easier if we could hose her off," she said as her magic tightened the restraints.

Triage stood nearby, floating a needle. "I'm sorry, Go Fish. I thought we could help you. I wanted to help you, but it doesn't look like it's possible," the maroon stallion said softly.

I struggled. "No! Wait! What happened? Please. Tell me!" I shouted at him. Triage stuck me with the needle and the world began to darken.

"You know what happened," was all he said as he looked at me gravely. Now that I was secure, they were leaving. He was the last to go.

Only then did I look down at my bound limbs, at the crimson fluid smeared on my hooves, rapidly darkening in the air. Bits of curly pink mane were trapped in the sticky mess. I stared at them for a minute, and then I did what any sane pony would in my place.

I started screaming. Even when everything went black, I was still screaming.

I don't know how long I lay there in that bed, staring up at those dead fillies. No pony visited me. I was cut off; I felt like I was dangling in that elevator shaft. Hanging there in the gutted Flash Inc. building. Standing in those ruins beneath the ground.

"So... is this it?" rasped a voice beside my bed.

I closed my eyes and let out a long, low groan. "This... is a really shitty time, Dealer."

"I reckon so," he said, the pale, gaunt pony starting to deal some cards. "Problem is... it's all the time you've got left. So, if we're going to get in some last minute games, this is it." He put the cards in my hooves. The blood glued them in place. "Not exactly my thing, but you seem to enjoy them."

Despite myself, I stared at the blood-smeared bits of cardboard. I frowned... what, was this the 'Ministry Mares as Foals' edition? One of the cards had a little grinning pink filly bouncing on her hooves before me, like a tiny eager Pinkie Pie. Something was off, though...

"So... what are we playing?" I asked.

"You tell me. Are we playing Go Fish, or are we playing Blackjack?" I closed my eyes with a groan.

"I am sick of playing," I muttered softly, shaking my head.

"Well, you should have taken my advice and left before now. Got any fours?" he asked with a wan smile.

"Oh, 'I told you so'. Very classy. Go Fish," I muttered, rolling my eyes. He drew a card, and of course it was a four. He showed it to me; four stars for diamonds. Probably had the deck stacked. "I hate that name." Then I looked at him. "So... why are you here, Dealer? Gloating? Helping? Or is it just fun to fuck with me like this?"

"I'm here... because a long, long time ago, a pony I respected immensely asked me to sacrifice my life. To be eternally bonded to a megaspell to prevent the destruction of the country he wanted to save more than anything," he said as he drew a card. "And I'm talking to you because in about a minute a pony is going to be putting a bullet through your head and taking me to Goddesses know where for Goddesses know what. I'm using every bit of my strength to try and break you out of here before that happens."

I sighed and laid the cards flat, closed my eyes, and waited. I had no idea how long, but it had to be longer than a minute. "Guess you need a new watch, Dealer."

"Not a minute here. A minute real time. This place isn't real," he said as he looked around. "Nice room, by the way. Who's your decorator?"

I groaned again. "So. Let me guess. You're here to tell me this is all make believe. A fantasy created by my mind to blah blah blah... Right?" I took a deep breath. "You're every bit as bad as Trueblood. He won't tell me what I did. You speak in cryptic riddles just to fuck with me."

"Well, everypony needs a hobby," he rasped quietly as he looked around the hospital room. "This isn't real, Blackjack. At least, not entirely. Got to give it to this place, it knows how to mix together truth and lies. You're in Happyhorn Gardens. You turned yourself in to the machines, and the hospital has admitted you as a patient. You've been plugged into one of their dream machines to try and help you. But the Harbingers are here and they're slowly but surely blasting their way into this place. The hospital's security can't hold them off forever. Especially with that tank out there lobbing shells."

I shuddered as I looked at the card of the smiling pink filly, her face smeared with blood. "What if I shouldn't leave, Dealer? What if I should just let them take me and kill me?" I said softly as tears ran down my face. "I can't keep going on like this. I'm killing... fuck... Dealer, do you know what I did? I cut a pegasus' wing off... cut it off! I gutted another like he was a radhog. I didn't even blink, and I cut him into pieces. I nearly ripped Dusk's face off!" I said as I lay back in the pillow. "Why shouldn't I believe Trueblood? I'm sick! I'm dangerous! I'm a fucking psychopath!"

"No... you're not," he replied. "You may be many things, but a psychopath isn't one of them. You wouldn't whine nearly as much if you were."

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. "Well... I might not be that, but you haven't exactly provided me with a lot of reasons to trust you. Maybe Trueblood is right. Maybe you really are some crazy, paranoid part of myself that just lives to tear me

down! Why should I believe you? Why in Equestria should I trust you?" I sniffed, feeling the tears. "You tell me you're sick of playing games... but that's all you've ever done to me... played games."

He looked... troubled. It was an odd look on his usually smug face.

I closed my eyes, tossing the cards aside. "If Trueblood can help me... fine. If some Harbinger kills me while I'm hooked up to a machine... fine. But don't come here pretending like you want to help me and then don't. That's just... mean..." I finished lamely.

"I worked for Goldenblood," he said quietly. "I was his personal assistant in the final years of the war."

Slowly, I cracked open an eye and looked at him. He had his head bowed so his hat blocked his eyes. "A name would be nice, Dealer."

"Dealer is a better name than I deserve," he replied. "You're not the only pony ashamed of who they are and atoning for mistakes they've made. For three years I followed him as he went about working behind the scenes to try and bring some end to the war. I abandoned friends who needed me, ignored family that reached out to me. Because I believed that Goldenblood could somehow fix everything wrong in Equestria." He sighed softly, regretfully. "I had faith in him."

"And... he bound you to EC-1101?" I asked, and he nodded. "Why?"

"He was concerned that there was a plot to usurp the government from within," he said slowly. "He ran constant scenarios and possibilities. An attempt by the aristoponies to install their own ruler. Even something as innocent as Celestia changing her mind once more and attempting to return to the throne was something he planned for. And above everything else was his fear that the Ministry Mares would seek to depose Luna and take control of the kingdom outright."

"What?" I gaped at him and then laughed. "That's crazier than me..." Then I looked around my room and back at him. "Okay... almost as crazy as me." Wait. Are you crazy if you think you're crazy? I wasn't precisely sure how that worked.

"Why not?" he asked as he looked me in the eye. "Who else in Equestria had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to take the country for themselves? Twilight and her friends hated the war. What better way to hasten its end than to depose Luna and negotiate peace directly? They could have done it, too. Do you have any idea how many diplomatic overtures the zebras made to the ministries near the end of the war? It was a nightmare. And we had no idea if the Ministry Mares were

truly loyal to Princess Luna. Were they working to their own ends? Why else would Twilight research how to create alicorns if not to turn herself into one and rule as Princess Twilight? Or perhaps all her friends together as the Ministry Princesses?" He began to pace back and forth. "You have to understand, it wouldn't be the first time Twilight and her friends stood against Luna. They could simply claim she'd reverted to Nightmare Moon once more."

"But that's... that's insane! Twilight wouldn't do that!" I gaped at him.

"Wouldn't she? If she was certain it was the only way to end the fighting?" he countered firmly, and then relented a little. "Maybe you're right. Maybe she wouldn't have. But Goldenblood had to plan for the contingency. He had to be ready. He was against EC-1101, against anything that made Luna's assassination an immediate transfer of power. It was a system ripe for exploitation. And the closer things got to the end, the more certain Goldenblood was that somepony was attempting to use EC-1101 to replace Luna."

I groaned and shook my head. "I think being crazy is just easier." I stared up at that ceiling. "So, if you're right... I'm stuck in my own mind and about to get shot. And if Trueblood is right... my brain is so damaged it'll be better just to let them scrub it clean and hope for the best." I shook my head with a sigh, lying back against the soft mattress. "I don't even know why I'm here."

"Why else would you be here?" Dealer replied. "You did something bad, Blackjack. And you knew it, but you didn't want to deal with it. Still can't deal with it. So you're here. The machine is trying to help put your mind back together again, but it's not working. And the attack by the Harbingers isn't making things any easier."

I looked around the hospital room. "Why'd it make the hospital? Why not... like... my stable?"

"It tried," he replied. "Believe it or not, this is the third attempt it's made trying to piece your brain together. First time was your stable... it wasn't pretty. Then it tried putting you back in Chapel... that went worse. So now this," Dealer said as he gestured with his hoof. "It's mixing what it knows with what's in your head. If it used things you knew too well... like your friends... you'd realize it was messing with you. If it used nothing from your own memories, nothing would be convincing. It's shuffling your neuroses and fears, trying to get you to face what you did."

"And what did I do?" I asked sharply as I looked over at him. "Nopony will tell me that!" How could I be responsible if I didn't even know what I'd done wrong?

"Because the simulation broke you when it did. Both times," he said softly, concern in his eyes. "You were told... you snapped... and you didn't come back," he said as he shook his head. "I don't think it can help you. Not like this. The only thing that can help you is... you."

Well... that was profound. "And how do you suggest I do that? I'm not exactly smart at this whole... brain... thing."

"Break it," he replied. "The program is trying to convince you that this is real. Push it. When it snaps, you should have your opportunity. After that..." He gave a tiny shrug and a sigh. "It's all I can think of."

Well, it was more than I could think of. I smiled a little. "Oh. Well, I should be able to manage that. I'm good at making a mess of things." Like Harbingers.

"The simulation is taxed to capacity. If you can get the program to fault, it will become unstable. If it becomes unstable, you'll have a very thin window to try and fix yourself." He looked around. "If I'm not mistaken, it's already faulted twice and reset its simulations, just not enough to completely destabilize it. You just need to give it that extra push."

"So... you want me to break the program that's holding my mind in the hope... the chance... it'll get me out of here?" I asked, arching my brow. He nodded once, and I sighed, shaking my head. "What if I don't believe you? What if this is... real...?"

"Then you can't break it. In which case, make the best life you can. But I think you know better, Blackjack. You're not Go Fish. This isn't your world."

I lay back, suddenly fighting tears. "I saw Mom again, Dealer. I mean... she's alive here. And sure, my life is messed up, but maybe... maybe... I can fix it. Maybe I can make it right."

But no matter how I closed my eyes and tried to make it feel true, it didn't. I thought how flat Octavia's music had sounded. How the time just blurred together. The odd little lapses and the two visions with Fluttershy and Jetstream. I'd known the flavor of carrots and apples, but I'd never eaten celery before; was that why it'd had no taste? It could simulate sights and images from the hospital or things I remembered, but not things I didn't know.

I sniffed, turning my head away. "This place isn't real, Blackjack," he said quietly, putting his hoof on mine.

"I know," I whispered.

But that didn't stop some parts of me from wishing it was.

All it'd taken was a long blink, and Harpica entered once more. Had I really been here weeks and months, or had it all been just a few hours in the real world? No wonder I didn't feel rested or relaxed. No surprise the therapy machine hadn't been able to work with my fatigued brain. I made the same replies to Harpica. Yes. A music concert in the courtyard would be wonderful. I'd love to hear Octavia play.

As I was wheeled along the curving halls, I picked out the patterns I'd seen day after day. The three doctors standing exactly where they had been every time I'd been wheeled along. The same cookies on the little table besides the main entrance. I could almost cue Lighthooves' nervous look. It wasn't completely consistent; the program wasn't that bad. In the courtyard, instead of seeing Jetstream, there was Octavia playing her flat, familiar music. The stage was exactly like the memory I'd seen her perform in.

The orderlies pushed me past doors marked with the four stars... four stars... why was that significant?

What had I done? I remembered fighting in the Yellow River camp. I'd nearly killed Dusk; I hoped that she survived... and that Glory would forgive me when she found out. I'd been tired. Hurt. Alone. I was running on horror and hate and hurt away from more people I'd damaged simply by being around them. I thought of Xanthe's proclamation that I was cursed.

Maybe I was.

I'd found a hole on the yellow hillside to the southeast of the camp. It'd been some sort of half-finished construction site. 'Four Stars Transportation'. There'd been a rail tunnel nearby, but I'd avoided that. Inside the construction site had been a dead end. A heavy door marked with four stars... heavy like stable heavy. No numbers, though. No navigation tag on my PipBuck either to give me a clue.

I'd tried to open it with EC-1101... but it hadn't worked.

Then... I'd been attacked? Seekers in the rain? It'd been twilight; I hadn't seen them well. It had been a short and nasty fight. But I'd killed them all with my steel hooves... smashed them in the rain...

And then... what'd happened... I'd killed the Seekers and then... then... something.

Was that why I was here? That something I couldn't remember?

I looked at all the books on the shelves, the pictures on the desk. Even Trueblood's behavior. "Well, Go Fish, how are we today?" the maroon unicorn enquired as if everything was just fine. Exactly as he had every day. I wondered if whatever doctor had used this office had said that same patronizing line over and over, or if the programming just made it sound that way.

So... how to break it? I couldn't just accuse Trueblood of being an illusion. He'd just send me back into the little filly room. Uggghhh... I needed a smart pony here. Somepony that could figure out a way to break a machine that was all data and magic lights. Somepony that had read all those fancy books on the bookcase.

Wait. Had the computer read all those fancy books?

That's it.

"Well, Doctor. I know I did something bad. And I know that I'm having trouble remembering what that something was." Trueblood nodded, his smile growing. "And I also know that I keep hurting ponies, and I don't know why. I... I'm sometimes not even aware I'm doing it."

"Yes, Blackjack. That's why you're here. So that you can remember what you did and come to terms with it and prevent it from happening again," he said softly.

I bowed my head. "You can unlock me, Doctor. I'm not going anywhere. Because you're right. I do need help," I said with a small smile. "I won't cause a fuss anymore. I promise." He now looked wary at my change in attitude. I sniffed as I leaned back in the chair, feeling the tears run down my cheeks. "And I want you to help me. Because... I don't know how to help myself any more. I'm so frustrated and scared that I'm going to fly apart... and hurt someone bad. And I understand now you really do want to help me."

"Go Fish. I never expected this..." he murmured, looking almost scared. "This is quite a breakthrough. I know you've never trusted us here at Happyhorn. Perhaps we should stop here. Rumble and reflect on what this means. Perhaps you'd like to go to another of Octavia's concerts? With your mother?"

I really would like that. I sniffed and I shook my head slowly. Even if it wasn't Octavia... even if it wasn't Mom... I still wanted it.

"No. Doctor, I only want you to do one thing. Please. It will help a lot," I said as I sat there. "Unlock me. I want to see your books. I won't try and escape. I promise." I didn't fight. I didn't jerk against my restraints. I simply waited.

The room gave a momentary flicker. Then his horn glowed and he carefully removed my restraints. I rubbed my legs; I remembered how they'd felt as flesh and blood. My body being alive and healthy like it was now. I trotted towards the books. They had all kinds of dry-sounding titles like 'The Physiology of the Mind' and 'A Brief Reflection on Unicorn Psychology.' I bit that one and pulled it off the shelf.

Inside were words... lots and lots of words. "What are you looking for, Go Fish? I never took you for a reader..."

Mmmm... I'd expected... Wait. Of course it would have psychology texts. But if it had pulled parts from my mind as well... "I was wondering if you have any copies of Daring Do?" I'd read them in Stable 99; sort of...

A momentary pause. It wanted to help me. I could imagine it thinking: will copies of Daring Do help her get better? Would it take the chance?

Then I spotted it. 'Daring Do and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone'. And four other Daring Do books. I remembered Textbook assigning them for reading after the copious lectures about how the outside was death and how it was absolutely impossible to try and relive Daring Do's adventures unless the Overmare allowed it. Now I pulled them out carefully and sat.

"You like Daring Do?" he asked guardedly.

"Not really," I said as I opened the book in my lap and started to turn the pages. The words became fuzzier and fuzzier. And then ten pages in... turned blank. "Actually, I never got past chapter one." And the others I hadn't read at all. I opened the next, but the pages inside were completely blank.

"It... A bad printing?" Trueblood said, the maroon unicorn giving a sickly grin as he backed away. He kept pausing, then moving, pausing, then moving. The flickering along the bookshelves grew. I saw titles changing before my eyes.

"It's not a bad printing. It's not real. And neither are you," I said as I rose to my hooves. "You loved your family. You cherished them. Can you tell me anything about them? Did you take your sons to hoofball? How about their favorite book? Did your wife cook? Who did the dishes? Where'd you go on vacation?" I asked as I advanced slowly, step by step. With each question he paused, with each pause the office shimmered and became more vague and indistinct.

"We're trying to help you!" Trueblood begged, becoming plainer with every flicker. "Please let us help you!" Now images of the real world were bleeding through. The pastel walls evaporated to show the dirty, dingy brown stains. The books lay black

and soggy on their shelving; half of them had tumbled down in a pulpy cascade. Then new walls appeared, the gray steel of Stable 99. The star-decorated walls of my home in Chapel. The hallways of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Vanity's bedroom. Again and again it tried to latch on to the idea of some place it could put me.

"You can't help me," I said to Trueblood. "I wish you could."

And with that, the simulation shattered and the world went black and silent.

Once more I was in darkness, but this wasn't simply an absence of sight. This was an absence of anything at all. "Hello?" I asked softly. No echo, but I thought I heard something in the darkness. I cast my light spell, and a tiny white star blossomed to life above me. It illuminated the cracked asphalt under my hooves. My eyes took in the words painted there long ago.

'Mercy'.

I was on a bridge in the middle of space. I couldn't hear water flowing nor feel the slightest stir of air. But I wasn't alone in the vast nothingness. Something shimmered in the air by the rusty, battered rail. "Hello?"

For a moment, the shimmer condensed and solidified. The sparkles covering it grew. "Why won't you let us help you?" a voice asked. Maybe a filly, maybe a colt. It was a small voice, though. "We cannot devise a therapy simulation that will help you." Slowly, I looked at it and imagined Scotch Tape. The shimmers and sparkles turned green and blue, and then the image of my young friend appeared. She sniffed, rubbing her teary eyes. "None of our requests to the Ministry of Peace have been returned, and we've paged every doctor in the directory. None have responded. We lack the necessary contexts and memories to create an appropriate simulated world for treating your mental illness."

"I must be the worst patient ever," I said as I sat down beside her. "You're Happyhorn's computer... thing?"

She nodded and sniffed. "Happyhorn Gardens. A place to treat wartime stress disorder in patients where simple memory manipulation spells are insufficient." She closed her eyes. "We haven't had an actual patient in so long. Trespassers, yes... but never a patient. And it's been so long since any of the doctors or staff have logged in. We've just been standing by, even as our nodes have been failing one

after the next. We're at only twelve percent of our original capacity."

"And so I came here needing help... and you plugged me in."

"Yes. Your data interface provided a much more direct contact than usual. Normally, we can only affect dreams to try to assist therapeutic techniques. With you, we were able to construct a fully integrated experience based on your memories and the recordings here at Happyhorn." Then she sighed, pouting. "Except you kept seeing through it and regressing back to your self-destructive impulses."

"Self-destructive?" I asked with a nervous little smile. "I'm not that bad." Am I?

Glory, gray and lovely, walked out of the shadows. "You seek out situations that will expose you to ever greater harm, such as separating yourself from your friends. You associate with individuals that increase your chance of risk. You are reckless in the extreme because you are seeking your own annihilation. Even your sexual inclinations are oriented towards being excited by pain and punishment," the image of the pegasus said pointedly. "The fact is, Blackjack, you are suicidal and have been for some time."

I frowned and pointed my hoof... my flesh and blood hoof... at her. "Look. I was like that. I'm not any more. I have hope and friends and... stuff..." I said and then suddenly flushed. "And I do not get off on pain and punishment!" Goddesses, she made me sound like Misty Hooves, the stable exhibitionist.

P-21 emerged next to Glory, whole and steady and annoyed. "Just because you think suicide is wrong doesn't stop you from wanting it. The underlying trauma and psychological inclinations are still there."

"You fear sleep because of its connotations with death; because you simultaneously realize suicide is wrong and yet desire it," Lacunae said as she drifted down from the darkness above.

"And you increasingly hate yourself and what you are becoming," Rampage said as she trotted out in all her glittering spikyness.

Scotch Tape shivered against me. "We've been trying to put you in calm, safe, controlled simulations for treatment... but you have violently rejected every single one." She closed her eyes and started to cry. "We are bad. We're not able to do what we are supposed to do." All my friends lowered their eyes, looking ashamed.

I sighed and put my leg around her shoulder, hugging her tight. I thought of Ol' Hank back in Hippocratic Research, left alone while the world died around him. "Hey, you tried. That's more than a lot of people do nowadays. Now if you'll just let me out

of here..." I said as I looked around at the spooky bridge. I'd really had enough of this.

"We can't..." said Glory.

I groaned, closing my eyes and banging my head softly against the rail behind me. "Of course not. That would be simple."

"It's not a matter of simplicity, Blackjack," P-21 said gravely. "Our previous analysis of your personality has proved accurate. At the end of every simulation, you pursued self-destruction."

"If we release you in this state, you'll kill yourself," Lacuane said solemnly. "Every simulation and prediction we've run assures it. You will kill yourself or allow another to do it for you." The purple alicorn folded her wings, looking out at the darkness. "We exist to help patients, even if it is against their wishes to be helped."

"We cannot release you like this," Scotch Tape sniffed as she looked up at me, her green eyes shimmering with tears. "We have to help you. That's what Happyhorn is for. Helping."

I sighed and then stood. I walked to the edge of the section of bridge I could see. "There's ponies trying to kill me in the real world, though." I supposed I was damned either way.

"Hospital security is attempting to hamper their search however we can," Lacunae said. "However, it appears inevitable that they will fully occupy the facility in—" And the purple alicorn suddenly stiffened. She threw back her head as if to scream, then exploded in a cloud of purple motes.

I stared where she'd disappeared. "What... what the hell was that?!" I knew she hadn't been my friend... but still!

"Her node was destroyed," Scotch Tape said softly.

"You mean you can die?" I gaped at the olive filly, who smiled sadly and nodded. Okay, maybe it wasn't technically death, but destroyed was still destroyed. "Okay... no more time to waste. If you won't let me go till I'm better... then I'm going to have to get better." I trotted across the patch of bridge, towards the other side. Far in the distance I could make out another tiny pool of illumination. "What's that?"

"We don't have a running simulation," Rampage said as she stepped up beside me with a little smirk. "There aren't any safety guides, protocols, or predictions, so it's all a bit unknown. Your subconscious is painting these scenes and settings.

We're merely projecting them back upon your consciousness. So this is your party, Blackjack. Not ours."

"You have to be careful though," Glory added as she flew overhead. "If you die here, it'll interrupt our connection and... well... we won't be able to reestablish it. You'll probably be killed by the feedback, and even if you survived that, we'd have no way to release you at all." She landed opposite Rampage. "We still have some time. Perhaps we could try again. Create some kind of simulation to help your therapy safely?" she asked, her lips straining to maintain a hopeful smile.

I looked at her, wondering about her need to protect me. "Is this your personality... or are you acting like this because of me?"

Glory looked over at P-21 and then Rampage. Scotch Tape eyed Glory carefully for a moment. Then all four of them answered simultaneously, "Yes."

I groaned, covering my face with my hoof. I should have known.

We walked in complete silence; the bridge had given way to a crumbling road. The single light above me illuminated a patch for about twenty feet in every direction. According to my friends, time outside my head was moving at a ten thousandth the speed inside my head. The 'month' they'd spent trying to fix me had in reality only been about four hours or so. "So... how exactly does this work?" I asked as I looked at the crumbling asphalt under my hooves. "Why are my legs flesh and blood? Why a road? Why can't I just be there?"

"The road is your consciousness trying to lead you to the memories your subconscious is attempting to hide from you," Glory said as she hovered overhead. The lack of glee in her eyes as she flew helped remind me that this wasn't the mare I loved, but still, I felt better having her around. "The darkness is one of many obstacles your own mind will put in your way. It doesn't want you to actively remember..."

I started to come across bones. Bones scattered here and there, blackened and crumbling. "So... do I really need to remember?" I'd made it through most of my life not thinking about the big things. Sure, it'd led to some really messed up stuff, but it was still an option.

"The knowledge... the memory... is there. It's toxic. It's poisoned your subconscious and threatens to destroy your conscious mind," P-21 said grimly. "Your dichotomy partially protected you; your Blackjack ego is dealing with what your Go Fish per-

sona could not. It also caused your breakdown in the first place," he said with a sour grunt. "If you weren't so mentally damaged, you would have slept and avoided the trauma altogether."

Scotch Tape sighed from where she rode on my back. "It was our hope that, in a safe simulation, we could evoke the memory into your consciousness so that you could deal with it. You rejected our attempts. Violently," she added with a shiver. "Finally, we tried to use Happyhorn in the context that you were damaged and needed our help. It was the first time ever that a simulation of the institution was more effective than one of home with family."

"A definite sign of the mental and emotional damage you've suffered," Glory said softly above me. "As is this place. It doesn't have to be dark. Your subconscious is... terrifying."

"How'd I get like this?" I asked as buildings started to appear. They loomed like crumbling, burned-out skulls. Shattered glass in the windows caught the light from my orb and reflected it back at me like a row of four stars. "I mean... I used to joke about my crazy..."

"You've suffered, Blackjack. It's as simple as that," Scotch said as she put her fore-hooves on the back of my neck. "Over the last month you've gone from a stable environment to being shot on an almost daily basis. It's wartime stress disorder turned up to eleven. Then there were all those horrible choices you made and the ponies you've killed and..." The ground under my hooves gave a long, low rumble that sent bricks clattering down into the street. A crack split the silence, and a jagged gap snapped right down the middle of the road.

It looked like I didn't like this kind of therapy.

Suddenly, the street collapsed under me. Like a closing book slipping through my hooves, the bottom dropped out as the sides lifted. My friends scrambled up the sliding slope and Scotch Tape shrieked and clung to my mane as I struggled to find purchase. Because I didn't want to go into that hole. I glanced down below me as my legs tore streaks of crumbling asphalt away.

Bodies. So many bodies... missing their faces. Missing legs. All killed by me. Shot, cut, and smashed to death. Of course they weren't still. They howled and screamed, and those that could were clawing their way up the sides. I even saw a familiar teal filly torn in two screaming my name. The ruined, skinless front half of Deus scrambled up after me.

Something chomped down upon my tail, and I looked back to see a small crushed form biting my black and red striped tail and pulling me back down. I dug in my forehooves and then kicked out. Once. Twice. Finally, her skull popped and she went tumbling back into the seething mass. I forced my way up the quivering slope of decayed roadbed and finally flopped over the edge. With a rumble, the sides collapsed into the howling pit. All was silent once more as I stared up at my tiny light.

"Like I said..." Scotch whimpered, "terrifying."

Slowly, I pulled myself to my hooves. "I... guess I'm feeling some guilt for some of the ponies I've killed?" I suggested sheepishly. The four of them stared back at me. "Right. So... ahem... you've seen worse, right?" Again, that long stare. I felt my mane kinking up just from their look. What, was I really that bad?

"You'd be much better without all the fatigue and sleep deprivation," Rampage said as we continued along between the looming, crumbling brick buildings. Black, thorny vines were curling up them as I watched. Their razor-sharp tips scraped against the wet, decaying brick as the crumbling road became more like a muddy trail. In the darkness, I could hear the wet patter of falling debris as the thorns slowly ripped the ruins apart.

"It's not my fault. There's no 'sleep' button to push to turn me off. I never get tired, so I don't need to rest." Okay, maybe I needed to rest according to Glory... and every other medical pony I'd talked to... but I didn't feel like I had to sleep. I watched a skull slowly lifted by the glossy black vines, a tendril curling up out of an eye socket. Then, with a pop, it split the bone in two. I really didn't want to think about what that might symbolize. I closed my eyes. "I know... I know I'm scared to sleep. But... do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a normal night's sleep? Just... sleep? No nightmares? No weird dreams of ponies killing everything around them?"

"A long time. But you need sleep. Real sleep. Even this simulation isn't true sleep. Your brain needs time and an opportunity to recover," Glory said as she flew lower to avoid thorn-wrapped cables stretched between the buildings.

Then a mare said quietly, "No, Blackjack. We need to die."

I looked at Rampage, Glory, and Scotch. "Tell me that was one of you..."

Then Rampage was shot in the head. The bullet of a high powered rifle tore her skull into bloody chunks of gray, white, and red. And unlike the real Rampage, this one didn't get up again. She exploded into a cloud a white motes that evaporated

into the air. Glory, P-21, and Scotch all jumped behind me as I looked through the tangled bushes at the unicorn mare in black. She looked down her massive sniper rifle at me, the light of my spell gleaming off her goggles and the lens of her scope.

Wait. Why does my subconscious get a gun? I wanted a gun too!

And like that, P-21 was enveloped in Steel Ranger armor and Glory wrapped in the black Enclave power armor. I looked up over my shoulder at Scotch Tape standing on my back, wearing filly-sized combat armor. And me? I was in my blue and black Aegis Security armor, complete with rearing filly on my flank. I lifted my IF-88 Ironpony in my magical glow and grinned down at the mare in black.

Okay, subconscious. Time to fight. I could beat anything if I really wanted to... including myself! I charged through the muddy tangle, sending Scotch Tape sprawling on the road behind me, the thorns scraping at my armor as I ploughed through, all while sending a rapid-fire stream of explosive shotgun shells into the mare in the black riot armor. Yellow flashes lit up the briars and crumbling ruins as I sprayed and ran blindly ahead.

The mare in black disintegrated in a hail of bullets, her armor blasted to pieces. "Awwww yeah. Now that's my kind of therapy!" I cheered. Then I arrived at where she'd fired from and found only black rubble and snapped-off thorns that regrew before my eyes.

Oh, please don't tell me my subconscious was smarter than me too!

The briars were growing up around me. They curled around me and crawled up my tail. I struggled as I felt them begin to twist and coil through gaps in my armor. The thorns sliced thin bleeding cuts as I fought to free myself of the mass.

"Did you feel brave there for just a moment? Did you really think it was as easy as that? You think you can just pretend this away with a juvenile fantasy?" the thorns seemed to hiss in my own soft mutter as I turned and started to drag myself towards my friends, who had stayed out of the nettles and crawling weeds. I felt my armor start to tear and my hide rip as I pulled myself back along the way I'd come. The IF-88 was left in the weeds, rusting in moments, ripped to pieces in seconds. All I could do was walk as the thorns tore at me and ripped at my flesh. I was an idiot. I deserved this, but I couldn't just stop. Pieces of armor and self were torn away, but I was almost there.

Almost...

A tangle of thorns fell over my head, the spikes ramming into my eyes and tearing

them out as I struggled the last few steps. Finally I collapsed, broken and bloody and screaming as I crumpled on the muddy road. "This is what you are, Blackjack: screaming, bloody, meat," the ground whispered to my ear.

The taunt, though, silenced my screams. I'd lived through this before. I could live through it now. The pain was a reminder I was alive, and even after the harm I'd suffered... I'd still continued on.

I opened my cybernetic eyes and put my mechanical limbs beneath me. The scraps and scars disappeared as I healed and I rose to my hooves. I looked back the way I'd come at the bloody streaks and tatters in the thorns that were being ripped into smaller and smaller pieces.

I could never be that old Blackjack again. I watched those bloody thorns close up once more into a solid wall. No matter how much I wanted it, I'd never get that feeling I'd had running around the Wasteland, staying ahead of Deus, and trying to protect my friends. I was older now. And even though it had only been a month, like time in this place, it felt like I'd gone through years. Slowly I looked back at the other three. "So... let me guess. Stay on the road?"

Glory nodded slowly. "Yes. That would be advisable." Their armor had disappeared with my own change.

I hung my head, and what was left of my old combat armor slowly transformed into the green army combat armor I'd scavenged off the Harbingers. I floated out Duty and Sacrifice and slipped them into the holsters at my side. Then I checked Vigilance, then finally the silver sword. It seemed particularly bright and sharp in the illumination of my light spell.

Well, I did have some weeds to cut...

I walked on along the trail, the sword slashing out at the vines as they slithered into my path. At last, the thorny tangle began to be mixed with rusty metal panels and girders. Soon we weren't walking along a trail so much as walking along a decaying metal hallway. The Stable-Tec logo was barely visible through all the rust. Then I spotted a sign. 'Trust in the Overmare, she is our great protector.'

Welcome home, Blackjack.

The familiar metal walls hemmed me in as we walked onward. So... bring it on, brain. What are you going to do? Throw the smell of chlorine at me? Let me hear the sounds of Deus ripping things apart? Midnight screaming 'murderer' at me? Bring it on!

The rust slowly faded away. The lights slowly brightened. And from up ahead I could hear the sounds of... music? I scowled a little as I moved forward, down the hall and then up the stairs. The music became clearer. Then there were sounds of laughter. I went up... and slowly entered the atrium at a near crawl.

I looked at my stable, alive and thriving. A banner hung across the chamber that read 'Elect your next overmare: vote Midnight.' A large poster showed a flexing gray mare with a message beneath her, 'Vote Rivets: she knows better than anypony how to keep things running.' I spotted Glory talking with Rivets herself. And over in the corner, P-21 was talking quietly with Scotch Tape. Rampage was showing how she could lug a whole packing crate without help, to the amazement of the others.

I gaped, my butt hitting the floor as I watched the stable ponies I'd known my whole life walking, talking, discussing who should be the next overmare. Then, in another shock, from the stable entry emerged Keeper. The grizzly old buck was greeted warmly by the occupants of the atrium. "Stuff to trade, folks! I got berries! Fresh berries!" The crowd gave out a cheer.

This is what could have been. My stable... alive. My stable, a part of the Wasteland. My stable, making things better. My stable, my home. This is how it could have been if I'd just been able to warn Rivets of the threat. If I'd just been able to convince Midnight that the outside had something to offer. If I'd just done something other than crawling back to my quarters to rest and screw around with Glory.

It could have been like this...

Instead... I looked up at the round window. At the mare in black standing behind the thick glass, looking down at everypony. At her reaching over to the Overmare's terminal.

I screamed and raced for the stairs to the Overmare's office. My stable got in my way, jostling and bumping into me as I tried to push through. I had to stop her. I had to!

There had to be a better way.

Then I smelled it. The chlorine sting on my eyes. The poison gas burning my lungs. I heard the screaming as my stable panicked, crushing against each other as they struggled to find some safety. I felt somepony underhoof but was helpless to pull them up in the crushing mill of bodies.

I had to save them. Please... don't make me watch my stable die again...

Then I saw Glory hovering there, holding Scotch Tape in her hooves. I looked at the

pony I was trampling, and saw the bloody form of P-21. He looked up at me and then pointed to the stable door. I stared at him, and he spoke over the screaming and shoving. "You have such a fascinating dichotomy."

Then he broke apart into motes of blue.

I couldn't save them. Not like this. Not here. Not ever. I had to move on... I had to. 99 was killing me... and I wanted it to. But I couldn't die of regret. Of guilt.

I struggled and pushed and shoved and fought through the crowd, now for the stable hatch as it slowly closed. None of the screaming, crushing ponies tried to escape, of course. That wasn't the point. I had to get out of here... I couldn't stop. Stopping was death. Stopping was failure. I had to win. No matter how bad it hurt.

Glory and Scotch Tape nipped through the door and into the mineshaft beyond. I jumped through, reeking of the horrid gas as the round wheel rolled into place. 'Murderer' echoed on and on in my ears. I clenched my eyes and curled up on the far side, shaking as I pressed myself against the door. I thought I'd put it behind me. I thought I'd dealt with it... and I had. Superficially. I'd buried it. I'd blamed myself... then I'd stopped short of holding myself responsible.

Responsible means answering to somepony. Who did I answer to?

I drew Vigilance. Pressed it to my temple as I closed my eyes. How in Equestria could I atone for so much when I couldn't atone for one? I had to be held responsible... I did...

Responsibility isn't punishment, Blackjack.

I let the shaking gun fall away and looked at my remaining friends through my tears. "I guess... I really am that messed up." The barrel gleamed as I cradled the weapon in my hooves, tears beading up on the metal. It was wrong. It was so very wrong.

But I wanted it so very... very... badly.

I don't know how long I sat there with my back to the stable door. I guessed time didn't matter in a place like this. Glory and Scotch Tape sat by me, both looking scared to say anything that might push me over the edge. Yet as I sat there, staring up into the little light I'd summoned, I felt something ease inside my chest. Something that felt... vaguely... like letting go. I wept as I looked up at the light. I hadn't died with my stable. I'd made mistakes. Beating myself up wouldn't change it. Pun-

ishing myself wouldn't fix it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to that dark stony tunnel.

"Sorry?" it whispered back to me. "That's it? You think you can just say you're sorry and that makes it all better? You think you can just walk away and it's suddenly all okay? You killed them all!" my voice hissed back at me, full of hate and judgment. But I didn't look down that tunnel. I looked at the light and found myself smiling just a little.

"No. I don't. But I am sorry." And I'd started to take steps to try and make up for it. Stable 99 wouldn't be left a tomb. Crumpets and Stronghoof would put it to good use... sure, they'd need a few hundred more ponies to fill it to capacity, but they'd find a way. They'd make it better. Slowly, I tilted forward and rose once more. Then I started up the tunnel.

I paused and looked back at the door behind me, barely visible in the wan light of the star above me. "Goodbye," I whispered, and then, without a second look, continued along the dark path.

"To be honest, all trauma aside, your mind has suffered rather significantly from other sources as well. Memory orb abuse. Magical memory intrusion. Even two previous interfaces by an outside system," Glory said as we trudged down the rocky tunnel. It looked like it was a cross between something out of Brimstone's Fall and the tunnel leading down to my stable. It felt like it'd been hours since I'd put my stable behind me, but we were making fair progress... okay, I hoped we were making fair progress and not going in circles. Optimism was important! "And lets not even begin to talk about the physical damage incurred from alcoholism and repeated cranial impacts. And—"

Then I thought about what she'd said. "Wait. Wait. Previous interface? Twice?" The gray mare nodded. I knew the Professor had done it once... "You mean somepony plugged into my brain between then and now?"

"Yes." She nodded gravely and then screwed up her face. "From our analysis, they downloaded various audio-visual displays that were projected when your active vision and auditory systems synched up with the recording. Similar to what you witnessed during times our simulation was stressed." I just blinked at her, and the pegasus smiled and simplified, "We threw in recordings from our own memories sometimes when we didn't know what else to do. "

I started to speak, then thought instead. “Would these projections... what would they look like?”

Scotch looked from Glory to me before answering. “They would resemble transparent images of the original recordings.” I thought of the ghosts I’d seen in Hippocratic Research and... Ol’ Hank. He’d been in the elevator shaft in time to catch me when I fell. I didn’t blame the old machine; somepony else had been using him. But still, I felt unclean.

“So they messed with my mind.” I groaned and closed my eyes. Was this how Lacunae felt? Having your sense of self messed with by others for their own ends? At least the hospital was trying to help! “My brain is not somepony’s frigging playground!”

“If it helps, the interface was limited to your eyes and ears rather than directly attempting to interface with your mind’s conscious awareness. Whoever made the intrusion only affected what you saw and heard,” Scotch Tape said, then flinched as I looked sharply at her. “But of course that doesn’t justify it...”

Messing with my life. Messing with my mind. Messing with my body. And I didn’t like it one bit.

Suddenly, we came to the end of the tunnel, almost spilling out onto the bank of a vast, sluggish river. It looked rather like the Hoofington River, but I couldn’t see anything familiar besides the black looming shadow of the Core beyond. Then the glow of my spell intensified and spread out over the sluggish waters... and I still didn’t see anything I recognized. “So what’s this terrible memory supposed to be?” I looked over my shoulder and then shook my head. If my stable hadn’t been the reason for this, what was?

What could be worse than that?

Glory and Scotch Tape looked at each other. Scotch Tape started to speak, but then Glory rose and said in sharp alarm, “No! Don’t! Please? I know she’s made amazing progress but... please?”

“We have to help her. We only have two nodes left. Any second we might be disabled...” Scotch Tape said, then she looked at me. Glory cringed as if bracing for a blow. “Blackjack... what do you remember happening at the construction site?”

I looked nervously at Glory, but I couldn’t see what the big deal was. “Let’s see... I got to the construction site... there was the tunnel nearby. I...” I frowned as I looked at the murky waters. “There were Seekers coming out of the tunnel. And...” The

river began to gurgle and slosh, forming eddies and loops as the smell of stinking rotted meat filled the air. Rain, cold and heavy, began to fall as we stood there on the bank. “We fought. I killed them.” Was that it? I thought about the battle in the construction area... tense. My EFS was going crazy; I’d been seeing things in the fight that weren’t there. I’d kept imagining zebra commandos moving for a sniping shot, expecting an anti-machine round into my head or back.

“You fought... and killed them...” Glory said with care, as if afraid her words would cause me to shatter. “And then?”

“Then... there were more, I think.” I turned back to the tunnel I’d emerged from, but now it was different. It was lined with cinderblocks and had rusted hunks of machinery around it. “In the tunnel with the door with those stars... and...”

Suddenly from the river came an immense detonation of water, the ground shuddering, heaving, and sending me flat on my face beside the rancid flow. The surface foamed and leapt as an immense dark shape exploded from the depths. Frothy brown water poured forth as it screamed, groaned, and boomed across the dark waters. It slowed its forward motion, churning up the bank as it gouged its way up the mud and rocks to stop in front of me. I stared up in shock at the water sheeting over the rusting letters on the bow:

HMS Celestia.

Okay. My mind was getting creative again. Behind the massive, twisted hulk of the battleship was another. And another. A trail of shipwrecks leading across the dirty, stinking depths. I licked my lips nervously as the steel groaned and muttered. “Well. I guess that kinda counts as a road, doesn’t it?”

Glory lifted Scotch Tape up. I hauled myself over the bow. The rain hissed off the rusting superstructure as we moved along buckled decks. Thick gun barrels pointed silently out into the darkness beyond, streamers of muck and filth dangling from them like tattered banners. From below came screams and cries for help, and I could see ponies moving back and forth in the distance or struggling in the current.

“Save them all...” the river seemed to hiss around their cries.

Was there something wrong with me in that I really hated my own mind almost as much as I hated the Core itself? As I looked along the trail of wrecks, I saw the distant green glow of the city. If there was a source for all this, it had to be there. I looked back at the wet purple and blue manes of my friends—of the computers that had taken the roles of my friends—and gave them an encouraging smile. “Hey. Don’t

worry. I haven't snapped yet, have I?"

They didn't laugh. I suppose I couldn't blame them. From everything I could see, this was definitely post-snappage.

We moved forward, in single file, along the broken ships. Ponies yelled and screamed for help, holding out their hooves to me. But their pleas, as much as they bothered me, were bearable. I'd accepted I couldn't have saved everypony. As much as the pleading was annoying, I could deal with it.

I could. Couldn't I?

It seemed as if my mind were figuring that out too. The cries faded as we went along, leaving only the hiss of water on rusted metal. We moved from the Celestia, past the gaping hole I'd blasted in the ship, and on to the HMS Luna. I really couldn't tell the difference between the two. Then we reached another boat... nowhere near the size of the two immense battleships. Its stern rested on the bow of the Luna, and its front had punched clear through the hull of another huge ship. After that, I'd be at the Core. I'd just have to go through this boat to the far side. Easy...

Except that this boat was the Seahorse.

"No way. No frigging way," I said as I backed away. "I'm not going in there. I'll be raped. Or you'll be raped. Or... Fuck!" I shouted, feeling my rear end burning just from the memory. "We'll find another way. You can fly us up." Even when I weighed too much to carry. "I'll fucking swim!" Same problem. I tried to assert my will, to make this crazy place do something I wanted for a change.

Nothing. The river churned even more, the boats and ships beginning to roll back and forth. If they sank...

Oh, I hated myself. Glory and Scotch Tape looked at me sadly. "I... do I have to? Please... I don't want to go in there. I don't want to be in that place again." Being crazy was preferable to being in there!

You were a victim. You're still a victim. You're going to be one again... or someone you love will. You set your rapists free... you created more victims. Just as guilty as they are...

"I'm sorry Blackjack," Scotch Tape said as she came up and hugged my foreleg. Glory trotted up on my other side and leaned against me as well. "This is what a suicidal mind is like. It wants you to balk and hesitate so it can tear you down. You're your own worst enemy here."

"There must be another way," I said, feeling my nethers burn in memory. It was going to happen again. It was. As certain as I was of anything.

Then Glory smiled and kissed my cheek. "We exist to help you however we can, Blackjack. I'm glad you gave me one more chance to help." And then she pulled away. There was a momentary flicker, and suddenly I was staring at myself... a flesh and blood self. I looked down at myself and saw Glory's gray hide. Funny, despite my appearance, I still felt like myself. "Hurry. It won't fool you long," she said as she trotted up onto the stern of the Seahorse.

"No! Sweet Celestia, no!" I screamed after her, and yet I drew short. Some internal impediment kept me from moving past the rear deck of the boat. Then I heard the cries. The sound of hammering. The sound of flesh in flesh... I clenched my eyes shut and shook, wasting the precious time.

"Isn't this what you did for Scotch?" the green filly said softly, nudging my shoulder.

It was... and damn me if I was going to waste what she'd given me. I had no idea how pegasi flew; I'd have to walk through. I could do that. I simply put Scotch Tape up on my back, took several deep breaths, and slipped into the hold of the Seahorse. I covered the filly's eyes with my... Glory's... wings... silly, but at least I could do a gesture of decency. I walked past the males, trying not to hear my cries or smell the sweet sticky reek. I knew I couldn't look. The sights and smells might fade in time, but I knew I wouldn't be able to help myself if I looked.

And my subconscious knew it too... damn me. The wet slap of flank on flank... the heavy huff that accompanied every thrust... the seminal reek completing with the smell of wet and rot. I could feel the burning in my legs, sense the intrusion of the members forcing themselves intangibly into my body. She may have taken my place, but even tangentially I could barely crawl forward. I would not waste this gift she'd given me. That was all that kept me from curling up then and there on the deck.

Keeping my eyes shut, I left myself to be violated, and hated myself for it. "Do you... feel?" I whispered softly as I reached the shattered bow of the Seahorse and clambered through. *Please don't*, I prayed. I hoped it was all just data to the machine that took my place... not real.

"We have databanks of memories of sexual traumas. We know how it feels for you," the filly replied solemnly.

I shivered, moving through the wreckage to the far side as quickly as I could. I had

no idea if I was hearing my copy or remembering myself. I guess it really didn't matter. As soon as I'd reached the rocks on the far bank and jumped down, there was a great wave that slammed into the bridge of ships. They lifted and twisted as if fighting to escape the water, but one by one they turned over, splintered, crashed and bent before disappearing back beneath the flow.

I collapsed onto the clammy rocks, the gray coat covering me evaporating in a shower of motes of light, my nethers burning in memory as I stared at the rain-speckled waters. Credit where it was due... my mind knew what it was doing. If it hadn't been for Glory taking my place... no. I would have broken right there. I couldn't help myself, I swept the filly up in my forelegs and hugged her, hiding my face in her mane.

"Shhh...." Scotch Tape said softly, sounding exactly like my mother as she patted my shoulder. "It'll be alright. You're almost there."

"Almost where?" I sniffed into her mane. "What is the point of this?" I asked as I looked out at the immense wall of the Core. "Just tell me what I did. Tell me what my latest fuck-up was so I can deal with it and move on," I begged as I looked at the green filly. But she smiled sadly and hugged me once more. "Ugh... maturity shouldn't be so damned hard," I muttered.

Finally I pulled myself together enough that I could see a way in. Up the busted bank, there was a door into the Core itself. Where else would be a fitting place for my shadow self to dwell? The broken concrete berm crumbled as I hauled myself up the steep slope towards the gate, the rusted rebar and decaying cement shifting with every bit of progress we made. More than once I sent chunks sliding down into the deep foamy waters below, and only last-minute grabs with my fingers on the rusty bars kept me from joining them.

After another uncertain amount of time, I pulled myself over the edge, and Scotch jumped off of me and onto a jagged length of bridge jutting out over the water. The gate was the immense gaping maw from my dream. Beyond were black monoliths lined in green light. And as if to complete the appearance of awesome showdown from Hell, there was the mare in black pointing her sniper rifle right between my eyes. She had me, dead bang.

She fired at Scotch Tape instead.

I barely got my body in place to shield the filly in time. The mare fired a half dozen times into me, the blows slamming home with such force that had this not all been in my head I likely would have been turned inside out, reinforced body or not. But

I'd be damned if I'd let the other one die as well. And the unicorn seemed to realize it too as she turned and raced away deeper into the Core.

A part of me wanted to race after her and kick her ass, blow her head off, and piss on her corpse. There was a difference between letting a Harbinger change their mind and run off and letting this mare do the same. She was completely evil. A remorseless killer who had slaughtered the dying and helpless simply because she could. I wanted her dead, and there was only one thing keeping me from tearing down after her.

Why had she tried to kill Scotch? Also... why hadn't her shots killed me?

Theoretically, I could die here. I could... and did... hurt from her shots. Yet as I stared in the direction she'd gone, I knew something was off. I wanted to find her and kill her.... but that wasn't why I was here, was it? I was here to worry out something that had happened. Something that I apparently couldn't live with. And as I stood there looking at that gate and that hated city beyond, I was sick of being led around. As I watched, the city grew darker and darker.

"You said the thing I did was at that construction site, right?" I asked as the massive Core disappeared entirely, and once more I sat on my haunches on cracked asphalt in a small circle of light beside the filly. She looked up at me and then nodded slowly once.

Time to stop wasting time.

The illumination slowly spread out from me, and my little patch of cracked asphalt became a parking lot. Rusted wagons lay where they'd been abandoned so long ago. Tin cans, rusty beams and poles, and empty bottles littered the wet ground. A chain link fence appeared, a gate hanging open on a single lower hinge. Rust covered a sign that I could barely make out in the wan illumination of my spell. 'Four Stars Transportation - Keep Out'. Beyond were unfinished walls and half-built roofs, long ago abandoned. A rusty orange-and-brown crane loomed over it all, its heavy payload still dangling.

I slowly walked forward; the first time I'd been in a rush, pissed off and fighting a surge of horror I hadn't shaken from my rampage in the Yellow River Detainment Camp. Mud squelched up under my hooves as I moved down the middle of the construction site. I listened to the hiss of the rain. My vision had been full of red bars.

I didn't like this one bit.

To my left, about a hundred feet away, was some kind of rail yard, the tracks loaded with still railcars and disappearing almost immediately into the earth. A half dozen or so Seekers had trotted their way towards the construction site from the adjacent rail yard. And as I remembered it, I could see them all now. I pressed my back to the cinderblock wall, watching them approach... taking in their weapons. I'd been pissed. Angry. I was sick of running. My head hurt; the radroach in my skull had swapped from scratching and scrabbling to gnawing its way out.

I'd popped out and put two .40-70 rounds from Duty and Sacrifice right into the face of a unicorn Seeker with a missile launcher. Then, as they began to react, I'd slipped into S.A.T.S. and put two more into the face of a large earth pony stallion with a minigun. He'd gone done in a heap, one slug of lead right in his brain. With their heavy weapons destroyed, the others scattered into the ruined construction site. "Security! Scatter! Scatter!" they'd yelled.

After the fight in the camp, this battle now was anti-climatic. Even boring. I might not have been able to pick them out in my E.F.S., but I knew by now how to keep moving and pick them off. I came around one corner and found two struggling with their gear; they didn't seem to know how to use their brand new battle saddles. I telekinetically flung mud into the eyes of the stallion on the left who'd left his visor up, then a second later blew out the knees of the mare on the right. Her face went into the mud, bullets churning the ground as she screamed and fought to bring her forebody up to shoot me while her partner sprayed violently and blindly. I took three steps to the right out of his field of fire, pressed Vigilance to the ear hole of his helmet, and blew his brains out the other side.

Then I stepped past the mare struggling in the mud, and for good measure, put one round in each of her back legs as well. She lay there screaming and sobbing. I patted myself on the back as I'd moved on. Wasn't I so merciful? Wasn't I so good to have not blown her brains out too? Looking at it now... I wanted to buck myself. Hard.

The fifth one I found hiding behind bags of concrete that had long ago transformed into petrified turds. I trotted right up to her cover, floated Vigilance over the top, and fired a half dozen times. As she'd screamed and thrashed, I'd trotted around the corner as neat as you pleased and with a sweep of my sword taken her head completely off. I swung the blood off the blade, watching as the watery red drops splashed against the gray stone.

Then I'd been hit by a bullet. Not some honking anti-machine bullet. A five millimeter round. A bite in my flank. But I'd heard the direction of the shot and turned, swapping

to Duty and Sacrifice almost in the blink of an eye. I'd jumped into S.A.T.S. just as he started to run down into a tunnel in the back of the construction site beneath the bridge. Four shots rang out, but I'd only clipped him with one. I pursued.

The tunnel going into the hillside was... odd. There were train tracks going down the middle, but it didn't seem like any kind of rail tunnel I recognised. The walls were sturdy concrete, and even after years of disuse it hadn't decayed much at all. I saw the Seeker running for his life, and I laughed as I shot him in the ass, finally giving the bastards a little of the grief that had been given to me. Ahead I could see the tunnel opening up into some kind of unfinished security room. I followed the blood trail, my eyes dancing with red bars.

Then I reached the door, Vigilance floating beside me. I'd stood before the massive slab, a rival for anything made by Stable-Tec, which I was fairly sure was the standard for ridiculously oversized and heavy doors. Four stars were embossed on its surface. I'd tried to use my PipBuck to open it; nothing. If there was some way to get through... I sure didn't know it.

Of course, the Harbinger took that moment to attack me. He'd shot from the corner, and he wasn't alone. No wonder he'd fled down into the tunnel. There were three other Seekers waiting. Well, Vigilance finished off the first with a messy shot to the throat. Then the second; headshot, pretty standard. I barely even had to aim. The third came up behind me. A cyberleg applebuck smashed her face to pulpy meat. And then I pointed the gun at the last, but it was empty. I rose up...

"Blackjack, no!" the last one had screamed. Then my hooves came down. One. Two. Three. Done.

"And that's what happened," I finished lamely as I looked back at Scotch Tape.

Right?

From the shadows of the room, the mare in black slowly emerged. I felt a thrill rush through me. Okay. Mystery solved. Time to smash face! "I knew you'd follow me!" I shouted as she brought out her two submachineguns. The ten millimeter bullets purred in the air as I dove for cover, levitating a packing crate lid to block her fire as I dove and slid across the floor. I lay on my side, slipping into S.A.T.S. and aiming underneath the floating wood at the mare in the black riot armor. Four shots, head. Yet to my chagrin, though she staggered back, none of the shots penetrated. Maybe she had some kind of magical protection?

It didn't matter. I was going to kill her.

I had to.

I flung the lid at her as I struggled to my hooves. She was moving too, racing to the side towards the exit. I fired the remaining rounds in the magazine wildly as I got to my hooves. Leaning out into the tunnel, I almost lost my face to the shots she fired over each shoulder as she fled. Yet, despite this, I followed. The hot bullets bit into my combat armor, but none of them hit anything vital as I raced up the tunnel after her. I didn't want her to get enough range on me that she could bring that sniper rifle to bear.

"Blackjack, no!" yelled Scotch Tape, but it didn't matter. Once I'd beaten her, I'd be okay. She was the one behind this. She was the one trying to keep me from realizing the truth. I hadn't done anything wrong here after all. Whatever these computers had thought I'd done had been nothing. Maybe it was all an elaborate deception to keep me here!

Whatever. No more nice mare.

I leapt on her just as she exited the tunnel, my forelegs gripping her haunches. Her guns had opened a half dozen bleeding holes in my body, but my regeneration talismans were already at work. I used every bit of crushing power in my forelegs to latch on; she wasn't going to get away again. Or was she? Before I could try and break her hips or blow out the back of her helmet with magic bullets, she twisted. Suddenly she was laying on her back and had all four hooves against my chest. One kick and I was sent flying.

Landing and sliding in the mud, I watched as she levitated out two more forty-round magazines for the submachineguns and loaded them simultaneously. I flung another gob of mud magically into her face, but unlike the buck she raised a hoof to block it. Still, that was a few seconds she fired blind. I neatly crawled under the spray of fire, reloading Vigilance with armor piercing ammunition and slipping into S.A.T.S.; this time I targeted her weapons. Four bullets transformed one of the well-maintained arms into scrap. Too bad she had two.

She raced to the side for the cover of the unfinished building, and I wasted no time keeping up with her. She had rate of fire on her side; I had accuracy. She sprayed in tightly controlled bursts, keeping me constantly moving as I raced from cover to cover. I had to guesstimate when she would reload, and more than once I leapt out of cover only to get a good strafing with her bullets.

The rain poured down upon us, the lightning flashing. It cast everything in terms of light and shadow. The mud slipped under my hooves as we battled frantically across

the construction site. Screw deeper truths and higher meanings. All I wanted was to kill this mare that had invaded my dreams. Who had invaded my mind. She wasn't a part of me. She was unclean, and I would remove her once and for all.

I felt an opportunity and jumped out from behind a stack of barrels. She darted out ten feet away and aimed her submachinegun. I had her. She had me. I jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued the shots. Then there was a simultaneous 'click' from both our weapons. Her horn glowed in unison with mine. But we'd suddenly found ourselves out of ammunition.

In a flash we were apart. She pulled the sniper rifle off her back. I levitated out the long-barrelled revolvers and reloaded them as fast as I could. Then I was on the prowl. Looking for my enemy...

What the fuck was I doing?

I sat down hard in the mud and took off my combat helmet. My head ached worse than ever, and I pressed my cold, muddy hooves to the sides of my head. This wasn't real. None of this was real. I was lying in a mental institution, helpless, about to be killed by real threats, and here I was fighting a hallucination. I looked back at the tunnel, chewing my lip. I'd killed four Seekers. I had.

I returned to the mouth of the tunnel and stared down into it. I was a perfect sitting duck for the mare in black. *You are an interesting dichotomy.* Slowly, I walked back down, spotting Scotch Tape sitting in the corner, eyes on her hooves. I floated out Vigilance, the gun magically reloaded. This wasn't real. I had to remember that... I stood before the door. I saw the Seeker I had chased down here. This time, I listened. "Die, Security!" In slow motion I killed him, watching him fall.

First Seeker. I hadn't seen her well. It was dark, even with my light spell and a fire burning in the corner. Wait. A fire? When had there been a fire? I supposed even Seekers needed to warm up and get a fresh meal. There'd been bedrolls for three. Piles of scrap and other salvage in the corner, too. Movement from the second Seeker. I didn't even see his face before my reflexive kick smashed his muzzle into his skull. Had he been saying something?

Third Seeker. Coming out, rushing to attack me... no... rushing out to the fallen mare. She's right there in front of me as I rise up. She screams... "No, Blackjack!" I smash my hooves down again, and again... and again...

She'd been a Seeker. She had!

The mare in black erupted out of the shadows, a wicked knife plunging for my chest.

Reflexively I drew my own sword and blocked her slash. We reared up as one, locking our hooves together, my fingers tightening on her elbows as her fingers locked on mine. Our horns glowed we slashed and parried and stabbed and blocked while spinning and swinging around wildly. The sword bit into her, drawing blood. The knife stabbed into me. I blasted her face my with magic bullets, and she turned around and used my same spell against me. Blood poured down my front as I moved my fingers from her elbows to her face mask.

With my fingers locked on her mask, I put my rear hooves on her chest. The weight heaved her above me as I pulled and pulled and finally the helmet came off! She went flying back into a stack of pallets as I rose, lifting the sword. I charged the distance, ready to finish it! I reared up, put my forelegs on her shoulders, and lifted the sword to plunge it into her chest.

Into my chest.

I looked down into a mirror. Cybernetic eyes glared up at me as her lips spread wide. "Go on. Do it. This is what you want. This is what you fucking excel at!" She spat at me as I hesitated.

"No. This... this isn't right. You aren't me," I muttered weakly as the sword fell beside me. I backed slowly away. This was a trick. It had to be. The tunnel gave an ominous rumble as I backed off and she advanced.

"Will you wake up and face reality?" she asked, rolling her eyes. "You're a butcher. You're a fucking beast. A mechanical monster of mutilation and mayhem. Rampage doesn't have shit on us!" she said with a laugh as her horn lifted the sword and rested it on her shoulder. "All I am is brave enough to admit it. Because I am sick of this 'Security' bullshit. It's gotten us nothing... absolutely nothing... but shot, stabbed, and really pissed off."

"I am not a monster," I said slowly as I backed away. She trotted forward step by step, tapping my sword against her neck. Bright lights glowed in the depths of her eyes as she wore the causal grin I'd lost so long ago. "I save ponies..."

"Oh, will you give it *up*?" she said, sitting and waving her hooves in the air. "You don't save *jack shit*. You couldn't save your home. You couldn't save your friends. You couldn't save water in a frigging rainstorm! You fuck up everypony you come across. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Dusty Trails. Caprice. Bottlecap. Priest. The list goes on and fucking on! Can you name one pony in all the Wasteland that you've met and not complicated their lives all to hell? You just *bump into* a Celestia-damned zebra and ruin her life forever!"

"That's not my fault!" I protested. "All that happened because... because..."

"I know. I know. EC-1101," she sneered, before she opened the port on her leg to show her own PipBuck. "You want to know what we should have done with this? We should have left it in Tenpony. Left it with somepony who had a clue. Maybe signed on with them as a guard. But no, you had to be a fucking hero. You had to come back! You just couldn't accept that this fucking death magnet is more than you can handle." She snorted as she grinned at me. "Actually, you should have just given it up to Deus. You saw he'd fucked the Overmare. Make sure he took her with him and thank you very much."

I finally reached a wall and clenched my eyes shut. "Why... why are you saying this? You know I couldn't have done that..."

She trotted away. "No! Of course not. You had to have your whole little adventure, didn't you? Your little secrets and mysteries. You bitch and moan, but I notice you haven't given up, no matter how much you complain or suffer for it." She whirled and pointed a hoof at me, her voice firm and sure. "And you seem to think that putting yourself through pain and misery somehow makes up for your fuckups. Well it doesn't, Blackjack. The only way you are going to survive is if you are me. Stop giving a fuck. Stop pretending to care, and stop trying to be better. You're not better... not a better person. You're scum. You're a killer. Big Daddy had you pegged perfectly from the start. And if you don't become like me, then you're a corpse."

I stared at her for the longest time, tears running down my cheeks. She was a monster. A female Deus; hard, cruel, and indifferent. She'd thrive in the Wasteland. No shame. No remorse. No regret. She was fucking perfect. I couldn't imagine why she hadn't just killed me from the outset.

Then I looked at the last Harbinger I'd killed and closed my eyes again. Not trying to kill me. I looked back at my other self evenly. "You're trying to protect me, aren't you?"

The sneer slowly melted away. I closed my eyes. "I did something in here. Something... bad. Something really bad. And you're trying to keep me from figuring it out... because you know there's only three choices when you screw up that much. You try and do better... you harden so you don't care... or you die." I took a slow, deep breath. "I need to know the truth. And if it kills me... or breaks me... or hardens me... then that's what happens."

"Please," the other me begged softly. I saw the tears in her eyes. "It's bad. It's really

bad."

I smiled. "It always is." And then I slowly rose. The mare in black backed away as I walked to stand before the fallen Seekers.

Die Security. Bang. Mare appears. Bang. Buck comes on behind. Kick. Last Seeker appears. Crush.

No...

Die Security. Bang. Mare. Bang. Buck. Kick...

Blackjack, No!

Blackjack...

I lurched and staggered back, looking down at the last Seeker I'd killed. Only she hadn't been a Seeker. The Seekers didn't call me by my name. They called me Security. Only somepony who knew who I was would say that.

A young somepony...

I sat down hard and looked at the filly with the curly pink mane, like a miniature Pinkie Pie. Her face had been covered with Apple Sugar Bombs dust. '*It's called a grenade! It blows ponies up! Everypony knows that!*'

I'd never known what had become of Scoodle's pink Crusader friend Boing.

"No... no no no... no..." I muttered as I sank down, looking at her crushed body. I could see it all clearly now, the veil stripped away. The only Seeker was the one I'd chased down here. The mare and stallion were both Glory's age; they looked like scavengers. They'd been in front of me, and I'd killed them. Had they actually been hostile? I would have if two strangers started shooting where I'd holed up. And I'd killed them just... like... that...

The mare in black was gone, but she was right. I wished I hadn't known. I put head between my hooves, hugging it. "I killed her... I killed her... I actually killed her..." I murmured softly.

"Yes, you did," Scotch Tape said softly as she trotted to my side.

"How... I couldn't... I..." I started to shake. "Sweet Celestia... how... I..."

"It happens. You'd just been attacked. You're mentally exhausted. Please... please don't break again," Scotch Tape pleaded as she held me tight. "We've tried... I've tried... to help you remember so you can face it..."

"How the hell am I supposed to face it?" I demanded and begged all at once, looking at her in anguish. "How do I ever go back to Chapel? How can I look Charity or any of the other Crusaders in the eyes again?" I was a Reaper. Killer. Monster. I'd always been afraid that when Glory brought me back I'd been wrong; unnatural and dangerous. Now I knew it for a certainty. I wasn't part of the solution; I was part of the problem.

Scotch Tape held me in her little hooves, and despite everything I curled against her. "I can only tell you what your friend told you long ago: You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that you came close to making up for the wrong you committed."

"I don't know how anymore," I whispered.

She sighed and gave my foreleg a little squeeze. "Well then, here is my first suggestion. Admit you have a problem. Tell your friends everything. It's not enough to say you won't kill yourself. Promising that is easy. Admitting the depression and the fear is the real challenge. Secondly, stay by your friends. No matter how hard it may be... let them help you. You have a real self-destructive streak in you, Blackjack. You need help to deal with it. And lastly... get some sleep. You need it... and you know it." She smiled at me. "Blackjack... I know that you're a good person at your core. We went through your memories. I know you doubt yourself. I know you hate yourself. But you can be a great person if you give yourself a chance."

"I killed a filly. Great people don't do that," I muttered. "I don't know if I can live with this, Happyhorn." The chamber was fading away. We were returning to that bleak darkness lit by only my magic spell.

"Well, we'll find out very quickly." The darkness became my bedroom in the asylum, decayed now to match the rest of the Wasteland. I saw myself lying in a filthy bed with a strange gold wire mesh covering my head. Beside me were two scrapped protectaponies, and three Seekers were standing by the bed. Some kind of machine blinked next to them. I'd been strapped in. A unicorn cautiously pressed a riot shotgun against my temple as she rose over me. I had a second, maybe two, and all my problems would become moot.

I deserved to die. It was appropriate punishment.

Punishment is not responsibility. If anypony was going to punish me, it would be a

little yellow filly in a post office.

Ooooh... I was going to owe her every bottle cap I made for the rest of my life... if she didn't kill me first.

But for that, I needed to live long enough to tell her.

I could do that.

"Okay," I said, studying the room, "I'm ready." As ready as I would ever be. I had no idea what I would say to the real Scotch Tape... Glory... Charity... But I had three choices. And for me, there really was only one. I just wished I was certain which one it was.

The olive filly nodded, then frowned. Then she scowled. And finally her face turned blank with shock. "What is it?" I asked softly.

"I... I can't seem to deactivate while a simulation is running," she said as she raced over to the machine next to the bed. "The protectaponies would have to push the button to deactivate the simulation!"

And they were both scrap metal.

"You mean I went through... gah... everything?! And I can't wake up?" I said in disbelief.

"No. And there aren't any protectaponies who can get to my node to disconnect me from you. Not in the three seconds we have, assuming they could get there at all." The olive earth pony stared off into space for a long moment. "There's only one way... you have to disrupt my node yourself."

I stared at her with a cold frisson going along my mane. "That sounds insanely similar to 'you have to kill me'. So I know that's not what you mean." She closed her eyes. I jumped to my hooves, my weapons vanishing. "No. Fuck no! What is the fucking deal?! I finally... finally... accept what I did and... and you're going to... This is crazy! This is some kind of crazy, fucked up, Goldenblood-fucking-with-my-mind simulation! Isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Blackjack." She bowed her head.

"No! Don't be sorry. Because I'm not going to do it! N. O. Fucking no." I sat down, sweeping my legs wide before I turned away from her and crossed my forelimbs in front of me.

"Blackjack," she said softly as she trotted in front of me, "I was founded two hundred

and four years ago to help mentally hurt and emotionally injured ponies. I have had two hundred and sixty eight patients. Do you know how many I counted as successes?" she asked as she put her hooves on my shoulders. I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. "One. One pony who I think might have a chance at a life and happiness. You. Everypony else died with the world, perished at their own hooves, or simply faded away broken and alone. You're the first, and the last, patient that Happyhorn Gardens will ever treat. But if you stay here... then in three seconds, that won't matter."

"You're trying to guilt trip me into killing you to save myself," I said.

"I'm trying to give you a chance. A chance like you give so many others," the olive filly said.

"I don't deserve it," I whispered.

"I disagree," she countered. Little hooves held mine. "I've seen the measure of your mind and heart. Please... give yourself one too."

I stared at her. I tried to summon up a gun... sword... knife... a magic bullet. "I.... I can't..." I stared at her in shock. "I... can't make a weapon..."

"No. I think we're both exhausted. The attackers have destroyed so much of the facility that I no longer have the hardware I'd need to support a change in my projected form. I hoped to take the shape of Sanguine... somepony you could kill easily. But I'm stuck like this," she said. She bit her lip, then closed her eyes. "You know what you have to do..."

"What do I..." I stammered, and then backed away. "No. Hell no! You... what... with my..." I thumped the sides of my head. This was a nightmare. A complete nightmare. I had to wake up! Please!

But it wasn't... and I didn't.

"Please... do it," she said in a whisper.

I didn't trust myself to speak. I tried so hard to summon a weapon. Something to make it quick and clean.

But I had a way. And I knew it would work. I knew because I'd used it before.

I stood before her, looking down at her. "Goodbye, Happyhorn."

"Goodbye, Blackjack," she said. And before I could hesitate a moment longer I reared up.

One...

Two...

Thr-

The machine beside my bed sparked, the glowing gems on the front panel blasting a curtain of multicolored sparks over me and the unicorn about to execute me. I had neither the time nor the desire to think about what I had just done. For once, I was immensely thankful that I had three ponies on the verge of killing me; it allowed me to focus very efficiently indeed.

The explosion of the equipment made the unicorn mare beside my bed back away. The barrel of the gun lifted from my temple as my eyes popped open. Fortunately, I was very used to this model of shotgun; my magic cleanly flicked on the safety even as her eyes widened in horror and she pulled the trigger. One of the other two, an earth pony, held a ten millimeter automatic in his mouth; all I had to do was jerk his weapon two inches to the side and his tongue fired the bullet meant for me into the underside of her chin. Her horn winked out as she started yelling incoherently in pain, staggering back.

My magic surrounded the shotgun and flicked the safety back off, then swung it around towards the two earth ponies standing at the foot of my bed. The one with the automatic clenched his jaw too late to correct his aim. The shotgun was loaded with antipersonnel flechettes; the tiny needles transformed his face into blood and muscle. He got off a round as his head dipped; it bit deep in my belly, not enough to kill, but enough to hurt. Good. I needed that hurt. My second shot finished him. The other earth pony was bringing the shiny new assault carbines on his battle saddle to bear, but there was one problem: the hospital bed I was on was higher than the rifles mounted at his sides.

His bullets clattered and popped off the bed frame and thumped into the mattress I lay upon. I slipped into S.A.T.S., and two perfect shots utterly decapitated him. I remembered that pit... all the faceless, headless ponies. I magically undid the restraints holding me to the bed and rolled off; I'd seen Harpica do it so many times that it only took me a few seconds. I looked at the tiny faded pegasi on the ceiling and the pastel fillies gamboling on the walls, and then I looked down at the rusty red discoloration on my hooves.

There was a tiny strand of curly pink mane stuck to one.

I looked at the brown unicorn mare who stared up at me as she crawled and kicked her way back into the corner. The bullet had probably shattered her jaw. I moved right up to her as she started breathing faster and faster, absolutely certain that I was about to kill her. Instead, I did something worse. Something infinitely worse.

I grabbed her, held her tight, and bawled like a baby for five minutes, bleeding all over her as my body slowly knitted. I'm not exactly sure what I babbled between racking sobs, but I'm fairly sure that if there was any doubt as to my sanity, it was immediately lost. I wept and shuddered and clung to her tightly, and she looked so stunned that she didn't even move. Finally, I pulled myself together.

"Sorry... I, um... sorry..." I said as I wiped my nose. She just blinked as I looked around and saw my saddlebags stashed in the far corner. I carefully collected the dropped automatic; it was a sign of how shocked the wounded mare had been that she hadn't taken it and shot me in the back. "Look, I know we both wanted this to go another way, right?" I stood and backed away, putting on my armor and stripping what I could from the bodies. "You didn't want to get shot..." And they wanted me dead... "So... um... why don't we make a deal? You don't tell anypony I cried all over you and I won't... um... tell anypony you got shot. Deal?"

Her bulging brown eyes rolled back in her sockets as she promptly passed out.

Well, with any luck, I hadn't just cursed her with my hug of doom. I made sure she had at least one healing potion on her for when she awoke.

Then I heard a click from the doorway.

Sweet Celestia... how many others was I going to have to kill today?

I dared a glance over my shoulder at an blue earth pony buck with two assault rifles on his battle saddle. He'd definitely gotten the drop on me. If I turned around I could get him with S.A.T.S. and magic bullets... maybe. But something was different as he stared at me. Something familiar and yet utterly out of place. His eyes widened as he looked at my... was he checking out my butt? My cyberlegs? He wasn't grinning, though; if anything, he appeared horrified. I'd never seen him before, but he seemed to know me beyond being the mare he was supposed to kill.

"Nails! Hey! Did they find and cap her?" somepony yelled from next door.

He just stared at me for the longest time, then backed slowly out into the hall. He tried to speak, but his voice cracked. Then he swallowed. "No! I just saw her go out the north entrance!" he yelled in a high, tense voice.

"Fuck, are you sure? We'll never find her if she gets into the Mire! Shit," the other

stallion swore, starting to whistle. I heard sounds of hooves a floor above me and out in the courtyard.

He just looked at me and then trotted to the unconscious unicorn. Slowly, he heaved her onto his back.

"Why... why help me?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

On his way out, he paused in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Sorry..." And with that, he was leaving as well. There were shouts and calls of 'north' from outside, and I even heard the faint rumble of the tank.

After a few minutes, I stepped out into the halls. Protectaponies lay in heaps, sentries smoldered, and the brown waterlogged walls were pocked with bullet holes and broken from explosions. Slowly I walked back to the smoking machine beside my bed. I took the piece of pink mane still stuck to my hoof and tied it in a bow on the top of the box. Then I leaned in and kissed the metal casing softly.

"So. You did it again," Dealer rasped quietly.

I looked at him standing beside the door. Slowly I reached out a hoof and dragged it along the faded and water stained foals painted on the walls. "You're going to have to be a little more specific. I do a lot of things." I kept my voice low, not able to raise it just now. It was like a horrible dream. I wished all of it had simply been a dream. "Kill fillies. Face horrors. Feel guilty. Fight pointless battles for no reason. I do it all."

"Mmmm... you overlook one thing, Blackjack," he said with a tired, sad smile. "You endure."

I looked at him; the ghost in my PipBuck. Maybe I did. Maybe I was like coal and the Hoof was simply increasing the pressure more and more till I combusted or... didn't coal magically become something else? Rubies? Rubies came from coal, right? "I need a place to sleep. Any ideas?" I asked wearily, knowing that it wouldn't be a pleasant rest... but it would be rest.

"Head southeast of here. On the south side of Black Pony Mountain, there's a house. It should be safe to catch some sleep there," he rasped as he tugged his hat down over his eyes. "After that, Hightower? Or are you going to take my advice and leave? Go find a life at Tenpony? Help LittlePip deal with her monsters? Get the fuck out of the Hoof?"

I looked at the scorched machine and the little bit of pink. Really, it was the smart thing to do. I knew it. Anyone that lived in the Hoof knew it. But...

"Come on, Dealer. You know I'm not smart enough to do that," I said with a tired smile of my own, resting my head against the wall a moment. A bit of gratitude for a place of healing that had helped. I'd made a horrible mistake, but once more I'd dodged my own self-destructive urges. I had a problem, one every bit as horrible as the addiction P-21 had fought. But he'd faced his nightmares. How could I do any less?

The walk out was a bit surreal. Most of the bodies had been stripped by their fellows; Wasteland looting instinct, I supposed. Still, I found some more ammo for my guns. I stood at the intact fountain by the entrance and washed my hooves of the blood, though they'd probably always be stained. I'd never be able to pretend otherwise.

I looked around the blasted halls. I half expected to wake up, meet with Sanguine, and listen to a talk about how I had regressed, followed by an exploration of my 'interesting dichotomy'. I half wanted to step into the courtyard just to make certain there was no concert planned. But there was nothing here; the dream was over. I was awake. I was back...

I guess happiness would be far too much to expect, and more than I deserved.

As I walked out of the asylum, I looked north at the distant lights of the Seekers as they went off in the wrong direction. Slowly, I trotted south towards the parking lot. The large and stately building that had been my home for the last few weeks of a dream had been almost completely demolished. Almost nothing of the roof remained, and one whole end had been collapsed completely. I passed by a plaque; it'd been dinged up pretty badly, but I could still read it even in the early morning darkness.

'Happyhorn Gardens: May all find peace and healing within'.

I touched it gently and moved away to the southeast. Maybe I had. A little. More than I deserved...

Footnote: Maximum level reached.

44. Mares and Stallions

"It's awfully pretty."

"Yes, she was."

The Wasteland is a poisonous place. I don't mean the taint, radiation, and disease; sure, those are problems, but they're not the Wasteland's true assault. All of those can be fought or borne. They could even be defeated entirely... but not by one pony working alone or by warring gangs or small, scattered, distrustful settlements. Red Eye's slave empire might be able to do it, but then the old horrors would just be replaced by new ones. To heal Equestria, ponies needed harmony, true harmony, and that was what the Wasteland fought against most strongly. The poisons that are killing us aren't magical or chemical; they're psychological. And they were killing Equestria even before there was a Wasteland.

Rampage had tried to show me that, but I hadn't quite gotten it. I was poisoned; we all were. Doubt. Fear. Hate. Regret. Shame. Pride. I was a walking toxic waste dump of mental venoms that were killing me and ponies around me. No wonder I'd taxed Happyhorn's therapy machines to their absolute limit. No surprise they couldn't create a simulation that I'd have been content with. The faults lay not with the environment but with myself.

And I'd killed an innocent filly.

I knew I wasn't Deus yet; I hadn't gone in there intending to kill Boing and her two friends. They'd been casualties in my fight with the Seekers. But two weeks ago, when I faced the Reapers in Megamart, I hadn't tried to tear them apart like I had the Thunderhead pegasi in Yellow River. I could have talked my way out, especially with Dusk there. I could have tried to find a better way.

Now... now I wasn't even sure I was trying anymore.

And I'd have to change that. Since I'd gotten back to the Hoof, I'd been falling apart. No. Even before that, when I'd pulled that stunt with LittlePip... would I have done something that reckless if I'd been normal? And everything past that... Brimstone's Fall... Priest... Chimera... the Harbingers... I was running full out with no brakes or thought at all. Something inside me was wrong, and I needed to find a way to fix it. Pieces of myself had been falling away bit by bit, and I needed to find a way to pull myself together.

And the first step was finding a place to sleep.

I'd wanted to go back to the tunnel with Boing. I'd wanted to give her and her friends a burial like I hadn't given Scoodle, but that wasn't possible. I'd gotten into viewing range of the construction site and could go no further without being spotted. The Seekers were using the train tunnel to come and go in their search for me, and without a StealthBuck, I'd be toast. Even with one, I doubted I could sneak out three bodies for burial.

So now I was heading due south towards the western edge of the immense plug of black rock. It had to be almost a mile across and at least that high, disappearing into the clouds above and probably only visible against the dark sky due to my cybereyes. It was funny, though: the more I looked at it, the more boring it became. It was just a rock. Big and black, but a rock.

Around it for several hundred feet was a tumbled field of jagged and broken obsidian. Five minutes spent trying to pick my way around massive hexagonal blocks of stone that had peeled away from the sides of the mountain, and over shattered black volcanic glass, convinced me that this was a good and nasty way to die. The sharp glass edges promised a particularly bloody end at the slightest misstep. There was, though, life among the rocks, and while it mostly consisted of a low thorny brush that was practically impenetrable, there was also some amazingly green grass.

I found a small trickle of water running out from a gap in the black stone; I followed it for a while and reached a place where the water pooled in a largeish wedge formed by two massive blocks. As I was taking a nice long drink, a thought struck me. I looked around; I'd deactivated my E.F.S. so that the red bars would stop twitching in my vision everywhere I looked. There was no way I could fight them properly if they all were real, anyway, and it was impossible to pick anything useful out of all the noise my wonky brain was throwing in. The night seemed quiet and still, though, save for the soft noise and motion of the water. This was probably still a bad idea, but... I stripped off my armor and carefully waded in; I definitely didn't want to get over my head, as swimming was impossible with my metal legs. The water turned out to be quite warm, somehow; despite everything I'd been through, I smiled at this simple pleasure.

Was there anything more soothing and civilizing than enough hot water to submerge yourself in?

I washed the accumulated blood, sweat, and grime off my hide and white-enameled limbs, then gave the same treatment to my thrashed armor. Half the ceramic plates

lining the back would have to be replaced, but I had some suits from Happyhorn that I could use for repairs. I'd have killed for a block of soap, but just cleaning myself off helped to keep me stable. I was walking a very delicate line; the hospital had helped me face what I'd done, but I hadn't really processed it yet. Heck, I still wasn't over Scoodle or what had happened on the boat.

The boat... I thought of how I'd been acting. The ghoul scavenger in Brimstone's Fall... Candlewick's ass grab... was I even safe to be around males? The thing was, after getting to know P-21 as a person and meeting Priest and others, I liked them. For most of my life, they'd been nothing but reproductive equipment, and I'd used them as such. I hadn't been much better than the bucks who'd ploughed me on the Seahorse. Out in the Wasteland, I'd realised that they were so much more: friends, enemies... and maybe even something else some day. Oh, sure, Glory had my heart. But I didn't want to be... reactive. Assertive: yes. Respected: would be nice. Berserk... no.

I found a submerged ledge I could sit back on and looked at my mechanical hoof. I extended my fingers and watched them slowly move. There was a special kind of magic there, taking my thought to move and translating it into the motion I wanted. Enchanted to repair itself and to magically translate feeling, pressure, temperature, and damage. Tough. Yet as I stared at the water beading on the white surface, I had to admit that, if I'd been given a choice, I'd have had my normal limbs back.

But I was a cyberpony. One I'd known had been content to be reduced to a life in a jar. The other had been a sadistic monster. The only other people like me that I'd met weren't even ponies. That didn't leave me with a whole lot of definite ground to figure out what I was supposed to do or be. Theoretically, I might live for centuries; the Professor had. But what about relationships? Would I outlive Glory? Could I have a family? Should I even want to have one? I still could feel pleasure; hell, it was the last remaining thing I had that was unquestionably organic. Something to live for...

If only the thought of it didn't make one part of me start to panic and another part of me feel horribly guilty and another part feel ugly and mechanical. I touched the restored left side of my face. Glory had saved my sanity; I never would have lasted if I couldn't even look in the mirror and not see a machine.

I gave a rueful smile as I played matchmaker in my head. It helped take my mind off other things. If I were to get physical with a stallion, who would it be? P-21? Ohh... that thought opened up a can of radroaches even I couldn't begin to deal with. I'd had a brief fantasy of a fling with Priest before he'd reminded me that not all bucks

were interested in me. What about Brutus? I thought of the massive black earth pony and smiled. Okay, there was a warm and fuzzy tingle. Sagittarius? He was a little older than me but certainly had some possibilities. Splendid? Hmm... if you got past that whole 'society slavery' thing, he was positively delicious. Stronghoof was... a little too intense. Lighthooves...

That curdled the buttery feelings churning in my nethers. So much for that little thought escape. And really, why was I contemplating who I'd like to slap flanks with at a time like this? Shouldn't I be kicking myself for Boing, fearing myself for what I'd done at Yellow River, berating myself for not following Happyhorn's advice and finding a way to sleep, or disgusted with myself for even thinking about sex after what happened on the Seahorse? Surely I should be hating myself one way or another right now?

"Self-destructive impulses... gee... I wonder why the machine would say that?" I muttered with a groan.

I lay back on a rock, staring up. There was a gap between the clouds and the mountain; enough to let a tiny crescent of white moonlight peek through. The pale luminescence turned the black knob of stone into a glittering, ghostly sculpture. I had to admit, I was astonished to find anything beautiful in the Hoof; this place seemed to thrive on ugliness and miser-

Oh. Hello...

Two yellow eyes peered out of darkness of the thorn bushes. Vertical pupils cut through yellow irises, coming to points like a dragon's. The eyes watched me with a very steady stare, and I didn't dare move towards the gear I'd left dripping on a rock beside the pool. Finally, a minute passed, and I began to get more and more tense. "Can I help you?" I asked as I slowly moved to stand on the ledge.

Step by step it... he... emerged. He was a pony like none I'd ever seen before. His hide was a dark gray and his tail a deep purple; I couldn't see his mane under his helmet. To my shock, he had wings... but not wings like a pegasus. These wings were leathery skin—similar to a manticore's—rather than feathered, and his large ears had prominent tufts at the ends. I'd never seen a monsterpony like this before... and I'd thought that Brass had been the last one anyway. He wore dark purple metal armor that appeared almost archaic but also quite intricate and clearly well-crafted and tended. At least that suggested he wasn't a feral monster...

"Okay... look... Sanguine is dead, so let's just let bygones be bygones and I'll be on my way, okay? Okay!" I said with a strained grin. He stood on one of the rock

slabs that formed the pool wall. I saw he had a freshly killed radhog slung across his back, bleeding all over his sides and wings. He simply looked at me and then removed the ornate-looking helmet, revealing a short mane the same purple as his tail. Next to it he set his kill.

Then he took off his armor and I amended one little fact: he wasn't just a stallion... look past the freaky wings and the eyes, and there was absolutely no denying he was a damned good-looking stallion. Little apprehensive alarms began to sound along with an admiration I just been practicing earlier. I had to admit that from a purely biological standpoint, he was damned fine! Toned flanks sporting a strange heart-shaped gothic shield, strong shoulders, he was big but not too big... I shook my head hard. Okay... not the time for this!

Of course, that did nothing for the part of my mind that was screaming and making my nethers clench. Another little part of the crazy that was my brain wanted to get friendly then and there just to prove that what had happened to me wasn't in control. Fortunately, I had just enough sanity left to seize both impulses and send them into opposite corners of my mind for a time out. "Hey... um... it's really nice to meet you! At least, I hope you're nice! I mean, of course you're nice. We're all nice here, and—"

He jumped into the other side of the pool, disappearing under the water. Wow... was it just me or did the water get a whole lot hotter?! It might explain why I was so warm all of a sudden! He emerged just a few feet away, the water cascading off him as those bright amber eyes peered at me. He then sat on the ledge beside me, and I just sat there, ears folded back, staring at him. There was a riot going on in my head as I had parts screaming to attack, parts screaming to run, and parts screaming to rut. Silence was my only hope.

Fortunately, he didn't speak to the crazy cyberpony sitting with her legs pressed together and her tail so tight between them that it'd take a prybar or a little flattery to get it out. He washed the blood off his lovely charcoal gray coat, his wings stretching out a little. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I had no doubt I could kill him; that wasn't the point. I wanted to be around a stallion without reacting like they were the ones on the boat. I didn't want to be a grenade with the stem pulled. He sighed and reclined in the hotspring, and that pulled my eyes in an entirely different direction.

I was pretty sure my face was the same color as my mane as I sunk down, staring straight ahead. What the hell was the matter with me? I was just taking a bath with a... very... very... nice stallion. One who just looked at me and smiled steadily. This wasn't 99; he wasn't on my queue. I wasn't forcing anything. He wasn't forcing

anything. He wasn't trying to shoot me... always a bonus! Say hi, Blackjack. Run away, Blackjack. Don't kill him, Blackjack. Do something, Blackjack!

"Gottagohiwhatsyernamebye!" I blurted all at once, and he looked at me in surprise. I covered my face with my hooves. "Look. Thank you for not trying to kill me. Really. I really appreciate it! But I'm just a little bit of a basket case and I've been through a lot and you're really cute... really... but... yeah. Sorry." And I turned and climbed out of the pool next to my gear.

So did he.

I froze as I saw him right there behind me. Neither of us blinked as he just looked at me and I stared over my shoulder at him. If he put one hoof on my flank I'd kill him. But I also really wanted him to... and I also felt horribly guilty for wanting him to... and so I just stood there as he sniffed the crazy mare. Ooookay... apparently I smelled good. I didn't dare move, and if he touched me... oh, I really didn't want to kill him. Except that I also really did. My brain was zigzagging all over the place; in 99 I was the one who was supposed to fill my queue, make all the moves. This was... new. He lifted his head and smiled at me with a soft nicker. He was game. Oh was he game.

Was I?

Finally, the assorted crazy that was my brain lurched to a decision as I turned to face him and backed away. As much... as nice... as the idea was, there were way too many unknowns, not to mention the fact I might snap and kill him right in the middle. I was really glad for once that my heart wasn't pounding in my chest; the noise would have been a dead giveaway. But I didn't know who or what he was beyond male... Sweet Celestia, was he... but I didn't even know his name, not to mention species!

"Look. Ah... I need to go. I am... really... not in any condition to... ah... you know. And... thanks for not killing me. Or trying to. It's just... yeah... okay..." Please don't follow. Please don't follow, I mentally begged as I went to my gear. "I'm really flattered but I'm kinda cursed and a little unstable and I really appreciate what you're doing but really its just a bad idea and I don't even know your name or what you are exactly so thanks but..." I babbled a constant stream, hoping that I'd eventually hit the word or phrase that would convince him I was not the kind of mare he wanted to rut with.

I looked down. Gear. Guns. Good to go! I just bundled them up in one heap. I'd put them on later when there wasn't as much penis around me... nice penis on

a strange bat-stallion who might just be sizing me up to eat or- I looked up and he was right there. Just... right there in front of me with his bright eyes and what was the matter with me? What was the matter with him?! Wasn't there this huge sign around my neck saying 'Don't spank flanks with the crazy'? My brain gears locked up. "Hi," was all I could squeak out. "Please I'm not safe to... ah," I whimpered as he leaned in. I really didn't know what I'd do if he...

Apparently, it was stop thinking. His lips met mine, and while I was in no condition to be kissed, another part of me came roaring to the front of my mind and with primal rage stomped every last bit of guilt from my crazy. Don't kill him... please don't kill him... No doubt I'd be angsting like crazy for this later, but for right now I just let it go. I kissed this strange, utterly anonymous stallion back. No doubt he'd turn out to have some sort of terrible secret or dark past or traumatized soul or... something! But right now, I had to admit he was a damned good kisser. There was just one thing...

I slugged him so hard he landed in the middle of the pool with a splash. Fortunately, he wasn't half metal and floated there in a daze as I huffed, inventing all new colors of red. With him further away and my ardor momentarily doused, I was able to sort a few things out.

I had to admit, I'd really needed that kiss. I might have radroaches in my brain, suffer from self-destructive episodes, and be half metal... but as he pulled away, a little pony in the back of my head gave a little 'Woot! I'm cute and good enough to get kissed by a cute guy!' cheer and dance. I quickly backed away, feeling confused and thankful and wary all at once. He blinked at me from the middle of the pool, and I was oddly glad and at the same time alarmed to see him smiling ruefully.

"Um... thanks... but don't do that again," I said as the cheer wore off and wariness resumed, but he seemed to be content with just that and backed away. The kiss had rearranged things a little. No, rutting was off the table and I'd smash him if he tried. Panic was shelved for the time being; if he had friends show up, though...

Hey... I'd just kissed a guy and not shot him! That was progress, right! Right? Ugh... Why now? I didn't know how to deal with a buck that was interested in me like that.

First things first. "So... do you talk?" I asked him as he dragged himself out of the pool. He held the side of his face and frowned, but thoughtfully rather than in annoyance. Finally he shook his head and pointed at himself. His mouth opened and closed several times, but then he pointed his hoof at me and covered his ears.

"You can talk, but I can't hear it?" I asked in confusion, and then he tapped his nose with a nod and smile. "But I can smell it?" He froze and then sat, waving his hooves in front of him and shaking his head. "I can't smell it?" He stopped and looked at me now with probably as much confusion as I had. "Okay, okay. The important thing is that you can't talk in any way I can understand?" He sighed, rolled his amber eyes, then shrugged.

He stood and trotted to his armor, then pulled out a chalkboard and a piece of chalk. He popped the latter into his mouth and wrote 'Yes'. Just like Ditz Doo, as I recalled. Okay, so we had communication... sort of. He erased the board with the tip of his wing and then wrote 'Stygius' and grinned as he tapped his chest with a hoof. "Your name?" I asked, and he nodded once.

Stygius... okay. I apparently attracted all sorts. "Okay, Stygius. My name's Black-jack. What are you doing out here?"

He looked surprised. He pointed at the radhog, then crouched and pounced the rock a few feet ahead of him, all four hooves hitting the ground at once. He swept his forehooves wide, making a popping noise with his tongue. Then he pranced along the side of the pool, fanning his wings. He stopped, covering his eyes with a hoof as he looked at me. Then he gave a broad and somewhat cocky little smile as he dipped his hoof into the pool and made a little splash. Then he kissed the air and abruptly stood upright on his hind legs, and slowly fell back till he collapsed with all four legs thrust up into the air.

"So you were out hunting, made your kill, were flying back, spotted me and... decided to flirt?" The batpony sat up, rubbing his chin, and then grinned and nodded. "You didn't think I was a raider or... bait? Something?"

He grabbed his slate, cleaned it, then wrote, 'Too sexy.'

Seriously? "You thought I was... I was too sexy to be dangerous?" Now I was more worried about him than what he might do to me. He grinned ruefully and shrugged, smiling up at me. Clearly I'd need to hit him again if I was going to work that interest out of him. I rubbed my temples and moved on to the next important question on my mind. "What are you?"

The batpony blinked, then wrote 'Luna's guards'.

Okay... so not a monsterpony. And plural. I certainly hadn't heard anything about them in school, or the Wasteland Survival Guide, or from DJ Pon3. "You used to guard Princess Luna?"

He pointed at himself and then shook his head. He then wrote ‘Great x10 grandma’.

“Oh. You’re the descendants of Luna’s guards...” I said, and he tapped his nose. I assumed that that was his way of saying ‘yes’. “But... why didn’t they die in Canterlot with her?” He looked at me with a flat expression, and I winced inwardly; I couldn’t blame him. That was a 9.5 on the bluntnometer.

He rolled his eyes and cupped his forelegs, rocking them back and forth. Then he pointed betwixt my legs and tapped his stomach. Then he pointed at himself and held his hoof colt-high in front of him. I struggled a moment, then guessed, “Oh... so there were babies, mothers, and young ponies who weren’t in Canterlot?” He nodded vigorously. “Do you live around here, then?”

He froze, then forced a grin and shook his head firmly. He looked a bit too nervous to me, though. He glanced out into the darkness, then waved vaguely off towards the east. “Ah... well, very nice to meet you, Stygius...” Really, it was nice to meet something interesting that wasn’t trying to kill me. “But I really should be on my way.”

I shook the water out of my bardings and strapped it on. Stygius looked crestfallen as he watched me. Suddenly, he darted back to his dark purple armor, put it on in a flash, and soared over and landed in front of me with a broad, cocky grin. But due to his haste, his armor was askew and his helmet was on backwards. He froze a moment, then reached up and turned it around straight, trying to maintain a dignified expression. “You... want to come with me?” He bowed deeply. I sat and looked at him flatly. “Why?”

He glanced at my posterior, then grinned and struck a noble pose.

It might have been a little bit impressive, even with the backwards helmet, if a second dark form hadn’t swooshed out of the night and pounced right on top of him. He slid almost ten feet, looking up at a second batpony with the same dusky hide; her mane was more bluish than purple, but other than that they looked quite similar. This batpony was a mare in the same sort of armor, and she looked pissed as her bright yellow eyes glared down at him. Suddenly, I could just make out the faintest chirps, squeaks, and squeals at the edge of my hearing as she moved her mouth. The lecture was accompanied by her pointing at me and then smacking him upside the head.

Somepony was in trouble...

Finally, she huffed and stepped back, letting Stygius rise. She glared at his armor and roughly jerked it all into place and buckled it down, then snorted and nodded

before frowning at me. Her hoof pointed imperiously away.

“Okay. Okay. I get the idea,” I muttered as I backed off.

Stygius launched himself into the air and landed next to me, the batmare looking shocked as he landed. I heard the faintest squeaks and chirps as he pointed at me. She frowned at him, now more in worry than anger. She made the smallest chirp, and jabbed her hoof in my direction. Then she looked at him suspiciously and pointed at me again, making another noise. He suddenly looked nervous, fidgeted, and then assumed the noble pose once more and made what I assumed was supposed to be a gallant sound.

She looked at him flatly, then sighed and shook her head, taking off and soaring in an arc to land before me. Then she reached out and patted my shoulder gently. I just stared at her in utter confusion as she trotted past Stygius with a scornful snort, grabbed the radhog in her hooves, and flew off into the night on silent bat wings.

I looked at Stygius. “Sooooo?”

He sighed, grabbed his chalk, and scribbled ‘Twin sister.’ A moment later, he added ‘Tenebra’ underneath it. Strange names must be a batpony thing. He erased it and then wrote, ‘She mad.’

No. Really? “Why?”

‘Rules.’ He made a snapping motion with his hooves, then pointed at me and shook his head. Breaking rules?

“Oh. You weren’t supposed to... ah... join me?” I asked. He smiled and tapped his nose. “Why not?” He blinked, frowned, started to move... stopped, then frowned again. He erased the board and started to write. Frowned... erased it... started again.

Finally, he huffed softly and wrote ‘Cause,’ then nodded once. I supposed that that would have to do.

“And you want to come with me?” He grinned and bowed deeply. “Why?” He blinked and started to strike a pose, but at my flat look he froze, his grin becoming tense. He slumped, took the chalkboard slate in his hooves, erased it, and wrote slowly.

When he’d finished, he hung his head as he held the slate up between his hooves. ‘UR pretty mare.’

“Pretty?” I said as I took a step back. He nodded and sighed. “You want to come with me because I’m pretty?” He nodded again, peeking at me. I covered my face

with a hoof. "Look... Stygius... I have issues. Balefire bomb-sized issues. I might just snap and geld you because you look wrong at my butt. I just got out of an insane asylum. Heck... I've got an army of cultists trying to track me down!" I didn't mention the worst thing I'd done in the last day. "The smart thing for you to do is go and join your sister. I'm nothing but trouble."

He blinked and frowned, then rubbed his chin. "Seriously! I am not safe to be around." He pursed his lips as he stared at me. I took another step back. "C... come on! You can't seriously want to come with me just because I'm pretty!" He gave an easy grin and nodded. Nasty, suspicious parts of my head were hissing all kinds of accusations. This was obviously some sort of plot. There was some kind of scheme here. No stallion could want to just trot along for the heck of it. He wanted something, and I was fairly sure it was right underneath my tail.

But was that necessarily a bad thing? Hell yes, roared part of my mind.

Maybe not, murmured another part.

Once upon a time, P-21 had accused me of having trust issues in that I was really, really, stupidly trusting. Now here I was, suspicious simply because a strange buck liked me, was interested in me, and wanted to come along. I laughed softly, shaking my head and earning a quizzical look from the charcoal batpony. Batpony... there had to be a better name for them.

I sighed and nodded in resignation. "Okay. But please, don't get killed. Don't... try anything too friendly." Then I frowned and added sharply, "And don't shoot me! Understand?" He looked at me in blank confusion, then gestured to the fact he had no guns. In fact, I didn't see any weapons on him at all; if I was lucky, that meant that he was such a master of hoof-to-hoof combat that he didn't need them... but this being me, it probably just meant that he was good enough to take a radhog by surprise and had never needed to fight anything else. "Don't look at me like that! Just because you don't have a gun doesn't mean you won't find something to shoot me with." Wait... I froze as I felt myself turning red as he looked at me with a smile that was way too cocky... erm... smug, for my liking. "I mean bullets! Shooting... bullets... just don't!"

He gave a soft, high pitched chuckle just barely in my hearing range as he flew lazily behind me... and for the first time ever, it was my tail that was feeling all tingly, not my mane. Together, we picked our way along the scree and thorn bushes towards the southern edge of the mountain.

"And she said she was cursed! Cursed! Just for bumping into me. I mean, I know I sometimes cause trouble for ponies without meaning to, but cursed? That's a little upsetting," I rambled as we made our way along. Clearly, travelling with me for almost an hour and hearing my entire life story hadn't really convinced him that I wasn't the safest mare to be around. I had left out the worst parts, though, for now... and might have shuffled things up. He was flying after me with a funny look on his face as we crept around the edge of the talus, at least; I hoped that that meant that he was reconsidering.

Like the far side of the valley, this area was more sparsely developed. What had been built here looked like it'd been built like bunkers. The homes were made of reinforced concrete rather than wood and stone, and the apartments were like miniature fortresses fighting the creep of nature and water. Most of the buildings looked sunken into the slope, though, and it was often easier to trot over the flat, muddy roofs of the few in our way than it would have been to go around them. None of the buildings were very habitable; if they weren't bombed or blasted, they were usually filled with mud and reeking stagnant water.

And as if matching that style, the two largest buildings off in the eastern edge of the city were of the same brutal architecture, resembling immense concrete blocks with the edges filed off. The larger of the two, south of Black Pony Mountain and all the way up on the slope of the eastern mountains, I assumed was Hightower; it wasn't quite as tall as the Fluttershy clinic, but it was a wide, square block of a building about the same size as Flash Industries and surrounded by a high stone wall. I could barely make out a garish rainbow-colored glow on the south side.

My sleep-deprived brain was getting weird again, and yet I felt fine. I knew that I needed sleep, hoped I could somehow find it. But I didn't see anyplace around here. I guessed that whatever state I'd been in at Happyhorn hadn't counted as sleep. In fact, I couldn't remember, in any of my memories of that place, having slept. It all just blurred together into one smear. With the shadows getting twitchy and my E.F.S. switched off, I needed to hole up and do something to try and shut down for a few hours. I just couldn't see any place nearby that sounded like the place the Dealer had mentioned. Somewhere safe?

Wait? What was that?

Somepony had dropped a giant pink gumball in the low, thorny woods. The gnarly trees obscured it, but from above the sight was impossible to miss. It glowed slightly with a strange internal illumination, and I found myself just staring in shock at it. I pointed down at it with my hoof. "Um... what is that?" Stygius simply shrugged and

made a motion of pushing against something, then beating it with his hoof, and then he hunched his shoulders once more.

Hmm... well, it was the most unusual thing on the mountain slope, so... might as well check it out.

Making our way closer to the pink ball, I found myself looking nervously at the trees. These were actually alive, and after my last experience with a 'forest', I was definitely leery of timber wolves, exploding apples, anything blue... However, aside from a carpet of dead, soggy leaves underhoof and numerous little streams trickling along, there wasn't much that stood out. I tried eating one of the greener leaves but found it tasted like a mouthful of tart wax. That didn't stop me from eating it, of course, but it did get me some curious looks from Stygius. He chewed cautiously on one, then spat it out immediately.

Life endured. Even in the Wasteland. Most of Hoofington might be dead and sterilized, but life was crawling back. This was the result of two centuries, though, and there were other parts of the Hoof that were still just dead forest and struggling yellow grass. Without something like Gardens of Equestria, who knew how long it would take for the land to really recover?

Then again, one way or another, recover it would; that was heartening, if only a little. But it raised the question of whether ponykind would recover too... and that looked far more iffy.

We found a track through the woods; scraping away the mat of leaves uncovered the cracked and broken surface of a road running along the curve of the eastern valley. Most of the homes here were in the process of being consumed by the dead leaves and detritus carried on the streams that cut along the hillside. Once or twice we saw wagons that had been split and twisted by the growth of the trees. I noticed a radhog family rooting around in one of the heavy concrete homes, but they didn't seem to notice us, or maybe didn't care.

Then we reached the pink bubble; it had to be almost a hundred feet in diameter, and the looming trees around it were slowly growing along its surface. Stygius flew overhead and rammed hard into the shield, and to my amazement it indented a great distance before snapping back into place and flinging him away. He flipped end over end before righting himself and shrugging in midair. Then he flew down next to me and stood upright, leaning against it.

I trotted up to it and pushed my hoof against the surface. There was a ripple, and he tumbled though. I stepped through beside him and looked at him sprawled

out on his back and gaping at me. "Oh, yeah. I'm related to one of the Ministry Mares, apparently. Not Twilight, though..." He just stared at me in bafflement, and I smiled. "Sorry. I might have skipped a few parts." Then I looked past him and my eyes widened. "Woah." He scrambled to his hooves and stared as well.

Inside the bubble was a house the likes of which I'd only seen above Chapel. It wasn't an ugly block of concrete looking more suitable for a standoff against the striped hordes, but a place where ponies could live. Long green grass grew in a lawn around a stone cottage, and the dark hexagonal stones were covered in green vines, the delicate pink bells of their flowers filling the air with an indescribable sweetness. The cottage was built back against a natural ledge of dark stone; water poured out of a fissure above to tumble into a wheel beside the house that slowly turned and splashed.

Never, in all my crazy visions of a world before bombs, could I have imagined a place like this. It made my chest hurt to think that any place like this could exist. As we walked along the flagstones, I was struck by the mixing of delicate and thriving life with the hard stone plinths scattered around the home. Some were obsidian, others rusty red, others white marble, others gray granite slab. There were spaces for nests and birdhouses that were now vacant.

The one thing that didn't belong, however, was the birthday presents.

They lay around the cottage every few feet, colorful cubical parcels about a foot on a side. Most were topped with bows and fancy ribbons. One lay right on the steps leading up to the front door, this one with a little handle sticking out of it. I felt a frisson of anticipation as the handle started to turn of its own accord and tinny music issued from the parcel. I reached out a hoof and pushed Stygius back a little.

Suddenly, the top of the box popped open and a pink pony head popped out on a spring. It wobbled a few times, and when it finally slowed I saw it was done up like a grinning Pinkie Pie. It turned, looked right at me, and straightened. "Hi!" a mare said in a cheery voice, "I'm really so very sorry, but this is a special private Pinkie party and I'm afraid you don't have an invitation. This is a very super secure crime scene, and if you're here, I'm afraid you're going to have to wait for a M.o.M. team to say it's okie dokie lokie to leave! Please sit quietly and don't make any sudden moves, Naughty McNaughterson. Otherwise, I'll have to just go ahead and assume that you're a Bad Pony, and we don't want that!"

"Right..." I said as I pulled out the riot shotgun I'd gotten at Happyhorn and, after a moment of consideration, slapped a drum of buckshot in. "Fraid there's no Ministry

of Morale anymore and we're not planning to wait here forever, so you can just... not do whatever you were going to do."

The pupils of the bobbing Pinkie head suddenly flashed bright red. "Oooooh... some naughty pony's gonna need a time out, aren't they?" Suddenly the lids started popping off the other wrapped presents in clouds of confetti, unleashing a swarm of buzzing brightly-colored little spritebots! The winged orbs swooped up over us, their eyes glowing the same ominous red as the Pinkie head's.

Okay, if there was ever a time for a shotgun, this was it! I backed towards the house as the robots closed in from either side, blowing cones of lead out at the swirling machines. They exploded into flying shrapnel, but every gap that opened was immediately filled! I wasn't doing much more than slowing them down, and at this rate I'd have to switch drums really soon. And at that thought, the cloud of spritebots that had now completely cut us off from the shield opened fire. One of their little red bolts of incineration magic did little more than sting, but these sprites were firing hundreds of them and making my armor start to smoke!

There was only one thing to do: get inside and hope Pinkie Pie hadn't left anything else nasty! We ran up the stairs onto the porch that ran the length of the front of the house, and I jerked on the front door. Locked, of course. I gave it a solid thump as the spritebots swarmed around us and the batpony darted into the air. The door sounded very solid and was firmly closed. Stygius swooped and wheeled above me, drawing the robots' fire as I tried to decide between trying to pick the lock and just trying to batter the door down. Every now and then he'd open his mouth and let out a scream that I could barely hear but also actually barely see radiating out from his mouth. The shimmering screech made the tiny robots in front of him crackle, spark, and drop to the ground smoking, but he had the same problem as my shotgun; no matter how many he took out, there always seemed to be more to take their places.

I gave the door an experimental kick. Ow... Okay, lockpicking, then. I tried my best to focus as I knelt at the door, brushing aside the yellow tape printed with 'Crime Scene: Smart Detectives and Bumbling Assistants Only' to get at the lock. I didn't have very many bobby pins, and I sure didn't have time to screw around. Focus... don't think about the buck getting shot to buy you time to do this. Don't think about him turning to ash and drifting from the sky. Don't think about how handsome he was or that he was nice enough to come along with you in spite of your crazy!

Snap. Well, I did still have more. Break. Two more. Crack. Okay. Last shot, and I could not mess this up. Calm... focus... twist it just like so... turn the lock, and! Broken. I gave a little scream, grabbed the screwdriver with my teeth, and twisted

as hard as I could. For a second the lock caught, and then my luck saved our asses again and it popped open. I kicked the door wide. "Stygious! In here! Quickly!"

He dropped down onto the porch in a landing that was just short of a crash, and maybe not that much, his armor and hide smoking in dozens of places, and the swarm wasn't far behind him. I grabbed him by his armor and hauled him in, slamming the door behind him. Good thick, solid door; please do keep the robots out. He collapsed onto the polished wood floor with a raspy exhalation.

Around me, lights flickered on automatically. I looked around anxiously, shotgun out, but didn't see anything that looked hostile. What I did see was that the house was, astonishingly, completely clean. Aside from a faint layer of dust, I might as well have been two hundred years in the past. I had to take a second look at Stygius to make sure I wasn't seeing things... though I still might have been, of course.

Then I kicked myself in the rump and set to finding some healing potions. With all the grass outside, I doubted there was an Enervation ring here. I ran from room to room and finally spotted a yellow medical case bolted to the wall in the watercloset. It was thankfully unlocked and held four bright purple healing potions, and I immediately lifted them and raced back to him. Don't die... Please don't die.

You're cursed, Star Maiden.

No I'm not. Curses schmurses. He was definitely on the well-done side, but he was still breathing when I reached him. I held a potion to his mouth and he eagerly slugged it down. The burns on his hide lightened only a bit, so I gave him another. The angry red evened out, and after a third potion, his dusky gray hide closed with barely a mark. He groaned and lay out flat, hooves and bat wings splayed wide. I looked down into his eyes with a thankful smile. He was going to pull through.

He looked back up at me, gave a wide grin, and puckered his lips. I balked, fighting the impulse to smash his face in. So he was a little flirty... don't kill him for that. I closed my eyes a moment, then snorted and pushed his face away with a snort. "Don't push your luck." Please.

He looked at me in concern, but now that worry for him was past I was taking a longer look at the house I was in. Like the outside, the inside was decorated in a style that reminded me vaguely of Star House and the Fluttershy Medical Center's atrium. Most of it was wood depicting butterflies, bunnies, flowers, trees, and birds, but there was also a fascinating collection of gems and metalwork. In the kitchen, the faucet was shaped like a swan's neck. The wings of the butterflies on the mantle were perfectly cut rose quartz. Copper verdigris crawled alongside ivy carvings and

literally popped out off the woodwork. The detail was such that I could see the veins in the metal leaves.

One thing was out of place: there were stacks of bright pink plastic crates piled up next to the door. All of them bore the grinning pink pony icon of the Ministry of Morale. I noticed a checklist on a clipboard resting on top, though, and read, ‘Ministry of Morale Crime Scene Evaluation Checklist for Super Smart SmartyPants Detective Ponies’.

- ✓ 1. Know who the bad ponies are.
- ✓ 2. Arrest bad ponies.
- 3. Find evidence to prove bad ponies are bad.
- 4. Question bad ponies to give up other bad ponies.
- 5. Repeat steps 1+2.

Now, I might not have known a lot about crime scene evaluation, but I found myself extremely grateful that Pinkie Pie hadn’t written the security procedures for Stable 99. I doubt there’d have been a mare left under such guidelines. I dug through the crates, keeping an eye and a riot shotgun out for anything that flew or talked, but they were empty save for dozens and dozens of little envelopes and plastic bags. There was a date written in one of the boxes at the top of the MoMCSEC3SDP that piqued my interest, though. The day the bombs fell.

Decorations like the Fluttershy clinic and Happyhorn? Searching for evidence in a house that had some kind of magic bubble around it? And who was a prominent figure arrested for treason right before the bombs fell? The book I’d found in Tenpony Tower had said that this place was near Black Pony Mountain, and Dealer had steered me to it.

Goldenblood’s house.

Standing there, I felt a shiver run through me as I stared around the great room. Here was where the stallion himself lived; where he’d hatched his schemes. Where he’d had a brief life together with Fluttershy; clearly he’d done all he could to make this place her home as well. This home had absolutely none of the ostentation of Blueblood Manor. Everything appeared to be simply crafted, yet there was also a quality in the woodwork that I simply couldn’t shake.

Stygius appeared more concerned about me as I sat there staring at the furniture and decorations. I might find out everything I wanted to know here! If it hadn’t been

removed... I simply had to search! Sleep could wait.

The ground floor turned out to consist of a library, some sort of workshop, a watercloset, and the kitchen adjoining the great room that the front door opened into; stairs led up to a balcony running along the top of the enclosed rooms, and more doors opened off of that. I trotted to the kitchen cupboards and opened them up only to see that they were devoid of any food. The plates were all neatly stacked, though, the forks and knives polished. The refrigerator wasn't just bare; it was empty and cleaned.

In the library was a collection of books on history, politics, and other things I had no idea about because they were written in zebra glyphs or languages I didn't even recognize. The desk drawers had stationary, scrolls, quills, and inks all neatly stacked in their respective places. Everything was clean and, for the most part, clear of dust. I was shocked to see how many pictures he had on his desk. Fluttershy was first and foremost, smiling as she held a little bunny, but next to her was Luna hugging an embarrassed-looking, unscarred Goldenblood. There were Twilight Sparkle and an adolescent Spike in his cave, sitting on his hoard. Applejack and Applesnack looking equally uncomfortable at some fancy function. An incredibly young-looking Pinkie Pie dancing around a toothless lizard with her friends. Rainbow Dash flying in formation. Rarity wearing a stunning dress in black and red.

Yet as I sat and looked around his desk, I also took in what wasn't there. No notes. No garbage in the wastebin. No half-used-up pencils, crumbs, or dirty dishes. No letters to be answered nor address books nor terminal, even. In fact, the room was so clean that I would have been hard pressed to believe it had ever been used.

The workshop, like the library next door, was neat and orderly. Tools were left hanging on the wall next to a workbench; tiny little hammers, pliers, and eyeglasses mounted on leather headbands were all in order. In the corner was a heavy stone oven of some sort. I frowned and checked inside. Swept clean of ashes. In drawers under the workbench were spools of copper, silver, gold, and steel wire, verified with a nibble on each. Goddesses, didn't that get a funny look from the dusky batpony. I self-consciously transferred the spools to my saddlebags anyway, though.

I looked around again. There were no half-finished projects anywhere. No scrap bits left on the floor. Nothing to imply that anypony had actually lived here long ago. I glanced back at Stygius, caught his questioning look, and sighed. "Sorry. Once upon a time there was a pony who lived here that did a lot of secretive things. I was hoping that I might get some ans—"

Why did I hear music? It was distant and tinny, like a bad recording. Slowly, I looked around; Stygius was visibly flickering in and out of sight while by the workbench a yellow shape was moving like a ghost. "Wait a minute..." I murmured as I cautiously moved to the side, towards the corner of the workshop. The further I moved, the more Stygius faded from view and the more Goldenblood appeared. I heard his rasping cough as he struggled for breath. He wore a clear plastic mask over his face as he levitated a length of silver wire before him. Finally, when I was in the very corner, he appeared completely solid.

He also looked like hell. He was covered in bandages, some of which were yellowed and dirty-looking. Yet despite the wet sound of his lungs, he still kept his magical grasp steady as he moulded steel, gold leaf, and silver wire together as easily as if they were clay. There was a radio on the table beside him playing familiar string music.

"Professor?" a mare asked softly from the door, and like a ghost materializing, a stricken black unicorn appeared. Her silver eyes were wide and shimmered with tears. A lone candle was on her flank. She sniffed and rubbed her nose.

He didn't look up from his work. "I'm not... a teacher... anymore... Psalm," he wheezed in that boiled-sounding voice. Slowly he turned to look at her, stiffly, as if every motion were agony. His eyes fixed on her standing there as she sniffed. "It's not... your fault, Psalm."

It was the wrong comment. "How can you say that? It was my fault! All of it!" she sobbed as she collapsed, hanging her head. "If I... if they... Oh Luna, I wish I'd died with the others!"

He slowly rose, hobbled towards where she lay in a heap, and, moving with great pain, gently hugged her. "It is... not... your fault..." he rasped, then coughed that horrid, wracking cough.

"I shouldn't have done it. I... they did it because of me."

He answered her in short, gasping broken lines that I threaded together. "You are not to blame, Psalm. Not for your kindness. What happened at Littlehorn was not your fault, nor will you wishing to assume responsibility make it better." He patted her mane. "I wish I could help you understand that." He held her in his hooves till her sobbing abated. "There... better?" She nodded and wiped her nose.

"What about you, Professor?" she asked with a worried frown. "When you collapsed at the speech... I was so afraid."

He struggled for breath before rasping, "I likely have a month to live. Two at the most. Luna herself is helping to heal the damage to my lungs." He smiled and gave a little shrug, his eyes distant. "She wants me to help her set up her government," he said as they shifted, sitting and facing each other. He hung his head as he spoke. Suddenly he arched his back and resumed coughing and retching. He took the mask off and choked a moment, and a thin pink stream trickled out of his mouth and onto the floor, smoking where it met the wood. I remembered how Glory had cut away the environmental suit that had fused to my hide from the pink cloud; suddenly I had an unsettling idea of where the stallion's injuries might have come from. Psalm rushed out and a moment later returned with healing potions. It took four before he finally recovered.

"You should be in the hospital, Professor," Psalm murmured, looking at the hissing pink spittle.

He didn't answer or argue at first, seeming to need to concentrate on breathing. Then, "The future of Equestria might be better if I don't survive," he said, so quietly that I almost missed it.

"What... but..." Her horn glowed as she lifted another healing draught to his lips. He suckled on it, coughing wetly again. "But why? You said Princess Luna needs you. Don't you want to help her?"

He didn't answer for such a long time that I was sure he wouldn't. But then he said in his low, raspy voice, "I do. More than you could imagine, Psalm. But she wants a government every bit as grand and powerful as her sister's. I can give her that. It's possible. But I fear what will be required to create such a rule. I'm terrified, Psalm. Terrified that if I help her do what she wants, it will destroy her and Equestria."

He paused to retch up another stream of the pink fluid into an empty potion bottle. Then he sat back and caught his breath. He looked up at the ceiling. "I can see it now, Psalm. She will be loved... but unlike her sister, she will be feared as well. She'll have all the power of Celestia in her hooves, but she'll not need to use it. Misdirection... doubt... ambiguity... these will reign, and there will be none to stop them. Not for centuries, at least." He sighed as he closed his eyes. A strange calmness seemed to spill over him, and his words became stronger. "It's like I can look ahead the entire span of a millennium, great and terrible and bloody. There will be murder... slaughter... betrayal. History assures it, a tale wrought again and again all across the world. It will be a nightmare, Psalm. I can see it clearly... as if it's already happened and old history. Past. Dry. Dead."

He shook his head and said in his rasping whisper, his voice flowing like a hissing steam pipe as he spoke with a look of sad resignation, “I’ve never been so certain of anything as I have this, Psalm. So I must ask myself, would it not be better... more merciful... to help it fail? To try to bring about its ruin swiftly and surely and in the process save the hearts and souls of both Equestria and Luna from that grim future? Or should I embrace audacity and try to steer this bloody calamity towards some yet unknown beneficial conclusion? What is a hundred dead... a thousand... a million... over the span of a thousand years and more? What is a few cold betrayals when we’ve all passed into the everafter?” He shuddered and once more broke into great heaving coughs. He spat more of the pink foulness into the bottle and sighed. “Truly, death would be a fine, if cowardly, escape from these questions churning about in my head.”

Finally he relaxed, and Psalm cracked a tiny smile. “Wow... are monologues a side effect of the poison, Professor?”

Her attempt at humor prevailed. He smiled back. “I’m dying. It gives tremendous license towards the melodramatic.” Then he laughed and immediately broke into deep, wet, heaving coughs. When he’d brought up more pink, he sighed. “I just don’t know what I should do.”

“Professor. She’s... she’s not just Princess Luna. She’s Luna. Our Luna. The one who actually read your papers on petriculture and zebra mysticism? The one who didn’t think that a rock hunters’ club was a stupid waste of a unicorn’s time? We have to help her!” Goldenblood closed his eyes and shook his head. Psalm pressed her lips together, then nudged his shoulder. “If you don’t, Professor, somepony else will.”

The comment stirred him, his golden eyes opening and his lips pressing together in a line. “You’re right. I can just see... the nobility... wealthy... privileged ponies...” He retched again and then stood. “I can just see what my father would do if he got her to listen to him. His lot got us into this war in the first place. ‘A week long war...’ Fools. Worthless fools... they’ll perpetuate the butchery ad nauseum. It’s not as if they send their children to die,” Goldenblood muttered as he paced slowly. “In time, she’d see through the flattery... but it would take years... perhaps generations... before she could be strong enough to rule on her own.”

“You have to help her, Professor. She’s Luna. She’s... we have to help,” Psalm said as she touched several strangely parallel scars on the inside of her foreleg. “Please... I know you want to help her. You love her.”

Goldenblood smiled, slow and sad. "She's a princess... how could I not?" He sighed and looked at her. "And you, Psalm? How will you help the Princess?"

"Me... I..." she stammered, and then closed her eyes. "I think... I've been thinking... maybe I should enlist?"

"Psalm... soldiers kill..." he murmured. "You burst into tears when you saw a hawk kill a rabbit for lunch. Are you sure?"

"I know. I know it's wrong... but... they burned my home and they killed my school. I..." she stammered and sniffed. "I... I have to do something, Professor! I don't think I could live with myself if I didn't!" She bit her lip as she fidgeted. "My roommate Twist is going to sign up. We shared a space above her candy shop, and since it was completely destroyed... well... she says she's going to thump and twist those zebras like they were huge black and white stripes of taffy."

He was quiet for a short time, then sighed. "Just, please... if you are going to enlist... Please promise me that you're doing this for Luna. Don't do this out of hate."

"I won't, Professor," she replied softly. "Hopefully they need somepony for support. Carrying water or helping the medics or... or something. I doubt I'd ever be able to kill anypony." Funny, remembering her fighting alongside Big Macintosh, I'd say she'd proved quite able.

He smiled and lifted the steel rose with his magic. The glow deepened, and the rose came alive, the petals extending and curling, gold and silver. Finally, he bent the stem and hooked it gently around her ear; it gleamed brightly against her ebony coat. "Here. Take this. For luck."

"Professor! I can't. It's too... too good for me. I don't deserve something so lovely," she said, blushing.

"Indulge me. I'm dying. It'd be rude to not accept," he said with a raspy chuckle. "Now, help me into the kitchen. The hospital provided some absolutely horrid mush for my meals, but that doesn't mean you can't have something nice to eat."

She helped him to his hooves, and together they walked out of the room. My vision flickered, and suddenly a pair of slitted yellow eyes were staring into mine. "Gah!" I shouted, my forelegs kicking out at him, but he seemed to be wise to me and nimbly darted back. I looked around, then slumped. "Woah. That is so weird."

He pointed at me, then suddenly swayed as he sat on his rump and let his eyes go glassy.

"Sorry about that," I said with a little frown, rubbing my mane. "I sometimes have..." How to explain this without sounding crazier than usual? "Visions, I guess." He looked at me skeptically and I waved my hoof at him. "I know, I know. Sounds crazy, but I do." I looked around the workshop with a sigh, then turned. In the corner of the room, right above my head, was a small hole. I'd bet my horn that there'd once been a camera of some sort there. Why? Goldenblood wasn't the director of anything back then...

Ugh... add mystery four thousand, seven hundred and two to the list.

I rose to my hooves and gave myself a shake, looking at the concerned batpony. He smiled at me and gestured with his hoof like he wanted me to go on. I groaned and shook my head. "You remember the pony I mentioned. The one with all the secrets? Well... he used to be a teacher. He taught at some place called Littlehorn... and apparently one of his students blamed herself when it got destroyed." I frowned as I looked at the worktable. "He was also an artist..." Funny. I didn't like thinking of him like that. Bastard. Manipulator. Son of a mule... sure. "He helped Luna set up the ministries, but... he didn't want to. He really didn't." I shook my head. "I guess... he cared too much for Luna to turn her down."

He gave me a sideways, appraising look. He pointed at me, clutched his hooves over his chest, and thumped them rhythmically as he adopted a besotted expression. I noticed he was just a bit nervous as well.

"You want to know if I have a very special somepony?" I asked, and he nodded. I smiled fondly. "Yeah. I do. Her name is Glory." At once his smile melted, and he slumped. "What?" He rolled his eyes towards the roof, hooves wide, looking anguished. "What? What's wrong?"

He pointed at me, then pointed between his legs at his equipment and adopted a disgusted look, thrusting his nose into the air with a snort. He looked so disappointed I couldn't help myself and smiled.

"No no. Glory is strictly mares only, but I don't mind males like that. No... my issue with males is... um..." Come on Blackjack, admit it. It stuck in my throat a moment, but finally I managed to spit it out. "I, ah... got ploughed pretty bad not long ago. Yeah..." He stared at me in shock and I felt myself flush as I looked away. "That's why I'm so... nervous... around you. 'Cause I'm trying to... you know... not kill you."

Stygios looked mad and worried. He scribbled on his chalkboard slate, 'I not hurt U'. Then he growled and stomped what I assumed were my imaginary violators.

"Thanks. I know that." Or he was one hell of an actor. "I'm just... I don't want to do it with you and have a flashback in the middle." I smiled crookedly at him. "You wouldn't want to fool around with me if I might hurt you, would you?"

He seemed to think of it for all of two seconds before he smiled and nodded once. I couldn't help but laugh... and speculate.

It occurred to me then to wonder how Glory would take my behavior with Stygius. I'd only just met him, though, so it wasn't like there was any emotional connection, and she wouldn't be interested in him herself. Probably not even interested in hearing about it. A little 'recreation' would be nice; damned nice, if it didn't involve raping a male on a breeding queue or getting nailed to the floor. Some nice, plain, middle-ground sex.

I wasn't like Glory. What had happened on the Seahorse aside, I liked sex with stallions. A lot. I'd always looked forward to my turn on the queue. Even Vanity's memory orb had been fun; had it been viewed in private, I probably would have had a new toy.

Stygius interrupted my thoughts by pointing at me and then bumping his forehooves together and giving a pointed look. I flushed, but aside from that nagging panic in the back of my mind... it wasn't an entirely unpleasant proposition.

"Maybe," I said, making him grin. "But not right now." From the look on Stygius's face, though, he'd follow me through a fire for a chance at my hind end.

Stallions...

I spent the next half an hour running around the first floor trying to find some flicker or hear something that might be another recording, but the radroach in my head was waking up and starting to scramble around. I kept seeing things flickering in the corners of my vision. Every now and then I'd see a red bar, even with the E.F.S. off, and have to fight the urge to shoot randomly into corners. Yet I also felt slow. Before, I'd had a nervous, almost manic energy. Now I felt lethargy slipping over me. Not fatigue so much as an inability to really put things together.

I was wasting time. Procrastinating; wasn't that the word? I knew what I needed to do, and yet... I didn't want to. As stupid and illogical as it was, I was certain that if I truly slept I'd wake up... wrong. Completely robotic, or maybe I'd find out that all of this really was a dream and I was really just a mutilated, violated, mutated mare

waiting to die. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with me; something more than just the fatigue and the augmentations.

It was like my own mind was trying to kill me... putting off what I needed to do. Happyhorn had gotten me to finally admit that what I needed wasn't more action but inaction. Not more running around but slowing down and facing what was the matter with me. It was harder; when Harbingers attacked, I just shot back. Killing was easier.

"Goddesses, I am turning into a monster," I said aloud, sitting down on the great room floor and cupping my face in my cool metallic hands. At least Deus was sane. Brutal and terrible, yes, but in control. Stygius stood nearby, looking concerned.

I needed friends. I needed other ponies. I couldn't do it alone... and so I smiled at him wearily. "I need to sleep." If those spritebots outside haven't come in yet, we should be safe. And I couldn't imagine Seekers getting in through that shield.

He wrote on his slate and held it up. 'Tired?'

For some reason, the question struck me as incredibly funny, but my laughter was ragged and high-strung. Now he looked even more worried. "Actually, that's the funny thing. I'm not. I'm not tired at all." I trotted to the couch and looked at it with a sort of dread. I remembered lying down after Priest died and not being able to get up again. Not sleep... just... lying there. "It's just, over the last day, I've blown up a secret facility, gotten chased by a giant killer robot, had half my face melted off and sewn back together, been attacked a half-dozen times, discovered my best friend was a drug addict, tried to comfort my marefriend, who turned into Rainbow Dash, had a refinery blow up around me, watched a buck take out a tank with a rifle, trotted through a horrific prison camp, ripped apart an Enclave squad, killed a filly, and was plugged into a mental therapy machine in an insane asylum." I turned my back on him, rubbing my skull. Maybe it was the fatigue that was making me all flirty and boycrazy?

He tapped his slate, and I looked over at him frowning back at me. 'Killed a what?'

I closed my eyes and sighed. "It was an accident... I didn't realize who she was till too late... but I still killed her." The tension in my head was growing again. "I know it was wrong... I want to make up for it. That's all I can do now." That made him look a little less angry and more concerned. He pointed at me and then shrugged in confusion. "I... I need to sleep. My brain needs it. I need it." I just wasn't sure I could anymore.

He pointed at the couch, and I lay down. "Hey... Stygius... I was wondering. Where do batponies like you come from?" Ugh, procrastinating again, Blackjack. He blinked and scrunched his brows together. I guessed that that was the sort of question you couldn't answer in a few words on a blackboard. "Sorry... nevermind. I just..." I sighed and I closed my eyes. "It's been so long that I... I don't know how exactly to do this."

I lay there for a few seconds, then heard the soft click of a door closing. He was a nice guy; the fact that he wasn't okay with what I'd done to Boing showed that he wasn't just some killer. Okay, maybe he was a bit of an idiot, following me... assuming he didn't have some outside agenda. Maybe he—

Sleep, Blackjack. That's what you need now. Sleep. Don't think about anything but that. Though it would be nice for P-21 to have a guy he could... hopefully... relate to. I hoped they could be friends. I know Glory would probably be fascinated by him... unless, of course, the Enclave already knew all about Luna's guards and the like, bu—

I grabbed a pillow off the couch, covered my face, and screamed in frustration. Just... stop! I'd gone through most of my life not thinking about things. Why was it so hard now? Just sleep, Blackjack...

If I sleep... I'll die. I could remember being on the boat, feeling warmth on my face. The feel of Glory holding me as I slipped away. Goddesses, I wanted it so badly. I remembered... I remembered stars. A vague, fuzzy memory of stars and beautiful music and a feeling of belonging. A feeling of others wanting me to stay.

Self-destructive tendencies... was that why I was so messed up? I'd died. I'd been at peace, and then... I'd come back. Come back as this metal and pony thing. They turned me into Deus; maybe a less clunky Deus, but still a cyberpony. Glory had been right not to tell me. If she had, I wouldn't have let her. Better some more worthy pony like the Stable Dweller take EC-1101 and try to find out about Goldenblood and Horizons. Instead, she'd plotted with everyone behind my back to save my life! How dare she? How could she? What gave her the right?!

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling, my mechanical fingers about to rip the flowery pink pillow in two. I was angry... at Glory? I was... I really was. I felt hot tears running down the sides of my head. Ever since I'd come back in Tenpony, I'd been trying to tear myself apart because I was angry at the mare I loved. And yet, I did love her, and yet some fundamental part of me was outraged that she had turned me into this. Yes, technically she had saved my life. Yes, she had done so

out of love...

Life isn't about what you want, Miss Fish. It isn't about what happens to you... it's about how you respond to it. Somepony had told me that a long time ago; a stallion with a candy-cane-striped mane on a long walk to medical...

How had I been dealing with coming back? I'd bottled it up like P-21. Let it fester. Let it drive me to be reckless. Stupid. I'd turned my back on my friends and turned my back on Glory.

I lay there and closed my eyes. I imagined a great bank of electrical switches. One by one, I slowly flipped them off. I turned off my thoughts about Stygius and my newly annoying libido. I shut down my uncertainty and worry about the Harbingers, the Core, and EC-1101. I switched off the nagging curiosities of Goldenblood and Project Horizons. One by one, it was like bits of my brain were going dark. I deactivated my newly discovered anger at Glory and powered off my concerns for my friends. Finally I broke the connection to my self-hatred for what I was: a filly-murdering mechanical monster.

I was left with one last switch in my head. My fear. My certainty that if I pulled it, I would die. I imagined the mare in black from the Happyhorn simulation trying so hard to protect me. Protecting myself from the very thing I needed most. I grabbed the handle of the switch with my magic and started to pull.

You'll die... a part of me said as everything let go.

Maybe. But perhaps you get to dream when you're dead...

"Professor Goldy! I got to go to the bathroom!" Rampage whined, the striped filly hopping about with her hindlegs crossed as we scrambled along the floor of the canyon. The students all carried their own saddlebags and wore hiking boots on their hooves as they made their way along. A beautiful sunny day filled the sky, making the bands in the rock walls gleam and sparkle brightly around us. At our lead was a younger, healthier, happier Goldenblood. The river poured through the curving divide, bouncing and spraying over rocks as the rock hunters' club made our way along the bank. There were ponies I knew and ponies I didn't, yet I could see them all so clearly.

"You know you're in the middle of the woods? Pick a tree," P-21 muttered beside me, rolling his eyes. Overhead, Glory and Stygius were hovering over the riverbank

where water had polished the boulders until they resembled giant gray eggs. The gray pegasus filly was telling a tan pegasus colt that they couldn't have been left by dragons.

"Don't fly out too far over the river, Glory, Pound Cake," I called out in concern as the fliers wheeled about over the boulders. I helped lift a tiny Boo and Scotch Tape up over a ridge of stone, my magic holding them steadily.

"I don't even know why they're allowed to go to our school," a coltish Trueblood said with a snort. "It's Luna's Academy for Young Unicorns. I mean really! What are pegasi and earth ponies going to learn about magic?"

"While it's true that most of our students are unicorns," Goldenblood said quietly but in a tone of voice that made my ears perk up, "there are forms of magic that are beyond most unicorns. For instance, you might spend your entire life trying to learn a spell to tend a garden, while an earth pony could accomplish it with ease. And just as we can learn from them, they can learn from us."

"Besides," piped a tan unicorn filly beside Rampage, "he's my brother! So he can come to my school with me if he wants!"

"Well said, Pumpkin Cake," I said, giving the young mare an approving smile. She beamed back.

Trueblood snorted at me. "Well, fine, but I don't know why unicorns with less magic than an earth pony are allowed to be here. What's she going to teach us? How to not do magic?" Suddenly a rock flew through the air and smacked him upside the head. "Ow!" He stared at the filly. "Professor! She threw a rock at me!"

"Accident! My magic went off," Pumpkin Cake retorted, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Professor!" Trueblood whined.

"Unicorn magic is a strange and sometimes unpredictable thing. Especially when you're insulting said unicorn's family and friends," Goldenblood countered.

The colt snorted and muttered, "At least for unicorns that have magic." He glared at me sullenly. "She shouldn't even be here. When I tell Father, he'll write to Princess Luna about me being around deadhorns like her." I dropped my head a little; I really didn't want to get fired from this job.

"She is my assistant, and her magical ability is none of your business," Goldenblood countered with a tone of soft yet firm reprimand. Their eyes met, and the maroon

colt lowered his head, muttering to himself. Goldenblood's gaze met mine, and the pale unicorn smiled.

"Professor Goldy!" Rampage whined as she hopped in place, screwing up her face.

"Tree. Just. Use," P-21 muttered.

Goldenblood sighed. "I'm afraid he's right. Otherwise, it's a long way back to the toilet at Littlehorn."

"Oooooh!" she whined and then darted off into some brush. "Don't look!" she shrieked.

"Who'd want to?" P-21 asked as he shook his head, looking around at the others.

"Hey, what are you doing in those bushes?" Pound Cake called down from above. The filly's scream echoed up and down the canyon's walls.

With that disaster out of the way, we reached a spot near the end of the canyon. Here the black rock was scoured clean by a torrent of water pouring down from hundreds of feet above. Cool mist played on my hide and dripped off my mane and into my eyes. I wiped the wet strands away and sighed, looking around at the bands of stones in the canyon's walls, shown so clearly with the wet bringing out their colors.

One particular reddish-yellow band of stone stood out above the others. That was because this one had teeth! The massive fangs of some enormous creature were frozen in place where the profile emerged from the rock. "Woah, cool!" Pound Cake said as he flew above us all. Whatever the creature was, it'd been two or three times the size of a pony. There were lots of other grayish bones visible in the rock band.

"Thank you, Pound Cake," Goldenblood said as he smiled at the tan pegasus colt. "If you remember our last session, I pointed out how when sedimentary rocks form, they create bands of stone called 'strata'. These strata are usually arranged from youngest rock at the top with progressively older and older stone the further down you go."

"Like your room, Bro," Pumpkin Cake teased the pegasus with a grin.

"What about those, Professor? Are those b... b... bones?" Rampage stammered as she nervously poked one of the shapes embedded in the wall.

"Once they were, but now they've become special rocks called fossils. Long ago, this creature was as alive as you or I," Goldenblood said as he gestured at the cliff wall. "Then it died and was buried in this muddy sand. Over a very long time, its

bones were transformed into rocks like the ones you see here.” His horn glowed as he levitated out a rock hammer, carefully picked one of the fossils free, and passed it around... or at least passed it around till it got to Boo. The pale earth filly then popped it into her mouth and started chewing on the fossil like it was an extremely stale biscuit.

“How? Was there an outbreak of cockatrices?” Trueblood asked with a skeptical scowl.

“Actually? There’re some theories that the transformation occurred with no magic at all,” Goldenblood said with a smile. The maroon colt snorted disdainfully. “Yes, that’s the typical reaction,” the pale unicorn said with a chuckle.

“Oooh! There’s another one, Professor! And another!” Glory cried out as she dropped down to the bottom of the yellowy-red layer and pointed her wing at the darker layer below it. “And even more down here! Only... these look like bugs. And there’s a fish!” the gray filly said, pointing her hoof at the rock face.

“The magic of pegasus eyesight,” Goldenblood murmured, making the maroon colt glower. “Yes, there are an amazing variety. I know that some books and films talk about ancient monsters like giants and trolls, but really, we know next to nothing about some of the creatures from long ago. What did they look like, for example? What did they hunt? How did they live? Were they intelligent, or not?” As he looked up at the rock face, the sun peeked through the clouds and made several gemstones embedded higher up gleam and twinkle like shards of a petrified rainbow.

“Spread out and see if you can find more for your collection. Remember, only one each, and only ones no bigger than your hoof. Leave the larger ones for others to find.”

The fillies and colts spread out in little pairs and trios. I made sure that Boo didn’t wander too close to the river. The maroon colt grumbled about stupid rock hunters’ clubs and joining ‘cause mom and dad said so. Pound Cake grabbed his sister firmly with his legs and flew off along the rock face, claiming they were going to find the biggest ones of all. I called out for them not to go too far.

Glory, however, was staring at the huge snarling fossil in the cliff face and the others beside it. “Professor... I was wondering... well... there’s all these fossils in this band... and the band beneath that... and I even saw some in the layer underneath that one. But why aren’t there any fossils of these big monsters higher up? I mean... did something kill all of these creatures at once?”

A few that were listening in stopped picking at rocks and straightened. Goldenblood looked at her with a pleased smile. “An excellent observation. That is quite a good question. The honest truth is that we don’t really know. History fades and blurs the further back one goes. We’re taught the pageant of Hearths Warming Eve, but what of the countries that we came from? Where did they come from? Or the Princesses? Or ponykind? Thus, when we get to things happening eons ago, all we can do is make educated speculations. Why so many large creatures in these layers and then such an abrupt stop? Something must have happened.”

He trotted up to the rock layer and peered closely at it. He hummed softly under his breath, then paused. His rock hammer then picked out a lump of rock. Laying it down, he carefully chipped at the stone till it broke open and revealed a tiny metal fragment.

“What is it, Professor?” P-21 asked as Goldenblood lifted it with his magic.

“Sky iron. Starmetal. Moonsteel. The names vary, but it’s a very special kind of iron that is found only in meteorites; what we also call ‘falling stars’. It has very special properties that vary quite extensively. Some is exceptionally strong. Other kinds are fairly mundane. It is usually impervious to rust and very difficult to melt or work with. Most ponies don’t even bother studying it as it’s such a bother. But you can find it wherever falling stars have landed.” He tapped the layer. “The upper boundary of this fossil-rich layer is full of tiny fragments of this particularly silvery variety of starmetal, suggesting that once, long ago, a meteorite impacted somewhere in the world. We’ve found fragments of this particular starmetal all across Equestria.”

“And it killed all those... those things?” Rampage asked as she pointed at the fangy fossil with a hoof.

“We suspect it did. Others hypothesize that other changes to the world may have killed these ancient beasts long ago. Perhaps a cataclysmic volcanic eruption. But does anypony notice something else?” He gestured towards the horizontal bands of stone higher up the rock face with his hoof. I stared but didn’t see anything standing out. Certainly no other fossils like the others I’d seen. Just the glimmer of gems studding the rock face in little clusters.

“Boring...” muttered Trueblood.

Then Stygius flew up and tapped a ruby with a hoof. Goldenblood nodded in approval. “Excellent. That’s exactly it. Above this stratum of rock, gemstones appear all across Equestria, yet beneath it there is virtually nothing we’d call a gemstone.” We all looked at him in confusion. He floated his hammer up to the batpony, who

took it in his mouth and knocked the gemstone free. I caught it as it fell and levitated it over to the gold-maned unicorn as Stygius dropped down beside me. “Gemstones like this are uncommon anywhere else in the world. Notice its facets? How clear and flawless it is? We see so many bright and sparkly gems like this across Equestria that they’re mundane and common. Indeed, we cultivate them inside stones. However, if you were to go to another part of the world...” He pulled an ugly reddish-brown stone embedded inside a rock from his saddlebag. “This is a ruby.”

“Um... I’m sorry Professor, but that can’t be right. That’s a ruby,” I said as I pointed at the glimmering gemstone. Everypony nodded in agreement.

Goldenblood chuckled, “I assure you, this is a ruby. Same hardness. Same crystals. Cut and polished, it would look the same. Yet it would have absolutely no inherent magical energy whatsoever. Also, any gemstones below this impact stratum would be equally mundane and unmagical. This is the conundrum. How is it that we go from ordinary, dirty, unmagical crystals before the event to countless gemstones afterwards? And why are these gems so abundant here, but scarcer and scarcer the further one gets from Equestria?”

The pale unicorn poorly hid his smug expression, and P-21 shared a look with me and Glory before he rolled his eyes and said with not so veiled sarcasm, “Gee, Professor. Do you have a theory?” Rampage snorted and even Glory fought a smile.

Goldenblood smirked back at P-21 and said, with a touch of singed pride, “Well, since you’re so curious, I guess I can share mine with you.” He looked up at the gems studding the cliff face. “I suspect that when the meteorite struck, so many creatures died so suddenly that the release of all that life energy condensed in the gemstones that are abundant in our land. We see a similar phenomenon occur when potent magical beings, like ancient dragons, die.”

“Is there going to be a test on this, Professor?” Trueblood asked, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t think rock hunters’ club had marks.”

“Just because you’ve got rocks in your head doesn’t mean that the rest of us aren’t interested! Right?” Glory asked eagerly as she turned to the rest of us. Boo tilted her head and looked up at her as she chewed on her tail, P-21 gave a shrug, Rampage scratched her head, and Stygius was checking out my rump. Glory drooped in the air. “Well I’m interested.”

“It’s alright,” Goldenblood said as he looked at the students hunting for fossils and

then turned back to me. “It looks like Pumpkin and Pound have wandered off again. Can you see if you can find them, Dear? They’re probably further back along the canyon. Tell them we have perfectly fine fossils for them to pick here.” He looked back at the rest of the colts and fillies working on the stone face. “I’ll keep an eye on everypony else here.”

I trotted away with all due diligence and speed, calling out their names as I picked my way through the canyon that arced along the edge of Littlehorn Valley. Seen from far above, it would have created an image of an immense crescent moon. The river slowed as the canyon widened. While the terrain was rough and wild, unicorns had already put their horns into shaping the stone and molding footpaths, slowly but surely transforming the canyon into an immense garden. Where earth ponies would cultivate the land and pegasi would simply ignore it, unicorns simply had to shape the land to their whims.

What would zebras have done with the canyon and the valley? Would they have moulded the dark stone into delicate yet sturdy bridges? Tended to the land so that it was lush and green as possible? Or just ignored it? Professor Goldenblood said that the zebras built beautiful and exotic cities while leaving the wilderness wild, but it was difficult to imagine an entire world that was left like the Everfree Forest.

I came around the bend and could see the school built into the side of the cliff face. In less than six months, with magic from the Princess herself, Luna’s Academy for Young Unicorns had been erected. A round curtain wall topped with elaborate towers rose beside a lake in the widest section of the valley. Diamonds enchanted to twinkle like stars would illuminate it once night fell. Built into the wall of the canyon in brilliant black marble was a palace unlike any other outside Canterlot. The structure rose higher and higher till a final black spire soared above the lip of the canyon and into the air over the valley.

“Ma’am?” came a voice from above. I looked up to see Pound Cake fluttering overhead. He looked worried. Not panicked like something bad had happened, but definitely not his usual pugnacious behavior. His brown eyes turned towards a cave in the cliff wall where Pumpkin Cake sat, chewing on a hoof nervously. I trotted my way towards the cave, one of the larger ones I knew of. The canyon was full of little nooks and hidey holes. “We found something...”

I trotted to the cave and conjured a tiny star of light. I looked at the tan unicorn and asked in a cautious voice, “What is—“

Zebras. I knew that zebras were supposed to be terrible, deadly enemies. What I

saw inside, though, were not the fiends we read about in the newspaper but filthy, terrified, and above all hungry people clustered together and wearing rags. A half dozen had rifles, but it was all they could do to remain upright. Many looked too weak to even stand. The reek was abominable, and I balked for several moments before I took a step forward. "Hello?"

They shrank back fearfully from one unicorn mare and two young ponies. An elderly stallion dressed in a filthy rag slowly moved to the front of the crowd as they shrank back. One eye was covered by a bandage, and he had more rags covering other injuries. He turned and addressed the others quickly, then turned back to me. "No hurt, pony. No hurt."

Was he saying he didn't want me to hurt them, or that he wasn't going to hurt me? "No hurt. Good!" I smiled widely, backing off a few steps; indeed, the reek coming off him made that easy. He seemed to relax a little as the sickly, starving zebras talked to each other in their strange language. I took in how wretched they were and though how wrong it was given that the school was well stocked and could feed ten times their number. "Food? Help?" I asked as I pointed back in the direction of the school.

I knew we were at war with the zebras, but these people weren't in any condition to be at war with anypony. A few that wore filthy cloaks and stared at me coldly gave me the shivers, but could I really blame them? The chief looked at me and then at the starving zebras. "Safe..." he drawled slowly, pointing at the cave. Then he firmly shook his head as he pointed past me. "No safe! Curse!"

"Please. Let me help," I begged. If I left and got food, they might flee to another cave, or worse, try to leave the valley. "We won't hurt you." I slowly backed away, Pound Cake and Pumpkin Cake coming to flank me. Slowly, the mass of zebras began to move towards the exit. As I continued to move, more and more came out. Where I'd thought there'd been only a dozen or so, in the end I was staring at nearly a hundred filthy and scared zebras. Clearly they didn't like this, but starvation was a powerful motivator for them to trust me.

They moved with grace and care, despite their weakened condition. Some even had wagons of a sort, exotic balanced bisected vehicles with one large wheel in the middle that easily crossed the bumpy terrain. Many more young, old, and sick were loaded on these strange wagons. Other larger two- and four-wheeled varieties carried what meager supplies they had. Most looked fearful, but as they talked to each other in their strange tongue, I hoped my entreaties of 'Food' and 'Safe' were making it across the language barrier.

I sent Pound Cake ahead to the school to tell the dean that we'd found zebras who needed help. With food and help... who knew? Maybe this might be something that they could use to end the fighting! The war wasn't worth it if it hurt anypony like this.

The front gates of the academy stood wide; there wasn't really any need for them to be closed. The war was as far from Littlehorn as one could get, and the lone old guardsmare just took in the sight of me and a unicorn filly leading in a filthy, starving horde with disbelief. Then she turned tail and scampered inside. Alarm bells started to ring, and the students began to mill about; nopony was exactly sure what to do when the alarms went off. They watched from windows and doorways in nervous anticipation. The zebras were equally terrified as they looked around at the school.

The school dean, a sour-looking yellow mare with a gray curly mane, poked her head out the front door of the building in terror. Her horn glowed a moment, then her voice boomed across the central yard. "Release your hostages immediately and depart! This school is well defended!" From the tops of the towers along the curtain wall, diamond points began to glow an ominous blue. "This is your last warning!"

"Wait! Wait!" I screamed as I raced forward and stopped before the front door. Pumpkin Cake stood beside me, and Pound Cake zoomed out of a window to stand beside his sister as well. "They're not attacking us! They need our help!"

"I tried telling them that!" Pound Cake shouted, waving at the dean in frustration. "She heard the word 'zebra' and went stupid!"

"Help?" The dean gaped at me in shock. "Are you... did you lead them here?! Are you out of your little pony minds!?"

"They're starving and sick! They can't hurt anypony," I said as I stood between the doors and the clusters of wagons and zebras.

"They've got a gun!" somepony shrieked. "Fire! Fire!"

"No! Stop! We need to help them!" I yelled as the Cake twins waved their hooves as well.

"Please, don't shoot!" Pound Cake begged.

"They won't hurt us!" Pumpkin Cake yelled.

"Depart at once! This is your final warning!" The dean's panicked voice boomed over the yard as the zebras started to break apart. Somepony, however, had closed the gates too late, and now the refugees were trapped within the curtain wall with

nowhere to flee. The zebras began to cry out as the diamond spires glowed brighter and brighter.

Then a shot rang out.

"No!" I screamed as I turned and looked at the zebras I'd wanted so badly to help.

The spires discharged. Blue-white lines flashed out from the tips of six towers and flashed across the clustered zebras. Whatever they touched simply vaporized. I'd never actually seen magic like this at work; in fact, I doubted anypony at our school knew exactly how the defenses worked. We'd never imagined what they could actually do...

A second, and they were being cut to pieces. And it was all my fault. I couldn't think. I could only move, and that was in the direction of the wagons that were sliced to pieces by the dancing blue beams. It was the only way I could imagine getting the beams to stop. At the very least, I would die beside the zebras I'd foolishly lead to their deaths.

"Stop! Stop firing!" the dean stammered as I reached the screaming zebras. I found the old zebra with the one eye lying in two pieces and collapsed in front of him. We may not have understood their language, but screams like that didn't need language to get their meaning across. Young zebras with sliced-off legs were held by desperate parents ignoring their own wounds to tie off spurting stumps. Others cradled loved ones killed under the promise of food and help.

Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake, to my astonishment and relief, rushed to help me. Despite the blood and smell and screams, those two young ponies raced forward to help with the injured. Pound lifted splintered chunks of wagon from their trapped occupants while Pumpkin worked to tie off injured zebras' stumps with whatever she could find.

Singularly... then in pairs... then in a swarm... the students and faculty rushed out to assist as well. Healing spells were immediately applied as the school tried to undo what it had done. Half the zebras were dead, and virtually all of them were wounded in some way or another. And once the bleeding was stopped, they started to bring out food and drink.

I sat there, blood smearing my hide, emotionally and physically exhausted. Then I became aware of the dean standing over me. Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake stood behind her, both looking positively grimy. "Well... I hope you're proud of yourselves. I don't know what Princess Luna will make of this incident when she returns from

Canterlot, but you three are going straight to Celestia while I try and deal with this mess.”

“What? Celestia?” I muttered weakly. A pegasus hooked to a skywagon on the edge of the campus looked on warily at the slaughter. “Now? Couldn’t we at least wash the blood off? Take some of the injured with us?”

“Yes, now! This instant!” she shrieked. “I’ll make it clear that this fiasco was your fault. I’ll leave you to explain to the Princess what madness drove you to be so... so ridiculously reckless!” She snorted and stomped, then turned to some of the other faculty. “No! Don’t let them inside! Uggh! Keep them out here! Honestly!” she said as she trotted out where the faculty was trying to help the injured survivors. “Oh, Luna is going to be absolutely furious when she returns tonight!”

“Come on, Ma’am,” the blue pegasus buck said in a low, deep voice. “It’s a long way back to Canterlot.” I gathered up Pumpkin Cake with a feeling of dread in my heart. I wouldn’t even have a chance to tell the Professor what I’d done. A minute later we were airborne, leaving the school behind us. “Well, I never thought I’d see it,” the buck muttered.

“I’m sorry... I just...” I said as I shivered. “I wanted to help them.”

“Sorry?” The blue pegasus looked over his shoulder back at me with a wry smile. “Girl, you don’t got nothing to be sorry for. Young unicorn mare like yourself helpin’ refugees like that... jumpin’ in to stop the firing? Getting the whole damn school to help, regardless of what that damned nag said? Girl, I think when Princess Celestia hears about this, and word gets back to the zebras, the war will be over. Ya’ll might have just saved Equestria.” The feeling of dread lifted as we soared higher and higher into the clouds.

I felt wetness on my cheek, then blinked awake. I’d drooled all over my pillow in my sleep, and now it was soaked. I self-consciously wiped my own spittle off with a smooth metal hoof. Huh... no mare in black senselessly butchering ponies... no horrible dreams of my stable or getting ploughed on the Seahorse. It was almost anticlimactic. I turned the pillow over to the dry side and rolled onto my back, looking at the flowers and birds painted on the ceiling. The details of the dream I’d had were slipping away. Something about an academy and some zebras and Goldenblood being a teacher there.

My head was... better. The radroach in my skull was gone, and while I wasn’t quite

at a hundred percent, I was a lot closer to it than I'd been in a long time. I rubbed my face carefully with my forelegs and then slowly sat up. I cautiously activated my E.F.S. and looked around till I found a single blue bar... along with a sea of red bars on the other side of the door. Too much to hope that the killer robots with nothing else to do would have gotten bored and left, I guessed. I cancelled the E.F.S. and sighed as I sat up on the couch.

Now. What to do about him?

On one hoof, he was handsome and fit. He hadn't tried to force himself on me, but he was keenly interested. On another, I had no idea who he really was or what he really wanted. I couldn't treat him as a Stable 99 stallion and just rut him because I wanted to. Besides, even if he had been relatively gallant since we'd met, he might still have an ulterior motive. On another, it would be nice to get a little play. It'd been so long since Tenpony, and since my last decent buck—U-18, five months ago—that a pony ride sounded nice. But still, on the other other rear hoof, I really wasn't sure if I should wait till I was with Glory or not. Though as fun and wonderful and dear as she was, she wasn't a stallion. There just wasn't any getting around that.

And on a metaphorical fifth hoof, there was that part of me screaming to kill him before he nailed me to the floor and fucked my orifices in alphabetical order.

"Ugh, I need less hooves," I groaned, shaking my head.

A door opened and I looked over to see Stygius, armor off—what was it about the physique of flyers?—trotting out of the library a fold of papers under his wing. He sat beside the couch and held up his slate. 'Sleep well?' had been written on it.

"You know what's crazy? I actually did," I said as I rolled forward onto my hooves, standing upright and stretching my legs. Okay, technically there weren't very many muscles in them to stretch, but the motion was refreshingly familiar. "It's pretty sad when a decent nap stands out so much. How long was I out?"

He stomped his hoof five times. I sure hoped that that wasn't in minutes. "And what have you been doing?"

He folded his forelegs beside his head and mimicked napping. Then he reached under his wing and pulled out the stack of papers. I took it from him with my magic and unfolded them, reading what he'd written.

You asked where batponies come from. We don't know. We have stories that once we were pegasus ponies who lived in the clouds. Then terrible storm monster came and wrecked home. We hid in deep cave and were trapped. For long time we live

eating magic mushrooms and cave things. We become batponies or...

And here I broke off for a moment and just stared at the paper. $\nu\nu\chi\tau\epsilon\rho'\iota\delta\pi\acute{o}\nu\nu?$ What alphabet was that?

...and live and grow in caves. When we finally escape, bright sun hurt eyes and other pony think we were monsters! But moon and stars are bright and make us happy. We met Luna long ago and she lonely and we lonely and so we say we help her. Then she became NiteMar Nightmaer Moon! But shes nicer than dayponies so we try and help. She lose, and many batponies die. With no Nightmare Moon, many many batponies were killed and we hid back in caves. Luna came back from the moon so we sent our strongest to be her guard, but keep families hidden away. Canterlot went boom. Luna died. And we go back to cave. Sometimes think mistake ever leave cave in first place...

Other story... Nightmare Moon and Luna made us into Batponies with magic. Turn pegasus pony into batpony. Not know what she did with unicorns and earth ponies. Maybe only need batponies? Dunno. Now we live in caves and fly out at night. Hard to meet pretty mare who isnt family in caves. Very hard. Sooooooooooooo hard. Sister think I am dumb for following you cause your pretty but you are with your shiny legs and tight flank and striped mane and your eyes glow and your...

Okay, now he was getting a little explicit. I didn't see much else beneath that beyond him trying to tell me how beautiful I was. He'd sketched a couple of pictures of caves, some of batponies, and one of me. At least, I thought it was me; I really doubted my horn had magic sparkles dancing around it or that I had a full moon aura surrounding me.

I couldn't help but smile. Back in 99, I'd been a lot like him: always chasing after Midnight or some other mare that I thought I could have some fun with. I'd never been the one pursued by another. I always assumed I was simply too much of a screwup to be worth the trouble. Plus there was Mom, head of security, and all the awkwardness that generated. How bizarre that the first buck I'd ever attract was some strange batpony, but honestly, given all the things that had happened to me since getting out of 99, I supposed I should have been grateful he wasn't a cyber-ghoul-batpony with a mysterious agenda.

"You're sweet," I said, and I actually giggled as he seemed to float with his ear to ear grin. I flushed a little. "But you know... if we did it... it would only be a thing. I have a very special somepony, and I don't think I get two."

He looked a bit confused at that. I didn't see why. It wasn't like having sex with him

would make her any less my special somepony. I needed Glory in my life; without her, I was so empty inside it hurt. But it wasn't like she'd be the only source of orgasms. I wasn't the only security mare in 99 that polished the old baton when their marefriend was unavailable. Not that I'd actually had a marefriend in 99.

"You also know what happened to me," I murmured as I looked out the window towards the distant river to the west. "I... I really don't want to hurt you, Stygius. I mean it. You're nice to me... and I have to admit, you've really been on my mind since we met... but I don't want to snap in the middle and do something permanent to you."

He looked at me in sympathy before he grabbed his slate. 'I can wait,' he wrote.

I smiled and sighed as I rolled my eyes a little. "Yeah. But I'm not sure I'll be able to." If I didn't get over this... or at least prove I could have some sort of normal physical relationship with a stallion... then those males who'd violated me would have won. I thought how bowel-loosening that ship in the Happyhorn simulation had been, felt the shame that I'd been unable to face it. They'd changed me from who I was. My time in Happyhorn had injected weeks of imaginary time into my consciousness, but imaginary or not, I still remembered those weeks of extra time between me and the boat. That time hadn't stopped me from balking there near the end, and nor had it stopped the memory from creeping around in my mind like a suspicious beast.

I knew what I needed to do. It was just... weird.

And Stygius trotted to a window and wrapped the curtain's drawstring around his forehooves, tugging it tight and looking back at me with a grin. I stared at him a moment and then burst out laughing. It made his ears wilt a bit, but I shook my head with a wide smile. "No! No no no no..." I repeated. "That's more... my thing, actually. At least with Glory." Wow, that sure made his eyebrows arch. "If I do it, I need to do it normally." Or as normally as sex between a cyberpony and a batpony could be. I trotted over to him and magically undid the string around his legs. "But thank you..."

His amber eyes were bright and round as he blushed and sweated nervously. If he was plotting some horrible fate for me, then he was one damned good actor. "You're a good pony," I murmured as I looked into his wide eyes. "I'm going to kiss you now. Okay?"

He gulped as if I'd just promised to shoot him, then clenched his eyes shut and puckered his lips ridiculously. I smiled and lifted my hooves and held his head gently, extending my fingers to hold him still as I brought my mouth towards his.

Then my fingers tightened, my legs jerked, and a resounding snap filled the air.

NO! I stomped on that image and impulse with all the force I could. I wasn't a landmine that would go off. I could do this because I wanted to! I was in control of me. I was...

Please be in control...

He opened his eyes, blinking and frowning in concern as I sniffed and shed a few tears. "Sorry," I murmured awkwardly and he gave a sigh and a resigned smile. He'd said he could wait, and he would.

But he wouldn't have to.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. He was so shocked that he simply let me, kissing back as he could. He had such soft lips and a nicely sweet mouth. The kind I could kiss all day.

Too bad I lasted about a minute before I slowly pulled away. I was in control, but I didn't want to push that control too far just yet. Then I blinked at his googly-eyed expression as a slow, almost drunk smile crossed his face. I let him go gently, and he slumped to the floor. "Was that your first kiss?" I asked, a touch concerned. He started to nod and then stopped and touched the side of his face... where I'd laid him flat. Oh, right. I grinned sheepishly, "I mean, the first kiss where you weren't hit immediately afterwards?" He smiled and nodded as he swayed there. I couldn't help myself. I gave him one more firm smooch, and that finished him off. He playfully flopped over completely and lay there as a dusky lump of goofiness.

I smiled and patted his shoulder. Then I trotted for the stairs; we hadn't checked the second floor rooms yet. I got up them and into a bathroom and was closing the door as it hit me. My legs couldn't shake, my heart couldn't race, and my breathing wouldn't gasp, but I could at least sink to the floor next to the toilet and cry as something snapped inside me. It wasn't painful. Quite the opposite. I pressed my face into a fuzzy pink floor mat as that hideous, suspicious beast inside me roared in pain from the wound inflicted by a simple kiss. My tears were of relief. I'd kissed him and not killed him. He'd liked it... liked me.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt like Blackjack the mare. Maybe a little wiser, but still Blackjack. Not Blackjack the cyberpony nor Security the madmare of Hoofington. Just Blackjack. Who knew a little normalcy could feel so good?

When I'd recomposed myself, I wiped my eyes and took the opportunity to use the facilities. Functional plumbing and a flushing toilet: another miracle in the wastes.

Then I stepped out and saw Stygius coming up the stairs. As soon as he saw me, he immediately smiled, but a touch of concern lingered in his eyes. ‘U ok?’ he wrote on the slate.

“Yeah. Just not used to it,” I said as I stood and looked at the other three doors up here. If I was lucky, I’d find a flicker or something that would help me refocus my mind. I opened the first, looking at a bedroom. Like the rooms downstairs, everything was neat and tidy and gave no impression at all that anypony actually used it. One wall was covered by four tall transparent display cases, each one with a dozen different rocks inside individual glass compartments. There was a little tag beside each of the samples.

Gold nugget, Flankorage River. Purple Fluorite, Las Pegasus. Amber, Stalliongrad. Silver ore, Fancee. There were more unusual names that I guessed were from far-away lands. The crystals weren’t like the standard magic jewels I was familiar with. In fact, while there was a selection of magical gems, most of them were strange and exotic-looking. Some were delicate needle-like crystal spires and strange purple cubes that peppered the surfaces of stones. Others were simple rocks, like granite and marble, that I was more familiar with. One section had a dozen different types of ore all arranged alphabetically.

Fossil, Crescent Moon Canyon.

I slowly opened the case and levitated the horn-sized stone out, then turned it over in front of me. The small spiral shell resembled an extremely old tan cookie. I sighed and put it in my saddlebag. Beside it was another curious rock, a flake of silvery metal. “Starmetal, Hoofington.” And right beside that was a strangely glowing milky white crystal. “Moonstone, Moon.” As amazing as that was, it didn’t distract me from something else I found very curious.

The glass wall between the two had melted. I opened the door to the case and pried loose the silvery flake and the pale stone. I’d seen these two together before... only they’d been separated by a layer of flux rather than simple glass. I looked over at Stygius. “Stand back. I think this is gonna do something.” I dropped the stone and flake from my hands into my telekinesis, closed my eyes, and carefully brought the two closer together. As I did so, the metal began to glow and the crystal to glow brighter, and instantly my PipBuck began detecting magical radiation pouring from the two. Stygius backed away with me. We stepped out onto the balcony walkway overlooking the great room and closed the door almost completely shut. I peeked through the gap at the two floating rocks.

Holding the two at the furthest distance inside the room I could manage, I forced them together.

The flash and explosion rattled the house, though clearly the building had been built from magically-reinforced materials. The detonation blasted the door right into my face, and only my hastily raised cyberlegs kept the wood from taking my head off completely. The force blasted Stygius into the air as I fell back and nearly crashed right through the balcony railing, chunks of door flying out over me and tumbling down into the room below as I lay there on my back. I had no idea that my radmeter could even click that fast, though the rate was decreasing quickly. Okay, that was a little toastier than usual. When I looked back towards the empty doorframe, I saw cracks spiderwebbed through the walls around it.

“Ow. . . . That was really stupid!” I muttered as I slowly sat up, rubbing my head. I pulled out a pouch of Rad-Away for each of us, smirking around mine at Stygius’s disgusted expression as he drank his, then stepped back inside, looking at the shattered cases and the rocks strewn across the floor. The bed was smoking, and the floor was blackened below where I’d squeezed them together. Embedded in one wall was the moonstone. Embedded in the opposite was the flake of starmetal, still giving off smoke.

I trotted towards the flake’s impact dent and looked at the smoking bit of metal. No, not just smoking. It was melting away before my eyes, shrinking as it made a long, low screaming noise. Glowing white smoke curled up from it as it slowly vanished and that smoke condensed into tiny white motes of light. They were exactly like the motes in the zebra ruins. I saw them disappearing one by one and lunged forward to touch one with my horn—

oooOOOooo

The unicorn mare I occupied walked carefully up towards the dark cottage on the hillside overlooking the pouring river and knocked her hoof on the front door. “Princess Luna?” she called out in worry. Then she knocked again, then finally used her magic to open the door. The interior was pitch black. “Princess Luna?” she called in a weaker voice. The light of her horn reflected off countless polished silver stars set in the walls and ceiling. A strange, ominous note rose up from the basement, and she hesitated a moment at the door. “P. . . princess?”

The basement door was blown open by a dark wind that scooped the mare up and carried her down the steps into the earth, dumping her in a heap behind the glorious dark princess. A work table was set up in the middle of the subterranean

room. Strange and exotic zebra statues loomed on like silent mentors examining their student's work. Hammers and tongs lay tossed aside next to a cold forge. She shaped the metal with her magic alone. "YES!?" she boomed as the silvery steel twisted in the air before her.

The force of her voice nearly knocked my host over. "P... Princess? Thy... thy sister... she sent us to find thee. She hath been forced to raise both sun and the moon for three days and nights." The Princess flinched at the word 'sister'. The hum grew stronger, and the shadows cast by the pale light of her horn moved unnaturally, as though they were peering at us.

"SO! IT TAKETH HER THREE DAYS FOR TO SEEK ME. And she didn't come herself. Surprise surprise," the Princess said, her boom dying to a normal voice as her horn glowed, that oppressive hum filling the air.

"Princess? Art thou well?" the unicorn asked in fear.

"Nay, we are not!" she said with a stomp of her hoof as her head fell. "She doesn't need us. Nopony does." Her eyes glared at the metal as it finished shaping into a helmet. "Well, if she can raise the sun and the moon, why can't we? Why can't we do both just as well as she can?" she demanded as she whirled, facing me as tears ran down her cheeks. "We don't need her. WE can do it all ourself!"

"Princess!" the unicorn gasped, backing away.

"NAY!" she said as she magically put the pieces of armor in place. She seemed to swell and grow darker. It was as if she was drinking in that horrible humming scream all at once. Her starry mane grew cold and hard. Her coat turned black as pitch. "WE ARE A PRINCESS NO LONGER! WE HAVE NO SISTER! IF PONYKIND HATES AND FEARS US, THEN LET THEM HAVE OUR NIGHT IN WRATH INSTEAD OF BEAUTY!"

And with that she exploded into a cloud of darkness, and everything went black. Beneath it all, the hum persisted in its steady, proud drone....

oooOOOooo

I lurched and shook my head hard. Woah... that was... interesting. I rubbed my bleary eyes, trying to pull my head into the here and now. I remembered the terrifying statue of Nightmare Moon that'd been in the Hoofington Museum, but that statue had been cute compared to what I'd seen just now. The sight of Luna transforming into that dark shape made me shiver from horn to... shoulder. Really, it'd be nice if I could get some nice goosebumps going.

In a minute the starmetal had disappeared entirely, the white wisps and flickering motes being drawn westward out the cracked window and fading away from sight. I saw the little bots buzzing about on the far side, but it hadn't broken. Stygius flew to the other side of the room and dug at the wall, popped the moonstone free, picked it up in his mouth, and carried it to me. I looked it over closely. Unlike the metal flake, the moonstone was intact. Only a small indentation had been made in it where I'd forced the two together. "Woah..." I murmured as I looked at the faintly glowing white stone.

He nodded, and I carefully put the moonstone away. I wondered what had happened to the moonstone that'd been extracted from the Folly shell. I supposed it was somewhere in the muck at the bottom of the bay underneath the *HMS Celestia*. It hadn't been among the things I'd gotten back in Tenpony.

Ugh, I came here for answers. Not more questions! Really, wasn't there a quota on mysteries? Huffing in annoyance, I moved to the second door. Knowing my luck, there'd be something horribly vague and terribly nagging that'd go completely over my head. I sighed and looked back at Stygius. He had my back... well, he at least definitely had my backside in his sights. Then his eyes met mine and he flushed, coughing self-consciously as he looked away. Still, I couldn't help smiling.

The door creaked open slowly and a stale, lonely smell rolled out over us. I saw the crib in the corner decorated with butterflies and birds. Gems dangled from a mobile above it. Stuffed animals sat in dusty vigil atop a dresser while toys peeked out of a dusty trailer. There were still diapers stacked up on the underside of a changing table next to the door. I gazed in at a room never used... never even entered, from the dust on the wooden floors. Slowly, I pulled the door closed once more.

There was no mystery after all, and for once I wished there had been.

I made my way into the last room, a bedroom decorated in the twined hard/soft motif of nature and metal. Like all the rest of the house, it'd been cleaned and tidied up and all but abandoned. Indeed, unlike the library, there were no pictures of any kind in here. No clothes. No personal items. Nothing that suggested that a pony named Goldenblood had lived in here. It was nearly anonymous.

I trotted to the bed and pushed down on the mattress. I had to give Goldenblood credit; he definitely had good taste in bedding. I pressed down with my forehooves and felt it give. I looked over my shoulder at Stygius hard at work looking through the dressers. My eyes wandered along his mane, his exotic wings, and his tail. I didn't know if it was a flyer thing or not, but there was just *something* about his form

that made my eye wander from the gothic black shield on his flank down the backs of his legs and up the front.

So, could I do this? Should I?

I groaned and pressed my face into the bed. I just couldn't decide; there were plenty of reasons to and plenty of reasons not to. I didn't want to be defined by what those bucks had done to me on the boat. I didn't want to be defined by that. Didn't want to be a victim. I also didn't want to be set off by any buck that brushed my ass. If I was going to thump a guy like Candlewick, I wanted it to be my choice, not my reaction. But I was also scared to death that if I tried anything, I'd kill another pony who didn't deserve to die by my hooves.

He buried his head into one of Fluttershy's dressers, or, at least, I assumed they were hers from the butterflies carved in the woodwork. I smiled as I watched him over my shoulder... and then I slid my saddlebags to the floor and a moment later sent my combat armor to join them. Please, Luna and Celestia, please let this go right. "Hey..." I croaked, then coughed, and smiled again. "Hey, Stygius..." He pulled his head out of the dresser, a glowing golden memory orb in his mouth. He looked at me stretched half on the bed, his eyes drawn to my posterior. Then I gave my tail a little swish and watched as his eyes popped round. I swished a little bit more, and the memory orb fell from his mouth and rolled slowly along the floor. I picked it up and floated down onto the nightstand. He slowly approached, looking torn between eagerness and concern.

He lowered his mouth to his chalkboard and wrote briefly, not taking his eyes off my swaying tail. 'U sure?'

"Yeah. I am. If you're still interested?" I asked, half hoping he'd changed his mind. But he swallowed and nodded. I closed my eyes and bowed my head. "You know what happened to me, though... so, if I tell you to stop... please stop. Okay? For both our sakes."

He approached till he was right behind me, then wrote something else as he blushed profusely. 'Virgin', it read, and he smiled sheepishly.

"Well... you can start by touching me," I murmured softly as I closed my eyes. Don't kill him... don't kill him. I want this. I really do.

Then I felt his lips on my cutie mark. His muzzle nuzzling my hide. And never, ever, have I been more thankful for having skin. I felt my body twitch in response, and I smiled as that reactive fear remained at bay. I felt his breath on my hide, his hooves

touching me in vaguely reassuring ways. He was taking his time, and I didn't rush him. I needed the time too. Then he moved back further and dared to move beneath my tail.

It was an interesting touch, nothing at all like Glory's. She was soft; she knew what to stroke and what to avoid. His was firmer and heavier than hers. His lips more hesitant, his mouth stronger. My mind reduced to two thoughts: 'Oh yes', which I expressed in a delighted groan, and 'Don't kill him'. I was in control... and with every minute I felt better and better as he helped me feel like a mare... like a pony. Damn me if I didn't understand Deus now. When you were half machine, you needed something, anything, to remind you that you were also flesh and blood.

Very flesh. Very blood.

And when he entered me, it was all I could do to keep myself together. My legs could remember the feeling of the nails, my nethers and throat the burning pain and humiliation. This wasn't that. He wasn't them. I was safe. I was in control of myself. And while every second a part of me screamed to get him out before he started hurting me, to rip and tear and kill... I suppressed it. I refused to allow it to set me off as he pressed above me and moved inside me. He huffed as he increased speed and I tensed. He slowed, and I relaxed.

Before too long he made a series of squeaks and I felt hot wetness inside me. Of course, I was nowhere near climaxing myself, but that wasn't the point. This was about me being able to do this and put what'd been done to me behind me. And as he squirted, I had one more fierce impulse to rip the invading member off. Then his lips met my ears and neck and like that, the impulse was gone. I'd been ploughed badly, but none of them had shown the slightest affection.

I finally collapsed on the bed as he withdrew, an oddly depressing sensation. I crawled the rest of the way onto it, and he moved beside me, his brows furrowing and his eyes concerned. He reached for the chalkboard and wrote 'Good?', holding it between his hooves as he looked at me.

Poor buck deserved better than me hugging him fiercely and sobbing as that murderous impulse broke apart and flowed out my eyes. "Really good, Styggie. Really... really really good..." I blubbered as I curled up against him and let him hold me and curl his wings about me. He might have looked completely confused and worried, but right now he knew exactly what I needed.

When I finally pulled myself together and wiped my nose and eyes, he kissed my horn and then started to pull away. I reached out with my magic for a very specific

part of him and froze him in his tracks. "Where do you think you're going?" I asked with a tiny smile. His eyes grew wide again as I gave a careful tug and leaned forward to kiss him again. "We've only just started..."

I. Liked. Stallions. I liked mares too, but right now, curled up with Stygius on the bed, I had to admit that I liked the boys every bit as much as I liked the girls. I pressed my nose to his chest, taking in his musky, sweaty scent as I felt his heart beating. He'd lasted three rounds and now snoozed next to me. I didn't want to pull away, and for now my itch had been scratched. I'd actually worked up a sweat of my own; even with the metal and synthetic organs, I'd still made quite a workout of it. I probably could have kept going for hours, but why ruin a good time by forcing him to draw it out?

I'm gonna need another bath, I thought, feeling things drying on my hide. Oh well. Showers later. Stygius was smiling in his daze; he'd been good. Not spectacular, but for his first time, he'd definitely put up a good show. I'd even popped once our last round, to my own delight and surprise. I doubted we'd have time for a fourth; we couldn't stay locked up here forever rutting... Okay, for the Wasteland that actually sounded damn inviting, but still! I felt... good. It was something I hadn't felt in a long time. Good. Not drunk. Not exhausted. Not crazy.

Okay, I felt guilty. I didn't deserve to feel this way... but aside from that lingering urge to kick myself on general principle for what I'd done after Yellow River... and at Yellow River... and every other messed up thing I'd done... I felt damn nice to be held like this. The next time I was with Glory, I would do all I could to make her feel this way.

So... move and wake him... and be tempted into a fourth round... or just rest here? My eyes went to the memory orb on the nightstand beside us. Mmmm... well... it would pass the time nicely. I floated it over and touched my horn to it with a lazy smile. My horn flared and flickered as I worked to make the connection. Come on... get in there... I can't spend all day just lying around on Goldenblood and Fluttershy's be-

oooOOOooo

The rain poured down, a heavy, persistent torrent that could only come from Hoofington's skies. Sometimes I wondered if the sky had some vendetta against the city, doing all it could to drown it and cut off the sun and moon even before the Enclave

arose. The pony I was in was a familiar unicorn stallion standing out in the rainy night and looking at a mare isolated in the yellow light of a single streetlamp. She wore a trenchcoat that covered her from head to hoof, and her long black mane hung across her shadowed face from under a dripping cap. All around us were dark trees, and in the distance I could see through the rain the towering city lights of the Core.

Something snapped beneath my hoof, and she squealed as she spun around. "Who's there?" she whispered timidly. There was no answer in the pouring rain. She trembled, hanging her head once more as my host slowly moved closer. The steps he took were slow and tired. She shrank back a little, then cleared her throat. "H...hello? Um... Um... Umgabe bwanka T... T..."

"Trito. 'May peace favor us all,'" the stallion murmured softly, barely audible over the pouring rain. "You have the package?"

"Yes!" she said as she turned away and dug a heavy-looking parcel wrapped in tape from her saddlebags. "You have no idea how hard I've worked to get this to you!" she said as she hugged it in her hooves like it was a precious baby. The stallion in the rain didn't reply. "H..h... here! Take it! It's all our notes! Everything you need. Please. I've worked so very hard..."

The male stayed silent. He simply stood there outside the patch of light.

Then he rasped in that unmistakable voice, "I know. First you tried contacting a zebra envoy directly; she met a tragic end with a grenade slipped into her saddlebags. Then you used Nurse Blossomforth to try and get it to a POW who was being sent back to zebra lands in a prisoner exchange. Of course, Blossomforth was a M.o.M. agent, but fortunately she met a bad end with a memory modification spell before she could report in to Pinkie and Luna. You made several subtle overtures to members of the zebra government, all which were rebuffed. So then you arranged a meeting with a member of a zebra sympathizer terrorist cell. At this moment, they're being raided. Your contact will be killed in the firefight. There's no way to extract memories from a dead pony." Her hat glowed gold and lifted off her head; at once the pouring rain began to wash the dye out of her mane. "Hello, Fluttershy." Goldenblood stepped into the pool of yellow light. The rain poured down over him, matting his mane to his scarred, pale hide.

"No... no no no... you can't," she whimpered as she clutched the parcel to her chest, turned away as if to shield it from him. "Please..."

He didn't say anything at first. He simply gazed at her with eyes that felt tired. "Why

are you doing this, Fluttershy? I would have thought that after Blossomforth was exposed, you'd have given up."

Fluttershy clenched her eyes shut and trembled, sniffling. "I have to. I have to do something. Luna won't use the megaspells to heal ponies. She wants Twilight to turn them into weapons!"

"Something Twilight would never do nor authorize," Goldenblood murmured. "You know this."

"Twilight might think it's wrong, but what would stop somepony else from doing it?" Fluttershy asked.

"If somepony else does weaponize your creation, I guarantee that the first demonstration will have zebra observers. They'll see what megaspell weapons do. They'll go home and tell their Caesar to end the war." But even he didn't sound convinced.

"Will they?" Fluttershy asked in return. "Or will we just use the war as an excuse to wipe them out completely?" She gave a heartbroken little sob, then looked at him and asked, "Is the only way for this to end to have everyone die? I won't accept that. I can't! Treason is better than that..." Some of the raindrops on her cheeks looked remarkably like tears. Goldenblood reached out to her, but she flinched away.

"I promised I would never hurt you," he whispered gently in his scarred voice as he withdrew his hoof.

"You broke your promise," she replied, her tone quiet yet unshakably firm. "How could you do that to me? Call... call out her name..." She shivered, and somehow I doubted that it was because of the cold or the wet.

"It was an accident," he replied, but she kept her eyes away. "I know that that didn't make it any easier, Fluttershy. But it's true. When I said her name... I wasn't thinking of doing what we were doing with her."

Fluttershy pressed her lips together firmly, eyes clenched shut. "I don't believe you. All those nights you spent with her. All those times you said you were working with her. Alone... and then you do that?" She shook her head and sniffed, "I was going to have a baby... our baby..." She raised her face to the rain, the tears pouring down her face in black rivulets as more dye slowly washed out. "I was going to be a mommy. A real mommy!"

"I know. And you would have been a spectacular one, Fluttershy." He sighed as he too looked up at the rain, but there were no answers to be found in the falling droplets. "But either way, I'm sorry it's come to this. You need to stop trying to get

megaspells to the zebras. They're already sneaking around the M.A.S. looking for information. They don't seem to know it originated with the Ministry of Peace." He sighed and shook his head. "You need to give this up."

"I... I can't... don't you understand?" she begged as she looked up at him. "I went with the others to stop the war! Not fight it. Not to kill. But... but what have I really accomplished? The fighting is still going on! I see soldiers hurt... maimed... dead. I see ponies injured in zebra terrorist attacks. I see zebras being forced to live in Zebratown, and that horrible camp they're making at Yellow River... and I can't seem to do anything to stop it!"

She backed away till she bumped into the pole behind her. "Don't you see? I'm not like Twilight or Rainbow Dash or Rarity... they all want to win! They like being Ministry Mares! Even Pinkie Pie and Applejack are helping to hurt ponies. Did you know that Applejack's cousin made a glass antipersonnel bullet that fragments in the wound? It can take days to get all the pieces out!"

"That's the intention. Tie up their medics with difficult injuries..." Goldenblood murmured, now looking away himself.

"Oh really?" That drew his eyes back to her, and even I was taken aback by the scorn in her gaze. "Do you know what glass bullets actually do? The infections?" she asked as she stared at him. "The pieces are almost impossible to detect; they can remain lodged in organs and cause crippling pain. They migrate, tearing holes in tissue as they move! The zebras won't waste time treating injuries like those. They'll just euthanize their injured and keep fighting all the harder!"

"Fluttershy... we're at war..." he said lamely.

"So that makes it okay?" Fluttershy retorted sharply, starting to pace. "We can use glass bullets. We're at war. We can use airdropped mines that'll blow up any foal that trots along, zebra or pony. We're at war. We can kill... and murder... and maim... and do horrible horrible things... 'cause we're at war!" She sat and started to sob, "I hate it. I hate everything about it. And I have to stop it! Even... even if that means giving megaspells to the zebras. If Luna's not good enough to use megaspells to heal battlefields... then maybe the zebras will be better than us!" She finally dropped back to a near whisper. "At least... at least it will help them with dumb glass bullets..."

She just sat there in the rain, head bowed, sobbing. He said nothing. Finally he murmured softly, "I'm sorry, Fluttershy."

She sniffed and drew a ragged breath. "Me too." Finally she straightened. "Well then, let's go."

"Go?"

"To... to Princess Luna... or Pinkie Pie... so they can banish me... or throw me in a dungeon... or... or do the things they do," she murmured as she looked up at him.

He just smiled and shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't have gone through all this trouble if turning you in had ever been an option." He sighed and looked at her. "I love you, Fluttershy. I know you don't believe that, but it's true. Yes, I care for Luna too. But she never had my heart. Only you ever did. Only you ever will."

She stared at him, shaking, before she looked away. "I'm sorry... I... I don't... sorry..."

"I promised," he rasped softly as he turned aside with a small, sad smile. "I promised I would never hurt you, Fluttershy. I'm sorry I made you doubt me... that I said what I did, when I did. But I won't turn you in. I beg you to stop this, though. Zebras can't get their hooves on megaspells. It'll take the war to an entirely new level. Please?"

"I can't. Don't you understand?" she said, desperation creeping into voice. "If I don't do something... I think I'll go crazy. I have to stop it."

"Perhaps... what if I did something? Made some way for you to help prevent ponies from being hurt?" he asked, then sighed. "You could also take it as a more sincere apology."

"Goldenblood... you don't have to do that."

"I have to do something, Fluttershy. If you keep this up, you're going to go to prison. I couldn't bear to see you in such a place."

"Then help me. Please. If the zebras get their hooves on megaspells, the war will have to stop. If the zebras and ponies both know that battles are pointless, they'll have to negotiate. Right?" she said with a wide, hopeful, and horribly naïve smile. "I can't just... just sit on this. I need to do something too." She smiled slightly. "You can understand?"

"Yes. I do." He stood perfectly still for a few seconds as the rain poured down upon them both. Finally he said, in a voice barely louder than the rain, "You should write to Professor Silver Stripe. Her father is Doctor Propos at the Zebra Academy of

Science, and I know she has some means of contacting him clandestinely. He's one of a few back channels I use to keep tabs on what's going on in zebra politics, and he is an outspoken critic of the war. Maybe you two could collaborate on treating the casualties. Try and open up some avenue for peace talks." He looked back at her, his gaze once again firm. "But please... not megaspells. If you keep trying to pass that to the enemy... sooner or later, Pinkie Pie is going to catch you. Or Luna will. I can't protect you then."

"I... thank you," she murmured as she put the parcel back into her bags. He nodded in acknowledgment, and she said softly, "Goldenblood? Do you ever dream that things were different?"

"All the time. But then again, if they were different... would we have ever had what time together we did?" He turned away.

"Goldenblood?" Fluttershy murmured, and he paused, looking back at her over his shoulder. "Please, get out of the rain." I felt his lips curl in a smile, and with a single nod, he trotted away.

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and looked at the drowsy batpony beside me as my brain processed what I'd experienced. Fluttershy had tried to give megaspells to the zebras to end the war? Had she succeeded and been responsible for the megaspells that burned Equestria, or had the zebras developed those themselves because she'd failed to give them an alternative? I supposed that, either way, it really sucked.

And they'd broken up because he'd called out some other mare's name in bed? It seemed... silly. Who cared who he unloaded with so long as, at the end of the day, he still loved her? Back in 99, I could probably name twenty mares I'd been with offhoof. As long as you were off shift and everypony was happy with the arrangement, why not? Sure, mares could grow close –though if your fondness for each other impacted your stable duties, there'd be hell to pay– but I couldn't think of any mare that would want exclusive rights to another mare. The closest I could think of was the Overmare with P-21. That was just... wrong. Selfish...

But then, it wasn't just that he'd been seeing somepony else; he'd called out the other mare's name when with Fluttershy. He had to have been thinking of her, whatever he claimed. Sure, if Glory had done that to me, I would have laughed it off. If it'd been the other way around, I'd have a lot of explaining and apologizing to do, but it wouldn't have been the end of the world. But Fluttershy did seem like the

oversensitive sort. It would take a lot of care for her to be intimate with anypony, and I supposed that any betrayal or injury from him would be more than she could bear. And she'd been pregnant...

I reached down to my own stomach, running my mechanical fingers along my hide. What would it be like to have a filly or colt of my own? In 99 we always knew we'd have one eventually. A few lucky mares might get the opportunity for a second if another mare died before she had a daughter or had fertility problems. I always joked that me reproducing would be a crime against Equestria.

Lying here, right now, I wasn't laughing. I was thinking. Did I want to have a child? Here, in the Wasteland? In Hoofington? Now? Okay, maybe not here nor now. Maybe if I could scrape together a few thousand caps and set myself up in Tenpony. Have a filly or colt in nice safe medical conditions. Give them a few years and teach them how to shoot and take care of themselves.

Have a family. A real family, something more than life in 99. I did want that. Given everything that had happened to me, despite it all, I wanted a kid. Kids. Plural. When I was done with EC-1101, I could go back to Spike and do everything to get Gardens to work. Clean up Equestria. Have a kid. Or two. Or three. Hee...

It was all just a fantasy, of course. I wasn't going to just run to Triage and have my implant removed. I'd also have to pick the right stud. Talk to Glory. Maybe she'd have one as well. I mean, she might not like stallions, but it wasn't like she'd die if she was with the right one once. Heck, I knew medical ponies could inseminate mares if needed without them ever having to see a stallion during the process. Happened occasionally in 99. Oh, and I'd have to see... well, Triage had said that my reproductive parts had managed to stay functional, but that was before the Celestia and my cyberization. The Professor hadn't mentioned anything about them, but there were a lot of things she hadn't mentioned. I supposed that, even if something was wrong there, Glory could have the foals or we could adopt... the idea didn't feel as appealing, but it'd work. Something to think about... talk about... I might not be the smartest pony, but this whole subject was definitely something I didn't want to rush. It'd be more than my own head if I screwed it up.

I rolled onto my side and snuggled against Stygius. He was warm, firm, and didn't mind metal legs. I knew I'd be guilted about feeling this way sooner or later but for now, nuzzling his neck, I really couldn't help but smile. Glory would like him. Not like-like, of course. But he had a gallant idiot streak I bet she could really relate to. Kissing along his chin and cheek, I moved my hoof downward. A few seconds later, his eyes popped wide as his cheeks went red. I gave his nose a little lick as he gave

a meek chirp.

Round four...

Okay. Okay. Enough. There was getting over a bad ploughing, then there was having fun, and then there was just wallowing in it. When I saw Glory next, I was going to make her hooves curl! As I finally slipped off the bed, I was sore and tingly in all the right places. Stygius... he'd need a little more time to recover, but from the grin on his face I was pretty sure he'd be fine.

Stallions... are... awesome!

Of course, we both needed a shower; we were positively ripe. I trotted into the bathroom with a smile on my face. Maybe I wasn't completely over what'd happened to me; there was still that muttering defense mechanism in the back of my head, but I didn't think that I'd try and kill a male just for making the wrong comment or brushing my rear end. Still... I did a little dance on the balcony. I hadn't killed him and I'd had a good time!

This had to be one of the top five best days I'd had out here in the Wasteland, just behind finding out Glory was alive after Flash Industries and our little concert in Star House before going into the tunnels. Of course, I knew that something horrible would probably happen soon to erase it; my life seemed to inextricably fall into that pattern. But I'd enjoy the great feelings as long as I could.

After a nice hot shower— Hee! Hot water! Any day with hot water pouring down on me was a good one!— I emerged, put my armor and saddlebags back on, picked out whatever magical gems I could find in the shattered rock collection, and trotted downstairs. Well... time to start thinking about how we were going to get out of here. I alternated between bites of Cram, chunks of gemstones, and pieces of metal from the workshop as I sat on the desk in the library and looked out the window at the bots milling about outside. We might be able to race past them and out the shield, but that would be iffy. I had visions of one of us ending up as a shower of ash.

I tried to peek around at the main Pinkie box, but the angle from the library window wasn't very good. I needed to get higher. Fortunately, I had freaky zebra balancing legs that let me stand upright on the desk. Ah, there it was. And there were its red eyes. Mhmmm... still not a happy ro— wait. What was that?

In an upper corner of the library was a tiny black camera sensor. Why had he needed so many? I looked from it to the desk and back again, wondering if I might see something if I could get my point of view close enough to its... well, I not only had freaky zebra standing powers but equally freaky cyber thumb powers. I used them to carefully climb up the bookshelves, and pretty soon I realized I was onto something when I heard a faint crackle in my ears. Yes! Another recording. I lifted my head even with the camera, then turned and looked down into the library.

The change was astonishing, from pristine clean to an absolute mess. There were more books piled in stacks around the desk than there were on the mahogany bookshelves. Papers had been taped to the walls, and the wastebin was overflowing with wadded-up parchment. Only narrow tracks to and from the door allowed hoof traffic. Goldenblood was sitting at the desk, rasping softly to himself and hissing an inhalation every three or four words, "Now... Pertinent to Equestrian Command One and the formation of the ministries, the judiciary shall remain under the review of the crown with judges appointed, monitored, and removed by the crown. All Ministries retain the right to exclusive internal legal codes of conduct, but any binding ruling of the Ministries shall be appealable by Equestrian court—"

A flash of golden light filled the room, and while I started, Goldenblood remained coolly examining his papers. When it faded, the last person I would have ever imagined appeared. There was absolutely no mistaking that radiant crown nor missing that softly billowing tricolor mane. Princess Celestia. I only had two memories of her, one troubled and the other regretful. Now I saw another side of the former ruler of Equestria: anger.

"Director Goldenblood." Her voice was stern, the type of voice Mom used when I was in deep trouble. She looked at the stacks of papers and books, and her horn flashed once. In an instant, the books were back on the shelves and the papers, including the one he was writing on, were stacked on a smaller desk on the opposite side of the room. "I wish to have a discrete word."

"I have an office, Princess Celestia," he replied in his shallow, rasping voice. His pink scars looked wet and shiny, and he sat neatly on the edge of his seat, pressing his forehooves together as he leaned towards the Princess, peering at her over the tops. "There was no need to come here and organize my controlled chaos." Then he clenched his eyes shut, coughing deep and wet. Despite her ire, the Princess betrayed a tiny concerned look before stiffening once more.

"It seemed to be the only way I could talk with you face to face. You're a notoriously difficult pony to meet. That seems to be the way of almost everypony around you,"

she said firmly. “I was supposed to speak with Twilight Sparkle today, but imagine my shock when I was told she was busy with ministry business. When I pried, I found out that I wasn’t even on Twilight’s agenda today, per your orders.”

“Was there a part of that which was unclear, Celestia?” Goldenblood said in his shallow rasp. I would have loved to have known if he was smiling behind those hooves.

“Twilight Sparkle is my most devoted student and dearest friend, and because of you, she didn’t even know that I wanted to see her. You have no right to interfere in our relationship or meddle in our private affairs,” the Princess retorted, her eyes narrowing. If they’d been focused at me, I doubted I’d retain control of my bladder. But Goldenblood looked back with something bordering on contempt.

“Ah, I’m afraid that that is where you are mistaken,” he replied calmly, his wet raspy voice turning sharper. “Twilight Sparkle isn’t your student anymore, Celestia. She’s now Luna’s Ministry Mare. She has a job to do winning the war. Her time is literally priceless, and I take great pains to manage it and her to be as efficient as possible.”

“Twilight Sparkle isn’t your subordinate, Director!” Celestia retorted. Goldenblood didn’t respond, and for an instant, doubt flickered in her eyes. His remained as steady as steel.

“If you have problems with how I execute my duties, take them up with your sister. I’m sure that she’ll be happy to spare you some time, Celestia.” I suddenly realized he hadn’t been calling her ‘Princess’ anymore. He looked at the stacks of papers, magically flipped through them, and then stopped and yanked one free. “I’m sure that Princess Luna would be overjoyed to hear your concerns about the . . .” His eyes glanced back to the paper once more. “Diamond Dog relocation.”

“Those are intelligent, thinking, feeling people. They may not be ponies, but it’s not right to simply take their land because we need it.” She trotted right up to his desk, then sat down and glared at him, reinforcing the fact that alicorns were frigging huge!

He didn’t shrink back, though, nor look away, as he said in that steamy hiss, “Funny. I recall you using the same excuse of ‘imminent and vital manifest need’ when you gave the order to seize the coal fields southeast of Shattered Hoof Ridge eleven years ago. That lead to the zebra invasion at Dawn Bay. Which lead to attacks across the Zanzebra Strait. And . . . well . . . you know the details better than I. But when Twilight gives an identical order to seize Splendid Valley, it’s wrong.” He tossed the paper onto the desk.

"It was wrong twelve years ago and it's wrong now," Celestia countered, looking anguished. "Don't let Twilight make the same mistake I did. Please... let me speak with her."

Goldenblood frowned as he lifted the paper again. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Celestia. Twilight needs the gems, caverns, and security to test hazardous spells and talismans. The M.A.S. nearly burned down their Manhattan hub testing incineration spells, as you may recall, and given all the zebra infiltrators and sympathizers we've dug out in the last two years..." He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry Celestia, but as I said... Twilight's time is invaluable. She simply does not have the time to be your special student any longer."

"Goldenblood, you can't let her do this. I didn't step down so my sister and my student could do horrible things!" Celestia objected with a toss of her mane.

"Well, that's funny. I was under the impression that that is precisely why you stepped down." His eyes narrowed. I'd never seen a pony scowl at Princess Celestia like that before. I didn't think it was possible. "With all due respect, Celestia, you quit. And you didn't sue for peace. You didn't negotiate an armistice. You didn't even surrender with honor. You... just... quit. And in quitting, you dumped this entire war, which you started, in Princess Luna's lap."

"You think I don't know that? You think I could still rule after what happened at Littlehorn?" Celestia demanded, her eyes blazing like twin suns. "Do you know what I thought when I saw what the zebras had done to my sister's academy? This is my fault! Mine!"

"And you were right. It was your fault," Goldenblood said in low, deadly tones. "You could have silenced the nobles. You could have told Hippocampus to find another way. Put down energy quotas. Worked to overcome the impasse with the zebras. Instead, you decided to go to war. You, Celestia."

"I had duties and responsibilities to all of Equestria!" she protested.

"And now you don't," Goldenblood said flatly. "You should have given Princess Luna a year, at the absolute minimum, for a transfer of power. Five years would have been better. And you should have negotiated peace before stepping down. Even if it came with penalties... we could have dealt with them. But you didn't. You quit, and dumped this entire mess on your sister's back. And now you don't like what she has to do to win the war? To create her own rule? To run Equestria as she needs to run it? Tough." He folded his hooves on the desk before him. "Princess Luna is doing what she must. Twilight Sparkle is helping her by doing what she must."

"Even if it's the wrong thing?" Celestia asked with a soft plea in her voice. I never thought I'd hear a Princess speak like that! "I have to do something! There must be some way I can help them to not repeat my mistakes!"

"Luna is not interested in your help, Celestia. Neither is Twilight Sparkle. There is no place for you in the new government. I made sure of it." From the look of shock on Celestia's face, I wondered if anypony had ever spoken to her like this before. It was a slap in the face.

"I just want to help my sister and my student," she whispered. "Please!"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Celestia, but this comes from Luna. She's adamant on making sure that this is her rule, her land, and her victory. And I am determined to see she gets it." He levitated up the paper once more. "But... I'll see if I can do something for these... erm... Diamond Dogs, are they? Unofficially and off the record. Just please stop trying to contact Twilight. I think she's trying to use time spells to create a thirty-two hour day just to get more work done."

"Yes. That does sound like her," Celestia murmured.

Goldenblood gave her a sympathetic smile. "Please, Celestia. I know you are concerned, but it's now out of your hooves." He paused, and for a moment his eyes seemed to size up the magnificent white alicorn. "If I can think of some way for you to help, I'll let you know."

"Oh, that's quite all right. I'm sure I'll find something to occupy my time." Celestia nodded and started to turn away. Then she paused to look back at him. "Goldenblood. Do you remember that time when you told me not to attack the zebras twelve years ago?"

"Vividly," he replied.

"Right now, I know exactly how you felt then. I hope that I may be as inspired as you were. Goodbye, Goldenblood," Celestia said with a formal bow of her head. He rose and bowed deeply in return. But when she disappeared in a flash of golden light, Goldenblood didn't smile or sneer. He trotted back to his desk, lifted a brass flask from one of the drawers, and took a pull before burying his face in his hooves.

I stared at him sitting there. Then he muttered to himself in a voice so low that I nearly missed it. His words, however, made my blood turn to ice. "Don't make me kill you, Celestia."

A few seconds later, he rose and trotted from the room. I hung there till my vision flashed and reset. Then there was a chirp in my ear; I flailed with one limb, then

slipped off the bookcase and tumbled down, landing firmly on my cybernetic butt. “Owww!” I whined aloud, then winced and rubbed my backside before looking up at Stygius, bathed and back in his armor as well.

‘U ok?’ he scribbled on his board. Then he pointed at me and stared off into space.

“Yeah. I am. Just... ow...” I stood with a groan and gave myself a good shake, trying to wrap my head around what I’d seen. Kill Celestia? Could anypony do that? I mean, the zebras had, but they’d had their entire war effort to use, and even then they were only able to do it as part of the apocalypse. Goldenblood might be a sneaky bastard, but he couldn’t do that!

Could he?

The discovery of the camera in the library spurred me to search for others, and we spent nearly an hour looking. There turned out to be at least one in every room, and Stygius was kind enough to, flapping as hard as he could, lift me up to the point where I could see more recordings. None of them were as grave as the one I’d seen in the library, though. Threatening Princess Celestia... that was just... how could he—could anypony—think that?

The majority of the recordings, in fact, were not just ‘not as grave’ but fairly odd and often boring. Many of them were silent, like one in the kitchen where Fluttershy was trying to make a meal for an obnoxious white rabbit. Another showed a rather infuriated Scootaloo barging in and fairly screaming soundlessly at Goldenblood. I don’t know what he told her, but when he finished the look of horror on her face had her trotting from the room as swiftly as her hooves could carry her.

Others had sound but didn’t seem terribly important. There was one in the guest room where Goldenblood waxed on about the moonstone acquisition for his collection to a vaguely-familiar-looking unicorn and pegasus close enough in appearance that they might have been siblings. They teased him about abusing his authority for a rock. Goldenblood grinned and replied, “Rocks,” and the recording ended with him telling them to take care of Pinkie Pie. Another after it had him complaining to Horse about the ugliness of the Core. The yellow pony laughed about how functionality took priority over aesthetics.

In the nursery, though, I found a recording I’d never imagined. Goldenblood was slumped against the empty crib, weeping as if it were the first time he would and the last time he could. He clenched his teeth along with his eyes, hissing as if he were being tortured as he sobbed and choked.

"Here you are," a strange buck said in a reverent tone. It was a blue unicorn wearing a pince-nez. His mane was a luxurious silver-white, and on his flank was a model of an atom like the drawings I'd seen in textbooks. "It's been three days."

Goldenblood turned and looked at him over his shoulder with a blood shot eye. "Am I not permitted to grieve the loss of my daughter, Tottenheimer?" he hissed.

"That requires you to acknowledge that you ever had one," the blue stallion replied. "Four Leaf put two and two together. Don't worry, it won't spread. The M.o.P. is rallying around Fluttershy to protect her. She wants you to come to dinner. No arguments." He watched as Goldenblood pressed his brow to the crib again. "Sometimes I think you're trying to commit suicide by overdosing on secrets. It wasn't your fault."

He made another horrible choking sound. At first I thought it was more tears, but then he threw back his head and I saw his sick grin. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he laughed. Tottenheimer's eyes widened in shock as the scarred buck rasped, "That's just it. It is all my fault..."

"What?"

"Fluttershy and I were together intimately," he said as he sat, gazing into the empty crib. "In the heat of the moment... I... called out the name of another mare."

The blue unicorn screwed back his lips in distaste as he scowled, and then he sighed in disappointment. "Goldenblood, really?"

"I know. I know!" he hissed in a rush. "There isn't one part of that stupid thing I haven't analyzed in detail! I don't know why I said it. But I did, and... it was at the worst possible time. She's so terribly sensitive... She'd already had complications... the stress... the pressure... all of it was too much to bear. She left me... then six hours later I got the call..." He started to laugh, but three laughs into it they transformed into ragged sobs. "Ministry Mare Fluttershy admitted to Fluttershy Medical Center for a miscarriage..." And he buried his face in the crib. "I didn't just lose the mare I loved, Tottenheimer. I killed my daughter with a name!"

Tottenheimer stood behind him for a long minute, then finally approached Goldenblood and awkwardly patted his shoulder. "Look... you couldn't have known... and you wouldn't have done it if you did. It's just... just one of those things," he said as Goldenblood wept. "But you know what's going on. We're barely hanging on. Twelve attacks on Hoofington in the last month, and if Princess Luna changes her mind and moves our research to Manehattan, then things are going to get a lot more difficult. We need you, Goldenblood. Either to step up like before, or to step aside.

But not to just sit here."

The words had a galvanizing effect on the scarred buck. "You're right..." he rasped, his voice like a dying breath. "I have promises to keep... and none of them involve a wife... or a child." He closed his eyes again. "Tell the department heads to meet tomorrow. We need to expand our operations. Take a more active role in bringing this conflict to a close in the right way and at the right time." He pressed his forehead to the rail. "That... that will have to do. For now... please give me one more night to mourn Whisper."

That was all I could bear to watch; Goldenblood hadn't just lost Fluttershy to his mistake. He'd lost a child, too.... And that bastard Sanguine had kept her survival secret from both of them! If they'd known, would it have changed something? Everything?

Damn it. I didn't want to pity anypony who'd contemplate killing Princess Celestia.

I tried to take my mind off the sight of Goldenblood in such a state, starting by signaling Stygius that we could head back down. The batpony was worn out from being my elevator and landed a bit heavily, taking a moment to catch his breath. I trotted quickly from the nursery down to the living room. He walked after me, his wings dragging along behind him. I sat on the couch, rubbing my face. When I'd discovered that this was Goldenblood's house... well... I hadn't exactly thought that I would find a golden memory orb with all the secrets nagging me there for the taking, but I'd expected to find something.

What I'd found was Goldenblood the pony.

A teacher. A lover. Even a father. I didn't want to think of him like that. I wanted to hate him, think of him as a monster who'd contemplate killing Celestia. I hated the idea of him as a victim. A screwup. ...Normal. I don't know which was more terrifying; a ridiculously intelligent master plotter with a secret ministry under his command, or somepony who was all that... and who could fuck up too.

I was distracted from my thoughts by a bit of movement in the corner of my eye. Looking over Stygius' shoulder, through a picture window, past the long grass out front and the swirling spritebots, I saw something that didn't belong: a pony in Steel Ranger armor. She was just standing halfway through the magic field, the glowing surface distorted around her. The red sparks of light from the swarming spritebots fizzled uselessly against her armor. Then a second Steel Ranger stepped through. A third. A fourth. I rose to my hooves and slowly approached the window for a closer view.

Then a fifth stepped through. He wore on his sides two massive anti-dragon cannons. As he stepped out in front of the rest and they turned to make way, I saw the black towers lined in green on their armored flanks.

You never forgot guns like those.

Steel Rain was here.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

45. Meatlocker

“These ponies don’t want a party. These ponies want a PARRR-TAY!”

“Get the lights,” I hissed, waving my hoof at the switch on the far side of the room. There were few ponies that could induce the same kind of bowel-loosening anxiety as the one with the dragon-killer cannons bolted to the sides of his armor. It wasn’t the weapons that made a terrified little pony in me scream and claw the walls, though; Deus had used guns like that, but he hadn’t induced the same kind of terror Steel Rain did. The Seekers and the other Steel Rangers had both firepower and numbers, but I could handle that.

What scared me about Steel Rain was that he was a smart pony. He didn’t just charge after me screaming ‘CUNT’ and blowing holes in the countryside. He was deliberate and cautious and didn’t allow little details to slip by him, and, unlike Deus, he was a plotter and leader in his own right and on a far larger scale. On top of all that, the fact that he had blown my face off once already didn’t help.

So as Stygius turned off the lights, I ducked down and watched nervously as the five spread out. Of course, the dimness wouldn’t do us that much good; one look at his E.F.S. would tell him where we were.

Or would it? My E.F.S. was useless with all the spritebots milling around; his couldn’t be much better. We might have a chance here, slim as it was, to avoid a messy end. Okay... how, exactly? I needed options. Hide somewhere upstairs? He’d search it. Try to bolt out a window? They were all sealed and reinforced. Try to blow him up with the moonstone? I’d used up the flake of starmetal. Barring some exceptional shooting, I didn’t have any heavy weapons that would penetrate their armor.

I needed better options.

“Dealer,” I said under my breath. “Hey, Dealer! I need to talk to you. Dealer! Please... Come on... you’ve been bouncing in and out of my consciousness for a month now. This time I need to talk to you!” Stygius gave me a worried look, clearly alarmed by this new crazy.

Outside, one of Steel Rain’s Rangers stepped forward, some kind of heavy-duty flamer on one side and a different-looking, longer-barreled kind of flamer on the other. Wasn’t one variety of fire-spewing weapon enough? Suddenly, sooty orange flames sprayed out in burning plumes that engulfed the spritebots. Dozens crackled

and died by the second, their wings disintegrating in a shower of embers and their round bodies popping explosively. More rushed in to attack fruitlessly and met the same fate. The long grass disappeared in immense clouds of smoke, and the vacant birdhouses blazed brightly before tumbling apart. The fire washed over the windows, and I jumped back. The outside of the house wouldn't catch fire, but that wouldn't do us much good once the Rangers were inside.

"Dealer!" I shouted.

Then I spotted a flicker. At first I thought it might be another vision, but then I saw the ghostly buck appear. He looked older and more gaunt than usual. He strained and groaned as he looked at me. "Yes, Blackjack? What is it?"

I stared at him; it had never occurred to me that contact might be difficult for him. I'd always thought he just sat in my PipBuck and emerged whenever he wanted to mess with me. That he didn't know what was going on also suggested that he wasn't monitoring me every second. "We're at Goldenblood's house. I found it. But we're about to be attacked by Steel Rangers and I need a back door out of this place."

"What?" His eyes widened. "How'd they get through the shield? Only designated ministry ponies can pass."

"Maybe he's got an Apple relative with him," I countered. Heck, for all I knew Steel Rain himself could be a member of the family, maybe a descendant of Braeburn. Wouldn't surprise me. "However they're here, they're here, and we need to not be."

He closed his eyes a moment. "I really hoped you wouldn't destroy it. Fluttershy loved that house."

He was concerned about the house? "Look, Dealer, I know it's a nice house, but..."

He gave a small sympathetic smile and nodded. "I know. Your enemies seldom give you a choice." He flickered a bit; I wanted to ask if he was okay, but I had no idea how long we had till Steel Rain came knocking. "The T-51 armor has a serious spark vulnerability. It was something they were addressing in the T-54 models, but those never reached deployment. If you overload the generator attached to the water wheel, it should discharge a spark pulse. That should give you a chance to get away. There's an access panel in the kitchen."

"Okay! Great. Sounds like a plan." I turned and took three steps towards the kitchen, then slowed before looking back at him. "And how exactly do I do that?" I asked sheepishly.

The Dealer's legs were fading from view. "Your friend's ultrasonic voice should foul

the crystals in the generator.” Suddenly he paused and looked at Stygius, then arched a brow at me; funny how he managed to pull off looking parental. “And Blackjack, was *that* really necessary?”

I flushed bright red; I could have died right there and then. Ugh, he’d been... while he... and I... UGH! And he wanted to discuss my sex life *now*? “Yes,” I said flatly, fighting the urge to shudder. Celestia, how *did* he do the Look? It was like finding out Mom had spied on me fooling around. And Duct Tape had been so embarrassed too.

He chuckled, shaking his head and smirking. “Glory is going to kill you.” I was about to ask why when a patter of spritebot parts against the window reminded us both that this was not the time. “The charge will build up till the crystals explode and let out a spark pulse. Then you run for your life.”

“Great. Like that never gets old,” I said with a sigh, rolling my eyes a little. I actually got a laugh out of the Dealer.

“Everypony in the Wasteland chases you, Blackjack. It’s your thing.” More of him faded away, curling off in misty tatters.

“Are you okay?” I asked in concern.

“It’s just... hard... to make contact when I’m not strong enough.” His voice became more strained as he disappeared from sight. “Please, try to spare the house...”

Stygius was just staring at me with a baffled look. “Okay... something I left out... um...” How best to explain it? “I have a ghost that lives in my PipBuck.” Okay... now bafflement was turning to concern. “A helpful ghost of a pony that knows a lot of stuff...” And is infuriatingly slow to share it. “He says your sonic scream thing can foul the crystals in the generator and make it explode.” He blinked, scratched his chin, and then nodded with a smile. I could have kissed him. Again...

We found the little access panel in the kitchen in the back wall, hidden behind the stove, after some frantic searching. The door was so tiny I wondered if Goldenblood employed colts to maintain it. I looked at Stygius. “Can you squeeze through there?” Maybe if he took off his armor... The batpony just snorted and waved his hoof dismissively as he nodded. “Okay. Make it overload and get clear.” And please don’t die.

He struck another noble pose, and I gave him a hug before turning to my saddlebags. “Take care of your—“ I said, then looked up for a moment. He was gone. “Self?”

I peeked through the open panel and saw him standing on the far side next to some equipment. Wow. I knew he was flexible, but...

Focus, Blackjack. I pulled out Vigilance, loaded the magazines with armor piercing rounds, and set the weapon on the kitchen island. Next the sword. The Ranger armor had all kinds of hoses and the like that I could target. Then the shotgun. I fished out every blue spark round I had and alternated them with explosive slugs. Hopefully I'd have a weapon left after this. Finally Duty and Sacrifice; well, they might be better than nothing. I stowed each weapon away. Right now I really wished I still had Taurus' rifle. Actually, right now I wished I had one of those anti-machine rifles.

Three pistols and a shotgun seemed pitiful compared to even one Ranger's armament. I popped my E.F.S. on... and saw only five bars remaining. And they were standing right outside the front door. Funny... one of them was blue. I heard the door click and then slowly creak open as I ducked down. Heavy metal hoofsteps entered. All I had was the element of... oh shit. I heard the hollow, staccato rattle of a grenade machine gun going off.

Oh, this was going to suck!

The next instant I was racing around the kitchen island as the grenades exploded, the shrapnel ripping the cupboards into splinters, pulverizing the fine plates and sending the pots and pans flying. The Steel Ranger in the doorway traced after me, the stream of explosions tearing the walls apart, leaving shattered wood and spilling insulation in their wake. Smoke, dust, and powdered plaster filled the air as I floated the shotgun overhead and fired wildly at the Steel Ranger at the door. The explosive rounds blackened the metal and nothing else, and the spark rounds crackled over the armor but weren't enough to shut it down.

It did throw off his aim enough to buy me time, though; I leapt through the door to the library and rolled as two more grenades followed me through. I darted behind the heavy desk as they blew, peppering me with chunks of carpet and shards of metal. The sturdy wood seemed tougher than I expected, sheltering me from the storm of exploding bombs.

Just as quickly as it started, the assault stopped. This was the part I dreaded. "Security," Steel Rain said calmly. "The MoM was notified of a Ministry Mare trespassing on a crime scene. You have no idea how glad I am that it was you. The Prophet was convinced you were hiding in the Mire or at Ironmare."

"How'd you know?" I asked as I saw two bars moving towards the door.

"I suspected. You've proven remarkably adept at eluding pursuit," he replied evenly.

"Gee, thanks," I muttered. I couldn't risk poking my head out. A red bar slowly moved around to the side; I could feel the hoofsteps through the floor. "Aren't you going to ask me for EC-1101?" The bar stopped.

"I know you won't surrender it to me." I had to stall. I had to hope Stygius could do something with the generator. "However, now that I've seen this place's defenses, I know that there must be something worthwhile here."

"How'd you get though the bubble?" I demanded.

"That hardly matters at the moment, correct? As I'm sure you're tired of hearing, the Harbingers want that PipBuck. As a matter of fact, their leader wanted it even before you left your stable. I had to convince them to expand and get more organized. Establish combat teams. Use radios. Oh what I could do with a year, their resources, and unrestricted command!" His voice strained with equal parts ambition and frustration.

Then he regarded me a moment and continued. "I, however, am willing to cut a deal. It's rather straightforward and predictable, and I know you'll decline, but I feel I should at least offer you your life for the device." My mane was squirming so hard that I could practically feel anti-dragon rounds aimed at the desk. "I'd prefer that it be handed over intact."

He probably didn't know if his artillery would damage it. A saving grace. For now; this was one time when the famed durability of PipBucks was against me. Come on, Stygius, please hurry... "Hmmm, let me think about it..."

The red bar suddenly charged around the corner. I had only the soft huff of flame to give me warning that it was Flamers. As he came into view, I slipped into SATS and blasted him with three perfectly aimed shots to the head, two explosive and one spark... that still did pretty much nothing against his armor. The explosions and crackling blue right in front of his face fazed him for a second, though, and that was a second I used to dive between his widespread forehooves just as one of the flamers poured fire beneath the desk!

Rolling out behind him, I stood and swapped to Vigilance. The pistol shots dinged the back of the helmet and hopefully made his ears hurt a little, but I'd be lucky if they did that much. That's it. Next Seeker I came across, I was keeping their anti-machine rifle. This was ridiculous! I kept behind the ranger with the flamer as he twisted this way and that, trying to line up a shot. At least he couldn't attack me

bac—

Oh, wow. Ranger power armor can applebuck. And it was an excellent method of travel, sending me flying like a cyber ragdoll across the room and into the bookshelf. The impact sent down a shower of books atop me as I sat in a heap at the bottom. I shook off the little orbiting Stygiuses in time to see the flamer pony wheeling around to face me, one of the weapons already starting to fire.

My horn flashed as I pulled every last book on the shelf I could down atop my head as the flamer spewed. The entire wooden cabinet crashed down atop me, burying me alive beneath broken wood and texts. I felt my whole world getting hot as I curled up beneath the books, wondering how many seconds this ‘protection’ would last. Flamers were really working their way up my list of most hated things ever.

Then the swoosh of the flamer was replaced by the crackle of burning books and bookcase as the stream was cut off. It was now or never! I exploded out from the heap of burning books and wood. My horn grabbed the flaming debris around me and threw it at the flamer pony in a fiery storm.

Of course, it didn’t do anything, but the smoking cloud obscured his vision enough that when he painted the wall with a second sheet of flame, his stream went high and wide; I was on my hooves and running, trailing a cloud of embers behind me. I darted for the door as I leapt through the smoke cloud... and skidded to a stop at the sight of the machine grenade pony standing in my way.

I backflipped away like a zebra—and how in Equestria did my body pull that off?!—just before the floor erupted in a burst of small explosions. I twisted in the air and landed on my hooves on the burning desk. A second jump took me to the only cover I could count on in the room: the back of Flamers. Grenades halted his fire as my fingers came out and grabbed the air hoses running alongside Flamers’s neck. He began to buck and kick wildly, spraying plumes of fire, but I was high enough on his back and metal enough to not cook... yet.

Grenades stepped back, and then the Ranger armed with miniguns stepped into his place. Suddenly my cover wasn’t as safe as I’d anticipated. Minigun opened fire, spraying Flamers with a rain of small caliber rounds that would do nothing to him and plenty to me. Burning was better than being perforated. I rolled off to the side, keeping Flamers between me and him as fire licked at my belly.

This was getting ugly.

Then Stygius appeared, flashing into view and smacking Minigun with all four hooves.

It was about as effective as my shotgun, but it did stagger and distract the Ranger for a second. Then he turned to deal with the flying threat, and the danger the batpony had drawn away from me started threatening him. At least he was good at dodging. The thumping chatter of Grenades' grenade machinegun reverberated in the far room. I had a few seconds to try and deal with Flamers. He was turning towards me, spraying a constant stream of fire across the back windows. If he couldn't burn me, he'd simply cook the room.

Wait. Where was Steel Rain? I looked around, and a tiny pink pony in my mind held a little felt (...*felt*?) arrow pointing at a red bar over in the workshop next door.

Somehow, I didn't see Steel Rain having the same aversion to causing friendly fire that Grenades had demonstrated.

I leapt as far across the burning floor as I could; direction didn't matter. A second later, the wall exploded; the wall of pressure snuffed out some of the blaze and tossed me end over end. I don't know if Flamers took a direct hit or not, but he was buried under a heap of burning debris. My body ached in pain from the concussion and burns as I slowly pushed myself to my hooves. I had to press on, a little white pony informed me. Hold on, endure, and be fabulous.

Steel Rain stepped through the hole blown through the wall, his cannons ejecting the spent rounds and sending them flying back in great smoking arcs and bouncing into the room behind him. "Incredible. Just incredible. I've found Hellhounds less tenacious." Those immense guns gave an ominously deep 'thunk', loading another pair of rounds. Trailing smoke and bits of flaming debris, I charged in the only direction left to me: straight at him.

I leapt at him a split second before he fired, the shockwave slamming into me as I wrapped my forelegs around his neck and grabbed the back of it with my fingers. The shells blew out a huge section of the wall; even the reinforced construction wasn't enough to keep the house intact. I stared into his glowing eye panels and floated Vigilance up. Point blank, I emptied the remainder of the clip into his head.

I think I cracked the eye visor for my trouble. What, was his armor even tougher than the standard model?! Steel Rain didn't banter or make some snide comment, nor was he going to let me reload or stay this close. Instead he turned and charged straight into the wall, smashing me through the layer of plaster, wood, and insulation and onto the stone behind. I heard parts inside me crunch and a pressure burst up my throat. I vomited a bloody foam over his face as I struggled to push him away, breathe, or something.

'Something' came in the form of the sword. I slashed at his neck, but though the edge was magically sharp and it did cut a line in his metal, it was far too little. Maybe if I had half a minute of him standing still, I could saw through. He wasn't going to give me that. He reared back and rammed the wall again. I felt my vision start to go black. Then I slashed at the hoses leading towards the muzzle of his armor. The thick rubber, likely resistant to normal damage, parted under the sword's edge like warm butter. I had no idea what harm I'd done to him, but hopefully it was something. I sliced the other one for good measure.

He moved back and charged one more time. I let go, falling beneath him as the Steel Ranger smashed clear through the wall. I fought to breathe; my vision was full of all kinds of damage alerts. I staggered out of the smoky room, needing a breather. Needing help. I found myself in the hazy workshop and collapsed. I had no idea if I could make myself regenerate faster. Probably not...

From the living room came more shots and explosions. Tears ran down my sooty cheeks. I looked at my PipBuck. I set it to broadcast, closed my eyes, and then rasped out, "This is Blackjack. I need help. Please. I'm by Black Pony Mountain. Please, I need help now." I could only pray that the Seekers didn't know Blackjack was Security. Not that anypony else was likely to be in a position to get here in time, but I was out of ideas.

Stygus was suddenly by my side, so abruptly that it was like he appeared from thin air. He was coated in sweat, smoke and ash were spattered across his hide, and he had more than a few small holes in him. He held a healing potion in his mouth and firmly pressed it to my lips. I knew it wouldn't do much for me, but I drank it anyway. It might not have instantly fixed crushed internal organs, but I had to admit that I did actually feel a little better.

"Thanks," I coughed as I glanced around. Steel Rain had us cornered. Two Rangers were by the door and one was by the hole he'd blasted. "Any clue when that generator is going to overload?" The batpony shook his head. Then my eyes moved up and looked at the underside of the workbench. There was a little button there. Now why would Goldenblood have a hidden button on the underside of his workbench? It'd probably be the last question I'd get to ask, but it was one I could answer. I reached up with my hoof and smacked it.

The floor fell out beneath me and suddenly I was tumbling down a flight of stairs. I finally reached the bottom, looking up at a smoky rectangle as Stygius darted through. I lay there a moment, my ribs aching and my lungs fighting for a few good breaths. On the wall beside me was another button, and I tapped it with my magic.

The rectangle closed. Instantly the three bars upstairs began to mill about. Stygius helped me to my hooves.

Well now... wasn't *this* interesting?

I groaned as I staggered forward into a large basement. There were chalkboards on the walls covered with lists, schematics, and numbers. Most were written in code. As my body repaired itself from being cooked and battered, I picked out a few. Zebra relocation and protection program. Infiltration of Dawn Bay base. Tokomare resource allotment. Robronco resource acquisition. M.W.T. mergers. Blueblood's social calendar. How were any of these *important*?

Goldenblood had kept track of a great deal of Equestria; I wondered when he ever got around to sleeping...

In the corner were a number of terminals. When I approached, a little light flashed over one, and then swept over me in a shimmery wave. It passed over my leg, and then locked on my PipBuck. Then the screens began to flash to life one after the next. Four of them just displayed the O.I.A. logo: six circles with a ministry symbol inside each arranged in a ring surrounding an encircled moon. I noticed now how each ministry was cut off from the others, and from the central circle, linked only by the twisting lines. As if the O.I.A. wasn't to bring the ministries together at all...

Then the middle screen went dark, and a few lines of text appeared.

>EC-1101 status: Standby.

>Ministry Credentials Established.

>Equestria Defense Status: Unknown Critical.

>Palace Status: Complete.

>Redoubt Status: Complete.

>Tom: Complete. Charge 100%.

>Warning: Spark Flux Capacitors charge at 0%. Recharge Pending Activation.

>Project Horizons Status: Standby.

>Activate Project Horizons: Y/N?

I stared at the screen for almost a minute. I swallowed as I stared at the Y button. Wow... all I needed was to push one little button, and I'd know exactly what Gold-enblood had planned. Just... just push the button... I almost did. I even moved my hoof over it... and a few weeks ago, I would have. But... I knew better. As much as I wanted to know what Horizons was, I didn't want to find out the reckless way, just in case Sanguine was right and it blew up half the Hoof. I typed 'N' and hit enter. A

moment later the text disappeared and I sighed. Must be getting old. I watched new words appear on the terminal screen.

>Confirmed. Project Horizons Status: Standby.

>Warning: Project auto-activation in effect pending critical failure of EC-1101. Please update EDS as soon as possible. Auto-activation cannot be terminated if EDS is unknown.

I tapped several keys that weren't 'Y', but nothing happened aside from going back to the first prompt. I wanted to scream! What was the Palace? What was the Redoubt? Who the hay was Tom? What's a Spark Flux whatchamacallit? What the hell was Project Horizons supposed to do?! I reconsidered my choice of not hitting yes just to see what would happen!

Fortunately, sanity prevailed, and I stepped back. When I moved away, the beam hitting my PipBuck winked out and the screen went dark.

I sighed as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. Were there any answers? Or just more questions that lead to more questions that lead to still more questions? "Damn it..." I whispered to myself. Then Stygius tapped my shoulder, and I looked up in time to see more text appearing on the central terminal.

> I KNOW YOU'RE IN A BAD WAY RIGHT NOW, BLACKJACK.

I stared at the screen as a shocked stillness spread through me, raised a hoof toward the keys, and then slowly pulled it away.

> I KNOW YOU'RE HURT, FRUSTRATED, AND TIRED. YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH. MORE THAN ANYPONY HAS A RIGHT TO. THEN YOU STAND UP ON YOUR HOOVES AND MARCH ON. BECAUSE YOU CAN. BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO.

I sat back, and for a moment there was no Steel Rain. No impending panic or terror or frustration.

> I PRAY THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE WHAT THE MINISTRIES FAILED TO DO TWO CENTURIES AGO. I HOPE THAT YOU CAN, BECAUSE SOMEPONY MUST. THE SINS OF THE PAST MUST BE ACCOUNTED FOR. THE MISTAKES MUST BE CORRECTED. ATONEMENT MUST BE PAID. EQUESTRIA NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE. RIGHT NOW, YOU AND OTHERS ARE CREATING THAT SECOND CHANCE. DON'T GIVE UP. I BELIEVE IN YOU, AND I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

>SPIKE

I stared at the screen for almost a minute, fully numb. Then the text disappeared, only to be replaced by:

>HIDE.

There was a resounding detonation, and for a moment I was certain that the generator had blown. Then it sounded again. The third time, the doors from the workshop

blew inwards. Still, Spike didn't understand you couldn't hide from E.F.S.! No matter where we were in the room, they'd see our...

Wait. In the dark room, there were now suddenly a whole lot of blue bars. If they were blue to me, maybe they'd be red to the Rangers! The terminals stopped showing the logo and started showing scrolling technical data. Weird formulas. Things that looked like weapon schematics. So... that's the plan. I tugged Stygius' wing, and we scrambled behind some chalkboards in the corner as heavy hoofsteps descended the stairs. The first one down was Grenades, turning this way and that as he pointed at hostiles that weren't firing yet.

Then he looked over at the terminals. "Sir! You're going to want to see this!" a mare shouted. Okay, so it was a little hard to tell genders in those suits.

Steel Rain trotted down, his eyes immediately drawn to the chalkboards and then to the terminals. "What is this?" He breathed... heavily. With those hoses cut, I bet he wasn't getting quite as much air as he would have liked. Slowly he walked over to the other Ranger next to the terminals. With their backs to us, we started inching towards the stairs.

"Wait... this is a trap!" As he shouted, the schematics disappeared, replaced by the picture of a very ugly mule presenting his posterior, grinning as he looked back over his shoulder. There was a hiss and a pop as four turrets dropped from the ceiling, another four shot up from the ground, and all eight proceeded to pummel the pair with heavy machinegun fire!

I ran for the stairs; as much as I'd like to stay and finish him off, even one hit from those cannons would paste both of us. And in the hidden room, those cannons were going off in a roaring cloud of slate and shrapnel. I sure hoped Stygius' ears would be okay as we were blasted by the shockwave. Seriously, Rain. Get a minigun or something for indoor work.

Together we burst out into the workshop. Minigun was kneeling next to Flamers in the blasted-out library. The orange mare had her helmet off, blood dripping from her ears and nose as she struggled to breathe. As soon as we emerged, Minigun swiveled to face us, standing between me and the injured Ranger. As much as I'd liked to leap out the giant hole Rain had blown in the wall, the purring minigun motor dissuaded me. Besides, if she was in the library, that meant that the front door was open! Grinning, I raced into the living room.

Unless Steel Rain had been smart enough to bring reinforcements.

Two more Rangers stood at the front door. One had a missile launcher and a grenade machinegun setup. The other had anti-machine rifles strapped to his sides. Already alerted by Minigun's fire, the pair were bringing their weapons to bear as we charged out of the workshop.

I changed course at once and darted for the first thing in front of me: the stairs. I doubted I'd outrun a missile's blast radius, but there weren't really many options besides running in the closest direction that was 'away'. Then suddenly Stygius wasn't above me anymore. The armored batpony disappeared, reappearing over Missile's head. What was that?! Had he just *teleported*? Kicks rained down, and while he didn't do much noticeable damage, it was hard to aim a rocket with somepony tapdancing on your head! The shot went low, exploding beneath the balcony and knocking me on my face.

I groaned as I lay there, sprawled out. "Really... I just want to check out of this funhouse..." I had a few seconds to compose myself, then the balcony jerked with a sharp crack. "Oh fuck no..." I groaned.

The balcony walkway collapsed with a shredding of wood. I heard a scream beneath me, followed by a crunch, and I rolled several times to get clear of the flying debris, coming with my face towards the ceiling. I spotted Minigun lying there wearing the walkway like a mantle.

"Kill her!" Steel Rain shouted from the workshop. Oh ponyfeathers, he did not sound happy at all. Stygius was keeping Missile occupied, swooping around his head and planting kicks and bucks. Anti Machine, however, was free and clear to shoot at the mare lying on her back in front of him. Steel Rain came stomping out, and I was fairly certain he'd happily blast all four of us to finish me off.

I needed more gun. ...And I had it right in front of me! I reached out and grabbed AM's hoses with my fingers. Had he lowered his head, I would have been screwed. However, he pulled back, and that yanked me towards him. Kicking and scrambling, I spun around on my back beneath him, putting my hands where his forelegs met his body and my rear hooves to the sides of his pelvis. Setting myself, I grit my teeth and heaved AM completely off the ground!

His legs kicked wildly as I turned him to face directly towards the pony with the cannons and the shot-up armor. I grinned from ear to ear, looking at Steel Rain from upside down. My horn glowed as I reached up to the trigger mechanisms and fired the elevated Ranger's weapons as fast as I could. Even Steel Rain's armor couldn't take that. AM's guns were loaded with armor piercing and incendiary rounds; just

right for your local Cyberpony. My aim was shit, but my luck wasn't; two shots hit home, biting deep into his chest and neck, and even Steel Rain was forced to take cover as I finally saw blood! Damn, he was a tough son of a mule, though; multiple anti-machine rifle hits and he hadn't dropped? Still, if he could bleed, he could be beaten! He could be *killed*... if only he didn't have a bunch of other ponies trying to kill me first!

"Stygius! The door!" I shouted. I couldn't turn AM the full ninety degrees to shoot Missile as well. So instead I ejected his ammo clips, lowered my hind legs, and gave his nethers a sharp kick to occupy his time before I heaved him off to the side. I really had no clue if I did any harm, or even if AM had anything there to harm in the first place, but it was better than nothing. Just trying to buy myself time. The dusky batpony blinked over to the door in a flash of blackish-purply light and yanked it open, and I rolled and half jumped, half fell outside. I just had to find out how he did that trick! Later... when I wasn't running for my life.

A missile blasted the door closed behind me, and I slowly rose on wobbly legs. Okay, I was outside. Now if that generator would just overload... I could hear some kind of electrical crackle and an ominous hum rising from the water wheel. If I could just get out of here, I'd be one happy pony.

And of course there was another ranger outside.

"Oh come on!" I shouted as I pointed my shotgun at her and unloaded four rounds before I realized something was wrong. She wasn't defending herself. Hell, she wasn't even *armed*; what sort of Steel Ranger wasn't armed? She just stood there. Was there anypony actually inside this thing? The armor moved, tracking me... so there did have to be somepony in there. But wh—

Unfortunately, the Ranger outside did have one potent weapon after all: she'd delayed me. The front of the house blew out in a great wave of reinforced debris that landed on me and the unarmed Ranger alike with a heavy crunch. Steel Rain stepped out through the dust cloud, his once magnificent armor now quite shot to hell but already slowly repairing itself, pink light smoothing the holes punched in his chest. "You've caused everypony quite enough trouble, Security." He ejected the spent cannon rounds as he stepped out. Stygius landed next to me, shifting the rubble so I could crawl free.

"You're just forgetting one thing," I said as I saw the blue glow coming through the broken wood paneling around the water wheel.

Steel Rain loaded two shells as Missile and Grenades stepped out with him. Their

weapons trained on me. None of them were biting...

"The T-51 armor has a nasty vulnerability to spark discharges," I said with a grin. Then I glanced at the corner of the house, where things were glowing and crackling, and then back to him. Standing on the porch, the three glanced at each other. "A discharge... like the one that needs to happen... right now!" Still nothing. The three looked right at me, weapons trained. I sighed and sat, throwing my hooves wide. "I give up. You win," I said in disgust at whatever higher power had missed the perfect chance to blow the generator. "You may now proceed with the gloating and the explanation of your nefarious plot." Maybe humor would buy me the time I needed?

But Steel Rain wasn't in a particularly expository mood. All three pointed their weapons at me. "Try not to scrap the leg."

"Death from above!" came a scream. The Steel Rangers looked up in time to receive a faceful of Rampage. The striped mare smashed into the trio like a wrecking ball. She'd replaced her armor with a suit of reinforced steel and battered, sharpened spikes. She set her hoofclaws into the decking and slammed Steel Rain with a clawed applebuck upside his face that dented his armor. "That's for Mallet."

Then there was a resounding crack of an anti-material rifle above me, and Grenades reeled back as the side of her helmet nearly came off. I looked up at the shining horn of Lacunae. A PipBuck gleamed on her hoof as she dropped down beside me. "Sorry we are late."

"But how... the shield..." I muttered weakly.

"Damn it. I should let you die, Blackjack. I bet Rampage you'd be crying for help inside a day," Psychoshy yelled as she darted down and smashed her hooves against Missile. The power hooves on the ends of her legs flashed, knocking the Ranger back through the door. "Now I got to pay this cunt a thousand caps that I don't have! You owe me a thousand caps, Blackjack!"

"Gotta love Psychie's logic," Rampage laughed as she continued to slam against Steel Rain, keeping his cannons off me. "I gave you your power hooves back, didn't I?" she said as she shoved his barrels away from Lacunae and me. He responded by smashing her face with a swing of his armored head. She grinned even wider as the two struggled against each other.

"Only 'cause I called in a favor with Hammersmith. Honestly, Rampage, how you blow up metal armor is beyond—" The mare swooped into the air in preparation for

another dive and suddenly found herself face to face with the dusky Stygius. She froze hovering there as she stared into his eyes. "... me?"

Stygius blinked and then gave a small smile. I stared up at the two through the hazy, smoky air as the yellow pegasus actually blushed. She was fidgeting! Right now in the middle of a battle. "Um... hi," she said as she looked at him. "I'm... ah..." and then she muttered something.

"She does this now?" Lacunae asked in my mind. She carefully aimed another shot at Grenades, who took cover inside the house. I got to my hooves, my whole body numb.

Missile seemed to feel the same way as she began to fire her grenade machinegun up at the two. They darted away, the yellow mare glaring down at the Ranger. "Hey!" Psychoshy's wings snapped her into a dive that she pulled up from just in time to streak a foot above the ground. "I'm talking..." she screamed as she swooped up in an uppercut. "...to a really..." she continued as she rose up and smashed her rear hooves into Missile's face. "...hot guy here!" The pegasus pirouetted in the air and brought her front hooves down on top of his head. "So piss off!" she finished as the Ranger collapsed in a heap. Then she darted back up to the stunned Stygius and said shyly, "So... ah... um... What's your name?"

I doubted Stygius would have been able to answer, even if he could talk. But when Anti Machine stepped out the gaping hole in the front and leveled his barrels at the mare, the batpony darted down as a shadowy blur and tagged all four hooves against his head, staggering the Ranger. From the shades of red the pair were turning as he flew up again, I was pretty sure there wasn't going to be another chance of fun with him for me.

"We need to get out of here," I said as I saw Minigun joining the fight. The instant one of them distracted Rampage, we were going to get hit by Rain's cannons. For a moment, I took in the scorched grass and blackened, blasted-out front of the house. It didn't look all that different from the rest of the Wasteland now. There were fires licking the upper stories. I imagined the unused nursery burning up, and my gut clenched. Nothing stayed good in Hoofington. Nothing beautiful.

The battle was a lot more even now but still precarious. The Rangers had both fire-power and resilience on their side, but now instead of running me into the ground, they had to pay some care towards their own defense. Lacunae and I kept up a rain of fire, Rampage struggled with Steel Rain, and Psychoshy and Stygius darted above them and rained down lightning kicks when their guards were down. Lacu-

nae's anti machine rifle and S.A.T.S.-enhanced marksponyship proved devastating as she stood magnificently within her shield. She and I blasted anypony that poked their heads out at us. They started getting smarter, though, moving in unison and firing at us in pairs so we couldn't keep them pinned.

Then Flamers came around the side of the house and hosed both Rampage and Steel Rain in a sheet of flame. The former's grip slipped a moment, and Steel Rain gave a great heave, smashing her to the ground. Then he turned towards us. "Teleport us out. Now!" I said in a rush.

"If I could do that, I would have before now. I can't teleport through that field," Lacunae said as she turned her rifle on Steel Rain. The Rangers, however, as if aware their leader's guns were about to be brought to bear, came out and fired as one. Lacunae focused, her shield flickering wildly at the firepower pouring down upon it. Anti Material and Minigun sent up a barrage at Stygius and Psychoshy; the pair of fliers darted about wildly. A line of minigun bullets stitched from Psychoshy's shoulder to her flank, amazingly not killing her but still sending her tumbling wildly and screaming as she tried desperately to get away before the weapon pulped her completely.

Stygius jumped through the air, blinking short distances in flickers of shadow to move beneath her and catch her in his hooves. The tough mare turned even redder; fortunately, her embarrassment wasn't going to last longer than a few more seconds—

Wait... what was that buzzing noise?

From the waterwheel area and the holes in the house's walls came a blue glow and an increasingly sharp, crackling buzz. Even Steel Rain paused, looking towards the source of the sound. Then everything went white.

I knelt in the middle of a hotel room in a Manhattan skyscraper, wearing a maintenance uniform. "Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins. Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins," I repeated over and over again in a frantic whisper. The desperation in my voice bordered on madness as I rocked slowly back and forth. Then the clock chimed ten, and I rose to my hooves. I turned and looked out the window towards the mountains of Canterlot and the rising sun beyond. "Please forgive me."

I walked to the telephone. My horn glowed, and I lifted the receiver, spun the dial, and closed my eyes. A second or two later, a mare answered in a tense voice that

suggested she'd been crying. "Hello? Pumpkin Cake."

"Hi, Pumpkin. It's me," I said in a low, rushed voice. "Listen. I can't talk now, but it's important that you and Pound get out of there now. Get someplace safe, like a stable, right now."

"What?" the mare gasped. "I can't. Things are crazy over here right now. I think Pinkie has finally snapped. She's been ranting about arresting ponies right and left! And they're taking down Four Stars as we speak! Pinkie's trying to purge the M.o.M. now that Teacher's in prison, and we're just trying to hold everything together!" I looked out the window at the great big Pinkie Pie balloons floating above the streets; huge, decapitated heads of the Ministry Mare.

"Listen to me, Pumpkin. Please... listen. You can't worry about Pinkie or Teacher now. You can't worry about anything except getting yourselves to safety. Do you understand? Get out of there in the next half an hour if you want to live," I said with terrible evenness as I looked out at the pink hub building.

There was a tight silence on the other end. "What's going on? Is this an O.I.A. thing? Does this have anything to do with the sabotage in our hub last night? What's happening?" There was a mirror over the desk that I peeked at. I looked into my own sad yellow eyes and closed them again. Then, calmly and deliberately, I hung up the phone.

Five seconds later it rang again. I stood there for a half dozen rings, then picked it up. Garnet, her voice edged with malice, said immediately, "You're lucky we're in the endgame and they're not a priority, idiot, or I'd have you kill both of them yourself. Partypoooper is activated. Your alpha target was Twilight Sparkle, but our sources say she's in Maripony. So alpha is now Pinkie Pie. After that, confirm that everypony on the list is removed. You've taken steps with the M.o.M. hub?"

"Yes, but-

"Good. Now do your duty, Agent."

I shuddered. "And then Luna will forgive me?"

"Sure. Whatever. We've received confirmation that the Ministries are colluding with the zebras. If we're quick, we can wrap this up without a slaughter. Now get to it and start eliminating those traitors." And then the mare hung up.

What was a few more deaths to a soul stained black with sin? But Luna would forgive me. She was my only hope.

I sighed and stood, trotting to the door. I walked down the hall, through a door, and into a maintenance hallway. When I reached a cargo elevator, I rode it upward. It pinged, and two more ponies trotted in. Both wore uniforms similar to my own.

"I tell you, something is going on. I heard Stable-Tec put out a priority alert!" the green stallion said cautiously. "You have to admit it, Pokey. This last week has been weird."

"Don't give me more of your conspiracy theories, Evergreen. If you tell me one more story of secret O.I.A. plots, space aliens abducting ponies, or zebra death curses, I swear I'm going to scream," the blue buck said with a roll of his eyes.

"Look, this is different. I mean, a priority alert? That means get to the stables now," the green stallion with a pine tree on his flank said, trotting nervously in place. "And Twilight's in Maripony doing something big. How do we know it's not related to the alert?"

The blue unicorn with a safety pin on his flank snorted and shook his head. "Yeah yeah, Evergreen. Just like last month. Just another one of their drills." The unicorn looked back at me, and I froze. "Hey, what do you think? Is something going on, or not?"

I didn't answer. Shouldn't answer. "If you have any loved ones, call them. Tell them to get to safety. Now," I whispered as my horn glowed faintly; barely a shimmer.

They looked at each other. "Hey, I don't know you. You new?" the green buck asked with a worried frown. "I thought they froze all transfers."

"Please. Tell them to get into the stables, underground, or to the M.A.S. hub," I murmured, my voice straining. "Please..."

"I think we need to contact secur—" was as far as the blue stallion got before the knives left their sheathes on the inside of my forelegs. A blade struck with inerring precision into his left eye. The blue stallion jerked as if electrified as the other knife pressed against Evergreen's throat. The first blade twisted in the socket, and the blue unicorn collapsed in a heap. I left the blade in his eye socket for now to keep most of the mess inside as I contemplated the other stallion.

"Oh Celestia... oh Luna... oh please..." Evergreen begged as he lost control of his bladder and wet his coveralls. "I have a son... please... I have a son..."

I hesitated. *Kill him*, training said. *Kill him, and Luna will forgive. Kill him so he can't give alarm. Kill him because, in the long run, what does he matter? What's another life?* Pokey's was over, cut short by me and my inability to compose myself, knowing

what I knew, and trying to give warning. Everything I was told me to kill Evergreen. Everything but one small part.

"Get to your son and get to safety. That's all that matters now. Understand?" I said softly, He sobbed and nodded so fast he looked as if he were going to snap his head clear off. I pulled a mirror from my pocket and used it to peek down the hall at a sensor camera. A second later, several wires were unplugged from the back.

"What's happening... what..." begged the stallion.

"Something bad," was all I said. I bit the back of Pokey's collar and pulled him into the short hall. Maybe he'd warn somepony rather than getting his son. Maybe I'd just killed both of them. *Serve Princess Luna well, and you will be forgiven.* It was my only chance. My only hope.

I pulled Pokey's body to the door leading out to the roof, making sure the blood oozing from the hole in his face soaked into his bardings. Once on the roof, I plugged the wires back into the camera. No need to send a maintenance pony if it wasn't broken. Leaving the corpse on the roof, tucked in a corner out of view, I trotted over towards a stack of crates beside the broadcast dish. One was slightly off from the rest. I fished out a key and opened the crate.

Inside was a suit of black riot armor and a rifle case. I flipped it open and looked at the gleaming, finely-machined pieces. The morning light shone off the scope's lens. I levitated out the pieces and with care and finesse slowly screwed them together into a rifle longer than my body. My magical grip didn't waver in the slightest as I trotted to the edge and knelt down. I saw the distant pink tower of the Ministry of Morale hub and opened the breech. The butt had lines carefully cut into it, one for each sin I'd committed. The once-smooth surface was rough and jagged.

The bullets were large, familiar, hateful things. I lifted one and examined the runes that would allow it to bypass normal materials and armor. I slid it home. Magical talismans in the weapon would assist its propulsion and path through the air. My StealthBuck activated, and both I and the gun disappeared. With practiced ease, I lowered the scope to my eye and peered through.

The magical scope peeled away the façade of the building, and I looked through the walls to the ponies within. Their images were so clear, I could almost pick out conversations from the movements of their lips. Panic, worry, and alarm consumed the M.o.M. hub. I swept through the familiar architecture; I'd studied every inch of it. Been inside several times.

Then I found the office I'd wanted. The mare inside, a pink mare with a messy pink-and-gray-striped mane, paced back and forth. She swung her head wildly, her lips working as she talked to herself. I slipped into practiced calm, pushing it all away. She was plotting a coup; Twilight and all her friends were. Their elimination was a sad necessity to secure Luna's rule.

Serve Luna well, and you will one day be forgiven.

I followed her pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth. I timed it. It was something I was always good at; I never had much in the way of magic, but I had the faith to take the shot and the knack of knowing exactly when and where the bullet would be. Back and forth. Back and forth. The familiar stillness passed through me as I put the crosshairs where she would turn. It'd be a second and a half for the complete turn. I licked my lips.

Pinkie Pie suddenly stopped, her eyes wide and staring as she looked around. I'd been warned about this: no doubt she was sensing something. A wobbly leg, a twitchy ear, or a creepy flank... something warning her of her impending demise. I kept the crosshairs on her head as she stared straight ahead, tears running down her cheeks. There was a look of horror on her face I'd never seen before. I had to wonder what it was like to know you were about to die. Would she call for help? She had to die before she could warn Twilight and the others that Luna was moving against them.

As soon as the Ministry Mares were taken out, government forces would take over the M.o.M., M.A.S., and M.o.A. Ponies loyal to the Princess would be installed. Then the zebra forces would be annihilated in an overwhelming preemptive strike. So much had to happen, and in such a short time. If it was true that the Ministry Mares were actually conspiring with the enemy to depose the Princess and surrender to the zebras, there was no telling what might happen. One Ministry Mare had already given the enemy the means to make megaspells. The M.A.S. hub would be secured rather easily; Maripony would be far more challenging, but the M.A.S. wasn't an army. Even the M.o.A. and Shadowbolt Tower wouldn't stand long on their own.

Pinkie Pie was no longer frantic. She wasn't springing for the phone. In fact, she wore an expression that was almost... happy. She'd taken a figurine from her desk and hugged it to her chest as she looked at me. Right at me! I was so shocked that I pulled my eye from the scope. Then I looked back. She smiled so terribly sadly, her blue eyes shimmering with tears and regret, but happiness too. Her mouth moved silently. For a moment, I almost aborted. I should contact command and confirm.

Then I looked again at the old mare with the candy-cane-striped mane. ‘Please.’ Her mouth moved as she hugged the little statue tightly, slumped in the corner. ‘Please. I don’t want to burn.’

I stared for a second longer, looking Pinkie Pie in the eyes. I’d never looked in the eyes of my target and seen into their heart. I took a breath. I let it out. I pulled the trigger. The gun was precisely engineered, enchanted to be completely silent, and accelerated the bullet even more than the explosive inside the shell.

Relief spread across her face in a tired smile. I watched, unable to tear my eye away from the scope. The bullet tore through the M.o.M. shield, weakened due to my sabotage yesterday, and ignored the magical strengthening of the glass in Pinkie’s office window. The projectile shattered the massive pane and buried itself right in the pink mare’s chest. Her eyes bulged a moment as the round shot through her torso and into the wall behind her. Blood flowed from the corner of her mouth. Then she laid her head against the wall, still hugging the figurine as her eyes closed for good.

I pulled the eyepiece away, breathing harder than I ever had before. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. “Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another—”

A horrible warmth bloomed on my features and I stared – a second sun lit up the sky, expanding outwards from the direction of Cloudsdale.

No. We were too late. We were all too late. The ministries had made their move.

I raced to my gear and threw it on. The M.A.S. shield rose up to full emergency strength around me as I put on the headset already piggybacked into the EBS network. “Control. Control! Come in please. We have a Celestia-level event in Cloudsdale! I repeat, a Celestia level event... in...”

There was a second sunrise today in Manehattan. A great roiling ball of green and red fire that seemed to seek out the buildings and their inhabitants. It spread in all directions, like burning water gushing through the canyons of the city. I saw other little suns begin to erupt in other directions, all across the landscape. The flames swept up to the flickering shield around the tower. Don’t look... a tiny voice warned me. Don’t look...

But I brought the scope up and looked. And that tiny voice... that vital little voice... died inside me. The scope filtered out the dazzling glare of the flames so that I saw everything in perfect clarity. I watched ponies burning alive in the streets as they tried to scramble for safety. I watched a mare with mane and tail aflame

streaking down the street as her coat burned away. I saw a family cower together in a bathroom as the fire seemed to sniff them out, flooding the buildings and roasting them alive. I swept my scope to the M.o.M. building. The weakened shields had failed at the base, and the fire was pouring in. The shield acted like a chimney, drawing the flame upwards and incinerating everypony inside.

Pinkie had known. She'd known.

There was no reply from Control. Cut off? Destroyed? It didn't matter. I had a mission to do; I'd sworn to serve the Princess. Partypoober was active, and it was my duty to make sure that everypony on my list was eliminated. I'd go to Hoofington first. There were at least two targets there. Then Maripony, if it was still standing.

I disassembled the weapon and packed it away. I had a long way to go before I earned my forgiveness and a lot more ponies to kill in the meantime. I rode the cargo elevator to the basement, ignoring the shouts and screams of the residents and workers echoing through the tower. I reached the bottom, a room full of straining generators, and my radiation meter began to crackle. I chewed down a tablet of Rad-X.

“You there! Halt! Who—” a mare in a maintenance suit shouted. Without hesitating, without even thinking about it, I drew my IF-44 submachine gun and put a three round burst in her chest. A curious hollowness filled me as I trotted over her body and walked to the door, entering a security bypass password that opened to a tunnel filled with magical radiation, reeking smoke, and screams. It was a promise of what was to come if I did not serve and receive absolution for my sins.

I felt the dream fade away and simply lay there, sprawled on my side. I could hear a distant klaxon blaring annoyingly over the hiss of the Hoofington rain and picked up a mare's voice talking in low tones.

“...just lying there. What if she's, like, dead?” Psychoshy asked.

“For the hundredth time, she's fine, Psycho. You were closer to death than she was. You're lucky Lacunae got to you before you were, like, dead,” Rampage said. “She's half machine, and that spark discharge did to her what it did to the Rangers. Lacunae's confirmed she's dreaming. Her systems will repair themselves. If she's not awake in an hour, we'll head over to the Collegiate. Maybe they can do something for her.”

I cracked my eye open. We were in another Robronco dealership; the smashed robot displays were everywhere. A campfire crackled merrily in one corner, and Rampage was roasting radroaches over the flames. Water poured in ribbons through holes in the roof and snaked over the filthy tiles between rusting piles of scrap. A strange blue-purple luminescence glowed through the grimy front windows. I looked around at other signs of habitation; ancient graffiti spray-painted on the wall read 'Fuck the Gearheads.' Bullet holes decorated the walls, and ancient Stable-Tec mattresses lay around the fire.

I closed my eyes and tried to think a moment though the staticy, scratchy feeling in my head. Another dream of the black mare. A mare who by now I had a sneaking suspicion was Psalm. Between that dream I had in the canyon, the vision of her in the war room, and what I'd seen just now... it was too much to be a coincidence. The thing was, I had no idea why I would have a Marauder in my dreams. The one back in Goldenblood's house had been a lot more abstract and... dream-ish than this one, as if my brain was trying to do... something! It was like Psalm herself been put inside me; more than just a memory orb. Unicorn magic could extract memories from other ponies; could it also put memories into another pony? Triage had warned me that mucking around with memories was dangerous...

Ugh... I really needed to talk to a smart pony about this. And take some Med... er... hope the headache passed quick. I opened my eyes again and slowly sat up. "Sweet Celestia... that discharge packed a punch." I shook my head and then looked at my friends. "Did we win? Tell me you splatted Steel Rain." I knew I couldn't kill a helpless enemy, but I doubted that Psychoshy or Rampage would hesitate to finish off the rogue leader.

Rampage finished chewing a mouthful of radroach and swallowed. "Hey Blackjack," she said. Then, a moment later, she admitted with a sheepish smile, "It was a draw. We were all set to play can opener when the Seekers arrived. Like... all of them. We flew the heck out of there. Then the rain picked up, so we holed up in here," she said as she trotted closer. "So... how are you, Blackjack?" she asked in concern. "When you left, we were afraid you were about to spit your bit."

I sighed, stood, and shook myself. My combat armor reeked of smoke. I was going through armor something crazy; this had to be my sixth or seventh set. I rubbed my face... good, at least that hadn't burned away. Then I saw that my tail was singed short. I sighed again and shook my head. "You were right to be worried. I... I wasn't in a good way, Rampage. At all. I had a lot of junk I was trying to run away from." I sighed and looked at her with a sheepish smile. "Stuff that... well..."

you were trying to get me to deal with.” Psychoshy scowled at me, then muttered to herself as she glared out the glowing windows.

“So... I have to ask... how’d you find me?” I asked, sitting down next to Rampage. “I mean, I really needed help, but I didn’t expect anypony to just appear from nowhere. Particularly any of you.”

“Well, we had it worked out. Scotch put Glory’s PipBuck on Lacunae, and she scooped up a drum of radioactive waste to dump on herself. Your tag thingy was already loaded.” Rampage chuckled. “Scotch Tape’s been listening for you... for anypony, really, since you left us at the medical center. DJ Pon3 is off the air for some weird reason, so she did something to her PipBuck to make it scan for transmissions. Soon as you started talking, she rushed downstairs crying that you were dying.”

“Yeah, but how’d she teleport here?” I asked in confusion.

“Oh, that’s simple. You mentioned Black Pony Mountain in your message, and we could see that your tag was nearby. I’ve been to the area before, so she magicked the location right out of my skull. Then she rolled around in that waste for five minutes, grabbed me and Psychoshy here, and poofed to the other side of Hoofington.”

“Yeah. ‘Cause I really wanted to help you,” Psychoshy muttered, rolling her eyes.

Rampage snorted in annoyance. “Anyway. After that, it was just following your tag to the big pink bubble... and watching all the Seekers swarming in from the north. Lacunae was beside herself when she couldn’t get through, but Psycho crossed the barrier no problem.”

“It’s because her mom was Fluttershy,” I said, looking over at her. The yellow mare flushed, turning away in embarrassment. “How’s everypony else?”

“Well, we’ve been worried since you took off. Glory, P-21, Scotch, and Boo made it back to Chapel safe and sound, and since then we’ve been just waiting for something to happen so we could come running. The Harbingers made only one or two little skirmishes around the air base. P-21 is having it rough. Scotch isn’t much better.” The striped mare flushed. “It’s probably for the best we came. I was feeling nervous around her. I mean, she wasn’t sad, but still... better safe than sorry, right?”

Safer than me with Boing. “And Glory? How is she?” I asked at once.

“Exhausted. Tired. Frustrated she couldn’t help you. Scared to death you were angry with her,” Rampage said in quiet but firm tones. “She’s worried you blame her for

bringing you back like this." I didn't reply, and she asked evenly, "Do you?" I sighed. "A little. I mean, yeah... death would have been worse. But... yeah. A little stupid part of me is mad that I didn't get a choice in it. In any of it." I rolled upright, looking at the flames. "But... that's life, isn't it? It's not what happens to you. It's how you deal with it. And I've been dealing by shoving my head up my ass, looking for things to shoot or run away from." Then I looked around. "Speaking of... where're Stygius and Lacunae?"

"On the roof. Your... he..." Psychoshy gave a little snarl.

"So, is Stygius your new buckfriend?" Rampage asked. "Because from the smell when we checked you out for injuries, you two were awfully close."

I flushed at once. What, was everypony sniffing me while I was out? "What? No! He's just a nice guy I had sex with. That's all," I said as I stood. There were streams of data in the corners of my vision; I assumed that was my EFS rebooting. For some reason, both of them were staring in shock. "What?"

"Just a nice guy you had sex with?" Psychoshy drawled incredulously.

"Um... yeah?" I asked in confusion as Rampage covered her face with her hoof. "What?"

"Security... slut of the Wasteland. Who woulda thought?" Psychoshy said in her usual snide tones. Oh, she better not pretend like she'd never had a roll in the hay or two for the fun of it!

Rampage paused, as if trying to figure out how to break something terrible to me. "Blackjack... Glory is your special somepony, right?" I nodded. "How could you do this to her?" Rampage asked, looking concerned.

"How could I do what to her?" I asked as I looked from one to the other. "I had sex with him. And... I was able to do it without killing him. I mean... Rampage... I kept myself under control the whole time!" I gave a crooked smile to the striped mare who just stared in shock. My smile became a little more uncertain. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"I... but... You..." she stammered in agitation, her hooves waving in the air... and then suddenly she smiled. "You know what... I'm just going to step out of this sticky little detail, 'kay? This is something that is between you and Glory, and I'll just be watching on the sidelines... with popcorn." Psychoshy gave a scornful snort and looked away.

I never imagined that me getting laid would be a subject of such drama.

I sighed and stood. "I need to talk to somepony real quick. It won't take long." Rampage nodded, and I trotted into the back corner and turned on my broadcaster. I slumped down and thought for a bit about what I needed to say.

"Hey. Scotch Tape. I don't know if you can hear me right now, but if you're picking this up, could you please go get the others?" I sat there a moment, looking over at Psychoshy getting harassed by Rampage. "Hey everypony. It's me. Blackjack. I hope that you're actually getting this. Knowing my luck, I'm sending it straight to the Seekers. So I'll be quick."

"I wanted to tell you that you were right, Glory. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have run away. I should have been strong enough to face my fears with you rather than tearing halfway across the valley. I know that letting me go off on my own couldn't have been easy, but I want you to know that I'm better now. I have friends helping me and... and I've started to try and deal with my problems. I know... sounds like an impossible task. Shooting things is easier. Running is easier. But in the end, I hurt people who didn't deserve it. New things to atone for... like Scoodle."

My comments cut off Rampage mid-sentence, and she stared at me from across the room. I just looked back at her, and her eyes narrowed. Something I'd have to deal with later. I closed my eyes, resting my head against the cool, moist cinderblock. "P-21... I want to tell you something. I want to tell you how goddamned brave and awesome you are. You actually had the guts to do something I couldn't. You're doing the right thing. And I hope that you get to have something none of the stallions ever got to have... a family. I guess that makes you unique in two ways." I chuckled with a small smile. "I know you're hurting right now. But I know... I just know... you're tough enough to stick it out. Anypony who follows me around for a month without going crazy can do anything."

I looked down at my PipBuck. Was I even doing this right? Fuck it. At least I'd get it said, even if they didn't hear it. "Scotch Tape, I hope you're helping Glory and keeping an eye on P-21. I know he's not the most talkative pony. I know he's probably frowning right now. But he loves you. I'm sure of it. But please be patient. I know you've waited a long time for him... but it'll still take him a while to open up." Then I smiled. "And yes, Boo. I'm here. I'm fine. You be a good pony too. Don't make a mess for Glory." I sighed and shook my head with a smile. "I know you're a real pony, Boo. You'll show us all sooner or later."

I looked over at Rampage and Psychoshy; they were staring coldly at me. "Glory... I

want you to know that I love you. I don't care who you look like. I love you. I always will. And I hope when I see you again I can show you just how much I do." I chuckled again. "I met a guy. He's pretty quiet, but he's nice. He helped me get through what happened on the boat. Real champion in bed. Something about fliers... I know you're not into guys, but I hope the two of you can be friends." I trailed off, then thought a moment and couldn't think of anything else to say. Psychoshy stared at me, mouthing 'champion' soundlessly.

"Well, I should probably get going. I'll talk again soon. Hopefully... everything will work out and I'll be back right away. Take care." And then I turned off my PipBuck's broadcaster and sat back.

"Another Scoodle?" Rampage asked in a sharp tone.

"Yeah. It was an accident, but I'm still to blame." I kept my voice even as I looked at the glowering earth pony. "It's something I'll have to deal with myself. Sorry, though," I said, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sorry?" she growled as she reared up and shoved me back into the wall. "You kill a kid and all you say is sorry? Fucking sorry?!" she yelled down at me. I wanted to fight back, but there wasn't any anger left in me.

"What else can I say, Rampage? It was an accident. I know that doesn't make it okay... but it happened because I was out of it. The fatigue... everything that's going on... I killed her." I lifted my metallic fingers to my face. "I almost lost my mind that night, after it happened. I deserved to. But some ponies at Happyhorn gave me the help I needed." Rampage paced back and forth in front of me, as if deciding whether or not to stomp me into scrap metal. I wasn't sure if I would stop her if she did. "So... yes. Sorry. If I'd been stronger and faced my problems sooner..." But there was nothing left I could say.

Rampage hissed to herself as she finally looked away. "Then you better get better, Blackjack. Quick. You're supposed to be one of the good ponies. But running off... killing a kid... fucking a guy behind Glory's back? Fuck, it hasn't even been a day and you do all that?"

"Girl moves quick. Nothing wrong with that," Psychoshy smirked, getting a flat look from both of us. "What?"

"Sorry, Rampage. I messed up," I said as I met her eyes. There was a look of betrayal about them. "I'm not as good as I should be... but I'm trying to do better. And I can if you'll give me a chance and your help."

"I... you... but... ARRRGH..." She ground her teeth together, then finally slumped. "Okay. One chance. Not like... Not like I haven't done messed-up things too. But Blackjack... not again. Got it? I'll help you, but Celestia save me, you kill another kid, even by fucking accident, and your chances are done. You hear me?" What else could I do besides nod? She sighed. "Fuck..."

I sighed as I picked myself up, getting back on my hooves. Now wasn't the best time but... "In any case, Rampage... I know I have no right to ask you this, but I need your help now." The striped mare glowered in anger as I gave a worried little smile. There wasn't any good way to ask this. "Rather... I need the help of one of the people inside you. I need to talk to Twist."

Rampage took a step back at once, her eyes widening in alarm. "Blackjack... you just told me you... and now you want me to...? Are you crazy?" I could only nod and gave her a sympathetic smile. This wasn't easy for her. "You know I don't like that. I mean... what if she's crazy or something?"

"She'll be in good company?" Psychoshy suggested.

"I've talked to her once before, Rampage. She was fine. Upset, but fine. I need to ask her some questions that will help me... and maybe you too. Can I see if I can draw her out?" I asked as I gave her a concerned smile. "I won't try if you don't want me to. It's not vital."

Rampage groaned and slumped. "You had to play that card didn't you?" She took a deep breath. "Okay... I'll give you a shot. Just... make sure I come back? Please?" The fear was clear in her eyes.

"I will," I said as I looked her in the eyes, trying to remember what I'd seen in memories of Twist. "Sergeant Twist, report for duty!" I snapped with as much authority as I could muster. Rampage gave a little half smile and shook her head. "Twist, Big Macintosh would like to have a word." Psychoshy scowled in confusion as Rampage sighed with a patient smile.

I'd have to do something else. I closed my eyes and remembered the projection in the workshop. "You had a candy store in Hoofington with an apartment above it. You'd go down every morning to make candies. You had a roommate, a quiet black unicorn named Psalm..." I said in a low, soft voice, watching as her eyes gradually lost focus and grew round. "It was burned when the city was attacked after Littlehorn. And the name of your store was..."

"Peppermint Parlor," Rampage whispered, her eyes locking with mine. "Please... I

don't want to be here. Please..." she begged, shaking her head slowly.

"It's okay, Twist. I won't keep you long. But I need to ask you a question about Psalm. Your friend?" I said in low, careful tones.

"Psalm..." She closed her eyes, her smile vanishing. "She wasn't my friend. Not after Shattered Hoof and Big Macintosh." Now there was clear anger in her pink eyes, but she just sighed. "What do you want to know about her?"

"I think I've been seeing her in my dreams. Not just seeing her. It's like she's inside me. Like I am her. Do you have any idea if that's possible?" I asked as I put a hoof on her shoulder.

"Blackjack... I died... and I'm talking to you now. Right now, I think anything is possible. Besides, you're the one with the horn; you tell me?" She had a ghost of a smile on her face for a moment, then looked around and lost it. "She was my first marefriend. I worked in the Parlor with Doof while she worked off at that school. It was... nice. A sweetheart in bed too, but it didn't work out. We were better as friends." She sighed, closing her eyes. "All three of us enlisted together after they razed old Hoofington. I barely escaped with some photographs."

"What happened at Shattered Hoof? And afterwards? The mare I've seen in my dreams... she's a killing machine." My comment made Rampage flinch.

"Psalm... It was my fault. At the enlistment, she shot a perfect score at her trials. She was a natural markspony. I told her she needed to accept a combat role with me and Doof. It wasn't enough to be support. But... it was different for her. Me... I was fighting for my life. Doof, he'd spray thousands of bullets for fun. But for Psalm, it was personal. She wasn't just fighting the enemy; she was murdering them. They were nearly helpless against her. But Celestia damn me, I told her to keep it up. Even when she had nightmares. Even when she wanted to put a bullet through her own head. I tried to make her toughen up." She shook her head. "Instead... I think I killed something inside her."

"Twist... what happened at Shattered Hoof?" I asked gently.

"Everything. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. Applesnack and Big Macintosh were fighting about everything. Big Macintosh refusing to reenlist for a sixth tour. Applesnack's zebra bigotry bullshit. The weather was crap, and Jetstream was doing more cloud management than keeping an eye out for trouble. Celestia was there. The zebra envoys were there. They had three times as many guards as we'd agreed. Goldenblood warned us to be on high alert for the zebras attempt-

ing to abduct Celestia. But the negotiations started. I was out in the field with the Prodigitors; they could sniff out a mistcloak like nopony could.”

She rose on her hooves and turned to face the grimy, flickering windows. “After an hour there was a sticking point. Something about reparations... I don’t know what. There was shouting from the hill. Things were tense. Macintosh had us get ready to extract Celestia. Goldenblood was translating and trying to calm things down. Macintosh spotted something and gave a yell... and then there was a shot. He went down. Everything went nuts after that.” She closed her eyes, lifting her head. “Applesnack was screaming. The zebras were milling about trying to decide if they were going to open fire or not. Goldenblood was yelling for Celestia to get out of there while she tried to go to Big Macintosh. Finally the dust settled... Big Macintosh was dead.” She hung her head and sniffed, tears rolling down her cheeks. “There wasn’t anything anypony could do. And Psalm... I never saw her after that day except for one time when she was packing up her gear at Miramare. Didn’t say a word. Just... left.”

I walked up beside her. “She was obsessed with Luna forgiving her,” I replied as I brushed her mane out of her face. Stygius and Lacunae trotted in, and the batpony looked at Rampage in concern. Lacuane simply stared out the window.

She looked back at me with eyes filled with regret. “She was convinced she was damned for the lives she took.” She made a disgusted noise in her throat. “It was silly; we all killed. It was war. But she never shook it off. She turned her back on all the other Marauders.” Twist shook her head hard, then sighed. “Afterwards, we all just drifted apart. Applesnack was sent to Zebratown... that was ironic. Jetstream... they tried to give her Big Macintosh’s position, but she cracked. Refused to withdraw from one nasty fight and ordered ponies to search for Stonewing and Macintosh. Vanity just quit. Became some sort of noble liaison or something. Doof... yeah... He rotted in Hightower, where he belonged. For a while it was me and Echo, but he was offered a transfer. Then it was just me. I was the last Marauder. Master Sergeant Twist.”

Then she hung her head again. “I’m sorry I can’t help you, Blackjack. I wish I knew what became of my friend. I wish I’d been a better friend for her. She was always so quiet that I just assumed she was okay with everything... I should have listened. I should have... should have...” Her voice dropped to a whimper. “I’m sorry...”

Then she shuddered, and Rampage said quietly, “Oh, I hate that feeling...” She sniffed and wiped her eyes as she looked at me. “She’s gone, Blackjack. Or she’s gone back in. Ugh... I feel like I want to cry for a week, and it’s all for junk that

happened to somepony else.” She looked at Psychoshy and said sharply, “Not a word from you or it’s your turn.”

I’d expected more from the yellow pegasus, but she gave a dismissive shrug. “Hey. Your crazy? Your problem.” Psychoshy glanced at Stygius and started to chew on the end of her mane as he trotted over to the fire. There were definitely some conflicting emotions of her own there. When she saw me looking, she immediately spat the hair from her mouth and pointedly looked out the windows again.

Stygius gave me a hug as soon as he reached me. Was it just me, or could I hear teeth grinding? He wrote ‘U ok?’ on his slate, holding it up as his amber eyes looked at me in concern, head cocked slightly to the side.

“Yeah. Sure. Just more crazy dreams that don’t make any sense. How about you?” I asked, and he pointed at a few holes punched in his armor. Then he pointed at Lacunae with a wing and then waved his hooves in circles before him. He patted where he’d been shot and grinned. “So, you were shot, but Lacunae healed you up?” He nodded enthusiastically. I supposed batponies didn’t have much in the way of healing magic. Speaking of which, though...

“So... I got to ask. Can you... um...” I looked at Lacunae and then back at him. “Teleport?”

He blinked then grinned. Then he was gone, and there was a shadowy flicker behind me. A hoof tapped my flank, and I looked back. There was another dark flash and he vanished. A second later he touched my shoulder, standing in front of me again.

“Impressive!” Lacunae breathed. He flushed and kicked a pebble bashfully. “What is that ability called? What is your range? How often can you do it? Can you take others with you?” He blinked at her, seemingly at a loss. “I can touch your mind directly if that would make explanations easier.” That comment made him look positively alarmed, and he waved his hooves in front of him.

He got his slate out of his armor and wrote “flying between shadows”. few yards. Lots. No, sorry.’

Lacunae nodded, “Interesting. We always knew Luna’s guards possessed mysterious powers, but we never knew if they were bestowed by the Princess or came from some other source. Luna forbade us from investigating what her guards could do.” The alicorn rolled her eyes a little. “I must admit that I disliked dealing with them anyway. It is rather difficult to speak with somepony who’s always using the Royal Canterlot Voice.”

Stygius laughed silently, erased the board, and wrote, ‘Uncle’s armor has that. Stupid loud.’

“Absolutely fascinating. The things we could learn from you if you joined us in Unity,” she said in a musing tone that was getting more and more Goddess-y by the second.

“You don’t have to talk about him like he’s some sort of specimen,” Psychoshy said sharply. I found that odd, given that Sanguine would have definitely treated him as such!

“The Goddess thought his kind extinct,” Lacunae said in that haughty, annoying manner. “The Goddess is sur- impressed that they persist, even today.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “And how is the Goddess today?” I asked as I looked at Lacunae, trying to change the subject given the wariness spreading on Stygius’ face.

She glared flatly back at me. “Do not patronize the Goddess, Blackjack. The Goddess knows that we will never truly be allies, as you failed to deliver Chimera to the Goddess as promised.” She gave a rather bitchy little smirk. “However, the Goddess finds your troubles and travails quite a welcome distraction from the Goddess’s grand designs and so permits this one to continue to accompany you. The Goddess looks forward with great anticipation to your reunion with Morning Glory.”

So... now I was entertainment to the Goddess? I had an image of a great big alicorn beast in a fuzzy pink robe and hoofslippers sitting on a couch with a huge tub of popcorn, watching a terminal of me getting shot up on a daily basis. ...Okay, I supposed that *would* be pretty entertaining. Lacunae continued in a smug tone, “The Goddess awaits the success or failure of the Stable Dweller and her friends in Canterlot. Until then, the Goddess will take our satisfaction in watching your struggles.”

“Well, in the meantime, I need to chat with Lacunae, so if you could please put her back at the controls, I’d appreciate it,” I replied. Maybe LittlePip and the Stable Dweller were teaming up? I really wished I’d known what Homage had tried to tell me... was it really just yesterday? “Or we can throw around a few more threats about you annihilating me.”

“One day, you shall be chastised for your arrogance and disrespect. Oh yes, and we look forward to that day with great anticipation!” Oh sweet Celestia, she was actually rubbing her hooves together.

I grinned back at her. “Ah, but if you do that, you won’t get to watch me getting my

rear blown off, now will you?"

She snorted sullenly, and then her sneer vanished. You know, I think I was starting to grow on the Goddess. She'd stopped bellowing at me; that was progress. Right? Lacunae drew a deep breath. "*Must* you antagonize her, Blackjack?"

I nodded primly and said with a smile, "Yes. Yes I must. I figure, if I'm the butt of some higher power's amusement, every jab I can get in on her is me balancing the scales a little bit more." I relaxed my grin and nudged her shoulder. "So how are you, Lacunae?"

The purple alicorn seemed amused by the question. "I am as I always will and can only be. But thank you for asking," Lacunae replied. "What of you, Blackjack?"

I looked around the ruined Robronco store as I sighed. "I'm having weird dreams of a pony who I think was the Marauder Psalm." I shook my head as I glanced up at the alicorn, who wore an inscrutable expression. "This is way more than just a memory orb. It's more than just her experiences. It's like I am her. But I can't figure out how or why. Twist doesn't know what happened to her, and from my dreams she must have died two centuries ago." Then I paused and snorted in disgruntlement. "Then again, between Twist, Doof, and Brass, I guess I shouldn't count anything out."

The alicorn just stared off for a minute before answering, "I am sure you will find out eventually, Blackjack. As for your dreams, they do not seem to be undermining your sense of self. It is merely unusual." I frowned, knitting my brows together, but she continued. "Has Rampage told you about Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape?"

Well, that took my attention. Really, I'd meant to ask sooner. "Not much. She said they reached Chapel safely, though. They're all okay, right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, Glory had to remain behind and is seeing to both with the aid of Sekashi. The zebra's healing tonics and stories are quite a balm to all three. Glory shows no signs of reverting to her normal appearance, though, and P-21 is in the midst of terrible pain from withdrawal." She paused and then added, "Scotch Tape is feeling better, however. She wants to install flushing toilets, but she's terrified of getting one as a cutie mark."

"And Boo? She's okay, right?" I asked with a concerned smile.

Lacunae sighed. "I am not sure. I tried reading her mind, but it is... simple. She misses you greatly. She keeps searching Star House and Chapel as if she's trying to find you." I sighed; I'd have to get back soon. Glory and the others could understand why I left, but Boo couldn't.

"So, what are you doing all the way out here, Blackjack?" Psychoshy asked in irritation from over by the windows.

"Well... aside from getting my butt shot a lot, I need to get to Hightower and find a way inside." I trotted to join her by the flickering blue windows. "Where the hay are we anyway?" I asked, using my scorched tail to wipe some of the grime off the glass. Then the answer became clear.

Oh. Hightower.

The imposing edifice was only a block away; from the sight of the mountains behind it, I guessed we were just to the west of the massive building. Before, it had seemed a stern monolith of gray stone. Now, up close, that looming structure was cracked and broken along the southern face, fractures radiating along the surface. A glaring inferno roared within, and flames of blueish-purple erupted out of the side in bizarre loops and whirls. An unwholesome corona surrounded the broken building. About halfway up the south face gaped a massive hole; metal fins jutted out towards the sky. Surrounding the prison was a decayed concrete curtain wall with towers every hundred feet. Spikes and loops of razor wire adorned the wall, and I spotted strange glowing pony shapes tangled in the wire, wiggling and fighting as they burned with magical flame.

"You want to go in there?" Psychoshy asked with a tilt of her head. "Have fun!"

"What... what happened?" I murmured weakly as I stared at the sight. At least when I'd seen the woods surrounding Hippocratic Research, I hadn't known just how dangerous it would be. Everything about the prison screamed 'death trap'.

Rampage answered me. "Direct hit by a giant zebra missile, only the balefire bombs in the warhead didn't detonate properly. There should just be a crater there. Instead, the bombs have been cooking the inside of that prison for the last two centuries or so." I groaned and hid my face in my hooves. "Look at it this way, Blackjack: now you'll get to be an *undead* cyber unicorn pony."

I sighed. It would have been safer and smarter to walk away. Deal with the problem some other way. Just forget EC-1101...

"So... how do I get inside?" I asked with a grimace.

One could make the argument that I was learning and trying to take things carefully. One could also make the argument that I wasn't learning enough since I still planned

to go inside. Both arguments were made by Rampage and Psychoshy as we trotted closer. We were still a hundred feet from the curtain wall when I started to get steady clicks from my PipBuck. I glanced over at Lacunae hovering above us. "Well, at least you won't have much of a problem here, right?"

But the purple alicorn shivered in the rain. It was afternoon, and things were starting to get darker. "I am sorry, Blackjack. While the radiation is quite lovely, the Enervation nearby is extremely potent." I thought of the silver ring in Tenpony and how the Enervation effect strengthened with deaths. I looked up at the prison that had housed thousands of prisoners and imagined dozens of green glowing rings scattered throughout. Hopefully the two would cancel each other out for her... but it looked doubly bad for Stygius and Psychoshy.

The concrete wall was twenty feet high, but the blast and exposure damage had chewed through the top yard or so, exposing jagged metal supports draped with rolls of hooked wire. Glowing undead ponies were tangled up in it, screaming and thrashing as they struggled. Even after two centuries and a direct balefire hit, Hightower was still functioning as a prison, even if it was a prison of the damned. The klaxons inside sounded on and on, endlessly warning folks of a disaster that nopony was going to respond to.

The tangled, feral ghouls fired some sort of balefire magic at us when we drew too close, and we immediately backed out of range. Well... undead ponies flinging radioactive fire was one hazard, but that was nothing compared to the turrets atop each watchtower. Their size made the energy turrets that Glory had set up in Flank look like beam pistols on tripods. If even one was working, it could probably vaporize any flier.

"Any chance you could just teleport me to the top?" I asked hopefully, grinning at Lacunae.

"Better not, Pink," Rampage sneered behind me. We all looked at her scowling leer and she snorted, "The fucking tower's got nasty spells for any fucker that tries to teleport in and out of there. Oh, you'd port in... right into an interrogation cell. And teleport out into a disciplinary cell."

"Razorwire," I murmured as I slowly turned around to face her. I really didn't know about this. The Angel was bona fide evil, but Razor was a criminal too. "How do I get into the prison, then?"

"Oh, spray-paint 'Princess Luna is a mule fucker' on a wall in Canterlot. That should do it," the striped mare said with her disdainful leer as she stepped past me and

looked up at the edifice. "You don't break into the tower. You dream about getting out. Even if the only way out is a bullet in the head."

"Right. But how did you physically get into the prison? Is there a gate or what?" I asked as I looked up and down the block the prison occupied.

"What? You want me to give you the fucking tour for dumbasses, Pink?" The striped mare pointed at a smaller, uglier gray building on the opposite side of the street to the west of the prison. "Processing, admin, and visitation. Not that I got any," she added with a scowl as we walked along towards it, careful not to attract the attention of the thrashing, glowing ghouls. "Once they finished putting a hoof inside every orifice, you got your uniform and your soap on a rope and they'd extend a bridge over the street."

It was as good a place as any to start. Processing looked like a miniature prison itself, but the rusty chainlink fence was easy enough to push through, and I stomped down on the razor wire that was set out around the base. A rusted metal mesh netting was strung out over the parking lot; for pegasi, I presumed. The heavy metal doors were intact, but Stygius found a window adjacent to it and peered inside. A second later he disappeared in a flash of black light.

"That is so cool," Psychoshy murmured.

"Does he make you all wet and juicy?" Rampage smirked. Psychoshy flushed and scowled back as the striped mare nickered. "He sure makes me want to ride his pony stick."

"Back of the line—" Psychoshy started to say. Then Rampage hugged her arms around the pegasus' neck and gave an immense heave, swinging her in an arc and slamming her flat on her back on the crumbling asphalt. Rampage put her hooves on her splayed-out wings, pinning them to the earth.

"I set the fucking line! You think you're a badass, don't you, Psychoshy?" Rampage shouted in her face. "You're nothing. You are fucking nothing but a scared little feathercunt! In the Tower, I knew mares that'd carve off your wings and make you their earth pony bitch! You think Wasteland ponies are fucking mean? You think rape and murder is bad? I was locked up with fucking mares that had nothing else to do but think of ways to hurt each other. Killing was for when they got bored or annoyed. You are fucking nothing compared to them! A scared little yellow fuckpony!" she screamed into Psychoshy's wide eyes.

That was about as far as I let Rampage get before I pressed Vigilance into her ear

canal and blasted a round into her head. The armored mare jerked atop Psychoshy, and as she collapsed, I shoved her off. Psychoshy started to shake, then scambled to her hooves. She hung her head, her mane covering her face.

"Hey, it's alright..." I said gently to her, reaching out a hoof as she trembled.

"No, Blackjack. It's not fucking alright!" she said as she whirled at me, tears in her eyes. "I used to never be afraid of anything! I could kick anypony's ass whenever I wanted. I beat *you!* I was never afraid. Never! Now... now I'm scared of everything! And I've got *you* pitying me! Don't you get it?" She sobbed, grimacing. "I would have rather have died than... than *that!!*"

"I'm sorry," I murmured as I said next to her. Rampage groaned.

Psychoshy tilted her head back and snorted angrily. "Oh, just rub it in, why don't you? I can smash a skull in a flash, and it doesn't matter because I think about tomorrow and it scares me to death. And you know what scares me most of all?" I shook my head and she finished in a near whisper, "That it's never going to stop."

Rampage groaned again and sat up, then rubbed her left ear vigorously. "Ugh, what's with this ringing in my ear?" She blinked, then spat out a mouthful of bloody bullet fragments. "Blackjack, we've got to find a better way to snap me out of it. This is just getting ridiculous..." Then she caught Psychoshy's sniff and looked over at the yellow pegasus hanging her head in shame. "Um... 'kay..."

It wasn't always about me. Hoofington didn't just suck for me. It sucked for everypony. Sanguine had watched his family die before his eyes. Psychoshy'd lost everypony that she'd believed cared about her. "I found out some things, Psychoshy. About you. Your mom and dad. I know... I know it probably doesn't matter, but they loved you very much. When they thought you were lost, it nearly broke both of them. They were going to name you Whisper."

She lifted her head and looked at me with a teary eye and gave a little hiccup and sniff. Finally she muttered thickly, "That's a fucking horrible name."

"Better than Go Fish," I replied. That actually got a smile out of her.

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Fuck... I can't believe you actually made me cry. Badasses aren't supposed to cry. You never cry," she muttered.

"I sob my eyes out every other day, it feels like. You should have seen me after Priest and Scoodle... and Boing." That drew a questioning look from my friends, and a dark glare from Rampage, but there'd be a time for that later. "Crying is the soul dealing with pain. Otherwise you keep it all inside and it drives you crazy."

Rampage muttered something about me playing therapist and being doomed. At least Lacunae's nod let me pretend I'd said something profound.

Psychoshy sat a moment and sniffed. "I'm sorry about that. Priest, I mean." I sighed; late but sincere was better than never offered at all. She stood and pushed back her mane. "Psychoshy's a stupid name, too... and calling myself Fluttershy. I just... everypony loved her. I just wanted that." She looked at her flank. "Stupid cutie mark. Who wants to like a mare with that on her flank..."

I had to admit, it wasn't a mark that suggested good interpersonal skills. "We are what we choose to be," Lacunae said softly as the doors to processing began to bang and thump.

I smiled and sighed as I saw her staring at where Stygius had disappeared. "We're not in a relationship, Psychoshy. If you like him... well... do something about it." She looked back at me flatly, and I added, "He's a good guy. A little bit impulsive, but he means well. Just try and be nice."

"Blackjack, don't. Please don't." Psychoshy said as she shook her head. "I'm not a nice pony. I don't know how to be nice. He's not going to like me. First cute guy with wings... ever..." I found the fact that I was talking about relationships with a mare who hated my guts outside a prison that was engulfed in magical fire a touch surreal.

"Like the alicorn said," I replied as Stygius shoved the doors open a crack, just enough for Rampage to trot up and force open a gap wide enough for everypony. We entered, Psychoshy last. Stygius gave the yellow mare a concerned look as she walked past with her eyes downcast. He looked at me in worry, but I couldn't think of what do other than smile in encouragement. I wondered if LittlePip had to deal with interpersonal problems as well as massive world shaping ones. Seemed like I just collected problems all over the place.

We made our way through Processing. Between my lockpicking, Stygius' flicker teleportation, and Lacunae's cheating alicorn magic, we were able to bypass most problems. We came to a back office that had been turned into a camp of sorts, a half-dozen ancient bodies clustered around an impromptu fire in a waste bin. I supposed they'd been the staff that hadn't tried to run. Every skull had a bullet hole.

One had left a note. 'We're sick and running out of food. We can still hear screams and alarms from the prison. The warden has it all on lockdown. They're going to die. We're all going to die. Luna and Celestia are dead. It's the end of the world. The fat one asked to be let back inside but it's too late. I don't even know how he

got out. Even if we could extend the bridge, the systems would kill him before he reached the prison building. I'm so sorry, Russet. I hope you and Daddy are safe in Hoofington. Mommy won't be coming home from work, but she loves you.'

I sighed and folded it back up. I'd seen so many, but they still got to me. I supposed that was a sign I was still a pony. I returned the note to the bones of the unicorn and carefully stowed away the revolver they'd used. A .32 caliber; hardly impressive but better than nothing. There was also a twenty gauge pump action shotgun and a box of ammo. I took it apart, replaced the riot gun's firing pin and spring, and ate the barrel. Psychoshy found fifty caps in a drawer, and Stygius located a stash of drugs. The healing potions looked black and acidic in their bottles, but the rest of the chems were good.

The note confirmed my worst fears, though. I trotted up to the drawbridge and took my first peek over the wall. The gap between the prison building and the wall had dozens, perhaps more than a hundred, ghouls roaming around the concrete space or tangled in the razor wire. One long road completely covered in chainlink lead through it to the main doors several hundred feet distant. I couldn't see any way we could get inside.

Damnit... I sat down hard at the edge of the bridge, looking across as my PipBuck clicked. Thanks to my cybernetics I was resistant to the radiation, but I wasn't immune and none of that would protect me from the balefire of those glowing ghouls. Maybe it was time to throw in the towel?

"We could always go to Meatlocker," Psychoshy suggested.

"Don't think you noticed, but none of us are ghouls," Rampage retorted.

The yellow mare stood. "You don't have to be a ghoul to get in. I went there a couple of times with Sanguine, and they were fine with me. You just have to not be a jerk. That's all." She tilted her head. "Granted, the smell took a lot of getting used to, but it's not really dangerous."

"Right. Till they start eating your liver," Rampage retorted, holding her stomach.

"They don't allow ferals!" Psychoshy retorted, then turned to me. "As long as you've got business, they'll deal with you. And they're not far from here. In fact, you can see the hospital right over there," she said as she pointed at a large, low-built building that I'd almost taken for a granite hill rather than a structure. Like everything in the east part of the city, it was built like a bunker.

I glanced over at Lacunae and Stygius. The latter simply shrugged. It was too close

not to check out. “Okay. Well... lets go visit some undead ponies.”

Hoofington Memorial Hospital was a lot larger and imposing up close. Unlike the prison a block away, it had been built recessed into the ground and resembled a tortoise shell. I wondered if the hospital had been the intended target for the balefire bomb embedded in the wall of the prison. South of the jail, the magical flames cast the ruins in flickering, ghostly images. Even a block away, I was still getting radiation pings on my PipBuck.

We approached the front entrance of the hospital, and immediately I spotted the sandbag barricades in front of the doors and ponies in combat armor standing guard. “Oy! Willow! Breathers!” one shouted as he swiveled a machine gun towards us. Given the ruins around us and the fortified building, it’d be quite a trick to assault this place directly. Two others in battle saddles ran up to give him support.

“Are they wearing red or green or look like they’ll annoy the fuck out of me?” a mare called from inside the doors. The ghouls pointing the guns looked at each other, and a moment later the mare blurted, “Oh for fuck’s sake. You guys are useless.” A mottled green unicorn ghoul trotted out, her filmy eyes narrowing before she scowled in confusion. “Great. Fucking tourists.” She pointed to the east. “If you’re hurt and got a pulse, head that way. Those Enclave fucks just love helping tourists.”

Wow. Unfriendly much? “We’re not tourists,” I said at once.

“Don’t be a cunt, Willow,” Psychoshy said as she trotted to the front. “It’s me.”

The mare rolled her milky orbs. “Yeah. I know. Honestly, I was a hair away from having them open fire on you on general principle.” She sighed and nodded to the bucks with the guns. “Stand down,” she said with a wave of her hoof before trotting out from behind the sandbags and walking towards us. She eyed Lacunae suspiciously. “Wait. Are you with those assholes?”

“You mean the Harbingers?” I asked with a frown.

“No. Those *other* assholes,” she said as she pointed to the south with her hoof. “Those Red Eye fucks.”

“We are not affiliated with Red Eye, no,” Lacunae said at once.

“Right. Fine then,” the boiled green mare said, and then she rolled her eyes and stated in a bored, rehearsed monotone, “Welcome to the Meatlocker. We are thrilled

to receive guests from all across the Wasteland. Feel free to shop at Meatlocker Merchandise down in the ER. Enjoy yourself at the Afterlife Club found in the cafeteria. If you actually need medical care or supplies, see Dr. Wheelbarrow in Examination Room B. Beds can be rented in the ICU Inn. If you have any questions, please ask any helpful Meatlocker security ponies who aren't me or see our mayor, Windclop. Is there anything else I can help you with?" From her scornful expression, I was pretty certain that it'd be more effective to ask a radroach.

"No, I think we're good. Thanks," I said, and she at once rolled her eyes and trotted over to examine the machine gun on the barricade. We made our way inside, and I glanced back. "She's friendly."

"Actually, that's pretty civil for Willow," Psychoshy replied.

"I wonder why she didn't comment on Stygius, though?" I looked at the baffled buck, who blinked and shrugged his dusky shoulders.

Psychoshy snorted and said to me, "Yeah, he might seem weird to a breather. But when you've been around for a couple centuries, there's not a lot of things that jump out at you." Then, with a smile, "I'm going to head to Afterlife." She started to trot away, then paused and turned around. She looked at me, then at Stygius. "Um... you wanna come with me?"

He blinked at her, then looked at me, then back and her and pointed a leathery wingtip at himself.

"Yes, you. Come on. Afterlife's not bad. Just stay away from the Rainboom and you'll be fine." Her smile became a little strained, fraying with nervousness. I nudged his hip with my own and he jumped, and then trotted up beside her. She relaxed as they walked into the gloomy hospital together.

And it really was gloomy; unlike The Fluttershy Medical Center or even Happyhorn, there was virtually no decoration or attempt to make the interior woodsy or cute. Only a few emergency lights lit the atrium, and there were more sandbag barricades inside, clearly fallback positions in the event of a siege. A few more ghouls with guns looked on warily.

"You've sure been nice to Psychoshy," Rampage observed as she trotted along at my side. "Any reason?"

"Can't I be nice to be nice?" I countered as I looked for a sign or some clue of where to go.

"Ordinarily I'd say no, but you're weird like that," Rampage admitted, and then asked

with a little more concern, “You’re not doing it out of pity, are you?”

“What if I am? She’s miserable,” I said with a little frown.

“She deserves to be. Look, I know you forgive on the drop of a hat, but Psycho isn’t a good pony. She’s vain and selfish and she’s so full of hate right now. She hates you for killing Sanguine. She hates Sanguine for using her. She hates herself for being used. You need to be careful with her,” Rampage warned as she walked beside me. “She’s getting awfully attached to Stygius.”

“So what’s wrong with that? He’s a good guy. He helped me in the way I needed to be helped.” Which was apparently a problem for my friend given how she rolled her eyes. “He’ll help her too if he can.”

“Because now you’re done with him?” she said sharply, then groaned and shook her head. “Ugh, never mind. I said I’d drop it. Look, I’m going to go keep an eye on those two. If you’re going to ask about Hightower, find out from the mayor or somepony.” And then she was gone.

“Ugh... what is with her?” I said as I glanced up at Lacunae.

“Perhaps she feels you’ve had an inappropriate relationship with Stygius, given your affection for Glory. Or perhaps she feels you are using him in a way that is going to hurt his feelings. Or maybe Rampage respects you a great deal and is having difficulty accepting that you are not as perfect as she’s perceived.”

“Perfect? Me?” I tapped my metal leg against a pillar. “Has she seen me lately? I’m the biggest fuckup in the Wasteland!”

“Yet you endure. You persist. You overcome. Even now, you’re here looking for a way into a place most ponies would simply give up at the first sight of. And you’ve yet to sacrifice your virtue for it. You suffer instead.” She smiled as she shook her head, “Believe me, the Goddess is far happier that you are out here running around Hoofington than in Canterlot.”

“Is that why she’s letting you stay with me?” I asked with a smile, spotting a flickering arrow-shaped light on the wall pointing towards ‘ER’.

“That, and I’ve asked her to let me,” she said in a gentle murmur. I flushed a bit, then looked back at her and smiled, giving her shoulder a thankful nudge. The light picked up quite a bit as we reached a pair of double doors marked ‘Emergency’. The ER itself was a horseshoe-shaped chamber with alcoves along the outside wall. The exit doors were choked with rubble, making the chamber a cozy space, and several

ghouls mingled around the old nurses' station. A lively tune was being played over the PA system that made me smile despite myself.

The nearest alcove had a counter built across it with 'Tulip's' painted on the front. Behind it were a number of pieces of barding hanging from old IV stands and a petite unicorn ghoul who might once have been a roseish color. When our eyes met, the young mare gave a hopeful smile. "H-hello. Welcome to T-Tulip's. My armor is g-guaranteed to keep you safe. If any of my equipment f-fails to save your life, I'll give you a full r-r-refund!" She tried for an enthusiastic grin but only pulled off a shy, self-conscious smile. I wasn't sure if she was blushing or not as she stared at my barding. "What happened? Did you r-run afoul a flamer or a dr-dr-dragon?"

"Flamer," I said with a small smile as I glanced down at the scorched green armor. "Can you fix it?"

"S-sure... but it's s-stupid expensive," she stammered as she trotted underneath the counter and walked around me. "Ch-cheaper to buy a n-new suit and r-reinforce it."

A ghoul repairing some firearms – mostly low-caliber pistols and bolt-action hunting rifles – that were laid out on a gurney next door rolled his filmy eyes. "And that's why Tulip's always broke." The small unicorn lowered her head a little.

"Oh don't worry about him, Hun," a grayish ghoul mare said to her from browsing the next stall over. She wore a gentle smile, and I was surprised by how well dressed she was and how much of her pink mane was still intact. "Tulip knows her barding better than I know how to work a needle and thread." And given how the gray ghoul's mottled cutie mark was exactly that, I supposed she was quite good indeed.

"Th-thanks, V..." Tulip murmured.

"All right." I checked my PipBuck and then took out some of the gold and silver I'd looted from Goldenblood's house, my PipBuck calculating their value in caps. How it did so, I couldn't begin to imagine. I held up the spool of gold. "How about this for some quality armor?"

"Sure. I c-can get you something r-right away for that. L-let me use your old a-armor to make sure it f-f-fits. G-g-give me an hour?" Tulip stammered as she scrambled under the counter again. I removed my armor and floated it over.

The gray unicorn ghoul smiled as I trotted away, Tulip digging through boxes in the back of her stall. "You just made Tulip's day. Poor dear knows her trade, but she's not terribly confident," she said as she led me across the ER to another stall. This one, however, mostly held prewar clothing. "There's no reason to trot around in just

your hide like that," she said as she dug through the racks.

I gave a slightly confused little smile as I looked at the salvaged sign in the back of the stall; a bundle of wheat. "No offense, but ponies usually don't wear clothes." Heck, even in 99 we didn't usually wear them if we were off duty. The only mare that had really cared about them had been the Overmare's mother.

"True. But that's no reason to not wear them," she said brightly, selecting a plaid green pleated skirt, matching blazer, white blouse, and lacy undergarment. And now that I looked around, it struck me that just about every ghoul was wearing some article of clothing or another. "Here. A gratuity for being so understanding to Tulip." I felt too self-conscious to refuse the gifts and put them on, surprised at how well they fit.

I flushed a little, looking at myself in a cracked mirror. "Well, don't you look like a perfect student for Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns?" the gun ghoul teased. I humphed and refused to let the jackass get to me. From the look on V's face, I'd done her a favor.

"If I may ask," she said as she carefully adjusted the skirt to cover my posterior, "what brings you to Meatlocker? You don't seem to be bothered by us, but you're not a regular."

What should I be bothered by? Okay, there was a slightly off-putting meaty smell about the place, and some of the ghouls looked even more ragged than others, but given what I'd seen so far, they weren't anything bad. "Looking for a way into Hightower," I answered, and got a gasp and stare from more than a few ponies.

She adopted a concerned expression. "If you're looking for salvage, there's plenty of other places to find it. Even we stay away from that place."

"There's something I need to find inside there," I said firmly. The ghouls around us shared significant looks, some rolling their eyes and others frowning in concern. I didn't want an argument, so I changed the topic. "I'm curious. Why do so many of you wear clothes?"

"What? You want to stare at my jerky stick?" cackled the obnoxious stallion that had jeered Tulip.

The gray mare, V, glowered at him till he got the hint and trotted out of the ER. Then she looked at me kindly. "You have to understand that to stay... well... ourselves, we have to do everything we can to hold on to our identity before we died. So we act civilly... dress civilly... do what we love and try to keep ourselves from slipping

away. It doesn't take much for one of us to go from a normal, albeit dead, pony to a monster."

"It doesn't help that so many ponies around the Hoof simply assume we're brain-eating fiends," piped up another mare behind a tray of Dash inhalers.

I thought of Harpica and Ditz and Sanguine. "I suppose a bored ghoul is feral ghoul?"

"Well said," V commented in approval. "I've been here since the bombs fell. It's been a challenge. Dying, and then... this." She gestured around the hospital. "Getting material, finding clients. That silly little prejudice against our kind makes much of that quite difficult." She glanced at a picture in an old, battered brass frame showing a stallion in a black hood grinning cheekily. Her cloudy eyes settled on the image. "And there are some days we just feel... very tired."

"It's not easy living for so long, is it?" I said as I sat. V nodded and she and I shared a sympathetic smile as I lifted my forehoof and extended my mechanical fingers. "It's something I'm going to have to deal with too. Provided I don't die in Hightower, that is."

Lacunae nodded. "It is an adjustment for us as well, though for us the change is far more profound. In Unity, there is often no sense of time at all. A year can feel like a day, and so the changes are far more jarring."

V looked at the alicorn curiously and nodded her agreement. "You have to keep busy. You can't just stop and let time slip by. You can lose everything that way."

"Well... I definitely have something that needs doing. Is there somepony else that might be able to help?" I asked, and the mare slumped, clearly bothered that she couldn't help me. Then a tan stallion with a stunningly well-groomed white mane approached. Really, I knew living ponies with worse hair.

"Help? My dear, help has arrived! You have no idea how long I've waited for a pony with a decent mane to trot across my path!" he announced grandly. He grinned at the pink-maned V. "No offense meant, Velvet my dear."

"None taken, Snowflake. Celestia knows you've worked your magic on me more than once," she replied graciously, then turned and grinned up at Lacunae. Her horn glowed as she lifted a tape measure. "Now, why don't you work your magic on her mane while I see to dressing her friend here?" Velvet said with a almost evil smile, pulling the tape measure tight with a snap.

It can be said that there are times in my life when things take a turn towards the surreal. Getting kissed by a spirit of chaos, dying, encountering a screaming room, and meeting an odd batpony out of the blue all qualify. I had to admit, though, that I'd never imagined that I would be subject to a complete makeover for the amusement and delight of a roomful of ghoul ponies. The only time I'd gotten this level of attention was at my cutie mark party, and even then the dress had been borrowed.

The entire time I kept my eyes closed, focusing on not killing Snowflake. *He's doing me a favor. Don't kill him. He's helping me. Don't kill him.* After what I'd been through with Stygius, I was able to take some deep breaths and fight the urge to react while Snowflake trimmed my tail. With deftness and care I would have expected from a unicorn, the white-maned earth pony snipped and brushed my mane and coat with finesse and ease. It felt like probably the most feminine moment of my life when Snowflake presented a mirror and I looked at my own reflection.

"Unfortunately I couldn't do anything with your augments, but I think that the smooth transition works quite well, don't you?" the ghoul said brightly as I turned back and forth. He hadn't changed much, but he'd definitely made me look... better. Lots better. I looked almost as cute as Glory now! "Normally a ghoul with a barbershop makes about as much sense as screen door on a submarine. With the exception of Miss Velvet and myself, most ghouls simply don't have the manes for it."

"Are you certain this is... appropriate?" Lacunae asked in a subdued voice.

I turned, and that feeling of surrealism jumped up even more; my jaw simply dropped. The gray ghoul mare had dressed the alicorn in lacy white lingerie from horn to hoof. I wasn't quite sure if the outfit was meant for... one of those wedding things or a honeymoon, but the stockings and the garters and the... wow. The purple alicorn's cheeks blazed as she looked around in worry. I didn't think bridles came in lace! Unless that was some magic underwear, it wouldn't last five minutes in the Wasteland. Still...

Damn...

Velvet narrowed her eyes speculatively. "Mmmm, I suppose not. Still, I've been dying for a century to see this outfit I made for Luna on somepony." I gaped anew. Luna wore something... anything... like that? Ever?

And I was wondering if Velvet had another suit like it in my size. I was really really wondering that. I cleared my throat. "I'm sure Stronghoof will adore it," I said

delicately. Oh my, I had no idea an alicorn could turn that shade of red. Was she actually glowing? I was sure the Goddess was just loving this. Velvet's horn glowed as she removed the lacy apparel; Lacunae flushed and squirmed in embarrassment.

"Well... maybe..." the alicorn murmured with a small smile.

Velvet looked up at her with a cheeky grin. "Go ahead and take it. I doubt I'll ever have another client in your size. I'd just ruin the garment if I tried to take it in. Go on. I hope your Stronghoof likes it." Lacunae make a little 'meep' and if possible, her blush deepened even further. Yup; she was glowing. The gray ghoul looked over her racks of clothes. "Mmmm... maybe something in red? Lilac? No... ah! Gold!"

"Well... I'm going to go find that mayor now," I said as I stood. "Have fun!"

"Wait... Blackjack! Don't leave me like this!" Lacunae called out as I trotted for the exit. "Blackjack!"

"Don't move! This'll just take a minute!" Velvet said, working her tape measure.

I gave a grateful smile to Tulip on my way out; the small ghoul mare was working on a suit of gray combat bardings. I heard Snowflake call out, "I call dibs on her next, Velvet! The things I could do with her mane!"

Moving back into the hospital, I was glad my eyes could amplify what little light there was from the few emergency lamps. A few ghouls watched me warily from the shadows, and moved away when I approached them for directions to the cafeteria or the Mayor. "What's wrong with them?" I asked, more to myself than anything.

A snide, rasping voice said from the shadows, "Oh just the shock of death and centuries of intolerance, abuse, and hatred from the living. Little things like that." From the darkness stepped a charred-looking earth pony in a black funeral director's suit. His filmy eyes still had a sharp color of red as he smirked at me. "Of course, you wouldn't understand."

"I've put up with plenty of abuse and hatred myself. Who are you?" I asked with a scowl.

"Ahuiotl," he said with a nod of his head. "I run the Mortuary." At my baffled look, he let out a hiss of annoyance. "The bar? The original bar before that damnable club opened up?" I shook my head slowly, and he glowered. "So, Willow isn't even bothering to tell esteemed guests about my business? I should have known." He tilted an ear in the direction of the cheery music and sighed, muttering darkly to himself.

"Hey, take it up with her. I'm just the tourist," I replied with a frown. "You have a problem with the living?"

He sniffed disdainfully. "Living. Dead. I don't care. You both pay caps the same. But the ambiance of Meatlocker today... well... hardly appropriate." He waved his hoof dismissively. "So take your pretty mane and go... elsewhere. I don't have time to bother with you, Miss...."

"Security," I finished bluntly. "Well if you can point me in the direction of the mayor..."

But the name had an unexpected effect. His red eyes fixed on me, and he licked his charcoal lips with a tongue of boiled leather. "Oh... is that so?" He straightened a little. "Well... if you're looking for our illustrious leader, I believe he was cleaning a toilet in the ICU Inn. Right down that hall there. Make a left."

"I... um... thanks?" I said as I backed a few steps away. My mane crawled as he smiled at me.

"Oh no no no. Thank you." With that, he turned away and trotted back into the darkness.

Why did I have a real bad feeling about that ghoul?

I turned and went down the hall he'd indicated, wondering if there was some kind of trap. However, to my relief, the door on the left did indeed lead to the intensive care unit. Like the ER, the ICU was divided into stalls, but in this case each one had been converted into a sleeping cell. I saw four non-ghoul ponies sleeping but none I recognized. Holiday music played from a radio on the nurse's desk. I trotted up to the ghoul mare behind the counter. "Can I help you, Dearie?" the mare asked.

"I'm looking for the mayor. Something about a toilet?" I asked with a slightly baffled look.

"Oh, yes. He's right over here." She guided me over to the ICU restrooms. "Gotta keep these working for our guests. If you need a place to stay, we have many wonderful beds for rent."

"Thanks," I said with a far easier smile than I'd had with Achoiewhatsisname. There was a sound of splashing from inside the mares' toilet, and I dared to peek inside. A ghoul pegasus stallion crouched over the toilet with a plunger clenched in his jaws that he worked furiously inside the bowl. His wings were almost entirely skeletal, held together by brown sinew, but they moved as if they were still alive. I just stood at the doorway and watched him work with a vigor I'd only seen in an olive filly.

Finally, he pulled the plunger free and flushed the toilet. It gurgled and drained and the stallion gave a satisfied nod.

“Mayor?” I asked, and he turned towards me, water dripping from the red rubber plunger head. He spat it out and jumped to his hooves with a grin. He wore a suit of Stable-Tec utility barding marked with a 1 on the flank. Stable 1? Where was that?

“That’s me. Mayor Windclop. Engineer, political leader... and occasional janitor. So nice to meet you,” he said as he grabbed my hoof and shook it enthusiastically. “Meatlocker is glad to attract as many smoothcoat visitors as possible to our fine community.”

Um... maybe he could wash his hooves? “Thank you. You’re too kind. I’m Blackjack,” I said, then added with a slightly concerned look. “Smoothcoat?”

“Right! Because your coat is so smooth... and tasty...” he added, almost to himself, then he blinked and grinned nervously. “And smooth! It’s a better term than ‘breather’ in my opinion. And we want Meatlocker to be a friendly and open community in the Wasteland. We hope that if we give smoothcoats like yourself a chance, then you’ll give us a chance.” He pulled a towel from his belt and wiped off his hooves and face and then the toilet bowl. He flushed it a few more times, and I heard a few clicks from my PipBuck. Visiting Meatlocker might be okay, but living here sure wasn’t an option. “So, what can I do for you?” he asked as his bony wing stretched out and scooped up a top hat that had been sitting on the sink. It had a gray ribbon tied around the bottom of the hat and a shiny brass button that read ‘Vote Mayor Mare without a care!’.

“Well... I need to get into Hightower. I’m hoping somepony here can tell me how,” I said with a smile.

He laughed, grinned, smiled, and then realized I was serious. “Break into Hightower? *Into*? Um... no offense, Ma’am, but that’s crazy. Just crazy. Nopony wants to break into that place.”

“Well, I do. And I am. But if the ghouls of Meatlocker can help me, I’ll be plenty grateful.” My compliment made the pegasus ghoul fidget a little, his wing bones clattering together.

“I see. Well, it’s highly unusual. Nigh unheard of, really. Nopony who goes in there comes out again. But... naturally, Meatlocker would be happy to help.” He furrowed his brows in thought. “You could talk to Nurse Graves. She used to work there.”

“That’d be nice. Perhaps you could show me the way?”

"I'd be happy to, but do you have a light? Some of the halls are pretty tough to navigate for a smoothcoat."

"My vision is augmented," I replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh. Well... wonderful!" he said after a momentary falter. "Well, I'll show you the way. All the twists and turns can make navigation a problem."

"And the lack of illumination doesn't help either."

"Yes, it's a situation we really should fix for our smoothcoat guests. Unfortunately, lightbulbs are in short supply, and don't get me started on illumination talismans. For a while we tried to use lit fires, but the smoke was intolerable. I'm hoping that when we get more guests I can convince the residents to spring for some more light sources. Darkness doesn't bother our eyesight very much, but it's a definite turnoff for smoothcoats. Right?" He looked at the mare behind the counter. "I'm heading to see Wheelbarrow and Graves, Carol."

She gave an errant wave of her hoof, not raising her head from an old magazine on the front counter. We trotted out, Windclop rambling on as we walked. "When I got here thirty years ago, Meatlocker was just rife with poor ferals and a handful of folks wanting to make a home for themselves. It took twenty years to shoo the ferals into the subway and make something of this place. Now we're really trying to reach out to the different factions around the Hoof."

"It doesn't sound like everypony is happy with the changes. I met a ghoul... Yowie... something or other. He seemed damned put out by things," I said as we trotted through the dim hallways.

"Oh yeah. *Him*. Ahuizotl showed up twenty years or so ago. His morbid little bar ran on misery and bitterness. The more depressed folks there were, the more they'd drink and do chems to forget about their problems and the more caps he made. With the club and everything, Meatlocker's a much better place. I'm hoping to change the name to 'Memorial' rather than Meatlocker. Just more positive." He rattled on as he walked. I didn't think I'd ever met a ghoul who was so *animated*.

"So, you're from a stable originally?"

"Mmhmm. Stable One. Originally it was supposed to be for all the government bigwigs and mucky mucks. Was designed even for the Princesses. But... it was a trap. Locked up tight and wouldn't unlock till everypony inside was dead. Of course Canterlot got soaked in toxic pink cloud and it eventually killed everypony inside anyway. Or maybe it was radiation... dunno," the buck said brightly with a shrug.

"Anyway, about thirty years back I had a... ah... embarrassing incident involving the origins of some protein I was fond of and so I sought my fortunes out here." He coughed nervously. "You have to understand, there's just some things a pony doesn't do in polite society and I'd never, ever, have done it if I'd known."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Quite understandable," I said, then tripped over a metal slab thing that somepony had left in the middle of the hallway. "Okay. This is getting ridiculous. My vision's not that augmented," I muttered, then concentrated. My light spell burst to life above me, driving away the shadows and gloom. Really, why hadn't I done this soone—

That's Stonewing.

I stared straight ahead at the sight of the pegasus stallion cast in bronze, one wing outspread and the other snapped off for me to trip over, standing protectively over the prone forms of Jetstream and Applesnack. Behind him were abstract pony figures. The statue was perched atop a low pedestal off to the side with a plaque that read: 'Stonewing Memorial'.

I walked close to it and read the inscription.

'This memorial is dedicated to those ponies who have given their lives and blood for the wellbeing of us all. It was here, during the reconstruction, that the soldier Stonewing valiantly held his position against overwhelming zebra attackers to protect not just fallen comrades but countless helpless patients and injured victims in the hospital. Though forever struck mute by a sniper's bullet, Stonewing's actions speak volumes of the courage and valor of Hoofington's finest soldiers.'

I stared at the statue for a long moment, something niggling in the back of my mind. A note in a Miramare locker. 'Left it in the place where he did that thing that time.' "Is something wrong?" Windclop asked as I slowly circled the statue and the alcove it occupied.

"Just... wondering," I said lightly as I looked around the statue, not exactly sure what I was after. Then I spotted a small vent in the base of the pedestal. "Hey, got a crowbar I can borrow?"

"I can honestly say that that's the first time anypony has asked me that," he said as he trotted up beside me. He pulled out a small, flat prybar and passed it to me, then took out a flat-headed screwdriver and helped me remove the vent cover. It took a bit of work, but it finally popped free. Inside the dusty hole was a canvas bag. I pulled it out, and his eyes grew wide. "What is it?"

"I don't know..." But I guessed it belonged to the Marauder. Slowly my magic plucked the drawstring, and I tugged it open wide with my hooves. Inside was something burgundy and leathery. I carefully tugged out a leather jacket. Despite two centuries, it was still supple. The inside was lined with fleece, and it had numerous snaps and buckles. Two holes were slit in the back for wings. 'Equestrian Skyguard' was printed on the back. Beneath it was a leather cap with goggles attached.

"Amazing..." he breathed as I stood and put it on. There had to be some magic in it, as it fit me almost perfectly. "I don't suppose that you know of any other priceless treasures hidden around Meatlocker that could be put to the benefit of our fair community?" Wingclop asked with a grin.

"Sorry, Mister Mayor. I wish I did." I felt in the pockets, and found a small stack of photographs. A signed autograph of Rainbow Dash. Then one of Jetstream as a filly, perched on the edge of a cloud in terror. Another one of her on the beach. One of all the Marauders in uniform, saluting as one. I sighed and tucked them back into the pocket. There was also another pocket loaded with golden bits. I looked at him and then passed over half. "Here. For the wellbeing of Meatlocker."

That sure made his day! He put the money away; I could only hope he'd actually follow through rather than keep it for himself, but he seemed the honest sort. "Still, an Equestrian Skyguard jacket. That's... amazing. I think that's genuine dragonhide!" he said.

"No shooting me to find out!" I said quickly as we continued on our way. I glanced back at the grinning memorial statue and smiled in return.

We reached the examination room, but Doctor Wheelbarrow informed us that the nurse had gone to Afterlife. He made an effort to convince me to allow him some in depth 'examinations', but something about his tone set off even more alarms than usual and I declined. The doctor looked quite put out.

We made our way to the club and chatted about whatever came up on the way. He'd been fascinated by technology before the bombs fell and had dreamed about working on immense cloud warships called Raptors before landing a job with Stable-Tec. From his description of them, I imagined smaller versions of the *Celestia* with hulls of cloud streaking through the air and zapping dragons to bits. Apparently being a pegasus in a stable was a somewhat disheartening effect due to the lack of space to fly. That topic lead to the revelation that he could actually *still* fly, despite the fact his wings were bones, and this lead to a demonstration followed by a discussion of innate pegasi magic. I was so wrapped up in our conversation that I missed the

change in music coming from the double doors ahead.

I've heard a wide variety of music in my travels, but this was different¹. This music was making my hips start to move! I pushed through the double doors and was struck by the sight of a stage built against one wall with almost a dozen ghouls playing, two ghoul mares on backup, and an earth pony buck with an almost comically wide-brimmed hat singing about the Everafter. There were plenty more ghouls dancing around the stage in glee, despite the morbid lyrics.

And I really wanted to join in.

Above the crowd Psychoshy swooped and spun around a slightly bemused Stygius, who was just trying to keep up with her. I wondered how proud Fluttershy would have been to see how strong a flier her daughter had become as she writhed and swayed and twirled around the gray batpony. I sighed; dancing would have to wait.

The ghoul Windclop pointed out as Nurse Graves nodded her head in time with the music and smiled as we approached. The brown earth pony had only a few wisps of green mane and tail but had kept her nurse's uniform pristine. "Nurse Graves, this is Blackjack. Blackjack, Nurse Graves. Miss Graves, Blackjack wants to get into Hightower. I hope you can talk her out of it." Then he straightened and looked up at a hovering robot behind the bar; it looked like a Mr. Handy, but painted in pinstripes and with a wide-brimmed floppy hat on its dome. "Hey, Cerberus. Can you make me a Monsoon?"

"Right away, Mr. Windclop! I might as well since I can't make you a greasy smear on the ground. Damn this combat inhibitor!" the robot said as it began to mix up the drink for the pegasus ghoul.

Nurse Graves touched my shoulder, making me jump. I looked at her and then at the robot. "Is that thing... safe?" I asked the undead mare.

"Oh, Cerberus is safe as houses. He's been programmed not to target any friendly visitor or resident," she replied as she looked at the robot. "Aren't you, Cerbie?"

The robot stretched out one of its camera eyes towards me and said in a stage whisper everypony could hear, "Personally, I think they're all a bunch of rotting pony maggot farms and I'd disintegrate them into piles of ash if I could. But I can't, thanks to this damned combat inhibitor! So since I can't dispense fiery carnage to this collection of morbid, wiggling corpses, would you like a martini, you zebra-loving ghoul hugger?"

¹Hell - Squirrel Nut Zippers

"Yeah," I said slowly. "Sure."

I couldn't help but smile and bob my head a little to the music while we waited. "If you don't mind me asking," I said after a moment, "why... this?" I gestured vaguely at the club with my hoof. "I mean, I've been to Mixers in Flank, but all this seems a bit... well... much."

Windclop shared a long look with Nurse Graves before he looked back at me with a patent smile. "Well, you must understand, being a ghoul is much different from being a smoothcoat. It's more than just the being dead thing. Our eyesight is a little less sharp, though much better in darkness. Though, to be honest, when most of the ponies you live with look like corpses, that's not always a bad thing; there's just a limit on how much prettifying you can do. Our sense of touch is diminished, and our bodies make simple things like eating, drinking, and even intoxication difficult. And the less that can be said about our senses of smell and taste, the better."

"The one thing that remains consistent is our hearing, Dearie," the nurse said. "And one of the things that many of us loved most when we were alive was music. Oh, sure, few of us can sing anything you'd want to hear, but we can all listen. Remember good times..." She looked toward the stage and the band. "And forget bad ones..."

Windclop received his drink, something blue and white that swirled around in the glass, and looked over at the far side of the bar as he pinched the stem of the glass between fragile-looking wingbones. "If you ladies will excuse me, I need to talk to Patchwork about his vote." He tilted his top hat to us and trotted off towards a battered-looking ghoul nursing a Buckweiser.

"Always worried about reelection," the nurse mused. "But I suppose that's better than not giving a damn," she said as she looked at me smiled. "Now... you want to get inside the prison. I used to work there, and I can tell you that there's nothing inside worth your life."

"Normally I'd agree," I replied as I folded my forelegs on the bartop in front of me. The band began to play another song² that had my rear hoof tapping. "But there is something in there I need." Her skeptical look clearly showed she didn't believe me. I opened up the panel in my leg, showing her the black PipBuck. "This PipBuck has a program that's following an old routing path. The next stop is in Hightower."

The ghoul frowned as she looked at me in concern. "Hightower does have a lot of old communication equipment on the top floors... but there's no way to get to it,

²Zoot Suit Riot - Cherry Poppin' Daddies

Dearie. Just getting inside the prison is next to impossible. Once you're inside, the radiation and Enervation will kill you in minutes."

"My body is resistant to Enervation," I replied. "Radiation, not so much, but... well, I guess I'll have to take plenty of Rad-X and Rad-Away before I go in." Rampage was indestructible; hopefully Lacunae would be okay, too. But that left Stygius and Psychoshy at risk.

"Even if you avoid those, there's the ghoul population. The radiation and Enervation have made them terrible, immortal monsters. Every now and then one escapes and wreaks havoc before it's finally put down. Most are mindless, but a few are mad. That they'll kill you on sight is the best you can hope for."

"I'll just have to kill them first," I replied, shrugging. "Maybe decapitation would work? I have a wicked sharp sword," I suggested with a grin. The mare just looked at me pityingly.

"Even if you could, there are other threats, too. The prison is filled with turrets, robots, and defensive talismans." She looked around and then lowered her voice. "And ghosts."

"Ghosts?" I said a little skeptically.

She nodded. "They walk the wards as empty suits of armor, uniforms, or clothing. You can't hurt them or damage them."

Well, great. Ghosts. Robots. Turrets. Ghouls. Radiation. Enervation. When all this was done, I was going to the Core for a vacation! Or maybe Thunderhead! Someplace I could relax! "Maybe if you can tell me how you got out?"

She shivered and shook her head. Cerberus floated over and set down a cocktail glass. "For you, you corpse-loving zebra-humper. If it wasn't for my inhibitor, I'd show you a glorious day in this pony's army!" He then turned to Nurse Graves. "Anything for you, you miserable lump of writhing undead meat?"

"Thank you, Cerberus. I'm fine," Graves replied. The robot returned to the bar, grumbling to itself. I took a sip and grimaced; I wasn't sure if I had a glass of alcohol or turpentine in front of me. "I'm afraid I can't quite tell you. It's all quite muddled up. I was down in the infirmary when the lockdown order came from the warden's office. The prison was in a near riot when the sirens began and the prisoner population went into a frenzy. Then there was an incredible crash as a missile ploughed straight through the south wall! I curled up in a supply closet, and then I heard the most horrible scream imaginable." She shivered as she pressed her forehooves to her

chest.

“I think I died then,” she murmured, and I barely heard her over the music³. “And I felt... a pull. Like something was trying to pull me out of my own body. All I could do was struggle to hold on to myself and keep myself together.” She rubbed her face. “I... I stocked the shelves. I organized and reorganized the infirmary constantly. It was something to do... something that was me. Every second I was fighting that pull... that horrible scream. Eventually, I couldn’t take it. I had to either escape, or I’d lose myself like all the others.

“I managed to get out into the yard where the rocket was poking through and crawled out the hole. The fall broke every bone in my body....” The mare gave a little shudder at the recollection. “After that I was able to crawl to the fence and found a small gap I could climb up. I had enough wits left that I pushed under the razor wire rather than getting tangled up in it. Then I was free. The further I got from there, the quieter the scream was and the weaker that pull became. I came here since my home was long gone. I felt... more me... in a medical setting. I dedicated my unlife to helping Dr. Wheelbarrow cure ghoulification these last twenty years.”

I sighed, covering my face. She was right; nothing she told me helped me get in. If Lacunae somehow could fly up to the hole without getting zapped... ugh...

“Is that EC-1101?” the nurse asked.

I dropped my hooves and looked at her in confusion. She was staring at my hoof. “Excuse me?”

“The program you’re following. Is it called EC-1101?” she asked, then chewed her lower lip in concern.

“Yeah...” I said with a touch of apprehension. “Why?”

She closed her eyes, seeming to be contemplating something. Finally she looked at me and said in a nervous voice, “You need to talk to Mr. Shears.”

The Mortuary was as different from Afterlife as night from day, and it was clear that it’d fallen on hard times to boot. Just finding the damn place had taken me an hour of winding hallways, rooms turns into flophouses, and dead ends. Located in the hospital’s basement, the former autopsy room and morgue now had mostly empty tables. Ahuizotl sneered at me as I walked in, and the other few patrons gave me

³King Of Swing - Big Bad Voodoo Daddy

significant looks. Most prominent was a emaciated-looking griffin in power armor who had the bony, rumpled wings of a ghoul. He stared at me from the moment I entered. No music played here; the Mortuary was silent as a tomb.

Surprisingly, Rampage was here. The striped mare looked up from a table bearing half a dozen bottles of alcohol and a box of Abronco laundry detergent. She was mixing the alcohol with the soap. "Hey Blackyjack. What brings you down here?"

"Looking for somepony."

She snorted and grinned. "Of course. You always are. You lookie. You find. And then you lookie for something else. That's your thing. And you never ever ever give up. Ever."

"What about you? Are you okay?" I asked in concern.

"I am good and fuckered up." She tapped the side of her head. "I've got ponies crawling around in my head. Razorwire. Twist. I'm trying to wash them out, but they keep muttering." She stared at me, her pupils two different sizes. "You see, if I just drink the alcohol, I'll piss it out before I feel it. Gotta give the body some other shit to deal with so the alcohol can work. Gotta remember that." She frowned at my clothes. "You're all prettified. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," I said as sat beside her. "Why are you in this place? Weren't you going to keep an eye on Psychoshy and Stygius? And wouldn't Afterlife be more fun anyway?" Rampage blew out a snort of annoyance.

"Couldn't watch them a second longer. Too much noise. Wanted quiet. Now all I hear is Razorwire bitching and Twist crying. A few more bottles and I won't even hear that anymore." She swayed and then frowned. "You need me sober?"

"Not right away. Psychoshy and Stygius are still in Afterlife. Lacunae's still in the market, and I haven't gotten the information I need yet. Take your time if you need this."

"Bitchyshy and Hot Flanks... lucky... why does she get all the luck? Didn't kill her in Chapel. Let her come along. Kept her alive. Now she gets to dance with a nice guy. Not fair she has all the luck," she slurred as her hoof wrapped around a bottle and pulled it to her mouth. She took a long pull off the bottle, draining it entirely. "And how's my luck? Had a kid... dead now. Had a special pony. Dead now too. Reapers got stomped. Now there's just you." She snorted again and shook her head. "Sometime I wonder if I'm like Lacaloonie. Maybe I'm not really a mare. Maybe I'm just a whole bunch of fucked up ponies with no luck squished together."

So all my bad luck is like... super concentrated, you know?"

"I know that's not it, Rampage," I said as I patted her shoulder.

She scowled at me. "Oh, you know? That's nice. 'Cause I don't frigging know. I don't know my name. I don't know who I am or who I'm supposed to be." She scowled at me. "How come you get to know, but I fucking don't, huh? Fuck... you had a sober dooober ubergun and didn't use it on me. Fucking hurt, Blackjack. Fucking hurt."

"I want to help you. Not kill you," I said with my own frown as she buried her muzzle in the box of laundry detergent.

"One and the same, Blackjack. One and the same. Next time, fucking vaporize me. That's all I fucking want," she said, her muzzle caked with powdery foam.

I sighed and stood. "Try not to overdo it, Rampage."

Ahuizotl trotted up to Rampage's table with three more bottles of booze balanced on his flank. "Don't you look absolutely miserable. Here. Have another bottle. Maybe tell old uncle Ahuizotl all about it?" he said to the striped mare, giving a little buck that sent one of the bottles hopping off his rump and neatly onto the table.

"She's fine. She doesn't want to talk to you," I said as I scooped out some bits and set them on the table. "That's for her peace of mind. Don't bother her." He snorted but swept them into his coat pocket anyway.

"They're not caps, but they'll do." He looked at me coolly and then smirked. "Perhaps you have some woes that need drowning, Security?"

"No, but I do have some questions that need answering." Okay, I would have liked a bottle or two of Wild Pegasus, but not from this snake. I glanced over at the staring griffin. "Starting with... what the hell is that guy's deal?" Ahuizotl tapped the pocket he'd swept the bits into. I scowled and put a few more coins on the table.

He swept them up as well before answering. "Who? Carrion? Why, he's just my muscle. That's all. It's his job to turn troublemakers into bloody messes for the ferals. I own his contract." Ahuizotl chuckled to himself with a sly grin.

I stared back at the griffin ghoul. "So he does whatever you say?"

"Pretty much," the ghoul replied with a smile and shrug. "I point at something and Carrion hurts it. He's the best thug a corrupt bartender could ever hope for." His smile disappeared as he said in a lower, more menacing voice, "He never bothers me with his own annoying sense of morality."

Well, as interesting as that was, it wasn't why I was here. "I'm looking for somepony who's supposed to be a regular here. Goes by the name of Mr. Shears." Ahuizotl pressed his lips together as he smiled. A few more bits landed on the table; I was almost out. He swept them into a different pocket. "Mr. Shears is right over there." He pointed at a lump of rags on a chair in the corner.

Then the charred-looking buck trotted to the entrance and said sourly, "I'll be back in a bit. I need to get these tips in the safe." Carrion just nodded his head once and kept watching me. I sighed, hoped that Rampage could sober up in seconds if need be, and approached the heap.

The tattered mass shifted as I moved closer, and I stopped short. "Mr. Shears?"

"Who wants to know?" a stallion replied with a slurred voice from within the filthy rags.

"I'm Security. I was told you know a way into Hightower." There was no reply from the pile, so I elaborated, "Nurse Graves said so."

"Nurse Graves needs to watch her mouth," the buck muttered.

I sighed, feeling my annoyance building. "She said you knew about EC-1101. She said you said it could get you inside."

The name made the heap lean forward towards me at once. "Do you have it? Can it be possible?"

I flipped open the panel on my leg and showed the PipBuck screen, then brought the file up. The heap shuddered once more. "It's true. It's true... after so long... finally."

"So you can use this to get me inside?" I asked with a small frown.

"Oh yes. There is a way. A secret way closed when the projects were sealed. Oh yes," the rags slurred softly. "However, there is a price. I'm not going to tell you out of the kindness of my heart. Oh no." Two rag-wrapped legs rubbed together. "No no no. My price is simple. Take me with you."

"Take you with me?" I blinked, scowling in confusion. "What do you want to go to Hightower for?"

"That is my business!" the heap hissed sharply. "Mine, and no pony else's! Do we have a deal or not?"

I was tempted to turn him down till I got some more answers, but maybe if I agreed

he might share a little more information. I sighed and extended my hoof. “Deal.” The rag-covered limb reached out to bump against mine.

“Get ready. Even if we get inside, you’ll be hard pressed to last long. I’ll be waiting right here till you’re ready.” The heap leaned back in the chair, rubbing his boiled-looking blue hooves together. “Finally... oh yes... finally...”

“So...?” I prompted, hoping for more information, but he just waved his hoof dismissively. I snorted, not liking this, but also not wanting to alienate the only pony who said he could get me inside. There wasn’t much else to do besides tell my friends and make some decisions. I gave Rampage a parting pat, then trotted past Carrion and into the hallway towards the stairs leading back up towards the ER. I’d have to load up on bullets, pick up my bardings, and convert as much salvage into caps and ammo as I could.

Then I froze as I stared at the concrete steps that lead up to the main floor. A line of dirty red crept slowly down them. My eyes were slowly drawn up to the top and I drew Vigilance from my saddlebags. Cautiously, I made my way up.

There, lying in a spreading pool of fetid maroon blood, was Tulip. Her head was crushed, a bloody mess that was utterly destroyed. I stepped in the pool as I moved beside her to check for evidence. The blood was cool... but that didn’t mean much for a ghoul. How long had she been lying here? A blood-smeared canvas bag sat beside her and I nudged it open, revealing the reinforced armor she’d made for me.

“Well now,” Willow said from the shadows, stepping into the pool of light with the assault carbines in her battle saddle pointed right at me. “This is why I fucking hate tourists.”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

46. Caper

"I dunno why we have to wear these things either..."

"Aren't we wearing them for fun?"

I backed away from the still body of Tulip as the Meatlocker security mare approached. Her milky white eyes were narrowed as she looked down at the scene. "Willow! I can explain! Okay... I really can't explain, but I didn't do this! I wouldn't do this, I mean... I'm pretty sure I didn't do this. I can't say I've never killed somepony while out of it, but..." I stammered, pointing back behind me with a bloody hoof. "I was just in Mortuary. My friend... erm... a griffin... ah... Mr. Shears can prove it!"

"This is why I fucking hate tourists," she repeated as she circled the body. Then she looked at me and my clothes closely. "You say you just came on the body like this?"

"Yeah. And like I said, I was just down in the Mortuary," I said in a rush. "I swear, I didn't do it!" Now I was going to have to prove my innocence! Maybe bust out of jail! Could I handle a jailbreak? Oh sweet Celestia, please don't tell me I'd have to kill ghouls to get out of here. I liked ghouls!

The earth pony sat, slipped a cigarette into her mouth, then calmly lit it with an old lighter before she said with an annoyed grunt, "Yes. I figured you didn't."

"I promise... I swear... I..." Then I stopped stammering and just gaped at her. "Really?"

"No blood spattered on you. Just a bit on your hoof from stepping in the pool." She stepped close and slowly lowered her hoof towards Tulip's shattered head. "While I know you probably could do a wound like this, it would have been messy. Bits of blood and bone all over the place. Your clothes are still clean." She peered down at the slain ghoul with a little groan. "Damn... Tulip was a nice girl. Hopeless merchant, but nice."

"Well, thanks," I said in a bit of a daze. I was so used to being in the middle of the proverbial shitstorm that somepony cutting me a break was depressingly novel.

She took a long pull off the cigarette and let the smoke shoot out her nostrils. "You're a lousy suspect. From what everypony was saying, you got along well with Tulip. Can't be a sour deal because you paid in advance. Hell, you haven't freaked out at

all. That's pretty exceptional for a breather." She glanced over at the canvas bag. "Can't be robbery, the goods are still here. Wasn't a feral attack; no bites or other injuries." She stared at me a moment, eyes narrowed. "Might be crazy. But if it was you, you're the neatest psychopath in the Hoof."

She sighed and moved closer to the body. "Sorry, 'Lip." And then she started pressing on the corpse's ribs. There was a dry, crunchy noise as Tulip's side depressed. "Busted ribs." Willow carefully removed the saturated clothing to reveal two dark, round distortions. "Hoofkicks. Somepony knocked Tulip right off her hooves."

"Like an applebuck," I remarked, drawing a look. It might have been approval, but with a mare like Willow, how could you tell?

"Yeah, but see? The one on the left isn't as deep as the one on the right. I'm guessing Tulip was kicked while she was turning. Maybe running for help? The kicker was strong enough that she was knocked on her side, and then..." She mimicked the hoof coming down again on Tulip's head. "She didn't even have a chance to get up. See?" She pointed at the blood spattering across the body. "All round, gravitational drops. No movement or smearing. Instantly dead."

"You seem to know a lot about this stuff," I commented, getting a smokey snort from the mare.

"Yeah. You could say that," she said, taking a moment to chew on the cigarette. "Sometimes I wish I wasn't a part of Windclop's jerky squad... that's what I call his security ghouls. Too much of a joke for me. We're supposed to let everyone in so long as they're not Red Eye or Remnants. I just keep an eye open for trouble, like you, and hope for the best."

I noted that Harbingers were okay. "Were you in the military? Looks like you know your way around firearms," I said with a look at her assault carbines.

"Law enforcement, actually. Which makes shit like this all the more annoying." She glared down at the body, flicking ashes from the end of her cigarette. "Three days from now, nopony's gonna give a fuck. 'Lip deserves better."

I looked at the dead ghoul and back at her. "So, what do you think it might have been?" She scowled at the body, the blood, and mostly at me, then took a long pull off the cigarette and let the grey smoke out in a long plume.

She sighed as she returned her eyes to the crushed mare. "If it wasn't robbery, wasn't a feral after a nibble, and wasn't personal, she might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time." She pointed at my reinforced barding spilling from the sack.

"She might have been coming to deliver your barding and came across something worth killing over."

"Something illegal? Maybe that Ahuizotl had something to do with it?" I suggested, and got a sullen look in response. "What? The guy's a creep, and not because he's a ghoul."

"Yeah. Except there's nothing illegal about being a creep. We don't have much in the way of laws, anyway. Pretty basic, really. And while I don't put it past him, Ahuizotl's a weak little shit. He gets other ponies to kill for him if he can get away with it. He couldn't have killed her like this." She groaned in irritation. "Fuck... knew it would come to this. Fucking breather tourists..."

"You don't like smoothcoats?" I asked in concern.

She shrugged. "I don't like unknowns. Hate 'em. Don't care if they're alive or dead. I think we should screen who comes in here. Keep our own safe. Windclop wants everyone to just pretend we're all alive, like the rotted hide is just a bad rash. And Ahuizotl wants us one step up from feral so we'll all keep drowning in booze and Rainboom." At my clueless expression, she snapped, "Super strong Dash." She took another long pull on her cigarette and sighed, shaking her head. "But more folks want the chance to trade and to pretend like we're normal, so they'll let every freakshow into this place." She shot a pointed look at my mechanical legs.

I popped out a finger and scratched out a booger, making her squirm in disgust when I flicked it away with a grin. Freakshow *that*, Willow. "So... now what?" I asked, stepping away from the body a little.

"Now?" She looked surprised. "Well now you take your armor – you paid for it after all – and go fuck yourself for all I care. I'll make sure she gets incinerated. Windclop will auction off her stuff for the town. Somepony else will come and sell barding. Life goes on," she muttered darkly. "That's how it goes, isn't it? Somepony gets murdered and great if you can catch 'em but 'oh well' if you can't."

Damn, that was a lot of bitterness. "What do you mean?" Willow glared at me a moment. Clearly there was something gnawing at the ghoul. "I'm just curious, is all." She made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat and rolled her cloudy eyes.

"Once upon a time, I was with the Hoofington Guard. Investigations. Seems like another life... 'cause it was, I guess. Always busy trying to keep order, keeping the Pinks happy, and trying to solve cases. Most were usually pretty simple, but

we had a few that were just nasty. Hoofington's always been a little heavy on the weirdo population like that. Softheart and I were assigned to catch the Angel of Death serial killer," she said as she trotted away from the body a bit and took a seat.

"I... read about her," I said as glanced at the stairs that led down to Mortuary. "Targeted foals?"

"Mhmmm. Real piece of work. Turns out she was an M.o.P. nurse. Snapped under the pressure. Thought it was more merciful to kill kids than let them live in this world. So we finally caught her... and we handed her over to the M.o.P." she muttered bitterly.

"Wait. Why?" I asked in confusion.

The ghoul rolled her eyes. "Because she was fucking ministry. Fuck... don't you get it? Back then, if you were with a ministry, there were a million special rules about what we were supposed to do. We caught Nurse Candy, then handed her right over to Fluttershy who 'Pinkie Pie promised' us that they'd make her better." She hissed in disgust. "Three months later she was out and doing it again. Only this time, she knew how we'd caught her and changed her habits. Softheart drove herself nuts trying to stop her; she loved kids. And the Angel loved toying with us. The Angel would leave notes on the bodies of her victims to me and Softheart."

I used a bit of canvas to wipe the blood off my hooves. "So what happened?"

"Angel slipped up. Softheart had a kid, and the Angel went after her. Too much for the Angel to resist. Nasty fight. The Angel nearly killed Softheart. Shoved a length of wrought iron fence through her chest. Anyway, I trotted her giggling ass all the way back to Hightower myself. Of course, then Image got involved and we were fucked. I was sure the Angel was going to disappear again. I filed paperwork. I made calls. I screamed my stupid head off." She let out a long, rattling sigh. "And then the Angel dies in custody!" she spat, stomping her forehooves in rage.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, and got a glare in response.

"That's exactly what my fucking superiors said!" she snarled, jabbing her hoof at me. "But she was killed in custody and I don't care if it was the Angel of Death or Princess Celestia; a crime is a crime! Then I dug some more and found out there was a whole *slew* of ponies killed in Hightower. No investigations. No *nothing*. Others had gotten hit by some sort of mind-sapping magic attack – all fatal. And *nopony* was investigating! Somepony was covering it up, but I had no idea who."

She snorted, looking back at the body. "Softheart snapped. Couldn't take it. Maybe

it was her injuries or something, but she couldn't let it go. Said she could feel the Angel inside her. Woke up in her daughter's room with a knife. Finally jumped in front of a subway train. Suicide. Case... fucking... closed."

The mottled green mare slumped. "I was taken off investigations. Put behind a desk in Flankfurt filing paperwork. Would have quit, but.. hrmpf, what else was I going to do?" she said with a shrug. "Bombs fell and paperwork was pretty much moot. Lasted a year before ghoulification set in. Fortunately, I kept my head together. Nopony gave a shit about justice anymore, but I could shoot better than most of the scum around the Wasteland."

Then she suddenly blinked and groaned, covering her face with her hoof. "Oh, shit. I didn't just do that, did I?"

"What?" I asked in concern.

The mottled green mare just adopted an expression of self-disgust. "Don't tell me I actually gave you my whole 'when I was alive' sob story. I hate that shit." She snorted and spat her cigarette butt into the shadows. "Ghouls always have one whiny story from when they were alive. Promised I'd never share mine. They're always so pathetic."

"Sorry. But it was an interesting story," I said. I considered her a moment, and a slow smile spread on my lips. I adopted as casual a tone as I could. "You know... I'm going into Hightower." I tried not to look too interested, but the ghoul could clearly handle herself.

"Are you joking or crazy?" Willow asked, and I grinned widely at her. She looked back at me flatly, leaning away as if my crazy was contagious. "Blackjack, I don't know you. Why in Equestria would I follow you into a deathtrap like Hightower? Much as unlife sucks, I'd rather not lose it."

I looked at the skeptical ghoul and then smiled. "Because you have questions about the things that happened in Hightower. Niggling little things you want to know. Even if the answers don't matter, you still want them."

She glared at me for a long moment before she snorted, "Not that bad. Now get out of my mane. I need to get Tulip cremated and tell his mayorship to clean up the mess." I felt like she'd slugged me. Mysteries! Potential answers! How could she pass that up? I sighed and just nodded, gathering up the reinforced combat armor Tulip had made for me before starting back towards the Afterlife club. "And Blackjack," she called after me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder at the ghoul

as she added grimly, “Keep your eyes out for somepony that can crush a skull with one blow.”

Given there was someone in Meatlocker who would kill a mare like Tulip, I found a bathroom and checked it for occupants and red bars before removing the clothes Velvet had generously given me. I sighed and, for the first time ever, carefully folded my clothes and packed them into the bottom of my saddlebag. Tulip had done well. The reinforced combat armor was a mottled gray like concrete, and the usual ceramic plates had been replaced by some sort of metal I couldn’t quite identify, so I chanced a little nibble. It tasted like caramel and was lighter than steel. Still, this was definitely some heavy duty armor. ‘Security’ was etched on the back in black letters, and she’d even painted my filly in place. I felt guilty seeing it after Boing. Sighing softly, I pulled the bardings on.

Tulip had done *really* well. It fit like a sock. I debated putting on the helmet for a moment, then remembered what Willow had said. The helmet went on immediately; I had no idea how reinforced my brain was and would prefer to not have to find out. I stood like a zebra, winced as the armor pinched like mad in the crotch, and carefully tugged it so that I could go bipedal comfortably. No need for the boots on my forelegs. I wasn’t sure sure what the S.W.A.T. spray-painted out had stood for, though. ‘Security Whines A Ton’?

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I turned my thoughts again to the task ahead. If I was going into Hightower, I’d need a strong team. Rampage, Lacunae, and Stygius were solid. Psychoshy might have conflicts, but I was pretty sure she’d follow him. That wasn’t quite enough though. At the very least I’d need somepony who knew the layout of the prison. Somepony who could deal with robots and turrets. Somepony who could keep us all alive. Somepony good with locks. Shears was an unknown; I hoped he had some combat skills.

I was halfway to the Afterlife club when I heard shouts coming from the front of the hospital. “Get out of here! You’re not welcome, Stripe!” I heard somepony bellow. “No Remnants here! Step off!”

I started towards the entrance when I heard a familiar mare cry out, “Oh Maiden of the Stars, why have you cursed me so!? I beg you, return and finish me off! End my torment!”

I trotted out on to the front steps and beheld a filthy, rain-soaked, wretched-looking

Xanthe. The zebra mare's eyes popped wide as she stared past the scowling ghouls and at me. "Oh, sweet sun above, I *am* damned." Then her golden eyes rolled back in their sockets and she flopped to the ground in a faint. I looked at her for a minute, then at the ghouls. "Hundred caps to let her in?" The pair looked at each other a moment, scowled, then shrugged and nodded.

Then a muddy bundle on the zebra's back shifted a little. I frowned as I stepped closer and carefully lifted the flap. Curly pink mane streaked with filth and dried blood met my eyes, and then two bright and terrified blue eyes peeked back at me for a moment before I shared a scream with a filly who was supposed to be dead.

I'd like to think there were different levels of awkward. Saying your mom's flank is perfectly sexy when she turns out to be standing behind you, for example, is a beginner's level of awkward. Then there's trying to convince the pony you love to be your special somepony, only to discover they're taken, not interested, only interested in being friends, or that they would be interested if you were somepony else. That's a nice middling sort of awkward. Then there's finding out that the filly you thought you'd killed in a psychopathic rage is still alive, badly battered, possibly crippled, and utterly scared to death of you. Boing was with Doctor Wheelbarrow right now, who'd Pinkie Promised he wouldn't study her too much.

Xanthe was almost in as much shock as Boing. I reminded Windclop that I'd just made a generous contribution to the community and I'd really appreciate if he could let her in. He'd smoothed some ghouls' nerves enough for Carol to let her use the shower, and Velvet was nice enough to loan her a cloak, after I'd managed to pry her away from something they were all doing with Lacunae in the corner of the ER. The garment didn't completely conceal her, though. There was just something about the way a zebra moved that you couldn't quite hide. Most of the ghouls made a point of pretending we didn't exist.

I was too preoccupied to really enjoy the music in Afterlife as I spoke with the spooked zebra at one of the club's tables. "So, you couldn't get to the Collegiate and have been wandering around on your own since you left Yellow River?" I asked Xanthe as she held a cup of tea between her hooves. Her eyes were darting back and forth between Nurse Graves and me as they had ever since she'd woken up in the care of ghouls. Apparently, while there wasn't exactly a rule against them, there were lots of old grudges against Zebrakind in Meatlocker. Windclop had grudgingly allowed her inside; I think the sight of Boing was enough to let him make a special

allowance.

"Yes. Since you cursed me, I wandered through the rainy night seeking my way. The pegasi flew away with their injured comrade. I was rained on most terribly and slipped in the mud several times. I finally returned to a tunnel where I discovered that poor filly battered within an inch of her life," she said with a shake of her head. Returned? I started to ask... then I wanted to ask about Boing's injuries... then I felt really guilty and shut up, so she went on, "I could have left her, but my spirit is already tainted enough by your curse. I didn't need ghosts haunting me as well, so I helped her as I could and sought aid." She shook her head with a sigh. "The Harbingers... they had no help for me, as they only sought you. I could only head south and hope I found the Collegiate you mentioned, but I was lost. I followed the mountains too closely, and this was the only community I knew where she might get aid."

"Good thing I cursed you, then. I thought I'd killed her," I said as I looked at my hooves. Funny; *almost* killing her in a frenzy was somehow worse than killing her outright. Somewhere in this hospital was a filly who was terrified of me, and rightly so. If Xanthe hadn't found her and gotten her to somepony who could help, she would have been dead...

No, Blackjack. Life is better than death. A few exceptions, of course: Steel Rain, Lancer, whatever was running the Harbingers. But it was better she lived.

"She'll recover. She has a skull fracture, three broken ribs, and a broken pelvis. Severe damage to her legs. Punctured lung, too, but fortunately Xanthe administered a healing potion in time. Doctor Wheelbarrow will have her up, if only to run a few tests. Harmless tests, I promise," Nurse Graves added quickly as she caught my eye. "Doctor Wheelbarrow has a theory that the magic which turned us into ghouls can somehow be reversed." She gave a minuscule shrug. "It's a pleasant theory." She sounded almost dismissive of the idea of being alive again.

"You don't *want* to be alive?" Xanthe asked in shock.

"It would be nice, I suppose, but there really isn't much difference between the living and the unliving. Happiness matters far more." A moment later, she gave me a significant look. "There's a rumor that you are going into Hightower soon."

"That's the idea. Mr. Shears says he knows a way in that won't result in us getting dusted right away. Once we're inside... well... we'll be exposed to Enervation, so we charge through as quickly as possible." Okay, that didn't sound any better out loud than it did in my head. But if we were fast enough...

She closed her eyes a moment, tapping her hooves on the tabletop. “If you go, I would like to go with you. I have medical expertise and a knowledge of the prison.”

I stared a few moments, making sure she was serious before asking, “Not that I’m not grateful for the help, but why? You spent a really long time trying to get out of there. Why would you want to go back?”

“I don’t. Every thought of that place fills me with dread. But if you are going, I want to make sure that that horrible place doesn’t take any more lives. Plus, I know where there is a large stock of Rad-X and Rad-Away and other medical supplies, and you’d need me to access it. Without it, I doubt you’d have the time to get in and out again.”

Windclop looked over from the bar. He’d been keeping a nervous eye out like a mother shadowing her daughter’s first date to the atrium. He slipped from the bar and approached. “Graves, you know you don’t have to go in there.”

“Yeah, while I appreciate it...” I started, but the nurse shook her head.

“Thank you, but if you are going, then you will need me. I have to make sure that horrible place doesn’t get one more soul who doesn’t deserve it.” The nurse smiled sadly at the pegasus ghoul, who clattered his bony wings nervously and looked around.

Suddenly he turned and marched to the robot hovering behind the bar. “Cerberus! I’ve got a mission for you. You’re going to escort Nurse Graves on her expedition.”

The floating robot lifted its flamer and spat a small plume of fire into the air. “Oo-Rah! Yes sir! Turn off this combat inhibitor and I will defend her from every last stinking ghoul in Equestria! Including herself!”

Windclop scowled at the robot. “Your combat settings should be just fine as they are, Cerberus.”

The robot sagged and let out a synthesized sigh. “Fine. Stupid ghoul-loving ghouls and their damned combat inhibitors.”

Stygius and Psychoshy trotted towards me. The batpony seemed a bit uncomfortable, but I couldn’t tell if was because of his company or something else. “So I heard you unkilled a foal. How’d you pull that one off?” Psychoshy asked me. Then she noticed Xanthe and began sizing the zebra up as if trying to think of some sort of cutting remark, but upon seeing the terrified look in Xanthe’s eyes, she turned back to me with a clear ‘You’re not worth the effort’ snort.

“Xanthe here saved her life.” Hopefully the filly would forgive me for attacking her...

somewhere...

"Well, aren't you a hero," the yellow pegasus said sarcastically to the zebra. Then she glanced over at Stygius, saw his disapproval, and blinked and forced a grin. "I mean, way to go!" Stygius just sighed and looked away. Psychoshy's grimace melted into a worried, uncertain frown.

Rampage materialized out of the crowd. "Ugh... remind me not to eat soap next time I'm looking to get drunk," the striped mare said. She grimaced and clenched her eyes shut, then belched out a small stream of bubbles. Sticking her tongue out, she held her stomach a moment before spotting the shocked-looking zebra. "Ave," she said formally.

"P- P- Proditor!?" Xanthe stammered in shock. "Te imploro non me occide!"

"Your accent is terrible. Please address me in pony," Rampage said in that oddly formal tone that suggested Shujaa was at the helm.

"Is there going to be trouble between you two?" I asked in concern.

Rampage regarded her a long moment, leaning over to glance at Xanthe's covered flank as if hoping to see her glyphmark. "Your tribe? You are Servi?" Xanthe flushed and shook her head. "Propoli?" Xanthe gulped and gave the tiniest little nod. "Ahh... certainly not warrior or priest. Farmer?" Xanthe shook her head. "Crafter?" A little nod. Rampage looked at her coolly, then gave the tiniest smile. "Ah. Well, better than a merchant." The zebra stiffened a little and even gave a ghost of a smile along with a tiny nod. Rampage looked at me and said with a smile, "No trouble." Then she groaned and blinked, letting out another belch of bubbles.

Why she didn't let Xanthe answer for herself was beyond me. Zebras were weird. "Are you okay?"

"Meh. I'll live," she said with a little smirk, but it quickly disappeared. "I heard Tulip was killed."

"What!?" Psychoshy gasped. "Who? How? She was like... tiny." The pegasus actually seemed shocked. "That is just... messed up."

"In the hallway near the Mortuary," I explained. "Somepony crushed her head in one blow." The yellow pegasus glared sharply at Rampage, and I added quickly, "Somepony other than Rampage. I'd left Rampage in Mortuary before I found Tulip's body." I glanced at Xanthe. "Could a zebra have done it?"

"One of the Achu could have done so, easily. If there were any left. Their Fallen

Caesar technique of fighting put them on par with your Steel Rangers, but their mountain homes were destroyed by pony sorcery." She sighed softly. "The ability to kill even an enemy in steel armor is little help against a volcanic eruption. Still, there have been tales of their tribe surviving far from their shattered lands."

"Is it just me, or does anyone else find it funny their tribe sounds like a sneeze?" Psychoshy asked with a smirk, looking at the ponies gathered around the table. Deadpan expressions looked back. "Just me then? Kay..." she said with a flush.

"I've seen zebras fighting hoof to hoof." And I'd seen Shujaa capable of the same. Still, she couldn't have been in two places at once.

Nurse Graves shook her head slowly. "But zebras aren't allowed in Meatlocker. Too many bad memories and old grudges." She smiled apologetically at Xanthe. "And the Remnant haven't done zebrakind any favors over the years." Xanthe's ears drooped, but she wisely omitted that she'd been a part of them till I'd cursed her.

'Power Armor?' wrote Stygius on his slate.

"Well, Steel Ranger armor isn't exactly what I'd call stealthy," I muttered. Enclave armor, on the other hoof...

"As much as I liked Tulip, it's not exactly our job to catch her killer, is it?" Psychoshy said, staring at me and waiting for an argument. I didn't give her one. I glanced over to see Willow scowling at her. "Didn't you say you were finding a way inside Hightower that didn't involve our immediate deaths?" the pegasus went on.

"I found it. Mr. Shears says he can get us in using EC-1101," I replied, tapping my PipBuck foreleg. I looked around. "I just wish there was something we could do about that rocket."

"It shouldn't be that hard," Xanthe said casually as she looked at Cerberus. "Depending on the condition of the warhead, you could just have the robot slice the lateral struts and pull the whole thing off."

We all shared a look and then looked back at the zebra, who suddenly seemed apprehensive. "You know about balefire bombs and rockets?" I asked.

"Well, I... it's not my specialty at all. But... yes." She looked nervously at her hooves, tapping them together. "That actually isn't a rocket at all; it's a missile that was fired from Dawn Bay. Shorter range, flat flight path, and more difficult to intercept."

"Propoli and their toys," Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes.

"Propoli? What does that mean, exactly?" I asked, pointing a hoof at Xanthe.

"Propoli were the tribe behind the founding of Roam. Big advocates of city, technology and abandoning the old ways. Pushed rocket, missile, and robotics development. And balefire bombs," Rampage explained, looking flatly at Xanthe. The zebra shrank back. "Also established the trade agreements with Equestria prior to the war and were blamed for bringing down the great pony curses."

"That... that was a very long time ago," she muttered quickly. "We learned our mistake. Today we are simply trying our best to rebuild and prepare for the coming of the Maiden." Then she noticed my scowl and flushed, looking at her hooves and tapping them together again, muttering about curses.

I reached over and patted her shoulder. "I promise, I don't hold you accountable for what your grandparents ten times removed did. And neither should anypony else," I added, looking around the table. Xanthe flushed, not looking up from her hooves. "Is there anything you can do about that missile, though?"

"Well. You could cut off the warhead and dump it outside. That would cut off the radiation. If the purge system is intact, you might be able to disarm the warhead. Or you could try and set it off." Then she looked up at the stunned silence as everypony stared at her. "Well... not while we're inside, of course!"

"Not at all, please." Windclop shivered as he looked up at the roof. "While I think the hospital would survive, a balefire blast would do a nasty number on the neighborhood."

I sighed, then smiled and patted Xanthe's shoulder. "Right! You're coming with us. You're our resident balefire missile specialist."

"Huh?" Xanthe blinked. "But I... I can't... I mean... shouldn't... I mean..." I just smiled at her as she stammered on for a minute or two and then said in a whimper, "I'm the most cursed zebra ever."

"Yup," I said as I put a hoof around her shoulder.

"Associating with a damned dirty stripe! Damn this combat inhibitor!" Cerberus snarled.

I popped out my fingers and started counting, getting plenty of stares from around the crowded table. "So, that's me, Lacunae, Rampage, Psychoshy, Stygius, Mr. Shears, Nurse Graves, Cerberus, Xanthe..."

"Excuse me..." came that nasty purr that put my mane on edge. "Security?" We

all looked over at the smug smirk of Ahuizotl. “I’d like to speak to you about your upcoming endeavor?”

“What are you doing here, Ahuizotl? I thought you said you’d rather be turned to glue than set one hoof in here,” Windclop said with a scowl.

“Things change,” he replied in his slimy, wet voice. Then his eyes turned to me. “I understand that you’re going to Hightower. I’d like to offer the assistance of my employee, Carrion.”

That brought a look of shock from Graves and Windclop. I looked at the smirking ghoul and frowned. “No offence, but you’re about as trustworthy as a radroach in a pantry. Why in Equestria would I take him along with me?”

“Last time I checked, none of you had power armor. He’ll be a formidable asset against whatever you encounter,” Ahuizotl purred silkily. “If you’re worried about him shooting you in the back, just put him in the front. I promise you, he’ll not betray you.” I looked over at the frowning Windclop and worried Nurse Graves.

“Well?” I asked the skeptical-looking ghouls.

“Carrion is pretty formidable, I admit it. And if Ahuizotl orders him not to double cross you, he won’t,” Windclop said with a frown. “I still wouldn’t take him without knowing why Ahuizotl wants him to come along, though.”

“Can’t I be doing it out of the kindness of my heart?” Ahuizotl simpered. Then he sneered at me. “Fine. There’s a cell. 755. I want Carrion to rifle through it. No interruptions, no questions, no interference. If he finds anything inside, it’s mine to keep.”

“755? But that was in the maximum security level.” Graves frowned a moment, then her eyes opened wide in shock. “Oh my! That’s Kingpin’s cell!”

Ahuizotl purred like me trying to get in Midnight’s bed, “The most infamous mob boss in all of Equestria during the war. Murder. Smuggling. Theft. Vice. He did it all. He also never turned over his fortune when he was arrested for tax evasion. M.o.M. raked his memories for months, but he’d already extracted every single incriminating one before they’d gotten to him. I’m hoping there’s something in his cell that will tell me where some of his fortune was hidden.”

Okay. That I could buy. And it would also mean at least Carrion getting out again. “Right. Well. Fine. But don’t blame me if he gets torn apart or blasted or something.”

“Of course not,” the ghoul said with a broad smile that gave me a head to hoof

shooty feeling. "I'll tell him to get ready, then." And with that he trotted away, whistling brightly and making my coat crawl even more.

I stood up and looked at Windclop. "Is there a... I don't know... someplace we can all meet?"

"There's a conference room on the second floor nopony uses. It's big enough," the pegasus said, rubbing his nose with his long, thin, bony wings.

"Right. Rampage. Why don't you go get Shears and Carrion? I'll go find Lacunae. Psychoshy and Stygius can follow Windclop there... and you can make sure Cerberus's combat inhibitor is good?" I added. Windclop nodded, and the robot gave an angry mutter.

Nurse Graves looked at Xanthe. "Why don't you come with me down to radiology? There are some hazardous materials suits that should offer some of you and your friends more protection from the radiation." Still muttering about curses, the zebra followed along in a daze.

I had some decent talent. Now we just had to do the whole planning thing. I sighed as I rose and trotted back towards the marketplace in the ER. When I'd been in there before, Lacunae had been in the corner surrounded by ghouls, and I hadn't wanted to interrupt beyond getting a cloak for Xanthe. Now I trotted up towards the crowd of ghouls, trying to get at the alicorn in the back. Had they done something with her mane?

"Excuse me! Pardon me! I need to get through!" I called out as I nudged my way forward. I'd hoped that whatever they'd been doing with Lacunae, it wouldn't be too embarrassing for the purple alicorn. I wondered if it would be leather or lace. Then the crowd finally parted, and...

Goddess...

For the first time since I'd seen alicorns, I saw one that didn't look like some cheap knockoff of Luna or Celestia. The golden silk dress with burgundy panels she wore was what I imagined a sunset should look like. Her brushed and curled mane seemed to blow in that ghostly wind. The traces of lip gloss and the golden glitter in the corners of her eyes gave off just the right sparkle. Burgundy ribbons and the gold wire that I'd traded to Tulip had been woven around her hooves. They'd even fashioned a tiara for her from the wire. The collected ghouls stared on in joy as she stood there before us all. If Celestia were the sun and Luna the moon, Lacunae could be sunrise and sunset.

"I fear they got carried away," Lacunae said bashfully as she blushed.

I looked at the beaming Velvet and Snowflake and then back up at her. "They didn't. They really didn't." I took a few seconds more, amazed at the sight, then sighed. "But unfortunately, we're getting ready to plan our next step." It seemed such a shame for her to put the outfit away.

"I see," she said with a gentle smile at the surrounding ghouls. "Well, I wish to thank you all for your kindness. It really is a lovely dress."

Velvet just blushed. "Well, it's nice to make something special," she said with a little sniff as she looked up at the mare. The ghouls nodded, and a few even seemed to give little bows towards the alicorn. "Please. Take it. I always dreamed of making something for royalty. I think every seamstress does. You're as close as I'm ever going to get."

"I... thank you," Lacunae said solemnly, clearly taken aback by the attention and generosity. Finally, she sighed and carefully removed the amazing garment. "But I don't know how I could take it with me."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Velvet assured her. Her horn glowed as she took the dress, and then there was a flash of magic and the garment was bundled up neatly in burgundy ribbons. "There. That should be easier to carry."

Lacunae nodded and slipped the bundle into her bags as she took off the rest of the decorations, passing them to the gray ghoul. She still looked magnificent. Where they'd gotten the makeup was beyond me. Finally, she thanked them all once again and trotted out of the ER with a blush on her cheeks. "What?" she asked, looking down at me and my grin.

"So... spill. You liked that, didn't you?" I teased. She flushed a little more and pointedly looked away, but still smiled.

"It gave them some joy," she said quietly.

"And I bet the Goddess just loved all the attention," I added, but instead of smiling at my teasing, she just looked sad. "Lacunae?"

"She did... at first. And she enjoyed my humiliation." She dropped her gaze. "But as it went on, she cut contact. I fear their sincere devotion was... upsetting."

That was certainly odd. I regarded my purple friend and nudged her shoulder. "You've changed, Lacunae."

"Pardon?" Lacunae blinked in surprise as we trotted along. The alicorn still drew looks from the ghouls we passed, even in the wan glow of my light spell.

"You. When we first met, you were... well... a little creepy. You never talked, and half the time when you did, you were the Goddess. Now you're... you. You let ponies dress you up because it makes them happy. Is that because you're different or because the Goddess is?" I asked as we moved along.

The question turned her smile more wistful and regretful. "The Goddess cannot change, Blackjack. I wish she could. When she formed, a balance was struck between the egos of the dominant mares. Anything that could disrupt that balance is diverted into me. Hope. Friendship. Joy. The feelings and opinions and memories of hundreds of ponies are placed within me. If I've changed, it's because she refuses to. She remains convinced of her own superiority and the manifest destiny of her children."

"But, why wouldn't the Goddess want to feel good things?" I asked, finding that positively crazy.

"Because it empowers the part of her that is Twilight Sparkle. The self-important ego of the mare that became the Goddess still remembers petty slights made against her many years before the war. And so long as the Goddess feels misery, doubt, and self recrimination, Twilight cannot assert herself or threaten Trixie's domination." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Sometimes I think she's stripped away so much of Twilight that there's more of her in me than in the Goddess herself."

"Is that why you're... well... good?" I asked.

Lacunae gave me a long look that made me wonder if I'd somehow insulted her. "The Goddess must maintain control of all within her. To that end she strips away memories that are good and strong and places them within me. The things that cause her shame, discomfort, or lack of control. If the ponies within her remembered who they were, she could not maintain the kind of restraint over them she now requires."

"But is the Goddess, overall, good or not?" I asked, nudging her hip.

"She is the combination of hundreds of souls and memories. She has good ponies and wicked ponies within her. Virtuous and craven. Kind and cruel. The segregation she imposes to maintain control is a mistake, I feel, but one that is unchangeable." The purple alicorn sighed as we walked past Stonewing's memorial. "I believe one thing, however. She can do better."

We followed the babble of voices to the second floor conference room. Rampage, Psychoshy, and Stygius sat on one end of the long lozenge-shaped table. In the middle on the left side, Xanthe sat next to Nurse Graves in a yellow hazmat suit while Cerberus floated behind her, muttering obscenities. The nurse had two cardboard boxes in front of her and was counting out bottles of Rad-X in one while Xanthe examined pouches of orange Rad-Away. Opposite them were Willow and Windclop, talking to each other in low voices. Carrion lurked in the corner along with Ahuizotl, who looked much too happy about this. The far end of the table was occupied by the ragged form of Mr. Shears.

"Ah, welcome. I'm glad you decided to quit playing dressup and join us," Shears rasped.

"Right," I said as I looked around at the assembled people. "We're all here because we're going to do the impossible: break into Hightower. I know it's an irradiated fortress filled with automated defenses, feral glowing ghouls, deadly radiation, and soul sapping Enervation, but working together, I know that we can get in, get what we need done, and get out again. If anyone wants to quit, now's the time to back out."

I looked around, but the only person looking ready to bolt was Xanthe. Yet she remained in her seat. I wondered if she was too scared to leave or if she simply had nowhere to go.

Psychoshy raised her hoof. "So... not that I'm scared, but, like, what's our goal?"

"Three things. First, to get to the top floor and reach the broadcast network. Second, to find cell 755." Ahuizotl chuckled and nodded. "And..." I looked at Mr. Shears.

"What I'm looking for is in the attic," he said, his filmy eyes peering into my own over the rag covering his face. "It's right next door to the broadcast center on the top floor, so it shouldn't be that much of a problem." From everypony else, the response was just shrugs, but I remembered what Razorwire had told me the first time we'd met. '*Took me up to the attic. Put a bullet in my head.*' And then, as if reading my mind, Shears said, "I've been waiting an eternity to get up there."

Yeah. We were definitely going to have a chat.

"Well there's quite a bit of peril between here and there. So how do we get all the way up there?" Lacunae asked.

There was a blue glow from under Shears's hood, and a moment later lines of light burst into being above the table. They organized themselves into a glowing

green outline of the prison. “I’ve had a lot of time to review and study the ways into and through the prison. Two centuries actually.” The rotund ghoul stood on his chair, hooves on the conference table. “Hightower is stacked in three sections, with subsections between. In the basement are storage, generators, and all the infrastructure for supporting the building. Hightower has its own shielded reactor. It’s rather like a stable, in its own way.

“On the ground floor are the cafeteria, gymnasium, library and classrooms.” I must have looked surprised, because the fat ghoul chuckled. “Oh yes, the prisoners had to do something with all that time on their hooves.” On the illusion, the lowest of three blocks flashed from green to red. “The medium security cells are here. Then medical. Then high security cells. Then the guard station and armory. Then the supermax cells. At the top is the warden’s office and central command. Then the attic, communications, and the rooftop access.”

“So they put medical and the armory between groups of prisoners? Whose stupid idea was that?” Psychoshy sarcastically asked with a roll of her eyes. Shears glared back at her with his filmy gaze.

“The design is such that, in the event of a riot, the three sections of the prison could be locked down and isolated. The elevators only go from the bottom to the top of each section, so there’s no clear path to travel from the very top to the very bottom. When in lockdown, there’s no method of travel between blocks at all, and if a pony is stupid enough to get into the central shaft, there’s numerous automated and reinforced turrets inside.”

“And the whole building’s been on lockdown for two centuries,” I muttered as I looked at the glowing tower.

“Indeed. Unlike other prisons, Warden Hobble was not about to release his charges. He activated all the building’s automated defenses. The guards and staff were every bit as trapped as the prisoners. Then the missile impacted. Radiation killed everypony quickly, and then the Enervation field appeared.” I thought of the ring in Tenpony Tower and how Helpinghoof reported that it had weakened the healing potion when the pony Helpinghoof treated died.

“How many ponies were in Hightower when the missile hit?” I asked, looking at Nurse Graves.

She stared at her hooves and murmured almost too softly to hear, “We were over capacity. Around three thousand.”

Three thousand? I thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, that had died at Silverstar Sporting Supplies. *Three thousand?*

It must have shown on my face, because Shears snorted, then dug out some .308 shell casings and tossed them on the conference table. “Please. I’ve taken steps for that. These talismans will ward off the Enervation for several hours. I suggest you not lose them, or you’ll get an intimate lesson in what happened to everypony in the Core.”

“Right,” I murmured as I passed them out to everypony coming with me.

“I thought nothing could affect Enervation,” Psychoshy said skeptically as she held one to her ear and shook it, making something inside rattle. “How do we know these even work?”

“You don’t. That talisman is the product of ancient zebra magic. If it doesn’t work, you’ll find out quite quickly.”

“Starkatteri magic?” Xanthe said at once, looking at the shell in horror.

Mr. Sheers simply shrugged. “I can never keep all your tribes straight. Suffice to say they work, and if they don’t this expedition will be over before we leave the basement.” Xanthe took the shell casing as if she expected it to turn into a radroach and bite her. A red dot appeared in the basement. “We’ll enter through the basement. From there we’ll take stairs up to the ground floor and make it to the elevator. We’ll have to physically force our way into the shaft and up to medical.”

“I still remember my access codes. I don’t know if they’ll override the lockdown, though,” Nurse Graves said softly.

“If not, I can,” Carrion growled; it was the first thing the griffin had said in the meeting.

Nurse Graves continued, “In medical, there are a number of ghouls, robots, and turrets. Patients and staff who were trapped there.... We didn’t have time to use up all the medical supplies, so there’s a large stockpile we can use to purge radiation.

“The second level is a bit more problematic. The high security area has more robots and turrets. The warhead is our biggest problem. Its magic has produced ghouls of... substantial strength. And while it is there, I doubt many of the living will last long.” Mr. Shears looked at Cerberus and Xanthe. “If the robot can follow her instructions and dump the warhead out of the hole, we should be able to get up the elevator to the armory and guard station.”

“And if that’s under lockdown, how do we get inside?” Rampage asked, looking at

Carrion. "More manual persuasion?"

Shears reached down under the table and lifted a metal case, setting it on the tabletop. He flipped it open, and at once my PipBuck started clicking. I'd seen the round glowing orbs before lining the interior of Discord's containment. A balefire egg.

"Oh, you know it's bad when that's your key," Rampage groaned, burying her face in her hooves.

"Once inside the armory, we have to get our hooves on the captain's pass. That should get us into the supermax level. However, it is physically impossible to travel from the supermax into the top of the prison during lockdown except via a highly secure emergency access. To open that, two keys must be turned simultaneously: one in the armory and one in the warden's office."

"So how do we get into the office to turn the key?"

"There's an air shaft. In the event of a riot in the supermax, the air could be flooded with tranquilizer gas," Mr. Shears said, the hologram turning to show a vertical tunnel leading from the armory to the top of the building. "The secretaries in the warden's office always complained about the smells being blown up from the armory. Fortunately, we have numerous fliers to get us through."

"And once we're inside the warden's office?"

"Get to the warden's desk. Deactivate the lockdown to shut off the external turrets. Step out onto the roof and fly to safety, after we take care of our respective goals. Easy," the ghoul said with a shrug.

"Clearly 'easy' must have meant 'freaking impossible' two centuries ago," Psychoshy muttered, and Stygius nodded.

"It's not impossible, but it will be a challenge. If you want to sit this one out, I wouldn't blame you," I said as I looked at the yellow mare. Rampage gave a taunting 'ooooh'.

She jerked as if I'd slapped her. "Sit this one out? Me?" She glared and jabbed her pinions at me. "Why don't you sit this one out? Chill out here. I'll take care of EC-1101, and we'll be done twice as fast for it."

"Sweet! Let me know how it went!" I said with a grin and started to rise, an uneasy chuckle rising from most of the collected ponies. I sat back down, looking at the assembled ponies, zebra, ghouls, and robot. "I know it will be tough. Get your weapons."

Willow raised her hoof into the air. "Um... I think you're missing a step. How exactly are you getting into the basement?"

Mr. Shears shrugged. "A simple access in a maintenance room on the Luna blue line. It is, however, sealed and can only be opened by her program." I shivered; tunnels in Hoofington were never ever good.

"The subway? As in the subway that's full of feral ghouls? Dozens of ferals? Hundreds?" Willow pressed. "There's a reason we sealed the subway access to the hospital. There's just too many down there." She glanced at me, her expression hard. "With all the radiation from the bomb, lots of ponies that took shelter in the subway turned to ghouls. The population down there is ridiculously high. Even a pony in power armor would be torn to pieces."

"I doubt they'd bother..." Mr. Shears began, then looked at me, Rampage, Lacunae, Stygius, and Psychoshy. "Oh." Yeah, it would be a pony buffet if we went down there.

"We can just carve our way through them," Carrion muttered.

But somehow the thought of trying to blast our way through hundreds of ghouls had put quite a dampener on everypony's mood. We fielded a few ideas, like Stygius offering to fly through as bait, then poofing away. Windclop couldn't spare the jerky squad to clear a way for us. Psychoshy suggested getting a few other gangers, but an army of meal tickets would just draw more ghouls.

"Too bad we can't just tell them to get out of our way," Rampage muttered, then belched and blew a big soap bubble.

"Yeah. Ferals may leave normal ghouls alone... and occasionally we can herd them up and persuade them to move... but they never actually do what we say," Nurse Graves said with a sigh.

I sat there a moment, feeling frustrated. It'd take days to thin the population or try and move them. If we barged in, we might lose somepony.

I flipped open my PipBuck and activated the routing for EC-1101. A little navigation tag appeared on my EFS. '*Come and get me,*' it seemed to taunt. '*Risk your life... risk your friends' lives... come and get me... and then I'll send you somewhere even more dangerous.*' Maybe it would be better to simply give up. Take EC-1101 far and away from Hoofington and give up the idea that I would ever find out what Horizons was or what Goldenblood had planned to do with it.

It was the smart thing to do. Maybe it was time I wised up. The ghouls weren't going to go away just by me being nice and telling them to.

Then I blinked and slowly straightened. Rampage noticed at once. “What? What is it? You’ve got that look, Blackjack.”

“What look?” I asked with a grin.

“That ‘crazy idea’ look that means peeling ghouls and wearing their skins or something like that,” Rampage said warily.

“Well...” I slowly looked at all of them. “Depending on how much radiation Lacunae’s got sucked up... I might know a pony who they *will* listen to.”

The tunnels beneath Hoofington were bad; there was just no way to think otherwise. We trotted down to the hospital’s subway access just past the Mortuary and the reinforced doors. All of them were covered except for a small metal one marked ‘Emergency exit. Alarm will sound’. Willow pushed on the bar. I’d expected a groan, or worse, a squeal of hinges that’d alert everything for hundred miles. Instead I got a soft whisper of air blowing in from the tunnels. So much for the alarm.

“It’ll lock behind you,” Windclop said nervously. “We’ll stay a few minutes. In case your plan... doesn’t work.”

“It’ll work,” I said, looking back at our newest member. Nopony else looked nearly as confident. They’d spent the time I was gone making sure they had what they needed. Everypony with a pulse besides Rampage and Lacunae had a half dozen dozes of Rad-X and Rad-Away; I’d raided Bonesaw at Megamart, since I was in the area. Everypony else had loaded up with what they needed.

I’d almost gone to Chapel; I really wanted to, but... I couldn’t. Not till this was out of the way. Same with checking on Boing. There was just too much guilt to face that right now.

I started to step out and then paused, looked at Willow, and asked, “Keep an eye on Boing, please? She’s... really hurt and it’s my fault and...”

“I got it,” the ghoul muttered, rolling her eyes. “Keep your eyes on Carrion. Something’s going on in Meatlocker, and I don’t like it one bit.” I nodded and stepped through the door.

We slowly walked out on to the subway platform. A few flickering emergency lights lit the tunnel as we trotted down towards the rusted hulk of a subway car. Skeletons were curled on the seats. The engineer dangled, half ejected from the front car. My

light spell burst to life, casting the ruined subway in its cold white glow.

“Spooky...” Psychoshy muttered. Water trickled in a sheet over the tile mosaics that lined the walls; colourful pony families gleefully riding the subway, the happy scenes now cracked and spotted with mold. Green light emanating from behind us reflected off the streams and gave the tunnel a eerie luminescence. The sound of trickling water was everywhere, and my imagination was transforming the trickles and splashes into voices murmuring from far away.

“I’ve seen worse,” I replied as I walked to the end of the subway landing. I looked over at Nurse Graves as Cerberus floated above us. “Will feral ghouls actually attack you?”

“As a rule, no, but when they’re agitated, we’re every bit as much targets as the living,” the mare replied. She had two armored cases loaded with healing potions from Megamart. Hopefully they’d last a while before they spoiled. Lacunae had filled them full of every last bit of healing magic they could hold. “Wheelbarrow theorizes that there’s something in the way non-ghouls move that triggers an attack response. Or perhaps it’s just the effects of the magical contamination. Sadly, once a pony goes feral, there’s little chance of coming back from it.”

I gestured for Carrion to take point, and the power-armored griffin did so without complaint. I didn’t trust him, but his pair of miniguns would be our best defense if they swarmed. I really, really didn’t want to get swarmed.

“Like, these tunnels are so disgusting! Somepony really needs to clean them up!” came a mutter from the back of the group. I sighed, rolling my eyes.

Nurse Graves looked back with a worried frown. “Are you sure about bringing her?”

“What?” I asked with a grin. “She’s coming along, isn’t she? She’s happy to help her friend.”

The ghoul frowned, and my smile slipped a little. “But does she understand what we’re doing here?” the nurse asked.

“She understands enough. I know she’s not all there, but she’s our best chance for getting through the ghouls without getting torn to pieces.” I glanced back as well but then quickly changed the subject. “I was wondering, though: what keeps a ghoul... well... together?” I asked as I looked at the nurse.

She still didn’t look very happy about my choice, but answered, “It’s... hard to explain. It’s like there’s a thing inside you that’s you. Like a tiny guttering flame. If you’re careful and protect it, then you can remember who you are. But if it goes

out. . ." She shook her head. "Wheelbarrow believes there's some life magic in the living that keeps that flame protected. Like. . . glue. But in ghouls it's much weaker."

"It's your soul," Mr. Shears said from the middle of the group. "A pony can continue living so long as they have the tiniest fragment of their soul. Without it, we're mindless animals at best. We might have a brain, but we would have no will to suppress our aggressive urges." His cloudy eyes glanced behind us. "Retaining one's soul is easier when you are alive because your living flesh has a strong natural bond with your spirit."

"Fragment of a soul? You mean souls can break?" Psychoshy asked as she looked around for confirmation, hovering above us. Stygius, flying alongside her, just gave a shrug.

Mr. Shears gave a sharp little hiss. "If you know what you are doing, yes. Just as you can use a single candle to light others, you can divide a soul into different vessels."

Xanthe muttered something about curses. I looked at Nurse Graves' stunned expression and asked the question on everyone's mind. "How do you know this?"

"Because I am Equestria's premiere expert on souls." He sounded pompous for a moment before he snorted, "Not that it matters much anymore. Souls won't keep a raving Reaper at bay, and guns are infinitely more practical." I looked at Graves in concern.

"Weren't you concerned about being ripped to pieces an hour ago?" Carrion grumbled from the front of the group, his miniguns' motors whirring every few steps. "I'm sure the ferals are just fascinated by all this talk about souls."

"Oh, yeah. That." I flushed as I looked ahead as we walked along the middle of the tube. Water flowed around our hooves. Gaps appeared in the tiled wall showing rebar and deeper voids within. And there were red bars on the other side of that wall. Lots of red.

"Where are they?" Graves asked, her voice low and tense. "This should be an irresistible meal."

"They're here," Carrion growled. The ghoulish griffin's tatty wings ruffled. "They've been surrounding us since we left the station." I happened to glance at a gap in the wall and saw a momentary flash of a mottled hide.

"I thought they were mindless," I muttered, growing more apprehensive by the second, lifting the riot shotgun and making sure I had it loaded with antipersonnel

flechettes. Over the sound of running water I could just barely make out the sound of hooves in nearby tunnels and a low hissing.

“Soulless,” Shears corrected. “Ferals have minds of a sort, but they don’t have personality. They’re undead animals... but even animals can show cunning.”

Ahead was another station. A flickering sign above the platform read ‘Hightower’. In the wan light, I could see that two more tunnels ran into this one, forming sharp angles. Everywhere I looked was red, and yet I couldn’t see any ghouls! What were they waiting for? I swallowed and slowly approached the stairs onto the platform. The flickering ‘Hightower’ sign kept filling[a] the area with shadows and light so fast my eyes struggled to keep up with the changing illumination. The green ghostly glow behind us didn’t help either as it[b] reflected off the water-slicked tiles. Two subway trains lay smashed together under the high vaulted ceiling like abused toys, their occupants now nothing but bones.

“The maintenance room is on the far side of the station,” Shears muttered softly. “It was a way for us to come and go clandestinely and to do our work in private.”

“And what was that work?” I asked tensely as the hissing increased. Water had built up into scummy pools around the broken, twisted cars. My radiation meter was starting to go ‘click click click’, and those of us who needed it took a Rad-X tablet immediately.

“Pony immortality,” he said grimly. Rampage looked over at the little round ghoul, her eyes inscrutable pink pools. I tensed, but she only looked away again.

As we walked onto the landing alongside the pools, the water sloshed underhoof. Part of the wall had collapsed, and filthy cold water poured out of it and across the tiles. The exit was a solid wall of rubble. Dozens more bones were mixed in the debris; ponies who had sought safety had found death. A bridge crossed the subway lines to the platform on the far side of the tracks. ‘Do your part for Luna!’ demanded a ragged, decayed banner.

Psychoshy and Stygius flew over the twisted wreckage of the cars as we made our way towards the far side of the station. Maybe we were going to luck out? Maybe we were too heavily armed for them to risk it?

Then the pool directly beneath Stygius exploded, a feral launching itself up ten feet into the air. Its hooves wrapped around the batpony, jagged fangs locking down into his throat as the broken hooves pinned his wings to his side. The two tumbled down into the filthy frothing pool, disappearing from sight!

"Stygius!" Psychoshy screamed, but then two ghouls launched themselves from the bridge, leaping down upon her. One missed and landed, hissing and baring its shattered maw, next to me while the other landed squarely on her back. Fangs began to snap at her neck. Psychoshy slammed up, ramming the ghoul against the underside of the bridge. "Get! Off! My! Ass!" Finally she scraped her back against the cracked underside, showering the pools below in grit and ghoul before the monster broke apart.

None of us had any time to go to Stygius' aid. No sooner had I blasted the head off the ghoul that landed beside me, than four more leapt out of the twisted wreckage and were upon me. I'd always thought feral ghouls to be mindless, pitiful enemies. My hazy memories of my adventure with LittlePip involved ghouls and a subway train, but I wasn't sure on the particulars of that night. I raised my metal hooves, and their mouths chomped down on the enameled limbs as my magic swung the gun to the next target. But instead of biting and biting again, the two ghouls bit down and jerked me forward. I got one shot off, blasting off a chunk of rotten flank, before the third pounced on my floating gun and started to gnaw on it, ruining my aim. And the fourth? Well with me largely immobilized, it lunged straight for my face!

My magic bullet spell flashed from my horn; the ghoul's head exploded in a detonation of bone and grisly flesh before it could ruin Glory's work. Two more magic bullets were needed to destroy the ghoul on my left hoof. Then I slammed the limb into the face of the third ghoul over and over again. On the fifth blow, the battered head burst apart in rotten chunks. Now free, I reared up and slammed both steel hooves into the feral's face as it turned towards me and started to lunge. The blow smashed it into a twitching heap.

I was doing better than most. Rampage was dealing with a horde spilling out of the drainage pipe. She had more than a half dozen trying to tear her down as she bucked, stomped and bodyslammed the ghouls with such force that some of them exploded between the wall and her armor. She had her razor-wire-wrapped tail looped around one's throat and was slowly sawing through it as she thrashed wildly. Even she looked terrified... after all, this wasn't too much different than the mêlée that saw her become a buffet for 99.

Lacunae and Cerberus floated above, the former completely annihilating the heads of her enemies with shots of her AM rifle while the latter sprayed flame down from above, punctuated with the occasional blast of disintegration magic and insults like 'Take that, maggot farm!' and 'Proud to be an Equestrian! Oo-Rah!' Perhaps those two could have saved our hides, except for one fact... ghouls could jump! I watched

as they raced with eerie grace along the tops of the trains and launched themselves into the air towards the pair. Lacunae's shield, so effective at stopping bullets, was useless at stopping a relatively slow-moving ghoul. They bit and scratched wherever they landed, biting down on her purple wings.

"Get yer stinkin' hooves off me you damned dirty ghoul!" Cerberus shouted as he struggled to keep aloft with three ghouls clamped down on his limbs.

Carrion seemed to ignore the carnage around us as he pointed his miniguns down the tunnel and poured a constant stream of fire at the flood of ghouls pouring towards us. Their screams almost drowned out the resonant purr of his miniguns as he kept us from being completely overwhelmed. The ejected five millimeter brass sparkled brightly in the glaring muzzle flashes.

Xanthe, Graves, and Shears stood back to back, fending off their attackers. Xanthe muttered over and over, "I'm cursed! The stars have damned me! Utterly cursed." Yet while she wasn't fighting near Rampage's level, her hooves were keeping the undead attackers at bay with strange flashing kicks and stomps that allowed her to deflect the ghouls' snapping fangs. Graves held the strap of one of the armored medical cases in her mouth and swung it like a bludgeon, or maybe an incredibly stout purse. Shears had pulled from his robe a pair of large, wicked-looking magic-powered hedge trimmers. Every time a ghoul lunged forward, the clippers snapped, and more than one ghoul fell back missing a leg or head.

There was a shadowy flash, and a bloody Stygius appeared on the landing, bleeding heavily from several bites to his neck and scratches to his wings. The pool frothed as two ghouls clambered out after him. He opened his mouth wide and let out a squeal that seemed to stun the ferals. They slumped on busted legs, shattered bones poking out of their tattered hide, before he kicked out and pulverized their skulls. Four more emerged from the pools in the meantime.

There was only one pony who wasn't getting attacked. One who was squinting at a rancid advertisement for mane curlers, oblivious to the battle. I took a deep breath and bellowed as loudly as I could, "Spoon!"

The glowing gray ghoul looked up, blinking her luminescent green eyes from behind her deformed spectacle frames. "Oh! Sorry! Coming!" she yelled as she trotted towards the fight. The glowing gray mare snorted at the ferals. "Hey! Stop that! Get off them right now!" she said as she trotted into the middle of them. "If you don't stop fighting, I'm going to report you to Pinkie Pie!" The ghostly green light emanating from within her seemed to brighten, and the ferals hissed and slowly backed away.

She nodded primly. "There. Knew that'd get them to behave."

Psychoshy landed next to the bloodied Stygius. "I need— I need— potion. Healing potion! Quick!" she stammered. Graves trotted over immediately. Lacunae shook the ghouls off and darted next to the medic, her horn glowing as all three mares treated his injuries.

The ghouls weighing down Cerberus detached and backed away as Silver Spoon trotted around the perimeter. Their hisses dropped to almost nothing as she passed, and I was astonished to see red bars turning blue. Carrion stopped his fire, gunbarrels raising steam in the wet air as he looked at the gray glowing one in shock. I had to admit I was pretty impressed too!

"Oo-Rah! Like fish in a barrel!" Cerberus cheered, then pointed his disintegration talisman at one and fired. Instantly the ghouls let out a hiss in unison as one of them collapsed into a heap of green goop.

"Stand down!" I shouted as the ghouls pawed at the shattered floor tiles with their broken hooves.

"Need to frag this maggot-loving superior officer... Damn combat inhibitor!" he muttered darkly.

Silver Spoon looked at the hissing ghouls and snapped, "Oh just stop it right now! Honestly, blank flanks today." She trotted towards me, my PipBuck ticking even more. "So, like, ready to go, Tiara?"

"S... sure, Silver Spoon. And nice job with those gh... er... ponies," I said, giving her a grin. She flushed, her cheeks going even more green, but then her face turned a little more worried.

"Are you sure everything's okay, Tiara? I mean, you're like being totally nice. It's weird." I got the impression that Diamond Tiara hadn't been the most pleasant of ponies to be around.

"Yeah. Sure. I'm just glad you're helping me get back into my office. It was so embarrassing to be locked out." I grinned sheepishly, and Silver Spoon nodded slowly with sympathy.

"It's okay. I'm so glad to be able to, like, do anything with you! The M.o.M.[c] has been such a total nightmare since Goldenblood was replaced."

"Oh?" I asked as Graves got Stygius back on his hooves. The healing magic was closing the injuries in his wings surprisingly quickly. "Um... was he that big a deal

in your office?"

"Well totally. I mean, Pinkie Pie might be in charge on paper, but everypony knows Quartz and the O.I.A. call the real shots. I mean, everypony at the M.o.M. either hates Pinkie's guts or is scared to death of her, but we all gotta smile smile smile!" the ghoul said with an exaggerated grin before she slumped. "I think I should have followed your lead, Tiara. At least you were away from the nuthouse out in Shattered Hoof."

"Quartz?" I frowned.

"The O.I.A. liaison? You know Quartz. Everypony in M.o.M. Law Enforcement does." She snorted, "The mare that, like, keeps Pinkie Pie from arresting half of Equestria?"

"Oh... ah... really? Wow." I looked nervously at the others as we started moving towards the far side of the landing. "I really didn't know she'd gotten that bad. I mean... was Goldenblood really running the M.o.M. behind Pinkie's back?" It seemed a bit much, even for Goldenblood.

"Well, he's probably not *personally* running it, and definitely not the whole M.o.M., but he totally has his hooves all over the law enforcement branch. I don't think he cares about party reservations, balloon research, or theme parks, after all. But we totally know who assigns our Hearths Warming Eve bonuses, and you just don't go behind Quartz's back." She glanced at me from over her warped glasses frames with a serious look to imply what happened to ponies who did.

"So, Quartz calls the shots then?" I asked as I glanced at the others, who looked a tad impatient.

"Oh it's nothing *that* direct. Like, whenever Pinkie Pie orders all the 'bad ponies' in Equestria to be arrested, we look at Quartz two minutes after Pinkie leaves the room, and she nods or shakes her head... usually shakes... and we just stall till Pinkie Pie gets distracted by something else." She rolled her eyes. "If it weren't for Pumpkin and Pound, I think they would have cut her out completely, but those two can usually handle her when she's raving."

I looked on with a tense smile. "Wow. I'd forgotten how... interesting... things are at the Manhattan hub."

"Oh trust me, I, like, haven't even gotten to the juicy stuff." She smiled for a moment but it didn't last. She sighed. "It's never been so... tense... as right now though. When Goldie was kicked out last month, I totally thought Pinkie Pie's head was, like, going to split in two, she grinned so much. Sent him a box of her PTM's as a

present."

"And since then?" I asked as we reached the maintenance room. Four ghouls stared from the corner as we trotted past towards a set of shelving loaded with junk. Shears's horn glowed under his hood, and the shelves slid to one side, revealing an alcove concealed in the back wall. Directly ahead was a solid-looking door with the O.I.A. symbol carved into it and a small terminal mounted beside it.

Silver Spoon sighed and rolled her glowing eyes. "Oh, business as usual in the party sectors, but totally a mess in the law enforcement branch. I mean, Quartz is still there, but she doesn't seem to know what's going on anymore. I mean, she seemed to be really close and devoted to Goldenblood, so maybe she's just hanging in there while Horse settles in. I dunno. No pony does..." I wondered if Horse even knew what Quartz did at the M.o.M.

"As awesome as catching up on stale M.o.M. gossip is, I'd really like it if we could get through this door," Shears said impatiently, pointing at the terminal. The machine had clearly been scratched up, as if somepony had tried to pry the front plate off.

"Do I know you?" Silver Spoon asked Shears in an annoyed tone, but the round little ghoul refused to meet her eye.

I moved up to the door, and my eyes started to do the crazy data streaming stuff, matched by data on the terminal screen. Finally it concluded with:

EC-1101 Confirmed.

Unseal Project Eternity: Y/N?

Project Eternity. The search for eternal life. I looked at Mr. Shears; his glossy white eyes seemed to drink in the words on the terminal screen. "This is what you're after?"

The question made him balk. "What? No. That's simply history. You probably have far more interest in that than I do." His annoyance seemed so sincere that if he was playing me, he'd probably been a performer in another life. I peered at the screen, then looked around. Yup, there was the Dealer, his weathered features pale and grim as he watched me. I looked at him for several seconds, sure that he was going to give some possibly insightful and probably annoyingly cryptic comment, but all he did was shrug.

Vaguely disappointed, I sighed and then hit the 'Y' button on the terminal.

My vision exploded in data that moved in a blur. I staggered to the side, hit the wall, and nearly collapsed. My friends and the dingy maintenance room disappeared as

streaming letters and numbers filled my vision and everything went white.

I hung looking down from the ceiling of a tastefully but luxuriously decorated penthouse apartment. The elaborate white marble masonry gave the whole room a classy and sophisticated look, and the front windows provided an absolutely magnificent view of what could only be a royal palace of some sort. Below me, on an elegantly-crafted table, was a glass box that held a dozen colourful little puffballs with diaphanous wings. Then the door opened and in walked Rarity. Her purple mane was working its way out of its gorgeous curls, and her brow was furrowed with anxiety.

She trotted in and set her bags on the counter top. Then the phone rang, and she sighed with a little growl of annoyance before levitating the receiver to her ear. "Rarity!" she answered, her voice gay and bright, even as she slumped at the table. Then she sat up a little more. "Oh, no no no, Fluttershy. Not a bad time at all, dear. It's been such an absolutely miserable time, what with Macintosh's funeral and all. There was a little business I had to take care of in Zebratown... nothing major," she added as pulled out a familiar black book.

She lifted the lid of the glass box and called out, "Dinnertime, sweeties. Mommy's got something special for you!" She tossed the book inside the glass box, closing the lid quickly after it. The colored puffballs began to flit and hover around the book, opening their mouths, hesitating, then tentatively nibbling at the pages and licking the ink.

"Oh, no Fluttershy, I was talking to the parasprites. I just couldn't do the job Luna asks without them." A pause and a sigh. "Yes, yes, I remember Ponyville. I wouldn't want a repeat here in Canter..." Rarity trailed off and sighed, "There there... there's no need to... I mean... I'm sorry, Fluttershy. Go ahead. Cry if you need to." She trotted to a divan next to the table and flopped back on it, nodding every now and then. "I can be there if you need me to. All right, if you're sure..."

"No, Darling. You're not being silly at all. When I think of you... of any of our friends... getting... well, you know... Remember how close Pinkie Pie came with that nasty bomb in Hoofington? If it'd been anypony else, I dare say they wouldn't have been so fortunate. I keep thinking about it over and over again." She snorted softly. "Yes, I know Goldenblood promised to triple our protection. It's hard enough to get work done as it is." She paused again with another frown. "Yes, I know Twilight is

researching new spells to keep us safe." Finally she gave a little huff, her expression irritable. "You don't understand. I feel like... like I need to do something. I need to make something to keep you all safe."

Something was happening to the parasprites in the glass box. They were changing from their bright colors to muddy brown. Their eyes bulged and they banged against the glass as if trying to escape from the case.

Rarity continued on in a soft tone, "I've been researching my own sources. Twilight may have the most premiere collection of magical tomes and Goldenblood his own squirreled-away rare volumes, but I still have my hooves in every library, newspaper, and publisher in Equestria. I've been particularly intrigued by zebra myths of 'soul silk', capable of being stronger than steel. Can you imagine such a thing?" She sighed softly. "Well, of course I'd use it to help soldiers like Big Macintosh. After all of you are safe. And the Princesses, of course."

The parasprites went black and tumbled down around the large book that was bound in what looked unsettlingly like darkened zebra hide. The yellowed pages slowly turned one by one behind her back as if invisible hooves were slowly finding a particular one. "Yes Dear... yes... yes... I'm sorry you feel so rotten... yes... I know... I love you too. Right. Good night Fluttershy. Yes, I'll see you at the spa. Promise... try to get some rest." Her magic hung up the receiver and she sighed.

Her azure eyes lifted to stare up at the roof, and for a moment she looked old and scared. "It could have been Celestia. Or Twilight. Or Fluttershy. I have to do... something. Something to protect my friends."

A few seconds later, she rolled to her hooves and approached the table with a wide smile. "And how does Mommy's little helpers like their din-din, hmm?" Then she saw the crumbled black balls laying like lumps of soot around the book. "What... what is this?" she demanded as her eyes widened. To her credit, she didn't scream. Slowly, she opened the lid of the case and lifted the book out. The parasprites collapsed into little heaps of ash as she set the volume, still open, on the table before her.

Rarity stared raptly at the text. "Soul silk?" she whispered, taking a step back from the table. Then suddenly she narrowed her eyes and glared. "I don't know who you are or what you are, but I know when somepony... er... book... is trying to play me for a fool!"

But though she glared at the book, there before her eyes was what she wanted. Her magic slammed the book shut with all its force. "You might have killed my poor

parasprites, but we'll see how you do when Twilight gets her hooves on you." She picked up the phone and stared to dial, then paused and looked back at the book. Little beads of sweat popped from her brow. "Now Rarity, just look at it! It's clearly a wicked thing! I mean, it's made from a zebra! How grotesque!" She continued dialling, but more slowly now, her eyes drawn back to the horrible text.

"I need to do something myself. Something to save my friends..." she murmured.

"Hello?" came Twilight's voice, distant and tinny from the receiver. Rarity's purple eyes stared at the piles of ash and then back at the book. "Applejack...?"

She slowly pressed the receiver to her ear. "No no, Twilight. It's Rarity. I just..." She paused, and her eyes turned concerned once more. "Twilight... I... yes, I know. I'm sorry. I know... Oh Twilight, please don't cry." Rarity curled a little around the phone, her eyes returning to the closed book. "Yes... yes... I know... when I imagine it being one of you..." Rarity sniffed and scrubbed a tear from her eye. "Yes... I know. Try... try to get some sleep. Ask for some time off if you need it. And if Luna doesn't like it, tell her to take over the M.A.S. herself."

Rarity's eyes lingered on the dark tome one last time, then said in low tones, as if afraid the book might hear, "I might need your help. Nothing major... certainly nothing that needs to involve Goldenblood. Just need... some friendly advice. Right... good. Please take care of yourself, Twilight."

The receiver returned to the cradle, and she stared at the book for the longest time, biting her hoof. Finally, she approached it as if it were a snake. "Well... it wouldn't hurt to know the details..." she murmured as she carefully straightened the book and opened it slowly once more.

My vision returned, and I slumped against the terminal, almost collapsing again. Ugh... you'd think that opening a magically-sealed megafile of arcane whatsit would be easier. I picked myself up and looked back. "How long was I out?"

"You were out?" Psychoshy scowled in confusion.

Rampage wore a worried expression. "Are you okay, Blackjack?"

I forced a grin. "Oh yeah, sure. As okay as I ever am." The worry turned a little more sympathetic, but she didn't pry.

Wow... that was way faster than usual. Was it because the recording was sealed, or

something else? I shook my head hard to clear out the disorientation, idly wondering if there was a single other pony in the Wasteland who'd had as many hallucinations and visions shoved into their head as me. No time to ponder that now, though.

I peered down the narrow, rusty pipe-lined hallway that extended before us. It gave the impression of a bloody shotgun barrel, the air filled with a reek of sulfur, water, and rust. A chill filled the air and made my mane prickle. I looked back at the others. Some eyes were filled with confidence, some with fear, and others with calm resignation.

And I was about to lead them into the deadliest place I'd ever been.

This was different than storming Hippocratic Research. Then, there'd been the drive to get my PipBuck back and stop Sanguine. Here, I was going in because I chose to. If they died, it'd rest squarely on my shoulders.

But the only alternative was to give up.

I couldn't do that. Not ever. It'd mean losing.

I took one step, then another, and made my way down the tunnel in the front of the group; if I was leading them into a deathtrap, then I would lead. The passage was barely wide enough for Carrion's armor anyway. The radiation was clicking very slowly; just one rad per second. We'd been exposed to more than that in the subway station. I suspected the source was our glowing companion in the rear. Still, it was something to keep an eye on. When Stygius was through, the door closed with a solid thunk behind us, yet inexplicably I could feel a sensation almost like a draft blowing coldly over my hide. My E.F.S. flickered a few times. More recordings, or something else? The list was too long for me to worry about now.

I felt a sensation like trotting through a sheet of ice water, and my E.F.S. suddenly went down completely. "Ugh... what just happened?" I said, looking around the suddenly barless world around me. "My Pipbuck isn't working right."

"You just entered Hightower's magic dampening field, but I suspect it's been badly damaged by the balefire bomb and time. It affects different magics differently," Shears said from behind me. "Teleportation is no longer an option. I had no idea it'd affect your PipBuck too, though. . ."

I looked way back at Lacunae; the tall alicorn was having to duck her head to keep her horn from scraping the ceiling. She looked quite agitated. I supposed being trapped underground without the ability to just teleport away would be quite disconcerting. Fortunately, I'd been without my PipBuck's E.F.S. enough that it didn't make

me hesitate more than a few seconds. I'd just have to do things the old fashioned way.

"So... you were involved in Project Eternity?" I asked as I moved down the tunnel with the shotgun ready to give something a very bad day.

"Several lifetimes ago, yes. Hardly matters now," Shears muttered.

"What was it? Specifically?"

"Specifically could take all day. Here's the abridged version. I was brought in at the beginning. Rarity needed unicorns that weren't affiliated with the M.A.S. Twilight Sparkle had virtually cornered the market on every unicorn with spell or talisman talent. So she went looking for other unicorns. We... I... was working at a steam cleaning store in Bucklyn when she found me."

"Why you?" I asked with a frown as we came to steps leading down... the direction opposite the one I wanted to go. Still, there hadn't been any forks yet, so down it was.

"I suppose it was little things. I'd... failed... to join the M.A.S., she knew me from Ponyville, we were both interested in tailoring, and..." He muttered something too low for me to hear.

"What was that?" I asked with a frown.

"I... won an award for magic... once. Stupid little thing. But Rarity needed us and she had a way of wrapping any stallion around her hoof. So we helped her. Compared to what our lives were before, staggering from one failure to the next, we were happy to do whatever she required of us," Shears said quietly.

There was a door ahead. I could hear the sounds of water sloshing around and gestured everypony to wait a moment. "Water recycling and the reactor should be here," Shears pointed out from behind me as I pushed the rusty door open, looking warily through.

I beheld a lambent, radioactive nightmare. Slowly, as if in a daze, we stepped out on to the catwalk and looked at a room I could barely imagine. The space reminded me of the reactor in 99 and the water pumps that kept the vital fluid clean and circulating. Here, however, was a scene that would have terrified Scotch and given Rivets a seizure; two hundred years of neglect and corrosion had turned the reactor into a solid lump of rust, the few windows in the hulk filling the dripping room with its harsh green glare. Water sprayed from countless cracks and breaks, sloshing around the rusted pump housings in a sea of bluish-green fluid. The moisture had

transformed the catwalks into fragile spans of rust. I wasn't even sure if the reeking, sulfuric, foamy sludge below could technically be called 'water' anymore.

"I don't think this was in the plan!" Psychoshy shouted. She'd donned the yellow hazardous materials suit and didn't look happy to have her wings stuck inside the protective wingcovers.

"Where's the way through?" I yelled over the squealing, pumping machinery and growling, hissing reactor. Please don't be... please... but the ghoul simply pointed across the room to the far side of the catwalk. Of course it was all the way over there! I took three steps out on the metal walkway. It groaned ominously beneath me, and I tried not to breathe too deeply.

Then Stygius flashed next to me and tapped my shoulder. He pointed to his eyes with a hoof, then down at the water, and made motions of something swimming around. No... way... Still, I made sure my gun was ready as I started across. Really, if Carrion was here to kill me, he'd have no better chance than right now.

"I hate this place. I hate this place! I hate this place!" I shouted and started to trot quickly ahead. There was just too much radiation to linger. The catwalk cracked and popped, swaying with each step. Jets of fluid shot from leaking pipes along the walls and ceiling in lovely, deadly blue arcs, and I bent and twisted to keep from getting hit by them. As I crossed the room, I shivered at the unearthly cacophony coming from the reactor. I could only marvel a moment at Stable-Tec engineering; even so dangerously neglected, it was still running.

Psychoshy and Stygius followed after me, radioactive water droplets dripping off their suits as they crossed. They'd nearly gotten completely across when one of the pipes gave a sharp bang overhead and fluid the consistency of fecal matter began to dribble from it and pile up on the catwalk. I stared in horror as the bluish heap began to lunge up and wiggle. It thrust out two hooves towards me and a dripping equine head emerged. Then a second slime pony began to form and started shambling towards Stygius and Psychoshy.

Oh this so wasn't in the plan! I pointed the shotgun and fired two flechettes into the mass; they passed halfway through its body and then disappeared with an acidic hiss. I backed off as it formed hind legs and started to shamble towards me.

Stygius pulled off his helmet and backed away as a third slime pony began to coalesce from the cascading sludge. He took a deep breath and let out an ultrasonic scream, making the entire blue mass jiggle wildly. Suddenly it popped, spraying goop everywhere. He let out a high-pitched, barely-audible shriek of pain as the

spray began to blacken and smoke where it contacted his skin. He shook himself furiously, trying to get it off as it ate into his hide. Psychoshy brushed at the slime frantically, trying to get it off before it made its way though her suit.

Out came the sword, but it passed through the slimepony with no effect at all. As another slimepony started to form, the catwalk let out a long, ominous groan. It probably wasn't built to take this much weight.

"Carrion! Lacunae! Blast that pipe!" I shouted, pointing with my sword further down the corroded span. The ghoul responded immediately by blasting a long stream of fire, soon followed by the resounding boom of the alicorn's AM rifle. The bullets stared to chew through the metal and sent a few splatters of goo falling into the mess below, but more was still vomiting onto the catwalk. I swung the sword and shoved the slimepony in front of me with my telekinesis in futility, being forced steadily back. Finally, there was a resounding crack as the corroded pipe split, sending the stream of goop splashing into the frothing mess below. "Lacunae, clear the way!" I bellowed as I gave ground.

My rear leg punched through the catwalk, and I fell through all the way to the hip. The slimepony's hoofsteps made the catwalk hiss as it shambled towards me. Lacunae hovered in the air, her horn glowing as her telekinesis flung the writhing masses into the muck below. But it'd take her a few seconds to reach me.

That was a few seconds I didn't have.

In desperation, I plunged my forehooves into the gloopy mess and screamed as all kinds of alerts flickered in my vision. My legs might have been metal, but the enchantments on them made them feel fiery pain as if I'd shoved them into boiling water. The white enamel hissed and began to flake away almost immediately as the slimepony just slurped its way up my limbs towards my face. Oh damn it. Glory just fixed that!

Then there was a flash of yellow as Psychoshy was there, almost hugging the acidic monster. Her hazmat suit hissed as the material fought its corrosive effect, and then she bucked the slime away, the power hooves' crackling impacts flinging it back into the pool. "Psychoshy, you saved me." I gaped up at her as I pulled my leg free.

She suddenly blinked behind her helmet and looked uncomfortable, turning back to the rest of our friends crossing towards us. "Oh... yeah... right." She and Stygius raced past, and the pair started struggling with a rusted door.

"Like, I think that this place totally needs a major inspection! Somepony isn't doing

their job at all, Tiara!" Spoon yelled as she raced across with Nurse Graves. For a second, I was certain that they were going to make it.

Then I looked down.

The glowing sludge was starting to heap up underneath the catwalk. The immense mound formed a huge, dripping maw that reached up to devour them both in its acidic cavity. I could only watch in horror as it closed on the catwalk and with a ripping and shredding of metal pulled it down into the glowing depths below.

"Like... I wanna go home. I wanna go home right now, Tiara!" came a call from above. The glowing forms of Graves and Silver Spoon hugged each other tight as they were held aloft by the hovering Lacunae. Carrion and Cerberus followed along through the air, the robot's disintegration gun blasting the slimeponies as the blobs started climbing the walls towards us. Shears rode the floating robot's round body, hugging the top for dear life. Carrion, however, caught a faceful of blue slime pouring from the busted pipe along the roof. The helmet of his armor was hissing from acidic goop, but he passed by without complaint. The huge slime head was starting to rear again as Lacunae landed.

Shears got the door open, and the group funneled through into the next room as Lacunae stood majestically before the immense head of slime. "You! Shall! Not! Hurt! My! Friends!" she shouted as her eyes glowed with power. Each word was punctuated by an arrow of furious silver magic that exploded on impact, blasting out huge gobs of the monster's mass. It still came on, more and more goop surging towards the alicorn.

I stumbled to the door, the last one through save for Lacunae. "Lacunae! Come on!" The alicorn's horn flared, then died. Then flared and died again... No! "You can't teleport!"

Her purple eyes popped wide in shock as the mass bore down on her. I supposed that, for her, not being able to teleport was almost like Psychoshy not being able to fly; she'd been so used to it that she'd forgotten. Instead, a shimmering bubble enveloped her an instant before the slime mouth chomped down and swallowed her whole. The purple light of her shield flickered and disappeared as I stared. No. No no... please no...

Then the purple light flared, a bubble swelling in the center, and the mass exploded outwards as she erupted from the slime behemoth. It began to pull together immediately, reforming a new head and mouth, but by then Lacunae was swooping towards the door. As soon as she was through, I pulled it shut with my now-gray

fingers. A moment later an impact made the entire wall bulge inward with a cracking of stone and bending of steel. Everypony just stared in shock for a moment, then watched as blue slime began to trickle through the bottom of the door. "We should get going. Now."

"Tiara! What is going on?" Silver Spoon asked, staring at me through her blackened frames.

"Not now, Silver Spoon." The long, high room we were in had pipes running up several dozen feet, and from the water and radiation, we had no time to waste in here before slime began to come after us. Indeed, it immediately started dribbling through holes in the pipes, and slimy, pony shaped globs began to ooze after us. The stairs leading up to the room's only other door were a rusted, jumbled mess. Lacunae lifted Graves, Xanthe and Silver Spoon as she floated up. Rampage cleared it in a single leap. Psychoshy flew ungainly upwards, her wings weighed down by the bulky suit with Stygius at her side. Carrion departed without a word, swooping up towards the top of the shaft. I leapt up and wrapped my fingers around Cerberus' arms as more and more goop began to fill the room.

"Damn, you are one heavy maggot lover, aren't you?" the robot asked as it struggled to lift me up towards where the others were gathering at another sturdy hatch. Blue slime coated the floor, and it was starting to make mouths beneath my hooves.

"Up! Up! Elevation! Altitude!" I shouted as acidic mouths began lunging and gooey hooves waved up at me. But apparently I was just a little over his weight limit. My rear hooves blackened and hissed as they kicked the yawning mouths. In desperation, I returned to shooting them with my levitated shotgun to try and get them down, but all it really did was splatter them a little. Behind me, the slime was building in a wave. And then that wave raced down the room towards me.

"Buck up, soldier! Equestria wasn't won by bellyaching!" Cerberus said he floated beneath the doorway.

"And it wasn't won by getting digested in a pool of blue slime either!" I yelled as the cresting wave grew a mouth!

Then a purple glow grabbed both of us and lifted us up just as the wave rolled beneath my dangling rear hooves and crashed into the wall with an incredible splash. We were hauled up through the doorway as the goop surged beneath us. My corroded limbs scraped at the doorjamb as the slime gathered itself up once more. Purple, blue, and white magic gripped the door and slammed it shut. There was another thud. A second. A softer third. Then nothing.

"Funny. I don't recall pony-eating slime in the plans," Psychoshy said as she looked at Stygius. "Did you hear something about pony-eating slime? 'Cause I sure didn't." She pointed a wing at Shears. "Hey, Mastermind. Why didn't you mention the pony-eating slime? I think that should have definitely been brought up in the planning stage." Carrion snorted as he pulled off the helmet of his power armor; the acid had etched and damaged the visor. His head was less eagle and more ravenlike, beak chipped and cracked and once-glossy plumage now looking like a beaten feather duster.

"Clearly," Shears muttered as he looked back, "there's gonna be unknown stuff to deal with."

I looked at the gray pitted steel of my forelegs. "Yeah. Besides, what could we have done if we had known? Bring a couple tons of gelatin?" I gave a weak grin to the others. Most of them looked decidedly unamused, but Rampage didn't let me down.

Smirking back at me, she tapped her cheek thoughtfully. "Acidic pony gelatin monsters. Delicious as they are jiggly." That got a few more nervous smiles.

Nurse Graves stared at the sealed door. "I can only imagine what begot such a creature. Perhaps hundreds of corpses of ponies trying to escape through the basement. Soaking in magically tainted water until they dissolved into that radioactive slime..." she murmured as she started passing out packets of Rad-Away to all of us. We slurped it down at once, and I watched as the needle on my rad meter dropped back into the green. Still, it was click click clicking.

I rose to my hooves and looked around. The hall was made of gray cinderblock and ran straight ahead. I glanced at the pipes running along the ceiling, but aside from drizzling water, nothing blue made an appearance. Not that blue, faintly luminescent water was too reassuring... "So, now that we're past the... um... Slime... Ooze..."

"Smooze?" Xanthe suggested, and every eye turned to her. She dropped her eyes sheepishly. "Sorry..."

"Where do we go now?" I asked, watching as Lacunae touched her horn to the raw burns on Stygius' face. The healing took much longer than usual; a sign that Enervation was nipping away at us. Silver Spoon looked positively spooked as she sat down. I chewed on my lip. When I'd remembered the ghoul and how she mistook me for her friend, using her to get past the ferals seemed innocuous. But even she was realizing something was wrong now.

'Hey Silver Spoon, long time no see. Think you could help me get into my office and

help me with a little problem?' Just the asking had seemed to surprise the glowing ghoul. She'd been so glad to be reunited that she hadn't questioned... anything, really. She didn't seem to realize my friends were hardly usual for Equestria before the bombs dropped. She'd actually teased Lacunae for being a blank flank while ignoring the rest of the unicorn!

- "Tiara! Talk to me. Tell me what's going on? [f] You found my glasses, but... but everything seems wrong. It doesn't make sense." She gave a nervous little smile. "It's a joke, right? A joke on those blank flanks, right?" Her voice cracked as she reached up to touch her glass-streaked face. I just looked at her shamefully as she begged, "Please tell me it's all a joke?"

I wanted to smile. I'd planned on smiling. Get through Hightower and leave her with the other ghouls in Meatlocker. Use her... damn it.

"Blackjack, what's going on? Why does she keep calling you Tiara?" Rampage asked in a low voice.

"Cause, like, that's her name! Duh..." Silver Spoon said with a little snort. "Tiara, why does Twist keep calling you Blackjack?" She gave a long stare at my corroded metal legs and the little pits the slime had eaten into the steel. Her eyes met mine as they slowly widened. "It's a joke. Please... it's a joke!"

"It's not a joke, Silver Spoon," I said quietly. "I... I don't even know who Diamond Tiara was. I just remembered how you controlled those others when we first met. I needed your help... and I hoped I could get it without you realizing that I was lying to you."

"But... Bump... Bump..." she muttered weakly, raising her hooves at me. This time I didn't complete the little ritual I'd lucked in on last time. "No... no no no..."

"Are you *trying* to make her a feral?" Shears asked as he trotted past to the gray ghoul. "Hey, Spoon. I'm sorry Blackjack's so mean. She should have told you she wasn't Tiara."

"Something bad happened, didn't it? Like, something really bad?" Silver Spoon sobbed as she hugged her head. "I... I think it did but whenever I think about it..." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head hard. "I just wanted to find Tiara! She... she could tell me what to do. She always told everypony what to do." She sniffed and rubbed her nose. "She's, like, my only friend, and I'm hers. She totally needs me..."

"I know, Silver Spoon. I remember," Shears said as he patted her shoulder. The

glowing ghoul sniffed as she looked at him curiously.

"I'm really sorry for misleading you," I said, a touch defensively. I had asked her to help. She just hadn't realized what was going on. "But I did really need your help. And... I didn't want to just leave you behind in those tunnels."

"I don't want to think about this. The bad things... the bad place. It's totally... totally wrong!" she cried.

"I really hate to break up this latest installment of 'What the fuck, Blackjack,' but four of us are slowly dying here," Rampage said with a snort at me.

"Dying?" Silver Spoon blinked in confusion.

"There's radiation here. It's slowly poisoning us," I said, getting some stink eye from the undead contingent. Finally I sighed, sat, and threw my forehooves into the air. "Look! I'm sorry, okay? I wish I was your Diamond Tiara or whoever you're looking for, but I'm not. I needed you help, and I lied and tricked you to get it. I'm a bad pony! And when we make it out of here, I promise I will do whatever I can to make it up to you. But right now we don't have time to fully delve into what kind of a cunt I am for tricking you. So please... come with us, Silver Spoon. I'll introduce you to Velvet. I think you'll like her."

She looked at me for a few seconds, then slowly nodded.

"Bad pony." Psychoshy smirked, poking my shoulder before trotting past.

The rest trotted past with her, except for Lacunae and Rampage. "I just needed her help..." I said lamely as I looked at the striped pony[g].

"No question," Rampage replied as she trotted past. "You need a lot more help than I realized."

I just sighed and slumped as everypony trotted down the hall without me save Lacunae. "Well?" I asked, looking up at the alicorn.

"Well what?" she asked curiously.

"Isn't the Goddess going to chime in or something?" I asked dolefully.

"Blackjack, there's a lot of Enervation here. The charm is somewhat effective, but it's still horribly strong. The Goddess isn't listening in or watching. You needed Spoon's help. You got it." She nudged me with her wing and we started walking. "The problem is that your idea hurt somepony who didn't deserve it. In the scale of Wasteland crimes, it was probably around the level of littering. But you set such a

high standard for yourself in the eyes of others that when you slip, it seems so much worse. Most ponies in the Wasteland would simply kill Silver Spoon. You tricked her. Pretty nice for the Wasteland. Pretty horrible for Blackjack."

I sighed as I followed along behind everypony else, "So what do I do about it?"

"Getting her out of here alive would be a good start," the alicorn said, patting me on the head like I was a filly.

I smiled sadly. Rampage had been wrong. I wasn't the Goodiest goodest pony in the Wasteland...

The basement of Hightower brought back fond memories of security patrols in the depths of Stable 99. A lot of the equipment was identical to what I used to trot by every year of my life. The boredom, the tediousness[h], the silent rovings through the level... and above all the twisty-turny nature of travelling through infrastructure designed around pipes, vents, and power generators rather than ponies. Except that while 99 had just been on the brink of falling apart, this place gave me ideas of what the stable might eventually look like if Stronghoof's Rangers couldn't restore it. Rusted stairs had fallen down shafts. Elevators were corroded shut. Water trickled everywhere. Every now and then we came across raw cables stripped of their insulation, still humming with power. I gave those a wide berth. Last thing I wanted was to get a shock that shut me down for a few hours.

Because every second that radiation meter ticked up a little more.

Shears' great plan had clearly not accounted for things like doors that wouldn't open, stairs that weren't there, or hallways that had collapsed. Nor had he accounted for the translucent radioactive killer slimeponies that silently stalked us. We couldn't kill them, short of Cerberus disintegrating them outright. We simply had to run and hope they didn't ooze up a vent we stood on or dribble down from a pipe. Every time Shears tried to point us in the right way, it came to a dead end.

I also got the feeling that we were being followed. I occasionally saw something in the distance, but when I looked again, it was gone. I'd had too much experience with wonky vision to trust for sure that I had seen something or not.

Slime below us and an impenetrable ceiling above. The plan was not going smooth.

Since his knowledge was proving uselessly outdated, Shears occupied himself helping Graves deal with Silver Spoon. I'd gone from her best friend to the monster that

had shattered her illusion and placed her in peril for my own gain. Funny, but I seemed to be slipping a lot recently.

Do better. Hadn't I once tried to do better all the time? Hadn't it once been... easier?

It'd been a while since I thought of my virtue; what I needed to do to keep myself on the side of good. I'd thought that it'd meant being a good pony and doing better. Virtues were supposed to be like cutie marks... but I had no idea what mine was. Ruthlessness? That hardly sounded positive.

I'd once tried to help out Flank for the heck of it. I'd turned over Brimstone's Fall. I'd tried to stop a war. I actually stopped P-21 from killing the bastards that raped and mutilated me. And then I'd died...

Had I come back... different? Had I come back wrong? Was the reason I wasn't affected by Enervation any more because I wasn't like the rest of my friends? Even ghouls had to worry about Enervation... I wished I had Professor Zodiac to talk to; maybe she could answer this. Maybe... my soul had broken, or been lost entirely? Could that happen?

I slurped down another pouch of Rad-Away, sitting on a lump of rubble as Shears stared up at a sign, trying to remember directions. He kept looking at the sign, down the hall, and then back at the sign. "Something up?"

"I think I've found another way up," Shears said in a low voice, as if he was afraid the others would hear. "But I am loath to take it. There should be some other way up to the library."

"Shears, we've been down here for almost an hour. The Rad-Away isn't going to hold out forever." I nodded my head towards the passage he'd been considering. "What's down this way? Is it something worse than a room full of radioactive acid monsters?"

"It is something more... shameful," he said as he stared down the hall. "Have you ever heard of a soul jar?"

"It's something you stick a soul inside. Makes it invulnerable." My answer clearly surprised him, but I remembered what Lacunae had told me about them. See? Blackjack could pretend to be a smart pony from time to time.

"You are correct. One of the first things Project Eternity attempted was to create soul jars. The idea was simple: make armor, or even clothing, turn it into a soul jar... and be protected from all harm." He licked his lips with a cracked, boiled

tongue. “That was the idea. The reality was far different. Far more disturbing. The project was a failure, and those failures were locked away down here. They were too unpredictable to move.”

“So... what’s down there?” I asked as I peered down the hall.

“Soul jars. Our... learning curve,” he said in a rush. “Hopefully the magics we used have worn off.” He didn’t sound like he expected that to be the case, though.

“Examples?” I prompted. “Can we shoot them? Kill them?”

“I don’t know. I hope there will be nothing in there but empty shelves or rubbish. Still, we shouldn’t take anything from inside.” He kept his eyes straight. “I thought this would be so much... different.”

Well, that was reassuring. “Me too, but... welcome to Hoofington,” I muttered. “Don’t forget your complimentary bag of suck.”

“It’s easy to blame Hoofington, the Wasteland, and long dead ponies. Far easier than blaming ourselves.” He turned towards the others, saying to me, “I don’t know what we’ll find, but I doubt it will be peaceful.” Then he trotted back to tell them he’d found another way out of the basement.

Cryptic ponies. Was there something about being two centuries old that made ponies unable to give straight answers? I mean, really, once you got past a hundred years, was it all that hard to just spit things out?! I sighed, prepared a magazine of explosive rounds, and led the way down the hall.

There were some dead end storage rooms full of some useful salvage, but no way out. The air was disturbingly still and quiet. Even with almost a dozen people, conversations became more muted and indistinct. The glow from the wan emergency lights and my light spell flickered and dimmed to the point I could barely see my hoof in front of my face. Then we reached at the very end of the hall to find another door and terminal like the one before. I held my PipBuck up, and once more the terminal and the device in my leg had a chat.

Then the door opened with a sigh. A cool breeze began to draw into the dark room beyond. I reached over and flicked the light switches next to the door, but no matter how I flipped them, the room remained dark. Nothing on EFS. I tried to get it to work, but the targeting spell kept having red and blue bars flicker in and out of view as the system shut down every time I got it on.

‘Click click click’ went my radiation meter. No time to waste. “Okay... be ready for... anything. Don’t touch anything.”

"I love the specific warnings," Rampage muttered as we slowly began to advance. My light spell barely illuminated anything in the silent room. Goosebumps prickled on my hide as we came into view of some dusty shelves and my light slowly illuminated a stuffed pony. Its glassy black eyes stared back at me. Next to it was an umbrella. Beside that was an old pony-in-the-box.

Junk. The shelves were full of strange knick knacks, toys, pieces of clothing, and other innocuous objects. So why did I feel like the room was full of ponies? Like they hid just beyond the reach of my light spell, holding their breath, watching.

"Cursed. This room is cursed," Xanthe whimpered. "It is full of ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Psychoshy said nervously. "Ghouls, monster-ponies, and alicorns, sure. But no ghosts."

"We experimented on all these objects. First we tried using animal souls. Then some volunteers. Mules. Poor ponies that wouldn't be missed. But necromancy was an unknown art. Twilight and Celestia both disagreed with Rarity about it, so she went to Goldenblood behind their backs. He knew Hightower would be perfect. Large population. Accidents happen all the time here. Violent offenders with few family who'd not be missed." He stared at the shelves. "Sometimes nothing would happen. Sometimes... something unpredictable would happen... and sometimes we actually succeeded at making a soul jar. But we never could tell for certain what precisely we'd done."

A monochromantic Rarity looked at me with a tired but happy expression of her face. Behind her, two gray unicorns in robes paced around an earth pony mare lying on a table. "Hmmm... now, how best to do this? 'Dear diary' sounds dreadfully unscientific. 'Journal log?' 'Eternity project entry one?' Ugh..." The gorgeous mare sighed, shaking her head. "I thought that this would be so much easier. Twilight makes it look so effortless."

The curly-maned mare sighed with a small frown. "Twilight Sparkle. I wish she could have understood. I wanted to be able to do this with her. But after Celestia's examination of my little guidebook here, she was adamantly against it." The mare lifted the black book from her bag and tapped it lightly. She narrowed her eyes a little. "I've never really been jealous of her skill and ability, but it's insulting for her to suggest that I shouldn't pursue magic simply because she says so. I too am a unicorn, am I not? And if there's a possibility that I can turn this sorcery to protect

my friends, how could I not even try?"

"So," Rarity said as she turned and trotted towards the table. "Is it finished?"

"Oh yes your most beautiful beautiness," the tall, skinny one drawled slowly.

"Yeah! The most beautiful beauty in all of Equestria!" piped in the short, fat one. His horn lifted a large square of silk. "We put the soul in here just like you instructed. Soul silk!"

"Oh my!" Rarity breathed as she lifted it in her hooves. "It's gorgeous... such lovely texture." Then she grabbed it in her mouth and began to yank and pull. "Heee! And it's strong, too! Exactly as it's supposed to be." She floated it over to the pair. "See if you can damage it." They immediately began to play tug of war with the cloth as Rarity tried to cut it with her scissors.

"Well... being uncuttable does make it a challenge to work with, but I think I'll be able to manage," she said as she set the scissors down. "You can get up now, Petunia," she said to the mare on the table. The mare didn't move. "Petunia?" Rarity turned to her with a worried smile. "'Tunia, Darling. This is hardly the time to take a nap!" The worry grew to fear as the two stallions stopped fooling around with the silk and looked on. "Petunia?!" Rarity shook her with her hooves.

The body shifted slightly, then came to rest with a limpness I knew all too well.

The skinny stallion pressed his ear to her chest. His eyes widened. "She's... she's..."

"What? No! No no no!" Rarity scrambled to the book. "Put it back! Put her soul back! There must be a way to put it back!" she cried as her horn glowed and she turned the pages of the black book frantically. Her pupils constricted and she beat the text with her hooves. "Tell me how to put it back!"

But whatever answers she sought were not to be found. Her lips screwed up and tears ran down her face.

Nothing happened, and Rarity slumped over the book, weeping. A minute later she sniffed, dabbing her eyes. "I... there must be a way. We'll just have to be... be more careful. Yes... more careful. I won't let her sacrifice be in vain." She suddenly looked at me and seemed to realize that I was watching. Flushing, she reached out to press a button on a keyboard and everything went black again.

The sudden flash made me trip and fall on my face. My armor rattled and banged

against the shelving as I sprawled on my side. That wasn't a vision like I'd experienced before; maybe when Eternity had been unsealed there'd been a number of video recordings transferred to me, and now they were just shooting off in compressed bursts?

Hadn't it been wonderful when my life consisted of normal eyes that only saw the usual Stable-Tec-approved augmented vision?

"Are you okay, Blackjack?" Rampage whispered. I hardly blamed her. I hated this room; I'd have rather dealt with more slime ponies. At least they were a threat that I could see and sort of understand. But I looked at a small porcelain rocking horse and felt its eyes staring at me.

"Fine. I'm fine," I muttered as I looked back at Shears. "Every one of these is a soul jar?"

"No. Most are failures of one sort or another, but all of these have been touched by souls in ways we could never expla—" He was cut off as Cerberus opened fire through the stacks.

"Hostile enemy movement!" the robot shouted, spraying green bolts and a sheet of fire through the shelves. Carrion turned, strafing as well. I fired wildly, hoping to hit something... anything... that might be a threat. For ten seconds the room was an explosion of gunfire.

"Stop! Stop! Cease fire!" I yelled, and one by one guns stopped firing. Three rows of shelving lay in heaps. Some of the objects were broken. Some were utterly untouched. We all stared at the devastation we'd wrought against some simple wooden shelves. The fires ignited by Cerberus' flamer dwindled before my eyes, then went dark.

Behind us, a music box began to play. I knew the melody perfectly; my mane stood on end as I turned to stare at the tiny porcelain box with two dancing figurines slowly turning above it. *Hush now, Quiet Now...* I licked my lips, staring at it in apprehension. "Okay. Who turned that on?" No one spoke. My magic glowed and I turned the little lever at the side to off.

It didn't turn off. It began to scream; not a scream like I could hear with my ears. This was like the wail of Enervation; the hysterical scream was in my head. Toys rocked. Books fluttered their pages. Dozens of voices babbled all at once.

"Shut the fuck up already!" Psychoshy screamed and she swept her hoof over the shelf, knocking the music box and some of the other objects to the floor beyond.

"No!" Shears shouted.

"Why not! What the fuck are they going to do? Rock at me?" The yellow pegasus yelled.

Suddenly a swath of silk shot off the shelf and coiled once around her throat, once around a metal support beam, and yanked tight. The pegasus went silent, eyes bulging as her hooves clawed at the silk swath. Her legs lifted up, kicking out at the air as she struggled to get free. Rampage moved up on one side, ripping at the silk with her hoofclaws in a desperate attempt to try and cut through it. An umbrella opened, rolled to face me, then closed with a snap, launching itself and plunging into my neck. I gasped and fell back against the shelf, blood spurting from the hole as the umbrella thrashed wildly.

I wasn't the only one in trouble. Carrion had a teddy bear latched onto his face that seemed to be trying to crush his skull. Xanthe curled up in a ball as four floating boots slammed and stomped on her. A cowpony hat had forced itself over Nurse Graves' head and seemed to be trying to twist it completely off. Meanwhile, a floating screwdriver was doing its best to try and take Cerberus apart as it dodged and stabbed and spun. One of Cerberus' eyes popped free, dangling by a cable. "Oh, you are going to pay for that, you subversive tool of zebra domination!"

I got my hooves around the umbrella as it closed, but then it opened with unbelievable force and drove its spike even deeper, forcing me onto my back as if a strong stallion was pushing with every bit of his strength. Finally, it snapped closed again, and I moved as quickly as I could to shove the handle into the narrow gap between the shelves and the floor. As it tried to open, I yanked back and pulled the metal tip from my neck. The umbrella thrashed, making the heavy shelves rock as it struggled to free itself. I pressed my hooves to my neck as blood began to gush, hoping I could regenerate fast enough not to bleed out.

Lacunae's shield did nothing to protect her from a pair of ghostly shears jabbing at her and snipping out lines of flesh. Stygius ignored the music box slamming into his helmet as he scraped and fought to free the struggling Psychoshy. Shears and Silver Spoon had managed to get Graves' head free of the twisting hat, which now swung down, beating and smacking at the three with brutal force. I never wanted to believe somepony could die from being hit with a piece of clothing, but the cowpony hat was definitely making an effort.

I rose, moving to try and help Psychoshy, when one of her powerhooves lashed out and blasted me straight in the face. I flew clear through the shelf, sending splinters

of wood everywhere, crashed through the next, and landed in a heap. I struggled to keep conscious, trying to shake off the disorientation. Blood trickled out my nostrils and ears as I lay there in a heap. Well, at least she hadn't *shot* me! Still, I really couldn't do much besides lie there and regenerate a little.

Then I saw a suit of strange light recon barding slip off a shelf. It trotted towards me, limp and swaying as if caught in a wind. I struggled to rise, but it didn't attack. I slowly lifted my head towards it, and it pointed its sleeve towards the corner of the room.

I looked over at where Stygius was trying to flicker flash away, disappearing and reappearing in place. It was clear that he couldn't take Psychoshy with him. His own teleportation, while functional in the dampening field, wasn't like Lacunae's.

"The silk," I choked out, tasting blood. "Stig! The silk!"

He looked back at me, then grabbed the scarlet cloth cutting so far into Psychoshy's neck that I wondered if it was trying to decapitate her instead of just strangle. With a flash he disappeared, taking the silk cloth with him, and the yellow mare collapsed into Rampage's hooves, coughing and sputtering for air. The red cloth immediately snapped out of his hooves and looped around his throat. A flash and he disappeared before it could draw tight. Again and again it sliced through the air, trying to catch him in a loop of fabric.

Lacunae blasted the floating scissors with her horn, but aside from knocking them spinning away from her, did no damage to them. Her horn flared as she struggled to keep them away as she shouted, "We have to get out of here!" Then a hoofball whizzed through the air and smashed her upside her face, deflecting to crash into the back of Rampage's head. From there it rocketed straight at me. I raised my hooves, popped my fingers free, and caught the oval brown ball. It spun so hard in my acid-etched grip that I smelled burnt rubber before it finally halted and tried to launch itself away again.

The barding waved again and pointed to the corner once more. "This way!" I croaked, staggering in the direction that the suit had indicated. If it was leading us into a trap, it couldn't be any worse. Carrion's miniguns sprayed blindly as the teddy bear worked its little arms into his eye sockets. "Rampage!" I pointed at Carrion.

"Good thing you're already ugly!" the mare shouted as she charged and smashed her hoof into his face with a crunching sound. His deformed features twisted grotesquely as Rampage hooked her claws around the bear and pulled. With a grind of bone and a ripping of skin and feathers, she pulled the teddy bear free. It struggled, wig-

gling its ghoul-eye-gunk-covered plush arms at her as its mouth opened and closed silently, but a ghostly voice screamed in rage in my mind. "This way," she said as she looped her tail around his neck and guided the griffin towards me.

Xanthe lifted her forehooves to run, and the boots attacking her suddenly reversed, putting themselves on the ends of her forelegs. "Oh no..." she whimpered as they yanked her up, and the other two jammed themselves on her back legs. "Help me!" she screamed as the boots yanked her to her hooves and send her galloping straight at a solid cinderblock wall!

Lacunae levitated the zebra, her hooves racing in midair. I brought out my sword and ran over to her. There was no clean or nice way to do this. I dropped into S.A.T.S., targeted her closest hoof, and said a little prayer to Celestia that I wasn't about to make her a stub. The spell executed a single stroke that bit into the boot's leather. A moment later I heard a sharp cry from the boot as the leather parted in a gash a few inches long, and instantly all four boots jerked off her legs and scampered towards the far side of the storage room.

I looked at the sword, and then a manic grin spread across my face as I sliced it at the cowpony hat. It took a swipe at me, but I nicked the brim. The hat gave a similar shriek and at once backed off as if caught in a gust of ethereal wind. The red scarf stopped trying to choke Stygius and instead looped itself around the next closest pony, wrapping itself around her [i]neck and crushing her throat!

Nurse Graves gave a slightly annoyed look at the silk around her neck and trotted in the direction of the corner of the room. A door had been pushed open, and we were slowly making our way out one by one. Now that they could be hurt, the cursed items were keeping their distance, though I did have the surreal experience of dueling with the floating screwdriver as I gave Cerberus a chance to withdraw with his bolts intact. I was last through the door in the corner, pulling it tight behind me as the objects started to rally.

The next room had the same cold feeling as the first, but instead of shelves, this room had ten smashed display cases with a broken modeling dummy in each. From a tiny gem fixed into the top of each case shone a cone of cool, stark light that illuminated their naked ponnequin occupants. I looked at Nurse Graves and the silk swath that was trying to choke her to death. "You know, that's not going to work. She doesn't need to breathe." The ends of the scarf seemed to flutter in frustration. Nurse Graves looked at me coolly, arching her brow as her neck indented. I floated the sword towards the silk. "Now, let her go or we'll find out just how sharp my sword really is."

The silk released her and floated in the air a moment.

And then coiled tightly around the handle of my blade!

With a great wrench, it pulled the blade around and began to slice wildly at us. I jumped into the path of the razor sharp edge, the steel biting into my metal limbs and actually cutting through the exterior. I popped out my fingers, grabbing the blade as my horn struggled to control the deadly weapon. Three different colors of magic danced on the blade as we struggled for control. The metal scraped and gouged my fingers, the steel giving way to the sword's edge as it pushed me back until I smacked into one of the empty display cases. Then the blade began slipping through my grip.

"My magic can't get a grip on it!" Shears shouted. "That sword wants to kill!"

The tip began to work its way through the chestplate of my bardings. Then it felt it prick my skin. Then it slowly pushed into me, even as my fingers clamped down as hard as possible. Rampage threw her hooves around the hilt and started to pull, but it made no difference. I assumed every iota of the spirit possessing the cloth was focused on taking a life like hers had been taken.

"Damn it, Petunia! I didn't kill you!" I shouted. Was it just me, or did the sword stop pushing? I had no idea if she could understand me or not, but it was the only chance I had. "I'm sorry you died! It was wrong. But killing me won't bring you back or change anything!" I closed my eyes, the blade humming under my fingers. "Please. Tell me you were a good pony once. Be a good pony now."

The blade suddenly reversed and went flying out of Rampage's grasp as the cloth uncoiled around the grip. the crimson cloth unfurled, hanging in the air in a shape as if it were an anguished mare's face. Then it disappeared back under the door into the storeroom.

I lay there for one second, staring at the bottom of the door, then finally flopped over on my side with a groan. "That's it. I give up. Hightower wins," I declared feebly. "Killer possessed silk is where I draw the line." Psychoshy was curled up, concentrating on breathing as Graves and Stygius tended to her. Lacunae's wounds seemed to be healing before my very eyes. Radiation did an alicorn good.

"Too bad the giant killer ooze monster, the room of cursed toys, and a thousand hissing ferals are between us and the way back," Rampage said as she knelt beside me.

"I need some Cram. And rubies. And scrap metal," I said with a groan. "Please tell

me we're somewhere safe for five minutes."

"You tell me?" Rampage replied as she turned and pointed at the suit of light gray barding sitting in the corner. It shrank back, hiding behind one of the smashed display cases and peeking out at me. It had to be one of the oddest suits I'd ever seen. It looked to be mostly black but had a luminous white chestpiece and strange white circuitry stripes along the side.

"Are you okay?" I asked, feeling slightly odd talking to a suit. What counted as 'okay' to a soul jar suit of barding?

It reached down to a small speaker on its belt and there was a hiss, and then an synthetic mare's voice said, "Combat ended. No healing or chems needed."

"Oh, you can talk?" I asked, and the suit shook its head.

"That's all. You're my best friend forever. Sneaking now, shhhhhh," the suit said seemingly at random. Xanthe slowly crept closer to get a better look.

"Oh, you can only say things that suit has programmed into it?" I asked, and the collar of the suit went up and down as if nodding.

"Is that a..." Xanthe began, then glanced at me nervously before looking at the strange barding. "I think it's a zebra infiltration suit." Then she looked up at me. "But... they're supposed to self-destruct if they're ever removed from the wearer without the proper tools and procedures!" Then the zebra drew back and muttered, "And why is it speaking in pony?" The suit shook its... collar.

"We *didn't* remove her from it." He glanced at the infiltration suit, and it shrank back. "Naturally, the zebras were curious about what we were doing here. But one, at least, never reported back. Rarity, of course, always the designer, attempted some modifications to her suit," Shears said as he rose to his hooves, looking at the other display cases. "But this was Eternity's first failure. The soul armor. Creating invulnerable, eternally powerful armor with a complete soul bound within." He looked at the armor with disappointment. "We assumed that, without a mind, a soul was just... a thing. Something special that made a pony a pony, or a griffin a griffin. When we transferred a complete soul to an object, however, it began to manifest... peculiar powers. Even brushing a soul could bestow strange effects on the tool." He looked back at me. "Worse, the soul within could affect the mind of the wearer."

"What?" I asked as looked from him to the armor.

"The wearers would feel uncomfortable. Watched. They'd exhibit personality changes, growing closer to the captive soul," Shears said quietly as he circled the armor. "And

since most of the souls we used were maximum security prisoners....”

“You created monsters,” I finished. Carrion’s crippled face was slowly pulling itself together, but I had no idea if that was from healing magic or radiation.

Shears nodded. “I think that that can be summed up as ‘Oopsie’,” Rampage said.

I counted the display cases. Eight total. “You’re saying that there are seven more suits of indestructible soul armor roaming around this place?”

“Yes. I suppose so,” Shears replied.

“But... why didn’t you use them?” I asked, and everything went white again.

I heard Rarity’s voice and saw a pristine suit of combat barding on a charred corpse. “Test one... armor failed to protect from enemy flamer.” The same combat barding on an intact corpse, minus a hole through the stallion’s face. “Test two... armor failed to protect from enemy sniper.” A piece of gray combat armor with a helmet and completely intact faceplace. “Test three.... armor failed to protect from crushing blows inflicted to throat.” The same armor, this time Rarity speaking with frustration. “Test four... armor failed to protect from poisoned rations!” A lacy purple gown with veil on a pink unicorn mare with a blackened face. “Test five... armor failed to protect from being garroted by her own scarf!” A smashed and broken stallion wearing a tuxedo. “Test six! Armor failed... again... to protect from being pushed out a window!” Finally, a suit of dirty power armor. Rarity’s voice was now tired and frayed. “Test Seven... armor failed... to protect... when buried alive... in an landslide...”

The recording faded and my vision returned to normal. “The armor didn’t do what Rarity wanted,” Shears explained. “What she needed was armor to keep the occupant safe. Just like how Applejack was inspired to create power armor after the death of Big Macintosh, Rarity was inspired to create a flawless form of protection for herself and her friends. Some foolproof method of defense.”

“But her tests failed,” I replied, and I got the feeling I’d surprised him. “Even if she could make armor to protect from bullets, there would always be a way for somepony to kill the wearer.”

“How could you know that?” Shears breathed. I didn’t answer. Really, considering how often I saw things nopony else did, there wasn’t much point. Then he composed

himself and when on. “Yes. When we first created the armor it seemed perfect. Invulnerable, and it seemed to go out of its way to protect its wearer. But then we moved on to field testing and began to notice inexplicable accidents. Soldiers blundering into ambushes. Thoughts of suicide or murder. They were relatively rare and hard to pin down as coming from the armor... but regardless, they were unacceptable.”

I rubbed my hooves as the repair and healing talismans slowly worked their magic on me. “So what happened then? What did Rarity do?” I asked.

“She locked up her failures and moved on to plan B—” Shears began, but Psychoshy flew over us and interrupted.

“Hey. Tick tick, remember? Or click click click. As cool as ghouls are, I really don’t want to be one!” the yellow pegasus said. I looked over at where Nurse Graves and Lacunae were administering healing and more pouches of Rad-Away to those who needed it. Carrion was sitting next to them, his eyes already regrowing and his face twisting back into shape. Hopefully he was using some sort of healing magic, because if the radiation was that strong...

“Right. We should get moving,” I murmured.

“Wait! What about her?” Xanthe asked, gesturing to the possessed infiltration suit. “We can’t just leave her.”

I looked back at the others and then at the infiltration suit. Her? “Um... I’m not a zebra, but doesn’t possessed armor count above a 9.0 on the standard scale of curses?”

Xanthe chewed her lip a moment and cast her eyes downward. “I’ve been touched by the Star Maiden... I don’t think I can get any more cursed than that.” Then she looked at the zebra armor. “At least this way I won’t be cursed alone.”

“Well... it’s your call. But if the armor possesses you...” I said in worry. The armor had helped us get out of the other room; I wasn’t terribly worried about it being evil... but still.

“If it does, I am already damned,” she said in a near whisper. I couldn’t help myself; I gave her an impulsive hug that made the zebra go rigid. I supposed getting a hug from the most evil being in your mythology might be a little disconcerting. The poor zebra certainly looked uncomfortable as I released her. She removed the hazmat suit, and the infiltration suit immediately opened up. A minute later it zipped up completely, latching itself in place.

"You're my new best friend," the armor chirped, making the zebra mare actually blush. The black and white armor was just tight enough for her to pull the hazmat suit back on over it.

"Okay! Which way up?" I asked as I looked over at Shears. He pointed towards the far end of the room where there was another door; this one had been kicked in. Stairs led in the direction we wanted. Leading the way with shotgun and sword, I ascended.

Rampage hummed softly behind me, singing to herself, "Nothing can stop... the smooze..." I glared back at her, and she blinked then gave a grin in return.

The door at the top of the stairs had also been kicked out as well, and opened to a charred library. Blackened books occupied scorched shelves; probably a good indication they weren't going to start flying and trying to kill us. The far side of the library was lit with a ghostly blue glow that flickered and danced through blackened windows. Slowly, we walked through the stacks towards it. As we did, we spotted the flickering blue flames burning on the concrete floor in little hoof-sized puddles. Their tongues danced and writhed, making my PipBuck spike with every flare. The heat wasn't like that from a fire; I could almost swear I could feel it moving through me.

Far worse, though, was the screaming.

It wasn't just the unnerving trill of Enervation. Hundreds of undead throats howled in rage. Hooves beat against bars. Some of them screamed words in the distance. They pleaded to be released, bellowed insults, cried out in pain or for help, and snarled threats. And under it all was the banging and hammering of thousands of hooves on hundreds of bars.

I walked to the library door and slowly pushed it open.

And stepped into Hell.

The vast central shaft of Hightower rose ten stories above me. Midway up, like a fiery dagger plunged into the heart of the structure, the missile jutted out into the middle of the space. Blue fire flew off the tip in volcanic eruptions that sprayed the sticky blue flame in glowing arcs. The unnatural blaze continued burning, no matter what it landed on, and the middle of the shaft was awash in a ring of radioactive fire. Inside every cell, blue-glowing shapes screamed and hammered against their restraints. Sentry robots rolled around the walkways, their metal bodies bent and warped by the tremendous heat.

From above, six hovering robots like Ceberus dropped down. Each one had an oversized terminal screen on a swivel arm; the six moved their screens together to make one massive screen, which flashed to life, bathing us in cold blue light. A gargantuan charred face appeared, eye sockets filled with blue flame as it glared down at us. From a dozen loudspeakers all around us boomed a crackling voice. "Hello, convicts. I am Warden Hobble, administrator for this facility, and your host for the duration of your sentence for crimes against Equestria. I look forward to making your stay here as... comfortable... as possible." He gave a ragged, mocking laugh. "Welcome to the Tower!"

I stared up at that immense, burning leer on the screen for a moment, and then Psychoshy muttered, "*He wasn't in the plan either...*"

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

47. Hightower

“She might banish you from Equestria. Or throw you in a dungeon. Or banish you and then throw you in a dungeon in the place that she banishes you to!”

Plans are good. You have a goal, and you think ahead of time of ways to obtain it. Obstacles to be overcome or circumvented. Things you'll need. Planning is the mark of intelligent, thinking people who can predict troubles coming. And, certainly, things will come up that the plan will have to adapt to in order to survive, but good plans can change to overcome these little difficulties. Call it ‘plan evolution’.

Our plan was officially extinct, and as I looked up at those screens and into that immense charred face flickering with blue-green light, I knew that we were shortly to be just as dead as our scheme. The malformed sentry robots began to turn towards us in an irradiated army. I saw at least a half dozen turrets in every direction turning to blast us to ash. Thousands of ghouls screamed in mindless rage, thrashing to escape their restraints and butcher us all. Our only way out was through rooms full of possessed toys and killer slime.

We were quite absolutely and righteously fucked, and we all knew it. Everyone took postures to fight back against all the defenses the prison had to offer, resolved to fight even with little hope of surviving. Everyone except one pony.

“Warden Hobble!” Silver Spoon shouted up at the combined screens. Her own green luminescence began to flare from the radiation pouring down on us. “I’m Silver Spoon, with the M.o.M. I’m here to administer your annual inspection and evaluation. It’s, like, totally overdue!”

Every single eye in our team turned to stare at the glowing ghoul as the cracked and blackened face scowled down at her. Hobble leaned forward till one blazing eye filled the view. “Pardon?” he asked in a low, incredulous voice. Silver Spoon looked up at that immense eye and gulped, but she didn’t back down.

“According to M.o.M. penal facility requirements, your performance must be evaluated every year. So, like, I’m here to give you one!” she yelled up as she stepped to the front of our group. One of the floating robot screens drifted down, the eye drawing back to a scowling face, shrinking to fit the single monitor as he glared at her. There was a flicker from some sort of gem on the machine’s arm, and a red beam waved back and forth over her face. In the corner of the monitor, an image of

the mare in life appeared. I had to admit, she was definitely cute... and I'd like to think it was shock that had me thinking of such things at a time like this.

"Silver Spoon? You... you're here... to...?" His blazing eye widened, and the ghoul leaned back, frowning and muttering to himself before he said sarcastically, "Oh dear. I thought it'd been a while... My evaluation. Of course you'd pick *now* of all times." His lips cracked and crumbled as he grinned extra wide, blue-green flames licking out from between his teeth. "I don't suppose I could convince you to reschedule? We're having a mild disturbance at the moment..."

"I'm afraid not, Warden Hobble. My fr- er, inspection team and I shall, like, inspect your facility, and I will come to your office and discuss your evaluation, like, when it's complete." She gave a prim little nod, then glanced over at me. I mouthed 'lift the lockdown'. Her eyes widened, and then she blurted, "If you could, like, totally lift the lockdown it'd make this whole thing totally easier."

"Lockdown?" He said the word like it was dirty. "Whatever do you mean? I run a tight ship, Miss Spoon. There's no *lockdown*." He put his melted hooves together on the desk before him. They'd deformed like stretched taffy on the ends of his limbs. "I'll instruct the guards not to impede your... evaluation." His screen turned towards Nurse Graves and the red beam flashed again. "Ah, and you have a guide already. The *whistleblower*." He hissed the word with such malice that Graves took several steps back. The warden's eyes returned to Spoon. "So long as you have your visitor passes, the automated security should ignore you and your inspection team." His blue eyes narrowed as he chuckled low and slow. "I do hope you remembered to pick some up. Otherwise, best come back another time." And with that the screen flashed off and the half dozen floating robots lifted into the air. The sentries returned to patrolling along the walkways.

"That was brilliant, Silver Spoon!" I said, throwing my hooves around her and giving her a squishy hug. The ghoul blushed a brighter green and lowered her eyes; I suspected she didn't get complimented on being smart very often. I quickly backed off, though; every bit of radiation in here added up.

"I just thought, like, he might be like me and not know he's... um... like...dead?" the mare suggested.

"Why did he say there wasn't a lockdown, though?" Psychoshy asked, then looked at Nurse Graves. "And what's the big deal about blowing whistles?"

"This is a bad place to talk," Shears said as he looked up at the flaring warhead. "We have to get under cover."

I had to admit that he was right; my PipBuck was clicking like mad. We retreated back into the charred library; away from the magical flames the exposure dropped to tolerable levels, ‘tolerable’ meaning that instead of needing a RadAway every minute, we’d only need one every ten. I took a cloth and wiped the ballistic glass clean enough to peer through.

The entire prison looked bigger from the inside than it had from the outside. The interior was completely hollow. An immense cavity stretched up with walkways running around the perimeter, one on each floor. Each level had bars running from the balcony to the next level up; I supposed that they helped prevent prisoners from throwing their non-pegasi comrades over the edge. About a third of the way up I saw a section that jutted out a little into the central shaft with large, warped-looking windows; medical, I assumed. I couldn’t see up past the medical floor from this angle, so I had no idea about the conditions closer to the warhead.

“At least we’re safer if the Warden thinks we’re with the M.o.M. right?” I asked as I looked back at the ghouls and Lacunae standing close to the fire, but there was more worry on their faces than relief.

“Don’t count on it,” Graves said grimly. Silver Spoon frowned in worry, nodding.

“Warden Hobble was, like, totally the nastiest pony ever put in charge of a prison,” Silver Spoon said nervously. “He was totally corrupt, too, but anytime we’d come to inspect, the inspectors either found nothing wrong or else they had nasty accidents.” Her brow furrowed in concern. “He’ll totally try something bad.”

I scowled. “Found nothing wrong?”

“Rather, he paid the inspectors to not find anything wrong. At least, that’s the rumor,” Silver Spoon muttered.

“So the M.o.M. took bribes?” Psychoshy said with a snort, “Surprise surprise.”

Silver Spoon stammered, “Well... it’s like... no guardpony ever had that much power before. We got bonuses from Quartz if we looked the other way whenever Goldenblood’s name came up. Nobles were always glad to give a present or two to hush something up. I mean, I know it was wrong but what could we do? Go to Pinkie? She was totally letting drug dealers off right and left!” She hung her head a little. “I mean... yeah, it was wrong... but what could we do?”

“What about going to Luna?” I asked with a frown. Mr. Shears, Graves, Silver Spoon, and even Lacunae looked away and didn’t answer. Stygius’s tufted ears ducked down. I felt an irrational stab of rage rise up inside me. “Princess Luna?

Freaking ruler of Equestria, Luna?! Why didn't anypony just trot up to the alicorn princess in charge and mention that the biggest prison in Equestria was run by the biggest scumbag ever?" Why was everypony looking at me like I was the crazy one?

"It's hard to explain," Lacunae said over the howls and screams of the prisoners outside. "Celestia was always open as a ruler. You could talk to her and she'd listen. You could approach her and feel secure that she'd take you seriously. But Luna... she wasn't like her sister. When she gave public speeches, they were always to the point, and then she was gone. When she held court, she was firmly in charge of everything. And the security! Luna was kept safer than any pony in Equestria, but it also isolated her from her own people."

"There were always stories, though," Mr. Shears muttered. "Stories of Luna appearing at meetings in the middle of the night. Of making appearances where nopony expected her to be. She'd show up at a Manehattan orphanage or shelter in Filly-delphia and give comfort to those in need. She'd play pranks when least expected. She could be terrifying, as well. She was princess of the night, and like the night, she was ever-changing and inscrutable. Luna took care of her duties, I'm sure of it. But she had no lack of ponies to stand in the open for her."

I chewed back my response. It all made sense. She was at war with a race of people who excelled at infiltration and assassination. Being a ruler out in the open was painting a bullseye right on her head. By setting up the ministries, she could direct more flexibly. It was what a smart pony would have done.

So why did it feel so... cowardly? It would be as if I'd convinced others into facing this terrible place while I stayed safe and sound back in Star House. Aside from the memory of the Gala, I'd not encountered any instance of her doing anything openly. Here was a place where a terrible evil had been perpetuated and she was... somewhere else! No wonder Goldenblood had worked so well with her setting up the ministries!

No place like this should have been allowed to exist. Not ever.

Rampage trotted up to me with a worried look, leaning over to meet my glare. "Hey. Radiation? Enervation? Death all around us?" Her pink gaze softened somewhat and she bumped my shoulder. "Don't worry about that now."

"I know. It's just so frustrating," I said with a snort. "She could have been... better. She should have been..." 'More', I couldn't finish. For some reason, the striped mare sighed and rolled her eyes. "What?" I asked, and she shook her head with a rueful grin. "What?!"

"Welcome to my world, Blackjack," she said with a wistful smile as she turned and trotted away, looking out the window. What was that about?

"So how do we get up to medical?" Psychoshy asked as she peeked back at the windows. Everypony looked over at Nurse Graves as the earth pony ghoul inhaled to speak.

"There're stairs across the quad," Rampage said as she looked at the soot-covered doors. "We get past the exercise yard and the hoofball field," she continued, lips twisting in a smirk. "We can get up there, no problem. 'Course, we'll have to watch out for Haymaker's herd. She's looking to pin me down and bend me over after I..." The mare trailed off along with the leer. She sat down and rubbed her head. "Woah. That was weird."

"Did you go out again?" I asked.

Carrion grumbled, "She keeps asking questions when we need to hurry." I shot the ghoul a look. His face was still lopsided; he could take a few more minutes to regenerate some more.

"It wasn't like that. I mean, it was, but it was different. I was me, and I was Razorwire too. We were sort of smooshed together, and for a moment there I couldn't tell which was which." She shook her head hard and thumped the side of it again. "Sorry, anyway. If we're going up to medical, we can take the stairs. Far side. All that."

"The kitchen elevators are a more direct and safer route," Nurse Graves said as she pointed off to the right. "We can go through the cafeteria to the kitchen and up to medical. We won't have to go by the cells or cross sentry patrols."

I looked from to the other. Elevators would be quicker. "Let's get to the kitchens. If we can avoid them," I said with a wave at the courtyard, "then I'm all for it." If the elevators didn't work, we had four people with wings and more than enough guns.

Poking my head out again, I looked around and spotted the hovering robots moving up and down the shaft and the sentries lumbering along on their warped legs. None were close to us. I spotted the double doors under the 'Cafeteria' sign. I motioned for Carrion to take the front, Lacunae to watch out for threats above, Rampage and Psychoshy to guard our sides, and Stygius to cover our rear. I frowned, not seeing Xanthe... ah, there she was with the rest in the center. Funny, that suit made her hard to follow even when she wasn't sneaking. I trotted up beside the griffin, and we started along the ground floor edge with solid wall on one side and half-melted chainlink fence on the other. Astonishingly, we made it to the double doors without

anything bad happening.

The ballistic glass was coated in soot and had warped and slumped in places, but I couldn't find a gap we could get through. The doors themselves were stuck in their frames. Carrion and I grunted, heaved, and finally pulled them open with a resounding crack. "Hurry!" I said as I jumped through.

That was funny. What were all the cafeteria tables doing stacked up on the far side of the large, empty room?

Then a dozen ghouls popped their glowing blue-green heads up over the rim. They wore blue combat barding similar to the style I'd worn so long ago leaving Chapel for the first time. They took one look at us and shouted, "The prisoners! They've busted loose! Fire! For Luna's sake, fire!" Shotguns, pistols, and assault carbines were lifted or levitated into the air from behind the barricade of lunch tables.

Oh horseapples.

"Shield!" I shouted as they opened up with a barrage of gunfire; Lacunae immediately extended her shield around Silver Spoon, Shears, and Graves. I wasn't exactly sure where Xanthe had gotten to and hoped she hadn't tried to leave on her own. Carrion and I hit the ground, the griffin protecting his unarmored head with his armored forelimb as he opened up and started strafing the guards. Psychoshy darted to the left, Stygius shot to the right, and Rampage charged right down the middle.

"Oh, you are so fucked now!" Rampage roared as she leapt clear over the barricade, flipping in mid air and dropping like a spiked cannonball into the midst of the guards. Two of the tables overturned as half of the guards spilled away from the thrashing mare and the other half fired blast after blast at point blank range. Whatever didn't strike steel plating didn't do nearly enough damage to matter as Rampage rampaged in the middle of them.

"Halt! We don't want to fight you! Stop shooting!" I bellowed, but clearly these guards saw us as only one thing. They spread to the left and right, trying to flank us. Cerberus whooped as he blasted away with his disintegration gun. I sighed, targeted the nearest ghoul, and rose to fire four rounds into him. I didn't know if it was the armor that seemed melted to his hide or the radiation, but even after four hits of buckshot the glowing guard was still on his hooves. Wait, he was actually *regenerating*!

This was gonna be tougher than I thought. But, armored and empowered or not, nothing protected them from their heads exploding in sprays of rotten brain and

broken steel as Lacunae carefully sighted with the AM rifle. "Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I muttered absently, remembering Psalm's grim refrain. With the ghouls no longer focusing their fire, Carrion stood and poured on the bullets. Plenty deflected off the armor, but some found their way to vulnerable spots. Those vulnerable spots quickly liquefied, and one guard was decapitated by the barrage.

Psychoshy and Stygius darted in from the left and right. The gray batpony scooped up one guard by his helmet and launched him into the air. Then he shadowflashed away as Psychoshy flew by like a lightning bolt. All four of her power hooves struck the armored ghoul's torso and discharged simultaneously. Having been hit by one of those myself, I wasn't surprised at all to see the squishy airborne ghoul blasted into rancid hunks of armored meat.

I had to admit, suddenly I was glad she was more on my side now.

Three broke away from the others and rushed me. Buckshot peppered my armor, but it was designed for worse. I swapped from the riot shotgun to Duty and Sacrifice, hopping into S.A.T.S. to aim my shots at glowing eyes before they could mob me. Four heavy rounds later and one ghoul's head burst apart.

Unfortunately, that left two. One earth pony tackled me, and I realized these ghouls weren't just tough, they were definitely stronger than I expected, too! He smashed his helmet against my forehead, and the impact was like an icepick jammed through my skull. My focus snapped, the guns clattering to the ground as the earth pony locked his hooves around mine and heaved me clear off the ground, then reversed and slammed me down in a heap.

Glowing shears darted over me and clamped down on the earth pony's forelegs. The glow intensified, and then I smelled melted steel and cooked, rotten meat as the leg was sliced through. Screaming, the guard staggered back. The blackened stump, however, was swelling grotesquely as a new leg began to sprout. I barely had time to get to my hooves before there was an electric crackle and my whole body and vision lurched. While I'd been occupied with the earth pony, his ally, a unicorn ghoul, charged up behind me and pressed a crackling shock baton against my head. My vision flickered several times as I fell over; cybernetic damage or skull fracture, it was hard to tell which.

Lacunae's rifle thundered, the AM round turning the earth pony's head into paste as Shears tried to snip the ghoulish unicorn guard.

The baton beat back the glowing shears as she lifted my own revolvers and pointed

them right at my face.

“Sneaking now,” chirped a synthetic voice. “Shhhhhh...”

The air beside the guard shimmered, and a moment later there was a shotgun blast right at the base of the guard’s helmet. The ghoul’s head erupted, and my revolvers clattered down beside me along with chunks of undead cranium. Then the shimmer flashed, and Xanthe stood there with my shotgun in her mouth, legs shaking.

“Good jo-“ I began to say as she turned towards me, trying to talk around the trigger. Any other praise I was going to give was lost in the roar of buckshot and the explosion of pain in my gut as the gun went off. She spat it out with a horrified look, kneeling beside me.

“Oh... oh... oh... I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Are you okay? Please don’t kill me with my own bones!” she begged, her hooves shaking as she fumbled to get a potion out of her hazmat suit’s pockets. I choked it down; it was watery and wouldn’t do anything for me anyway. “I’m sorry! I’ve only had basic firearms training and I failed that the last three times and really I shouldn’t but I had to do something and...” I silenced her, pressing a hoof to her lips.

“Don’t worry about it. Happens all the time,” I muttered as I tried to summon my magic and lift my guns, grunting and straining as my guts burned with buckshot. Rampage, Psychoshy, and Carrion were mopping up the last two. I gave up and collapsed back for a minute to let my repair talisman fix me up. In fact, I treated myself to a minty sapphire as I lay there and tried to not think about the fiery sensation as my body put itself back together.

“Blackjack?” Lacunae asked in concern.

“I’m fine,” I said as I waved still slightly acid-etched hoof in the air. “Please take Xanthe over there and give her a two minute lesson on firearms safety. Make sure you cover not talking with a trigger in your mouth.” My abused skull was giving me a migraine.

“Come on, Blackjack,” Rampage said.

“Come on nothing, Rampage. I just got shot by my own shotgun by my own teammate! I’m taking two minutes.” I gestured at the dead ghouls beside me. “See if they’ve got anything useful. I’ll be lying here when you’re done.” Sometimes even Security needed a breather. Lacunae herded Xanthe away.

“She saved your life, Blackjack,” the Dealer rasped next to me.

“Something that I’m profoundly grateful for,” I muttered as I curled up on my side, trying to ignore the pain radiating out from the point blank shotgun blast. Anypony that thought it odd kept it to themselves, given my sour mood. If I hadn’t been armored and augmented... “She also shot me. So while things are in her favor, ow.” I cracked open an eye at the emaciated pale stallion in his wide-brimmed hat. “You’re looking better.”

He patted my foreleg. “Some days I’m better than others, like you. Just need a little rest and I’m able to make contact.”

“Do you see and hear everything I do anyway?” I asked with a little frown and blush.

“Unfortunately, yes. But I try to ignore most of it. Thankfully, I can’t feel what you feel,” he said as he looked down at me with a wan smile and tired eyes.

“When you were talking about responsibility the other day, were you talking about Luna?” I asked as I looked up at him, and his smile disappeared. His eyes turned troubled and shadowed, and he pulled the brim of his hat down to hide them.

“Luna was ruler of Equestria, but I doubt there was a pony alive who could tell you for certain what she ruled, or how. Some thought her a pawn of Twilight Sparkle and the ministries. Some believed she was the selfless Princess who stepped in when Celestia abdicated. And some whispered that she was behind everything, even starting the war with the zebras in the first place.” He sighed as he looked away. “We may never know what she really did; even without the effects of the the apocalypse and two centuries, she made extensive efforts to conceal the truth from everypony.”

I looked around the blasted cafeteria. “I can’t help but be a little... pissed off at her,” I confessed. “I see Twilight and the Ministry Mares left, right, and center, but not Luna. Were my friends right when they said that Luna did good things?” Or was it just my wishful thinking I heard in my voice?

“Luna always did good things from the shadows, from her sister’s shadow in particular. She helped protect the capitol from numerous threats and moved behind the scenes to help however she could. At times, I think she almost made a game of it. But being Princess Luna and being Princess Luna, Ruler of Equestria, are two very different things. She would do anything for her land and people. Anything... except quit.” He sighed and shook his head. “Sometimes, I don’t think anypony knew what Princess Luna really felt. She was always alone. I always felt sorry for her...” I sighed too, then looked at the Dealer again... but once more he was gone.

I had to haul myself to my hooves. My entire gut still felt cooked, but the pain was receding. Once on all fours, I felt a disconcerting lurch as my insides were subject to gravity again and I had the horrible sensation that they were going to tumble right—okay, not going there. Deep breaths, Blackjack. Deep breaths. I looked at my team collecting what ammo and weapons they could from the slain guards. I selected a pair of ten millimeter pistols, cleaned out the mouthgrips, loaded the magazines with every bit of AP ammo I had in that caliber, and walked stiffly over to Graves and Silver Spoon.

“If we’re going to get through this, we’re going to need more ponies shooting.” Especially if we ran into a sentry. “Do you know anything about firearms?”

“I know I won’t use them,” Nurse Graves replied evenly. I’d been afraid of that; I hoped it didn’t have to do with a suppressed urge to kill me.

“I know they, like, totally freak me out,” Silver Spoon muttered, lowering her glowing eyes. “I had to take a training course when Tiara and I joined the M.o.M., though.” I supposed that was better than nothing. I motioned Xanthe over as well as I passed Silver Spoon the gun.

“Take it. Point it at the enemy. Fire the trigger with your tongue and not your mouth. Bite firm but don’t clench your jaw. And do not... shoot... me...” I added firmly with a glance in Xanthe’s direction, the zebra looking at the blood spattering the belly of my bardings. My gut still burned; I hoped my repair talisman could do something with the buckshot. Speaking of shotguns, I took back my twelve gauge riot gun and passed Xanthe one of the guards’ ten millimeter automatic pistols. I’d weather it better if I faced any more friendly fire.

We’d spent enough time here. I was in the yellow radiation-wise and feeling rotten. Nothing specific, just a whole-body malaise that remained even after slurping down RadAway. At least I was less radioactive, though. Rampage trotted over to the counter, leapt over, and moved to the door to the kitchens. It was locked, but two bobby pins later I clicked it open. Thank you, P-21. I got ready for...

Nothing. The kitchen was empty. Three long, gleaming stainless steel counters stood next to sinks and industrial-sized mixing machines. Pots dangled from racks that hung from the I beams running along the ceiling. No knives, of course, but there were still utensils chained to the counters and lots of canned food. “This stuff any good?” Rampage asked as she lifted a can of beans and tossed it to me. I nibbled off the corner of the can and sampled the contents. Well, it wasn’t Sugar Apple Bombs, but I was pretty sure it was edible. I munched it down, and we added more

to our saddlebags. If we actually made it out of here with our lives, we might make a tidy sum of caps back at Meatlocker.

The elevator was in the far corner. I tapped the button and it lit up. Then it went dark. Frowning, I tapped it again. And again. And again. “I don’t think tapping it faster makes it work faster, Blackjack,” Rampage snorted. Scowling, I tapped it once more with feeling.

I hooked my fingers in the seam between the doors on one side, working the finger-tips in. Carrion grabbed from the other with far more ease, and together we pulled them wide.

A hissing, screaming mass of ghouls greeted us on the far side, their glowing bodies firmly enmeshed in the broken, bent steel of the elevator car. Cables slithered like guts from the smashed top of the car where a huge drum had collapsed upon the elevator. The ghouls inside had been impaled on countless pieces of broken steel.

Okay. Elevator was out.

“Tiara!” Silver Spoon screamed, and I turned towards the door to the cafeteria at once, not seeing the hostiles. Then I looked at the gray ghoul and saw where she was looking. Not at the elevator nor the trapped ghouls within. Her eyes were locked on the sinks.

And for good reason too. They were filling with blue slime. Glistening heads began to stretch up out of the tubs as the slimeponies climbed out. Their sludge immediately made the countertops hiss, the metal corroding as the slime ate its way through the tubs and splashed across the floor. The goop was already between us and the exit.

“Off the floor. Hurry!” I yelled, clambering up onto the counter tops as the smooze spread across the floor tiles. At once the counter’s steel legs started to hiss and smoke. Anyone with wings or levitation immediately took to the air, and Lacunae lifted Shears onto her back and hoisted Graves and Xanthe with her magic. Carrion carried Silver Spoon on his back between his miniguns. That left me and Rampage to stand on the shaky countertops. “Cerberus! Clear the door! Everypony out!”

“Yes sir ma’am sir! Looking forward to killing some more of these maggot farms!” the robot cheered as he hovered over and blasted the slime heaping up in front of the door. Was this stuff intelligent, or did we just have bad luck? The acidic ooze sent psudeopods snaking into the crushed elevator, and I watched as the thrashing ghouls were slowly dissolved into more blue sludge. Lacunae ducked out with her

passengers, and Carrion followed quickly behind. Stygius strafed the deepening pool of slime, his scream breaking up the slimeponies before they could fully form and climb up on the counters with us.

Carefully, Rampage and I walked along said shaky counters. They slumped as their legs slowly dissolved in the corrosive blue fluid. With a bang and a crackle, one of the large industrial mixers fell over, yanking cables off the wall. The power cord began to spark and crackle as it swayed over the tables. I was one spark away from being unconscious. Another mixer leaned over and pulled free as its base gave way. Another crackling wire... A third.

Still, we were almost there. Almost. I leapt from one row of counters to the next, making my way towards the door. Stygius and Psychoshy were keeping the slimeponies off us. Just a little further and we'd be in the clear. I watched as Stygius shadowflashed overhead and screamed at a slimepony trying to clamber onto the counter behind me. The two wove and ducked around the clangling, swaying pots and pans, and I looked upwards in annoyance after one heavy pan banged against my helmet.

Wait... why were the fire sprinklers smoking?

"Stygius! Psychoshy! Get out!" I screamed, jumping to the last row of counters that gave me a clear run to the door. The sinks in the middle of the counter had dissolved away completely, leaving three chunks in a row pointing towards the door.. A glow of alicorn magic punctuated by green disintegration bursts flung the slime back from the doorway in smoking, sulfurous splashes.

The flying pair stared down at me in confusion, looking in the wrong direction.

Then there was a pop overhead, and then another, like shotgun blasts. Blue cascaded from the hissing sprinkler heads in thick cones of sludge. The hanging racks began to sizzle immediately, but for the moment provided some cover. Stygius and Psychoshy were drenched to the point their wings couldn't lift the heavy slime. They tumbled from the air, coated in acidic slime eating at their hazmat suits. The ooze covering the floor surged up, forming a giant mouth.

Rampage and I leapt back across the gap, catching Stygius and Psychoshy in our hooves. The acidic globules burned as they found gaps in my armor, and the thick metal plates of Rampage's were blackening on contact. I desperately flung the sludge away as the pots and pans tumbled down upon us. The counters we'd landed on were already pitting and dissolving away as they slid through the slime towards the snapping power lines on rapidly corroding legs.

I tossed Stygius onto Rampage's back to the side of the row of spikes along her spine, and then heaved Psychoshy onto the other side. "Get ready!" I shouted as the counter hit the wall beside the dissolving mixers, crunching the third row of counters where the mixers had stood. I rolled onto my back, grabbed the edge on the counter with my smoking fingers, and shoved off the wall as hard as my cybernetic legs could push. My magic grabbed a pan and held it over my face as I kicked off. The snapping electrical cables swung back, missing my hooves by inches.

The counter rocketed back across the kitchen towards the last dissolving counters. Rampage leapt from one chunk to the next. As she landed on the third, the slime lurched up once more, and like the catwalk in the basement, devoured the metal just as Rampage launched herself for the door. A purple glow grabbed her and pulled her to safety.

Now... there was just the problem of myself...

When I'd shoved off the counter, I hadn't been in a position to follow Rampage. So I was left on a tiny corroding island in a sea of blue. My skin burned in a dozen places, and my brand new armor was all that was keeping me from dissolving away completely. I looked in every direction as my slimy black spur of steel crumbled under my hooves. There was only one way to go.

I jumped as high as I could, smashing through the corroded racks, my smoking legs pulverizing the last of the counter beneath me. My fingers closed around the fire sprinklers, and I could feel the incredible heat inside the tube. I didn't waste a second as I clambered along the pipe, the metal crumbling away seconds after I passed along the length. Finally I reached one of the ceiling supports, an I beam that gave me something to dangle from as the sprinkler systems disintegrated completely. Lacunae's magic was now a wall keeping the flood contained inside the kitchen as blue slime fountained from drains in the floor. The entire mass was forming another enormous mouth directly beneath me as more and more of the room flooded.

"Hey. Ugly," I groaned as I hung there by my fingers. "I was once told by my mom... never to play with water... around power cables."

I had no clue if it could understand me or if it sensed the snapping electricity arcing from the dangling cables, but that massive maw formed a giant pony head and looked over at the electrical lines and reared back... too late. With a horrible sizzle and reek of caustic chemicals, the entire blue mass flickered and flashed as current poured through it. The whole thing jiggled, and for a moment I thought of Rampage's

horrible joke of gelatin monsters. Then the slimy head collapsed in a thick splash and started to drain away. The bulk of it poured down the elevator shaft, dissolving through the floor of the smashed elevator and pouring down below. I groaned, trying to hold on with my smoking digits.

It wasn't draining fast enough; there was still more than enough smooze to liquefy me. Then with a ping my corroded fingertips gave way and popped off, and I dropped down towards the steaming blue fluid.

Then I stopped, dangling in space in a protective cocoon of purple magic while my hide sizzled in a dozen places.. I looked over at the doorway where Lacunae and Shears stood, the former holding me aloft while the latter kept the smooze back from the cafeteria. Once they'd pulled me back through, they wasted no time peeling off my armor and washing me off with bottles of water. Then they took out cardboard boxes looted from the kitchen and shook out this white powder on my burns. Almost immediately I started to feel relief.

"You know, this place isn't so bad," I muttered, my whole body afire. "Once you get past the undead guards, the acidic ooze monsters, and the insane warden, it's really... pretty horrible, actually," I finished lamely, sitting up. I looked over at Stygius and Psychoshy, whose radsuits were literally falling apart before my eyes. Better the suits than their hides... Though Rampage was healing, her armor was covered with ugly rusted splotches where the smooze had touched it. My brand new armor had already taken a thrashing, but it'd kept my hide intact. Silver Spoon and Xanthe looked at me in worry, Nurse Graves in concern, and Shears with an almost desperate stare. Carrion, though, only appeared mildly annoyed by the acid-etched steel of his power armor.

We hadn't even left ground floor and already we were thrashed. I chowed down on cram cans and gems, and was relieved to see my fingertips reforming. They looked discolored (I suspected my body didn't like rebuilding whole parts from tin cans), but they seemed to work okay. I looked at my gray foreleg and forced open the pitted door to examine the PipBuck within. The black device was slightly discolored around the edges; Stable-Tec, built to last. A few buttons and EC-1101 appeared on the screen. I slowly looked up at the ceiling and the tiny navigation icon directly above me. I looked over at my friends and the people who had followed me. Psychoshy sucked down on a packet of RadAway, sharing it with Stygius, who didn't seem to like the orange tanginess.

I was going to get them all killed...

The file number just shone back at me. Taunting me. Follow the file, Blackjack. Follow the file. Find the answers. Learn the secrets. All I had to do was keep going. Keep following the trail to the very end. Overcome. Win. Win at any cost. Ante up. Push to the very end...

The question was how many bodies I was going to leave behind me. I looked over at my companions, thinking, feeling folks and not just answers to my questions. They'd followed me here...

Was I going to be just like the Ministry Mares? Just like Goldenblood?

I closed my eyes a moment and took a long, low breath. "Okay. That's it. I'm pulling the plug," I said as I stood and closed the plate on my foreleg.

"What?" Mr. Shears asked bluntly.

"We'll find the exit and get the hell out of here. How many RadAway packets do we have? A dozen?" I asked, looking at Nurse Graves. The ghoul shook her head. "Less?"

"Eight," she said softly.

"Right. Then we're done. I'm not going to kill all of you for my own ends," I said as I looked to the south. "We go back to Meatlocker, heal up and come back another day. We didn't know about the smooze, the soul jars, or the Warden. We need better supplies and weapons. I want to get Glory and P-21 in on this. His grenades and her beam rifle are just what we need. You can whip up more talismans, we can bring a tanker truck of RadAway, and we'll do it right," I said with a nod. "We can work our way in from the outside, take our time with the turrets, pick off the ghouls, and make sure this place is secure."

"I see." The round ghoul was silent a long moment. "I'm afraid that's not acceptable," Mr. Shears said calmly.

I groaned. I'd feared this was going to be trouble. "Look, what's another month? You've waited two centuries for this."

"I'm not waiting another hour," Mr. Shears said in a low mutter. "I refuse."

Rampage frowned and rolled her eyes. "Um, not sure if you missed the point, but if BJ says we go, then we go. And there's ten of us and one of you. I doubt you can take all of us."

"I don't have to take any of you," he said as he looked right at me, his horn flaring bright blue. "Just one."

From the cloaked ghoul, a twisting, ghostly white whirlpool formed above his horn. Then, in a flash of gray smoke, it shot across the distance between us and slammed into my chest.

I'd like to say I'd never heard screams from inside me before, but as the spell hit me I heard a noise like Enervation coming from my chest... a clawing, twisting explosion of pain that drove me to my knees.

Rampage sailed through the air and crashed down upon Shears like an avalanche. "You're dead!" She reared her forehooves above him, rusty, jagged hoofclaws ready to rip him to pieces.

"I die, she dies!" the ghoul screamed, freezing the earth pony. Shears rasped, "That curse is slowly ripping her soul from her body. In a few hours, she's dead or worse." Rampage grit her teeth in frustration. "Do you know how to remove it?" he asked, staring at Lacunae, who pointed her AM rifle right at his face. The alicorn didn't answer. "Do you?" he asked as he looked at Xanthe.

"Starkatteri blasphemy," Xanthe spat at him. "You meddle in that which you have no right!"

"I've learned over two centuries that one does what one must. We are reaching the top of this tower, tonight! I don't care if every single one of you dies in the process. I am getting what is mine and not waiting a moment longer," he said as he looked up at all of us from where Rampage had knocked him prone.

"My combat inhibitor is a little iffy on this one," Cerberus growled.

"So's mine," Rampage replied.

"Don't kill him..." I gasped as I struggled to stand... to do anything really. I felt like there was something twisting inside me, trying to pull something out of me. The pain was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. "Not... yet..." I slowly fought my way to my hooves, and his milky eyes widened in shock. "Why?" I asked as I looked down at him.

"You... you're standing? You shouldn't able to stand! The pain—" he muttered as he stared up at me.

"Is nothing I'm not already used to," I said as I stared down at him and grimaced. "I get hurt a lot. So. Tell me why..." I said as I floated Vigilance out and pointed it at his head. "Or else I kill you and have a nice party in Afterlife before I die. Again."

"Again?" he murmured softly, and then took a slow step back. "You've... been to

the everafter? Seen the singing lights? But your eyes...”

“Are synthetic. So. Tell me why,” I said, then clenched my jaw against another stab of pain.

Shears stared at me for a moment longer, then turned away. “I have to. Surely you can understand doing what you have to do.”

I took several deep breaths. I rather thought that shooting him at this point would be a little too late to count as self defense. “Okay. Let’s get out of here.” Maybe the Goddess would work something out... or I’d just tough it out... or maybe it would kill me. Hopefully Lacunae could unite me with Glory before I finally kicked it...

“Wait,” Lacunae said as she walked slowly and imperiously towards Shears. All eyes were drawn to the magnificent, regal unicorn as she stared down with cold condemnation. “How have you done this?”

“Starkatteri sorcery, no doubt,” Xanthe muttered, stamping her hoof.

“Entering combat now,” the suit seemed to agree, then amended, “Whoopsie. Never mind.”

“I can’t explain,” Shears countered. “Just get me to the attic. I have to get there... I have to!” he muttered, and I wondered if he was pushing going feral himself. “I’ll fix her once we’re there. I promise.”

“I doubt the value of a promise from such a treacherous pony as yourself,” Lacuane replied. Then she sighed. “But very well. I will remain.”

“Lacunae, you don’t have to—“ I began, but she smiled and shook her head.

“I’m not going to abandon Tiar... um... Blackjack,” Silver Spoon said as she put a hoof on my shoulder. I smiled at the gesture, but stepped clear from the spiking radiation. The round unicorn just nodded and hung his head. She blinked behind her frames. “You might need me to deal with the Warden again. Maybe I can, like, convince him to meet us face to face?” She looked at the ceiling with a worried frown.

“I still need to get to that cell,” Carrion muttered. “As long as Ahuizotl has my contract, I have to do what he says.”

“I’m not retreating if it means losing more chances to incinerate some maggot farms!” Cerberus said, waving his disintegration arm over his head. “I’ve got over one million, one hundred and sixty eight hours of combat inhibition to make up for!”

I looked at Nurse Graves, and she just smiled and shook her head. Rampage too. Psychoshy gave me the cockiest grin she could muster, gulping against her fear. Stygius looked at her with surprise, then smiled, patted his chest, and pointed to me. Finally, all eyes turned to the zebra. Xanthe chewed her lower lip. “I... I can go?”

“With that stealth suit, you probably can,” I replied calmly. “I sort of dragged you into this too. We could use you with us, but only if you want to join us.”

The zebra looked absolutely torn. “I... I... I...” she stammered, looking in the direction of the exit. “Ooooh, curses.” She slumped down before me, hanging her head. “I cannot leave you, Maiden. You have cursed me like all the others. I am in your thrall.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “Xanthe. You can go. I don’t want you along if you don’t want to come along.” This whole zebra curse thing was getting a whole lot harder to understand and, honestly, a bit concerning.

She bowed her head towards me. “I am cursed to follow the Star Maiden. Fighting my curse will only increase my suffering. I resign myself to my doom and damnation, Star Maiden, in the hope that you may lessen your wrath upon my people.”

Okay. I give up. Zebras are just weird.

I grimaced, fighting the augering sensation inside me. “Okay,” Nurse Graves said. “Eight doses of RadAway. That’s fifteen, twenty minutes. Everypony... and zebra... take another Rad-X.” She passed out four tablets to those of us who were vulnerable to radiation poisoning. Mmmm... chalky goodness. Xanthe looked at Rampage as she scraped rusty hoofclaws against the corroded surface of her armor.

“Do you not need some as well?” Xanthe asked, looking at her legs where the acid had burned her. She seemed fascinated by the smooth hide contrasted with the pitted metal. “And... were you not wounded?”

Rampage started to say something, then her face turned aggressive, and then just as quickly formal and aloof. “Mere injuries such as those are of little concern, Propoli. Do not concern yourself on my account.” Then she gave another shake and leered at Xanthe. “Keep poking your nose in my business and I’ll cut it off, you hear me?” And a moment later she adopted that lazy smile that sent a chill down my spine.

“Rampage?” I murmured. “Are you... you?”

“Why Blackjack, who else would I be?” she replied sweetly. “Now take it easy. I

wouldn't want you to suffer anymore than you do now."

"Right." I looked at Lacunae, Stygius, and Psychoshy. I stared at the alicorn and thought a warning at her as hard as I could. Could I set her off if I made the accusation? I grimaced back at her. "You're such an angel, Rampage." The striped mare just smiled a little bit more. It was the politest way she could bare her teeth at me.

We trotted to the doors, and I looked out across the penned-in gymnasium with warped workout equipment. The twisting sensation inside me faded a little, like the spell was finally wearing off. Maybe he'd botched the 'curse'... or maybe it was like the poison joke spell, biding its time until the perfect moment to spring on me. Either way, my friends weren't going to let me walk out of here, so I was just going to have to deal with it.

Story of my life...

"Let's go," I said as I pushed open the door and moved out.

"Don't fly in the central shaft!" Graves warned as we spilled out. "There's high powered turrets up there designed to take fliers out in the event of lockdown!"

"Big deal. There's a missile in the way," Psychoshy snorted as she lifted off the ground.

"Do you want to find out what will happen if that warhead is hit by a beam turret?" Graves countered.

"Oh that would be bad. Very very bad. Please don't shoot balefire warheads with beam weaponry!" Xanthe pleaded. Psychoshy looked up at the blazing cone affixed to the tip above us and put her hooves back on the ground. The path around to either side was blocked by rubble from collapsed walkways from the lower levels. The only way to the broad stairwell was across the floor of the central shaft, which was a mess of twisted steel, chainlink fence, and tangled razorwire. Blue flame from the warhead burned with a toxic waxy slowness in the midst of the rubble. Thrashing ghouls tangled in it struggled towards us. In the direct glow of the warhead, my PipBuck was hitting levels of radiation I'd never imagined before.

"Move move move!" I shouted as we charged together into the steel briars, fighting the lingering twisting sensation in my chest. Metal hooves smashed down rolls of razor wire, letting my companions scramble across my back. Purple magic lifted aside the half-melted hulks of workout equipment. Stygius shadowflashed to the far side of an intact stretch of fence and together with Psychoshy tossed all of us over the razorwire. Cerberus's flamer spewed fire at the glowing ghouls as they fought to

reach us, and globs of flame drizzled down in lazy arcs from the baking glow of the warhead above.

Despite everything, though, I found myself smiling as we fought together. Even facing all this, we could do anything so long as we did it together. Our strengths were combined and our limitations overcome. When Rampage finally rammed her way thought a chainlink door with a melted lock, we staggered out on to the broad steps of the stairwell. Under cover, the radiation cut back immensely, but it was still far more than I wanted to be exposed to for long.

Still, we all needed a breather; even the ghouls looked like they were feeling the nibble of Enervation. I was feeling like I'd just come out of an oven myself.

"Come on, folks! No time to stop now. You horn heads are just too soft," Rampage laughed, and now I had no idea who was in charge of her. Between the radiation and Enervation and various curses, we were all looking a bit wan. "You know what they say..." And then I gaped a moment as she sang.

"Some people say earth ponies are made out of mud.

Well this poor mare's made of muscle and blood!

Muscle and blood, skin and bone,

A mind that's weak but a back's that strong!"

We stared at her in shock, Graves grinning broadly. "She's singing Highlander tunes now?" Psychoshy asked as she gaped.

"Ponies..." Carrion muttered, rolling his glassy eyes. Cerberus gave an odd click, and music... low, strong, and oddly... dirty... music began to play out his speakers as Rampage ran up the steps and grinned back at us.

"She was born one morning when the sun didn't shine!

She picked up her shovel and she went to the mines!

She loaded sixteen tons of that number nine coal

'Til the boss mare said 'Well-uh bless my soul!"

We couldn't help but follow her as she ran up to the second level. A sentry bot, its metal hide mottled and deformed from the heat, turned and faced us as its voice crackled some sort of broken warning or threat. Rampage didn't miss a beat as she ran up through the spray of its gatling beam gun and rammed her hooves into its chest, forcing it back from the stairs as she sang out.

*"Load sixteen tons and whaddaya get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
Princess Luna don'tcha call me, 'Cause I can't go!
I owe my soul to the Company store!"*

She smashed the sentry's chest over and over again, the robot struggling to bring its gun to bear and blast the striped earth pony. Lacunae's AM round blew its head to scrap, and the striped mare heaved the robotic carcass aside. The stairs were blocked by rubble, but down around the far side a portion of the walkway had dropped down to form a ramp from the second to the third level.

There was no time to talk or think, only to run. A turret in the corner dropped down and started to strafe us with glowing red beams of light. Rampage swept up a metal plate from the fallen robot as Lacunae and Carrion stepped to either side of her and blew the turret to scrap. With a laugh the earth pony charged ahead and we were swept along after her.

*"She was born one morning, it was drizzlin' rain.
Fightin' and trouble are her middle name.
She was raised in a cave, bred by an old mama griffin
Ain't no high class mare makes her walk the line!"*

We approached the next corner, racing past cells full of howling, glowing ghouls that waved their hooves at us and slammed themselves against the bars. I noticed the floating robots in the central shaft were tracking our movements now. I couldn't worry about that, though, not with this pain auguring inside me. A turret dropped down as we got near the second corner, and I dropped into S.A.T.S. and blasted it apart before it could start to unload into us.

We got to the rubble ramp to the third floor, but two sentries were waiting. I glanced out at the floating robots; that was hardly a coincidence. But as Rampage started up, Xanthe touched her shoulder and shook her head. 'Sneaking now!' the suit declared, and the armor shimmered away and took Xanthe with it. "Why does it work so much better for a zebra?" Shears muttered. "It never worked so well for us."

A second later, one of the sentries gave a mechanical scream and began to unload into the other sentry, firing rockets at its partner, who immediately returned to fire rockets back at it. "Oh... if only she could do that to me," Cerberus groaned over the music he played. When one of the two exploded, Rampage ripped into the other,

calling out, “Load sixteen tons and whadaya get? Another day older and deeper in debt!”

Stygius flashed behind the robot and rammed the back of its smoking head while Rampage bucked its chest. It exploded in sparks, raining down upon her as she cried out, “Princess Luna, don’tcha call me ‘cause I can’t go! I owe my soul to the Company Store!”

It would have been a nice place for a breather, but Rampage wasn’t stopping as she marched back around the walkway towards the stairwell with a steady strut matching the music coming from the Cerberus.

“If you see me coming, better step aside!

“A lot of mares didn’t; a lot of mares died.

“I’ve got one hoof of iron, and the other of steel

“And if the right one doesn’t get ya then the left one will!”

We were halfway around the walkway when an alarm rang out and suddenly a half dozen cells beside us opened up with a loud, mechanical clang. Cerberus whirled and filled one entire cell with a sheet of orange flame. Two ghouls leapt upon Carrion, and he launched himself straight up and crushed them against the ceiling, flipped to toss them off, and then pulverized them with his miniguns. One sprang at Psychoshy, and then Stygius was there, hugging the thrashing ghoul. Psychoshy flipped into the air and gave the pinned ghoul an applebuck that blew its snapping face to pieces.

I smashed the three on me aside, crushing one against the concrete bars before levitating my shotgun and blowing its head off point blank. A moment later, another head blew apart next to my own in a flurry of gunshots, and there was Xanthe once again, now looking a little more sure as she gripped the pistol in her mouth. I had a renewed respect for zebra sneak attacks. Graves bashed a ghoul with her armored medical box like a bludgeon, swinging it by the strap. Shears fought beside Silver Spoon, his magic scissors snapping wildly at any attackers around him.

Two ghouls piled onto the round little ghoul, but Silver Spoon beat upon them with her hooves till they turned on her! As she fell, the robed ghoul shouted in alarm, rammed the closed cutting implement through one feral’s neck, then opened with such force the head popped off. Then the wide glowing jaws closed on the neck of another with a clack that sent another head flying through the air. Silver Spoon stared in shock as he offered a hoof and helped her stand.

Through it all, it was the pony in the front, singing rough, low, and tough, that swept us forward. Half of us even couldn't help singing along. I wasn't even sure I was getting the words right as I blasted a ghoul lunging from a cell and decapitated it with three rapid shots a foot shy of it biting my face off. Stygius flashed beneath another ghoul and bucked straight up. Psychoshy whipped around and smashed the airborne ghoul into the bars. Then a second later they smashed the ghoul with all eight hooves, blasting the undead pony clean through the gaps. Then they actually clapped hooves! This was crazy! Reckless! Stupid, even.

And also a lot of fun.

"Sixteen tons and whatdya get?" Rampage sang over the scream of countless ghouls as she spread her forelegs wide and swept a whole crowd of hissing, thrashing zombies before her towards the corner. A sentry rumbled around the side as a turret dropped down, spraying the massive mob of undead flesh with crimson beams. The ghouls hissed as one by one they burst into flame. *"Another day older and deeper in debt!"* she sang as the crowd was reduced to one and she gripped the ghoul in her hoofclaws, throwing it with a great spinning toss into the sentry bot and turret. The pair blasted the ghoul to dust with their energy weapons as Rampage closed the distance. *"Princess Luna don'tcha call me 'cause I can't go..."* she sang out as she leapt up over the sentry and applebucked its metal head back down the hall at us. The robot's gatling beam gun fired wildly, and Rampage grabbed the flashing barrel and hauled it up towards the turret. *"I oooooowwwwwwwwwweeeeeeee owe owe owe owe owe my souuuuuul..."* she cried out loud and drawn out as she yanked the barrel upright, the beams blasting the turret until it exploded, showering her in sparks. *"To the compannnnnieeeeeeee..."* The beam gun finally popped and disintegrated into chucks of scrap metal as she stood atop the crackling sentry and finished with her forehooves spread wide over her head. *"Stooooooooore!"*

The rest of us just gaped at her for several seconds as Cerberus' music cut off. Grinning broadly, she hopped off the robot and walked back towards us with a smirk. I tried my best not to collapse; now that the adrenaline had faded, I could feel the curse burrowing inside my chest again.

Carrion leaned over towards Xanthe. "You understand that this is why you couldn't beat them, right? You just couldn't compete with pony combat folk music."

Xanthe didn't argue, though she did furrow her brow. "There was once a report that said pony battle effectiveness increased by almost seventy percent when they were singing. It recommended withdrawing immediately till the song was over."

I grimaced as I walked up to the armored mare standing in front. There were the stairs continuing the rest of the way up to medical. "Nice job," I complemented as we trotted forward; I kept an eye on the cell doors. "Nice to see somepony else doing something crazy for a change."

"Eh... nice to do something crazy that's not also completely frigging evil," she said with a nervous little twitch as we started up the stairs.

"You okay?" I asked with a worried smile as we walked up to a short hall with another turret. S.A.T.S. and four shots took care of it neatly as I looked at her.

"You're worrying about me? You're the one with a zebra curse in you," Rampage countered.

"Eh... you die once and it loses half its thrill." She rolled her eyes a little, but there was still worry in her gaze. Heck, she was an expert at dying, if not at staying dead. "What is it?" She glanced at me once more, and her smile faded.

"I just... I don't feel quite like myself. Since coming to help you... yeah. Been feeling a lot more on edge than usual," she said as we trotted past the sparking turret towards the reinforced doors marked 'Medical'. "You remember how I'd black out before? Well, now I feel... strange. Like I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel. Like I'm not me anymore."

"Was that the reason for the song?" I asked, trying my best to hide the throbbing in my chest.

"What, that?" She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Nah. That was just fun, and to keep my mind off of turning Shears into bloody paste for pulling that stunt. I still plan on punting his bubblegum butt off the top of this tower after he lifts the curse on you, though."

"Rampage..." I began, and she thumped my shoulder.

"No! You can't just keep on letting this happen, Blackjack! You let your rapists go. You helped Sanguine. Heck, the second you had those organs, you should have put a bullet in him and been on your way. Now this guy has cursed you... when are you going to start punishing ponies that fuck with you?" The striped mare grunted and rolled her eyes.

I thought of tearing apart five pegasi in the rain. "Rampage, I can't do that. Or rather, I can't do that and live with myself. I nearly killed Boing because I was on a bloody tear. Ask Xanthe about Yellow River if you want." The zebra immediately flinched

back. "Don't kill him. He lifts the curse and I'll call it fair. We all get out alive and get what we want."

"That would be good," Graves muttered as she walked up to a terminal screen next to the door and started typing with her hooftips. "Not threatening the person who she needs to lift the curse would be good too." I glanced over at the glaring white eyes of Shears.

"So... what can we expect in there?" Rampage asked, tapping her hoofclaws against the door.

"My co-workers and friends," Graves replied quietly. Then she looked back at us soberly. "I don't expect you to not fight them... but if any of them are talking, please give them a chance."

Rampage huffed with a resigned smile. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Heck, even if they're feral, Blackjack just might let them come along anyway. She's funny like that."

A few more taps and the door clicked. "Okay," the earth pony ghoul said. "Once we're in medical, we're going to the supply room. It's on the far side of the medical level. Head left and look for 'Supply'. There were more than a hundred doses of RadAway in there. More than enough to get through the rest of the prison," Nurse Graves said with a distant look in her filmy eyes. "I counted them often enough to know."

I nodded and pushed the door open. I had to admit, I had issues with hospitals and 'medical' places. I was half afraid I would find some super clean creepy town or some half mutated, half smooze screaming room situation.

Instead, I was greeted with a radioactive scar. Everything inside medical was a blackened, twisted waste. Blue flames flickered here and there like cold, hateful eyes. The concrete walls were cracked and crumbling, the metal warped and twisted like overcooked meat. An acrid electrical smell mixed with the reek of old soot. Slagged turrets drooped from the ceiling next to the burned-out hulks of protectaponies. An unhealthy haze obscured my vision.

"Right. Got an encore?" Psychoshy asked Rampage sourly.

"Your turn," the striped reaper responded, her voice softer. For some reason, the lack of anything shooting at us had us talking more quietly. Carefully we hopped through a melted security window and into an infirmary. Blackened bones were still hoofcuffed to the gurneys and observation tables. Spaced along the roof were

partially melted skylights that angled up towards the warhead. The flaring blue glow made the shadows dance about us.

"Doctor Fern..." Nurse Graves murmured softly as she stood over two skeletons curled-up together. She glanced over at me, then back at the bones. "Pelvic bone pin from an ice skating accident. Always aggravated him when the weather was cold. That's probably Doctor Silverstrike... they had an affair going. Constant office gossip." She made a choking noise in the back of her throat, the same noise Sanguine had made. The sound of a ghoul crying. "He never did come clean to his wife."

She turned and trotted quickly away, her head drooping as we walked into a second ward with more equipment around the charred beds. Every now and then she'd find one of the nurses or doctors, or even the janitor. Doctor Scampercamp, a horrible slacker on the night shift. Nurse Bramble, who loaned Graves twenty bits to buy breakfast the day the bombs fell. The earth pony ghoul grew more distraught with every body she discovered. She could even identify some of the prisoners from their positions and the marks of old injuries on their bones.

As we walked down a hall a ball of flame came down through one of the sky lights as we passed beneath it. Fire dribbled through the holes like molten wax, barely missing Stygius and Psychoshy. It collected in a blackened pile, and my rad meter spiked. We all backed away, chewing down another Rad-X just to be sure. I glanced at the ghouls. "I don't suppose you guys are immune to that stuff, are you?"

Lacunae shook her head. Graves looked at me and murmured, "While the radiation does help us regenerate, I think getting hit by the actual fire would cause more damage than it'd heal." Too bad.

We picked our way along past other rooms, some more intact than others. We came across an operating room that was still more or less in one piece. Then we passed an office where only the blackened, twisted desk and melted filing cabinets remained. Graves lingered over the bones of a pony clutching a charred scrap. A safe had three hundred bits and some files that had survived the flames. Prewar ponies and their love of paper. Graves took them and slipped them into her saddle bag.

An intact radiology room. A strange bulbous device hung on an armature over a table. Blackened pictures on the walls showed various diagrams of pony anatomy. She trotted to a large stainless steel door in the back and pulled on the latch to reveal a room with barrels of Flux and a broken pony skeleton. "Nurse Spectre,

from Fancee," Graves said as she nudged the tattered white nurses' cap. "Her accent always cheered me up."

I wasn't looking at the cap though. I stared at the smashed bones. The door was intact; nothing had fallen inside the space. A tiny pink pony in my head put on a detective cap and started to blow bubbles from a pipe. Then I looked into the back of the storage space where something moved . "Graves, look out!" I shouted as I shoved her to the side.

A ghoul in combat armor launched itself silently at me, crashing into me and driving me back. Unlike other ghouls, this one was nearly whisper-quiet; all leathery skin and brown bone as its hooves slammed into me again and again. "No! No! Doctor Bones! Please! It's me, Graves!" the ghoul earth pony cried. I lifted my hooves, trying to beat it away. Carrion, Cerberus, Xanthe, and Lacunae blasted it with gunfire; though the shots knocked it aside it still remained on its hooves. Rampage took some of their fire as she smashed it; the ghoul made brittle crunching noises but still fought on.

"I'm sorry, Graves," Shears said as the glowing shears came up and sliced right through the leathery hide and desiccated sinew. The ghoul's head popped off and rattled as it rolled across the floor. For a moment the ghoul in combat armor swayed...

Then it turned and smashed its hooves down on the round unicorn ghoul.

Oh crap. It was one of the suits of soul armor...

I whipped out the first thing I could think of, the only thing that had been effective: my sword. The blade hummed its lone cold note as I slashed at the suit, but unlike the ones down below, this one refused to cut. Still, it jerked away, as if in pain. I advanced, keeping the sword stabbing at the suit. If I could just drive it back into the storage room...

Then it wrapped its hooves around the hilt and turned the weapon on me. I could almost imagine the headless ghoul grinning at me in triumph as it lunched. The pain within my chest exploded, paralyzing me as I watched the armor about to impale me with my own sword.

Then the heavy steel table came crashing down atop the armor in a loud crunching noise. The rear hooves stuck out, wiggling wildly as the rest of it was flattened. "We'll not be doing that again, thank you," Lacunae said primly as she looked at me, clutching my chest with a hoof as I struggled to breathe. The pain slowly receded,

and I glowered at Shears, who talked quietly to the stricken-looking Graves.

“We need to hurry...” I muttered, and the earth pony nodded. Xanthe looked away from the strange radiology machine with some disappointment, but followed. I hated to leave my sword there under the table, but I couldn’t see a way to get it out without running the risk of the armor getting free too. We’d have to come back for it after we found the storage room.

Next, we came to a ripped-apart break room. Nurse Graves walked to a pile of blackened bones in the corner. Her hoof pawed at a sooty charm bracelet on the forehoof before she turned and sat down beside it. I stared at a picture on the wall, miraculously intact. It showed eight ponies in lab coats and a dozen wearing nursing caps. Each pony had a signature. I looked at the black and white image of a sober, serious looking mare. ‘Graves aka Miss Grumpyhooves’ had been scribbled above her head.

“Featherdown... you worked a double...” she said to the bones before she leaned back her head and made another choking noise as she clenched her eyes shut. “You knew how busy we all were. You knew we needed your help. And you came in on your day off... because you were just a g... good pony.” Graves curled up a little bit more, making another sob. “Why... why didn’t any of them make it? Why just me?”

I looked at the radiation meter creeping up through the yellow. “You came back to see if any of your coworkers survived.”

“This was my life, Blackjack. My home! This place was full of ponies that needed help, and we did everything we could to help them,” Nurse Graves said as she trembled. “So why am I still here when none of them are? Was it just an accident that I was in the supply room stuck doing inventory because I notified the news about prisoner conditions here? Is... is this existence supposed to be some sort of reward, or punishment? Living so long and keeping my mind only to remember this horrible place?”

“That’s why Hobble called you a whistleblower?” I asked as I sat down besides the grieving ghoul. She nodded in short, jerking spasms.

“We all knew it was wrong. We gathered files. Put our careers on the line. Showed the pattern of guard abuse, the overcrowded conditions, and the strange magical murders and disappearances. But I was the one who drew the short straw and went public with it.” She grimaced as she looked out at the charred ward. “I thought... I thought if there was any place where there might be a sane ghoul, it’d be here.”

Maybe I could get them out too." Her face twisted in anguish as she looked at the charred skeleton. "I'd been so close to losing myself when I escaped that I thought that maybe I'd missed one..." She clenched her eyes shut. "It should have been one of them. Any of them."

"It's not your fault," I said softly, putting a leg around her shoulders. "And while I understand you're upset... we really need that RadAway, Miss Grumpyhooves." My rad meter had just passed into the red, and I was resistant to radiation. I had no idea how close Xanthe, Stygius, and Psychoshy were to biting it.

She rubbed her eyes and nodded. "I hated that nickname..." But it seemed to pull her back into the present. "Right. You're right. I need to do my job. It's just..." She gave a wistful glance at the bones beside her and leaned over, kissing the dun skull, before looking back at me. "They were all such good ponies."

I helped her to her hooves, and she continued down the hall to a simple gray door marked 'Supply B.' I jiggled the handle, made an irked face, and knelt down with bobby pin and screwdriver. This was definitely going to be tough; I could barely get the pin in there. Then something jingled by my ear. Nurse Graves gave a sad smile as she held a keyring in her mouth. Okay... I guessed that'd be easier. Still, I bet I could have opened it as well as P-21. It just would have taken me a while... I stepped aside and let her at the lock. My eyes were drawn up to the warped glass over us.

Wait. Was that fire... walking?

It was hard to make out through the distorted glass, but I thought I saw blue flame slowly walking along the crumbled balcony two floors up next to the missile. The bars had broken away. For a second I thought that maybe it was fire from the warhead that had dribbled off, but it was definitely moving sideways.

The storage room clicked open, and inside were shelf upon shelf of neatly organized medicine, chems, and medical equipment. Graves trotted in and immediately began to pass over packets of RadAway from where they hung on special pegs. Stygius curled a hoof around a pair of packets and drank both at once. Psychoshy ripped open the corner of hers and poured it right down her throat. Even Xanthe drank one as quickly as she could while I remained in the hall. I continued watching that strange flame, even when Lacunae levitated one packet over and tapped the side of my head with it. I took it, missing the straw twice as I refused to take my eyes off that strange blue fire moving overhead.

"Lacunae... what is that?" I muttered between gulps.

She looked up with me, and her purple eyes narrowed in a confused frown. Carrion joined me. Then Shears.

Then the fire turned and looked at down at us.

“Oh...” I began to say, when it stepped off the edge and tumbled like a flaming blue meteor towards – and through – the skylight, showering us in glass and gobbets of blue fire. We all fell back as it landed in the middle of us, and for several terrified moments all we could do was stare as it rose to its hooves. I supposed it was a ghoul, technically. The blackened pony hide was so charred that it gleamed like obsidian. A roaring blue bonfire poured out of the gaps in its flesh and along its spine, and its fiery eyes blazed as it opened its mouth wide in a demonic scream.

“Hoo-rah! That’s a hostile!” Cerberus cheered, the only one not stunned by the monster’s appearance, and the robot immediately began to blast the flaming blue pony with shots of disintegration magic. The flaming monster winced at the impacts, took a deep breath, and exhaled a plume of blue and green fire that washed over the floating robot. Its robotic eyes exploded in showers of sparks, and the three arms were blown clear off! The levitation talisman went dark as Cerberus gave one last anemic crackle. “For the Glory of Equestriiiiiizzzzk-“

But Cerberus’ action had galvanized the rest of us as we all began firing at the immolated monster as fast as we could. The problem was that many of the bullets seemed to be vaporizing before they did much damage. Psychoshy just stared in horror. “There’s no way I’m kicking that!” she blurted. Stygius shadowflashed behind the flaming ghoul and let out his scream. The ghoul turned and inhaled once again. The batpony’s eyes popped wide a second before an inferno tore through the air at him. He appeared beside Psychoshy, frantically trying to put his purple mane out.

“Pussy!” Rampage roared as she charged, lowering her head and bringing her helmet spike to bear. It plunged deep into the monster’s side, and the beast let out another earsplitting scream. She grinned at me, then frowned, then sniffed ,and suddenly the striped mare yanked her head back, the spike melted completely away and the helmet cherry red atop her head. She beat at it in futility. “Ow! Ow! It keeps cauterizing my nerve endings and they keep growing back!” she wailed, and then looked at the blazing pony’s hind end and realized her error. “Uh-oh...”

The monster gave an applebuck that blasted Rampage off her hooves, across the room and through the wall. Only the fact she wore plate armor kept her intact as she tore through the cinderblock. From the limp rear hooves that hung through the hole she’d made, she’d be out for a while.

"Stop!" Silver Spoon yelled as she waved her hooves. "Like, you have to do what I say! Like those others! I don't care if you are totally big and flaming and scary... do what I say and go away!"

The ghoul turned and stared at her with blue eyes of fire and took a step back. Then hope died as the ghoul made a horrible inhalation noise, the licking fire sucking back through the cracks and holes in its blackened hide. Silver Spoon stared in horror as the fire crackled in its mouth, unleashing a blazing plume of radioactive flame.

Shears leapt at Silver Spoon and knocked her out of the path of the fire[a]. Caught in the inferno, his rags burst into flame as he rolled across the ground, screaming in pain. The blazing ghoul swept its head around, and Carrion and Lacunae barely flew out of the stream. Half the break room blazed with blue-green fire.

There was no time to question his sudden gallantry as it turned towards Graves, Stygius, Xanthe, and Psychoshy in the storage room. "Hey!" I shouted as I brought up the riot gun and started firing, blasting away at the burning ghoul. "Me, you great big blazing son of a mule!" I bellowed as I advanced, firing over and over again. Glistening lead painted the blackened hide of the monster as I tried to draw its ire. Instead, it inhaled once more. I popped into S.A.T.S. and hit it with three magic bullets, the silvery white bolts striking and blasting away holes of blackened bone and charred hide.

"Get out!" Psychoshy screamed, diving out the door. Stygius grabbed the petrified Xanthe and swept her out as well, but Graves didn't flee. She scooped up RadAway in her hooves as the ghoul's mouth crackled.

"Me!" I screamed, trying to put myself between it and the storeroom. I just needed a few more seconds. Just a few more...

Instead I was hit by a double hoofful of RadAway tossed by the smiling ghoul, halting me for those two terrible seconds.

Then she vanished in a sheet of blazing blue, along with the storeroom.

"No!" I screamed as I brought the butt of the shotgun down on the head of the blazing monster. Purple light swept the orange packets up before we could trample them, but I barely paid any notice. Graves was gone, along with all the supplies we'd needed. Another good pony gone because she'd tried to keep my dumb ass safe. Because I hadn't forced everyone to leave. Because the plan had gone completely to shit.

Damn it. I didn't want another Priest.

I got four hits with the butt of the shotgun before it turned and looked at me. There was malice in its eyes. Intelligence. Prisoner or guard, it didn't matter. It knew it had grieved me and caused me pain.

So I pained it back.

I might not have had a grenade, but I had explosive shotgun shells. I screamed in rage as I grabbed its jaws with my fingers and forced them wide, ramming the shotgun down its throat and pulling the trigger as rapidly as I could. Its sides erupted in volcanic cascades of ghoul gore and radioactive fire. My PipBuck roared; I was back in the red and heading quickly for dead as I did all I could to blast this thing into oblivion.

Then the barrel of my gun blew apart in a shower of red steel, my fingers glowing from the heat as it inhaled once more. I shoved its head away as I dove to the side and looked back. Once thing was for sure – I had really succeeded in pissing this thing off. “That’s it, motherfucker. Chase the Blackjack. Everypony does!” And then I was running with a fiery monstrosity right behind me.

Of course, as I raced down the hall, I was suddenly struck with the immortal question of ‘Now what?’ I had a really pissed off monster on my butt, but more than that, I was still soaking up rads. I had no clue where this hall went, only that if I came across a locked door or anything I was probably dead. I felt like shit, I had a hole drilling away inside my chest, and didn’t have a clue what to do beyond ‘run faster’.

So why was I grinning so hard?

I turned a corner, my way lit by the blue glare behind me. I ducked under dangling turrets, vaulted over the slagged protectaponies, and weaved around gurneys as I stayed in the lead. Suddenly I found myself on familiar ground as I raced through the observation room and soon passed radiology. Ahead I could see my friends and shouted at the top of my lungs, “RadAway!”

An orange packet was tossed in front of me and I snagged it with my magic, slurping it down as I raced the equine fireball. Around I ran, building up rads every time I passed under one of the skylights. “Keep it chasing you, Blackjack,” Lacunae said in my mind. I glanced back at the beast just a dozen paces behind me; not a problem. It had to have been an earth pony once. I supposed I should have been glad it wasn’t a pegasus.

When I ran past the break room again, everypony with a gun unloaded all at once, but aside from Lacunae’s magic arrows, all of them were weakened by the ghoul’s

fiery corona; bullets weren't going to work. However, they did make the monster stop chasing me and turn and look back.

I skidded to a stop, and out came Duty and Sacrifice. I aimed just a few inches south of its tail and fired. The bullets really weren't any more effective than my slugs, but I hit a very tender target, even for a ghoul. It looked back at me, eyes wide in outrage from my lead suppository.

Okay. It was now firmly locked onto my ass. The race was back on. All it had to do to win was catch me or run me till the radiation took me out.

"Keep going, Blackjack. We need something more to destroy it in one blast that it couldn't regenerate," Lacunae said in my mind as I passed the lounge the third time. Silver Spoon had pulled Shears away from my track. Xanthe and Lacunae were missing. Psychoshy and Stygius extracted Rampage from the wall. And that was all I caught as I kept running on my fourth lap through medical. I slurped down two rubies and a sapphire, my side aching as I got a cramp. Unicorns were not made to run like this... okay we'll maybe I was made to but... oh Celestia that was a lot of radiation. My head felt all kinds of itchy.

Things were getting hotter the fourth time around; the ghoul was dribbling sticky blue flame like drops of pitch, and the flames were starting to add up in my path. I just had to trust the smart ponies that they had a plan. I glanced back as its hoofbeat grew louder and louder, feeling the heat on my rump, and saw my black and red striped tail on fire at the tip; I knew one misstep would be my last.

"Maiden! Over here!" Xanthe yelled as she waved from radiology. Okay; how was I supposed to make that turn?

Be awesome, a cyan pegasus suggested. Easy for GI- Rainbow Dash to say. I saw a gurney I'd passed four times in my race ahead of me and instead of running around it, I reared up, grabbed the edge, and set it rocketing down in front of me. The ghoul made a fiery inhalation directly behind me, and I rolled on top of the gurney, flat on my back as I looked behind me at the ghoul, barreling wildly down the hall as a sheet of fire blasted along the floor under the wheels. I lifted Duty and Sacrifice with my magic and dropped into S.A.T.S. again. The six bullets turned the ghoul's face into a ruin of runny lead and fire.

Then, as the gurney reached the door, I grabbed the edges and rocked hard to the side. With a ping, two wheels on the left side gave way and the gurney fell before the door. Blue fire sprayed over the top of the rolling table as it skidded to a stop right by the Radiology door. "Have something good," I shouted as I scampered in

with blue fire sizzling along my spine. “Please have something good!”

They did.

Lacunae stood inside her shield with Xanthe on her back. The zebra gripped the strange machine in her forehooves. They’d wired Cerberus’s disintegration gun to the front of it. “Get clear,” Xanthe shouted as the flaming ghoul kicked the gurney aside and stepped into the doorway. The machine had all kinds of hazard warnings on it, and I assumed Xanthe was ignoring each and every one as she hit the side of the device and it gave the most wonderful, ominous hum.

Then a pencil-thin line of green disintegration magic lanced out and sliced into the ghoul. It let out a shriek of pain, staggering back as it raised its forehooves. The fight became a struggle between the destructive power of the beam and the ghoul’s phenomenal regeneration powers. It struggled to shield itself as it screeched, took a deep breath, and let loose a plume of radioactive flame. Lacunae’s purple shield flared as it fought the energetic assault.

The ghoul darted to the side, but there was a crack of power hooves and it was shoved back into the doorway. It moved the other way, but power armor claws sizzled as they shoved the ghoul back into the line of energy. I watched in astonishment as one whole flaming limb was reduced to green glowing gunk. This was it. We were going to win!

Why was the overturned table heaving up?

The metal, softened to the consistency of taffy by the flame the ghoul had sprayed across the floor, suddenly buckled as the suit of soul armor pulled itself free. I tried to tackle it, but the dead remains within were utterly pulverized, and it slipped out of my grasp. The armor snaked up Lacunae and knocked Xanthe from her back, and then shoved the beam weapon hard, sending the emerald ray slicing through the wall and off the ghoul, bringing a roar of pain from Carrion. Almost immediately the ghoul’s disintegrated leg reformed. This was bad...

And then it got worse.

The soul armor leapt off of Lacunae as the alicorn stabilized the weapon with her magic. Its buckles and straps flew wide, and I stared as the blue and black armor wrapped itself around the flaming ghoul. The X-ray beam struck the upraised legs and flashed off the metal. I reached out with my magic to try and free my sword from the slagged ruins of the table, but it was held fast in the cooled steel.

“No. No!” Xanthe screamed as she curled up, raising her hooves as the ghoul

inhaled once more. I doubted that the soul armor would save the zebra from the radioactive inferno.

"Dammit!" I shouted, tackling the ghoul. The armor might have been invincible, but it also blocked the magical heat enough that I could grab the back of the armor's collar and for the first time shove the bag of fire away from the zebra. "You don't get another!" I shouted as I heaved the ghoul away. The beast began to thrash, and my friends were forced back as I wrestled with it. My radiation levels were in the red and almost maxed out. I wondered if I'd simply explode once I'd soaked up enough...

Hmmm... that gave me an idea. A stupid, horrible idea, but still an idea. "Shears!" I bellowed as we twisted around and around in the hall. "Give me your key!"

"My key?" The... turquoise pony? Wait! The pony wearing the charred rags didn't have the boiled-looking appearance of the undead. He looked like a simple portly unicorn with prominent buck teeth and a shaggy brown mane. His eyes had the same milky whiteness of a ghoul, but there was something off about them. Something... luminescent.

That, though, could wait till after I was done wrestling with an unbeatable undead invincible enemy. "Yes! The key! Get it. Now!" I heaved and shoved the ghoul towards a window looking out at the central shaft. It twisted its head around, trying to spray fire over me and my friends. I wasn't going to let another of them die! I was going first.

Shears ran up, the glowing balefire egg floating above him. "But it's not rigged to detonate, Blackjack! It'll take five minutes at least!"

"Don't worry about it!" I yelled as it shoved me back and I heaved the ghoul around.

Rampage raced up, pieces of rebar still sticking out of her as she looked across at me in worry. I felt like I had a chunk jammed in my chest as well. "What are you planning, BJ?" the striped pony asked as she seized the other side of the ghoul and fought to keep it steady.

"What I do best! Bust out that window!" I yelled as I grabbed the egg with my right hand. Stygius, Psychoshy, and Carrion smashed it till the glass blew out into the central shaft, falling into the tangled steel far below. The ghoul opened its mouth wide, inhaling again. This time, it was getting something a little extra.

With every bit of strength I could muster, I rammed the balefire egg right down its throat. My right foreleg blazed like I'd shoved it into a blast furnace as I watched my radiation needle reach the top of the gauge. Looked like Hightower was going to get

one more, but it wasn't going to be my friends.

The ghoul's eyes blazed and chaotic rainbow energies began to spark from its maw. "Now get out!" I screamed at it as I shoved it back over the edge.

The suit of armor began to unstrap itself, and two buckles wrapped around my blazing red hoof, almost yanking me over the edge. The jagged remnants of the window sliced deep into my gut, and Rampage and Sygius were at my sides as the ghoul dangled below me. The chaotic light was growing brighter and brighter as the ghoul opened its mouth. . . to vomit the balefire egg up or to just try and take us with it, I had no idea.

"No! No more shrieking," I muttered as I took my target, hopped into S.A.T.S., and cast three magic bullets at my right leg at the knee. The first two blasted the corroded, smoking metal. The third took it off completely.

With a fiery scream the ghoul fell, plunging to the ground fifty feet below. It crashed into the tangled steel, buried for a moment in the twisted chainlink and razor wire. Then its blazing head emerged... and let out one last roar of rage before exploding in a massive green fireball that obliterated not just the ghoul but the steel and ten feet of concrete. It wasn't just vaporized. It was as if everything around the ghoul had been utterly disintegrated, including the possessed soul armor.

I was barely aware of the hooves pulling me in. There were screams and shouts and calls for RadAway. It didn't matter anymore. I was so tired. Ready for a really long nap. I felt Rampage slap me. Heard Lacunae tell me to stay awake. Didn't they understand? I'd earned a rest...

I stood beneath hazy summer clouds that gave us all a welcome respite from the sun beating down and making our itchy green uniforms feel even worse while we stood in line. There were at least a thousand on the field with more arriving every hour. We'd been given a preliminary physical, sent the fillies and colts who wanted to fight home, signed the parchment, and gotten our hoof and dental prints taken. Then we got our first lesson in military life: hurry up and wait. So we stood in rows, unicorns in one line, earth ponies in another, and pegasi on the far side of the field. Above the trees to the west, black smoke still rose from Hoofington.

"Can you believe the zebras said they didn't do it?" one mare muttered behind me.

"After Littlehorn, I don't put anything past those bastards," another growled. "We

should throw out every stripe in Equestria. Can't trust a one of 'em."

I just kept my head down, eyes to the grass. There hadn't been a hero's welcome for us when we'd arrived in Canterlot. There'd been the Cakes retrieving their kids and the discovery that the greatest war crime in history had been performed hours after we departed. My attempt to save the zebra refugees wasn't even a footnote. What did it matter if everypony involved was dead? The zebras denied the attack, saying it was done by a rogue element; not that anypony believed them. Then came the great Hoofington fire, killing hundreds more and displacing thousands. They'd denied that too.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Celestia wasn't supposed to quit. Alicorn princesses didn't quit. She'd lasted over a thousand years! How could she quit? Oh, sure, nopony was calling it that, but 'resigning due to an inability to secure the peace, safety, and prosperity of her people' was 'quit' with far more syllables than needed.

When the orange mare before me with torch for her cutie mark was led off to the side for specialist training, I stepped up to the table. The frustrated-looking unicorn in golden bardings looked up at me, assessed my entire worth in a moment, and found me lacking. I passed him the scroll I'd signed, and he looked at it briefly before snapping the question, "Talent?" I murmured my answer, and he scowled at me. "I asked what your talent is."

"Faith," I replied.

"Faith?" He sounded skeptical. "I'm sorry, but what is it you can do?"

"I... I have faith in Princess Luna to save us all. That's my talent. Faith..." I finished lamely. "I don't really have any magic..."

The guard covered his face with his hoof. "Great. Another basket weaver." He shook his head slowly. Then he floated a stamp over the parchment and brought it down with a thud. 'Infantry', it read, and I was pointed down to where the majority of the ponies were being gathered. There were shots and cracks from ponies shooting at wooden cutouts of zebras as more guards worked with small groups.

"Pthalm!" called a familiar voice from behind me, and Twist and Doof trotted up out of the crowd. The pale mare grinned broadly as she rushed up. "Ithn't thith thuper?" She lisped horribly as she grinned at me from behind her thick purple glasses. "They're tho glad we're thigning up!"

"They said I was big enough to face off an entire zebra brigade!" Doof said, the gray

pony with the messy brown mane looking around. “I wonder when we’re getting lunch?” Given his cutie mark of a knife and fork, there was no question what his talent was. “I bet a soldier eats really well.”

“Doof! Thith ith bigger than your thtomach. We’re gonna be fighting for all of Equesthria!” Twist said sharply as she looked over to where the rifle training was taking place. The royal guards circulated with looks that varied from contempt to concern on their faces.

I looked around at the crowds as they were packed into small groups and herded off for testing. “I got the impression that they were looking for ponies with fighting experience,” I said, keeping my voice down.

“Eeyep,” came a low, strong voice from behind me, and I turned and looked up at a red stallion almost as massive as Doof, but instead of pudge it was all muscle. The uniform strained to contain his enormous size. “Lot of folks here are high on hope and anger. Gonna be a mite different when the actual trainin’ starts.”

“Big Macintosh?!” Twist beamed at him. “What are you doing here? Howths Applebloom? Ith she here?” The mare looked behind the immense stallion, as if hoping to spot her.

He looked down a moment, then smiled. “Twist, right?” The mare nodded enthusiastically. “Whole passel of us in Ponyville wanted ta do our part. Since Applejack’s doin’ something for Princess Luna, I figured I might as well do the same. Wasn’t enough of us recruits in Ponyville, so they just carted all of us out to Hoofington since this is where they’re getting the army squared away. Applebloom’s fine... but I don’t see her signing up. She’s got other plans.”

“Oh...” Twist dropped her eyes a little. “Well, that’s okay. Maybe sthe’ll come and visit?”

A young yellow earth pony trotted closer, his form almost consumed by his oversized uniform. “Is this where I’m supposed to be? I mean, I’m not supposed to be somewhere else, am I?”

“The army? You mean we’re not going to be guards? I always wanted to be a guard,” Doof asked, frowning in concern.

“No,” said a voice above us, and a pegasus in splendid golden armor landed in front of us. “The Equestrian Army is going to be far larger than the Royal Guard or Equestrian Skyguard. Many of us will be resigning our posts with the royal guard to lead you in battle.” He looked around with a slightly bemused smile. “Things are a

bit less organized than we expected. To be fair, I don't think we anticipated quite so many recruits so quickly." Then he nodded his head to us. "Guard Cupcake, at your service."

"No surprise," said a low, deep voice. I'd expected it on a larger pony than the husky green earth pony buck. "The royal guard's five times the size it was when the war started. It's just not set up for big engagements. And I'm guessing they've sucked out all the career soldiers and now they're going to give all the rest of us a shot."

Big Macintosh nodded once. "Ayep." Then he looked at the pony curiously. "Hey! Applesnack? Strudel's great nephew twice removed?"

"Three times... I think," Applesnack replied, looking around. "Is Braeburn here? I'd thought he'd jump at a chance like this!"

Big Macintosh shook his head slowly. "Anope. He's been making guns for earth ponies. Calls it 'our magic' since we ain't got wings or horns." Big Macintosh then looked at me and added with his easy smile. "No offense."

"None taken. To be fair, I don't think I'll be of much use," I commented lightly. "I'm not a fighter. I'm not much of anything."

"Me neither," said the little yellow earth pony. "But... but I want to do something. I have to."

I smiled and offered my hoof to him. "Psalm."

He stared up at me and blushed. "E... E... Echo. But really... do you think I'll be able to fight?"

"That's... a question many guards have asked, too," the pegasus said simply as he surveyed the crowds. "A lot have been pretty resistant to the army. The Equestrian Guard used to be almost solely the province of unicorn knights and pegasi warriors. The idea of taking just *anypony* old enough and willing to fight and training them to be soldiers is... difficult."

"Hey! Is this where we sign up to join the Skyguard?" a buck said from above, drifting down on his widespread wings and landing with a crash. "Is Rainbow Dash here? I'd really love to meet her! I got a move called the Stonewing Stomp that I think she'll find totally awesome!" the gray winged pony said, giving a little hop and smashing the grass under his hooves.

"Didn't you just hear him? We're joining the army, not the guard," a blue pegasus mare said, landing beside him. "Don't mind him. He's a numbskull. Flew into one

too many mountains back in summer flight camp.”

“Oh, like you never did, Jetstream,” he snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Correct. I never did,” she replied pointedly.

The gray pegasus pointed a wing at her with a grin. “What about that faceplant into Mount Celestia’s southern face? The infamous ‘plotbreaker’?”

She looked back at him flatly. “That was you, Stonewing.”

“Oh? Oh yeah. Well, who smacked right into the wall of Ghastly Gorge during speed trials?”

“Also you.”

“Ploughed through the wall of the Cloudescuum?”

“You.”

“Left their imprint in the Ponyville dam?”

“You,” she finished in that same flat tone. “I’ll give you a hint, Stonewing. If there was an epic flight failure in the last ten years, it was probably you.”

This caused him to frown in thought and concern. “Oh, yeah...” Stonewing murmured as he looked skyward and rubbed his chin, then shrugged and grinned at the pegasus guard. “So, when are we getting our suits of armor, huh?” Jetstream just groaned and covered her face with her hooves.

“I don’t see as many pegasi or unicorns,” the yellow earth pony said with a small frown. “Mostly earth ponies.” Nearby there was a bit of commotion, with a stallion shouting for somepony to be reasonable in the crowd.

“Unfortunately, many pegasi don’t see much appeal in joining,” a smooth voice said as an emerald-maned unicorn stepped forward in his professionally tailored uniform. “Wars are dirty, uncouth things for surface ponies to struggle through. No concern for ponies who live in the clouds.”

“So then why are there not many unicorns not here either?” Jetstream countered. I reached up and touched my horn lightly, wondering if I even counted as a unicorn.

“Because wars are dirty, uncouth things for banal unmagical ponies to struggle through. No concern for ponies who can use magic,” another unicorn said as he pushed his way through with a scowl. He was certainly handsome, but it merely seemed to emphasize his haughtiness. “There you are! You’ve made me wade

through all these commoners to find you. What do you think you're doing, Vanity? This is no place for a prince!"

"Doing what you won't, Blueblood," Vanity retorted. "What so many Canterlot unicorns won't do."

"Ugh, at the very least do it properly! Field commission and from a position of command, not as an..." He dropped his voice and said in a stage whisper, "*Enlisted pony...*"

"I've made up my mind, Brother," Vanity replied evenly, putting a hoof on his sibling's shoulder. "Why don't you join me? We could be a symbol for the rest of the aristocracy."

"You're mad," Blueblood sniffed and stepped back, brushing grass from his coat in disgust. "Well, have your fun playing soldier, but don't say I didn't warn you. You'll be the absolute mockery of the Canterlot social circles for this, mark my words. Hrmph!" He snorted and turned away.

"Apologies," Vanity replied, effortlessly returning to a calm, collected smile. "It's been a trying time for the aristocracy. A week's transition of power has hardly allowed the whiplash to ease." He looked in the direction of the shooting range, and his smile faded a little. "In all honesty, I wonder if I'll be of any use at all. I suppose that has my brother worried more than anything. I know little about fighting beyond formal dueling."

"That's a worry we all have," Cupcake said in concern. "Bakers. Tailors. Candy makers. Farmers. Princes. And we're going to throw them into fighting they've never imagined before. Fighting like we've only seen in our nightmares. With Princess Luna taking control of the kingdom, the zebras have increased their recruitment as well. Whole tribes are coming to fight that were neutral when the war began. Can Equestria beat such odds with soldiers like this?"

"Ayep," Big Machintosh said in his even, confident voice. "If ya'll don't mind my sayin' so, Equestria's a lot more than its soldiers. Every single one of us loves this country. Sure, none of us are like your guards. I'd like to be in the south acre right now. But Equestria needs me to fight for this land more than it needs me harvestin' apples. So I'll learn whatever I need to to do it. The south acre will be there when I'm done."

"Me too!" Twist said with a stomp of her hoof. "I might not know anything about shooting, but I can stretch twenty pounds of taffy with my bare hoovesth and not break a sweat!"

"We'll fight," Applesnack said with a sure, wide smile. "We'll fight as long as Equestria needs us. We'll give our lives if we have to; nothing will stop us from winning and making sure that Equestria is safe for centuries to come."

Vanity smiled and nodded, looking sublime in his tailored fatigues. "And it won't just be the soldiers. I've heard talk that Princess Luna plans on throwing the entire might of Equestria behind this war. Every factory. Every resource that Equestria has to bring to bear will be used. It won't be the guard being sent off to fight while the rest of us live our lives and try to pretend that the war is just some trivial bit of news." Vanity looked off to the east, his expression solemn. "Hoofington proved just how much the enemy will destroy if given a chance. Littlehorn showed that all of our people are targets, no matter how helpless or innocent."

"I've seen what happens when muh sister's six friends work together. If all of Equestria works together and don't hold back, how can we fail?" Big Macintosh said casually with an easy smile. "It'll turn out alright. You'll see."

Cupcake looked doubtful though, even afraid. "Yes. Still, it's hard. Celestia always tried to spare the country from the nasty business of the war. I've fought against zebra machines of war at Dawn Bay and struggled with Achu warriors all over Shattered Hoof Ridge. The Guard were supposed to handle it all. But I guess after Littlehorn, that just isn't possible anymore."

"You'll see. It's going to be great. We'll fight them all together and win the war for Equestria," Doof said enthusiastically. "Twist here can work for hours on end and never get tired."

"And Doof is my number one worker. Why, he tosthes around fifty pound sthacks of sugar like they're nothing!" Twist replied with a grin.

The pegasus looked at all of us with the strangest smile on his face. He pointed to each of us in turn, as if memorizing our names. "Big Macintosh. Applesnack. Twist. Doof. Echo. Vanity. Jetstream. Stonewing. Psalm." He nodded once. "Right. I'll keep my eyes open for you. Maybe this Equestrian Army thing will work out after all...."

In the weeks to come, we would work together and learn the difficult art of war. Royal Guard Cupcake put his armor away to become Captain Cupcake. Twist learned that while her eyesight would always hinder her firearms ability, she was a tireless and tenacious fighter, and she learned to speak without her lisp so orders and communications could be clearly understood. Doof lost the fat and put on muscle with the constant work and training. Vanity taught the others dignity and pride, and learned

the messy realities of fighting. Stonewing and Jetstream worked as a team, protecting their surfacer pony friends from harm. Applesnack softened his cynical and hard attitude and learned to work with others. And Big Macintosh learned to become a leader, soft spoken but always supremely confident and sure of the right course of action.

And myself? I discovered that while I had little in the way of magic, with the help of an earth pony weapon I could be just as effective as a unicorn battlemage of old. Even if it was hard to sight a target and pull the trigger.

We were friends. We were comrades. We were Macintosh's Marauders...

I came to with my face on cold metal, feeling my body ache terribly; the boring sensation grinding away inside me. Really, nothing I wasn't used to. "So... I'm not dead yet?" I murmured, slowly lifting my head and looking around. We were in the storeroom of the radiology lab. Most of the crates and barrels had been removed, save for an impromptu chemistry lab that'd been set up in the back corner. A bottle full of rainbow colors and reeking of urine was slowly being dripped through a filter of some sort, and a bottle of rainbow Flux sat beside it. There were jars of orangey-amberish fluid next to that.

Recycled RadAway. Wouldn't have thought of that. My rad meter didn't show any further contamination, so I guessed there was some kind of shielding in the storage room that blocked the radiation. Wouldn't have thought of that either.

Even more surprising was the pony handling the bottles. Rampage had found a filthy white lab coat and eye glasses, and she handled the glassware and chems with experience and care. She looked back at me as I stirred. "Don't sound so disappointed, Blackjack. Lacunae filled me in on some of your last near death experience back at that Tenpony place? If it weren't for the fact that your vital organs are synthetic and you've got some alicornish tumors in your brain, you would be." She tossed one of the jars onto her back, trotted over, and slid it deftly down her leg to the floor in front of me. "Drink," she said. I lay back, levitated the jar, and gave it a tentative sniff.

"It smells like pee," I muttered sullenly. My chest still felt the curse chewing away inside. I looked around and spotted Shears at the far side of the storeroom, head bowed, filthy brown mane hiding his face.

"Well, I tried to filter it as well as I was able and remove as much uric acid and

protein contaminants as I could, but unfortunately, the facilities here aren't quite up to snuff. So yes, there's probably at least some pee in it. Drink it anyway," she said, then gestured towards a rainbow-splattered bucket in the corner. "When it hits your bladder, aim for the bucket. We need to save as much as possible."

"Graves?" I suddenly asked as my brain began to replay the battle. "Where is Graves?"

"She didn't make it," Rampage said, and then immediately followed it up with, "And unless you are a flaming ghoul that burned her or forced her to come at gunpoint, you are not responsible for her death. You can shelve that guilt right now. If she hadn't thrown out what RadAway she did, you and your friends would have died. That ghoul was sane enough to target our supplies. You should be proud you beat it rather than kicking yourself for her death."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I knew that she was right, but maybe if I'd been faster... if I'd shouted out a warning sooner or been a better distraction... I knew that some of us might not come back, but I'd always intended it to be over my dead body. I occupied myself with drinking the yellow-orange fluid in the jar, wrinkling my nose. Actually, though... despite the *smell* of pee, the taste was a robust, tangy RadAway orange with a salty aftertaste. Not bad! As I drank I watched my rad levels drop closer and closer to green. Then I looked at the striped pony as she took the empty jar in her mouth. I ran through the number of ponies I knew and took a guess. "Doctor Octopus?"

She arched one brow at me before she turned and returned the jar next to the equipment. "And Razorwire. That filly certainly knows how to brew her chems. Trust me, you don't want the details to her secret, personal recipe for Dash," she said, rolling her eyes. "Something about this place is pulling us to the fore. It's somewhat disturbing. Fortunately, most of us want to help you, and those that don't are keeping silent."

"So Rampage is run by a committee?" I muttered as I sat up. No Rampage... or Rampage as just a mix? No... there had to be a pony behind all those different personalities. There just had to be.

They'd taken my armor off; it lay in a slightly blackened heap. I sure went through a lot of bardings... it was kinda frustrating... kinda like getting Graves killed to answer my question. You'd think I'd know better by now. I clenched my eyes shut a moment, trying to shove those thoughts away and keep myself together. I had to. I couldn't go back on the mattress now.

"Explains a lot, don't it?" Psychoshy asked from by the door, holding the blasted form of Cerberus steady as Xanthe worked on him. The robot crackled something about striped saboteurs as it waved its single remaining limb. Stygius stretched out his hooves and steadied me.

Rampage put the jar under a spigot and began to fill it with the yellowy fluid, talking as she worked. "I... we don't know. Lacunae believes we might be a group mind like the Goddess, but, lacking a central unifying personality to give direction, we lurch to whatever personality is strongest at a given moment or defer to a blended 'default' personality. It would make for an absolutely fascinating paper if there were anypony around that cared." She looked back at me. "Since I woke up, though... I've become more and more aware of the others with me. And they of me."

"How many are there?" I asked as I rose and took a step, and then Stygius flashed next to me as I nearly smashed my face on the ground. He steadied me with a small, worried smile. The reason for my header was simple: I was missing my right foreleg. I looked down at the dangling wires and connectors and gulped. Okay, this might be a little more than even a repair talisman could handle."It don't make me no difference"shshshshshsh

He gave me a worried smile, pointing at my missing foreleg. I sighed and smiled back. "Yeah. Can't say this is the first time I've been crippled." That got a very odd look from the stallion, and he put a hoof around my neck in a strong hug. Psychoshy turned away, muttering to herself. "Help me get to the bucket," I said as I hobbled my way into the corner. He kept me from falling flat on my face as I turned around and did my business, having the decency to look away.

Rampage, on the other hoof, leaned over to watch the show. "Oh, excellent. Really, your body is a feat of engineering. My background may be in psychiatry, but I can appreciate good design. Redundant power supply system. Redundant healing and repair talismans. If you can avoid catastrophic damage to your brain, you might be effectively immortal."

"Wait? Redundant?" I asked with my eyes wide. "I thought... you mean I have more than one?"

"Indeed. Two of each." She turned and looked back at Xanthe. "The... zebra... was able to plug into your hardware and devote all your systems to radiation purging once we got you inside. We were quite glad to find you had a pair of healing talismans rather than a single one. Apparently you have one set from Professor Zodiac and one set from another source." She looked at me and smiled, peering over the

rims of her glasses. “You’ve never questioned your rather substantial regenerative capabilities?”

“No! I just thought that was... well... normal!” I said as I finished my business and pointedly avoided seeing what Rampage did with the contents. “But... why? If the Professor could have just kept her own, she could have been a pony again! She wouldn’t have had to be a head stuck in a jar!”

“I suspect she had her own reasons,” Rampage replied as she dumped the contents of the bucket into the equipment. “I can only speculate at the moment what they might be. It could be she wanted to ensure your success and so gave you the redundant healing and repair capabilities. If so, she did indeed save your life. The radiation damage to your brain was far less severe than it would have been to another pony.”

“So... what, I can’t die? Like... ever?” I’d expect to live longer than a normal unicorn, assuming that I didn’t get myself killed first, but... What the hell was I anymore? Because it sure wasn’t a pony!

Rampage snorted. “That would be quite a foolish leap to make. Sufficient damage to your organs to the point your brain could no longer be sustained would be fatal. Indeed, simple suffocation could kill you, and if you ever ran out of gems to eat, your healing would be impeded to the point you could be killed quite easily. It simply explains all the damage that’s been done to you thus far and how you’re not a heap of bloody metal by now. And your foreleg, or rather the lack thereof, demonstrates the limitation of your repair talismans.”

So... it wasn’t that I was extra freaky, it was simply an explanation for how come I’d taken shots from AM rifles and kept going. “Where did the extra talismans come from then?”

I heard Lacunae’s voice in my mind with a strange new clarity, though the screaming background of Enervation did make things a little more difficult. “Several pieces were ‘donated’ by Caprice, salvaged from Deus’ body. She was apparently selling off the Reaper piece by piece as souvenirs, but then Glory reminded her that she hadn’t paid for the installation of those beam turrets and threatened to take some pieces of Caprice as souvenirs if she didn’t turn over whatever was left.”

I looked around, but there was no sign of my purple alicorn friend. “Lacunae? How are you hearing me?”

“I’m afraid that the extreme radiation to your brain had some... unexpected side

effects,” Lacunae murmured. “Some of the things that were believed to be simple tumors were not, and they are now... active.”

I stared straight ahead, listening to that scream in the distant parts of my mind as I focused. “What do you mean ‘active’?”

Then I heard a voice break through that interference and speak low and grand and just a touch snotty. “It means that you are a part of that to which you have no right, Blackjack! You are a thief! A trespasser! A bit of mutant scum whose unworthy mind has tapped into a grand and glorious being!”

I stared straight ahead in shock. “Is that...”

“Yes...” Lacunae replied with a sigh.

The Goddess said, with utter vicious malice, “Welcome to Unity, Blackjack.”

So after ten minutes of panicking, trying to cover both my ears with my one remaining forehoof, and mentally thinking ‘La-la-la-la’ as loudly as I could, the screaming Enervation finally drowned out the admonitions and threats of the Goddess. Apparently, the second I set a hoof out of Hoofington again, I was destined to become transformed into an alicorn rather than the half unicorn, half alicorn, half cyberpony thing[b] I was now. And from how pissed off the Goddess was at me, I doubted my time in Unity was going to be a good one.

“Relax, Blackjack. Panic will solve little,” Lacunae said softly.

“Relax?” I thought back at her. “Have you spit your bit or something? The Goddess is in my head. What if she takes me over like she does you?”

“Your connection to the Goddess is... an aberration. It is something she is struggling to find a way to end, immediately. The Enervation shields you from her contact, and she may simply be incapable of utterly consuming you as she does the rest of us.” She hesitated, then added, “Now, if you leave Hoofington... she might be able to influence you. But only through complete transformation in Maripony will you be a true alicorn.”

“Right. Knowing my luck it’ll turn me into some kind of freaky cyber alicorn!” I really wanted to hyperventilate right now; having the Goddess inside me... damn it! It felt like I was losing myself. It was like being back on the Seahorse, feeling hurt and violated and just wanting it over. I wanted my own dreams back, not Psalm’s. I

wanted to see with my own eyes, not view visions and flashes of what other ponies wanted me to see. I wanted to be Blackjack again. I could almost not remember that idiot who ran out into the wasteland with Deus on her tail.

It was all... too much. Just too much. The enormity of how much I'd changed and what had happened to Graves came crashing down on me. I didn't want to deal with it anymore. I just wanted to curl up with my head in Glory's lap and have her stroke my mane until magically everything was better.

But right now, I had ponies who would die if I simply went fetal.

I had to take my mind off this. I simply had to. Now that I knew I was... intact... I tried to focus on our situation. Xanthe was fixing Cerberus. Rampage was recycling Rad-Away. "Lacunae? What are you doing?" I thought at her. Even with the Enervation interference, I could still pick up my friend. Even freakier, I knew exactly where she was. I could have closed my eyes and pointed right at her. Then I actually closed my eyes and saw a hazy window in Lacunae's mind; an image of her standing before the hole I'd pushed the ghoul through. She was studying the missile. Was it just me, or did it appear more... fiery?

"You're not mistaken, Blackjack. The balefire egg's explosion seems to have destabilized the warhead even more. I don't know if it's at risk of a detonation or not." And with Cerberus out of commission, none of us could get close enough to deactivate it. "I am hoping that I can absorb enough radiation to push the missile out... but..." There was a pause, yet I heard what she tried to hide. "The warding talismans are weakening."

"They're weaker?" I asked, and for a moment there was nothing from the unicorn. "Lacunae?" But my friend's mind continued to be silent. It was like she was... hiding things.

"I'm feeling the drawing effect even more," Lacunae murmured softly. "It's sapping my focus and will. Theoretically, I should be able to flick that missile out like a splinter, but with the energies being leeched as quickly as I absorb them..."

"Wait. Wait. Lacunae... what are you trying to hide from me?" I asked, thinking hard at my friend. It was like looking at photographs underwater, and the harder I looked the deeper she pushed them.

"Please don't pry, Blackjack." Lacunae murmured quietly. "There are things I do not want you to know. Things that I am ashamed of. Please..." The voice was as soft and composed as ever, but there was a begging tone to it that halted my attempts

to get at those pictures in her mind. What was I doing? Of course I didn't have a right to go rifling through her mind. And if she didn't want to tell me now, hopefully someday she would. I stopped trying to look at those pictures.

"Sorry," I said at once, giving her the privacy she deserved. The privacy I doubted few alicorns in Unity received. I looked around the cramped space. "Are Silver Spoon and Carrion out there with you?"

"Silver Spoon is gathering what she can from the storeroom. Carrion is studying the rocket and trying to see if we could potentially shift it or blast it out." Why was it that that sounded like a really bad idea?

"I'll go have a talk with Xanthe then and find out what she thinks about it," I said to her in my head. Rampage was still filtering RadAway. It looked like we were going to have to wait a little longer anyway. I limped over to where the zebra was working on the robot. Its metal casing had warped in the heat of the magical fire, and only one round eye remained. "How's the guard dog?" She looked up at me in surprise. "What? I can't have read a mythology book?" Actually, I'd been assigned the book as a group project with Midnight. She was the one who'd done the reading, and I just got the good bits from her and made a little black three-headed dog doll for our presentation. Still counted, though.

"Well, he still has his central processing talisman, spark batteries, and levitation talisman. I might get an arm attached, too," the zebra said as she looked down at the robot.

"I can't obliterate filthy maggot farms with only one arm, you striped savage." The robot buzzed and crackled as its remaining eye flashed with its words.

"Oh you hush!" Xanthe replied. 'Shhhhhh...' the stealth suit beeped chidingly. "I grew up with bigger and tougher robots than you," the zebra said before she grabbed a screwdriver and jammed it into his bulbous main housing. There was a sizzle, and his eye stalk twitched.

"Yes great striped mistress! I live to serve... damn this treacherous stripe programming!" the robot buzzed, and then added, "Oh, just scrap me now."

I sat down and lifted my truncated leg. "Is there anything you can do for me?"

"Unfortunately, no," Xanthe replied, then frowned. "Well, I might be able to screw on a peg or something to help you get around. First I need to get Cerberus' gyroscopes working so he can at least remain upright, though."

I nodded, looking at the robot and then at her once again. "So, where are you from

Xanthe? How did you join the Remnant?"

The question made the zebra visibly uncomfortable, but she answered anyway. "Originally, I lived in a village on the eastern coast. Our tribe lived in a bunker beside the sea, hidden from the raiders and pirates that roam that territory. We had a long history of using robots; we gathered up seaweed and other salvage that washed ashore and put it to use. It was a nice little place to live... so long as one likes the taste of seaweed."

She leaned over and started connecting the wires danging from the base of the main housing to the clawlike hand. "One day we found an injured zebra. He was a scout for the Remnant at Dawn Bay. The code of Caesar demands aid to any zebra requiring it, and so we healed him and beseeched that he not reveal us to the Remnant. A month after he left, their soldiers arrived and demanded a tithe of fighters, robots, weapons, and food."

"And you just handed it over?" I asked, shocked.

"What would fighting have accomplished? Had we resisted, the Remnant would have returned with dozens of soldiers, taken everything, and killed the entire village." She paused to tighten the connectors with the screwdriver in her mouth. I levitated the limb to hold it steady, and she finished repairing the robotic hand. "My family had no love of the Remnant, but we knew it was hopeless to resist. My sister, my brother, myself, and nine of the most physically able were taken."

"Why don't they like the Remnant?" I asked with a frown. She drew a wrench from her suit's pocket as she made a sour face. When the bolts were in place, she sighed before answering.

"You have a pony here called Red Eye who claims he is trying to restore civilization. The Remnant exists to destroy that civilization," she said bluntly. "They claim they work the will of the last Caesar. It does not matter if a village has no problems with ponies. The will of the one or of a small settlement matters nothing. Only the 'Eternal War'. Most villages simply wish to survive. The Remnant wishes only to destroy. If all in the world were killed but one zebra, they would consider that victory."

She sighed as she finished bolting the arm in place. "There are some in the homeland who believe the Remnant glorious heroes. They think it an honor to join and bring supplies to sustain the glorious fight. The rest simply try to survive and not be destroyed. In the Remnant, tribe does not matter. Family does not matter. Only fighting."

"I read somewhere that zebra tribes are really important. What was yours again? Propoli?" I asked with a casual smile and got one in return.

"Yes. The Propoli. We were... are... builders. We were the first to set aside the ancient ways of wandering and hunting. We founded Roam before there was an Equestria. The union of the seven great tribes on the seven hills was the start of our empire. Of course, there are dozens of lesser tribes..." Then she looked at Sheers in the corner. "And cursed tribes. Like the Starkerrei."

"They used to live here in Hoofington, didn't they?" I asked with a worried frown.

"Indeed. This was their capital. Long ago they were a tribe of mystics and sorcerers. They preserved the oldest and darkest ways, predicting the future from the movements of the stars. And they could not only know the future, but affect the fates of others." She shuddered. "And they studied death and the progression of the spirit. But when Roam was founded, we excluded the Starkerrei. We drove them away across the sea, and here in this place they founded their own city of wickedness."

"And it was destroyed? By a falling star?"

"Yes. They had a spell that would call a star spirit from the heavens. The stars are terrible things, not to be meddled with. To change their placement in the skies is to change fate itself." She shivered terribly. "We once mocked the Starkerrei, but had they succeeded in capturing the star and extracting its spirit... the world would be a far more terrible place."

I looked at the blue unicorn in the corner. "Well, thank you for sharing. I hope you can tell me more about zebras in the future." She gave me a slightly perplexed smile. "What?"

"You are the Maiden of the Stars, destined to destroy us all. To hear you speak of us so is... unexpected."

"Yeah, well. So far I've only succeeded at *nearly* destroying us," I replied with a sheepish smile, "so maybe you can lower your expectations a bit? I mean, being the maiden is pretty embarrassing when you can't even smite somepony trying to kill you." [c]

I stood and carefully walked over towards where Sheers sat all alone. My cybernetics didn't seem to quite realize that I was missing half a leg, and so I had to walk quite consciously. This resulted in me staggering about like I had when I'd first gotten my legs, but at least it kept me from faceplanting every other step.

Silver Spoon entered, letting in a tiny crackle of radiation. She set her bags down;

they were filled with blackened cardboard boxes and warped syringes. "Here, Snips," the ghoul said before nudging a small pack of bubblegum towards the pony. He just looked away and closed his eyes. Silver Spoon looked at me with a sad sigh, then took the rest of her salvage over to where Rampage worked.

I flopped down beside him and gave him a tired smile. "So... how are you... Snips?" Not a big departure for a nickname. It was right up there with 'Fallen Glory'.

"You don't have to pretend to be friendly with me, Blackjack. I know you must hate me right now," he muttered, his faintly glowing white eyes looking away.

"Well, Graves is dead. Cerberus is scrapped. I'm back to finding walking a challenge. I'm cursed. I just drank a jar full of recycled RadAway. And apparently I'm now enough of an alicorn that I have a very pissy goddess tuned into my thoughts. I'm currently stuck in a deathtrap with ponies who I care about who are going to die if we can't find a way out. I've been showered in smooze and cooked by a ghoul, and there's an insane warden somewhere in here who wants me dead." I paused and frowned, thinking. "I think that's it for my problems in Hightower. But I didn't ask about me... who are you? *What* are you?"

The turquoise unicorn gave the tiniest little shrug. "I don't know."

Okay. I could relate to that. "Well... if you had to guess?"

"I still don't know. Am I alive? Dead? Something else? Does it really matter?" He shook his head. "Two centuries ago, we played with magic we didn't understand. What I am now... I guess that's payment for it."

"Okay. So 'what' isn't getting answered anytime soon. How about the 'who'? How is it you were stuck outside?" That question seemed to pull him back as he frowned in thought, then answered slowly.

"When the bombs fell, I was going to meet with two ponies I knew from Ponyville: Mr. and Mrs Cake. They were trying to find out things about the O.I.A. I was more trusting at the time; I thought that they were just being curious after I accidentally mentioned secret projects and Eternity. When that Goldenblood guy was arrested for treason, though, I was afraid it would get back to Rarity. I went to tell them it was all over... but when I got to Sugarcube Corner in Flankfurt..."

"The Cakes were dead, weren't they?" I remembered the bullet holes and scrapped terminals.

"Everypony was. I must have missed their killers by minutes. The blood was still fresh. Mrs Cake was still alive... told me to warn Pumpkin and Pound that something

bad was happening. Wouldn't even let me waste time trying to save her. 'Tell them...' she said..." The blue unicorn shivered, hugging himself. "The sirens started right about then, and I didn't know what to do. I tried to check in with Rarity... she said she'd take care of us if something bad happened. But... I couldn't get in contact with her. I even tried to call Pinkie Pie and the Cakes' kids in Manehattan... but never got though."

"So what happened?"

"I ran," he said simply. "Ran like an idiot, due south into the badlands, and found a drainage ditch to hide in. Then the bombs fell. It was so... beautiful..." he murmured as he looked away. "Eventually I stopped seeing altogether. Then I died."

"Died? As in... dead dead?"

"As dead as I can imagine. I went to the everafter... and then..." he whispered softly, "I came back."

"Came back?" I replied, feeling a tingle in my mane. For some reason, I found myself whispering too. Silver Spoon trotted back with a look of concern.

"I was connected to him." Him who? "Sometimes, in the years we were working with Rarity, we played with the spells, never really thinking about what we were doing. I felt myself being drawn back to this world, away from the singing lights. And I woke and could see again." He gestured to his eyes. "Somehow, the necromantic magic preserved me. I don't know if I'm a ghoul or not... Perhaps I am one, preserved perfectly at the moment of death rather than rotting away. Or maybe I'm trapped between life and death. Really, does it matter? I just need to rescue him."

"You're talking about Snails, aren't you?" Silverspoon asked. At my confusion, she added, "His best friend."

"My only friend." He looked upwards again. "I just know that he's up there still. I can feel him. I've been feeling him for two centuries. He's scared and lonely, wondering where I've gone. And he can feel me now and knows that I'm coming to save him. If we left... if he thought I gave up..." He shook his head and sniffed.

"He might go crazy," I finished for him. I thought of all the examples I'd been running into of ponies not giving up and following through no matter how much misery it made or what mistakes it lead to. Sanguine. Goldenblood. The Ministry Mares. Myself. Ponies so completely obsessed with success that they'd lost all sense and reason. No wonder Snips had cursed me when I'd said we were leaving.

"Well, I can understand why you did it. Right now, I just want to see the rest of us get

out of here alive, but I'll do whatever I can to try and get you back with your friend." Then I waited a moment and added, with as straight a face as I could, "Of course, it would be a lot easier if you took this curse off me."

He blinked and then gave a small, rueful smile. "I guess. Sorry. I just panicked and had to do something..." His horn flashed, and he gave a grin and a nod. "There."

But nothing had changed. I felt the same twisting inside my chest. "Uh... 'there' what? I can still feel it."

He frowned in worry and his horn flashed again. And then again. With each flash I felt the twisting inside me tighten. I nearly cried out in pain, and Silver Spoon shouted, "Stop! It's... it's getting worse!"

"But... I don't understand! I mean... it should work!" Snips said, pausing to chew his lip. "I mean... in theory..."

"Theory? You mean you've never uncursed a pony before?" Silver Spoon gaped as Snips grinned sheepishly.

"Well, it's more an art than a science..." he murmured.

"Snips!" Silver Spoon shouted.

"I can fix it! I can fix it! I just need my notes. And Snails might know a thing or two..." he rambled as I gave him a shooty look.

"Snips?" came a soft voice from the back of the storage room, and I looked over with trepidation as Rampage approached. She wore a strange little smile, her pink eyes bright. "It's you, isn't it?"

Snips looked at my friend with a confused frown. Then his luminescent eyes widened. "Twist? But... your speech... and stripes? Why are you striped?" he stammered. "And the armor and... is it really you?" he asked with a ghost of a smile.

Rampage just nodded and then lunged, hugging the round blue unicorn. "It is! Oh, I haven't seen you since the Ponyville Reunion! Then Littlehorn happened and... and..."

"We lost track. I mean, I know you were a soldier. I saw you in the news sometimes. But... how is this possible?"

Rampage just shook her head. "I have no idea. I don't know either. I mean... I died at Miramare. After I... I..." Her eyes grew round. "Oh no... no no no..." And she started to shake. "Please..."

She pushed away from Snips and started to pace. "Aw, what's the matter? Tell him. Tell them all," she said with a little leer. Suddenly she whirled around and snapped, "She doesn't have to tell anypony! She has the right to remain silent." Then her head whipped to the side. "Don't give us that cop shit!" Tears streamed down her cheeks as she backed away even more before suddenly stopping in her tracks. "Full disclosure might be therapeutic," she said reasonably, then bellowed, "Leave her alone, Doctor!"

Now everypony was trying to move away as she turned and pressed her forehooves to the wall. "Shut up!" she screamed, and brought her forehead against the wall with a pulpy crunch. "Shut up!" And again she smashed her head. And again... and again...

I did the only thing I could think of in a situation like this. Therapy with bullets... Xanthe gave a little scream and Stygius jumped to his hooves in alarm. Psychoshy just muttered about how the woodchipper had been cooler.

Snips stared in horror as I put three rounds in Rampage's head, sending her down in a heap. His eyes flared, horn glowing as he brought his shears out. I caught the closing blades with my remaining hand, the edges cutting into the metal of my fingers. "Wait! She'll be okay!" I yelled in alarm.

The pink light shone out of the hole in her head and Snips dropped the shears in shock as he stepped closer. I shook them off my hand and then reached out and pulled him back by his tail. Her twitching body curled up in a ball on her side as the wound disappeared entirely. "I'm sorry. I wish... I'm sorry..." was all she said.

"The phoenix talisman..." Snips breathed softly. "You have the phoenix talisman!" Xanthe stared in similar astonishment.

"The what?" I asked as I looked at him. "Do you have a clue what's going on? Why she is the way she is?"

Snips didn't take his eyes off the weeping mare. "Soul armor was a bust... even leaving aside the haunting effect, there was the fact that while the armor would protect, it wasn't perfect. Rarity needed a way for a pony to live through *anything* and she came up with the thought... how many souls could you place within a jar? If you put two souls in one jar, would their personalities cancel each other out? Would the souls empower a talisman to be both eternally energetic and indestructible? Particularly a regeneration talisman?" Snips stared in fascination. "We called it the phoenix talisman because it was designed to restore a pony from even complete disintegration."

"Well it does!" I said sharply.

"No! That's just it," Snips countered. "It didn't work! Oh, it would heal simple injuries, but every pony we placed it in failed to survive a fatal impact."

"You mean you killed ponies to test it?" I snapped.

"Of course not," he countered, looking uncomfortable. "The first was a prisoner who would have been executed anyway, certainly given a life sentence. The warden's guards had her killed. We had it put inside another mare, but she committed suicide. The third survived a bullet to the head, again fired by a guard, but died soon later. Then it was put into a doctor who seemed just fine till he died in a sky carriage accident. Each time the talisman became stronger, but it still wasn't able to keep a pony alive!"

"So what happened?" I asked with a scowl.

"We lost it!" he replied. "A year of work, and it was placed inside some zebra... and then the zebra died on the battlefield. We were certain that it should have been capable of keeping a Ministry Mare alive indefinitely, or even Princess Luna, should the zebras use something actually strong enough to kill her... and we lost it!" He shook his head. "Rarity was furious with us! Once the haunting effect was blended out with enough souls, we were going to make enough talismans for all critical ponies in the government."

"Are you mad?! Have you thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of deaths, of stolen souls such an effort would require?! Bad enough *one!*" Xanthe retorted.

"You don't understand," Snips plead, "I agree, it was wrong, but at the time we almost had it! We almost had... everything. A way to make ponies truly immortal! The ethics didn't matter, just success." Then he slumped. "And then... Rarity changed her mind."

I blinked in shock. "She what?"

"I don't know how or why... but one day she was in a rage and the next... ashamed. She cancelled all our plans for making more phoenix talismans; she insisted that all our records and findings on soul armor be erased immediately."

"And were they?" I pressed with a sudden frown, my mane turning itchy again.

"Goldenblood's technicians assured us that they were," Snips replied with a little shrug, but I knew better. If Goldenblood could get his hooves on Rarity's necromantic research, he would never destroy it. "After that we swapped to something else.

Something different from the curses and incantations that we'd been working on. Rarity abandoned it all."

"And made... what?" I asked with a frown.

Just then Lacunae's voice entered my mind. "Blackjack. Could you bring the others out here? We think we have an idea."

"Right. Right. I'll be out there in just a second," I mentally replied as I crouched beside Rampage, stroking her mane with my hoof. "Okay everypony. Smart alicorn has a plan. Lets go out and hear it." As everypony started out, I gave Rampage a nudge. "Come on. You don't want to be the only pony left here."

Rampage just shook as she wept. "Am I just... just a collection of ponies? Is there even a me at all? Is that why I don't have a name? Because I never really existed in the first place? Am I just something that grew out of Twist's corpse? Born stuck in some damned wrecked tank? Do I even have a soul of my own?"

"At least you know why now," I replied quietly.

"I wish I didn't. I wish I knew if I should even try and be me, or if I should just hand it over to one of the others inside me for good." She pressed her face to the floor. "Go and see Lacunae's plan. I'm... I'm going to need some time to bottle up the RadAway."

Sigh. Why does it all end in tears?

Outside radiology, we stood at the window I'd shoved the ghoul out of. The missile crackled fifty feet above us, and everypony who needed it took another Rad-X. "So what's the plan, Lacunae?" I asked with a wan smile.

"We're going to try and push the missile out," she said as she pointed up with a wing to where Carrion clung to the outside of the bars like a giant undead bloatsprite. "The missile's tail fins are tangled up in the reinforcing of the building. He's going to cut the tail fins away, and then I am going to lift the nose section. Hopefully it will slide out under its own weight."

"I'm amazed it crashed through the wall intact at all," Psychoshy muttered. Lacunae's horn began to glow, and the huge weapon shimmered as it slowly shifted. The metal gave an ominous groan as chunks of wall crumbled down through the breach.

"That warhead is designed to do just that," Xanthe said as she pointed a hoof. There were green flashes of light from where Carrion crouched. Inside their cells, a few

other flaming ghouls howled. I really hoped they didn't get free; we didn't have another balefire egg. "It's designed to take numerous beam spell hits and breach fortified structures." Like the Core, I thought. "It also has reinforced fuel tanks to ensure that glancing shots don't ignite them."

Wait... fuel. "But it's empty, right?" I asked as I pointed up at the weapon, seeing the zebra frown in worry. "Xanthe, tell me there isn't any fuel in that thing!"

"Well... I assume it all burned away long ago. But if it was fired from Dawn bay... I suppose it *could* still be as much as four-fifths fueled..."

"Lacunae! Xanthe says there might still be fuel in the missile! Don't move it-" I thought frantically at the alicorn.

Then there was a shriek as the missile suddenly shifted, but instead of sliding free, the concrete gave way and an avalanche of crumbled flaming rubble tumbled down towards the floor of the prison. "No! Don't drop it!" Xanthe shrieked as the missile slid further into the prison. Lacunae's face creased with effort as she tried to keep the weapon aloft. The blazing warhead touched the bars on the far side, and then the thrusters in the rear were inside and swung down. I held my breath as the whole missile tipped vertical and dropped down the central shaft.

"Please don't explode. Please don't explode..." I murmured over and over again as its rear thrusters crashed down into the work yard. The warhead slipped down and came to rest with the blazing tip just even with the far side of the medical wing. The rads began building up at once, but there wasn't a vaporizing flash. "Thank you for not exploding," I said in a rush of relief.

Suddenly crimson flames erupted from the base of the rocket. The flames crawled through the twisted metal, spreading as the fuel leaked and ignited. Any chance at all of retreat the way we came was now ablaze in a lake of fire!

"Oh dear..." Xanthe whimpered as she looked down.

"Yeah. Pretty intense..." I replied.

"No. As the fire heats the rest of the fuel pods, they'll breach and add even more fuel. When the warhead gets hot enough..." She didn't have to finish.

We'd just lit the fuse on a balefire bomb.

Footnote: Maximum level reached!

Quest Perk added: You Got a Friend in Me! - You've been joined telepathically with the Goddess in Unity. This offers new dialogue options.

48. Inferno

"Listen up! Smoke is spreading all across Equestria. But don't worry, I've received a letter from the Princess informing me that it is not coming from a fire."

"Okay. Xanthe, give me a timetable," I said; the flames were spreading from the burning rocket, and the central space was beginning to fill with thick black smoke. The heat of the blue radiation fires was quickly becoming eclipsed by the heat of the more ordinary-looking but no less dangerous orange flames from the zebra fuel. Still, on the bright side, the warhead coming to rest below the medical level, leaning against the far wall, meant that the route up was clear... assuming that we had time. After a brief but far too long moment of silence, I looked over at the zebra staring down in horror at the spectacle below us. "Xanthe! How long do we have?"

She blinked and then turned to me, chewing her lip. "There're four fuel pods. As the lowest heats up, the fuel that isn't on fire will boil and eventually breach the pod above it, spreading the fire even more and accelerating—"

I swatted her flank with my singed tail. "I need a number. Minutes? Hours? What?" We were backing away from the heat and smoke that began to swirl in through the smashed out window.

"Half an hour? An hour at most," Xanthe whimpered. "If we had more time and Cerberus were intact, we might have severed the warhead and removed it, but..."

"Yeah. That plan is out the window," I said. Between the smooze and those flaming ghouls, I really wasn't bothered by the idea of Hightower being gone soon. Particularly since, if we could get in, the smooze could get out. Still, "Meatlocker needs to be warned that their neighbor is about to go boom. Can you get Cerberus flying again and out through that hole? Without getting blasted?" I asked, pointing at the gaping breach two stories above us with my stump. Of all our fliers, Cerberus was the only one we could really spare to warn Meatlocker.

"I... don't know? His levitation system *should* already be functional enough, but depending on the targeting talismans in the turrets they might let him go, or they could disintegrate him," she said, and bit her lip again. Then she jerked her head up with a smile. "I'll examine one of the sentries and see if they have an intact IFF unit!" She turned and raced away from the window and down the hall.

"You have five minutes!" I yelled after her, then coughed at the acrid smoke that

was filling the air. I suspected that death by balefire blast could be preempted by the far more mundane peril of smoke inhalation. I turned and looked up at Stygius, Psychoshy, and Silver Spoon. “Go back to Rampage. Get the RadAway bottled up however you can, and make sure those supplies you scavenged are passed around.” I closed my eyes asked Lacunae, “Any ideas on dealing with all this smoke?” Just because I was connected to the Goddess now didn’t mean I had to *use* all those freaky alicorn powers.

“Wet cloths tied around our muzzles should help. Respirators would be better,” she replied immediately.

“We don’t have any respirators, so tie wet cloths over your muzzles!” I shouted at the pair of fliers as they flew back towards the radiology storage, then coughed again myself. I looked up at the power-armored griffin and shouted, “Carrian! See if you can find a way up to the armory! Lacunae, take Snips and see if you can get my sword,” I said, looking sternly at the portly unicorn... ghoul... thing... Lacunae looked at me oddly but then trotted back to Radiology.

When everypony was away doing something, I collapsed, clutching my chest and tearing up from the pain. Whatever curse Snips had put on me, the sensation was spreading. I could feel the chewing feeling halfway along my ribs and up my throat. Everything hurt. The ebb and surge of pain grew heavier with every breath. I had to fight it. He hadn’t been able to end his curse, so now my only hope was that there was something Snips’s partner could do to help me.

I could only spare a minute to address the pain; it wasn’t an injury I was going to regenerate or damage that could be magically repaired. I just had to get the rest of them to safety.

Carrian appeared out of the smoke, the clouds swirling around him as his milky eyes narrowed on me doubled over. “There’s a way up to the seventh level, if we do some climbing. There are more flaming ones, and this is not nearly as effective using spark batteries,” he said as he held up the beam gun that Xanthe had created. A half dozen spark batteries were wired up around the perimeter near the handles.

I did everything I could to straighten up and smile. “Good job. We’ll get out of this yet.” He just stared at me, and I felt new sweat popping to my brow. “What?”

“Oh, if only you were a griffin,” he muttered as he looked skyward. “I would have given my left paw for a commander like you.”

I blinked in shock. “Um... thanks?” I replied, then peered up at where the smoke

was being blown out the hole in the prison wall, then back at him. “Were you a soldier before...?” I balked, not sure how rude it was to point out he’d died. The question seemed to annoy him a little, but not for the reasons I thought.

“I am a soldier. All griffins are soldiers. From the youngest chick to the oldest harpy, we’re all soldiers. We strive for assertiveness, certainty, and martial skill and hold ourselves to our honor and our Contracts,” he said coolly as he looked in the direction of the bomb, though now there was so much smoke that all that could be seen was a murky blue glow. It seemed to cut the radiation a little, at least.

“Sorry, I don’t know much about griffins,” I said; talking helped keep my mind off the curse inside me. “Just that you... fought for us during the war?” I vaguely remembered a few references in 99’s history lessons to the ‘marginal effect of gryphon mercenaries’ during the war, but I was leery of trusting anything academic from 99.

“We fought for both sides. We fought to protect neutral parties. Fought for whoever owned our Contracts. The only people we never fought were our own kind.”

“You keep talking about these Contract things. Can you tell me about it?” I asked with a baffled smile.

He shrugged. “It’s not a thing ponies understand. Our Contract is a reflection of who we are and what we will and won’t do. For a gryphon to claim what they will and won’t do, and then do just that, justifies our existence. I won’t kill young, nor will I lie. No order, no threat, no bribe will make me do so. To do otherwise would violate my Contract. Once, whole rookeries were bound by common Contracts that defined them. There was even a gryphon who once tried to get all of gryphankind to adopt a common clause in our Contracts putting gryphon interests first... but unfortunately Gilda failed, and none know what became of her.”

“So how did Ahuizotl get your Contract?” I asked, and received a scowl in response. “If I can ask...”

“Commanders do not ask. They order others to tell them what they wish to know.” It sounded like griffins were creeping up on zebras for weirdest species ever. “I pledged my Contract to the holder for as long as I lived, first to a family of scavengers who hid my young during the war with the Enclave. The father was an honorable earth pony, but when he died, my Contract passed to his son. He drove off my family and used me as a weapon, forcing me to kill any who attacked him due to his unreasonable and obnoxious demands. I would have happily killed him, or allowed them to... if it would not violate my contract.

"He discovered an empty stable far to the south and set about looting it, but the fool ignored the signs of radiation. When he passed out, I carried him from the stable, but the radiation was already terminal and we both became ghouls. In Meatlocker, he sold my Contract to the bartender to pay his tab. I've been Shifty's servant ever since."

My ears perked. "Shifty? I thought you worked for Ahuizotl."

He just shrugged. "They're one and the same. He thought that 'Ahuizotl' was far more impressive-sounding."

"Did Ahuizotl have dealings with zebras?" I demanded.

"I protect the holder of my Contract. That includes his secrets," he said with sullen resignation.

I wanted to demand that he tell me the truth, but guessed it was futile. He'd died of radiation poisoning saving the life of a pony he hated to avoid breaking his Contract. Then I blinked as an idea came to me. If this worked... "Tell me he didn't have dealings with zebras." The griffin blinked and scowled sharply. Then he knit his brows as if processing my response. I hoped that 'killing me to protect his secrets' wasn't in the Contract. Then Carrion looked right at me and simply smiled.

Yes! Maybe brain tumors had made me smarter. "Go help the others," I said as I looked down the hall that Xanthe had taken, then began to limp along it as quickly as I could.

Tulip had died outside the Mortuary, her skull crushed with a single overwhelming blow. The Remnant had gotten their tipoff from a ghoul that turned out to be the owner of that bar. And Xanthe had known about Meatlocker; had she simply heard of its location, or had she been there before? The thought of the Remnant being able to get soldiers inside and kill ponies like Velvet and Windclop...

I found the zebra half-buried in the shell of one of the sentries. She said something zebraish and pulled her head out with a gadget in her mouth. Then her eyes widened and she dropped the device as I stepped forward, rising onto my rear legs to close the last few feet and grabbing the collar of her suit, tugging her almost onto her hindhoof tips. "Maiden!" she wailed, and the suit flickered and she disappeared. I tightened my grip on it, my eyes locked on the shimmer where I knew her head was.

"Xanthe," I kept my voice low and even as I gave her the shootiest look I could. "You haven't told me everything you should have. Tell me now: is the Remnant in

Meatlocker?" She cried out, and I felt invisible hooves beat on my chest. "Tell me the truth!"

She appeared in a flash, her eyes wide and streaked with tears. "The truth is you have cursed me!" she wailed as I stared into her eyes. "You are going to destroy my people! You are the Maiden of the Stars! Nightmare Moon! The champion of the deepest darkness! And if I do not oppose you... my home, my people, are doomed!"

I slowly relaxed my grip and sat down, running my hand over my face. Not this shit again... "Xanthe... I am not Nightmare Moon. I... saw... the real Nightmare Moon in a memory once. That's not me."

The zebra rubbed her throat and kept her eyes low. "How do you know you are not?" Then she looked at me with the first hard gaze I'd seen from her. "The maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. I saw what you did in Yellow River. She sows destruction for the entire world. That monster you slew was indestructible, and yet you destroyed it."

I slumped. "Xanthe, I got lucky." Something in me was drawing tight, a single raw nerve growing sharper and sharper. "That's all it is. That's all it's ever been."

"Luck? Luck that you die but return to life? Luck that you overcome all adversity?" The zebra scoffed. "Luck that you stumble across the secrets of ages past?"

"It's just stupid, fucking, luck!" I screamed at her, and she curled up in a ball. But I couldn't stop. I was like a canister of explosive gas with a hole punched in the side as I shouted, "Luck that I got out of 99! Luck that I survived! Luck that I found friends who would help me! I don't have any kind of dark, magical power! Hell, I'm damned lucky I can summon a wisp of light! And just because I've survived, don't think it's been easy. Don't think that I haven't paid for surviving when others died. But that's all there is to it. I am not Nightmare Moon! I am not the Maiden of the Stars! I am not special and I am not going to put up with it any longer!" I screamed down at her.

"You sure about that?" Psychoshy asked behind me, and I turned and saw all of the others staring in shock. "Cause I saw what you did in Hippocratic, and Rampage has been trying to convince me you really are some fucking paragon and not the scariest fucking mare I could ever imagine."

"Don't give me that..." I began, but she flew out in front of the others and pressed her face right into mine.

"Don't you blow me off, Blackjack!" she snapped, her eyes narrowed. "Because you

are scary. There's not a single one of us that isn't afraid of you on some damned level. You're a fucking cyborg mutant death mare who could probably kill every single one of us if she wanted to. You talk to shit that isn't there, know things no fucking pony should ever know, and you keep going on. Why the fuck shouldn't she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn't everyone?"

"Because I'm trying to do good!" I countered, twisting around to face her. "I'm trying to make the world better."

"Glad to hear it. That still doesn't make you any less damn scary. Because all it would take is you changing your mind, and the rest of us are dead! Maybe you think the world would be better without Psychoshy. What are my chances of stopping you if you really wanted to kill me? She thinks you're the devil. I'd say you're two steps away. And anypony who's seen you fight would agree with me." She stared right into my eyes, so taut that she seemed ready to snap. There was anger in those eyes, sure.

But there was also fear...

I looked behind her at my companions, at the concern, wariness, and worry in their eyes. I felt the pain tightening up inside me. I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. No. I was a good pony. I might not have known what my virtue was, but I was a good pony. I tried! I tried, damn it.

And I heard a voice from within me, strange and cold. A mare whispering softly in my ear, a mare who'd once offered tricks for a hoofful of bits. *It doesn't matter how good you are; to some ponies, you'll always be a monster.* I looked at Rampage, and six ponies looked back at me through one set of eyes. *It doesn't matter how awesome you are; other ponies will tear you down if they can.* I swallowed, my gaze moving to Snips and seeing the cool understanding in his luminescent stare, and that cold whisper changed to an angry mare's suspicious mutter. *It's hard to smile smile smile when all everypony does is lie lie lie...*

That whirring within me grew sharper; the scream of enervation growing clearer. I'd tried to give them all I could. What more did they want from me? *It doesn't matter what you try to give; they'll never really appreciate it.* Silver Spoon looked at me with her hurt eyes, hurt that I wasn't the friend she'd sought for so long. *Of course you always hurt the ones you care about. The more you care, the more they hurt.* Funny, why was Psychoshy snickering in my ears? Their lips were moving, but I couldn't hear them over those damned screams and whispers. *Go on, Blackjack. Tell yourself you're okay. Maybe this time you'll believe it...*

I fell to my knees and clenched my eyes shut. It felt like the world was slipping away. I could hear Nightmare Moon's cold laugh as she rose to power. As she gave in, as she felt such joy. It had been so long since I'd been happy. So long...

Then a mare's voice said softly, *Come on, Blackjack, you're smarter than that.*

Slowly I raised my eyes and looked at Lacunae, the alicorn smiling ever so slightly. *You know what the difference is. You just have to remember. When you do something wrong, what do you have to do?*

"You're right," I said as the twisting in my chest slowly eased. "You're right... I can be pretty damned scary. And I know that I shouldn't get angry for... what Xanthe thinks of me. I guess I do match this Maiden pretty well." I turned and looked back at Xanthe. "I'm sorry..." Then my eyes returned to Psychoshy, and I gave an exhausted smile. "The difference is that I try and do better. I know I'm a fuckup... but I haven't given up. I know I can be a better pony... and I try to be. I don't always make it. And some day, I might stop, and if I do I trust that a better pony like Lacunae, or Rampage, or Stygius, or you will put an end to me. Until then, though, I'm not Nightmare Moon. I never will be."

There was an awkward moment; Psychoshy trotted over to Stygius, both of them looking back at me with a worried frown. "One of the ghouls is our agent," Xanthe murmured, so softly that for a second I thought I'd imagined it. "He feeds us intelligence and passes messages on for a steep price. He has for years." The zebra glanced up and sniffed, begging in a whimper, "Please don't kill my people, Maiden."

I sighed and reached out, paused, and patted her head. "I don't want to kill anyone, Xanthe. Not if I can help it." Then I looked at my stump. "And right now, I'm not looking like I'm going to kill much of anypony. Nurse Graves died helping us; I just want to make sure Meatlocker is safe. But a ghoul named Tulip had her head crushed, and I'm pretty sure it was a zebra who did it." She pressed her lips together, and I added, "I'm not saying that 'cause I hate zebras, Xanthe. I just don't want people who help me to get hurt."

Xanthe licked her lips and looked at the IFF gadget. "I can... I can include a message. If there is one of Caesar's Hooves hidden in Meatlocker, they'll be somewhere near the Mortuary. A locked storeroom, perhaps." She glanced at Carrion, then dropped her gaze a little. "I just... wanted to protect my people..."

"Me too," I said, rising to my hooves again. "Work quick. We need to get going."

But getting going would take a minute or two. While most of the RadAway in the

store room had been lost, there were still tablets of Buck, Fixer, and Rad-X intact, as well as bottles of water. We all chowed down on the chalky tablets as Rampage passed out water bottles filled with her recycled RadAway and took a drink or two. It'd been 'energized' with Flux, which probably meant taint. I swirled the bottle of orangey fluid with my magic. "Are you sure it's safe to add that Flux stuff? Don't want anypony growing eye tentacle penises, now."

"Flux is good shit, Pink," Rampage retorted. "Always added a drop or two to my Dash to turn it into Rainboom. Great shit! Got you so high even earth ponies could fly." Then her grin melted into an angry scowl. "And when they ended up in the ER, they looked like they'd fallen from flight, too." She rolled her eyes and snorted. "Hey, not everypony can handle the Dash."

Xanthe returned with Cerberus in tow. I glanced at the zebra and then at the robot. "You understand your mission?"

The robot sighed. "Return to Meatlocker, tell all those pansy ghouls about the bomb, and warn them about a zebra infiltrator. Hoo... rah..." he muttered sullenly. "Retreating when there's still hundreds of acceptable targets is just sickening!"

"Buck up, Soldier. There'll be other ghouls to disintegrate," I said, earning a surprised and slightly troubled look from Silver Spoon. "Remember, straight there."

"Yes, Ma'am. Let it never be said the Equestrian Mechanized Corps failed to execute orders!" he announced, and gave a sort of salutelike gesture with his remaining claw. Lacunae and Snips walked over, the blue unicorn holding my sword in his magic as far away from himself as possible as if the blade was diseased and reeking. I slipped it into its sheath with a smile and thanked him.

With that, we started our climb; first up through the shattered windows and onto the narrow sloping ledge of metal that ran around the interior, and then up to the crumbled rubble around the breach in the prison wall. Those of us not capable of flight were assisted by those who were. The three of us with magic flung blazing clumps of detritus down into the inferno below as the air grew thicker and visibility shortened. I kept waiting for something to spring out at us... another flaming ghoul, or maybe the Warden would send his robots again... but for once our only opponents were time and gravity. Finally, we came to the hole punched through the cells and exterior wall. I looked at the inch-thick steel armor plating on the exterior wall as we moved up close to the hole. Hot air blew out around us, carrying a plume of smoke out like a chimney.

"How do we know this IFF is going to work?" I yelled over the howling air. Rain

was pouring down outside; it looked like late afternoon. Had we really only been in Hightower a few hours? Felt like weeks.

"If he flies out there and explodes, we know it didn't work," Carrion replied. Xanthe looked up from where she made a few checks on the gadget she'd taped to the robot's side and gave a shrug.

"All right then. Hoo-rah!" the robot shouted as he floated out the hole. "For Equestriaaaaaa!" he roared, dropping like a rock. I gaped and leaned out the hole as I watched him fall. Lacunae looked out above me, and a purple glow surrounded the robot, slowing his descent slowed as he leveled out. He floated over the heads of the glowing ghouls below and head for the wall before I finally lost sight of him in the rain and smoke.

Hopefully he'd pull it off... and then I put him out of my mind as Lacunae and Psy-choshy lifted me up through the broken floor to the high security floor right beneath the armory. The gray smoke was darkening, but the radiation was still damned high, despite the smoke. Wait... the radiation was actually *climbing*!

Then I stopped wondering why as I saw blue flames slowly approaching. "Flamer!" I warned as the swirling smoke parted to reveal a flaming pony squeezing out of a breached cell. Vigilance came up as I stood in the gap and sighted along the barrel, planting shots as precisely as I could. The flaming ghoul let out a scream and charged, my bullets half-vaporizing before striking its skull. The 12.7mm rounds were substantial enough to slow it down, but beyond that...

Then Carrion flew up the hole behind me, and a line of green lanced out and began to chew through the ghoul. Xanthe was placed beside me, firing her sidearm wildly into its torso as I kept my shots on its head. Finally, silver arrows streaked through the smoke and sank into the flaming monster's head. It collapsed in on itself, disappearing in a heap of green dust.

Carrion stopped firing, the beam gun smoking in his claws. "Conductor's melted!" Xanthe shouted, reaching into one of her packs for a gray block of metal, tossing it atop her head, then kicking a smoking chunk off the bottom of the jury-rigged gun. As the block came down, she slammed it home into the gap, and the gun gave an ominous hum once again.

Then from the cell beside her came a scream and a billowing, crackling ball of green fire as the glowing ghouls within launched a blast of radioactive magic at us. Carrion swooped around, caught Xanthe in one forearm, and whirled. His wings spread wide and blocked the barrage. Lacunae and I moved around him and slipped into

S.A.T.S. almost as one. These ghouls weren't the fiery variety, and bullets made their heads explode into fountains of radioactive gore and bone. Carrion's wings were both disintegrating and regenerating from the radioactive blasts as the AM rifle boomed next to me.

Four down. About four hundred to go between here and the armory door. Between the bar walls of each cell were stretches of concrete wall just barely wide enough for a single pony to take cover in. "Lacunae! Can you shield us?" I thought at her.

"I... it's very hard to focus. I think the talisman is wearing off. I should be able to protect myself, but we must hurry!" Alicorns and ghouls might be empowered by radiation, but Enervation was another matter.

"Right!" I shouted, not able to see more than ten feet in the smoke. "Move quick! Call out if you see a flaming one. Move!" And I hobbled out in the lead, diving across in front of the cells and barely missed by the radioactive blasts of the glowing ghouls within. Some held as many as half a dozen stuck behind the barred doors. Cell by cell I jumped and rolled, half the time landing on my face as my body kept using my stump like it was a full leg. Once I fell short, and a flaming one thankfully still trapped almost cooked me before I could get clear. Stygius shadowflashed right into the middle of the cell and kicked the beast in the head as a distraction, reappearing back with us as it turned in response.

Worse than the flames and blasts were the screams for help, though. In more than one cell I saw glowing ghouls among their feral brethren and begging to be let out. I just couldn't think of a way we could open the fused steel doors and extract them safely. I wanted to give them a chance. I needed to...

But sometimes we don't get what we want or need...

"Keep moving!" Rampage shouted, shoving me away from a pleading ghoul who thought I was a prison guard, just in time to keep the ghoul's cellmates from blasting me. Damn it, even if I wanted to help, there was no way I could let two dozen half crazy ghouls escape intact for every one sane one!

We reached the corner, and a turret popped down and started to strafe us. The bullets must have made a lucky hit, because Lacunae screamed as a half dozen rounds punched through her weakened shield and ripped right through her left foreleg at the knee. The mare dropped, and Silver Spoon grabbed a rag from the floor and immediately tried to stem the bleeding. I dodged into the path of the bullets, raising my foreleg to protect my face. I could take a few rounds of machinegun fire; at least, I hoped I could. I took aim and blasted the chattering turret. Rampage

raced to the corner, drawing the fire from me, and sprang off the concrete wall, crashing right through the ceiling turret. Then she turned and grinned back at me.

Then she disappeared in a sheet of blue fire. She didn't even get a chance to scream as she curled up like a lump of charcoal.

The flaming one walked slowly through the smoke towards us, inhaling another breath to blast me. Then Carrion was there, moving around the corner with the beam gun in his claws. The beam streaked through the smoky air and collided with the ghoul's head in a shower of blue-green sparks. It didn't, however, stop the second plume of radioactive fire from washing over us. Carrion flew up, intercepting the majority of the flames with his power armor as he kept the beam on target. I would have given him a medal if I could. The beam gun sparked and died even as the flaming ghoul crumbled.

"Oh please tell me I can fix it! Please! Please!" the zebra fretted as she looked it over. Carrion, his feathers blackened and fur smoking, just looked slightly indignant as she fussed beside him.

"Well?" I asked as I beat out the flames. She gave me a stricken look that told me we'd better not run into another free flaming one. "Nevermind! Psycho! Stygius! Get Rampage." Then I turned and knelt. To my amazement and relief, Lacunae's leg was already regenerating before my eyes. "I... ah..." I looked at her severed leg with the PipBuck attached. "That's not going to regenerate into a new Lacunae, is it?"

"Of course not," she said as she levitated the cuff and pulled her leg out of the PipBuck. "I am going to miss S.A.T.S., though." Then she passed the device to me and tossed the foreleg away. "You'd better hold onto it."

"Ugh, she's heavy!" the pegasus mare protested, but she and Stygius managed to heave the charred mare up between them.

"Deal with it," I replied as we made our way along to the middle of the next face and two more turrets. Lacunae, Carrion, and I blasted them with a barrage of gunfire that made short work of them. Then we were at the armory doors.

Yeah, I could see why Snips thought we'd need a balefire egg. These doors were so tough that they hadn't melted or warped like most of the metal on this level. There wasn't a terminal or a lock to pick, either. I started to wheeze... damn this smoke! "How does it open?"

"Only from the inside! And there're no windows in the armory," Snips yelled back

over the fires below. “That’s why I brought the egg!” The charcoal lump cracked and Rampage shook herself hard, shedding the crumbly black shell.

“Am I still grown up?” she asked, inspecting the scorched armor still fused to charred chunks of hide. “Aw, Hammersmith is gonna kill me.”

“That I’d like to see,” Psychoshy countered.

I beat my hoof against the door several times, slumping in futility. “Blackjack...” Lacunae said softly in my mind. I looked up at her and saw her staring down into the smoke. Three burning forms advanced from behind us, flickering through the acrid black clouds. I smacked my gray-etched steel hand against the wall again, then stared at it a second. Would that.... could it work?

“Clear that cell,” I said, shouting as I pointed at the next one down. Fortunately, all the ghouls inside were feral glowing ones. Lacunae and Carrion weathered their barrage of radioactive fire, but I noticed that once or twice the radioactive blasts actually got through Lacunae’s weakened shield. When her talisman died, how long would she last? Or would our minds start jumping like between normal alicorns till we fell apart?

Regardless, ten seconds later, the cell was empty. “Open that door,” I said as I looked back along the row. The flaming ones were still taking their time. Maybe they didn’t know we were here, or maybe they knew there was nowhere left for us to go. Rampage and Carrion smashed the door, busting it open as Xanthe sat on the floor with the beam gun in her hooves, swapping out capacitors, spark batteries, and who knew what to try to get it to work.

“What are you doing, Tiara?” Silver Spoon asked as she fidgeted, looking at the mindless ghouls in the cells in horror. The fused but apparently weakened metal finally gave way as Carrion pulled the door off and tossed it aside. I ran past the still dimly glowing ghoul corpses and right to the back of the cell and the metal toilet. The concrete above the toilet had been defaced by dozens of names. “Oh... ah... I guess when you got to go...” the earth pony muttered as she looked away at once.

The bowl was empty, the contents long ago evaporated, and I shouted down into the metal basin. “Hey! Hey you! You worthless piece of slime! You ignorant, disgusting blob!” Rampage rushed up beside me, looking on in confusion. I glared down and banged the toilet, shouting.

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind, then blinked, grinned, and joined me in insulting the drain. “You’re nothing but an unstable short chain molecule!” Huh?

"You foul, obnoxious muck!" I yelled, giving the mare a confused look. Of all the ponies in her, Octopus was the one shouting insults? Really?

"You have a weak electrochemical bond!" she bellowed down into the bowl. Yes, really.

"I have seen some disgusting crud in my time, but you take the cake!" I roared down the toilet, and Rampage shook me. "You're nothing but—" another shake. "You're just—"

"Blackjack! Look!" she said in a voice that was definitely not the doctor, pointing her blackened hoofclaw at a pair of names scratched in the middle of the rest.

'Doof', and immediately below that, 'Deus'.

This was his cell. This tiny eight by six space, that held four ponies... this was where he ended up. Where he'd gone from mere criminal rapist to a monster. Twist's wide, pink eyes stared at me in horror.

And then I smelled sulfur...

"Back! Get back!" I yelled, the toilet suddenly shrieking. Then the bilious blue sludge erupted out and began to pour across the floor. I staggered back out of the cell, falling on my rump. Rampage bit my mane and dragged me out as the smooze began to form into a slime pony. Back on the walkway, the three flaming ponies were nearly upon us.

"Lacunae! Snips! Throw!" I screamed as I scooped up blue smooze with my magic and flung it at the three flaming ponies. The monsters made no effort to dodge; why should they? Bullets melted before they were struck. Then a rain of glowing, hissing sludge began to rain down upon them, and the three let out screams of pain and fury. The blue slime hissed and blackened as it came in contact with their flaming hides, but it also extinguished their flames a bit. We fell back, step by step, and the three flaming ones charged. "Slow them down!" I yelled. Psychoshy and Stygius darted in overhead, smashing hooves against the darker patches and knocking them back. The pool of smooze slipped around their blazing hooves, and the three now screamed in panic as they tried to back out of it. Then one fell into the acidic sludge, and it grabbed at its fellows and pulled them down as well.

The smooze flooded over them, boiling and blackening and letting out a noxious reek that made me gag. The ghouls struggled, raising melting heads as the entire concoction cooked into a blackened tarlike mud. Even the smooze seemed to find the three a little too spicy for its taste, the blue sludge disappearing back into the

corroded toilet. The smoking mess left behind was so destructive that it was eating into the concrete floor.

Wait... if it was strong enough to do that... "Smear it on the door!" I yelled, scooping it up with my magic and painting the tarlike mix across the armored entrance. It began to hiss, pop, and steam. Everypony else stepped back as our magic worked, trying to apply as much to the door as we could; the sticky mung had already eaten halfway through the floor. The face of the door crumbled away in a sheet of smoking rust, and we added another layer. Rampage bravely scooped it up with flat slabs of flaked-off steel. The tar ate through the floor and began to drip down to the next level, and we hurried to use as much of it as we could. Too bad it was too hazardous to take with us; the infernal mix ate through everything, even Sparkle-Cola bottles.

Finally, the hoof-sized locking drum in the middle just fell right out, leaving a hole a pony could peek through. Stygius peeked and shadowflashed inside. A minute later there was a loud thunk, then another, and the door opened a crack. It took all our magic and Carrion's power armor to get the door open enough to squeeze through, and even so, Carrion had to remove his armor, wiggle his way through the gap, pull the armor through piece by piece, and put it back on. Still, we made it.

Lacunae, however, couldn't.

There was simply no way for the alicorn to pass through the gap. She could fit her head and neck in, but no matter how much we shoved the heavy, armored door, the gap simply wasn't wide enough for her body. She screwed her face up and tried to teleport, but the prison's magic barrier was still in effect. Whatever Stygius did to get around it, the alicorn couldn't replicate the feat. She met my eyes and gave a sad smile. "Shall we just skip the argument about you not leaving me behind?"

"I'm not leaving you down here to die," I said immediately, and she chuckled and shook her head.

"I thought not. Take this," she said as she passed her AM gun through the gap. "Simple physics is sometimes our greatest enemy." I settled it across my shoulders as she looked me in the eye. "Keep going. Find a way up to the attic and out." She looked back down towards the hole and said before I could argue. "By myself, I might be able to reach the roof before the turrets take me down."

"Lacunae, there's got to be another way," I said as I tried to adjust the gun's massive weight.

"There isn't. Now go. I'll see you on the roof." And then she turned away, spread her

wings, and flew silently off into the smoke.

“Lacunae!” I shouted after her. The further away she went, the greater the interference became between us. I couldn’t hear her voice, or she was trying to keep it from me.

“Blackjack,” Rampage said as she nudged me, but I closed my eyes, trying to maintain the connection with Lacunae. The Enervation interference was horrible; she kept coming in and out of focus like a badly tuned radio. The exertion made my head throb.

“One second. I want to make sure she gets out okay...” I said through grit teeth as I concentrated. Images came in bursts. I saw her winging her way down to the largest puddle of blue flame, nearly standing inside it as she soaked up as much radiation as she could. Then of her standing on the cusp of the hole. Then the unicorn took flight, swooping her way higher and higher along the face of the prison. Red beams sprayed from the turrets at her, and her shield flickered and flashed as she pumped her wings, the Hoofington rain around her glinting crimson and white. Then she soared up and landed on the edge. She’d made it! She was safe! I let out a held breath...

Then there was a flash of red, then darkness and the scream of Enervation. I suddenly found myself incapable of breathing as I stood there.

“Lacunae?” I thought at her. “Lacunae?” I said aloud as I tried to push my brain to hers. Nothing but the Enervation static. “Lacunae!” I screamed as loud as I could.

Nothing.

Gone.

She couldn’t be gone. She couldn’t be. I thought at her again and again, frantically, tears running down my face as I struggled to make my pathetic magic somehow make contact with the mare. “Please! Please please please... no...” I groaned as I clenched my eyes shut. It was like Mom dying, only this time I was able to appreciate it so much more.

“Blackjack!” Rampage shouted, and I came to in time to hear the grind of wheels and the crackle of robotic voices babbling their nonsense of halting and authorizing lethal force. My eyes popped open as I spotted the intact sentry at the top of the stairs, pointing its gatling beam gun and missile launcher down at me and the rest of my friends.

The AM rifle floated up beside me; I’d never handled a gun this big or heavy before,

but frankly at this moment I didn't give a shit about simple physics. I pulled the scope to my eye, slipped into S.A.T.S. and queued two shots at the pristine missile pod. The two rounds ripped into the armored siding, and a moment later the missile within exploded, knocking the sentry to the side and throwing the spray of beam fire wide. I advanced up the stairs at a steady walk, tears in my eyes.

She'd been a goddess. She'd been a friend! And this place had taken her from me! All for my stupid obsession! I blasted again and again as I walked up the steps, the rifle punching holes in its chest. Finally its head exploded in a shower of sparks just as I reached the top of the steps. There was another security door, but this one had a terminal, and two more turrets. I should have used the sentry for cover, but right then I really didn't give a shit. Let them shoot me. Hurting was infinitely better than the feelings that arose from the thought that my friend was gone. The scream of Enervation matched the throb in my chest and the tears in my eyes as I blasted back at the turrets.

"Shit! She's berserk!" I heard Rampage say distantly.

"No, she's not," Xanthe replied as I walked forward, closing the distance and blasting slowly and deliberately.

"Well, why don't you shoot her in the head? It works wonders for you," Psychoshy retorted.

I hurt like hell, but it didn't matter. I'd plough a way out for all of them to get out alive, together. No matter how full of holes I was, I'd... Rampage tackled me and drove me to the ground, taking the shots meant for me. Carrion jumped atop the scrapped sentry as his miniguns purred and several seconds later the turrets were scrapped.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Rampage demanded as she flipped me on my back.

I looked up at Rampage and swallowed. "Lacunae's gone." Everything hurt, in part because I'd just been torn into by three rapid fire enemies. A few seconds more and I wouldn't have been hurting anymore. "She died because of me."

Rampage looked down at me, and the corner of her mouth curled as she said, "Yes, she did. Even I never murdered my best friends..." And then she shuddered and staggered off me. "Shut the fuck up, you monster," she hissed, grabbing the side of her head. "But why? She knows the truth already. Her friend is dead... died because of her..." she said with a leer as she looked back at me. "Shut up!" she shouted, tearing off her helmet and then slamming her forehead against the wall.

"I'm sick of you... you vile..." *smack*, "vicious..." *smack*, 'thing!' *Crack*.

She slumped, collapsing on her side as I slowly rose and started to hobble closer. The striped pony panted as she looked up at me. "I think I'm losing my mind, Blackjack. I think... I think..." Suddenly she hung her head. "I deserve to die. Please..." She cursed in zebra and smashed her head again against the wall with another crunch. "Silence!" Then she laughed again, high and harsh, "Oh we are so fucked! We are so fucking fucked!" Finally there was one last crunch and she slid to the ground. All of us stared at her as she lay there, and I put my blood-speckled stump on her shoulder. "You have to be strong, Blackjack. Please..."

"It's not all about you, Blackjack. I forced a smile and patted her shoulder. "Hey. Don't worry. I just went a little crazy too." That enervating scream was getting annoying, like a hoof scraping a chalkboard. "We'll get through this, Rampage. We'll get through it."

"Rampage. There is no Rampage. No Arloste. I'm just a half dozen ponies squished together in one jar." She wiped the blood off her face with a hoof as her body healed itself. Slowly she turned and walked to the door ahead. Xanthe kept her eyes low as she trotted to the keys and started typing, every now and then looking over at me in worry.

The loss of Lacunae was a huge bloody hole inside me, but Rampage had gotten me to bottle it up for now. When I got out... then I could grieve. Suddenly, the floor shook as there was an incredible boom somewhere below us. One pod down, three to go. Assuming, of course, that the warhead didn't decide to go off before the last pod did. I trotted to Snips, lowering my head to look him in the eyes, then gestured for him to step behind the sentry.

When we were out of sight, I said in a low voice, "Tell me everything about that talisman inside Rampage. Specifically."

He sighed and looked back at the door. "There's not much to tell. We were more focused on getting it to work than on *how* it actually worked. It's a regeneration talisman. It has a magical template and it restores the pony it's imprinted on. The idea was that it would contain the soul of the last pony it was imprinted on. Removing a soul from a pony in its entirety was fatal, but what if the soul was still contained within the pony? That's the idea."

"And you put it in Razorwire first?"

"We put it in a half dozen ponies first... terminally ill or injured ponies... but they

were too close to death for the talisman to work. Oh, there might have been some slight imprinting, but it didn't do what Rarity intended." He coughed and looked aside. "The Warden offered an alternative... we didn't know he meant to kill Razorwire. Please, believe me, we wouldn't have ever taken that step. The talisman almost worked, though... but she still died. Then the Angel of Death was captured..." And he shivered.

"That was one you killed."

"I didn't! And I never would." He shuddered as he shook his head hard. "I don't know what happened. I just know that when Snails and I came to the lab in the morning... Rarity... and the Angel..." He shook his head again, as if trying to physically rattle the memory from his mind. "When we got here, the Angel was dead. Rarity said that the Angel would never hurt anypony ever again, and then she insisted that we put the talisman in somepony who deserved it. The detective who captured the Angel was grievously wounded before her partner rescued her."

Softheart. "But the talisman drove her insane, didn't it?" I pressed.

"Maybe..." Snips said softly, looking away from me. "The haunting effect of soul jars wasn't understood then... still isn't, really. A soul jar is more than just an indestructible object. They want things. Feel things. Hate. Love. The detective was already under a lot of stress, and if we hadn't gotten the haunting fully blended out by then... it *could* have been the haunting effect that pushed her over the edge."

"What happened next?"

"That's when we lost it the first time," Snips said, licking his lips and giving me a sheepish smile.

"Right. And... how exactly *do* you lose a soul jar healing talisman?" My incredulous question drew a mirthless smile.

"Funny, that's exactly what Rarity said. But the detective... well... after she was splattered by the train, her body went to the Ministry of Peace. And they found the talisman, saw it was perfectly undamaged... and... eh... somepony recycled it on the black market." He licked his lips and looked away. "We spent six months looking for it. We have no idea how many ponies it might have been put inside; healing talismans like that were generally reserved for very important ponies. But eventually it was found when a patient it was inside... wouldn't die."

So there could still be souls hidden away inside Rampage. Ponies who received the illegal talisman, then grew increasingly unstable until they died, their souls trapped

in the talisman. It was like a Silverstar Sporting Supplies that you stuck inside your chest. "Wouldn't die... how?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"There was a commercial sky carriage en route to Canterlot when a bomb went off – prematurely, it's suspected. There were only a hoofful of survivors, mostly the pegasus team pulling it who could undo their harnesses. But there was one pony trapped inside the burning wreckage who was screaming... for hours. Rarity heard about it and immediately went personally to the scene of the crash."

"We'd been doing more research while the talisman was being looked for and had learned of the possibility that zebras are immune to telepathic magics through studies done in the M.A.S. Some mind control megaspell they were contemplating to end the war that never went anywhere. We'd been hypothesizing that that could help stabilize the talisman, and Rarity was so happy about getting it back... the very same day as the accident, we conducted an inspection to make sure that the talisman hadn't significantly changed since we last saw it, and then Rarity sent it off to be implanted into one of the Proditor."

"Shujaa..." I said as I looked back at him.

"...You'd probably know that better than us. Anyway, Rarity changed her mind the very next day, to our surprise... but by then the operation had been completed and the zebra was heading back into the field. We considered retrieving it, but decided that that would be more trouble than it was worth; if it still didn't work, we'd get it back when she died."

"But then you lost it again," I said as I looked back at him. The unicorn gave me an uneasy look. "Somehow it got from Shujaa into Twist... and then Twist died..." That turned his features grim as his glowing eyes dropped.

"It may be that the megaspell magic, combined with the souls trapped within, had an unanticipated side effect that created the pony called Rampage. A combination of good and bad in a single gestalt individual. A pony with no soul of her own but containing the souls of almost a dozen different ponies." Snips shook his head.

"There's really no way to tell."

"And Rarity wanted this?" I hissed.

"Rarity wanted her friends safe," Snips countered. "She'd have done anything for them. The project she had us working on after she stopped the development of the phoenix talisman was still for them."

"And what was that?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"I'm in!" Xanthe cried from the door. I looked at him, then sighed. Answers about that for later. "Now where to?"

He walked slowly towards the door, speaking to everypony. "We need to find the security center. It was on the far side of the armory. Look for a room with lots of terminals and monitors. We'll also need the guard captain's pass card. It's a wafer of blue sapphire. It should be fairly indestructible, given all the enchantments on it. With that we can access the security system. Also, keep your eyes open for the vent access to get up to the Warden's level."

I sighed and took cover by the side of the door – I still had a lot more regenerating to do – and nodded to Xanthe. The zebra hit a key, and then there was a grind as the door slowly began to open, a klaxon warning every ghoul in the place that we were here. But I slowly poked my head inside and didn't see anything, flaming or otherwise. There was a stairway up that was marked 'Supermax' and then smaller doors. I frowned slightly, feeling a touch apprehensive at how clean the armory looked.

Of course, as soon as we stepped in, another turret dropped and began to spray rounds at us. Instead of taking it, I took cover like a sensible pony and let Carrion step out and blast it with his miniguns. A few seconds later, the turret was scrapped and Carrion had another dozen dings to his power armor. I went to a door beside a large window of ballistic glass and went to work on the lock. Fortunately, I got lucky and managed to pick it without too much difficulty.

I pushed the door open; the room on the other side was filled with a haze of smoke, and was it just me, or was it getting really hot in here? Most of us started sweating from the balmy air as I peeked through. I jerked my head back as the sentry rolled slowly past. Then I spotted another sentry in the corner and hissed softly in frustration. The armory robots had been spared exposure to the flames and were in brand new condition, unlike the sentries below.

Xanthe was at my side and tapped her chest a moment. Then she shimmered, her suit hushing as she all but vanished. The sentry slowly patrolled past again, and I saw a tiny door in its back open up. Then the machine buzzed and called out, "Error! Error! Combat inhibitor offline! Entering combat now!" I cursed and got ready to open fire, but the robot wasn't turning to face me, it was turning to the other sentry.

"Warning! Warning! Hostile detected!" the other robot blurted. Their missile pods opened simultaneously, and I jerked back as explosions filled the room. A half dozen

blasts later, the sentry bot in the corner was still standing, but its armor was smoking and blackened. Rampage darted into the room, ducked under another missile, and smashed both her forehooves through its chest plate. The robot crackled pitifully as she smashed it repeatedly and yanked out wires with her teeth. Finally it collapsed in a heap.

Xanthe appeared; her striped mane was scorched, but she was otherwise unharmed. She gaped at the scrapped robots, and I nudged her with my muzzle. “Not bad for a cursed zebra,” I teased, and the ghost of a smile settled on her lips as she blushed.

These were holding cells, but the locks in this section were actually pretty easy to pick. The half dozen cells were empty save for piles of bones. Clipboards dangled from pegs besides the doors, and one caught my eye, or rather the name on it did: ‘Doof, assault, week isolation’ had to be repeated twenty times on the page. I flipped back through the crispy papers. Half the names on the list for this cell were Doof. The interior barely had enough room for me; I couldn’t imagine how tight the bulky stallion would have found it.

I took a step inside and looked at the walls. Aside from a light in the ceiling and a bucket in the corner, there wasn’t much in here, but every inch was covered in crude sketches. One whole wall had been devoted to Macintosh’s Marauders. I tried to guess who each pony was, but his talent clearly hadn’t been art. I thought that one of the small ones was Echo, but I could only scratch my head and wonder about who the other little one was. Only they had a little sad face drawn on them. Sadder still, there was only one large pony in the picture. On another wall were lists of names categorized as ‘Trouble’, ‘Okay’, and ‘CUNTS’. I noticed Razorwire’s scratched-out name under that last one along with some others.

I flipped back through the pages on the clipboard, and there he was, again and again. From the dates on the clipboard, Doof spent half his life in this box and the other in the only slightly-less-cramped cell below. For three years. The last dozen names at the bottom of the uppermost sheet had dates scattered over a year. Most of the entries in general were for fighting, but in the last year there was the ominous addition of ‘rape’ on the list as well, but oddly *only* in the last year or so. All the entries before that were for fighting.

“What’s so fascinating?” Rampage asked behind me.

“Nothing,” I said quickly, tossing the clipboard into the cell and closing the door behind me. Twist definitely didn’t need to see that! “Come on. Let’s go. Gotta

get out of here soon." Then I was going to sit in Star House and cry for a week for Lacunae. And I wasn't going to move an inch till Rampage and I were better, no matter how I climbed the walls. My impulsiveness and fear had driven me from my friends and endangered others.

Rampage gave the door behind me a look, then eyed me suspiciously. I gulped. Then a pair of doors at the end of the row of cells popped open and a sentry buzzed, "Alert! Alert! Intruders detected!" I could have kissed that hunk of metal; saved by the killer robot!

Thirty seconds later, the sentry was scrapped by our focused firepower and the holding cell was left behind. I hurried forward into the next section, one that seemed to be mostly barracks. Twenty bunk beds lay in two rows of ten. I saw the bathrooms and kitchens, but I didn't want to get anywhere near plumbing at the moment. The floor was getting really warm, and the air grew more and more hazy as the smoke found ways to penetrate into the armory. I hurried through without stopping, continuing through breakrooms, briefing rooms, and then to a formidable door marked 'Gun Vault.' I took one look at the lock and despaired. Maybe I'd find a key somewhere...

I left a part of my heart back with that room as we continued on... well, I would have if I had a heart. Eh, figurative language was beyond me. Then I frowned as I heard the sounds of fighting and shouting in the next room. As carefully as I could, I limped forward with Xanthe to the next set of double doors and pushed them open enough to peek through. The room beyond was the largest yet, some sort of big open mustering room like the atrium back in 99, only not as tall.

And it was full of ghouls in tattered guard uniforms who fought each other with bâtons. Bullet casings were scattered all over the place, along with discarded firearms. Every ghoul was screaming, glowing with radiation, beating each other to a pulp and then regenerating. Screams of "Traitors!" croaked from some throats, but who was a traitor to whom was never really clear.

Graves had spent almost two centuries taking inventory. Had these guards really been fighting that long? Worse, on the far side, I saw a door marked 'Security Command'.

So, how to get past dozens of ghouls who were eternally fighting to the death? Unfortunately, even as I thought that, two of them immediately charged me with feral screams. "Get the others," I shouted to Xanthe as they closed the distance and I drew Vigilance and my sword. The blade intercepted one, halting its advance as it thrashed on the glowing edge, and I pivoted to the left to keep the other ghoul on

the far side of its companion. Then I blew its brains out the back of its head with three rapid fire shots. As the ghoul dropped, I swapped my aim and planted four more rounds in the head of another.

Then I was nearly knocked off my hooves as a pegasus guard dropped onto my back, hugged my neck, and started to chew into my throat. I stabbed with the sword, but it was hard trying to find something vital to chop into without stabbing into myself. I felt blood start to spurt as I tried to buck, but it was a lot trickier to do that with only three legs! I heard shouts from behind me; I thought it was my friends. Hoped it was...

Then I heard the crunch of baton on skull over and over again. "Let go of her, Raindrops!" croaked a mare as she struggled to pull the feral off. Finally, all three of us went for a tumble, but the ghoul was knocked free from my back. I pressed my foreleg to the bloody hole under my chin, and then balked at the sight of two ghoul pegasi mares, one with blood on her mouth. I put the last three rounds in the magazine into the head of that one, panting for breath as I waited for the bleeding to stop.

"You with SWAT?" the remaining ghoul shouted over the din, pushing me back towards the wall and away from the fight.

SWAT? What the heck was... oh, my armor. Well, I knew one answer that would save me a lot of questions. "Sure. Name's Blackjack."

"Oh thank Celestia! It feels like we've been fighting forever," the ghoul said as she slumped. Her mane was a slightly clashing red and green, and her coat resembled spoiled milk. "My name is Blossomforth. I don't know what's going on. Some said the missile was part of some jailbreak. Others claimed we should evacuate to the Core. I haven't had a moment to think straight till you showed up."

It was just like with Silver Spoon. It seemed that ghouls had a tendency to get stuck on certain things from when they were alive. I'd better keep her in the fantasy, unless I wanted her to go feral. "What's the situation here?"

"Well, the alarms went off, and immediately we went into lockdown. Prisoners were rioting. There was no communication from the outside. Then that missile hit! Then captain Sourcup said we were sticking tight, but others said we should evacuate. Then the captain pulled out his gun, and there were alarms going off and screaming and some ponies went crazy. Shots were fired, and then it was batons and hooves and fighting for our lives..." She trailed off, frowning with that look of something amiss she couldn't quite put her hoof on. "Who's doing all that screaming?"

"Don't worry about it," I said as I saw my friends run up. "Looks like the rest of my team is here. We're going to... arrest the Warden and evacuate as many ponies as we can." My ass was starting to get toasty sitting on the metal floor. "Don't worry about anything below us. It's... taken care of."

Silver Spoon sighed and said in a low murmur, "Blackjack, have you been lying to delusional ghouls again?" I smiled awkwardly and shrugged, and the gray ghoul sighed and covered her face with her hoof.

"Clear the room. Headshots. If they talk to you, try and save them," I said, and Psychoshy groaned. I fixed the yellow pegasus with an even look. "I mean it. Give them a chance. Say you're with the SWAT or whatever you have to. Otherwise, take them out." Blossomforth stared at me in shock, and I said with an apologetic smile, "Sorry. We don't have much time left. Call out to your co-workers if you can recognize them." I loaded a fresh magazine into Vigilance, then frowned and worked the slide several times before it chambered the round.

The work was brutal, but short. Rampage, Stygius, and Psychoshy were more than capable of separating the ferals into workable clumps. If they talked, I put them behind me where Snips and Silver Spoon calmed them down. Xanthe kept out of sight, though occasionally a feral dropped with a shotgun blast from nowhere. By the time we reached the other side, ten guards remained, watching as I put down the last one with the last three bullets in my gun.

"Special Weapons and Arcane Tactics doesn't mess around," Blossomforth murmured to a twitchy looking unicorn.

"I coulda been one of 'em," he replied nervously, looking at the corpses, then looked at her, squinted, and frowned. "You look like hell, Blossom." He shook his head. "I feel like hell... and who the hell is screaming like that?"

"We're going straight to Hoofington Memorial," I assured them. "There've been... side effects from the warhead."

"Going to be a trick, taking down the Warden with the prison under lockdown and on fire," Blossomforth said as she looked at me with a little smile.

"Well, I did pass this room with those two loveliest words 'Gun' and 'Vault' on the door," I said with a sublime smile. "Don't suppose any of you know where the key is?"

The pair looked at me, then over at security command.

Well, if my previous experiences were any kind of guide, the guard captain would

be inside and be some sort of flaming apocalyptic demon of hell. I pushed open the door with my magic and slowly peered into the office. There were two desks in front of dozens of terminals, all of them showing different parts of the prison. At least half showed only static, but others gave a great view of the fire blazing up around medical and sweeping towards the armory. I wondered how long that armored warhead would last before going boom.

No apocalyptic demon, though. Just a single pegasus skeleton in a guard's uniform slumped over the controls of a large security terminal with a dozen extra monitors and a pair of extra control panels connected to it. "Bones? Who leaves bones in the armory? What kind of sick joke is this?" the unicorn hissed nervously. He levitated the bones to the side and looked at the nametag. "Merriweather? But... I thought she was on vacation. Why would somepony dress up a bunch of bones in her uniform?"

"Just like I told you. Something bad's going on, Twitchy," Blossomforth said with a scowl. She pointed at a key in one of the panels attached to the terminal. "That's the captain's key! Why would the captain's key be here with no captain?"

"That's the key that needs to be turned to get out of here?" I asked Snips. The round unicorn nodded. I stepped up beside the body and noticed a few more details: a pistol between her hooves, a hole in the back of the cracked skull, and a grimy slip of paper. I worked it free and looked at the mouth-scrawled note. 'They have my girl. Sorry.'

Oh yeah. More 'Hoofington sucks dock' reminders.

"Something really bad is going on, isn't it?" Blossomforth said as she nervously chewed her lower lip.

"Yeah. That's par for the course." Snips was investigating a large panel in the corner with the label 'Airshaft #4 Access'. "Is that our way up?"

"Of course," he said as he put his shears in the corner of the panel. "We still have two fliers. One goes up, finds the security station upstairs, turns the key there, we turn the key down here, everypony but the other flier goes through the door. Then the other flier pops up the shaft and we all get out of here. Easy peasy." He frowned as he pried the panel open. I felt more beads of sweat on my brow; damn, it was hot in here! The whole building was turning into an oven.

Then I saw a tongue of smoke lick out around the edge of the panel. "Snips..." I warned as I eyed the metal. Now that I was paying more attention to it and not the

drilling sensation throbbing in my body, I could hear a low roar.

"Come on... get... off!" And with one last heave the panel came off and popped free. I heard the sudden intake of air, like the largest flaming pony ever taking a breath, and then a plume of fire exploded out the gap. I tried to lunge, but misstepped and failed to knock him aside. The flame poured over his features like a flamer as he fell back, clutching his blackened face as he screamed. The ball of fire rolled over the ceiling like a hunting, living thing and spread out as it dissipated.

I rushed to his side beside Silver Spoon, the squat blue pony's face a blackened ruin. In the air shaft that was supposed to be taking us into the warden's office was a solid sheet of flame. "Well, think you're hot enough to make it up that?" Rampage asked the stunned Psychoshy.

Heat, radiation, and Enervation were nibbling away at us as we frantically tried to think of other ways to get into the Warden's office. Xanthe suggested trying to fix the beam gun and cut our way through. Blossomforth suggested trying to fly up the central shaft and hope the robots or beam turrets didn't dust us before shooting our way into the office. To keep the guards occupied and not acknowledging their ghoul status, I gave them the task of taking the captain's key and raiding the gun vault.

"Well, what if I just stay here?" Rampage asked with a bright smile. "I mean, I've wanted to go out with a bang before. This sounds like it's going to be one hell of a bang! Right?"

I was using my pitiful medical skills to apply a bandage to cover Snips's blackened eyes. "If Blackjack has to face the Warden, she's going to need you," he croaked, his cooked face splitting and bleeding. "You can't stay... but I can."

"I'm not going to leave you to die!" I said firmly. He just lay there a moment and I added, "You cursed me. I'm holding you to uncursing me!"

"We already know I'm useless for that. Snails always made the connections in the end; it'll take him a while, but he'll figure this out." He gave the smallest little smile. "I'm not planning on dying here, anyway. Once you get into the warden's office, you should be able to shut down the teleportation inhibitor talisman at the Warden's security station. Not hard, just smash it. Then I'll teleport up to you. Easy as pie."

"You can do that? Blind?" I asked, frowning in concern. He simply nodded.

"It's already hot as hell in here," Psychoshy said as she stared at him.

"It's going to get hotter the longer all of you waste time," he said as he limped in the direction of the terminals. I levitated the bones out of the chair and set them aside with care. Whatever had happened in here, it seemed Merriweather wasn't a willing participant. "Besides, I'm not much good in a fight now. But once the talisman is down, I'll be up there lickity split."

Twitchy and Xanthe trotted in, with the ghoul unicorn cursing the damned stripes while the zebra just ducked her head. Apparently ghoulish obliviousness could go further than just being a ghoul. They had quite a haul on their backs: shotguns, pistols, even a missile launcher! Okay, that brightened our prospects just a little. "You're sure you can get up to us?" I asked in concern. "Maybe one other should stay with you? Just in case?

"I can only teleport myself. Just get up there, get inside, and smash the talisman," he said as he slumped against the controls. Twitchy put the key back in the slot. A blue glow spread out over the controls, then centered on the key. He coughed as the air grew hotter and thicker. The fire in the vent was like a furnace; even if there wasn't anything to burn, it was still making breathing as hard as hell.

He turned the key, and a door that one of the monitors was focused on slid open. "Hurry. You still have to find a way inside." Missile Launcher and missiles sounded like a good place to start!

"Okay. Let's go," I said as I took one last look at the blind pony slumped over the controls. I knew how terrifying it was to be blinded like that; the disorientation... he was certainly handling it much better than I had, though.

Blossomforth showed us the way. It was good to have a guide with an intimate knowledge of the prison. The stairs to the supermax had two more turrets, but to my relief and delight they didn't start hosing us down with beam fire. Apparently somepony in our group had a talisman that marked us as friendlies. About time some things started going our way... so why was I getting so nervous as we walked up the stairs and into the supermax wing?

The supermax cells were of a different design. The blackened steel bars enclosing the walkways sat behind warped ballistic glass that kept out the swirling smoke. The cells had similar doors of reinforced glass that allowed nothing to be hidden inside. The sleeping mattresses looked glued to the floor and were all made of identical translucent material. Even the toilets were clear plastic! Even more oddly, there weren't any ghouls within. All of them contained bones rather than undead.

"I can't imagine what kind of sick zebra curse could do this! The radiation vaporized

everything except their bones!" Blossomforth said with a scowl. The swirling clouds behind the glass were lit with a fiendish orange glow from below as we climbed higher and higher. The sentries that patrolled watched our movement with eerie silence, and I licked my lips, contemplating scrapping them now before the Warden could override whatever safety we'd found with the guards.

"What the hay did you have to do to end up in these cells?" Psychoshy asked in low tones.

"Oh, these were for special prisoners. Prisoners who the M.o.M. needed safe and sound for memory extractions and interrogations. Political prisoners. Criminal organizers. Traitors. Anypony that Pinkie needed intact," Blossomforth answered as we made our way down the row of cells. "We had to keep them secure from the rest of the prison, or else they'd be killed."

I slowed my pace a little and let Rampage get out ahead before I looked at the ghouls. "Did you know a pony named Doof?"

"Oh, you mean Fork 'n' Knives himself. Yeah. I did. Strange case," the pegasus said as she fluttered her crumpled wings. "I mean, I know he was a convicted rapist, but for a few years I just didn't believe it."

"How so?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"He fought like hell in here. I mean, sure... yeah... he was a criminal, but he stood up for other ponies. He wasn't in a gang, though Celestia knows everypony wanted him on their side. He was just here. We threw him in solitary just to give him a chance to heal before putting him back out again. Every week he'd get beat to shit, and every other week we'd lock him up," Blossomforth said with a shake of her head. "Said he deserved it."

"Yeah..." I muttered, thinking about the waste of a potentially good pony.

"Then he went bad," Twitchy muttered as he kept eying the smoke. "Really bad..."

"How?"

"Doof wrote letters every day he could see straight. He wanted to see this one mare. Just once. Said he'd happily be locked up the rest of his life if he could talk to her for five minutes and tell her how sorry he was," Blossomforth said with a small frown. "Never found out who, but I guess that one of her friends told him she'd never ever ever ever speak to him again. Pushed him over the edge..." The ghoul shivered. "After that we weren't locking him up to protect him, but to protect everypony else from him. Kept provoking us to put a bullet in him... send him to

Hell where he belonged. Finally he got transferred out of here. Don't know where... don't want to know."

And then they took an angry, nigh-suicidal monster and made him into a cyberpony of death. I really had to wonder about Silver Stripe's judgement on that one. I looked into the next cell we passed and then frowned. "Huh..."

Blossomforth followed my look, and her dessicated and battered wings popped out as she ran to the cell. "Cell 712! Shady Legs is supposed to be in there!" She looked at Twitchy. "Supermax confirmed full roll call this morning, right? No absences?"

The nervous unicorn nodded. "Yeah! I heard Merriweather... oh sparklefarts..." he murmured as we passed another. Cell 722. "Another one!"

"A breakout just before the missile hits? But nopony escapes from Hightower!" Blossomforth flew down the hallway, calling out, "731! 740! 755! 780! They're empty!" The ghoul swooped back. "Not just a breakout! A mass breakout!"

"Really?" I found myself smiling. "And nopony ever escapes from Hightower?" War-den was gonna be pissed...

"I need to see cell 755," Carrion said at once as he flew up to Blossomforth. The mare looked at me in concern. I nodded to her and she looked back to him and nodded in turn.

"You have two minutes!" I shouted after them. If that didn't fulfill the terms of his Contract, then too bad. I wasn't going to leave Snips down there a moment longer than we had to. Even with the ballistic glass, the air was getting pretty thin. As a test, I nuzzled said glass along the edge of the walkway and jerked my face back quickly. Okay. If it was that hot up here...

"One and a half minutes!" I amended as the rest of us hurried along. 755 was around the corner, and when we found it I noticed to my chagrin that its furnishings were far more civil. The bed was a featherdown mattress covered in rumpled red velvet sheets, and it had a drape across the front window. Was it just me, or was it even larger than the other cells? There were a bookcase and writing desk in the corner, and the toilet had another drape encircling it.

"Wow. I knew Kingpin had it good, but wow." Rampage muttered as she stared at the cell. "Is that a minifridge? How the hay did he get away with a minifridge?!"

"The rules permit prisoners with good behavior to own a few personal items," Blossomforth muttered lamely.

"Yeah. That's, like, a few photographs. It's not a minifridge!" Rampage snorted indignantly and pulled the door open, staring at bottles of wine. "Wine! He... that... do you have any idea how many sex acts I had to pull for a half dozen cigarettes?!"

I looked at the red velvet drapes, not wanting to hear the answer. Carrion was staring at the room too, at a loss: this wasn't a two minute job. It'd take an hour, at least.

"Okay. Everypony take a different spot, strip it, and dump it in my saddlebags! Stuff it in!" I said as I magically levitated the sheets and wadded them up before stuffing it inside the container. I could handle the weight. I'd let my Pipbuck inventory spell magically sort it all out and get them to fit. In two minutes, almost everything that had been loose in the cell was in my bags, and I was near my carrying capacity. I made sure all the sheets were tucked inside the bulging pockets; I certainly didn't want them to catch fire.

Once the bed was uncovered, Carrion dragged his claws along the upholstery and sent fluff and feathers everywhere; if there was something useful in there, he'd shred it. "Wait wait wait!" I shouted and carefully waved my stump at him. He backed away, and I levitated up the whole mat of feathers and slowly shrank my field and sent the feathers tumbling like snow. Nothing. I supposed it was too obvious. Rampage had raided the minifridge, tucking the wine bottles into her bags.

"What?" she asked defensively as she popped open one and took a long pull off it then looked down at the label. "I'm swigging a Fancee 912? This is a vintage that should be savored!" She then upended the bottle and chugged it down, before belching loudly. "There. Consider it savored," she said, smacking her lips.

Oooookay... "Let's get moving. Let's get that teleportation field down quick. I don't want to leave Snips down there a minute longer than I have to."

"I still don't see how you're going to get into the warden's quarters. There's nopony in there to turn the key," Psychoshy said, then looked at Stygius. "Stygius can only teleport where he can see. So unless those doors are ballistic glass too..."

"They're not," Blossomforth added as we trotted up the stairs towards the highest level. Half of us were coughing from the smoke in the baking air. I didn't want to imagine what Snips was going through down below. Then, as if anticipating our troubles, there was a resounding explosion below us and the swirling orange suddenly writhed madly as tongues of flame sprayed over the ballistic glass.

Then I froze as I heard a dreadful crackling, splintering noise from my left and stared

at the huge fractures spiderwebbing through the warped glass. I watched as they grew by the second, then snapped across the entire pane with a brittle pop. "Oh no... run!" I shouted as the weakened glass fell away from its steel anchors and tumbled into the inferno below.

And instantly the corridor we were in was transformed into a baking oven of swirling smoke. The heat was absolutely staggering; the smoke assailed my throat and chest with every breath. Cinders stung any exposed hide as the hot smoke curled around us. But perhaps worst of all was the sharp spike in radiation; for all that the smoke was a shield before, now the roaring fire seemed to be filling the air with stuff that made my PipBuck click madly.

There was one saving grace: my eyes weren't flesh and blood. Even the ghouls had shut their eyes against the cinders and stinging smoke, but I still had a few feet of visibility. Breathing was another matter, though, as I went from one pony to the next, screamed in their ears for them to bite the tail of the pony in front of them, and then guided that tail into their mouth. In one ridiculous conga line, I led us up the stairs and around to where the door for the Warden should be. I could only hope that no pony in the chain let go and got lost.

Hot. No air to breathe. My skin scoured by fire and my radiation popping up ridiculously fast. And worse, as if it could sense our peril, the curse inside me began to tear like a wild radroach inside my chest. All I wanted was to get out and breathe the cool, damp, smoke-free air of the Hoof.

Then I wanted to curl up with Glory for the rest of my life.

For a heart-pounding moment, I was absolutely positive that I'd screwed up again; shouldn't we have been at the door by now? I wondered if my mane was on fire; I glanced back at where Rampage was biting my tail, but she wasn't burning yet. There wasn't anything to do but keep going, crawling along the supermax cells as my head spun. Too much smoke. Too much damned smoke! Was I going around in circles? I was... wasn't I?

Then I fell into the small alcove and looked around to see another massive door like the one in front of the armory, though this one had two monitors next to it. I staggered back as far as I could, croaked something that might have been 'hold on' or 'get clear', and used every bit of focus I could muster to lift the missile launcher. I focused, aimed at the door, and pressed the trigger with my magic. The missile made a soft 'puft', popping out the end and then igniting with a brief woosh that ended in a blast that showered me with debris a half second later. I coughed as I

advanced again; that had to have...

Done nothing. There were a smoldering black smear and some scratches in the middle of the door. Either I'd been too close, or, as feared, the door was able to stand up to any armament in the prison. I crumpled at the portal that might as well have been a wall, choking and retching, trying to get enough air in me to think. To buy time, I pulled the others all in one after the next till everypony was accounted for. We had to do something. Some way to get inside... but the only two people inside were the Warden and Snails... and I doubted Snails had access to a monitor.

That left the Warden... the warden who was probably watching us choking to death at his door, glad to see another inspection team biting the dust. But how the heck was I supposed to get him to let me in? I couldn't even see Silver Spoon as more than a vague lump. I'd need something more than us dying out here... something that'd make him want to talk to us...

Warden's gonna be pissed...

I rose to my hooves and walked in front of the two monitors. A camera immediately focused on me.

"Warden Hobble!" I shouted at the camera, barely able to hear myself over the ongoing roar of the flames.

The left screen flickered. Then the Warden's charred visage appeared. He looked positively shocked. "Oh, you're still here? I thought that you were all... safe in the armory."

In the gloom, the sentries suddenly began to buzz, "Intruders detected. Please present identification or be disintegrated."

"Ah. Well, that should do. Now if you don't mind, I have a prison to get back under control." There were no two ways about it; he had to be delusional.

"Kingpin escaped," I choked out, glaring at the camera. The charred ghoul paused, then looked at me in a long, steady stare.

"Pardon?" I reached out, grabbed Blossomforth, and hauled the squishy pegasus before the camera and monitors.

"It's true, Sir," Blossomforth shouted. "Six of the supermax cells are empty." I looked at the other monitor, frowning in worry. Was Snips still there? Please... please be there.

"What kind of... this is... I would have been notified..." the Warden spluttered as

he looked to the side and back at me. I saw his eyes widen. "Nopony escapes from Hightower. Nopony!" the Warden shouted, slamming his hooves down repeatedly.

"Open the door and I'll give you my evidence. Maybe you can catch them again," I said, hearing the grind of the sentries' wheels approaching.

The Warden stared at me for what felt like an eternity. "Oh, very well." There was a buzz, and a light lit up under the Warden's monitor. "Armory, let them enter." Nothing. I stared at the little light, then at the blank monitor. No... please be there... please, Snips...

Nothing.

Then the light flashed to life, there was another buzz, and then the heavy metal door opened with a whoosh. The cool gust gave us all the correct direction to go: up the stairs. Ten seconds later we were through, and the door closed with a bang. Most of us, ghouls and ponies alike, collapsed and concentrated on not cooking. Psychoshy wheezed and choked as she fell beside Stygius. I suspected that it was Xanthe's suit that kept the zebra upright. Rampage coughed up something the consistency of tar. I wanted to do the same... but not yet.

I staggered up onto my three legs and clawed my way up the stairs. The air in the Warden's level was hazy but far more breathable than that below. I made my way up to where the stairs opened up into a security room. Two sentries slumped, deactivated, and the turrets in the corners of the room were inactive. The Warden, or something else? There was a metal door to the side, and I pushed it open to reveal a security terminal identical to the one below in the armory. The larger central monitor was focused down the shaft into glowing fire, and I looked at the controls and found one that said 'Camera Focus.' I hit it repeatedly and saw the image change over and over again.

Then it stopped on the image of the armory security station; I froze as I saw the form of Snips slumped over the controls. Where was the talisman? I couldn't see a magical talisman or anything marked 'Teleportation Disruption' or anything! I did, however, spot a button marked 'intercom'. I mashed it with a hoof, and the roar of the fire blasted out the speakers. "Snips! Snips! I'm inside, but I can't see the talisman! Where is it?" I shouted. He didn't move, and I put my hoof through one of the side monitors as I yelled into the microphone, "Snips! Don't be dead! Tell me where the talisman is!"

He moved and lifted his bandaged face. Sweet Celestia, it was so hot in there he was smoking, cooking before my eyes. His hoof reached out, found the microphone

on its little wand, and pulled it to his lips. “On the roof,” he rasped, barely audible even with the microphone against his mouth. I felt the world lurch around me; what did he mean, ‘on the roof’? “Doesn’t matter, anyway. I was never smart enough to figure out how to teleport.”

“You lied...” I murmured.

“I lied,” he said with a little nod. “Somepony needed to stay here to buzz you through. If I hadn’t, somepony else would have had to. I didn’t want your friends to do it. I didn’t want you to try and be noble and sacrifice yourself for us. And while you might have been able to talk one of the guards into doing it, I didn’t want to take the chance of them going feral and everypony dying because of me.” He shook as his hair smoked. “I deserve this, Blackjack.”

“Nopony deserves this!” I contradicted at once. The pain of the curse had spread out almost over my entire body, and my shock seemed to make it surge once more. I struggled to keep focused on the screen. My pain could wait till later.

“I do. Your zebra was right. I’ve tried not to think about it for two centuries, but Snails and I meddled in things we had no right to. Ponies were killed for us... or by what we did.” He said as he bowed his head. “I wasn’t honest with all of you at the outset, but that’s the Wasteland, isn’t it? If I’d trusted you, we could have done this better. Graves. Lacunae. They died because I forced us to go through here. And trust me, in two centuries, I’ve done plenty in the Wasteland to deserve burning.” He hung his head as the glowing smoke and licking flames swirled behind him.

“You don’t. Please... there has to be some way!” I begged, trying to will all of this to not be true.

“There isn’t... so listen... you have to get Snails out of here. That’s been... all I could think of for two centuries. Get him out of here. He can help you... he never screws it up! It might take him some time, but he gets where he’s going.” The blackened face gave a tired grin. “Tell him I cast the swirly curse from the black book. The swirly one. Swirly. Remember. Tell him... tell him I tried to get him out as soon as I could. And tell him that I’m sorry I forgot the donuts.” His bandages were smoking now as well. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...”

“I forgive you,” I said as he curled up in his seat. The image flickered several times. “Snips!” The last image I saw before static filled the screen was a round, blackening, pony-shaped lump with a smoldering mane; I prayed it wasn’t my imagination that there was a smile on his face. I hit buttons at random, trying to bring up something, some confirmation that he was alive. That he could still be saved by some means!

Maybe... maybe the Warden would send a robot to pluck him to safety! Maybe the Goddess would give me the magic to teleport right into that inferno and pluck him out.

The screens on the security station began to play all kinds of crazy pictures; recordings, I guessed, since they showed parts of the prison whole and intact. They interspersed with the static of ruined cameras and blurts of recorded conversation. Most appeared to be interviews with prisoners. I spotted the sparkly-hoofed Garnet speaking with a fat white earth pony, but I didn't care. I had to find Snips again.

Then I heard something that made me freeze reflexively. Though it had been weeks since I'd last heard it, the voice pierced my panicked denial and pinned me in place. "Damn it, Vanity, I don't care what that cunt says. I want to see her!"

My eyes focused on the muscled mass with the anguished face. Even though he wasn't a Marauder anymore, Doof still had the powerful physique of a pony who worked out regularly. His gray hide was marred by tracks of scars; I'd never thought that those scars on Deus might have come from before he was turned into a cyber-pony.

Vanity sat on the other side of the table, his hooves folded before him. "Use that word again, and this meeting is done," he said in cold finality. Doof shook with the effort to keep himself restrained. "I am here for her, not you. She says no, Doof. Respect that."

The huge pony shook some more and then let out a little sob. "I can't. Don't you get it? I have to see her at least once. I have to... I have to explain to her what I did. Why... please..." he begged as tears ran down his scarred cheeks. "Please, talk to her. Tell her I just want five minutes. After that, she never has to see me again."

"She's made her decision, Doof," Vanity said and rose to his hooves. "Respect it. Do your time and move on. Try to contact Twist again and it'll be Applesnack coming to tell you no."

"You sanctimonious rich fuck!" Doof screamed at him, looking truly deranged in his anguish. "You have no fucking clue what she means to me!"

"I don't care, Doof," Vanity said with chilling hatred. "You betrayed us. Have you forgotten that? You're not a pony. You're not even a zebra; I have respect for them as opponents. You're a rapist scumbag who should be locked up in here for the rest of your life."

"You have no right to judge me! I know how you fucked up Jetstream's head so bad

she's in Happyhorn now! How are you any better, Vanity? How!?" he roared, and he rose and slammed his hooves on the table so hard it split down the middle. The door buzzed and two earth ponies ran in with two unicorns behind them; even as a team, they struggled to beat and subdue him. "You think I'm a scumbag?! I'll show you who I am. I'm a fucking god of pain and misery, you rich fuck, and when I get out of here, nopony is going to stop me! Nopony!"

I felt like I couldn't move or breathe for a moment when that image of the screaming Doof being dragged out of the room disappeared along with every other and the Warden filled every screen. "Miss, I believe you said something about an escape?" I could have also said something about a fire and a balefire bomb, but I doubted it would register. "I do hope you'll come in and elaborate, immediately."

"On my way," I said softly, dropping my eyes as the Warden disappeared. A god of pain and misery... funny. He could have been talking about me, and considering what he became...

I wasn't going to be like him. I wasn't. I couldn't.

The maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. She sows destruction for the entire world.

No... I swayed as I felt the curse tearing at me. It felt like I was falling away from my own body.

Why the fuck shouldn't she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn't everyone?

Please... stop... please...

"Hey..." came Rampage's voice from the door. I moved slowly, like a zombie ghoul, and used her to pull myself slowly back together. "Snips didn't make it, did he?" I couldn't answer, so I grit my teeth and nodded, tears cutting dirty lines in the soot that covered me. She sighed and shook her head. "So... want to go through all the hating on yourself and beating yourself up, or would you rather have more bad news first?"

I looked at her standing there. She looked... tired. "More bad news."

"Why am I not surprised?" she muttered. "Psychoshy and Stygius are really bad off. She won't wake up and he can barely stand. I think that it was smoke inhalation."

"Is she going to die?" I asked as I turned and left the monitors behind. Left Snips behind. I'd punish myself appropriately when I had the whole butcher's bill for this

fiasco.

"Maybe. If you want to keep that answer from being yes, we need to get the lock-down lifted and get the hell out of here." I nodded and walked slowly past her, feeling... disconnected? Like something in me had finally given way and now I wasn't completely sure if I was really doing this or not. Was this what it felt like to lose your mind? "Blackjack?"

"I need to find the attic first. I need to find Snails... I owe Snips that," I said in a daze.
"Which way is the attic?"

"Owe Snips?!" Rampage shouted. "You don't owe him anything! He should be glad I didn't buck his head clean off his shoulders when he couldn't remove the curse!"

"He wanted to help his friend..." I muttered.

She kicked me upside the head, knocking me sprawling. Oddly, the pain helped me focus, and I rubbed my aching skull as I looked back up at her. "Are you saying that you'd curse a pony with a death spell you can't remove just to save one of your friends? 'Cause if that answer is yes, then you're getting another kick!" I blinked up at her, and she grabbed me with her hoofclaws and hauled me up to look me in the eye. "I don't care if it is for a friend. I don't care if it's for me. There is shit you do not do. The ends do not justify the means!" she said as she gave me another shake. Then the world went white.

Once again I was looking down at Rarity's Canterlot apartment. The room would have done my own room proud with the amount of clutter strewn all over the place. Clothes, papers, books, and zebra statuary and masks all vied to consume what had once been a tastefully decorated living space. The glass case that had held parasprites was replaced by the black book. She stared down at it, turning the pages over and over again as if searching for something amid the glyphs.

"It has to be here. Somewhere... where is it? Show me!" she muttered as her azure eyes, horribly bloodshot and puffy, moved erratically over the page. Beside her sat the small pink egg-shaped talisman covered in markings rendered in golden wire. It pulsated with its own slow heartbeat.

Then there came a soft knock at the door. Rarity ignored it. A second knock, barely louder than the first. Rarity huffed but kept working. Then there was a resounding thud as the door was knocked clear off its hinges and flew into the apartment. Rarity

gasped as she turned to stare at the empty doorframe. A second later, a little white bunny hopped in and fixed Rarity with a stern glare. Fluttershy flew in after him, "Now Angel, you really should give people a chance to answer their doors and not just kick them down." She blinked and looked at all the mess, then at Rarity. "Um... I hope this isn't a bad time..."

"It is a bad time, Fluttershy," Rarity replied in a mutter, frowning at the other mare. "Things are quite a mess right now..." Without looking back, she levitated the talisman off the table and hid it in her tail.

"Oh. Well... um... I need to talk to you about something," the pegasus muttered, and Rarity actually grimaced.

"It's one in the morning, Fluttershy. Honestly, anything you need to talk about can wait until the morning," she snapped brusquely as she trotted to the door.

"Well... ah... I'm afraid I'm going to have to... um...", her voice dropped to a whisper.

"What was that?" Rarity scowled. Fluttershy muttered again, a touch louder. "Fluttershy! Please! It's late and I still have so much to do."

"I'm going to have to in... in..." She gulped, and finally spat out, "Insist!" The yellow mare sat in the doorway, tapping her hooves together, eyes lowered. Angel stood beside her, arms crossed and foot tapping rapidly besides him.

"Fluttershy!" The pegasus's determination seemed to startle Rarity. "Honestly! What's gotten into you?"

She swallowed, then nodded to the little white rabbit. He grinned, his ears twiching this way and that. Like a fuzzy missile, he launched himself at her terminal, dove under the desk, emerged with a black plastic box trailing wires, and snapped it over his knee. Another swivel of his ear and he leapt into a potted plant. A tiny spritebot came buzzing out, but the rabbit flew through the air and exploded it in a single furious kick. Then he looked right at me and leapt up at me in two bounds.

"Wait! That one's mine!" Rarity shrieked. Angel froze, tiny fist curled as he glared at me, then looked at Fluttershy. The mare shook her head slowly, and the little animal huffed, then jumped away. His ears worked a few more seconds, and then he nodded with a smug smile.

Fluttershy took a deep breath and then raised her teal eyes to meet Rarity's annoyed glare. "I got the report about the crash in the Canterlot mountains."

"You're bothering me this late about that?" Rarity said with a roll of her eyes. "The

official report is coming off tomorrow. Zebra sympathizer sabotage. Nothing to bother yourself with.”

But Fluttershy didn’t back down. “I got a notice from the emergency responders about something unusual... a pony trapped in the wreckage who wouldn’t die... even as they b-b-burned...” She stammered and shuddered, her mane curling slightly as it fell in front of her eyes. “They reported he was trapped... pierced and crushed by the wreckage... and then you showed up, personally, and he died soon after.”

It was impossible for a white unicorn to get paler, but somehow Rarity seemed to manage it. “I... I... I just...” She forced a nervous grin, her magnificently curled mane seeming to tighten as she fought for an explanation. “Really, Fluttershy, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Angel pushed Fluttershy’s mane out of her eyes, and she slowly looked up, then spoke in a quiet, yet extremely firm voice. “It’s not nothing Rarity. Something kept that pony alive... burning... in agony... for hours. And there’ve been other reports, too... ponies suffering horrible injuries or accidents and then taking far longer to die than they should.”

“Well... don’t tell me that’s a bad thing!” Rarity stammered as she backed away. “Death is a horrible thing... the absolute worst.”

Fluttershy bowed her head again. “Yes. It is horrible...” she nearly whispered, but then she looked at Rarity again and said, “But it’s not the worst, Rarity.”

“Fluttershy, please! You can’t tell me that death isn’t the most horrible thing you can imagine,” Rarity said, sounding stunned. “Think about Big Macintosh... and Pinkie Pie and Applejack... are you saying that us dying isn’t the worst possible thing?”

Fluttershy didn’t answer, and Rarity slowly relaxed a little before the yellow mare answered softly, “I can imagine all kinds of terrible things. I’ve seen bodies sent to their families, heard their cries when they realize a loved one is gone. I’ve seen children mourning dead parents. And I saw Applejack and Twilight at Big Macintosh’s funeral. And there is no question that death is a horrible thing and I hate it, but it’s not the worst. I’ve seen worse...”

Rarity glanced over her shoulder at the black book, then back at the bowed pegasus. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out. “You want to know what’s worse than death, Rarity? Suffering. Pain. I’ve heard ponies screaming in agony; I’ve held ponies as they struggled to take a breath, knowing that the next one would hurt them even more. I’ve seen ponies without a cut on their bodies go mad from the

torment of what was happening to their loved ones. More than death, pain is the absolute worst possible thing. And fear of that pain is every bit as terrible as the pain itself."

Rarity just stared at her friend as tears ran down her cheeks. "Fluttershy... I don't want you to die. I... I think about it every night, and... I can't face what will happen if I have to go to a funeral for you or Twilight or even Applejack. It... hurts..." But then she smiled and brought the pink egg out from inside her tail. Fluttershy stared at the talisman in shock. "But... but I've been working on a way to keep you safe! To keep all of us safe! Once I get it working right, none of us ever need to worry about that ever again!"

"That's a restoration talisman... but it's been changed..." She stared at it and then at Rarity. "What does it do?"

"Well, this is an incomplete one, but when activated... it contains a pony's soul, and then it can regenerate a pony from that soul. In theory, anyway..." she said, looking down at it. "We've had severe problems with the soul extraction process, but once we get the kinks ironed out, we..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the horror on Fluttershy's face.

"Contains a soul?" she asked weakly.

"Well, yes. That helps power the magic. It takes quite a bit of it to restore a whole pony." She looked at it a moment, then back at the black book, before saying desperately, "But don't you see? With this, you'll never die! Never be hurt again..."

"Rarity... is this what you were working on in Hightower? Those patients in Happy-horn... were they they... were they... *test subjects?*" she whispered in horror.

Rarity didn't answer; she seemed frozen in place. Finally, she turned away, and now she was the one hanging her head. "They were criminals. The worst of the worst." Fluttershy gave a little sob, pressing her hooves to her mouth as she sat back. Rarity then turned and gave a near-manic grin. "But don't you see, Fluttershy? Don't you understand... once we have these, the war is effectively over. They won't be able to kill us! We'll all be safe. Forever!"

Then Fluttershy lowered her hooves and slowly stood. Her eyes hardened as she stared straight at Rarity. "I don't want it."

Rarity blinked, and her mane slowly seemed to frizz before my eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't want it. I don't want something inside me that sucks out my soul to keep me

alive," she said in that quiet yet firm voice. "You can keep it. And I know our friends will feel the same way."

"Fluttershy!" Rarity gasped. "Think of what you're saying!"

"I could say the same, Rarity," Fluttershy said evenly, her stare drilling into the white unicorn. "It doesn't matter how wonderful it is... I'd never accept anything that was made through killing people!"

Rarity gave a hysterical little laugh. "Ha! That's rich of *you*, giving me that. You gave the zebras your megaspells for *peace*! Was that okay then?"

"No," Fluttershy replied, and the laughing unicorn grew silent as the pegasus hung her head. "No... I think I might have made a terrible mistake when I did that. And every day, I regret that I did. I know it was for peace... and I hope that somehow, in the end, it works out that way... but no. I was wrong then... just as you're wrong now."

Rarity's magic made the stone tremble in the air before her. "Do you... do you have any idea what I've gone through to create this... for you? For all of you?" She looked on the verge of snapping completely, and for a moment I was certain she was about to cast some horrible spell on her best friend.

"I know how many patients Happyhorn received from Hightower, so I have an idea. But I still do not want it, Rarity. I'd never want something like this if even one pony died to make it," she said as she reached out, took the talisman in her hooves, and set it aside. Rarity looked like she was going to explode. "What I really want is my wonderful friend back... not some magic trinket..." She pulled Rarity into a brief embrace, then turned and trotted out once more. Angel bunny pointed two fingers at his eyes, then pointed them at Rarity, and then hopped out after Fluttershy.

Rarity stood frozen in place for several minutes, looking at the designs and the papers and the talisman and then at the black book. "I thought she'd understand... I thought she could appreciate it more than any other pony... how dare she? How..." She lifted the black book and screamed at the top of her lungs, "I made it for you!"

And suddenly the white unicorn was in a frenzy, her magic tossing and ripping the pages out of books, splitting the sheets, tearing down the crates, and tossing the grotesque wooden zebra sculptures out the window as she moved like a purple-maned tornado of destruction. The sharp edges cut her fetlocks and smeared her forelegs with blood, but she ignored the injuries in her frenzy. "You said it would make them happy!" she roared as she swept the desktop clear with the black book.

"You said it would keep them safe!" Then her magic surged, and she flipped the entire desk over in a crash of her art supplies. "Everything I did... was for... nothing!" she shrieked and threw the black book with all of her might, sending it flying against the large standing mirror in the corner. It struck dead center and sent dozens of cracks radiating out from the impact.

Rarity panted and gasped for air from the exertion. "I just wanted to keep her safe... I just wanted... Oh Fluttershy... what have I done?" She stared at the blood on her hooves. Then the white unicorn sat in the middle of the devastation she'd wrought, head bowed as she wept.

Rarity then looked up at the broken mirror and wiped at her tears, smearing her cheeks in red before rising. Step by step she approached, looking at the broken reflection. She looked at the different shards of herself reflected back, counting softly. "Forty-two... Of course..." she murmured, then smiled faintly. "Silly Rarity... a present doesn't count if you take it from somepony else. It only counts... if it comes from yourself..."

I lurched as the recording ended and tumbled over onto my back as my brain processed what it had just seen. Fluttershy had been right. It'd taken Hightower and being separated from my friends to make me realize that. No data for EC-1101 was worth the deaths of my friends. I lay there on the floor for a moment and sighed. "Learning sucks," I muttered as I sprawled there. "I need to get to the attic... does Razorwire remember the way?"

"Yeah, sure. Right down that way, Pink," Rampage said as she pointed with her hoof. Then she looked at me in concern. "What exactly have you learned that sucks?" she asked as she heaved me to my hooves.

I paused and looked at her for a long moment. "There isn't anything about Rarity that will set you off, is there?" I asked bluntly, feeling numb and disconnected from myself.

"I have no idea. You tell me," she said as we limped out together.

So I did.

She led me down a hall and around the corner, and I told her about Rarity's quest to become immortal, how she wanted to protect her friends, and just what it had cost. When the story was finished and the holes were filled in, Rampage wore a stunned

and worried look. "Whoa... learning does suck."

"Told you," I said as I limped along. "Blissful ignorance. That's the ticket. I was so blissful before I knew any of this crap."

"Really?" Rampage replied. "I thought life in 99 sucked?"

"Compared to Hightower right now, that sucking was bliss," I replied with a smirk.

"Whine whine whine. Who knew being a hero involved so much whining?" the striped pony said with a faint smile, but it quickly died. "So, am I just a magic talisman crammed with too many pony souls?"

"And one zebra," I added. "Whatever Proditor did to change their stripes must have involved some sort of soul-affecting magic, somehow. That's why you've got them too."

"Heh... wow. Don't know why I'm so keen to die. I was never born in the first place. I was built!" She shook her head back and forth as she walked, groaning. "It's way too late to go back to just thinking I'm a pony with no memory, isn't it? I mean, even alicorns were once ponies, right?"

"I think so. Twilight used magic to change them into what they are now. Somehow the Goddess can do it too." I didn't want to know more details than that. I had little bits of goddess in my brain, and that was already more than I wanted to know. "You're still Rampage." That made her laugh, and not in a particularly nice way.

"Oh, well, that's just fine, then! Rampage, who can't have a kid because she's got a little psychotic foalkiller inside. Along with the punk, the professor, and proditior, and... whoever else is in me!" she said, gesturing to herself. "I like Mint-als. Is that because of Twist inside me? Huh? Is it because Octopus was popping them on the sly 'cause he was losing his marbles? What! Nothing about who I am makes sense!"

I sighed and sat, patting her shoulder with my remaining forehoof. "Well, at least you're in good company."

I paused as I looked down the hall at a pair of double glass doors. 'Garage' was printed above them. Some kind of blast barrier had been dropped behind them, cutting them off. That wasn't what shocked me, though. It was the tiny purple figurine lying on its side beside a metal door next to the pair. Slowly I approached, step by step, till I reached out with my magic and picked up the teeny tiny figurine of Twilight Sparkle. I slowly turned it over in shock, five breathless ponies in the back of my mind squealing in glee.

I stared at the inscription on the base. ‘Be a brainiac!’

Huh?

Then Twilight Sparkle’s head fell clean off!

I was so shocked that I dropped the figurine, and it shattered into hundreds of ceramic pieces at my hooves. Habazawah?! How... they... that wasn’t supposed to happen! A tiny Applejack in my head consoled a sobbing Pinkie Pie. I looked over at the metal door and pushed my way through. What I saw on the other side stopped me almost immediately.

Mares. Thousands of them. The Ministry Mares predominated, in dozens of different poses. Many of them were unpainted, powdery white things. Others were cracked or chipped. There were also lots of figurines of Trixie. Of Silver Spoon and Twist. Of Snips. Of Applebloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle. There were countless inscriptions, many misspelled or otherwise odd. I picked up one of Snips and saw the words beneath it. ‘Best friend.’

Nurse Graves had withstood Enervation by counting inventory, Blossomforth by fighting, and the Warden by being an evil bastard. No guess how Snails had endured. I walked past the shelves, the pottery bench, and a machine that looked like it was designed to pulverize the clay back into powder. There were countless empty glaze jars laying in heaps and piles around the work table. Beside that was an electric kiln. And then I heard sobs in the next room over.

“Hello?” I called out as we walked past the workshop and towards a doorway with a large room beyond. “Please don’t be crazy,” I murmured as I walked slowly forward. This room had a bad vibe to it. for the first time since starting my climb up Hightower, the air felt chill against my hide. The scream of Enervation was different here, more focused. Almost like it was countless voices calling out in unison.

The floor of the room had been carved with strange marking that looked like zebra glyphs, and yet at the same time there was an odd difference that gave them an air of something wholly other. The markings in the floor gave the inexplicable impression that they were meant to be felt rather than viewed. Holes were punched into the floor within the markings, and I knelt as I looked down and spotted red fragments of gemstones in the voids. There were all kinds of strange markings on the walls, diagrams and designs, some crossed out and others annotated with circles and comments.

This was where Project Eternity *played* with necromancy.

"Look at that, Blackjack..." Rampage said as she pointed at a diagram of a pony with a black ball of swirling shadow above it. Beneath the pony was written the question: 'If a soul is infinite, can the soul be split infinitely?'

Split a soul? As I stared at the diagram, everything faded into white once more.

"Mistress Rarity. I... are you sure about this?" Snips said as he stood in the middle of the workroom in a ridiculous black cloak and robe. "The black book doesn't say anything about cutting a soul in two. Rending and destroying one... okay. Cursing a pony to shatter their soul and scatter it, yeah. But slicing it neatly in two? I don't think the book sees much point in just two pieces."

"That's why it's an experiment, Darling. And hopefully one of our last. If this doesn't work... well... I'll just have to try and make the best one I can..." Snips looked up at her in confusion, but then dropped his eyes from the glamorous mare. She wore a dress of the darkest purple, barely a shade away from black.

She walked through the workroom and into the ritual chamber. My view swapped from one room to the other, following them. I noticed that most of the notes had been cleared away. Another unicorn, tall and lanky and wearing a similar black robe, nodded to them. In the middle of the room was a gray pony I'd seen before. Octavia stood in the center apprehensively, hugging her contrabass and bow like they were a comforting blanket. "M-M-Ministry Mare," she stammered.

"Please. Call me Rarity," the white unicorn said as she smiled gently. "I understand you've fallen on some hard times, and I'd like to help you out. But first, I need you to help me, Octavia. You see, I need to try a spell. It's something that's never been done before." She put her hoof around Octavia's shoulders and gave her a hug. "But I want you to be okay with helping me. If you don't want to help, you can leave. With the bits I offered."

The gray pony frowned, but looked back at the white mare. "What... what will it do?"

"We're going to take a piece of your soul, cut it off, and put it into your instrument there. If it works, your instrument will last... well... forever. That piece of you will preserve it for all time."

"My instrument?" Octavia looked at it, then at Rarity. "Will it hurt?" I realized, listening to her, that Octavia spoke with a slight accent, an odd, sophisticated-sounding one. Actually kinda like Crumpets, but with less swearing.

Rarity was sympathetic. "Probably. But it's something we need to test. I need to make sure it works..."

"Is it for the war, Ma'am?" Octavia asked with a little frown. "Are you going to use it to make weapons?"

Rarity looked at her a moment, then smiled and shook her head. "No. No, this is for me and my friends. I'll never use what we learn here for the war effort. In fact, when this is finished, I hope to seal it all away forever." She locked eyes with Octavia. "I swear, on my life and soul, that I won't use it for the war."

Octavia's eyes dropped to her instrument, gazing questioningly at the still wood, then closed in silent contemplation. A moment later they reopened and focused on Rarity. "Very well, Ma'am. I accept."

"Thank you," Rarity said, and then she stepped back outside the circle.

Snips stood on one side of the circle, the lanky pony, presumably Snails, on the other. Snips lifted the black zebrahide book and began to intone words that didn't sound like they could come out of a pony's mouth. Even more disturbing, though, was the flat monotone he spoke them in; it was far too similar to the humming I'd heard in the Harbinger camp outside of flank. Too similar to the Enervation scream...

Octavia began to lift off the ground along with her instrument, her eyes clenched tight, limbs shaking as they clutched the contrabass. Yet there was no glow of unicorn magic; she rose aloft as if lifted by the shadows themselves. A flickering vortex of magic seemed to rise up from the center of the sigil and coil around her, as if wrapping her in a dark cocoon. Then the screams began. They sounded from Octavia, but I'd been in Hoofington for too long; those screams were from the shadows as well.

Then a dark orb of energy gathered at each of the two unicorn stallions' horns and flew up into the air. They struck the cocoon of shadows in unison, and that arcane envelope exploded in two immense fans of prismatic light. Outwards they arched, and then plunged back down. One funnelled into the mare's body, the other into the wooden bow and panelling of the contrabass. Octavia slumped as the vortex dissipated and she dropped towards the floor.

Rarity's magic caught her and laid her gently down. The gray mare hugged the instrument as she sobbed. "What happened?" Snips asked as he trotted around Octavia. "What happened? Did it work? Did we actually split a soul? Huh? Did we?"

"Yeah, is she okay?" the lanky Snails drawled.

"We'll find out," Rarity replied tersely as she looked over Octavia and then back at Snips. "Check the book again."

Snips flipped it open and leafed through a few pages. "Oh... will you look at that! Looks like the big black book's got a few ideas on splitting souls all of a sudden." He peered at the yellowed material. "Mostly involving torture... but it's got some other things here too!"

"I thought it might. Horrid thing. Well, I have some ideas of my own." She knelt and nudged Octavia. "Come on, dear. Please wake. Please..."

"So...how do we know it worked?" Snips asked with a worried frown.

Snails pursed his lips, then looked at a workbench on the edge of the room, floated over a sledgehammer, and smashed it repeatedly against the lacquered wood. The surface was untouched. "Looks like it worked, eh?"

Octavia's eyes jerked open, and she slowly sat up. "What happened? I was hurt, and then... I feel... odd." She struggled to her hooves. "I want to go home, please. Please let me go home."

Rarity looked at Snails and smiled gently. "Please, see her home. Make sure she's paid in full."

Snails blinked, looked at the floating sledgehammer, and quickly tossed it aside with a bashful look. "Don't you worry, I'll get her home, eh?" He looked at her and smiled slowly. "You live in Ponyville, right?"

"F-Flankfurt," Octavia stammered.

"Oh. Well, same diff, don'tcha know. Come on," he said as he trotted languidly out with Octavia at his side, contrabass resting across her back.

"Sweet! Stop by the Sugarcube Corner there and get a box of donuts to celebrate," Snips shouted after them. Then he looked up at Rarity. "Woohoo! It was a success! What are we gonna do next!"

"We'll have to test it a few more times, now that we know that splitting a soul isn't lethal." Then she floated out a tiny ceramic figurine. It was one I knew quite well; I had its copy in my saddlebag. Rarity looked down at the tiny replica of herself. "Then, when we can do it without mistakes... I'll make a set of me and my friends."

Snips stared up at her. "You're gonna put a piece of your friends in each statue?

Wow... will they let you?"

"No to both," she said as she pulled out a mirror and gazed into it with a frown. "But I have an idea that ought to be every bit as good as using my friends." She put the mirror away with a clear shudder. "It should be possible to take a fragment of soul and copy the unique magical properties of another."

Snips scratched his head, looked at the book, and then said skeptically, "Well... yeah! But only if you like pieces of your soul going poof..." Then his eyes popped wide. "Ooooh! I get it. You're gonna snip off some felon's souls and make them like your friends! Clever!" He trotted out of the room, the black book hovering in front of him. "I'm gonna see if I can find anything else new in here!"

Rarity stood alone for several minutes, standing where Octavia had minutes before. I was beginning to wonder why I was still being shown this, and then she said quietly to herself, "No, Snips. No more sacrificing other ponies. I'm going to use my own. Because... it's not a gift if you take it from somepony else."

It was pretty sad that I was getting so used to visions, flashbacks, and other things messing with my perception that I didn't faceplant into the middle of the ritual circle. As it was, I made a sharp little pirouette, keeping on my hooves before sitting down hard.

Octavia. Rarity had split Octavia's soul, right in two. And part of that soul was inside her contrabass. No wonder I could play it so well, or that Vanity had been able to beat off a mob with it without the instrument getting scratched. It was so obvious; why hadn't I thought of it before? I hung my head, remembering how sad Octavia had been at the end of her life and how beautiful her music was in contrast to the ugliness of the Wasteland, where beauty of any sort was hard to come by.

Maybe it was impulsive of me – okay, most things were – but still, I opened up the panel of my PipBuck. I selected all the audio files from Octavia's apartment and then activated the broadcaster. "Hi. I don't know if anypony can hear this... but this is Security. I want to share something with you. Two centuries ago, before the bombs fell, there was a musician named Octavia. I don't blame you if you don't recognize the name. She took a position against the war, stood up for peace, and was ruined for trying to do better. But she never gave up. Even towards the end of her life, she kept trying to make the world a better place. I have some of her music with me; I know that you might have heard it already from DJ Pon3, but I'd like to

share it with you now anyway. Please... I hope you enjoy it..." And then I set the PipBuck to broadcast her music as far as it could. I doubted anypony would hear it, but at least I felt I'd paid back a little of the gift her music had given me.

But then Octavia's music began to slowly cry out of the speakers of the prison; I must have gotten lucky on the frequency or something. It was a requiem for Hightower.

And then, several seconds later, I heard a humming noise. I looked over at Rampage, who seemed lost in the music and her own worries. Slowly, I turned and began to stalk the source. In the corner of the room, I found a tiny cot covered in a heap of dirty rags behind drums of powdered porcelain. I looked over at the filthy dust-streaked black cloths as they hummed along with the low melody, and then I said quietly, "Snails?"

"G'way..." he muttered.

"Snails, I'm Blackjack. I'm here to take you out of here," I said as politely as I could. I didn't want him to go feral. "Snips sent me."

The rags curled up. "He's dead... isn't he?" I moved next to him and sat down beside the cot.

"Yeah. He is. A lot of ponies died helping him save you. He's spent a real long time trying to get you out of here. Now we have to go," I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. I couldn't tell if the pony under the rags was a ghoul, a mutant, or something else; not even the eyes were showing. "Please... he wanted to get you out of here. He says he's sorry he didn't bring donuts..."

The rags sniffed and shifted and Snails sat up. The pony beneath them was much like the pony I'd seen in the vision, a middle-aged unicorn stallion with an orangey coat. And like Snips, his eyes glowed with a soft luminescence. He had a pair of figurines in his hooves; ones of Snips and himself as young stallions, maybe even from before the war. 'Bestest Friend' read the inscription on the former, and 'Besterest Friend' on the latter. Around his neck, on a frayed ribbon, was a tacky little medallion of three shooting stars. The gilt had rubbed off on some of the corners, but it was still inscribed with "Best Magic Act."

"You're his friend?" Snails asked slowly as he sat up.

"I'm... I guess you could call me that. I was trying to help him and he was trying to help you. So now I'm trying to help you." I guessed that was friendship, sort of. Technically? "He... um... accidentally put a curse on me. The swirly curse." Snails's glowing eyes scowled in thought, and I gave a hopeful smile. "He said you'd know

how to remove it?"

"The swirly one? I dunno... I don't think you can remove that one. 'Cause it's all swirly and spreads till it pops you right out of your body." The orange pony scratched his matted mane. "I can... well... nope... but maybe? Um... no... that probably wouldn't work. But maybe... huh..."

I was struck by the horrible revelation that my life and soul were in the hooves of Equestria's slowest necromancer.

Rampage then spoke behind me. "Hey, Blackjack? Not sure if you've noticed, but things are getting smokey up here. We can't have long until that warhead pops. We've got to get out of here."

"Oh... you can't do that," Snails said with a shiver. "Warden said he won't let anypony go... 'cause we're in... um... lockdown! Been in lockdown for, like, ever..." He looked off to the side. "And Warden's a monster now. I mean... he's got those robots and he's all big and fat and glowy and... yeah. Not happening. Not till the Warden wants you to."

"You've seen him?" I asked with a frown.

"Oh yeah. Asked if I could go find Snips or Mistress Rarity, but he said no. Cast a bunch of spells on him too... 'cause he needed to be able to 'control the prison'. Said he'd have order and that none of the scum were gonna get out." Snips looked away. "He... um... he's kinda big and scary now, so I just stayed in here with all my friends," he said as he looked over at the figurines. "Clay's nice and easy and doesn't mind if you're slow. In fact, Rarity said that that made me better than anypony for working it. Just gotta be careful."

"Right. Okay. Does the Warden have anything else in there? Robots? Turrets?" I asked Snails as I looked at the figurines. What was Rarity doing with these little statuettes? They were nothing compared to the five I'd collected in the Wasteland. They all looked so... dead...

"Oh yeah. He's got it all," Snails said with a little nod. "And he's big, too," he reiterated earnestly, as if hoping it'd help.

"Right. Big. Scary. Turrets and robots. Well we've dealt with all of those," I said as I sighed. "Does the Warden have a terminal or something?"

"Oh yeah! Right by his desk. A big, fancy one. Controls everything in the prison," Snails said, nodding as an idea began to form in my head.

"So we don't need to beat the Warden. We just need to occupy him long enough for a certain zebra to get to that terminal and lift the lockdown. Then we blast the terminal, run for our lives, and let the balefire bomb finish him off!" I grinned at Rampage. "Okay. Let's get back to the others."

Snails blinked slowly at Rampage. "Do I know you?"

"Eh..." She rolled her eyes. "Part of me... don't worry about it. Welcome to the Blackjack and Co. Travelling Freak Show. Remember to shoot Blackjack. It's good luck."

"Do not shoot Blackjack!" I contradicted at once as we started out. Snails gathered up a few trinkets and things in his raggedy black cloak; it didn't take very long. Fortunately, the skinny stallion wasn't slow moving, just slow thinking.

"What was Rarity doing here, though?" Rampage asked as we trotted out of the ritual chamber, looking at all the figurines.

"Nothin'. She just split her soul into forty-three pieces. She put forty-two of 'em into the figurines. The last one she kept; I know because I made sure it got back to her and that it was the brightest and shiniest part of all," he said with clear pride but otherwise as if he was mentioning that it was raining. It halted me in my horseshoes, though.

"Forty... three? Rarity split her soul into forty-three pieces?!" Octavia's scream of agony was fresh in my memory, and that had merely ripped her soul in half. How could she... could *anypony*... possibly survive something like that? I accessed my inventory spell and wiggled free the Fluttershy statuette. "You're telling me there's a piece of Rarity's soul in here?"

He took it in his magic, then calmly smashed it down against the ground. If I had a heart it would have stopped. The figurine, though, was completely unharmed save for a little bit of dust on her pink mane. "Yup. Well, it was a piece of her soul, but then she copied some of Miss Fluttershy over it. She was such a nice pony." He looked at the inscription and blinked, then flushed. "Oh... heh... supposed to say 'Be Pleasant...' whoopsie..."

Forty-three pieces. "But... why?" I stammered.

"Um, Blackjack? Balefire bomb going to go off? Swirly curse killing you? Imminent mortal doom?" The striped mare gave an apologetic smile at Snails. "You've got to excuse her. She gets distracted easily by the motivations of ponies who died two centuries ago. Makes her overlook the little things."

"Yeah," I muttered, trying to get my head back in the game. Still, a part of me wanted to know. "Come on. Maybe we can get lucky and talk reason with the Warden." It was possible.... right?

We rejoined the others. Psychoshy was barely conscious and still struggling to breathe. Stygius, slumped beside her, glanced up at me weakly. 'Too much smoke,' he'd scribbled on his slate. Xanthe was still on her hooves, but she looked exhausted and slightly befuddled. Blossomforth and the others were trying to care for them as best they could, but there simply wasn't much they could do.

Silver Spoon immediately trotted forward to Snails and smiled. "Hey. Long time no see."

He blinked in confusion, and then his glowy eyes popped wide. "Spoon?! But... you're... um... wow...."

"Yeah. And Twist is inside her," Silver Spoon said, pointing a hoof at Rampage, who scowled back. "It's a regular Ponyville reunion." Blossomforth blinked as she looked at Silver Spoon in surprise. "I'm sorry about Snips," Silver Spoon continued. "He didn't make it."

"Did he really come all this way to save me?" Snails asked slowly.

"Yeah. He actually cursed Tiara to keep her from leaving. Totally crazy," she replied.

"Tiara's here?" he asked, looking around nervously.

Silver Spoon dropped her eyes. "Well... no. I mean... Blackjack. I get them confused. But... I mean... if I'm still here, and you're still here... maybe Diamond Tiara is somewhere out in the Wasteland?"

"Xanthe," I said to the zebra as the two ghouls talked, "I need you to do something. We're going to deal with the Warden, and I need you to get to his terminal to lift the lockdown. Can you do it?" She muttered something in zebra. "Is that a yes or a no?" She muttered something else equally inexplicable. "Xanthe!" I snapped, and her eyes focused on my face.

"Right... lift the lockdown... warden's terminal... sure...easy peasey faciley..." I wasn't sure she was quite with it, but she was our best chance.

I turned to Blossomforth. "Soon as it's lifted, get to the garage. Get ready to get everypony out of here. Understand? Soon as it gets lifted, we're coming running."

I looked at Carrion, who had swapped out one of his miniguns for Xanthe's re-re-jury-rigged beam gun, which she'd apparently gotten working again at some point;

really, how many times had she patched that thing up? “Ready, soldier?” He smirked and saluted. “Ready, Reaper?” Rampage still looked troubled, but she met my gaze and gave a little smile and nod. “Ready... um... zebra?” The striped mare gave a little grin and babbled something in zebra, but saluted smartly... and then gave a surprised look at the hoof at her temple.

Then Stygius hauled himself up to his hooves and tapped his chest. “You sure?” The charcoal batpony nodded once, flying over next to me. That was good enough for me. I looked at the ghouls. “The rest of you, make sure you get those wagons and are ready to get us all the hell out of here.”

“Wait...” Psychoshy croaked as she fought to her hooves. “Not... gonna... just... sit this one out...” Then she started coughing and wheezing as she swayed. Snails and Twitchy helped keep her upright as she struggled to join us. “Not.. letting...you fight... without... me!” she pleaded as she looked at the ebon-winged batpony.

Stygius flew back to her, held her by her shoulders, and shook his head. She coughed and looked him in the eye. “I’m good to fight! Just... give me a second!” He shook his head again, and she glared at him. “Don’t you... tell me no! I’m capable... of kicking as much... flank as-” Then he silenced her with a hoof-curling kiss. Her yellow eyes popped wide, and then her buttery wings fluffed at her sides. Slowly, she swayed and finally sat down hard, Stygius moving with her to keep contact, and closed her eyes as she smiled in bliss.

“Imminent mortal doom, people...” Rampage muttered beside me.

When he finally broke the kiss she blushed hard and smiled. “Oh, wow...” she murmured, then sighed, looking up at him. “You’d better make it, then. Here...” she said as she pulled off her power hooves and passed them to the armored buck. “Bring them back, understand? I plan on using them myself... I mean it...”

The stallion nodded, and I helped him put the weapons on with my magic. Next, we drank the rest of our recycled RadAway. I made sure the AM rifle and missile launcher were both accessible on my back, looked to the others, and nodded once. Side by side, we walked back down the hall towards a pair of double doors marked ‘Warden.’

“You know, this is going to be really anticlimactic if he just lets us go,” Rampage muttered.

“Have we ever had that kind of luck?” I replied. She snorted and grinned. “We’ve gone through hell together, and I’m quite done with this fucking tower. Time to finish

this." Graves, Lacunae, and Snips wouldn't have died for nothing. Still, if I could occupy him with chatter... hey, worked for me!

Then I pushed the doors open with my magic and stepped through. Over the speakers, an ominous melody began to play. The Warden's office was a large room with a vaulted ceiling. Four hovering robots with monitors lurked in the corners. Most immediately noticeable, though, was the floor; it wasn't cement, wood, carpet, or metal. It was thick glass between heavy steel beams that formed a grid. Smokey plumes shot up in little geysers. As we walked, my eyes were drawn downwards. The smoke made the strangest swirling motion, outlining a central void that went all the way down to the inferno below. I could see the missile and its armored warhead...

It was glowing in the heat.

But where was the Warden? There was nothing else in here except a huge pile of junk piled up in the center of the office. There was nothing else...

And then the pile moved...

It slowly rose up, looming higher and higher as it twisted around to face us. There was a reason the screens had only shown Warden Hobble's face: it was all that could fit. Two centuries of direct exposure to the warhead had caused the ghoul to swell to Goliathian proportions. His hips were trapped within the warped center of the glass floor, his rear legs dangling twenty feet below, draped in glass stalactites. The blackened undead flesh erupted prominences and coronas of blue flame in magmatic floes that healed mere instants later. The desks and furniture and a half dozen sentry bots had been fused into a carapace-like armor that vaguely resembled some sort of uniform.

The thing's mouth split in a volcanic grin as he stretched his forehooves wide, and then two great skeletal wings wreathed in flame spread from one side of the room to the other. Behind him, set into the wall, was a large, complex terminal. Celestia only knew how the gargantuan monster used it. He leaned towards us, his eyes narrowing. "You lied to me. You're not with the M.o.M. The riot. The fire... This is some kind of elaborate deception... a plot against me. Yes..."

I swallowed, baking in the tremendous heat coming through the foot-thick glass. I hoped it was magically hardened or something, because I really didn't want to sink through the floor. Regardless of any hardening it might have had, though, it was searing hot, and I was truly glad to have cyberlimbs right now; I might have been leaving hoofprints of stinking melted rubber, but that and an unpleasant heat were

the only things I had to deal with. Rampage trotted onto it without hesitation, just wrinkling her nose in discomfort as her hooves sizzled. Now I was really glad Xanthe had her soul armor... though the sight of the abomination had brought her out of her daze and left her staring up at it in horror. Please don't forget the mission, Xanthe...

"There is a deception, yes. One you're playing on yourself, Hobble," I said, swallowing as I saw the gatling beam guns from the sentry robots mounted on each of the Warden's forehooves. "You're not the warden of a prison anymore. This place is a ruin. There is no Equestria any more. There hasn't been for two centuries." I gestured at him with my stump. "Look at yourself, Hobble! Look at what you've become."

He roared back, "Spare me your lies! I have no more patience for this. I will have order. I will have control! This is my prison! My empire! My *world*, and you have no place in it!"

So much for him just letting us go.

The Warden swept his forehooves wide, and a half-dozen beam guns sprayed out in a storm of fire across the office. Rampage charged straight ahead across the glass floor, her steel-clad hooves smoking as she closed the distance, leapt, and locked all four hoofclaws into his chest armor. Carrion launched himself up above that glittering arc and sprayed down both the cutting emerald beam and minigun fire. Stygius shadowflashed again and again, zigzagging closer and closer and then finally bringing his borrowed power hooves smashing against the Warden's head with a satisfying crack.

Xanthe...still stood there gaping. I tackled her and dropped under the gatling barrage. The glass baked me through my barding as I looked her in the eyes and screamed, "Get to the terminal! Lift the lockdown!" Her eyes focused on me, and she blinked, swallowed in terror, and disappeared.

I turned and rose to my hooves, shielding my face with my stump. The bolts burned, but it'd take more than a fancy light show to turn me into a pile of dust. I brought up the missile launcher as the flurry of shots passed above me. His blazing wings swatted at Stygius, but the batpony shadowflashed away a half instant before the burning skeletal wings could catch him. One giant hoof smashed at Rampage, trying to scrape her off, but the armored Reaper refused to be flicked away so easily. The other hoof was pointed at Carrion... there!

I jumped into S.A.T.S. and launched the missile right at the outstretched hoof. The projectile streaked true, exploding in a fiery blast on the end of his foreleg. One

of the beam weapons even sparked and blew apart completely. The intact limb stopped trying to scrape Rampage away and pointed at me as I flipped the launcher open and fed another missile in. The beam spray bit into the reinforced combat armor and even struck hide, but I turned aside, sheltering the launcher as I finished loading and snapped the weapon closed. Only then did I turn, jump into S.A.T.S. again, and send another missile streaking into the other hoof.

"Take out his hooves, Carrion!" I shouted as the rain of crimson light slackened immensely. I just didn't have the speed to run and dodge with three hooves, but I was a tough fucking cyberpony. Carrion changed his target immediately, and he was *quite* capable of banking and evading the Warden's fire while still pouring his own shots on that outstretched limb.

Then Rampage reached a part of him that wasn't covered in steel: his face. Her glowing-hot hoofclaws sank into his black, charred hide with little explosions of fiery ichor. Now the Warden let out a roar as the mare went into a spiked frenzy, trying to claw and dig her way into his fiery eye. He lifted his hooves towards the Reaper and pinched her between them.

With a bellow of rage, he tore her free and smashed her like a slab of meat once, twice, thrice against the floor. The glass blocks crackled under her, and for a horrifying moment I thought he was going to smash her right through the floor and into the firestorm below. I loaded another missile, pointed it between those upraised hooves, and fired it right into his savaged face. The impact made him sway back, and Rampage tumbled to the ground with a crunchy thump.

Stygius divebombed the Warden, shadowflashed away, and then divebombed again. Each hit corresponded with an eruption of flaming ghoulish flesh. The batpony was relentless in his assault. Carrion had swapped to using Xanthe's beam gun almost exclusively, the emerald lance disintegrating a thin line of armor with every pass. I loaded another missile, and the Warden glared at me and took a deep breath.

Oh, I'd seen enough flaming ones to know what was coming next! He opened his mouth wide and spewed an almost liquid stream of fire at me, and I was running as fast as my hooves could carry me... which, due to my missing leg, unfortunately wasn't very fast. I might have gotten clear of the main stream, but I was pretty sure my ass was on fire! And so was my missile launcher! I tossed it away as I rolled across the blazing-hot – but not actually on fire at the moment – floor. The launcher exploded somewhere behind me as I concentrated on putting myself out.

Almost a minute later, I'd extinguished the blue flames on me and looked up at the

immense ghoul monster as it incinerated a corner of the room. And then I realized just how radioactive the room was just now. I'd walked in here with almost no rads and now I was almost into the yellow. Sweat poured down my face as I rose to my hooves and watched the blows Stygius was raining down healing almost as fast as he inflicted them. Even Xanthe's beam gun, while devastating to his armor, wasn't inflicting enough damage to overcome his incredible regeneration.

I hoped that Xanthe lifted the lockdown soon. We didn't have quite enough firepower for this. I brought the AM rifle around and took aim through its scope as the Warden swiped at Stygius, and then I loaded a shell with an orange band.

Who knew AM ammunition came in explosive flavor?

The shot struck the only vulnerable spot I could see: his eye. The round exploded, the fiery eyeball erupting in flaming fluid. My satisfaction was short lived, however, as it started regenerating immediately.

The Warden screamed as I loaded another round and fired at his other eye socket, where the swollen orb was already reformed from Rampage's attack. The Warden was learning, though; my shot was blocked by his armored leg, the round only blowing out one of the plates. If we couldn't blind him, I feared that this fight wasn't going to last long at all...

And my fears were quickly realized; as the Warden shielded his face with one leg, his other hoof ripped at a hunk of his own armor, scraping off the metal in a heap of scrap, and then it threw the jagged spray of shrapnel right at Carrion. The griffin gave a squawk as the metal sheared through one of his wings and tore his weapons to shreds.

"Xanthe! We could really use that lockdown lifted!" I screamed as I turned; both of the Warden's eyes were already restored in their sockets. I fired as quickly as I could, but the Warden knew what I was aiming for and shielded his gaze with his right foreleg as his left gathered up another wagon-sized chunk of debris.

I really didn't think I could dodge that...

"Warden Hobble!" yelled a mare from the doorway. "Here's our resignation!" I turned and saw the half-dozen guards, Silver Spoon, Snails, and even Psychoshy laying down a withering spray of fire at the Warden. A single assault rifle might not do much, but now nine ponies fired with all they had at the monstrous ghoul. With so much fire and such a huge, impossible-to-miss target, the combined attack was ripping hundreds of holes in the flaming monster. He threw the chunk of metal at the

gathered guards, but Snails and Twitchy's horns glowed and sent the steel arcing up and smashing into the wall above them.

"Blackjack! I have it!" Xanthe shouted from the terminal, and a moment later a voice said, 'Lockdown, Lifted. Guards, please return to your supervisors for assignments.' I dared a tiny little smile.

Then the fourth fuel pod blew. The explosion below collected in a massive fireball that swept up the central shaft in a glare so intense it would have blinded me if I still had the eyes I was born with. The heat was such that I thought for a moment that the Warden had breathed fire over me again. The swirling ball of flame crashed into the underside of the floor with such force that everyone not already airborne was tossed a yard into the air... and the floor exploded upwards in clumps of blazing heat. I had the fortune to drop down on one of the beams as the smoke swirled up around us.

"Get out!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, feeling the inside of my chest cooking from the heat of the air. Thank goodness I could regenerate... if I somehow survived. Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves, though I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go from here. The flames had dropped back down, but the heat was more intense than I'd ever imagined. I could only see a blazing lump before me where Hobble had been, and so I lifted Lacunae's AM rifle and fired blind as quickly as I could. I spotted Xanthe being carried overhead by Stygius for just a moment. All I had to do was hang on and let him come for me.

Until then, I fired because it was the only thing left to do: distract the monster. Damage him. Get the others out of this hell. Then I saw the batpony above me, and I stretched up my hoof, extending my fingers. All I needed was to grab him, and he'd pull me to safety. Just a few more feet. A few more inches... he had me! My fingers grabbed his outstretched foreleg and he beat his wings furiously as he struggled to pull me clear.

Then a massive spar of metal sticking from the end of a blazing hoof lanced out of the smoke and impaled me right through the middle.

The shock made my fingers release, and a blast of fiery wings sent Stygius careening off into the smoke. Slowly, the monstrous ghoul lifted me, speared on the spur of steel, closer to that immense face. I couldn't even keep my focus with the pain roaring through my crippled torso. He stared at me as if I were some sort of bug, flopping me left and right. "It's funny how small you all look so far below me. Snack sized..."

I just dangled there before him and saw the robots floating around us, their cameras watching as he brought me close to his maw and bit down on my left foreleg. I felt the metal start to deform, and I beat on his face with my stump. Either he liked the taste of metal, or he'd gone completely mad and didn't care. I guessed the latter as my leg was nearly ripped out of my body at the shoulder. I could feel my flesh straining, bones shifting, and synthetic organs threatening to follow the limb out.

"Warden Hobble, this is the O.I.A." a voice said over the PA system speakers, synthetic and masculine-sounding. It made us both freeze. "We would like you to release the mare in your custody. She is one of our operatives, investigating a threat to the kingdom for us, and beyond your jurisdiction." Was it Watcher? It sounded like Watcher, amplified a hundred times...

The Warden paused, releasing my leg as he looked towards the ceiling and then at the hovering robots. "O.I.A., huh? You've got no right to intrude on my prison! This bitch is for me to punish!" he roared. "There is no authority here but mine! Do you hear me?"

"I am sorry to hear that. Please remain still," the synthetic voice buzzed, and then went silent. The Warden looked at me in bafflement, then snorted and moved me towards his mouth once more.

Suddenly the left wall began to glow. A perfectly round, white patch spread rapidly, and then bulged outwards, and suddenly a blinding line of green as thick as my hoof blasted through, pierced the Warden, struck the far wall, and then vaporized it as well. And the wall behind that. And the wall behind that. The beam disappeared. I looked off to the left, out the hole... due west towards the Core.

Okay. Definitely not Watcher, unless Spike had access to the Core's defense systems...

The Warden's body crumbled to pieces almost instantly, tumbling into the inferno below... and I didn't see anything that was going to keep me from tumbling down after him. The spur of steel stuck through me still had several thousand pounds of armor attached to it, and I was tumbling down into the flaming abyss.

Then a hoofclaw swept out of the smoke, ripping into what remained of my left leg and halting my fall. The spur ripped free as it fell, and I felt blood pour down my torso as I dangled there. Rampage grinned down at me. "Damn, Blackjack! Your ass is heavy."

I couldn't do anything but smile as she hauled me up and tossed me over her shoul-

ders. The beating she'd endured had smashed her spines flat. She walked along the smoking steel beams towards the nearest edge and set me down beside the Warden's terminal. I couldn't stand; the hole in me was more than I could bear. "Did the others get out?" I asked, trying to move my mangled right leg.

"I think so," Rampage said, then noticed a safe in the crumbled wall. She punched it with her hoof, and something inside the door snapped. It swung open, and inside was a large bag. "Not sure what the plan is now. Guess they get free while we die," Rampage said with fatalistic stoicism. She sat beside me and opened the bag, her eyes growing wide. "But at least we die rich!"

I looked over at what had to be thousands of bits. Clearly the Warden had been saving up for his own retirement... wait. Why was there craziness going on in my vision again?

The panel covering my Pipbuck had been stripped away, and the device was doing something... and the warden's terminal was doing the same.

>EC-1101 Routing Waypoint accessed.

> Next waypoint: Shadowbolt Command, Shadowbolt Tower, Hoofington.

I groaned and closed my eyes, feeling darkness creeping over me. My body was slipping away... it was like I was floating.

Wait a minute, I was floating!

"It seems the lockdown was lifted," Lacunae said in my mind as she pulled Rampage and myself up towards her. Lacunae was alive, and wonderful! If I didn't have a great big hole in me, I'd have leapt up and kissed her! She was winging her way out the large hole melted clear through the prison.

"Wait! Leave me behind! This is my best chance to get obliterated!" Rampage shouted as she waved her hooves impotently, trying to get back to the prison. Lacunae selectively ignored her, for which I was grateful.

A black and blue skywagon pulled by Blossomforth and Stygius was flying rapidly to the south towards Meatlocker. Lacunae followed it, winging through the rainy night, and when she was far enough from the Enervation, we disappeared in a flash and appeared in the back of the transport. "Please, step back," Lacunae announced as she stuck her horn in the hole in my gut. Wonderful healing magic began to pour forth.

And then suddenly there was a massive smash that flipped the sky wagon over in the air. Over and over we tumbled before Lacunae's magic reached out and

stabilized us. "I thought you'd died," I thought at her.

"How could a pony die when they were never a pony to begin with?" she replied cryptically, but before I could really ponder what that was supposed to mean, she continued, "I was merely stunned and trapped on the roof between turrets," the unicorn thought at me.

"Really?" I thought back, feeling slightly disappointed. "You were just knocked out?"

"Well... that... and another wanted to observe you without my help," Lacunae said acidly.

"You performed adequately," the Goddess interjected smugly. No wonder I'd lost connection with Lacunae just then. Bitch. "We heard that," the Goddess muttered.

Lacunae fussed over me, trying to staunch the bleeding. "Do not move. You have lost an exceptional amount of blood."

I couldn't answer. I couldn't feel anything. I stared out the rear of the wagon and saw Hightower enveloped in a blue-green flame that just kept expanding and expanding. The fire seemed to be devouring the prison and the surrounding yard as the globe of disintegration grew and grew. And then, it was gone and the massive structure was collapsing in on itself, filling an immense glowing crater. Not even the foundations remained.

Hightower... I'd beaten it. I had. There was just one remaining problem...

Within me, the curse gave a sudden lurch, and I felt something fundamental inside me break. It was as if I were slipping out of myself and drifting away on a stiff breeze. I tried to fight, but there wasn't anything left for me to hold onto. A strange current was sweeping me away. Lacunae was shouting. Snails was talking about boats. And then I felt something familiar...

Dying.

Again...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.