

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 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 ghoulish 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 Fillydelphia 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. "Whoa. 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 one 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 chain-link 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 midair 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. "Shhhhh..."

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 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 barding. 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 fingertips 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 pseudopods 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 clanging, 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 the 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 be 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 alicorn 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," Lacunae 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 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..." 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 any more 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’re 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, chain-link fence, and tangled razor wire. 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 razor wire. 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 through a chain-link 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
Till 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 turned 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 wall 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 whatdaya 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 oooooowwwwwwwwwweeeeeee 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 compannnnnieeeeeee..."* The beam gun finally popped and disintegrated into chunks of scrap metal as she stood atop the crackling sentry and finished

with her forehooves spread wide over her head. “Stooooooooooooore!”

The rest of us just gaped at her for several seconds as Cerberus’s 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 hoof tips. “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, and 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 saddlebag.

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 nurse's 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 lunged. 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 beside 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 Equestriiiiiiiiiizzzk--"

But Cerberus's 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 cinder block. 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. 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 ghoulish 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 so that it can'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, well, maybe I was, 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 disintegration 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 Stygius 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 chain-link 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 a 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 barding 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 Macintosth?!" Twist beamed at him. "What are you doing here? Howths Apple Bloom? 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. Apple Bloom's fine... but I don't see her signing up. She's got other plans."

"Oh..." Twist dropped her eyes a little. "Well, that'sth 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 pegasus 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 Cloudeiseum?"

"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 why aren't there many unicorns 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 Macintosh said in his even, confident voice. "If y'all 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 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 sthooting, but I can sthretch twenty poundths of taffy with my bare hoovesth and not break a sthweat!"

"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 tostones around fifty pound stacks 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 surfer 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 barding... 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.

He gave me a worried smile, pointing at the empty space past my stump. 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's 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 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 almost couldn't 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 RadAway. "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 alicorn. "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. 'Shhhhh...' 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's 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 dangling 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 Shears in the corner. "And cursed tribes. Like the Starkatteri."

"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 Starkatteri. 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 Starkatteri, 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, then back to Xanthe. "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."

I stood and carefully walked over towards where Shears sat all alone. My cybernetics didn't seem to 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 in to 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?” Silver Spoon 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 led 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. "We tested it on... several different subjects. While it handled general injuries, it was never able to provide recovery from a *terminal* injury. We guessed that the talisman just needed more soul power, so... we added more. With each addition the talisman became stronger, but it still wasn't able to keep a pony alive."

"So what happened?" I asked with a scowl.

"It was... misplaced..." he replied in clear embarrassment. "The M.o.P. got ahold of it without realizing what it was, and we couldn't tell them, of course. We lost track of it and spent several months trying to find out where it had gone." He shook his head. "Rarity was furious with us! The thought of starting over was almost too much to bear; we had been so *close*, we were sure! And once the haunting effect was blended out with enough souls, we were going to make enough talismans for Rarity's friends and Luna, and then for all critical ponies in the government."

"Are you mad?!" Xanthe shouted. "Have you thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of deaths, of stolen souls such an effort would require?! Bad enough *one*!"

"You don't understand," Snips pleaded. "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 bafflement. "She what?"

"I don't know how or why. She'd finally gotten it back before the M.o.P. could get their hooves on it again. She was elated... apparently, it had kept the last pony it was in alive for hours. But the very next day... she was ashamed of all our work. 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."

"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, everyone. Smart alicorn has a plan. Let’s 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 screech 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.

(Author's notes: Really sorry for the delay. I'd originally hoped to make Hightower one chapter. I should have known better... Also real life has gotten difficult with me needing to find a new place to live by August along with finding a new job. Tips would be really helpful right now. Anyway. Huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending twelve hours getting this chapter done and worth reading. Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Thanks to everypony who leaves feedback that keeps the story going. And really big thanks to anypony who leaves tips at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal.)

(Once I finish Hightower, PH will have to go on break until I get a new living situation worked out. Sorry.)