

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 48: Inferno

“Listen up! Smoke is spreading all across Equestria. But don’t worry, I’ve received a letter from the Princess informing me that it is not coming from a fire.”

“Okay. Xanthe, give me a timetable,” I said; the flames were spreading from the burning rocket, and the central space was beginning to fill with thick black smoke. The heat of the blue radiation fires was quickly becoming eclipsed by the heat of the more ordinary-looking but no less dangerous orange flames from the zebra fuel. Still, on the bright side, the warhead coming to rest below the medical level, leaning against the far wall, meant that the route up was clear... assuming that we had time. After a brief but far too long moment of silence, I looked over at the zebra staring down in horror at the spectacle below us. “Xanthe! How long do we have?”

She blinked and then turned to me, chewing her lip. “There’re four fuel pods. As the lowest heats up, the fuel that isn’t on fire will boil and eventually breach the pod above it, spreading the fire even more and accelerating--”

I swatted her flank with my singed tail. “I need a number. Minutes? Hours? What?” We were backing away from the heat and smoke that began to swirl in through the smashed out window.

“Half an hour? An hour at most,” Xanthe whimpered. “If we had more time and Cerberus were intact, we might have severed the warhead and removed it, but...”

“Yeah. That plan is out the window,” I said. Between the smooze and those flaming ghouls, I really wasn’t bothered by the idea of Hightower being gone soon. Particularly since, if we could get in, the smooze could get out. Still, “Meatlocker needs to be warned that their neighbor is about to go boom. Can you get Cerberus flying again and out through that hole? Without getting blasted?” I asked, pointing at the gaping breach two stories above us with my stump. Of all our fliers, Cerberus was the only one we could really spare to warn Meatlocker.

“I... don’t know? His levitation system *should* already be functional enough, but depending on the targeting talismans in the turrets they might let him go, or they could disintegrate him,” she said, and bit her lip again. Then she jerked her head up with a smile. “I’ll examine one of the sentries and see if they have an intact IFF unit!” She turned and raced away from the window and down the hall.

“You have five minutes!” I yelled after her, then coughed at the acrid smoke that was filling the air. I suspected that death by balefire blast could be preempted by the far more mundane peril of smoke inhalation. I turned and looked up at Stygius, Psychoshy, and Silver Spoon. “Go back to Rampage. Get the RadAway bottled up however you can, and make sure those supplies you scavenged are passed around.” I closed my eyes and asked Lacunae, “Any ideas on dealing with all this smoke?” Just because I was connected to the Goddess now didn’t mean I had to *use* all those freaky alicorn powers.

“Wet cloths tied around our muzzles should help. Respirators would be better,” she replied immediately.

“We don’t have any respirators, so tie wet cloths over your muzzles!” I shouted at the pair of fliers

as they flew back towards the radiology storage, then coughed again myself. I looked up at the power-armored griffin and shouted, "Carrion! See if you can find a way up to the armory! Lacunae, take Snips and see if you can get my sword," I said, looking sternly at the portly unicorn... ghoulish... thing... Lacunae looked at me oddly but then trotted back to Radiology.

When everypony was away doing something, I collapsed, clutching my chest and tearing up from the pain. Whatever curse Snips had put on me, the sensation was spreading. I could feel the chewing feeling halfway along my ribs and up my throat. Everything hurt. The ebb and surge of pain grew heavier with every breath. I had to fight it. He hadn't been able to end his curse, so now my only hope was that there was something Snips's partner could do to help me.

I could only spare a minute to address the pain; it wasn't an injury I was going to regenerate or damage that could be magically repaired. I just had to get the rest of them to safety.

Carrion appeared out of the smoke, the clouds swirling around him as his milky eyes narrowed on me doubled over. "There's a way up to the seventh level, if we do some climbing. There are more flaming ones, and this is not nearly as effective using spark batteries," he said as he held up the beam gun that Xanthe had created. A half dozen spark batteries were wired up around the perimeter near the handles.

I did everything I could to straighten up and smile. "Good job. We'll get out of this yet." He just stared at me, and I felt new sweat popping to my brow. "What?"

"Oh, if only you were a griffin," he muttered as he looked skyward. "I would have given my left paw for a commander like you."

I blinked in shock. "Um... thanks?" I replied, then peered up at where the smoke was being blown out the hole in the prison wall, then back at him. "Were you a soldier before...?" I balked, not sure how rude it was to point out he'd died. The question seemed to annoy him a little, but not for the reasons I thought.

"I am a soldier. All griffins are soldiers. From the youngest chick to the oldest harpy, we're all soldiers. We strive for assertiveness, certainty, and martial skill and hold ourselves to our honor and our Contracts," he said coolly as he looked in the direction of the bomb, though now there was so much smoke that all that could be seen was a murky blue glow. It seemed to cut the radiation a little, at least.

"Sorry, I don't know much about griffins," I said; talking helped keep my mind off the curse inside me. "Just that you... fought for us during the war?" I vaguely remembered a few references in 99's history lessons to the 'marginal effect of griffin mercenaries' during the war, but I was leery of trusting anything academic from 99.

"We fought for both sides. We fought to protect neutral parties. Fought for whoever owned our Contracts. The only people we never fought were our own kind."

"You keep talking about these Contract things. Can you tell me about it?" I asked with a baffled smile.

He shrugged. "It's not a thing ponies understand. Our Contract is a reflection of who we are and what we will and won't do. For a griffin to claim what they will and won't do, and then do just that, justifies our existence. I won't kill young, nor will I lie. No order, no threat, no bribe will make me do so. To do

otherwise would violate my Contract. Once, whole rookeries were bound by common Contracts that defined them. There was even a griffin who once tried to get all of griffinkind to adopt a common clause in our Contracts putting griffin interests first... but unfortunately Gilda failed, and none know what became of her.”

“So how did Ahuizotl get your Contract?” I asked, and received a scowl in response. “If I can ask...”

“Commanders do not ask. They order others to tell them what they wish to know.” It sounded like griffins were creeping up on zebras for weirdest species ever. “I pledged my Contract to the holder for as long as I lived, first to a family of scavengers who hid my young during the war with the Enclave. The father was an honorable earth pony, but when he died, my Contract passed to his son. He drove off my family and used me as a weapon, forcing me to kill any who attacked him due to his unreasonable and obnoxious demands. I would have happily killed him, or allowed them to... if it would not violate my Contract.

“He discovered an empty stable far to the south and set about looting it, but the fool ignored the signs of radiation. When he passed out, I carried him from the stable, but the radiation was already terminal and we both became ghouls. In Meatlocker, he sold my Contract to the bartender to pay his tab. I’ve been Shifty’s servant ever since.”

My ears perked. “Shifty? I thought you worked for Ahuizotl.”

He just shrugged. “They’re one and the same. He thought that ‘Ahuizotl’ was far more impressive-sounding.”

“Did Ahuizotl have dealings with zebras?” I demanded.

“I protect the holder of my Contract. That includes his secrets,” he said with sullen resignation.

I wanted to demand that he tell me the truth, but guessed it was futile. He’d died of radiation poisoning saving the life of a pony he hated to avoid breaking his Contract. Then I blinked as an idea came to me. If this worked... “Tell me he *didn’t* have dealings with zebras.” The griffin blinked and scowled sharply. Then he knit his brows as if processing my response. I hoped that ‘killing me to protect his secrets’ wasn’t in the Contract. Then Carrion looked right at me and simply smiled.

Yes! Maybe brain tumors had made me smarter. “Go help the others,” I said as I looked down the hall that Xanthe had taken, then began to limp along it as quickly as I could.

Tulip had died outside the Mortuary, her skull crushed with a single overwhelming blow. The Remnant had gotten their tipoff from a ghoul that turned out to be the owner of that bar. And Xanthe had known about Meatlocker; had she simply heard of its location, or had she been there before? The thought of the Remnant being able to get soldiers inside and kill ponies like Velvet and Windclop...

I found the zebra half-buried in the shell of one of the sentries. She said something zebraish and pulled her head out with a gadget in her mouth. Then her eyes widened and she dropped the device as I stepped forward, rising onto my rear legs to close the last few feet and grabbing the collar of her suit, tugging her almost onto her hindhoof tips. “Maiden!” she wailed, and the suit flickered and she disappeared. I tightened my grip on it, my eyes locked on the shimmer where I knew her head was.

"Xanthe," I kept my voice low and even as I gave her the shootiest look I could. "You haven't told me everything you should have. Tell me now: is the Remnant in Meatlocker?" She cried out, and I felt invisible hooves beat on my chest. "Tell me the truth!"

She appeared in a flash, her eyes wide and streaked with tears. "The truth is you have cursed me!" she wailed as I stared into her eyes. "You are going to destroy my people! You are the Maiden of the Stars! Nightmare Moon! The champion of the deepest darkness! And if I do not oppose you... my home, my people, are doomed!"

I slowly relaxed my grip and sat down, running my hand over my face. Not this shit again... "Xanthe... I am not Nightmare Moon. I... saw... the real Nightmare Moon in a memory once. That's not me."

The zebra rubbed her throat and kept her eyes low. "How do you know you are not?" Then she looked at me with the first hard gaze I'd seen from her. "The Maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. I saw what you did in Yellow River. She sows destruction for the entire world. That monster you slew was indestructible, and yet you destroyed it."

I slumped. "Xanthe, I got lucky." Something in me was drawing tight, a single raw nerve growing sharper and sharper. "That's all it is. That's all it's ever been."

"Luck? Luck that you die but return to life? Luck that you overcome all adversity?" The zebra scoffed. "Luck that you stumble across the secrets of ages past?"

"It's just stupid, fucking, luck!" I screamed at her, and she curled up in a ball. But I couldn't stop. I was like a canister of explosive gas with a hole punched in the side as I shouted, "Luck that I got out of 99! Luck that I survived! Luck that I found friends who would help me! I don't have any kind of dark, magical power! Hell, I'm damned lucky I can summon a wisp of light! And just because I've survived, don't think it's been easy. Don't think that I haven't paid for surviving when others died. But that's all there is to it. I am not Nightmare Moon! I am not the Maiden of the Stars! I am not special and I am not going to put up with it any longer!" I screamed down at her.

"You sure about that?" Psychoshy asked behind me, and I turned and saw all of the others staring in shock. "Cause I saw what you did in Hippocratic, and Rampage has been trying to convince me you really are some fucking paragon and not the scariest fucking mare I could ever imagine."

"Don't give me that..." I began, but she flew out in front of the others and pressed her face right into mine.

"Don't you blow me off, Blackjack!" she snapped, her eyes narrowed. "Because you are scary. There's not a single one of us that isn't afraid of you on some damned level. You're a fucking cyborg mutant death mare who could probably kill every single one of us if she wanted to. You talk to shit that isn't there, know things no fucking pony should ever know, and you keep going on. Why the fuck shouldn't she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn't everyone?"

"Because I'm trying to do good!" I countered, twisting around to face her. "I'm trying to make the world better."

"Glad to hear it. That still doesn't make you any less damn scary. Because all it would take is you changing your mind, and the rest of us are dead! Maybe you think the world would be better without

Psychoshy. What are my chances of stopping you if you really wanted to kill me? She thinks you're the devil. I'd say you're two steps away. And anypony who's seen you fight would agree with me." She stared right into my eyes, so taut that she seemed ready to snap. There was anger in those eyes, sure.

But there was also fear...

I looked behind her at my companions, at the concern, wariness, and worry in their eyes. I felt the pain tightening up inside me. I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. No. I was a good pony. I might not have known what my virtue was, but I was a good pony. I tried! I tried, damn it.

And I heard a voice from within me, strange and cold. A mare whispering softly in my ear, a mare who'd once offered tricks for a hoofful of bits. *It doesn't matter how good you are; to some ponies, you'll always be a monster.* I looked at Rampage, and six ponies looked back at me through one set of eyes. *It doesn't matter how awesome you are; other ponies will tear you down if they can.* I swallowed, my gaze moving to Snips and seeing the cool understanding in his luminescent stare, and that cold whisper changed to an angry mare's suspicious mutter. *It's hard to smile smile smile when all everypony does is lie lie lie...*

That whirring within me grew sharper, the scream of Enervation growing clearer. I'd tried to give them all I could. What more did they want from me? *It doesn't matter what you try to give; they'll never really appreciate it.* Silver Spoon looked at me with her hurt eyes, hurt that I wasn't the friend she'd sought for so long. *Of course you always hurt the ones you care about. The more you care, the more they hurt.* Funny, why was Psychoshy snickering in my ears? Their lips were moving, but I couldn't hear them over those damned screams and whispers. *Go on, Blackjack. Tell yourself you're okay. Maybe this time you'll believe it...*

I fell to my knees and clenched my eyes shut. It felt like the world was slipping away. I could hear Nightmare Moon's cold laugh as she rose to power. As she gave in, as she felt such joy. It had been so long since I'd been happy. So long...

Then a mare's voice said softly, *Come on, Blackjack, you're smarter than that.*

Slowly I raised my eyes and looked at Lacunae, the alicorn smiling ever so slightly. *You know what the difference is. You just have to remember. When you do something wrong, what do you have to do?*

"You're right," I said as the twisting in my chest slowly eased. "You're right... I can be pretty damned scary. And I know that I shouldn't get angry for... what Xanthe thinks of me. I guess I do match this Maiden pretty well." I turned and looked back at Xanthe. "I'm sorry..." Then my eyes returned to Psychoshy, and I gave an exhausted smile. "The difference is that I try and do better. I know I'm a fuckup... but I haven't given up. I know I can be a better pony... and I try to be. I don't always make it. And some day, I might stop, and if I do I trust that a better pony like Lacunae, or Rampage, or Stygius, or you will put an end to me. Until then, though, I'm not Nightmare Moon. I never will be."

There was an awkward moment; Psychoshy trotted over to Stygius, both of them looking back at me with a worried frown. "One of the ghouls is our agent," Xanthe murmured, so softly that for a second I thought I'd imagined it. "He feeds us intelligence and passes messages on for a steep price. He has for years." The zebra glanced up and sniffed, begging in a whimper, "Please don't kill my people, Maiden."

I sighed and reached out, paused, and patted her head. "I don't want to kill anyone, Xanthe. Not

if I can help it.” Then I looked at my stump. “And right now, I’m not looking like I’m going to kill much of anypony. Nurse Graves died helping us; I just want to make sure Meatlocker is safe. But a ghoul named Tulip had her head crushed, and I’m pretty sure it was a zebra who did it.” She pressed her lips together, and I added, “I’m not saying that ‘cause I hate zebras, Xanthe. I just don’t want people who help me to get hurt.”

Xanthe licked her lips and looked at the IFF gadget. “I can... I can include a message. If there is one of Caesar’s Hooves hidden in Meatlocker, they’ll be somewhere near the Mortuary. A locked storeroom, perhaps.” She glanced at Carrion, then dropped her gaze a little. “I just... wanted to protect my people...”

“Me too,” I said, rising to my hooves again. “Work quick. We need to get going.”

But getting going would take a minute or two. While most of the RadAway in the storeroom had been lost, there were still tablets of Buck, Fixer, and Rad-X intact, as well as bottles of water. We all chowed down on the chalky tablets, Rampage passed out water bottles filled with her recycled RadAway, and we each took a drink or two. It’d been ‘energized’ with Flux, which probably meant taint. As Xanthe bowed out of the room to work on Cerberus, I swirled the bottle of orangey fluid with my magic. “Are you sure it’s safe to add that Flux stuff? Don’t want anypony growing eye tentacle penises, now.”

“Flux is good shit, Pink,” Rampage retorted. “Always added a drop or two to my Dash to turn it into Rainboom. Great shit! Got you so high even earth ponies could fly.” Then her grin melted into an angry scowl. “And when they ended up in the ER, they looked like they’d fallen from flight, too.” She rolled her eyes and snorted. “Hey, not everypony can handle the Dash.”

Xanthe returned with Cerberus in tow. I glanced at the zebra and then at the robot. “You understand your mission?”

The robot sighed. “Return to Meatlocker, tell all those pansy ghouls about the bomb, and warn them about a zebra infiltrator. Hoo... rah...” he muttered sullenly. “Retreating when there’s still hundreds of acceptable targets is just sickening!”

“Buck up, Soldier. There’ll be other ghouls to disintegrate,” I said, earning a surprised and slightly troubled look from Silver Spoon. “Remember, straight there.”

“Yes, ma’am. Let it never be said the Equestrian Mechanized Corps failed to execute orders!” he announced, and gave a sort of salutelike gesture with his remaining claw. Lacunae and Snips walked over, the blue unicorn holding my sword in his magic as far away from himself as possible as if the blade were diseased and reeking. I slipped it into its sheath with a smile and thanked him.

With that, we started our climb, first up through the shattered windows and onto the narrow sloping ledge of metal that ran around the interior, and then up to the crumbled rubble around the breach in the prison wall. Those of us not capable of flight were assisted by those who were. The three of us with magic flung blazing clumps of detritus down into the inferno below as the air grew thicker and visibility shortened. I kept waiting for something to spring out at us... another flaming ghoul, or maybe the Warden would send his robots again... but for once our only opponents were time and gravity. Finally, we came to the hole punched through the cells and exterior wall. I looked at the inch-thick steel armor plating on the exterior wall as we moved up close to the hole. Hot air blew out around us, carrying a plume of smoke out like a chimney.

“How do we know this IFF is going to work?” I yelled over the howling air. Rain was pouring down outside; it looked like late afternoon. Had we really only been in Hightower a few hours? Felt like weeks.

“If he flies out there and explodes, we know it didn’t work,” Carrion replied. Xanthe looked up from where she made a few checks on the gadget she’d taped to the robot’s side and gave a shrug.

“All right then. Hoo-rah!” the robot shouted as he floated out the hole. “For Equestriaaaaaa!” he roared, dropping like a rock. I gaped and leaned out the hole as I watched him fall. Lacunae looked out above me, and a purple glow surrounded the robot, slowing his descent slowed as he leveled out. He floated over the heads of the glowing ghouls below and headed for the wall before I finally lost sight of him in the rain and smoke.

Hopefully he’d pull it off... and then I put him out of my mind as Lacunae and Psychoshy lifted me up through the broken floor to the high security floor right beneath the armory. The gray smoke was darkening, but the radiation was still damned high, despite the smoke. Wait... the radiation was actually *climbing!*

Then I stopped wondering why as I saw blue flames slowly approaching. “Flamer!” I warned as the swirling smoke parted to reveal a flaming pony squeezing out of a breached cell. Vigilance came up as I stood in the gap and sighted along the barrel, planting shots as precisely as I could. The flaming ghoul let out a scream and charged, my bullets half-vaporizing before striking its skull. The 12.7mm rounds were substantial enough to slow it down, but beyond that...

Then Carrion flew up the hole behind me, and a line of green lanced out and began to chew through the ghoul. Xanthe was placed beside me, firing her sidearm wildly into its torso as I kept my shots on its head. Finally, silver arrows streaked through the smoke and sank into the flaming monster’s head. It collapsed in on itself, disappearing in a heap of green dust.

Carrion stopped firing, the beam gun smoking in his claws. “Conductor’s melted!” Xanthe shouted, reaching into one of her packs for a gray block of metal, tossing it atop her head, then kicking a smoking chunk off the bottom of the jury-rigged gun. As the block came down, she slammed it home into the gap, and the gun gave an ominous hum once again.

Then from the cell beside her came a scream and a billowing, crackling ball of green fire as the glowing ghouls within launched a blast of radioactive magic at us. Carrion swooped around, caught Xanthe in one forearm, and whirled. His wings spread wide and blocked the barrage. Lacunae and I moved around him and slipped into S.A.T.S. almost as one. These ghouls weren’t the fiery variety, and bullets made their heads explode into fountains of radioactive gore and bone. Carrion’s wings were both disintegrating and regenerating from the radioactive blasts as the AM rifle boomed next to me.

Four down. About four hundred to go between here and the armory door. Between the bar walls of each cell were stretches of concrete wall just barely wide enough for a single pony to take cover in. “Lacunae! Can you shield us?” I thought at her.

“I... it’s very hard to focus. I think the talisman is wearing off. I should be able to protect myself, but we must hurry!” Alicorns and ghouls might be empowered by radiation, but Enervation was another matter.

“Right!” I shouted, not able to see more than ten feet in the smoke. “Move quick! Call out if you

see a flaming one. Move!" And I hobbled out in the lead, diving across in front of the cells and barely missed by the radioactive blasts of the glowing ghouls within. Some held as many as half a dozen stuck behind the barred doors. Cell by cell I jumped and rolled, half the time landing on my face as my body kept using my stump like it was a full leg. Once I fell short, and a flaming one thankfully still trapped almost cooked me before I could get clear. Stygius shadowflashed right into the middle of the cell and kicked the beast in the head as a distraction, reappearing back with us as it turned in response.

Worse than the flames and blasts were the screams for help, though. In more than one cell I saw glowing ghouls among their feral brethren and begging to be let out. I just couldn't think of a way we could open the fused steel doors and extract them safely. I wanted to give them a chance. I needed to...

But sometimes we don't get what we want or need...

"Keep moving!" Rampage shouted, shoving me away from a pleading ghoul who thought I was a prison guard, just in time to keep the ghoul's cellmates from blasting me. Damn it, even if I wanted to help, there was no way I could let two dozen half-crazy ghouls escape intact for every one sane one!

We reached the corner, and a turret popped down and started to strafe us. The bullets must have made a lucky hit, because Lacunae screamed as a half dozen rounds punched through her weakened shield and ripped right through her left foreleg at the knee. The mare dropped, and Silver Spoon grabbed a rag from the floor and immediately tried to stem the bleeding. I dodged into the path of the bullets, raising my foreleg to protect my face. I could take a few rounds of machinegun fire; at least, I hoped I could. I took aim and blasted the chattering turret. Rampage raced to the corner, drawing the fire from me, and sprang off the concrete wall, crashing right through the ceiling turret. Then she turned and grinned back at me.

Then she disappeared in a sheet of blue fire. She didn't even get a chance to scream as she curled up like a lump of charcoal.

The flaming one walked slowly through the smoke towards us, inhaling another breath to blast me. Then Carrion was there, moving around the corner with the beam gun in his claws. The beam streaked through the smoky air and collided with the ghoul's head in a shower of blue-green sparks. It didn't, however, stop the second plume of radioactive fire from washing over us. Carrion flew up, intercepting the majority of the flames with his power armor as he kept the beam on target. I would have given him a medal if I could. The beam gun sparked and died even as the flaming ghoul crumbled.

"Oh please tell me I can fix it! Please! Please!" the zebra fretted as she looked it over. Carrion, his feathers blackened and fur smoking, just looked slightly indignant as she fussed beside him.

"Well?" I asked as I beat out the flames. She gave me a stricken look that told me we'd better not run into another free flaming one. "Nevermind! Psycho! Stygius! Get Rampage." Then I turned and knelt. To my amazement and relief, Lacunae's leg was already regenerating before my eyes. "... ah..." I looked at her severed leg with the PipBuck attached. "That's not going to regenerate into a new Lacunae, is it?"

"Of course not," she said as she levitated the cuff and pulled her leg out of the PipBuck. "I am going to miss S.A.T.S., though." Then she passed the device to me and tossed the foreleg away. "You'd better hold on to it."

"Ugh, she's heavy!" the pegasus mare protested, but she and Stygius managed to heave the

charred mare up between them.

“Deal with it,” I replied as we made our way along to the middle of the next face and two more turrets. Lacunae, Carrion, and I blasted them with a barrage of gunfire that made short work of them. Then we were at the armory doors.

Yeah, I could see why Snips thought we’d need a balefire egg. These doors were so tough that they hadn’t melted or warped like most of the metal on this level. There wasn’t a terminal or a lock to pick, either. I started to wheeze... damn this smoke! “How does it open?”

“Only from the inside! And there’re no windows in the armory,” Snips yelled back over the fires below. “That’s why I brought the egg!” The charcoal lump cracked and Rampage shook herself hard, shedding the crumbly black shell.

“Am I still grown up?” she asked, inspecting the scorched armor still fused to charred chunks of hide. “Aw, Hammersmith is gonna kill me.”

“That I’d like to see,” Psychoshy countered.

I beat my hoof against the door several times, slumping in futility. “Blackjack...” Lacunae said softly in my mind. I looked up at her and saw her staring down into the smoke. Three burning forms advanced from behind us, flickering through the acrid black clouds. I smacked my gray-etched steel hand against the wall again, then stared at it a second. Would that... could it work?

“Clear that cell,” I said, shouting as I pointed at the next one down. Fortunately, all the ghouls inside were feral glowing ones. Lacunae and Carrion weathered their barrage of radioactive fire, but I noticed that once or twice the radioactive blasts actually got through Lacunae’s weakened shield. When her talisman died, how long would she last? Or would our minds start jumping like between normal alicorns till we fell apart?

Regardless, ten seconds later, the cell was empty. “Open that door,” I said as I looked back along the row. The flaming ones were still taking their time. Maybe they didn’t know we were here, or maybe they knew there was nowhere left for us to go. Rampage and Carrion smashed the door, busting it open as Xanthe sat on the floor with the beam gun in her hooves, swapping out capacitors, spark batteries, and who knew what to try to get it to work.

“What are you doing, Tiara?” Silver Spoon asked as she fidgeted, looking at the mindless ghouls in the cells in horror. The fused but apparently weakened metal finally gave way as Carrion pulled the door off and tossed it aside. I ran past the still dimly glowing ghoul corpses and right to the back of the cell and the metal toilet. The concrete above the toilet had been defaced by dozens of names. “Oh... ah... I guess when you got to go...” the earth pony muttered as she looked away at once.

The bowl was empty, the contents long ago evaporated, and I shouted down into the metal basin. “Hey! Hey you! You worthless piece of slime! You ignorant, disgusting blob!” Rampage rushed up beside me, looking on in confusion. I glared down and banged the toilet, shouting.

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind, then blinked, grinned, and joined me in insulting the drain. “You’re nothing but an unstable short chain molecule!” Huh?

“You foul, obnoxious muck!” I yelled, giving the mare a confused look. Of all the ponies in her,

Octopus was the one shouting insults? Really?

“You have a weak electrochemical bond!” she bellowed down into the bowl. Yes, really.

“I have seen some disgusting crud in my time, but you take the cake!” I roared down the toilet, and Rampage shook me. “You’re nothing but--“ Another shake. “You’re just--“

“Blackjack! Look!” she said in a voice that was definitely not the doctor, pointing her blackened hoofclaw at a pair of names scratched in the middle of the rest.

‘Dæf’, and immediately below that, ‘Deus’.

This was his cell. This tiny eight by six space, that held four ponies... this was where he ended up. Where he’d gone from mere criminal rapist to a monster. Twist’s wide, pink eyes stared at me in horror.

And then I smelled sulfur...

“Back! Get back!” I yelled, the toilet suddenly shrieking. Then the bilious blue sludge erupted out and began to pour across the floor. I staggered back out of the cell, falling on my rump. Rampage bit my mane and dragged me out as the smooze began to form into a slimepony. Back on the walkway, the three flaming ponies were nearly upon us.

“Lacunae! Snips! Throw!” I screamed as I scooped up blue smooze with my magic and flung it at the three flaming ponies. The monsters made no effort to dodge; why should they? Bullets melted before they were struck. Then a rain of glowing, hissing sludge began to rain down upon them, and the three let out screams of pain and fury. The blue slime hissed and blackened as it came in contact with their flaming hides, but it also extinguished their flames a bit. We fell back, step by step, and the three flaming ones charged. “Slow them down!” I yelled. Psychoshy and Stygius darted in overhead, smashing hooves against the darker patches and knocking them back. The pool of smooze slipped around their blazing hooves, and the three now screamed in panic as they tried to back out of it. Then one fell into the acidic sludge, and it grabbed at its fellows and pulled them down as well.

The smooze flooded over them, boiling and blackening and letting out a noxious reek that made me gag. The ghouls struggled, raising melting heads as the entire concoction cooked into a blackened tarlike mud. Even the smooze seemed to find the three a little too spicy for its taste, the blue sludge disappearing back into the corroded toilet. The smoking mess left behind was so destructive that it was eating into the concrete floor.

Wait... if it was strong enough to do that... “Smear it on the door!” I yelled, scooping it up with my magic and painting the tarlike mix across the armored entrance. It began to hiss, pop, and steam. Everypony else stepped back as our magic worked, trying to apply as much to the door as we could; the sticky mung had already eaten halfway through the floor. The face of the door crumbled away in a sheet of smoking rust, and we added another layer. Rampage bravely scooped it up with flat slabs of flaked-off steel. The tar ate through the floor and began to drip down to the next level, and we hurried to use as much of it as we could. Too bad it was too hazardous to take with us; the infernal mix ate through everything, even Sparkle-Cola bottles.

Finally, the hoof-sized locking drum in the middle just fell right out, leaving a hole a pony could peek through. Stygius peeked and shadowflashed inside. A minute later there was a loud thunk, then

another, and the door opened a crack. It took all our magic and Carrion's power armor to get the door open enough to squeeze through, and even so, Carrion had to remove his armor, wiggle his way through the gap, pull the armor through piece by piece, and put it back on. Still, we made it.

Lacunae, however, couldn't.

There was simply no way for the alicorn to pass through the gap. She could fit her head and neck in, but no matter how much we shoved the heavy, armored door, the gap simply wasn't wide enough for her body. She screwed her face up and tried to teleport, but the prison's magic barrier was still in effect. Whatever Stygius did to get around it, the alicorn couldn't replicate the feat. She met my eyes and gave a sad smile. "Shall we just skip the argument about you not leaving me behind?"

"I'm not leaving you down here to die," I said immediately, and she chuckled and shook her head.

"I thought not. Take this," she said as she passed her AM gun through the gap. "Simple physics is sometimes our greatest enemy." I settled it across my shoulders as she looked me in the eye. "Keep going. Find a way up to the attic and out." She looked back down towards the hole and said before I could argue, "By myself, I might be able to reach the roof before the turrets take me down."

"Lacunae, there's got to be another way," I said as I tried to adjust the gun's massive weight.

"There isn't. Now go. I'll see you on the roof." And then she turned away, spread her wings, and flew silently off into the smoke.

"Lacunae!" I shouted after her. The further away she went, the greater the interference became between us. I couldn't hear her voice, or she was trying to keep it from me.

"Blackjack," Rampage said as she nudged me, but I closed my eyes, trying to maintain the connection with Lacunae. The Elevation interference was horrible; she kept coming in and out of focus like a badly tuned radio. The exertion made my head throb.

"One second. I want to make sure she gets out okay..." I said through grit teeth as I concentrated. Images came in bursts. I saw her winging her way down to the largest puddle of blue flame, nearly standing inside it as she soaked up as much radiation as she could. Then her standing on the cusp of the hole. Then the alicorn took flight, swooping her way higher and higher along the face of the prison. Red beams sprayed from the turrets at her, and her shield flickered and flashed as she pumped her wings, the Hoofington rain around her glinting crimson and white. Then she soared up and landed on the edge. She'd made it! She was safe! I let out a held breath...

Then there was a flash of red, then darkness and the scream of Elevation. I suddenly found myself incapable of breathing as I stood there.

"Lacunae?" I thought at her. "Lacunae?" I said aloud as I tried to push my brain to hers. Nothing but the Elevation static. "Lacunae!" I screamed as loud as I could.

Nothing.

Gone.

She couldn't be gone. She couldn't be. I thought at her again and again, frantically, tears running down my face as I struggled to make my pathetic magic somehow make contact with the mare.

“Please! Please please please... no...” I groaned as I clenched my eyes shut. It was like Mom dying, only this time I was able to appreciate it so much more.

“Blackjack!” Rampage shouted, and I came to in time to hear the grind of wheels and the crackle of robotic voices babbling their nonsense of halting and authorizing lethal force. My eyes popped open as I spotted the intact sentry at the top of the stairs, pointing its gatling beam gun and missile launcher down at me and the rest of my friends.

The AM rifle floated up beside me; I’d never handled a gun this big or heavy before, but frankly at this moment I didn’t give a shit about simple physics. I pulled the scope to my eye, slipped into S.A.T.S., and queued two shots at the pristine missile pod. The two rounds ripped into the armored siding, and a moment later the missile within exploded, knocking the sentry to the side and throwing the spray of beam fire wide. I advanced up the stairs at a steady walk, tears in my eyes.

She’d been a goddess. She’d been a friend! And this place had taken her from me! All for my stupid obsession! I blasted again and again as I walked up the steps, the rifle punching holes in its chest. Finally its head exploded in a shower of sparks just as I reached the top of the steps. There was another security door, but this one had a terminal, and two more turrets. I should have used the sentry for cover, but right then I really didn’t give a shit. Let them shoot me. Hurting was infinitely better than the feelings that arose from the thought that my friend was gone. The scream of Enervation matched the throb in my chest and the tears in my eyes as I blasted back at the turrets.

“Shit! She’s berserk!” I heard Rampage say distantly.

“No, she’s not,” Xanthe replied as I walked forward, closing the distance and blasting slowly and deliberately.

“Well, why don’t you shoot her in the head? It works wonders for you,” Psychoshy retorted.

I hurt like hell, but it didn’t matter. I’d plough a way out for all of them to get out alive, together. No matter how full of holes I was, I’d... Rampage tackled me and drove me to the ground, taking the shots meant for me. Carrion jumped atop the scrapped sentry as his miniguns purred and several seconds later the turrets were scrapped.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Rampage demanded as she flipped me on my back.

I looked up at Rampage and swallowed. “Lacunae’s gone.” Everything hurt, in part because I’d just been torn into by three rapid fire enemies. A few seconds more and I wouldn’t have been hurting anymore. “She died because of me.”

Rampage looked down at me, and the corner of her mouth curled as she said, “Yes, she did. Even I never murdered my best friends...” And then she shuddered and staggered off me. “Shut the fuck up, you monster,” she hissed, grabbing the side of her head. “But why? She knows the truth already. Her friend is dead... died because of her...” she said with a leer as she looked back at me. “Shut up!” she shouted, tearing off her helmet and then slamming her forehead against the wall. “I’m sick of you... you vile...” *smack*, “vicious...” *smack*, ‘thing!’ *Crack*.

She slumped, collapsing on her side as I slowly rose and started to hobble closer. The striped pony panted as she looked up at me. “I think I’m losing my mind, Blackjack. I think... I think...” Suddenly she hung her head. “I deserve to die. Please...” She cursed in Zebra and smashed her head

again against the wall with another crunch. "Silence!" Then she laughed again, high and harsh, "Oh, we are so fucked! We are so fucking fucked!" Finally there was one last crunch and she slid to the ground. All of us stared at her as she lay there, and I put my blood-speckled stump on her shoulder. "You have to be strong, Blackjack. Please..."

It's not all about you, Blackjack. I forced a smile and patted her shoulder. "Hey. Don't worry. I just went a little crazy too." That enervating scream was getting annoying, like a hoof scraping a chalkboard. "We'll get through this, Rampage. We'll get through it."

"Rampage. There is no Rampage. No Arlostee. I'm just a half dozen ponies squished together in one jar." She wiped the blood off her face with a hoof as her body healed itself. Slowly she turned and walked to the door ahead. Xanthe kept her eyes low as she trotted to the keys and started typing, every now and then looking over at me in worry.

The loss of Lacunae was a huge bloody hole inside me, but Rampage had gotten me to bottle it up for now. When I got out... then I could grieve. Suddenly, the floor shook as there was an incredible boom somewhere below us. One pod down, three to go. Assuming, of course, that the warhead didn't decide to go off before the last pod did. I trotted to Snips, lowering my head to look him in the eyes, then gestured for him to step behind the sentry.

When we were out of sight, I said in a low voice, "Tell me everything about that talisman inside Rampage. Specifically."

He sighed and looked back at the door. "There's not much to tell. We were more focused on getting it to work than on *how* it actually worked. It's a regeneration talisman. It has a magical template and it restores the pony it's imprinted on. The idea was that it would contain the soul of the last pony it was imprinted on. Removing a soul from a pony in its entirety was fatal, but what if the soul was still contained within the pony? That's the idea."

"And you put it in Razorwire first?"

"We put it in a half dozen ponies first... terminally ill or injured ponies... but they were too close to death for the talisman to work. Oh, there might have been some slight imprinting, but it didn't do what Rarity intended." He coughed and looked aside. "The Warden offered an alternative... we didn't know he meant to kill Razorwire. Please, believe me, we wouldn't have ever taken that step. The talisman almost worked, though... but she still died. Then the Angel of Death was captured..." And he shivered.

"That was one you killed."

"I didn't! And I never would." He shuddered as he shook his head hard. "I don't know what happened. I just know that when Snails and I came to the lab in the morning... Rarity... and the Angel..." He shook his head again, as if trying to physically rattle the memory from his mind. "When we got here, the Angel was dead. Rarity said that the Angel would never hurt anypony ever again, and then she insisted that we put the talisman in somepony who deserved it. The detective who captured the Angel was grievously wounded before her partner rescued her."

Softheart. "But the talisman drove her insane, didn't it?" I pressed.

"Maybe..." Snips said softly, looking away from me. "The haunting effect of soul jars wasn't understood then... still isn't, really. A soul jar is more than just an indestructible object. They want things.

Feel things. Hate. Love. The detective was already under a lot of stress, and if we hadn't gotten the haunting fully blended out by then... it *could* have been the haunting effect that pushed her over the edge."

"What happened next?"

"That's when we lost it the first time," Snips said, licking his lips and giving me a sheepish smile.

"Right. And... how exactly *do* you lose a soul jar healing talisman?" My incredulous question drew a mirthless smile.

"Funny, that's exactly what Rarity said. But the detective... well... after she was splattered by the train, her body went to the Ministry of Peace. And they found the talisman, saw it was perfectly undamaged... and... eh... somepony recycled it on the black market." He licked his lips and looked away. "We spent six months looking for it. We have no idea how many ponies it might have been put inside; healing talismans like that were generally reserved for very important ponies. But eventually it was found when a patient it was inside... wouldn't die."

So there could still be souls hidden away inside Rampage. Ponies who received the illegal talisman, then grew increasingly unstable until they died, their souls trapped in the talisman. It was like a Silverstar Sporting Supplies that you stuck inside your chest. "Wouldn't die... how?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"There was a commercial sky carriage en route to Canterlot when a bomb went off -- prematurely, it's suspected. There were only a hoofful of survivors, mostly the pegasus team pulling it who could undo their harnesses. But there was one pony trapped inside the burning wreckage who was screaming... for hours. Rarity heard about it and immediately went personally to the scene of the crash.

"We'd been doing more research while the talisman was being looked for and had learned of the possibility that zebras are immune to telepathic magics through studies done in the M.A.S. Some mind control megaspell they were contemplating to end the war that never went anywhere. We'd been hypothesizing that that could help stabilize the talisman, and Rarity was so happy about getting it back... the very same day as the accident, we conducted an inspection to make sure that the talisman hadn't significantly changed since we last saw it, and then Rarity sent it off to be implanted into one of the Proditor."

"Shujaa..." I said as I looked back at him.

"...You'd probably know that better than us. Anyway, Rarity changed her mind the very next day, to our surprise... but by then the operation had been completed and the zebra was heading back into the field. We considered retrieving it, but decided that that would be more trouble than it was worth; if it still didn't work, we'd get it back when she died."

"But then you lost it again," I said as I looked back at him. The unicorn gave me an uneasy look. "Somehow it got from Shujaa into Twist... and then Twist died..." That turned his features grim as his glowing eyes dropped.

"It may be that the megaspell magic, combined with the souls trapped within, had an unanticipated side effect that created the pony called Rampage. A combination of good and bad in a single gestalt individual. A pony with no soul of her own but containing the souls of almost a dozen

different ponies.” Snips shook his head. “There’s really no way to tell.”

“And Rarity wanted this?” I hissed.

“Rarity wanted her friends safe,” Snips countered. “She’d have done anything for them. The project she had us working on after she stopped the development of the phoenix talisman was still for them.”

“And what was that?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“I’m in!” Xanthe cried from the door. I looked at him, then sighed. Answers about that for later. “Now where to?”

He walked slowly towards the door, speaking to everypony. “We need to find the security center. It was on the far side of the armory. Look for a room with lots of terminals and monitors. We’ll also need the guard captain’s pass card. It’s a wafer of blue sapphire. It should be fairly indestructible, given all the enchantments on it. With that we can access the security system. Also, keep your eyes open for the vent access to get up to the Warden’s level.”

I sighed and took cover by the side of the door -- I still had a lot more regenerating to do -- and nodded to Xanthe. The zebra hit a key, and then there was a grind as the door slowly began to open, a klaxon warning every ghoul in the place that we were here. But I slowly poked my head inside and didn’t see anything, flaming or otherwise. There was a stairway up that was marked ‘Supermax’ and then smaller doors. I frowned slightly, feeling a touch apprehensive at how clean the armory looked.

Of course, as soon as we stepped in, another turret dropped and began to spray rounds at us. Instead of taking it, I took cover like a sensible pony and let Carrion step out and blast it with his miniguns. A few seconds later, the turret was scrapped and Carrion had another dozen dings to his power armor. I went to a door beside a large window of ballistic glass and went to work on the lock. Fortunately, I got lucky and managed to pick it without too much difficulty.

I pushed the door open; the room on the other side was filled with a haze of smoke, and was it just me, or was it getting really hot in here? Most of us started sweating from the balmy air as I peeked through. I jerked my head back as the sentry rolled slowly past. Then I spotted another sentry in the corner and hissed softly in frustration. The armory robots had been spared exposure to the flames and were in brand new condition, unlike the sentries below.

Xanthe was at my side and tapped her chest a moment. Then she shimmered, her suit hushing as she all but vanished. The sentry slowly patrolled past again, and I saw a tiny door in its back open up. Then the machine buzzed and called out, “Error! Error! Combat inhibitor offline! Entering combat now!” I cursed and got ready to open fire, but the robot wasn’t turning to face me, it was turning to the other sentry.

“Warning! Warning! Hostile detected!” the other robot blurted. Their missile pods opened simultaneously, and I jerked back as explosions filled the room. A half dozen blasts later, the sentry bot in the corner was still standing, but its armor was smoking and blackened. Rampage darted into the room, ducked under another missile, and smashed both her forehooves through its chest plate. The robot crackled pitifully as she smashed it repeatedly and yanked out wires with her teeth. Finally it collapsed in a heap.

Xanthe appeared; her striped mane was scorched, but she was otherwise unharmed. She gaped at the scrapped robots, and I nudged her with my muzzle. "Not bad for a cursed zebra," I teased, and the ghost of a smile settled on her lips as she blushed.

These were holding cells, but the locks in this section were actually pretty easy to pick. The half dozen cells were empty save for piles of bones. Clipboards dangled from pegs beside the doors, and one caught my eye, or rather the name on it did: 'Doof, assault, week isolation' had to be repeated twenty times on the page. I flipped back through the crispy papers. Half the names on the list for this cell were Doof. The interior barely had enough room for me; I couldn't imagine how tight the bulky stallion would have found it.

I took a step inside and looked at the walls. Aside from a light in the ceiling and a bucket in the corner, there wasn't much in here, but every inch was covered in crude sketches. One whole wall had been devoted to Macintosh's Marauders. I tried to guess who each pony was, but his talent clearly hadn't been art. I thought that one of the small ones was Echo, but I could only scratch my head and wonder about who the other little one was. Only they had a little sad face drawn on them. Sadder still, there was only one large pony in the picture. On another wall were lists of names categorized as 'Trouble', 'Okay', and 'CUNTS'. I noticed Razorwire's scratched-out name under that last one along with some others.

I flipped back through the pages on the clipboard, and there he was, again and again. From the dates on the clipboard, Doof spent half his life in this box and the other in the only slightly-less-cramped cell below. For three years. The last dozen names at the bottom of the uppermost sheet had dates scattered over a year. Most of the entries in general were for fighting, but in the last year there was the ominous addition of 'rape' on the list as well, but oddly *only* in the last year or so. All the entries before that were for fighting.

"What's so fascinating?" Rampage asked behind me.

"Nothing," I said quickly, tossing the clipboard into the cell and closing the door behind me. Twist definitely didn't need to see that! "Come on. Let's go. Gotta get out of here soon." Then I was going to sit in Star House and cry for a week for Lacunae. And I wasn't going to move an inch till Rampage and I were better, no matter how I climbed the walls. My impulsiveness and fear had driven me from my friends and endangered others.

Rampage gave the door behind me a look, then eyed me suspiciously. I gulped. Then a pair of doors at the end of the row of cells popped open and a sentry buzzed, "Alert! Alert! Intruders detected!" I could have kissed that hunk of metal; saved by the killer robot!

Thirty seconds later, the sentry was scrapped by our focused firepower and the holding cell was left behind. I hurried forward into the next section, one that seemed to be mostly barracks. Twenty bunk beds lay in two rows of ten. I saw the bathrooms and kitchens, but I didn't want to get anywhere near plumbing at the moment. The floor was getting really warm, and the air grew more and more hazy as the smoke found ways to penetrate into the armory. I hurried through without stopping, continuing through break rooms, briefing rooms, and then to a formidable door marked 'Gun Vault'. I took one look at the lock and despaired. Maybe I'd find a key somewhere...

I left a part of my heart back with that room as we continued on... well, I would have if I had a heart. Eh, figurative language was beyond me. Then I frowned as I heard the sounds of fighting and shouting in the next room. As carefully as I could, I limped forward with Xanthe to the next set of double

doors and pushed them open enough to peek through. The room beyond was the largest yet, some sort of big open mustering room like the atrium back in 99, only not as tall.

And it was full of ghouls in tattered guard uniforms who fought each other with batons. Bullet casings were scattered all over the place, along with discarded firearms. Every ghoul was screaming, glowing with radiation, beating each other to a pulp and then regenerating. Screams of "Traitors!" croaked from some throats, but who was a traitor to whom was never really clear.

Graves had spent almost two centuries taking inventory. Had these guards really been fighting that long? Worse, on the far side, I saw a door marked 'Security Command'.

So, how to get past dozens of ghouls who were eternally fighting to the death? Unfortunately, even as I thought that, two of them immediately charged me with feral screams. "Get the others," I shouted to Xanthe as they closed the distance and I drew Vigilance and my sword. The blade intercepted one, halting its advance as it thrashed on the glowing edge, and I pivoted to the left to keep the other ghoul on the far side of its companion. Then I blew its brains out the back of its head with three rapid fire shots. As the ghoul dropped, I swapped my aim and planted four more rounds in the head of another.

Then I was nearly knocked off my hooves as a pegasus guard dropped onto my back, hugged my neck, and started to chew into my throat. I stabbed with the sword, but it was hard trying to find something vital to chop into without cutting into myself. I felt blood start to spurt as I tried to buck, but it was a lot trickier to do that with only three legs! I heard shouts from behind me; I thought it was my friends. Hoped it was...

Then I heard the crunch of baton on skull over and over again. "Let go of her, Raindrops!" croaked a mare as she struggled to pull the feral off. Finally, all three of us went for a tumble, but the ghoul was knocked free from my back. I pressed my foreleg to the bloody hole under my chin, and then balked at the sight of two ghoul pegasus mares, one with blood on her mouth. I put the last three rounds in the magazine into the head of that one, panting for breath as I waited for the bleeding to stop.

"You with S.W.A.T.?" the remaining ghoul shouted over the din, pushing me back towards the wall and away from the fight.

S.W.A.T.? What the heck was... oh, my armor. Well, I knew one answer that would save me a lot of questions. "Sure. Name's Blackjack."

"Oh thank Celestia! It feels like we've been fighting forever," the ghoul said as she slumped. Her mane was a slightly clashing red and green, and her coat resembled spoiled milk. "My name is Blossomforth. I don't know what's going on. Some said the missile was part of some jailbreak. Others claimed we should evacuate to the Core. I haven't had a moment to think straight till you showed up."

It was just like with Silver Spoon. It seemed that ghouls had a tendency to get stuck on certain things from when they were alive. I'd better keep her in the fantasy, unless I wanted her to go feral. "What's the situation here?"

"Well, the alarms went off, and immediately we went into lockdown. Prisoners were rioting. There was no communication from the outside. Then that missile hit! Then Captain Sourcup said we were sticking tight, but others said we should evacuate. Then the captain pulled out his gun, and there were alarms going off and screaming and some ponies went crazy. Shots were fired, and then it was batons and hooves and fighting for our lives..." She trailed off, frowning with that look of something amiss

she couldn't quite put her hoof on. "Who's doing all that screaming?"

"Don't worry about it," I said as I saw my friends run up. "Looks like the rest of my team is here. We're going to... arrest the Warden and evacuate as many ponies as we can." My ass was starting to get toasty sitting on the metal floor. "Don't worry about anything below us. It's... taken care of."

Silver Spoon sighed and said in a low murmur, "Blackjack, have you been lying to delusional ghouls again?" I smiled awkwardly and shrugged, and the gray ghoul sighed and covered her face with her hoof.

"Clear the room. Headshots. If they talk to you, try and save them," I said, and Psychoshy groaned. I fixed the yellow pegasus with an even look. "I mean it. Give them a chance. Say you're with the S.W.A.T. or whatever you have to. Otherwise, take them out." Blossomforth stared at me in shock, and I said with an apologetic smile, "Sorry. We don't have much time left. Call out to your co-workers if you can recognize them." I loaded a fresh magazine into Vigilance, then frowned and worked the slide several times before it chambered the round.

The work was brutal, but short. Rampage, Stygius, and Psychoshy were more than capable of separating the ferals into workable clumps. If they talked, I put them behind me where Snips and Silver Spoon calmed them down. Xanthe kept out of sight, though occasionally a feral dropped with bullets from nowhere. By the time we reached the other side, ten guards remained, watching as I put down the last one with the last three bullets in my gun.

"Special Weapons and Arcane Tactics doesn't mess around," Blossomforth murmured to a twitchy looking unicorn.

"I coulda been one of 'em," he replied nervously, looking at the corpses, then looked at her, squinted, and frowned. "You look like hell, Blossom." He shook his head. "I feel like hell... and who the hell is screaming like that?"

"We're going straight to Hoofington Memorial," I assured them. "There've been... side effects from the warhead."

"Going to be a trick, taking down the Warden with the prison under lockdown and on fire," Blossomforth said as she looked at me with a little smile.

"Well, I did pass this room with those two loveliest words 'Gun' and 'Vault' on the door," I said with a sublime smile. "Don't suppose any of you know where the key is?"

The pair looked at me, then over at security command.

Well, if my previous experiences were any kind of guide, the guard captain would be inside and be some sort of flaming apocalyptic demon of hell. I pushed open the door with my magic and slowly peered into to the office. There were two desks in front of dozens of terminals, all of them showing different parts of the prison. At least half showed only static, but others gave a great view of the fire blazing up around medical and sweeping towards the armory. I wondered how long that armored warhead would last before going boom.

No apocalyptic demon, though. Just a single pegasus skeleton in a guard's uniform slumped over the controls of a large security terminal with a dozen extra monitors and a pair of extra control panels

connected to it. “Bones? Who leaves bones in the armory? What kind of sick joke is this?” the unicorn hissed nervously. He levitated the bones to the side and looked at the name tag. “Merriweather? But... I thought she was on vacation. Why would somepony dress up a bunch of bones in her uniform?”

“Just like I told you. Something bad’s going on, Twitchy,” Blossomforth said with a scowl. She pointed at a key in one of the panels attached to the terminal. “That’s the captain’s key! Why would the captain’s key be here with no captain?”

“That’s the key that needs to be turned to get out of here?” I asked Snips. The round unicorn nodded. I stepped up beside the body and noticed a few more details: a pistol between her hooves, a hole in the back of the cracked skull, and a grimy slip of paper. I worked it free and looked at the mouth-scrawled note. ‘They have my girl. Sorry.’

Oh yeah. More ‘Hoofington sucks dock’ reminders.

“Something really bad is going on, isn’t it?” Blossomforth said as she nervously chewed her lower lip.

“Yeah. That’s par for the course.” Snips was investigating a large panel in the corner with the label ‘Airshaft #4 Access’. “Is that our way up?”

“Of course,” he said as he put his shears in the corner of the panel. “We still have two fliers. One goes up, finds the security station upstairs, turns the key there, we turn the key down here, everypony but the other flier goes through the door. Then the other flier pops up the shaft and we all get out of here. Easy peasy.” He frowned as he pried the panel open. I felt more beads of sweat on my brow; damn, it was hot in here! The whole building was turning into an oven.

Then I saw a tongue of smoke lick out around the edge of the panel. “Snips...” I warned as I eyed the metal. Now that I was paying more attention to it and not the drilling sensation throbbing in my body, I could hear a low roar.

“Come on... get...off!” And with one last heave the panel came off and popped free. I heard the sudden intake of air, like the largest flaming pony ever taking a breath, and then a plume of fire exploded out the gap. I tried to lunge, but misstepped and failed to knock him aside. The flame poured over his features like a flamer as he fell back, clutching his blackened face as he screamed. The ball of fire rolled over the ceiling like a hunting, living thing and spread out as it dissipated.

I rushed to his side beside Silver Spoon, the squat blue pony’s face a blackened ruin. In the air shaft that was supposed to be taking us into the warden’s office was a solid sheet of flame. “Well, think you’re hot enough to make it up that?” Rampage asked the stunned Psychoshy.

* * *

Heat, radiation, and Enervation were nibbling away at us as we frantically tried to think of other ways to get into the Warden’s office. Xanthe suggested trying to fix the beam gun and cut our way through. Blossomforth suggested trying to fly up the central shaft and hoping the robots or beam turrets didn’t dust us before shooting our way into the office. To keep the guards occupied and not acknowledging their ghoulish status, I gave them the task of taking the captain’s key and raiding the gun vault.

“Well, what if I just stay here?” Rampage asked with a bright smile. “I mean, I’ve wanted to go out with a bang before. This sounds like it’s going to be one hell of a bang! Right?”

I was using my pitiful medical skills to apply a bandage to cover Snips’s blackened eyes. “If Blackjack has to face the Warden, she’s going to need you,” he croaked, his cooked face splitting and bleeding. “You can’t stay... but I can.”

“I’m not going to leave you to die!” I said firmly. He just lay there a moment and I added, “You cursed me. I’m holding you to uncursing me!”

“We already know I’m useless for that. Snails always made the connections in the end; it’ll take him a while, but he’ll figure this out.” He gave the smallest little smile. “I’m not planning on dying here, anyway. Once you get into the Warden’s office, you should be able to shut down the teleportation inhibitor talisman at the Warden’s security station. Not hard, just smash it. Then I’ll teleport up to you. Easy as pie.”

“You can do that? Blind?” I asked, frowning in concern. He simply nodded.

“It’s already hot as hell in here,” Psychoshy said as she stared at him.

“It’s going to get hotter the longer all of you waste time,” he said as he limped in the direction of the terminals. I levitated the bones out of the chair and set them aside with care. Whatever had happened in here, it seemed Merriweather wasn’t a willing participant. “Besides, I’m not much good in a fight now. But once the talisman is down, I’ll be up there lickity split.”

Twitchy and Xanthe trotted in, with the ghoul unicorn cursing the damned stripes while the zebra just ducked her head. Apparently ghoulish obliviousness could go further than just being a ghoul. They had quite a haul on their backs: shotguns, pistols, even a missile launcher! Okay, that brightened our prospects just a little. “You’re sure you can get up to us?” I asked in concern. “Maybe one other should stay with you? Just in case?”

“I can only teleport myself. Just get up there, get inside, and smash the talisman,” he said as he slumped against the controls. Twitchy put the key back in the slot. A blue glow spread out over the controls, then centered on the key. He coughed as the air grew hotter and thicker. The fire in the vent was like a furnace; even if there wasn’t anything to burn, it was still making breathing as hard as hell.

He turned the key, and a door that one of the monitors was focused on slid open. “Hurry. You still have to find a way inside.” Missile launcher and missiles sounded like a good place to start!

“Okay. Let’s go,” I said as I took one last look at the blind pony slumped over the controls. I knew how terrifying it was to be blinded like that; the disorientation... he was certainly handling it much better than I had, though.

Blossomforth showed us the way. It was good to have a guide with an intimate knowledge of the prison. The stairs to the supermax had two more turrets, but to my relief and delight they didn’t start hosing us down with beam fire. Apparently somepony in our group had a talisman that marked us as friendlies. About time some things started going our way... so why was I getting so nervous as we walked up the stairs and into the supermax wing?

The supermax cells were of a different design. The blackened steel bars enclosing the walkways

sat behind warped ballistic glass that kept out the swirling smoke. The cells had similar doors of reinforced glass that allowed nothing to be hidden inside. The sleeping mattresses looked glued to the floor and were all made of identical translucent material. Even the toilets were clear plastic! Even more oddly, there weren't any ghouls within. All of them contained bones rather than undead.

"I can't imagine what kind of sick zebra curse could do this! The radiation vaporized everything except their bones!" Blossomforth said with a scowl. The swirling clouds behind the glass were lit with a fiendish orange glow from below as we climbed higher and higher. The sentries that patrolled watched our movement with eerie silence, and I licked my lips, contemplating scrapping them now before the Warden could override whatever safety we'd found with the guards.

"What the hay did you have to do to end up in these cells?" Psychochy asked in low tones.

"Oh, these were for special prisoners. Prisoners who the M.o.M. needed safe and sound for memory extractions and interrogations. Political prisoners. Criminal organizers. Traitors. Anypony that Pinkie needed intact," Blossomforth answered as we made our way down the row of cells. "We had to keep them secure from the rest of the prison, or else they'd be killed."

I slowed my pace a little and let Rampage get out ahead before I looked at the ghouls. "Did you know a pony named Doof?"

"Oh, you mean Fork 'n' Knives himself. Yeah. I did. Strange case," the pegasus said as she fluttered her crumpled wings. "I mean, I know he was a convicted rapist, but for a few years I just didn't believe it."

"How so?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"He fought like hell in here. I mean, sure... yeah... he was a criminal, but he stood up for other ponies. He wasn't in a gang, though Celestia knows everypony wanted him on their side. He was just here. We threw him in solitary just to give him a chance to heal before putting him back out again. Every week he'd get beat to shit, and every other week we'd lock him up," Blossomforth said with a shake of her head. "Said he deserved it."

"Yeah..." I muttered, thinking about the waste of a potentially good pony.

"Then he went bad," Twitchy muttered as he kept eying the smoke. "Really bad..."

"How?"

"Doof wrote letters every day he could see straight. He wanted to see this one mare. Just once. Said he'd happily be locked up the rest of his life if he could talk to her for five minutes and tell her how sorry he was," Blossomforth said with a small frown. "Never found out who, but I guess that one of her friends told him she'd never ever ever ever ever speak to him again. Pushed him over the edge..." The ghoul shivered. "After that we weren't locking him up to protect him, but to protect everypony else from him. Kept provoking us to put a bullet in him... send him to Hell where he belonged. Finally he got transferred out of here. Don't know where... don't want to know."

And then they took an angry, nigh-suicidal monster and made him into a cyberpony of death. I really had to wonder about Silver Stripe's judgment on that one. I looked into the next cell we passed and

then frowned. "Huh..."

Blossomforth followed my look, and her desiccated and battered wings popped out as she ran to the cell. "Cell 712! Shady Legs is supposed to be in there!" She looked at Twitchy. "Supermax confirmed full roll call this morning, right? No absences?"

The nervous unicorn nodded. "Yeah! I heard Merriweather... oh sparklefarts..." he murmured as we passed another. Cell 722. "Another one!"

"A breakout just before the missile hits? But nopony escapes from Hightower!" Blossomforth flew down the hallway, calling out, "731! 740! 755! 780! They're empty!" The ghoul swooped back. "Not just a breakout! A mass breakout!"

"Really?" I found myself smiling. "And nopony ever escapes from Hightower?" Warden was gonna be pissed...

"I need to see cell 755," Carrion said at once as he flew up to Blossomforth. The mare looked at me in concern. I nodded to her and she looked back to him and nodded in turn.

"You have two minutes!" I shouted after them. If that didn't fulfill the terms of his Contract, then too bad. I wasn't going to leave Snips down there a moment longer than we had to. Even with the ballistic glass, the air was getting pretty thin. As a test, I nuzzled said glass along the edge of the walkway and jerked my face back quickly. Okay. If it was that hot up here...

"One and a half minutes!" I amended as the rest of us hurried along. 755 was around the corner, and when we found it I noticed to my chagrin that its furnishings were far more civil. The bed was a featherdown mattress covered in rumpled red velvet sheets, and it had a drape across the front window. Was it just me, or was it even larger than the other cells? There were a bookcase and writing desk in the corner, and the toilet had another drape encircling it.

"Wow. I knew Kingpin had it good, but wow," Rampage muttered as she stared at the cell. "Is that a minifridge? How the hay did he get away with a minifridge?!"

"The rules permit prisoners with good behavior to own a few personal items," Blossomforth muttered lamely.

"Yeah. That's, like, a few photographs. It's not a minifridge!" Rampage snorted indignantly and pulled the door open, staring at bottles of wine. "Wine! He... that... do you have any idea how many sex acts I had to pull for a half dozen cigarettes?!"

I looked at the red velvet drapes, not wanting to hear the answer. Carrion was staring at the room too, at a loss: this wasn't a two minute job. It'd take an hour, at least.

"Okay. Everypony take a different spot, strip it, and dump it in my saddlebags! Stuff it in!" I said as I magically levitated the sheets and wadded them up before stuffing it inside the container. I could handle the weight. I'd let my PipBuck inventory spell magically sort it all out and get them to fit. In two minutes, almost everything that had been loose in the cell was in my bags, and I was near my carrying capacity. I made sure all the sheets were tucked inside the bulging pockets; I certainly didn't want them to catch fire.

Once the bed was uncovered, Carrion dragged his claws along the upholstery and sent fluff and feathers everywhere; if there was something useful in there, he'd shred it. "Wait wait wait!" I shouted and carefully waved my stump at him. He backed away, and I levitated up the whole mat of feathers and slowly shrank my field and sent the feathers tumbling like snow. Nothing. I supposed it was too obvious. Rampage had raided the minifridge, tucking the wine bottles into her bags.

"What?" she asked defensively as she popped open one and took a long pull off it then looked down at the label. "I'm swigging a Fancee 912? This is a vintage that should be savored!" She then upended the bottle and chugged it down, before belching loudly. "There. Consider it savored," she said, smacking her lips.

Ooooookay... "Let's get moving. Let's get that teleportation field down quick. I don't want to leave Snips down there a minute longer than I have to."

"I still don't see how you're going to get into the Warden's quarters. There's no pony in there to turn the key," Psychoshy said, then looked at Stygius. "Stygius can only teleport where he can see. So unless those doors are ballistic glass too..."

"They're not," Blossomforth added as we trotted up the stairs towards the highest level. Half of us were coughing from the smoke in the baking air. I didn't want to imagine what Snips was going through down below. Then, as if anticipating our troubles, there was a resounding explosion below us and the swirling orange suddenly writhed madly as tongues of flame sprayed over the ballistic glass.

Then I froze as I heard a dreadful crackling, splintering noise from my left and stared at the huge fractures spiderwebbing through the warped glass. I watched as they grew by the second, then snapped across the entire pane with a brittle pop. "Oh no... run!" I shouted as the weakened glass fell away from its steel anchors and tumbled into the inferno below.

And instantly the corridor we were in was transformed into a baking oven of swirling smoke. The heat was absolutely staggering; the smoke assailed my throat and chest with every breath. Cinders stung any exposed hide as the hot smoke curled around us. But perhaps worst of all was the sharp spike in radiation; for all that the smoke was a shield before, now the roaring fire seemed to be filling the air with stuff that made my PipBuck click madly.

There was one saving grace: my eyes weren't flesh and blood. Even the ghouls had shut their eyes against the cinders and stinging smoke, but I still had a few feet of visibility. Breathing was another matter, though, as I went from one pony to the next, screamed in their ears for them to bite the tail of the pony in front of them, and then guided that tail into their mouth. In one ridiculous conga line, I led us up the stairs and around to where the door for the Warden should be. I could only hope that no pony in the chain let go and got lost.

Hot. No air to breathe. My skin scoured by fire and my radiation popping up ridiculously fast. And worse, as if it could sense our peril, the curse inside me began to tear like a wild radroach inside my chest. All I wanted was to get out and breathe the cool, damp, smoke-free air of the Hoof.

Then I wanted to curl up with Glory for the rest of my life.

For a heart-pounding moment, I was absolutely positive that I'd screwed up again; shouldn't we have been at the door by now? I wondered if my mane was on fire; I glanced back at where Rampage was biting my tail, but she wasn't burning yet. There wasn't anything to do but keep going, crawling along

the supermax cells as my head spun. Too much smoke. Too much damned smoke! Was I going around in circles? I was... wasn't I?

Then I fell into the small alcove and looked around to see another massive door like the one in front of the armory, though this one had two monitors next to it. I staggered back as far as I could, croaked something that might have been 'hold on' or 'get clear', and used every bit of focus I could muster to lift the missile launcher. I focused, aimed at the door, and pressed the trigger with my magic. The missile made a soft 'puft', popping out the end and then igniting with a brief woosh that ended in a blast that showered me with debris a half second later. I coughed as I advanced again; that had to have...

Done nothing. There were a smoldering black smear and some scratches in the middle of the door. Either I'd been too close, or, as feared, the door was able to stand up to any armament in the prison. I crumpled at the portal that might as well have been a wall, choking and retching, trying to get enough air in me to think. To buy time, I pulled the others all in one after the next till everypony was accounted for. We had to do something. Some way to get inside... but the only two people inside were the Warden and Snails... and I doubted Snails had access to a monitor.

That left the Warden... the Warden who was probably watching us choking to death at his door, glad to see another inspection team biting the dust. But how the heck was I supposed to get him to let me in? I couldn't even see Silver Spoon as more than a vague lump. I'd need something more than us dying out here... something that'd make him want to talk to us...

Warden's gonna be pissed...

I rose to my hooves and walked in front of the two monitors. A camera immediately focused on me.

"Warden Hobble!" I shouted at the camera, barely able to hear myself over the ongoing roar of the flames.

The left screen flickered. Then the Warden's charred visage appeared. He looked positively shocked. "Oh, you're still here? I thought that you were all... safe in the armory."

In the gloom, the sentries suddenly began to buzz, "Intruders detected. Please present identification or be disintegrated."

"Ah. Well, that should do. Now if you don't mind, I have a prison to get back under control." There were no two ways about it; he had to be delusional.

"Kingpin escaped," I choked out, glaring at the camera. The charred ghoul paused, then looked at me in a long, steady stare.

"Pardon?" I reached out, grabbed Blossomforth, and hauled the squishy pegasus before the camera and monitors.

"It's true, sir," Blossomforth shouted. "Six of the supermax cells are empty." I looked at the other monitor, frowning in worry. Was Snips still there? Please... please be there.

"What kind of... this is... I would have been notified..." the Warden spluttered as he looked to the

side and back at me. I saw his eyes widen. "Nopony escapes from Hightower. Nopony!" the Warden shouted, slamming his hooves down repeatedly.

"Open the door and I'll give you my evidence. Maybe you can catch them again," I said, hearing the grind of the sentries' wheels approaching.

The Warden stared at me for what felt like an eternity. "Oh, very well." There was a buzz, and a light lit up under the Warden's monitor. "Armory, let them enter." Nothing. I stared at the little light, then at the blank monitor. No... please be there... please, Snips...

Nothing.

Then the light flashed to life, there was another buzz, and then the heavy metal door opened with a whoosh. The cool gust gave us all the correct direction to go: up the stairs. Ten seconds later we were through, and the door closed with a bang. Most of us, ghouls and living alike, collapsed and concentrated on not cooking. Psychoshy wheezed and choked as she fell beside Stygius. I suspected that it was Xanthe's suit that kept the zebra upright. Rampage coughed up something the consistency of tar. I wanted to do the same... but not yet.

I staggered up onto my three legs and clawed my way up the stairs. The air in the Warden's level was hazy but far more breathable than that below. I made my way up to where the stairs opened up into a security room. Two sentries slumped, deactivated, and the turrets in the corners of the room were inactive. The Warden, or something else? There was a metal door to the side, and I pushed it open to reveal a security terminal identical to the one below in the armory. The larger central monitor was focused down the shaft into glowing fire, and I looked at the controls and found one that said 'Camera Focus'. I hit it repeatedly and saw the image change over and over again.

Then it stopped on the image of the armory security station; I froze as I saw the form of Snips slumped over the controls. Where was the talisman? I couldn't see a magical talisman or anything marked 'Teleportation Disruption' or anything! I did, however, spot a button marked 'Intercom'. I mashed it with a hoof, and the roar of the fire blasted out the speakers. "Snips! Snips! I'm inside, but I can't see the talisman! Where is it?" I shouted. He didn't move, and I put my hoof through one of the side monitors as I yelled into the microphone, "Snips! Don't be dead! Tell me where the talisman is!"

He moved and lifted his bandaged face. Sweet Celestia, it was so hot in there he was smoking, cooking before my eyes. His hoof reached out, found the microphone on its little wand, and pulled it to his lips. "On the roof," he rasped, barely audible even with the microphone against his mouth. I felt the world lurch around me; what did he mean, 'on the roof'? "Doesn't matter, anyway. I was never smart enough to figure out how to teleport."

"You lied..." I murmured.

"I lied," he said with a little nod. "Somepony needed to stay here to buzz you through. If I hadn't, somepony else would have had to. I didn't want your friends to do it. I didn't want you to try and be noble and sacrifice yourself for us. And while you might have been able to talk one of the guards into doing it, I didn't want to take the chance of them going feral and everypony dying because of me." He shook as his hair smoked. "I deserve this, Blackjack."

"Nopony deserves this!" I contradicted at once. The pain of the curse had spread out almost over my entire body, and my shock seemed to make it surge once more. I struggled to keep focused on the

screen. My pain could wait till later.

"I do. Your zebra was right. I've tried not to think about it for two centuries, but Snails and I meddled in things we had no right to. Ponies were killed for us... or by what we did," he said as he bowed his head. "I wasn't honest with all of you at the outset, but that's the Wasteland, isn't it? If I'd trusted you, we could have done this better. Graves. Lacunae. They died because I forced us to go through here. And trust me, in two centuries, I've done plenty in the Wasteland to deserve burning." He hung his head as the glowing smoke and licking flames swirled behind him.

"You don't. Please... there has to be some way!" I begged, trying to will all of this to not be true.

"There isn't... so listen... you have to get Snails out of here. That's been... all I could think of for two centuries. Get him out of here. He can help you... he never screws it up! It might take him some time, but he gets where he's going." The blackened face gave a tired grin. "Tell him I cast the swirly curse from the black book. The swirly one. Swirly. Remember. Tell him... tell him I tried to get him out as soon as I could. And tell him that I'm sorry I forgot the donuts." His bandages were smoking now as well. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

"I forgive you," I said as he curled up in his seat. The image flickered several times. "Snips!" The last image I saw before static filled the screen was a round, blackening, pony-shaped lump with a smoldering mane; I prayed it wasn't my imagination that there was a smile on his face. I hit buttons at random, trying to bring up something, some confirmation that he was alive. That he could still be saved by some means! Maybe... maybe the Warden would send a robot to pluck him to safety! Maybe the Goddess would give me the magic to teleport right into that inferno and pluck him out.

The screens on the security station began to play all kinds of crazy pictures; recordings, I guessed, since they showed parts of the prison whole and intact. They interspersed with the static of ruined cameras and blurts of recorded conversation. Most appeared to be interviews with prisoners. I spotted the sparkly-hoofed Garnet speaking with a fat white earth pony, but I didn't care. I had to find Snips again.

Then I heard something that made me freeze reflexively. Though it had been weeks since I'd last heard it, the voice pierced my panicked denial and pinned me in place. "Damn it, Vanity, I don't care what that cunt says. I want to see her!"

My eyes focused on the muscled mass with the anguished face. Even though he wasn't a Marauder anymore, Doof still had the powerful physique of a pony who worked out regularly. His gray hide was marred by tracks of scars; I'd never thought that those scars on Deus might have come from before he was turned into a cyberpony.

Vanity sat on the other side of the table, his hooves folded before him. "Use that word again, and this meeting is done," he said in cold finality. Doof shook with the effort to keep himself restrained. "I am here for her, not you. She says no, Doof. Respect that."

The huge pony shook some more and then let out a little sob. "I can't. Don't you get it? I have to see her at least once. I have to... I have to explain to her what I did. Why... please..." he begged as tears ran down his scarred cheeks. "Please, talk to her. Tell her I just want five minutes. After that, she never has to see me again."

"She's made her decision, Doof," Vanity said and rose to his hooves. "Respect it. Do your time

and move on. Try to contact Twist again and it'll be Applesnack coming to tell you no."

"You sanctimonious rich fuck!" Doof screamed at him, looking truly deranged in his anguish. "You have no fucking clue what she means to me!"

"I don't care, Doof," Vanity said with chilling hatred. "You betrayed us. Have you forgotten that? You're not a pony. You're not even a zebra; I have respect for them as opponents. You're a rapist scumbag who should be locked up in here for the rest of your life."

"You have no right to judge me! I know how you fucked up Jetstream's head so bad she's in Happyhorn now! How are you any better, Vanity? How!?" he roared, and he rose and slammed his hooves on the table so hard it split down the middle. The door buzzed and two earth ponies ran in with two unicorns behind them; even as a team, they struggled to beat and subdue him. "You think I'm a scumbag?! I'll show you who I am. I'm a fucking god of pain and misery, you rich fuck, and when I get out of here, nopony is going to stop me! Nopony!"

I felt like I couldn't move or breathe for a moment when that image of the screaming Doof being dragged out of the room disappeared along with every other and the Warden filled every screen. "Miss, I believe you said something about an escape?" I could have also said something about a fire and a balefire bomb, but I doubted it would register. "I do hope you'll come in and elaborate, immediately."

"On my way," I said softly, dropping my eyes as the Warden disappeared. A god of pain and misery... funny. He could have been talking about me, and considering what he became...

I wasn't going to be like him. I wasn't. I couldn't.

The maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. She sows destruction for the entire world.

No... I swayed as I felt the curse tearing at me. It felt like I was falling away from my own body.

Why the fuck shouldn't she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn't everyone?

Please... stop... please...

"Hey..." came Rampage's voice from the door. I moved slowly, like a zombie ghoul, and used her to pull myself slowly back together. "Snips didn't make it, did he?" I couldn't answer, so I grit my teeth and nodded, tears cutting dirty lines in the soot that covered me. She sighed and shook her head. "So... want to go through all the hating on yourself and beating yourself up, or would you rather have more bad news first?"

I looked at her standing there. She looked... tired. "More bad news."

"Why am I not surprised?" she muttered. "Psychoshy and Stygius are really bad off. She won't wake up and he can barely stand. I think that it was smoke inhalation."

"Is she going to die?" I asked as I turned and left the monitors behind. Left Snips behind. I'd punish myself appropriately when I had the whole butcher's bill for this fiasco.

"Maybe. If you want to keep that answer from being yes, we need to get the lockdown lifted and get the hell out of here." I nodded and walked slowly past her, feeling... disconnected? Like something in

me had finally given way and now I wasn't completely sure if I was really doing this or not. Was this what it felt like to lose your mind? "Blackjack?"

"I need to find the attic first. I need to find Snails... I owe Snips that," I said in a daze. "Which way is the attic?"

"Owe Snips?!" Rampage shouted. "You don't owe him anything! He should be glad I didn't buck his head clean off his shoulders when he couldn't remove the curse!"

"He wanted to help his friend..." I muttered.

She kicked me upside the head, knocking me sprawling. Oddly, the pain helped me focus, and I rubbed my aching skull as I looked back up at her. "Are you saying that you'd curse a pony with a death spell you can't remove just to save one of your friends? 'Cause if that answer is yes, then you're getting another kick!" I blinked up at her, and she grabbed me with her hoofclaws and hauled me up to look me in the eye. "I don't care if it is for a friend. I don't care if it's for me. There is shit you do not do. The ends do not justify the means!" she said as she gave me another shake. Then the world went white.

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Once again I was looking down at Rarity's Canterlot apartment. The room would have done my own room proud with the amount of clutter strewn all over the place. Clothes, papers, books, and zebra statuary and masks all vied to consume what had once been a tastefully decorated living space. The glass case that had held parasprites was replaced by the black book. She stared down at it, turning the pages over and over again as if searching for something amid the glyphs.

"It has to be here. Somewhere... where is it? Show me!" she muttered as her azure eyes, horribly bloodshot and puffy, moved erratically over the page. Beside her sat the small pink egg-shaped talisman covered in markings rendered in golden wire. It pulsed with its own slow heartbeat.

Then there came a soft knock at the door. Rarity ignored it. A second knock, barely louder than the first. Rarity huffed but kept working. Then there was a resounding thud as the door was knocked clear off its hinges and flew into the apartment. Rarity gasped as she turned to stare at the empty doorway. A second later, a little white bunny hopped in and fixed Rarity with a stern glare. Fluttershy flew in after him, "Now Angel, you really should give people a chance to answer their doors and not just kick them down." She blinked and looked at all the mess, then at Rarity. "Um... I hope this isn't a bad time..."

"It is a bad time, Fluttershy," Rarity replied in a mutter, frowning at the other mare. "Things are quite a mess right now..." Without looking back, she levitated the talisman off the table and hid it in her tail.

"Oh. Well... um... I need to talk to you about something," the pegasus murmured, and Rarity actually grimaced.

"It's one in the morning, Fluttershy. Honestly, anything you need to talk about can wait until the morning," she snapped brusquely as she trotted to the door.

"Well... ah... I'm afraid I'm going to have to... um..." Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“What was that?” Rarity scowled. Fluttershy muttered again, a touch louder. “Fluttershy! Please! It’s late and I still have so much to do.”

“I’m going to have to in... in...” She gulped, and finally spat out, “Insist!” The yellow mare sat in the doorway, tapping her hooves together, eyes lowered. Angel stood beside her, arms crossed and foot tapping rapidly to his side.

“Fluttershy!” The pegasus’s determination seemed to startle Rarity. “Honestly! What’s gotten into you?”

She swallowed, then nodded to the little white rabbit. He grinned, his ears twitching this way and that. Like a fuzzy missile, he launched himself at her terminal, dove under the desk, emerged with a black plastic box trailing wires, and snapped it over his knee. Another swivel of his ear and he leapt into a potted plant. A tiny spritebot came buzzing out, but the rabbit flew through the air and exploded it in a single furious kick. Then he looked right at me and leapt up at me in two bounds.

“Wait! That one’s mine!” Rarity shrieked. Angel froze, tiny fist curled as he glared at me, then looked at Fluttershy. The mare shook her head slowly, and the little animal huffed, then jumped away. His ears worked a few more seconds, and then he nodded with a smug smile.

Fluttershy took a deep breath and then raised her teal eyes to meet Rarity’s annoyed glare. “I got the report about the crash in the Canterlot mountains.”

“You’re bothering me this late about that?” Rarity said with a roll of her eyes. “The official report is coming off tomorrow. Zebra sympathizer sabotage. Nothing to bother yourself with.”

But Fluttershy didn’t back down. “I got a notice from the emergency responders about something unusual... a pony trapped in the wreckage who wouldn’t die... even as they b-b-burned...” She stammered and shuddered, her mane curling slightly as it fell in front of her eyes. “They reported he was trapped... pierced and crushed by the wreckage... and then you showed up, personally, and he died soon after.”

It was impossible for a white unicorn to get paler, but somehow Rarity seemed to manage it. “I... I... I just...” She forced a nervous grin, her magnificently curled mane seeming to tighten as she fought for an explanation. “Really, Fluttershy, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Angel pushed Fluttershy’s mane out of her eyes, and she slowly looked up, then spoke in a quiet, yet extremely firm voice. “It’s not nothing Rarity. Something kept that pony alive... burning... in agony... for hours. And there’ve been other reports, too... ponies suffering horrible injuries or accidents and then taking far longer to die than they should.”

“Well... don’t tell me that’s a bad thing!” Rarity stammered as she backed away. “Death is a horrible thing... the absolute worst.”

Fluttershy bowed her head again. “Yes. It is horrible...” she nearly whispered, but then she looked at Rarity again and said, “But it’s not the worst, Rarity.”

“Fluttershy, please! You can’t tell me that death isn’t the most horrible thing you can imagine,” Rarity said, sounding stunned. “Think about Big Macintosh... and Pinkie Pie and Applejack... are you

saying that us dying isn't the worst possible thing?"

Fluttershy didn't answer, and Rarity slowly relaxed a little before the yellow mare answered softly, "I can imagine all kinds of terrible things. I've seen bodies sent to their families, heard their cries when they realize a loved one is gone. I've seen children mourning dead parents. And I saw Applejack and Twilight at Big Macintosh's funeral. And there is no question that death is a horrible thing and I hate it, but it's not the worst. I've *seen* worse..."

Rarity glanced over her shoulder at the black book, then back at the bowed pegasus. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out. "You want to know what's worse than death, Rarity? Suffering. Pain. I've heard ponies screaming in agony; I've held ponies as they struggled to take a breath, knowing that the next one would hurt them even more. I've seen ponies without a cut on their bodies go mad from the torment of what was happening to their loved ones. More than death, pain is the absolute worst possible thing. And fear of that pain is every bit as terrible as the pain itself."

Rarity just stared at her friend as tears ran down her cheeks. "Fluttershy... I don't want you to die. I... I think about it every night, and... I can't face what will happen if I have to go to a funeral for you or Twilight or even Applejack. It... hurts..." But then she smiled and brought the pink egg out from inside her tail. Fluttershy stared at the talisman in shock. "But... but I've been working on a way to keep you safe! To keep all of us safe! Once I get it working right, none of us ever need to worry about that ever again!"

"That's a restoration talisman... but it's been changed..." She stared at it and then at Rarity. "What does it do?"

"Well, this is an incomplete one, but when activated... it contains a pony's soul, and then it can regenerate a pony from that soul. In theory, anyway..." she said, looking down at it. "We've had severe problems with the soul extraction process, but once we get the kinks ironed out, we..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the horror on Fluttershy's face.

"Contains a soul?" she asked weakly.

"Well, yes. That helps power the magic. It takes quite a bit of it to restore a whole pony." She looked at it a moment, then back at the black book, before saying desperately, "But don't you see? With this, you'll never die! Never be hurt again..."

"Rarity... is this what you were working on in Hightower? Those patients in Happyhorn... were they they... were they... *test subjects*?" she whispered in horror.

Rarity didn't answer; she seemed frozen in place. Finally, she turned away, and now she was the one hanging her head. "They were criminals. The worst of the worst." Fluttershy gave a little sob, pressing her hooves to her mouth as she sat back. Rarity then turned and gave a near-manic grin. "But don't you see, Fluttershy? Don't you understand... once we have these, the war is effectively over. They won't be able to kill us! We'll all be safe. Forever!"

Then Fluttershy lowered her hooves and slowly stood. Her eyes hardened as she stared straight at Rarity. "I don't want it."

Rarity blinked, and her mane slowly seemed to frizz before my eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't want it. I don't want something inside me that sucks out my soul to keep me alive," she

said in that quiet yet firm voice. "You can keep it. And I know our friends will feel the same way."

"Fluttershy!" Rarity gasped. "Think of what you're saying!"

"I could say the same, Rarity," Fluttershy said evenly, her stare drilling into the white unicorn. "It doesn't matter how wonderful it is... I'd never accept anything that was made through killing people!"

Rarity gave a hysterical little laugh. "Ha! That's rich of *you*, giving me that. You gave the zebras your megaspells for *peace*! Was that okay then?"

"No," Fluttershy replied, and the laughing unicorn grew silent as the pegasus hung her head. "No... I think I might have made a terrible mistake when I did that. And every day, I regret that I did. I know it was for peace... and I hope that somehow, in the end, it works out that way... but no. I was wrong then... just as you're wrong now."

Rarity's magic made the stone tremble in the air before her. "Do you... do you have any idea what I've gone through to create this... for you? For all of you?" She looked on the verge of snapping completely, and for a moment I was certain she was about to cast some horrible spell on her best friend.

"I know how many patients Happyhorn received from Hightower, so I have an idea. But I still do not want it, Rarity. I'd never want something like this if even one pony died to make it," she said as she reached out, took the talisman in her hooves, and set it aside. Rarity looked like she was going to explode. "What I really want is my wonderful friend back... not some magic trinket..." She pulled Rarity into a brief embrace, then turned and trotted out once more. Angel bunny pointed two fingers at his eyes, then pointed them at Rarity, and then hopped out after Fluttershy.

Rarity stood frozen in place for several minutes, looking at the designs and the papers and the talisman and then at the black book. "I thought she'd understand... I thought she could appreciate it more than any other pony... how dare she? How..." She lifted the black book and screamed at the top of her lungs, "I made it for you!"

And suddenly the white unicorn was in a frenzy, her magic tossing and ripping the pages out of books, splitting the sheets, tearing down the crates, and tossing the grotesque wooden zebra sculptures out the window as she moved like a purple-maned tornado of destruction. The sharp edges cut her fetlocks and smeared her forelegs with blood, but she ignored the injuries in her frenzy. "You said it would make them happy!" she roared as she swept the desktop clear with the black book. "You said it would keep them safe!" Then her magic surged, and she flipped the entire desk over in a crash of her art supplies. "Everything I did... was for... nothing!" she shrieked and threw the black book with all of her might, sending it flying against the large standing mirror in the corner. It struck dead center and sent dozens of cracks radiating out from the impact.

Rarity panted and gasped for air from the exertion. "I just wanted to keep her safe... I just wanted... Oh Fluttershy... what have I done?" She stared at the blood on her hooves. Then the white unicorn sat in the middle of the devastation she'd wrought, head bowed as she wept.

Rarity then looked up at the broken mirror and wiped at her tears, smearing her cheeks in red before rising. Step by step she approached, looking at the broken reflection. She looked at the different shards of herself reflected back, counting softly. "Forty-two... Of course..." she murmured, then smiled faintly. "Silly Rarity... a present doesn't count if you take it from somepony else. It only counts... if it

comes from yourself..."

~ ~ ~

I lurched as the recording ended and tumbled over onto my back as my brain processed what it had just seen. Fluttershy had been right. It'd taken Hightower and being separated from my friends to make me realize that. No data for EC-1101 was worth the deaths of my friends. I lay there on the floor for a moment and sighed. "Learning sucks," I muttered as I sprawled there. "I need to get to the attic... does Razorwire remember the way?"

"Yeah, sure. Right down that way, Pink," Rampage said as she pointed with her hoof. Then she looked at me in concern. "What exactly have you learned that sucks?" she asked as she heaved me to my hooves.

I paused and looked at her for a long moment. "There isn't anything about Rarity that will set you off, is there?" I asked bluntly, feeling numb and disconnected from myself.

"I have no idea. You tell me," she said as we limped out together.

So I did.

She led me down a hall and around the corner, and I told her about Rarity's quest to become immortal, how she wanted to protect her friends, and just what it had cost. When the story was finished and the holes were filled in, Rampage wore a stunned and worried look. "Whoa... learning does suck."

"Told you," I said as I limped along. "Blissful ignorance. That's the ticket. I was so blissful before I knew any of this crap."

"Really?" Rampage replied. "I thought life in 99 sucked?"

"Compared to Hightower right now, that sucking was bliss," I replied with a smirk.

"Whine whine whine. Who knew being a hero involved so much whining?" the striped pony said with a faint smile, but it quickly died. "So, am I just a magic talisman crammed with too many pony souls?"

"And one zebra," I added. "Whatever Proditor did to change their stripes must have involved some sort of soul-affecting magic, somehow. That's why you've got them too."

"Heh... wow. Don't know why I'm so keen to die. I was never born in the first place. I was built!" She shook her head back and forth as she walked, groaning. "It's way too late to go back to just thinking I'm a pony with no memory, isn't it? I mean, even alicorns were once ponies, right?"

"I think so. Twilight used magic to change them into what they are now. Somehow the Goddess can do it too." I didn't want to know more details than that. I had little bits of goddess in my brain, and that was already more than I wanted to know. "You're still Rampage." That made her laugh, and not in a particularly nice way.

"Oh, well, that's just fine, then! Rampage, who can't have a kid because she's got a little psychotic foalkiller inside. Along with the punk, the professor, and Proditor, and... whoever else is in me!" she said, gesturing to herself. "I like Mint-als. Is that because of Twist inside me? Huh? Is it because

Octopus was popping them on the sly 'cause he was losing his marbles? What! Nothing about who I am makes sense!"

I sighed and sat, patting her shoulder with my remaining forehoof. "Well, at least you're in good company."

I paused as I looked down the hall at a pair of double glass doors. 'Garage' was printed above them. Some kind of blast barrier had been dropped behind them, cutting them off. That wasn't what shocked me, though. It was the tiny purple figurine lying on its side beside a metal door next to the pair. Slowly I approached, step by step, till I reached out with my magic and picked up the teeny tiny figurine of Twilight Sparkle. I slowly turned it over in shock, five breathless ponies in the back of my mind squealing in glee.

I stared at the inscription on the base. *'Be a brainiac!'*

Huh?

Then Twilight Sparkle's head fell clean off!

I was so shocked that I dropped the figurine, and it shattered into hundreds of ceramic pieces at my hooves. Habazawah?! How... they... that wasn't supposed to happen! A tiny Applejack in my head consoled a sobbing Pinkie Pie. I looked over at the metal door and pushed my way through. What I saw on the other side stopped me almost immediately.

Mares. Thousands of them. The Ministry Mares predominated, in dozens of different poses. Many of them were unpainted, powdery white things. Others were cracked or chipped. There were also lots of figurines of Trixie. Of Silver Spoon and Twist. Of Snips. Of Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle. There were countless inscriptions, many misspelled or otherwise odd. I picked up one of Snips and saw the words beneath it. 'Best friend.'

Nurse Graves had withstood Enervation by counting inventory, Blossomforth by fighting, and the Warden by being an evil bastard. No guess how Snails had endured. I walked past the shelves, the pottery bench, and a machine that looked like it was designed to pulverize the clay back into powder. There were countless empty glaze jars lying in heaps and piles around the work table. Beside that was an electric kiln. And then I heard sobs in the next room over.

"Hello?" I called out as we walked past the workshop and towards a doorway with a large room beyond. "Please don't be crazy," I murmured as I walked slowly forward. This room had a bad vibe to it. For the first time since starting my climb up Hightower, the air felt chill against my hide. The scream of Enervation was different here, more focused. Almost like it was countless voices calling out in unison.

The floor of the room had been carved with strange markings that looked like zebra glyphs, and yet at the same time there was an odd difference that gave them an air of something wholly other. The markings in the floor gave the inexplicable impression that they were meant to be felt rather than viewed. Holes were punched into the floor within the designs, and when I knelt down, I could see red fragments of gemstones in the voids. There were all kinds of strange symbols on the walls, diagrams and designs, some crossed out and others annotated with circles and comments.

This was where Project Eternity *played* with necromancy.

“Look at that, Blackjack...” Rampage said as she pointed at a diagram of a pony with a black ball of swirling shadow above it. Beneath the pony was written the question: ‘If a soul is infinite, can the soul be split infinitely?’

Split a soul? As I stared at the diagram, everything faded into white once more.

~ ~ ~

“Mistress Rarity. I... are you sure about this?” Snips said as he stood in the middle of the workroom in a ridiculous black cloak and robe. “The black book doesn’t say anything about cutting a soul in two. Rending and destroying one... okay. Cursing a pony to shatter their soul and scatter it, yeah. But slicing it neatly in two? I don’t think the book sees much point in just two pieces.”

“That’s why it’s an experiment, Darling. And hopefully one of our last. If this doesn’t work... well... I’ll just have to try and make the best one I can...” Snips looked up at her in confusion, but then dropped his eyes from the glamorous mare. She wore a dress of the darkest purple, barely a shade away from black.

She walked through the workroom and into the ritual chamber. My view swapped from one room to the other, following them. I noticed that most of the notes had been cleared away. Another unicorn, tall and lanky and wearing a similar black robe, nodded to them. In the middle of the room was a gray pony I’d seen before. Octavia stood in the center apprehensively, hugging her contrabass and bow like they were a comforting blanket. “M-M-Ministry Mare,” she stammered.

“Please. Call me Rarity,” the white unicorn said as she smiled gently. “I understand you’ve fallen on some hard times, and I’d like to help you out. But first, I need you to help me, Octavia. You see, I need to try a spell. It’s something that’s never been done before.” She put her hoof around Octavia’s shoulders and gave her a hug. “But I want you to be okay with helping me. If you don’t want to help, you can leave. With the bits I offered.”

The gray pony frowned, but looked back at the white mare. “What... what will it do?”

“We’re going to take a piece of your soul, cut it off, and put it into your instrument there. If it works, your instrument will last... well... forever. That piece of you will preserve it for all time.”

“My instrument?” Octavia looked at it, then at Rarity. “Will it hurt?” I realized, listening to her, that Octavia spoke with a slight accent, an odd, sophisticated-sounding one. Actually kinda like Crumpets, but with less swearing.

Rarity was sympathetic. “Probably. But it’s something we need to test. I need to make sure it works...”

“Is it for the war, ma’am?” Octavia asked with a little frown. “Are you going to use it to make weapons?”

Rarity looked at her a moment, then smiled and shook her head. “No. No, this is for me and my friends. I’ll never use what we learn here for the war effort. In fact, when this is finished, I hope to seal it all away forever.” She locked eyes with Octavia. “I swear, on my life and soul, that I won’t use it for the war.”

Octavia's eyes dropped to her instrument, gazing questioningly at the still wood, then closed in silent contemplation. A moment later they reopened and focused on Rarity. "Very well, ma'am. I accept."

"Thank you," Rarity said, and then she stepped back outside the circle.

Snips stood on one side of the circle, the lanky pony, presumably Snails, on the other. Snips lifted the black zebrahide book and began to intone words that didn't sound like they could come out of a pony's mouth. Even more disturbing, though, was the flat monotone he spoke them in; it was far too similar to the humming I'd heard in the Harbinger camp outside of Flank. Too similar to the Elevation scream...

Octavia began to lift off the ground along with her instrument, her eyes clenched tight, limbs shaking as they clutched the contrabass. Yet there was no glow of unicorn magic; she rose aloft as if lifted by the shadows themselves. A flickering vortex of magic seemed to rise up from the center of the sigil and coil around her, as if wrapping her in a dark cocoon. Then the screams began. They sounded from Octavia, but I'd been in Hoofington for too long; those screams were from the shadows as well.

Then a dark orb of energy gathered at each of the two unicorn stallions' horns and flew up into the air. They struck the cocoon of shadows in unison, and that arcane envelope exploded in two immense fans of prismatic light. Outwards they arched, and then plunged back down. One funnelled into the mare's body, the other into the wooden bow and panelling of the contrabass. Octavia slumped as the vortex dissipated and she dropped towards the floor.

Rarity's magic caught her and laid her gently down. The gray mare hugged the instrument as she sobbed. "What happened?" Snips asked as he trotted around Octavia. "What happened? Did it work? Did we actually split a soul? Huh? Did we?"

"Yeah, is she okay?" the lanky Snails drawled.

"We'll find out," Rarity replied tersely as she looked over Octavia and then back at Snips. "Check the book again."

Snips flipped it open and leafed through a few pages. "Oh... will you look at that! Looks like the big black book's got a few ideas on splitting souls all of a sudden." He peered at the yellowed material. "Mostly involving torture... but it's got some other things here too!"

"I thought it might. Horrid thing. Well, I have some ideas of my own." She knelt and nudged Octavia. "Come on, dear. Please wake. Please..."

"So... how do we know it worked?" Snips asked with a worried frown.

Snails pursed his lips, then looked at a workbench on the edge of the room, floated over a sledgehammer, and smashed it repeatedly against the lacquered wood. The surface was untouched. "Looks like it worked, eh?"

Octavia's eyes jerked open, and she slowly sat up. "What happened? I was hurt, and then... I feel... odd." She struggled to her hooves. "I want to go home, please. Please let me go home."

Rarity looked at Snails and smiled gently. "Please, see her home. Make sure she's paid in full."

Snails blinked, looked at the floating sledgehammer, and quickly tossed it aside with a bashful look. “Don’t you worry, I’ll get her home, eh?” He looked at her and smiled slowly. “You live in Ponyville, right?”

“F-Flankfurt,” Octavia stammered.

“Oh. Well, same diff, don’tcha know. Come on,” he said as he trotted languidly out with Octavia at his side, contrabass resting across her back.

“Sweet! Stop by the Sugarcube Corner there and get a box of donuts to celebrate,” Snips shouted after them. Then he looked up at Rarity. “Woohoo! It was a success! What are we gonna do next!”

“We’ll have to test it a few more times, now that we know that splitting a soul isn’t lethal.” Then she floated out a tiny ceramic figurine. It was one I knew quite well; I had its copy in my saddlebag. Rarity looked down at the tiny replica of herself. “Then, when we can do it without mistakes... I’ll make a set of me and my friends.”

Snips stared up at her. “You’re gonna put a piece of your friends in each statue? Wow... will they let you?”

“No to both,” she said as she pulled out a mirror and gazed into it with a frown. “But I have an idea that ought to be every bit as good as using my friends.” She put the mirror away with a clear shudder. “It should be possible to take a fragment of soul and copy the unique magical properties of another.”

Snips scratched his head, looked at the book, and then said skeptically, “Well... yeah! But only if you like pieces of your soul going poof...” Then his eyes popped wide. “Ooooh! I get it. You’re gonna snip off some felon’s souls and make them like your friends! Clever!” He trotted out of the room, the black book hovering in front of him. “I’m gonna see if I can find anything else new in here!”

Rarity stood alone for several minutes, standing where Octavia had minutes before. I was beginning to wonder why I was still being shown this, and then she said quietly to herself, “No, Snips. No more sacrificing other ponies. I’m going to use my own. Because... it’s not a gift if you take it from somepony else.”

~ ~ ~

It was pretty sad that I was getting so used to visions, flashbacks, and other things messing with my perception that I didn’t faceplant into the middle of the ritual circle. As it was, I made a sharp little pirouette, keeping on my hooves before sitting down hard.

Octavia. Rarity had split Octavia’s soul, right in two. And part of that soul was inside her contrabass. No wonder I could play it so well, or that Vanity had been able to beat off a mob with it without the instrument getting scratched. It was so obvious; why hadn’t I thought of it before? I hung my head, remembering how sad Octavia had been at the end of her life and how beautiful her music was in contrast to the ugliness of the Wasteland, where beauty of any sort was hard to come by.

Maybe it was impulsive of me – okay, most things were – but still, I opened up the panel of my PipBuck. I selected all the audio files from Octavia’s apartment and then activated the broadcaster. “Hi.

I don't know if anypony can hear this... but this is Security. I want to share something with you. Two centuries ago, before the bombs fell, there was a musician named Octavia. I don't blame you if you don't recognize the name. She took a position against the war, stood up for peace, and was ruined for trying to do better. But she never gave up. Even towards the end of her life, she kept trying to make the world a better place. I have some of her music with me; I know that you might have heard it already from DJ Pon3, but I'd like to share it with you now anyway. Please... I hope you enjoy it..." And then I set the PipBuck to broadcast her music as far as it could. I doubted anypony would hear it, but at least I felt I'd paid back a little of the gift her music had given me.

But then Octavia's music began to slowly cry out of the speakers of the prison; I must have gotten lucky on the frequency or something. It was a requiem for Hightower.

And then, several seconds later, I heard a humming noise. I looked over at Rampage, who seemed lost in the music and her own worries. Slowly, I turned and began to stalk the source. In the corner of the room, I found a tiny cot covered in a heap of dirty rags behind drums of powdered porcelain. I looked over at the filthy dust-streaked black cloths as they hummed along with the low melody, and then I said quietly, "Snails?"

"G'way..." he muttered.

"Snails, I'm Blackjack. I'm here to take you out of here," I said as politely as I could. I didn't want him to go feral. "Snips sent me."

The rags curled up. "He's dead... isn't he?" I moved next to him and sat down beside the cot.

"Yeah. He is. A lot of ponies died helping him save you. He's spent a real long time trying to get you out of here. Now we have to go," I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. I couldn't tell if the pony under the rags was a ghoul, a mutant, or something else; not even the eyes were showing. "Please... he wanted to get you out of here. He says he's sorry he didn't bring donuts..."

The rags sniffed and shifted, and Snails sat up. The pony beneath them was much like the pony I'd seen in the vision, a middle-aged unicorn stallion with an orangey coat. And like Snips, his eyes glowed with a soft luminescence. He had a pair of figurines in his hooves, ones of Snips and himself as young stallions, maybe even from before the war. 'Bestest Friend' read the inscription on the former, 'Besterest Friend' on the latter. Around his neck, on a frayed ribbon, was a tacky little medallion of three shooting stars. The gilt had rubbed off on some of the corners, but it was still inscribed with 'Best Magic Act'.

"You're his friend?" Snails asked slowly as he sat up.

"I'm... I guess you could call me that. I was trying to help him and he was trying to help you. So now I'm trying to help you." I guessed that was friendship, sort of. Technically? "He... um... accidentally put a curse on me. The swirly curse." Snails's glowing eyes scowled in thought, and I gave a hopeful smile. "He said you'd know how to remove it?"

"The swirly one? I dunno... I don't think you can remove that one. 'Cause it's all swirly and spreads till it pops you right out of your body." The orange pony scratched his matted mane. "I can... well... nope... but maybe? Um... no... that probably wouldn't work. But maybe... huh..."

I was struck by the horrible revelation that my life and soul were in the hooves of Equestria's

slowest necromancer.

Rampage then spoke behind me. "Hey, Blackjack? Not sure if you've noticed, but things are getting smoky up here. We can't have long until that warhead pops. We've got to get out of here."

"Oh... you can't do that," Snails said with a shiver. "Warden said he won't let anypony go... 'cause we're in... um... lockdown! Been in lockdown for, like, ever..." He looked off to the side. "And Warden's a monster now. I mean... he's got those robots and he's all big and fat and glowy and... yeah. Not happening. Not till the Warden wants you to."

"You've seen him?" I asked with a frown.

"Oh yeah. Asked if I could go find Snips or Mistress Rarity, but he said no. Cast a bunch of spells on him too... 'cause he needed to be able to 'control the prison'. Said he'd have order and that none of the scum were gonna get out." Snips looked away. "He... um... he's sorta big and scary now, so I just stayed in here with all my friends," he said as he looked over at the figurines. "Clay's nice and easy and doesn't mind if you're slow. In fact, Rarity said that that made me better than anypony for working it. Just gotta be careful."

"Right. Okay. Does the Warden have anything else in there? Robots? Turrets?" I asked Snails as I looked at the figurines. What was Rarity *doing* with these little statuettes? They were nothing compared to the five I'd collected in the Wasteland. They all looked so... dead...

"Oh yeah. He's got it all," Snails said with a little nod. "And he's big, too," he reiterated earnestly, as if hoping it'd help.

"Right. Big. Scary. Turrets and robots. Well, we've dealt with all of those," I said as I sighed. "Does the Warden have a terminal or something?"

"Oh yeah! Right by his desk. A big, fancy one. Controls everything in the prison," Snails said, nodding as an idea began to form in my head.

"So we don't need to beat the Warden. We just need to occupy him long enough for a certain zebra to get to that terminal and lift the lockdown. Then we blast the terminal, run for our lives, and let the balefire bomb finish him off!" I grinned at Rampage. "Okay. Let's get back to the others."

Snails blinked slowly at Rampage. "Do I know you?"

"Eh..." She rolled her eyes. "Part of me... don't worry about it. Welcome to the Blackjack and Co. Travelling Freak Show. Remember to shoot Blackjack. It's good luck."

"Do not shoot Blackjack!" I contradicted at once as we started out. Snails gathered up a few trinkets and things in his raggedy black cloak; it didn't take very long. Fortunately, the skinny stallion wasn't slow moving, just slow thinking.

"What was Rarity doing here, though?" Rampage asked as we trotted out of the ritual chamber, looking at all the figurines.

"Nothin'. She just split her soul into forty-three pieces. She put forty-two of 'em into the figurines. The last one she kept; I know because I made sure it got back to her and that it was the brightest and shiniest part of all," he said with clear pride but otherwise as if he was mentioning that it was raining. It

halted me in my horseshoes, though.

“Forty... three? Rarity split her soul into forty-three pieces?!” Octavia’s scream of agony was fresh in my memory, and that had merely ripped her soul in half. How could she... could *anypony*... possibly survive something like that? I accessed my inventory spell and wiggled free the Fluttershy statuette. “You’re telling me there’s a piece of Rarity’s soul in here?”

He took it in his magic, then calmly smashed it down against the ground. If I had a heart it would have stopped. The figurine, though, was completely unharmed save for a little bit of dust on her pink mane. “Yup. Well, it was a piece of her soul, but then she copied some of Miss Fluttershy over it. She was such a nice pony.” He looked at the inscription and blinked, then flushed. “Oh... heh... supposed to say ‘Be Pleasant’... whoopsie...”

Forty-three pieces. “But... why?” I stammered.

“Um, Blackjack? Balefire bomb going to go off? Swirly curse killing you? Imminent mortal doom?” The striped mare gave an apologetic smile at Snails. “You’ve got to excuse her. She gets distracted easily by the motivations of ponies who died two centuries ago. Makes her overlook the little things.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, trying to get my head back in the game. Still, a part of me wanted to know. “Come on. Maybe we can get lucky and talk reason with the Warden.” It was possible... right?

We rejoined the others. Psychoshy was barely conscious and still struggling to breathe. Stygius, slumped beside her, glanced up at me weakly. ‘Too much smoke’, he’d scribbled on his slate. Xanthe was still on her hooves, but she looked exhausted and slightly befuddled. Blossomforth and the others were trying to care for them as best they could, but there simply wasn’t much they could do.

Silver Spoon immediately trotted forward to Snails and smiled. “Hey. Long time no see.”

He blinked in confusion, and then his glowy eyes popped wide. “Spoon?! But... you’re... um... wow...”

“Yeah. And Twist is inside her,” Silver Spoon said, pointing a hoof at Rampage, who scowled back. “It’s a regular Ponyville reunion.” Blossomforth blinked as she looked at Silver Spoon in surprise. “I’m sorry about Snips,” Silver Spoon continued. “He didn’t make it.”

“Did he really come all this way to save me?” Snails asked slowly.

“Yeah. He actually cursed Tiara to keep her from leaving. Totally crazy,” she replied.

“Tiara’s here?” he asked, looking around nervously.

Silver Spoon dropped her eyes. “Well... no. I mean... Blackjack. I get them confused. But... I mean... if I’m still here, and you’re still here... maybe Diamond Tiara is somewhere out in the Wasteland?”

“Xanthe,” I said to the zebra as the two ghouls talked, “I need you to do something. We’re going to deal with the Warden, and I need you to get to his terminal to lift the lockdown. Can you do it?” She muttered something in Zebra. “Is that a yes or a no?” She muttered something else equally inexplicable. “Xanthe!” I snapped, and her eyes focused on my face.

“Right... lift the lockdown... Warden’s terminal... sure...easy peasey faciley...” I wasn’t sure she was quite with it, but she was our best chance.

I turned to Blossomforth. “Soon as it’s lifted, get to the garage. Get ready to get everypony out of here. Understand? Soon as it gets lifted, we’re coming running.”

I looked at Carrion, who had swapped out one of his miniguns for Xanthe’s re-re-jury-rigged beam gun, which she’d apparently gotten working again at some point; really, how many times had she patched that thing up? “Ready, soldier?” He smirked and saluted. “Ready, Reaper?” Rampage still looked troubled, but she met my gaze and gave a little smile and nod. “Ready... um... zebra?” The striped mare gave a little grin and babbled something in Zebra, but saluted smartly... and then gave a surprised look at the hoof at her temple.

Then Stygius hauled himself up to his hooves and tapped his chest. “You sure?” The charcoal batpony nodded once, flying over next to me. That was good enough for me. I looked at the ghouls. “The rest of you, make sure you get those wagons and are ready to get us all the hell out of here.”

“Wait...” Psychoshy croaked as she fought to her hooves. “Not... gonna... just... sit this one out...” Then she started coughing and wheezing as she swayed. Snails and Twitchy helped keep her upright as she struggled to join us. “Not.. letting... you fight... without... me!” she pleaded as she looked at the ebon-winged batpony.

Stygius flew back to her, held her by her shoulders, and shook his head. She coughed and looked him in the eye. “I’m good to fight! Just... give me a second!” He shook his head again, and she glared at him. “Don’t you... tell me no! I’m capable... of kicking as much... flank as--” Then he silenced her with a hoof-curling kiss. Her blue eyes popped wide, and then her butterfly wings fluffed at her sides. Slowly, she swayed and finally sat down hard, Stygius moving with her to keep contact, and closed her eyes as she smiled in bliss.

“Imminent mortal doom, people...” Rampage muttered beside me.

When he finally broke the kiss she blushed hard and smiled. “Oh, wow...” she murmured, then sighed, looking up at him. “You’d better make it, then. Here...” she said as she pulled off her power hooves and passed them to the armored buck. “Bring them back, understand? I plan on using them myself... I mean it...”

The stallion nodded, and I helped him put the weapons on with my magic. Next, we drank the rest of our recycled RadAway. I made sure the AM rifle and missile launcher were both accessible on my back, looked to the others, and nodded once. Side by side, we walked back down the hall towards a pair of double doors marked ‘Warden’.

“You know, this is going to be really anticlimactic if he just lets us go,” Rampage muttered.

“Have we ever had that kind of luck?” I replied. She snorted and grinned. “We’ve gone through hell together, and I’m quite done with this fucking tower. Time to finish this.” Graves, Lacunae, and Snips wouldn’t have died for nothing. Still, if I could occupy him with chatter... hey, worked for me!

Then I pushed the doors open with my magic and stepped through. Over the speakers, an [ominous](#) melody began to play. The Warden’s office was a large roof with a vaulted ceiling. Four hovering robots with monitors lurked in the corners. Most immediately noticeable, though, was the floor; it

wasn't cement, wood, carpet, or metal. It was thick glass between heavy steel beams that formed a grid. Smoky plumes shot up in little geysers. As we walked, my eyes were drawn downwards. The smoke made the strangest swirling motion, outlining a central void that went all the way down to the inferno below. I could see the missile and its armored warhead...

It was glowing in the heat.

But where was the Warden? There was nothing else in here except a huge pile of junk piled up in the center of the office. There was nothing else...

And then the pile moved...

It slowly rose up, looming higher and higher as it twisted around to face us. There was a reason the screens had only shown Warden Hobble's face: it was all that could fit. Two centuries of direct exposure to the warhead had caused the ghoul to swell to Goliathian proportions. His hips were trapped within the warped center of the glass floor, his rear legs dangling twenty feet below, draped in glass stalactites. The blackened undead flesh erupted prominences and coronas of blue flame in magmatic flocs that healed mere instants later. The desks and furniture and a half dozen sentry bots had been fused into a carapace-like armor that vaguely resembled some sort of uniform.

The thing's mouth split in a volcanic grin as he stretched his forehooves wide, and then two great skeletal wings wreathed in flame spread from one side of the room to the other. Behind him, set into the wall, was a large, complex terminal. Celestia only knew how the gargantuan monster used it. He leaned towards us, his eyes narrowing. "You lied to me. You're not with the M.o.M. The riot. The fire... This is some kind of elaborate deception... a plot against me. Yes..."

I swallowed, baking in the tremendous heat coming through the foot-thick glass. I hoped it was magically hardened or something, because I really didn't want to sink through the floor. Regardless of any hardening it might have had, though, it was searing hot, and I was truly glad to have cyberlimbs right now; I might have been leaving hoofprints of stinking melted rubber, but that and an unpleasant heat were the only things I had to deal with. Rampage trotted onto it without hesitation, just wrinkling her nose in discomfort as her hooves sizzled. Now I was really glad Xanthe had her soul armor... though the sight of the abomination had brought her out of her daze and left her staring up at it in horror. Please don't forget the mission, Xanthe...

"There is a deception, yes. One you're playing on yourself, Hobble," I said, swallowing as I saw the gatling beam guns from the sentry robots mounted on each of the Warden's forehooves. "You're not the warden of a prison anymore. This place is a ruin. There is no Equestria anymore. There hasn't been for two centuries." I gestured at him with my stump. "Look at yourself, Hobble! Look at what you've become."

He roared back, "Spare me your lies! I have no more patience for this. I will have order. I will have control! This is my prison! My empire! My *world*, and you have no place in it!"

So much for him just letting us go.

The Warden swept his forehooves wide, and a half-dozen beam guns sprayed out in a storm of fire across the office. Rampage charged straight ahead across the glass floor, her steel-clad hooves smoking as she closed the distance, leapt, and locked all four hoofclaws into his chest armor. Carrion launched himself up above that glittering arc and sprayed down both the cutting emerald beam and

minigun fire. Stygius shadowflashed again and again, zigzagging closer and closer and then finally bringing his borrowed power hooves smashing against the Warden's head with a satisfying crack.

Xanthe... still stood there gaping. I tackled her and dropped under the gatling barrage. The glass baked me through my barding as I looked her in the eyes and screamed, "Get to the terminal! Lift the lockdown!" Her eyes focused on me, and she blinked, swallowed in terror, and disappeared.

I turned and rose to my hooves, shielding my face with my stump. The bolts burned, but it'd take more than a fancy light show to turn me into a pile of dust. I brought up the missile launcher as the flurry of shots passed above me. His blazing wings swatted at Stygius, but the batpony shadowflashed away a half instant before the burning skeletal wings could catch him. One giant hoof smashed at Rampage, trying to scrape her off, but the armored Reaper refused to be flicked away so easily. The other hoof was pointed at Carrion... there!

I jumped into S.A.T.S. and launched the missile right at the outstretched hoof. The projectile streaked true, exploding in a fiery blast on the end of his foreleg. One of the beam weapons even sparked and blew apart completely. The intact limb stopped trying to scrape Rampage away and pointed at me as I flipped the launcher open and fed another missile in. The beam spray bit into the reinforced combat armor and even struck hide, but I turned aside, sheltering the launcher as I finished loading and snapped the weapon closed. Only then did I turn, jump into S.A.T.S. again, and send another missile streaking into the other hoof.

"Take out his hooves, Carrion!" I shouted as the rain of crimson light slackened immensely. I just didn't have the speed to run and dodge with three hooves, but I was a tough fucking cyberpony. Carrion changed his target immediately, and he was *quite* capable of banking and evading the Warden's fire while still pouring his own shots on that outstretched limb.

Then Rampage reached a part of him that wasn't covered in steel: his face. Her glowing-hot hoofclaws sank into his black, charred hide with little explosions of fiery ichor. Now the Warden let out a roar as the mare went into a spiked frenzy, trying to claw and dig her way into his fiery eye. He lifted his hooves towards the Reaper and pinched her between them.

With a bellow of rage, he tore her free and smashed her like a slab of meat once, twice, thrice against the floor. The glass blocks crackled under her, and for a horrifying moment I thought he was going to smash her right through the floor and into the firestorm below. I loaded another missile, pointed it between those upraised hooves, and fired it right into his savaged face. The impact made him sway back, and Rampage tumbled to the ground with a crunchy thump.

Stygius divebombed the Warden, shadowflashed away, and then divebombed again. Each hit corresponded with an eruption of flaming ghoulish flesh. The batpony was relentless in his assault. Carrion had swapped to using Xanthe's beam gun almost exclusively, the emerald lance disintegrating a thin line of armor with every pass. I loaded another missile, and the Warden glared at me and took a deep breath.

Oh, I'd seen enough flaming ones to know what was coming next! He opened his mouth wide and spewed an almost liquid stream of fire at me, and I was running as fast as my hooves could carry me... which, due to my missing leg, unfortunately wasn't very fast. I might have gotten clear of the main stream, but I was pretty sure my ass was on fire! And so was my missile launcher! I tossed it away as I rolled across the blazing-hot – but not actually on fire at the moment – floor. The launcher exploded

somewhere behind me as I concentrated on putting myself out.

Almost a minute later, I'd extinguished the blue flames on me and looked up at the immense ghoulish monster as it incinerated a corner of the room. And then I realized just how radioactive the room was just now. I'd walked in here with almost no rads and now I was almost into the yellow. Sweat poured down my face as I rose to my hooves and watched the blows Stygius was raining down healing almost as fast as he inflicted them. Even Xanthe's beam gun, while devastating to his armor, wasn't inflicting enough damage to overcome his incredible regeneration.

I hoped that Xanthe lifted the lockdown soon. We didn't have quite enough firepower for this. I brought the AM rifle around and took aim through its scope as the Warden swiped at Stygius, and then I loaded a shell with an orange band.

Who knew AM ammunition came in explosive flavor?

The shot struck the only vulnerable spot I could see: his eye. The round exploded, the fiery eyeball erupting in flaming fluid. My satisfaction was short lived, however, as it started regenerating immediately.

The Warden screamed as I loaded another round and fired at his other eye socket, where the swollen orb was already reformed from Rampage's attack. The Warden was learning, though; my shot was blocked by his armored leg, the round only blowing out one of the plates. If we couldn't blind him, I feared that this fight wasn't going to last long at all...

And my fears were quickly realized; as the Warden shielded his face with one leg, his other hoof ripped at a hunk of his own armor, scraping off the metal in a heap of scrap, and then threw the jagged spray of shrapnel right at Carrion. The griffin gave a squawk as the metal sheared through one of his wings and tore his weapons to shreds.

"Xanthe! We could really use that lockdown lifted!" I screamed as I turned; both of the Warden's eyes were already restored in their sockets. I fired as quickly as I could, but the Warden knew what I was aiming for and shielded his gaze with his right foreleg as his left gathered up another wagon-sized chunk of debris.

I really didn't think I could dodge that...

"Warden Hobble!" yelled a mare from the doorway. "Here's our resignation!" I turned and saw the half-dozen guards, Silver Spoon, Snails, and even Psychoshy laying down a withering spray of fire at the Warden. A single assault rifle might not do much, but now nine ponies fired with all they had at the monstrous ghoulish monster. With so much fire and such a huge, impossible-to-miss target, the combined attack was ripping hundreds of holes in the flaming monster. He threw the chunk of metal at the gathered guards, but Snails and Twitchy's horns glowed and sent the steel arcing up and smashing into the wall above them.

"Blackjack! I have it!" Xanthe shouted from the terminal.

Over the intercom, a voice said, "Lockdown, Lifted. Guards, please return to your supervisors for assignments." I dared a tiny little smile.

Then the fourth fuel pod blew. The explosion below collected in a massive fireball that swept up

the central shaft in a glare so intense it would have blinded me if I still had the eyes I was born with. The heat was such that I thought for a moment that the Warden had breathed fire over me again. The swirling ball of flame crashed into the underside of the floor with such force that everyone not already airborne was tossed a yard into the air, the ponies in the door falling back into the corridor... and the floor exploded upwards in clumps of blazing heat. I had the fortune to drop down on one of the beams as the smoke swirled up around us.

“Get out!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, feeling the inside of my chest cooking from the heat of the air. Thank goodness I could regenerate... if I somehow survived. Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves, though I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go from here. The flames had dropped back down, but the heat was more intense than I'd ever imagined. I could only see a blazing lump before me where Hobble had been, and so I lifted Lacunae's AM rifle and fired blind as quickly as I could. I spotted Xanthe being carried overhead by Stygius for just a moment. Both were struggling, but they were making it. All I had to do was hang on and let him come for me.

Until then, I fired because it was the only thing left to do: distract the monster. Damage him. Get the others out of this hell. Then I saw the batpony above me, and I stretched up my hoof, extending my fingers. All I needed was to grab him, and he'd pull me to safety. Just a few more feet. A few more inches... he had me! My fingers grabbed his outstretched foreleg and he beat his wings furiously as he struggled to pull me clear.

Then a massive spar of metal sticking from the end of a blazing hoof lanced out of the smoke and impaled me right through the middle.

The shock made my fingers release, and a blast of fiery wings sent the already-wavering Stygius careening off into the smoke. Slowly, the monstrous ghoul lifted me, speared on the spur of steel, closer to that immense face. I couldn't even keep my focus with the pain roaring through my crippled torso. He stared at me as if I were some sort of bug, flopping me left and right. “It's funny how small you all look so far below me. Snack sized...”

I just dangled there before him and saw the robots floating around us, their cameras watching as he brought me close to his maw and bit down on my left foreleg. I felt the metal start to deform, and I beat on his face with my stump. Either he liked the taste of metal, or he'd gone completely mad and didn't care. I guessed the latter as my leg was nearly ripped out of my body at the shoulder. I could feel my flesh straining, bones shifting, and synthetic organs threatening to follow the limb out.

“Warden Hobble, this is the O.I.A.,” a voice said over the PA system speakers, synthetic and masculine-sounding. It made us both freeze. “We would like you to release the mare in your custody. She is one of our operatives, investigating a threat to the kingdom for us, and beyond your jurisdiction.” Was it Watcher? It sounded like Watcher, amplified a hundred times...

The Warden paused, releasing my leg as he looked towards the ceiling and then at the hovering robots. “O.I.A., huh? You've got no right to intrude on my prison! This bitch is for me to punish!” he roared. “There is no authority here but mine! Do you hear me?”

“I am sorry to hear that. Please remain still,” the synthetic voice buzzed, and then went silent. The Warden looked at me in bafflement, then snorted and moved me towards his mouth once more.

Suddenly the left wall began to glow. A perfectly round, white patch spread rapidly, and then bulged outwards, and suddenly a blinding line of green as thick as my hoof blasted through, pierced the

Warden, struck the far wall, and then vaporized it as well. And the wall behind that. And the wall behind that. The beam disappeared. I looked off to the left, out the hole... due west towards the Core.

Okay. Definitely not Watcher, unless Spike had access to the Core's defense systems...

The Warden's body crumbled to pieces almost instantly, tumbling into the inferno below... and I didn't see anything that was going to keep me from tumbling down after him. The spur of steel stuck through me still had several thousand pounds of armor attached to it, and I was tumbling down into the flaming abyss.

Then a hoofclaw swept out of the smoke, ripping into what remained of my left leg and halting my fall. The spur ripped free as it fell, and I felt blood pour down my torso as I dangled there. Rampage grinned down at me. "Damn, Blackjack! Your ass is heavy."

I couldn't do anything but smile as she hauled me up and tossed me over her shoulders. The beating she'd endured had smashed her spines flat. She walked along the smoking steel beams towards the nearest edge and set me down beside the Warden's terminal. I couldn't stand; the hole in me was more than I could bear. "Did the others get out?" I asked, trying to move my mangled right leg.

"I think so," Rampage said, then noticed a safe in the crumbled wall. She punched it with her hoof, and something inside the door snapped. It swung open, and inside was a large bag. "Not sure what the plan is now. Guess they get free while we die," Rampage said with fatalistic stoicism. She sat beside me and opened the bag, her eyes growing wide. "But at least we die rich!"

I looked over at what had to be thousands of bits. Clearly the Warden had been saving up for his own retirement... wait. Why was there craziness going on in my vision again?

The panel covering my PipBuck had been stripped away, and the device was doing something... and the Warden's terminal was doing the same.

>EC-1101 Routing Waypoint accessed.

> Next waypoint: Shadowbolt Command, Shadowbolt Tower, Hoofington.

I groaned and closed my eyes, feeling darkness creeping over me. My body was slipping away... it was like I was floating.

Wait a minute, I was floating!

"It seems the lockdown was lifted," Lacunae said in my mind as she pulled Rampage and me up towards her. Lacunae was alive, and wonderful! If I didn't have a great big hole in me, I'd have leapt up and kissed her! She was winging her way out the large hole melted clear through the prison.

"Wait! Leave me behind! This is my best chance to get obliterated!" Rampage shouted as she waved her hooves impotently, trying to get back to the prison. Lacunae selectively ignored her, for which I was grateful.

A black and blue skywagon pulled by Blossomforth and Stygius was flying rapidly to the south towards Meatlocker. Lacunae followed it, winging through the rainy night, and when she was far enough from the Enervation, we disappeared in a flash and appeared in the back of the transport. "Please, step back," Lacunae announced as she stuck her horn in the hole in my gut. Wonderful healing magic began

to pour forth.

And then suddenly there was a massive smash that flipped the skywagon over in the air. Over and over we tumbled before Lacunae's magic reached out and stabilized us. "I thought you'd died," I thought at her.

"How could a pony die when they were never a pony to begin with?" she replied cryptically, but before I could really ponder what that was supposed to mean, she continued, "I was merely stunned and trapped on the roof between turrets," the alicorn thought at me.

"Really?" I thought back, feeling slightly disappointed. "You were just knocked out?"

"Well... that... and another wanted to observe you without my help," Lacunae said acidly.

"You performed adequately," the Goddess interjected smugly. No wonder I'd lost connection with Lacunae just then. Bitch. "We heard that," the Goddess muttered.

Lacunae fussed over me, trying to staunch the bleeding. "Do not move. You have lost an exceptional amount of blood."

I couldn't answer. I couldn't feel anything. I stared out the rear of the wagon and saw Hightower enveloped in a blue-green flame that just kept expanding and expanding. The fire seemed to be devouring the prison and the surrounding yard as the globe of disintegration grew and grew. And then, it was gone and the massive structure was collapsing in on itself, filling an immense glowing crater. Not even the foundations remained.

Hightower... I'd beaten it. I had. There was just one remaining problem...

Within me, the curse gave a sudden lurch, and I felt something fundamental inside me break. It was as if I were slipping out of myself and drifting away on a stiff breeze. I tried to fight, but there wasn't anything left for me to hold on to. A strange current was sweeping me away. Lacunae was shouting. Snails was talking about boats. And then I felt something familiar...

Dying.

Again...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: I write this at 1 AM for me, 4AM for Hinds, and 9AM for Bro and Snipehamster. That's right, my editors stay up to see Celestia raise the sun working on this. They're incredible, and deserve a round of applause. Also, thanks as always to Kkat for creating FoE. Huge thanks to everypony who gives me feedback. I might be slow to respond, but I read every review. And lastly, thank you so much to ponies who donate bits to help support the author and to keep the story going.

As I wrote last chapter, I'm doing a bit of forced relocation. I have a plan to move to Vegas and hopefully get a teaching job there, or at least pick up some subbing. I'd hoped to go to Everfree, but that'd kill my account so... sorry... anyway, if anypony else would like to help out, the tip jar is at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal.

Unfortunately this means there may be a brief hiatus between this chapter and the next. Hopefully it won't be too long. And don't worry, you haven't seen the end of Blackjack.

Thank you again for reading...)