

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 26: Descent

“Curses are artificial, fake magic. It’s conjured with potions and incantations, all smoke and mirrors meant to scare. But curses have no real power; they’re just an old pony tale.”

In the early morning, before the sky outside was switched on for the day (the illusory night apparently being used for matches rather than actual night), I lay in Rampage’s room. The striped mare was snoring heartily, but what had actually woken me was the disturbing sensation of my heart fluttering in my chest. To make matters worse, my head was throbbing with the promises of a migraine.

I lay there on the mattress while the rest of my friends slept around me, my amber eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. The cracked plaster slowly crumbled away, a black mold crawling along the edge, wet, pulpy, and glistening and growing before my eyes. It grew only because I looked at it, but if I looked away it would consume us all. My heart beat faster and faster. Something was inside that rot and fungus. Something was moving. Something was looking back at me. An inexplicable reek of ammonia reached my nostrils.

Suddenly, Scotch Tape jerked to her hooves next to me, snapping my gaze off that horrible patch of wall. The young olive mare muttered softly, “Damn it. Not again...” and trotted into Rampage’s bathroom with blankets still wrapped around herself.

I looked back at the wall, at the small cracks in the discolored plaster. All was normal. All was as it should be.

Thump thump... thump thump... thump thump thump... thump thump...

* * *

“You know, it would have been nice if Big Daddy could have thrown me a bone and let us cross the Zenith Bridge,” I muttered as I spread the map of Hoofington in the back of the Wasteland Survival Guide out against the row of bleacher seats in front of me.

Earlier in the morning, I’d gone to see the Reapers’ medic and swapped our salvage for some more little purple potions. Doctor Contusion, who, in her ponyhide armor covered in cutie marks with a disturbing medical motif, looked if anything more unnerving than the other Reapers, had also confirmed my guess about the low level of Enervation around the arena.

After that, I’d tried to get a new melee weapon, but, for all the bloody panoply of deadly implements I’d been shown, I hadn’t seen any that really appealed to me. I just didn’t have the horn for giant hammers or swords made from wagon fenders, and I felt wary about using rippers and chainsaws. I wouldn’t grow back my head if I accidentally sliced it off.

“Even if he did,” P-21 said, “the Steel Rangers aren’t letting anypony cross. And, according to DJ Pon3’s latest report,” he continued, pointing at the other crossing north of the Forks, “Toll’s been closed since the fighting started. Unless you have another *Seahorse* around here, I don’t see how we’re going to get to the far side.”

“Can’t she just fly over, blink back, and teleport us all across?” Scotch Tape asked, pointing at Lacunae.

The alicorn sighed. "Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to teleport a pony such a distance?" The young mare gave her a dry look, and the purple alicorn huffed softly. "The energy needed is the product of the square of the amount of mass to be transported, the square of the distance to be covered, Fireflash's constant, and the inverse of the amount of radiation I've absorbed."

I just stared at her for a minute, then said softly, "Lacunae, pretend for a minute that I don't know anything about alicorns, mathematics, teleportation, or arcane science. Can you teleport us all across the river?"

"I could, but only one at a time; that would take all day, and I would be exhausted after each. That would leave us woefully exposed."

"You teleported the bucks to safety in 99," Scotch Tape pointed out, "And the guns."

"That was a distance of no more than fifty feet, and afterwards I was so exhausted I could do no magic for almost two whole days." I looked around, glad to see that nopony was asking why a Goddess would have such limitations. "To teleport across the river, I would need to find a significant landmark and memorize it in detail. It is unlikely that I'd find one near the water on the far side."

"Could you just fly us across?" I asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. But some of you are heavy, and it is almost certain that the Steel Rangers would try to shoot us down. Alone, I could handle that, but if I have to focus on carrying somepony else at the same time..." That didn't sound like a risk we wanted to take.

"So, we can't cross on a bridge. Can't fly over and probably can't swim across. Can't teleport all of us without taking a really long time..." I sighed and rubbed my chin. Couldn't go over. Couldn't go across. Couldn't cheat with alicorny magics. That left... "Can we go under the river?"

"Under? Are you crazy?" Rampage said as she jumped to her hooves. I smiled softly at her, crossed my forehooves calmly in front of me, and arched a brow in a perfect expression of reasonability. Rampage groaned, pressing her face to her forehooves. "Of course you are..."

P-21 muttered, "Welcome to my world." I smiled at him and felt warmth when he smiled back.

"What's wrong with under?" Glory asked with a small gulp of nervousness.

"The tunnels of Hoofington," Scotch Tape read aloud from the Guide as she lay on her belly on an old cushion, her rear legs waving idly in the air, "are particularly deadly. Today they are the home to desperate raiders, feral ghouls, and packs of savage beasts called cyberdogs. Perhaps even more dangerous are the automated defense systems, including magical ward screens and patrolling robots, and pockets of intense radiation and Enevation. Extreme care should be employed, and visits should be brief.

"Over a thousand miles of tunnels, subways, and other pieces of underground infrastructure were constructed in Hoofington, and much of it remains intact and unflooded thanks to still active pumps and ventilation systems. Care should be taken to stick to sewage maintenance tunnels and blue line subway tunnels. Enter into green industrial tunnels only in dire circumstances. Red tunnels should be avoided at all costs. These security tunnels were restricted during the war and contain potent defensive systems. Remember: Red and you're dead.

"Ooooh pictures!" She lifted the book up in her mouth, showing us a robotic sand dog-esque monster that appeared more machine than meat. I sure hoped that that was artistic license and not an

accurate depiction.

“More than a thousand miles?” Glory gasped. “Where did they put them all? The Core is only five miles across at the most! How in Equestria did they dig out that much that fast?”

But I remembered Big Macintosh’s memory of the city during reconstruction. “Tunnels on top of tunnels on top of tunnels,” I said as I rose to my hooves and started pacing. “They dug tunnels to bring building materials under the river. And they buried all the power lines and the like after zebras started attacking with dragons; it was safer. They probably connected all the bases to the city by tunnels too.”

Hoofington was a fortress, but it was more than just the Core. The Core was like a great big fat bullseye, a challenge to the zebras. But, in reality, the entire valley was a fortress, a death trap for the zebras to attack over and over again. ‘Here is our technology. Here is the city you tried to raze. Come and get us.’ I had to wonder how many thousands of zebras had died besieging and assaulting the city. Tens of thousands? Hundreds? Millions?

I’d seen the bones in Nopony’s Land. That was just one small hill along the western edge of the city. How many were in the badlands south of Flank? Or east, toward the zebra lands? The zebras had come to Hoofington over and over again to die. The city wasn’t a fortress. It was a killing machine.

“So, is there a tunnel from here to the east side of the river?” P-21 asked as he looked over the filly’s shoulder at the guide. We all looked at Rampage, who gave a shrug.

Suddenly, I smiled. “We might not know, but we know somebody who does.”

* * *

“Ponies know nothing. Why do ponies always stick noses where not belong?” Rover grumbled as he picked through the wall of his workshop. We’d been walking all morning to hoof it from the Arena to Riverside. On a map, the two locations were fairly close. In reality, we’d had to snake our way through the rubble-strewn streets and more than once pick our way through fallen buildings. The Halfheart gang was also making our lives difficult now that word was out that Security had turned down Big Daddy’s offer. We’d been dealing with snipers all morning; it’d gotten to the point where Lacunae shed her dress and, together with Glory, swept out the snipers’ nests in the windows of the crumbling apartment buildings.

By the time we reached Sunset Station, I was carrying Scotch Tape to give her hooves a rest. P-21 was slowing us down too, but he simply set his lips together and tried to keep up the pace. The sand dogs had nearly attacked us a second time before they caught sight of Lacunae. She was a figure both pony and dog tended to remember, particularly with her minigun hovering ominously over her head. The alicorn had developed a habit of occasionally revving the motor when one of the bionic canines got too close.

“We have to get to the east side of the river. Are there tunnels that will get us there?” I asked. Fifi and Scotch Tape stood nearby, seeming to find each other fascinating but both a little too nervous to talk to each other. All the sand dogs were doing far better with gems powering their mechanical parts. Food came in through Riverside and salvage from the tunnels left. A lot of that equipment was being traded with Brimstone’s Fall and Chapel. Trade was saving the Wasteland.

“Yes yes yes, pony,” Rover grumbled sourly as he walked over to a pile of papers and pawed through them, muttering. “Tunnels is very dangerous for ponies. Yes. Many dangerous things in the deeps. Ponies should not go in tunnels. Tunnels is dogs’ home.” He dug through pile after pile while I looked at strange arcane plans and blueprints on his wall.

Luna Dam Power Generator Assembly #4. Fort Pony Annex. Samophlange housing. “Why do

you keep these?" I asked, trying to figure out what the Tokomare was supposed to be. Or a section 44 emergency release valve. Or why anyone would want to hang on to diagrams of them.

As Rover continued to dig through the old boxes, I noticed a dusty memory orb sitting in a stained coffee cup marked 'Aegis Security'. Curious, I shook out the slowly swirling orb. I glanced over at Rover, wondering what good a memory orb would do a sand dog. "Excuse me," I asked, lifting up the orb. "Do you mind if I look at this?"

He snorted in dismissal. "Is pony garbage. Dog uses as nightlight for Fifi. Pony can do with it as pony wishes."

Leaving him to dig through his papers, I smiled to myself and tapped the orb against my horn. Sometimes, physical contact seemed to be the only way to help the connection along. I felt the shock of connection, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Okay, not liking this memory. Correction: not liking this body! Something was very wrong here. My legs ached, my back was sore, my hips felt all tottery, and my vision was a mess of blurs. But, despite all that, I could smell the most amazing collection of scents... I wasn't exactly sure what they all were, but I could smell them. I could also hear voices talking quite clearly. With a groan, my host rose and trotted... well... walked, at least, down a cloudy hall.

"...glad that you're all right, Applejack. An accident like that... it's terrifying that something like that can strike right out of the blue," a buck said in conciliatory tones. The smell of mare, apples, bed linen and buck filled my nose.

"Well, we're not completely convinced that it was an accident, Horse." Applesnack's low, serious voice perked my curiosity. "Elevators don't generally fall on their own."

"I... I hadn't thought of that. I hope that the Ministry of Morale is taking a hard look at that possibility," Horse said in concerned tones. "Well, in light of that, maybe..." He trailed off, and silence fell for a moment.

"What is it, Horse? I can tell ya got some idea stuck in yer noggin," Applejack said tiredly. My host rose up, and I smelled her scent of mare, a bed occupied for far too long, and healing bandages. Something reached out to rub my host's ears... wait? What kind of ears were those? They felt... furry.

"There's been a lot of concern about high profile ponies being at risk from zebra assassins. We've been exploring some possibilities. Running a few experiments. We've found ways to place an organic brain inside a mechanical robotic body."

"I heard about that," Applejack said sourly. "I can honestly say that that's one o' the most ghoulish things I've ever heard."

"Unconventional, perhaps," Horse admitted, sounding like he wasn't too happy with the practice either. "We only use convicted ponies from Hightower, and only after removing most of their memories and personality. The brain, preserved in gel, just acts as a processor."

"Cut to the chase, Horse. What does all this have to do with Applejack?" Applesnack demanded.

Horse cleared his throat and said delicately, "Well, you see... we've also been developing a canine model. In fact, it's almost ready for production, given that there's far more canine brain samples available. We're just looking for a subject for our production prototype." An awkward silence ensued.

Finally, Applejack muttered, "Horse. If I could get outta this bed, I'd buck your head clean off your shoulders! I know what you're thinking!" Applejack swore and groaned. My host whined, licking her leg and tasting lotion.

"Well, *I'm* not under doctor's orders to stay in bed..." Applesnack growled.

Horse spoke quickly. "Please, listen to me. I know you love her, but face facts. Winona is old. She's an exceptional dog: intelligent, loyal, and well trained. Better than a lot of ponies, honestly. And," he continued in a calmer tone, "as you said, you think somepony is trying to kill you... and I agree. Let me give Winona a fresh new body. Onyx and Glass are both sure they can preserve both her mind and her personality. And she'll be able to keep your foals and grandfoals just as safe as you."

"Yeah, as if that'll happen any time soon," Applejack said in a slightly sharp mutter. Applesnack coughed awkwardly. The mare stroked my host's ears and rubbed between her aching shoulders. Despite her words, I could tell from her tone that she was... pensive.

"Just consider my offer. We'll be moving on to the security and combat prototypes one way or another. I just wanted to give you a chance. I know Winona would want to keep you safe." There was another moment of silence. "Well... I hope you feel better soon."

"Yeah. You too, Mr. Horse," Applejack muttered in worry. Her ears swiveled as Horse trotted away; a moment later, the door closed.

My host gave a worried whine in the back of her throat and nudged Applejack's hoof with her muzzle.

"I can't believe he'd propose something like that while you're still recovering," Applesnack muttered darkly.

"I didn't stop being the Ministry Mare just because I fell down an elevator shaft," Applejack replied. "He means well. Horse is the only one of the lot of 'em that didn't look like he was glad I'm laid up. Heck, even Braeburn seemed glad I'd be out for a while." There was a sigh. "Can ya help Winnie up?"

Applesnack, smelling faintly of sweat and musk and anger, trotted behind Winona and boosted her onto the bed. My canine host gave a happy bark and wiggled up next to the orange mare. Applejack sighed softly, running her hoof through my host's fur. "You're a good girl, Winona. Yes you are. You've always been my good little helper."

There was silence as Applejack just stroked my old body. "What do you think?" she finally asked.

"I don't know. I usually leave all this technology stuff to you, Applejack," the buck said softly. "I just know that, if we're right, I don't want you at risk again. And Horse was right... she is getting old."

Applejack gave a soft sigh and sniff. "T'aint fair. Angel Bunny don't seem any older at t'all."

"Yeah, but who knows what chemicals and potions that little monster's taken?"

"Don't let Fluttershy hear you say that," Applejack said with another sniff. "You're a good girl, Winnie. A good girl, ya hear?"

My host lifted her muzzle and licked away salty tears...

oooOOOooo

“Sand dogs dig. Sand dogs help make,” Rover muttered as he pulled out an old wooden box filled with still more rolls of paper. “Dogs make things that matter.”

“You helped make them?” I asked, curious. The sand dogs didn’t strike me as the most engineering-inclined people. Then again, they had bionic parts, so who was I to judge?

“Ponies have horns,” he muttered. “Dogs have thumbs.” He wagged the appendage at me for a moment with a grin before pulling out another piece of paper. “Thumbs is better, pony. Ponies think of things to make, but dogs make them. Heavy, sweaty, dangerous work, but we did it.”

I supposed that was true. “Goldenblood really wanted to help you, didn’t he?”

Rover growled but then sighed. “Golden Pony want impossible. Want things as they was. Want home as once was. Dogs home and pony home. He try to make dog town new home, but pony city is not dog home. Dogs have only one home.”

“Why is that? Isn’t home wherever you live?” I asked. He snorted in distaste, muttering to himself for a bit as he pulled out a few more papers and then finally seemed to settle on one.

“Home is home. Dogs have one home. That home is gone. Golden Pony say he fix home if could. Get rid of poison. Make apologies. But he not. Over time, he forgot about us till very end. Even Golden pony used dogs.” He growled faintly in a tone of finality, “Ponies is not nice.”

I felt a bit stung at that. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said, looking down at my hooves.

He pointed a finger at me. “Pony is using dogs now too. Pony wants information from dogs, tunnels only dogs know.” He snorted, a gob of snot dripping from his old gray muzzle for a moment before he wiped it off on the ragged sleeve of his jacket. “But,” he conceded, “Pony is at least nicer about it than most ponies.” He shook out one more paper and grinned. “Ah... yes. This will get ponies across city. Yes. Yes.” He spread out the wrinkled, faded map. “Green line to Factory. Through Factory. Into blue line. Out at big pony school. Safest path.”

“Factory?” I blinked at that, shocked. “Down here?” Then again, if there was power, why not? I wondered if, if those factories still worked, it might be possible to use them to make things to help the Wasteland.

Rover nodded absently as he traced a claw along a route on a paper and tapped a square. “Mmm. Many old factories underground. Make gun. Bomb. Magic. Robot. Many many things. Most quiet. Some broken.” He marked the route in chalk and then folded the paper up. “Do not stay long. Radiation and Enervation is strong down below, pony.”

“Thanks, Rover,” I said as I slipped the map into my saddlebags. He looked particularly grouchy about helping me. “If I may ask, do you know what happened in Riverside? DJ Pon3 said the village disappeared and then reappeared?”

“Hrmp. Day after pony come, dogs go to village with scrap and salvage. Village not trust dogs, dogs not trust ponies. Almost shoot. Then flying monsters come. Half cat, half bat, half scorpion. Dogs dig tunnels and ponies follow.” He twisted his lips as he crossed his arms, waving a warning finger at me. “Fifi ask we save them, so pony not thank dog for it!” he grumbled, refusing to meet my smile.

That was a more literal example of ‘trade saving the Wasteland’ than I had expected, but it was no less welcome for that. “Well, I’ll have to thank her, then,” I replied. “I owe you, Rover. I hope that

someday I can find a way to get you back to your home.” All it would take was finding six ponies that could be friends. How hard could that be? He gave a soft sigh as he waved me away.

As I left, I heard Rover mutter softly to himself, “Just like Golden Pony.”

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Rover’s entrance to the industrial line was near the tracks where the Crusaders had found me. Since I didn’t relish the thought of crawling through more of Riverside’s ruins getting shot at, we were talking an alternative route under the town. This way, we’d hopefully avoid the Halfheart gang’s hit and run potshots.

Water dripped, trickled, and splashed through countless cracks in the walls and ceiling of the train tunnel. Rusted train cars hunkered on their decaying rails, the bones of countless ponies within. In more than a few places, blackened and wet skeletons half hung through warped window frames, terrifying testaments of the occupants’ last moments. Scotch Tape hung close to me, shying away from the remains. More lay along the sides of the tunnels, and when a bone snapped underhoof, the filly jumped nervously. I was more concerned about the steady, low clicking on my PipBuck.

“What happened to them all?” Scotch Tape asked as she peeked at bones frozen in postures that made it look like they were still trying to pry open doors of the train car.

“When the balefire bombs exploded, one of them must have breached the train tunnel. The tunnel acted like a chimney, carrying the flames along and burning up everything in its path. Afterwards, I think ponies tried to take shelter in here... and the radiation finished them off,” Glory said solemnly. “The Enervation kept the remains from rotting further.”

“Have I mentioned today how much I love this place?” P-21 said as he clambered over some collapsed ceiling.

“Could be worse,” Rampage said with a chuckle.

“I know it could be worse. I expect it to get worse,” P-21 said as he looked ahead at the striped pony. “In fact, things are so pleasant right now that it’s starting to make me feel paranoid.” The seepage splashed around our hooves as we picked our way along the rusted tracks.

To be honest, I was getting a little paranoid as well. We’d been moving along the tracks for nearly half an hour, and there was no way to keep half a dozen ponies quiet. We should have been drawing all kinds of trouble, but my E.F.S. remained clear.

We reached the end of the Luna Line at Museum Station and picked our way up the muddy concrete stairs. This was a cold and heavy rain with fat drops that slammed into us with almost painful impacts. Standing at the subway entrance across from the museum, I looked down at my friends. Everypony was cold and wet. “Let’s get out of the rain for an hour. The loading dock door is open.”

The last time I was here, I was a bit too drunk to remember exactly how trashed we’d left the building. After two battles, mine and whatever had happened two centuries ago, the museum was definitely looking a bit worse for wear. Somepony’d gone through and tossed the place for anything of value. Maybe it had been the survivors from the ponies who’d attacked me; I supposed that was payment enough for what I’d done to them.

The lights were even more shot than I’d remembered. They flickered and flashed sporadically, and speakers slurred incoherent words and phrases like a mob of drunken ghosts. The bodies had been left and were desiccating rather than rotting. Enervation. I supposed that, in time, they’d get so dry that

they'd disintegrate rather than rot, leaving only bones and ligaments behind. "Well, at least it's out of the rain," Glory said with an attempt at a bright smile.

"Yeah. And a nine point one on the creepometer," Scotch Tape added. Suddenly, she jumped and pulled out her wrench, gripping it in her jaws as she pointed a hoof through the door to the mineral display. "Ehd Arrs! Ehd arrs!"

I looked, saw the red marks, and heard the telltale scuttle. "Just radroaches. Calm down." Then there was a long, low rumble of thunder and my mane crawled as the lights went dark, then slowly flickered back to life again. The building didn't seem to know which ambient music to play, and so two melodies slurred together. "Everypony stay close. Just in case."

Somepony had absconded with not just the dragon skeleton's remaining claws but with its fangs as well! "Well that's not fair," I muttered.

"That's right. Only Blackjack has a right to cool and deadly weapons in the Wasteland. Celestia forbid somepony else take them for their own survival," P-21 said sarcastically as I poked through the bones for even so much as a pinkie toe claw.

"Really? How did she get that right?" Glory asked politely as she looked at the bones. She caught our shocked looks, and her ears folded back a little. "I mean, it's quite convenient for her."

I smiled, then blinked. "Well... there might just be a cool and deadly weapon here for me after all!" I said as I wrapped my tail around P-21's neck and tugged him after me. "This way, Snarky McSnarkerson!"

I let him go and trotted to the sword case I'd been forced to leave earlier. "So, master lockpicker... ready for a challenge? Think you can get this open?" I asked as I tapped the sword case. The blade still sat on its crushed blue velvet. He looked at the weapon in surprise, then narrowed his eyes at the compact lock.

"Let's find out." He took out his screwdriver and pins.

I turned to the others. "In the meantime, let's see if there's anything here that was missed. Lacunae, can you watch his back?" The purple alicorn gave an elegant bow of her head, but looked at the sword with an odd expression of unease. Okay, well best put my best hoof forward. "Okay. Scotch Tape, with me," I said as I looked at the filly with a small smile. She looked back, a little curious and slightly wary. I turned to Glory and Rampage. "Can you two sweep upstairs?"

The gray pegasus nodded. "Sure."

Splitting up in a creepy building might have been a recipe for disaster, but it'd save time. As Rampage and Glory headed upstairs, I went into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit. Vigilance floated ahead of me, the twelve millimeter pistol sweeping across anything that looked remotely threatening. Long clear cases stretched in neat rows up and down the long room. The sight of a poster of Twilight Sparkle wearing a mining helmet and holding a rock in her hoof over a caption reading 'Rocks are cool!' struck me as incredibly... dorky. Okay, she created Gardens of Equestria, but there was no doubt that she was an egghead through and through.

Most of the cases had been ignored. The mineral samples within were just rocks, and one thing the Wasteland had plenty of was rocks. The only display that had been touched was a large display of 'magic gems' that glittered in their armored case. I could tell it was armored because it looked like somepony had tried using dynamite to blast it open and still the case was quite intact. I couldn't even smell the char.

“So... how are you doing?” I asked errantly as I used a magic bullet to turn a skittering radroach to goo. The filly jumped; I wasn’t sure if it was from the shot or the question.

She spat her nine millimeter automatic into a leg pocket that served as a holster. “I’m fine,” she said with a hard look around her. “Just... don’t like this place.”

“It’s a lot different from the stable, isn’t it?” I frowned too as I looked at the room with its flickering lights. She gave me a ‘no duh’ look. “There’s a place near here. It’s called Chapel. There’s a bunch of ponies your age who live there; they’re called the Crusaders. They’ve lost their families. I’m sure they’d be glad to have you. You know more about machines and the like than any of them.”

She didn’t answer right away. She stared at a pile of rubbish with that hard expression. Then, after a few seconds, she glanced at me. “I’m fine.”

“Scotch.” I trotted next to her and put a hoof across her shoulder. “You’re not fine. None of us are. A pony that’s fine would probably run screaming from the room at first sight of what we’ve dealt with.”

She sighed, her olive body drooping a little. “Mom died a month ago. I remember her telling me that she’d help me go over the terminal technician manual when she got home. I was having problems with passing that class.” She looked right at me with the dark blue-green eyes behind her goggles. “She told me that if I just toughed it out, it’d all make sense. I just had to be tough.

“Then I was being told by Rivets that I’d be taking Mom’s place. I didn’t even have a chance to say... to say anything before she was recycled. In the morning, I had a mother. In the evening... I...” Her voice caught and she drew a shaky little breath. “I didn’t.” She sniffed and rubbed her nose, pointing her hoof at me. “Then everypony went crazy and... and then you showed up. And then... then... one morning I woke up with a clogged digester to fix. And in the evening... everypony I knew was dead.” She glared up at me, her lips pressed tightly together. “And you killed them.”

“Scotch, I had to. If I hadn’t...”

“...we’d all have become crazy raiders too,” the filly said as she closed her eyes and nodded. “I know. I know. But... now I don’t have Mom... or home... or anything. All I have are you and your friends. You’re the last bit of Stable 99 I have. And you left too. And...” her voice trembled again as she clenched her teeth together, “and I am... I don’t want to lose anypony else. I’m going to be tough. I’m...” she pressed her face to my chest and she gave a soft little sob. “I’m not crying,” she said softly amid the tears.

“I know, Scotch.” I said softly as I put a hoof across her shoulders, sitting with her. “I’m sorry.”

We were all broken. We were all hurting. All of us were playing this game for stakes we didn’t understand. Was this why P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch followed me? Because I pointed in a direction, and any direction, even Hell itself, was better than sitting around and slowly falling apart? Big Daddy had once tried to save Hoofington. Goldenblood had wanted to save Equestria. This was what I was trying to save, just five ponies. I looked across the room at the rows and rows of rocks. Had there really been a time when they mattered more than ending a pointless war?

Why was that display broken open?

As I stared across the room, I spotted the only display that had been successfully breached. The explosion hadn’t just destroyed the armored glass, it had blasted out a chunk of the wall. That had taken a lot more than just dynamite! Scotch Tape seemed to sense my attention was elsewhere, and she lifted

her goggles, wiped her eyes, and looked at the blasted display as well. "What? What's wrong?"

"I don't know..." I said softly, but my heart was thudding and my mane felt like it was trying to stand on end. "Keep your gun out," I whispered as I walked slowly towards the case. Debris and mud fanned out in front of the display. Broken stars crunched underhoof as I looked at the plaque, which had broken off. I levitated the brass plaque, turning the heavy plate over.

'Rocks from the sky. Meteorites and meteor fragments recovered from the Hoofington area, Everfree Forest, and across Equestria.' A glob of wet mud slowly crawled down the front as the spot right between my shoulder blades tingled.

Wait? Wet mud?

I whirled in time to see the rifle barrel pointing out of empty space from the above end of the display cases behind me. The rifle fired with utter silence. Only plain, dumb luck had the plaque between my face and the rifle. The impact of the bullet with the plaque didn't make the slightest sound as it indented right in front of my eyes, almost knocking it from my magic's grip.

I slipped into S.A.T.S., but to my frustration, nothing was targetable by the system. Even the gun was shrouded enough to lower my hit chance to zero. I dropped out of the spell and fired at the faint blur around the barrel as I sprinted towards the shooter. His bullets smashed silently against the plaque, the tiles around me, and my combat barding as I fired back. My gun, to my horror, was just as silent. In fact, I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Scotch Tape was equally silent as she fired wildly behind me, as evidenced by one shot zinging my rump. Fortunately, the low caliber weapon didn't penetrate. The shimmer leapt into the air and disappeared. I had only a second to guess, and Vigilance was dry. Sense and reason said to reload and wait for whatever spell was on me to expire. *Be awesome*, suggested a little blue pegasus in my mind. Screw sense and reason. I leapt and slid on my side under the display cases and finished reloading Vigilance as I emerged on the far side. From thin air that barrel appeared, but now it had to swing down towards me. Vigilance came up as the shooter's motion opened the cloak enough to see their face.

Lancer's face.

His rifle pointed at my horn as he stood on his back legs in that freaky zebra stance. My glowing pistol illuminated the calm, certain expression on his face. Eleven zebras, you striped bastard! It felt like we'd hit S.A.T.S. as we pointed our guns at each other. That moment stretched on as our eyes locked together, our gazes warring as if trying to break the other through sheer will before firing.

Scotch Tape was under no such spell. The filly had all the marksmanship of me on moonshine while blindfolded, but the rounds striking the cloak made that barrel twitch ever so slightly off my face. My horn flared, knocking back the bolt of his weapon and ejecting the round. As fast as lightning, he caught the bullet in his teeth and spit it back into the rifle breech. His hoof slammed the bolt home as the rifle moved back towards my face. He was fast. Damned fast. Fast as when he'd shot us at Brimstone's Fall.

This time, I was twenty percent faster.

I leapt at him as the silent rifle flashed right by my ear. If it hadn't been magically silenced, I'd likely have been permanently deafened in that ear; as it was, the heat of the shot burned my cheek as I tackled him like a hoofball player. He flipped and twisted in my grip like an eel, and as we landed in a heap on the floor between the cases he jerked out of my grip. Refusing to let him get away, my mouth seized the invisible fabric of his cloak and locked down. Vigilance came around, the pistol flashing in eerie silence as I fired right in front of my face.

Then the cloak shredded as he jumped free once more. The blue gemstone brooch holding the cloak crackled and died. The tattered remains hung around his striped form as he slung the rifle around his shoulders and jumped back from me, tail coiling around the trigger. Suddenly, sound returned in a rush of Scotch Tape shrieking, Rampage bellowing, Glory zapping, Lacunae's minigun purring, and P-21 yelling "Blackjack, you idiot! Where are you?"

"In here!" I yelled as I kept Lancer moving for the door out into the atrium.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape yelled as he disappeared around the corner. She pointed at some blocks of gray explosive I'd seen stacked in a party cake in a memory. More ominous, though, was an... egg shaped, pulsating, multicolored glowing *something* strapped to the pile. I didn't know what it did, but I assumed it was probably really, really bad.

"Can you disarm it?" I asked. She gave me a look that put my question on par with 'can you levitate it with your earth pony powers?' "Right! Let's get out of here!" I shouted as we raced into the atrium and absolute chaos.

"Proditor!" snarled one mare at Rampage as she launched a flying hoofhick that actually dented Rampage's heavy steel barding.

"Spurius!" the red-striped pony yelled back, and atop the information counter the two engaged in the most graceful and terrifying display of hoof to hoof combat I'd ever seen. If it hadn't been so obvious that they were trying to crush each other underhoof, I'd have thought they were dancing. The scariest damn bit of dancing I'd ever seen.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to enjoy the sight, as a zebra overhead using the balcony for cover opened fire on Scotch Tape and me while her comrade kept sniping at the weaving and beaming Glory. I shielded Scotch as we raced across to where P-21 was loading another grenade into Persuasion.

"We need to get out of here! There's a bomb in there!" I said as I pointed back at the rocks exhibit. His eyes went round before he fired the grenade towards the two on the second floor. To my shock and amazement, one of the zebras shot the projectile as it dropped towards their cover, making it detonate uncomfortably close to Glory. That was just not fair!

Unfortunately, all of us getting out the one exit would be particularly difficult given that Lacunae was blocking it with her spell shield and minigun. The two zebras pressing were so fast that, by the time the gun started firing, they were already out of the line of fire. She couldn't strafe without risk to us all, so was having to use her magic arrows to keep the zebra hoof fighters off her. If her magic was anything like mine, though, I doubted that she had an unlimited supply. Worse, her shield was protecting her from the snipers, but zebra hooves seemed quite capable of passing through it.

"Unfortunately, they don't seem keen on letting us out first," P-21 said dryly. Then he blinked and reached into his pouch, drawing out a weapon that made my heart quiver. The sword was a thing of beauty. Deadly art. As my magic lifted it, I immediately wanted to try it out on those zebra hoof to hoof specialists. Hell, I wanted to go back to the Arena and give Psychoshy a rematch! "Blackjack?" P-21 said as he looked at me in worry.

"Nothing. Just a sweet sword," I grinned. "You go ahead and take care of the bomb. I'll take care of the rest."

P-21 stuck his head out and nearly got it blasted for his trouble by the sniper on the balcony. I looked at him and shielded him with my body and barding. "On three. One, two, three!" And together we charged back across the atrium. The zebra rounds were enchanted to electrocute, and when one hit me I

nearly fell on my face as my muscles jerked for a few seconds. We reached the stairs, and I used them for some cover while P-21 disappeared into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit.

I charged my way up the stairs, readying my sword. The balcony ran in an L, and all I had to do was get around the bend and I'd have a clear shot around their cover.

Then everything went silent.

I dropped to my face and saw a hole blown in the wall ahead of me. Without looking behind me, I rolled to the left. A second hole appeared. I rolled back to the right. A third hole appeared. I jumped to my hooves. A fourth hole appeared right against the second. *Awwwww, yeah*, a little blue pony crowed in my head as I looked over my shoulder with a grin at Lancer. The zebra stared at me as he hung out of a door behind me, left eyelid twitching a little in shock. Then I entered S.A.T.S. and my horn unloaded a rapid fire barrage of magic bullets right in his face.

Unfortunately, he was one tough, quick zebra. His face and chest bleeding, he disappeared back around the corner. I charged after him, bellowing silently... it was the thought that counted, damn it!

Then I froze in the doorway, sweeping the security office before me with my mutated gaze. There was a large terminal over a bank of monitors. I took two steps forward in that silence. There was a light on the floor right in front of me. A light on a small tin. I put a hoof on the disarm button and took another cautious step.

Then he shot the mine.

The fragmentation mine lifted me off my hooves and dropped me in a heap. My PipBuck gave me all kinds of warnings about how my chest was crippled. Really, given the staggering amount of pain I was in, I found the little crying pony icon rather redundant. I fell to my side and managed to sneak out a slightly Enervated healing potion before I blacked out completely. I couldn't fall now. I had to press on! I had to find Lancer and cut his striped ass!

Then he shoved me over onto my back and pushed the sniper rifle underneath my chin. Goddesses, zebras standing on their hind legs was a freaky sight! He had his hoof nudged against the trigger as he looked down at me in an expression of extreme frustration. Then he tapped a small bat-shaped talisman on the side of the gun.

"How'd you manage to not set off the mine?" he asked softly.

"I'm a light step," I muttered, trying to pull my focus together enough to cut his head off.

He looked just a little impressed. "You must be part zebra." The impressed look vanished. "Did you remove the bones of the stars?" he asked softly as blood dripped down his face and chest. S.A.T.S. was recharging, and even then, as fast as S.A.T.S. was, he might blow my head off before the first shot and certainly before the second. And if my horn glowed to seize the sword... I needed an opening.

"The rocks? You're here for rocks?" I groaned and pointed to one of the shuttered windows. "Go outside. Plenty of rocks. Enjoy!"

He crushed the barrel against my throat, making my breath rasp. Okay, I had enough chest trauma at the moment that I was raspy already. "Where are they? Where are the bones of the stars?"

I coughed, glancing at the door and getting another shove with his gun. "Why do you care? Sekashi said--"

But the name had a galvanizing effect on the buck as his eyes bugged out and he spat out something forcefully in Zebra. I didn't have a clue what he actually said, but I bet it was dirty. "She is dead! They must all be dead!" I bet that's what you told your boss, bastard.

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling. "She is dead. She told me before she died that the stars are not all evil."

"She was correct. The stars have power for any pony who dares." He chuckled darkly, obviously relieved to hear of her passing. "Clearly, they work though you. You guided me to my target. And you are here now when we discovered that the bones once lay here."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said as I glared up at him. "We came here to get out of the rain. That's all."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't believe in coincidences. Or loose ends..."

I saw the shadow and smirked. "Do you believe in Glory?"

An emerald beam struck Lancer in the chest. He fell back, and I pushed the barrel of his gun aside as it fired and blasted a hole six inches from my neck. Instantly, the world was reduced to a single ringing 'squee' as my left ear exploded in pain. I flopped in rather unawesome fashion as my magic struggled to grab the sword. Bleeding and burning, Lancer hooked the rifle sling in his hoof, threw the gun over his head, and raced out with Glory blasting at his fleeing backside. One shot struck the terminal, which sparked and sent the monitors flickering.

"Please don't need a Hydra... please don't need a Hydra..." Glory chanted as she rolled me onto my back and quickly pulled open my armored vest. "It doesn't look like anything penetrated too deep," she said in relief. "Just some broken ribs and contusions..." Thank goodness for Security's armor. She started to pass me some piss weak healing potions, carefully working towards stronger and fresher potions. My ear thankfully recovered with enough application of magic. Oh sweet Celestia, did I love healing potions.

Suddenly, the speakers of the terminal cracked, and a mare said in a panic, "...any Hoofington Guard units, this is Security Chief Cloverleaf at the Hoofington Museum. We're under attack!" On the monitor, I saw an image of ponies with SMGs and black security armor similar to my own sweeping through the museum. I cringed at the sight of mothers and young gunned down without hesitation. "They overrode the lockdown! They're using machineguns! They're killing everypony!" Behind her voice came the rising crackle of automatic fire chattering away. "Please! Send help immediately! This is Security Chief Clover--"

The door behind her clicked open, and a unicorn wearing unmarked black armor appeared in the doorway. Without hesitation, she raised a glowing zebra ten millimeter SMG and put a burst into the mare's back. She trotted over the corpse and put a hoof to a little device clipped to her ear. "U-2 to team leader. Security is pacified. I don't think she got a signal out. No sir. It looks like the jamming worked." There was a muffled explosion that shook the cameras. "We're collecting them now, sir. Yes, sir. Five minutes to extraction. Yes sir."

"Help," gurgled Cloverleaf, still barely alive after all.

"Sure." The unicorn in the black armor looked down and pointed her SMG. There was a brief burst. "There. You're helped. All of you were dead anyway." She turned and ran for the door. "Come on, ponies. We've got half an hour till showtime! Move it!"

"Show time?" Glory muttered in horror as she stared at the monitor. "They knew. They knew that

the bombs were going to fall! How could they know and not tell anypony? How could anypony do that?" I felt a cold horror inside too, but it was mitigated by two hundred years of radioactive barbarism and a half dozen zebra troopers.

"I don't know," I groaned as I rose to my hooves. "But I know it doesn't matter now. These zebra must have been after the same rocks, but they're two centuries too late." I lifted the sword and looked in the direction Lancer had fled. "I'm going to find that sneaky bastard and cut him apart alphabetically." Then I glanced at her. The recording had rattled her terribly. I wondered if it was her emphasis on loyalty or the sheer monstrousness of what they'd done. "What would I start with?"

She blinked and then looked at me and swallowed. "Depends on how specific you want to get. You could start with 'abdomen' or 'amygdala'."

"Amygdala? That's that dangly thing in your throat, right?" I asked her with a grin as I closed my slightly perforated armor up.

"No, that's the uvula. The amygdala's found..." She stopped herself when she saw my look and flushed. "Right. Joking. Catching on."

"Cause you're a smart pony," I said as I tapped her head. I stepped to the door he'd disappeared through and stopped short. Wow, that was a lot of mines. Ah well, have horn, will disarm! I smacked the tab on the first mine with my magic and stepped forward to pick it up. Then, without warning the mine exploded in my face! As I fell back, the redundant pony display once again flashed to life and told me my forelegs were severely crippled.

I screamed as I sat, feeling the blood drip down my limbs. "He tampered with the mines! That bastard!" I shouted as I brought out Vigilance and blasted at the mines and anypony that dared poke their head down that hall. Maybe he'd wired them so that they'd detonate when 'disarmed'; wouldn't that be a sneaky trick?

"Well, I always wondered why anypony would make a landmine you could disarm just by pressing the button on top..." she remarked as she dug out a fresh healing potion and dribbled it right on my bleeding forelegs to help focus their healing power where needed. I sighed in relief and satisfaction as one mine, then the next, then the next, detonated and filled the hallway with the reek of cordite. What was the point of having a brand new razor sharp sword if you didn't have a striped bastard to try it out on?

"Blackjack!" P-21 bellowed from the museum atrium. I let my breath hiss out through my teeth. I really wanted some zebra to test this sword on. Particularly a zebra who was a murderer and had shot me in the back. Twice. I almost started back down the hall after him when I saw Glory's worried look and grunted. Fine... hopefully P-21'd handled the bomb and...

Oh... hello. Another bomb sat right under the terminal. I looked at that sickly-glowing egg, heard my PipBuck clicking, and knew that where there were two, there were definitely more.

I ran back to the security office door and looked out. My friends were by the front door, shielded by Lacunae and her bursts of suppressive fire at the balcony snipers. Rampage's armor looked like it was a dented can of Cram, and she was still fighting brutally against one of the zebra melee specialists. The other one was smeared across the information desk. I had no idea what language they were speaking, but boy did that zebra look pissed!

Now if only Lancer would make an appearance.

I ran down and stepped carefully through the shield, my whole body tingling as it passed through the magical barrier. Lacunae's dress was almost shredded, and her purple hide showed a number of

significant injuries. Still, she stood with poise and focus as she fired her weapon in controlled bursts. I doubted she had much ammo left, though.

“Tell me you disarmed them!” I shouted as I looked at the zebra attackers.

“Them?” he yelled back over the gunfire, his eyes wide. “I couldn’t! They’re wired to a remote detonator!” My mane did not like this one bit. The zebras weren’t withdrawing, but Lancer was nowhere to be seen. And there were a lot of really bad explosives in this place.

What were the odds Lancer’d sacrifice his own zebras to cover his escape?

“Lacunae! Get us outside. Now!” I shouted.

Her purple eyes widened as she looked down at me. “The shield will drop when I cast the spell, and Rampage will need to be closer.” That meant ending her dancing, twisting duel with her striped opponent.

“I got it. Glory. Scotch. P-21. Keep the snipers’ heads down,” I said as I stepped out the shield, feeling every hair in my mane tingle from the magical charge. I had no time for flashy hoof to hoof combat at the moment. “Sorry Rampage!” I yelled as the bubble dropped and Lacunae’s horn began to glow. Immediately, the zebras rose to fire but ducked out of sight again as our fire sprayed the balcony.

“Eta?” She glanced at me as I racked the shotgun and blasted at her striped attacker. Rampage caught more than a little friendly fire, but her opponent dropped in a bloody, striped heap. Okay... so not the most honorable thing to do but--

“Futuere!” she snarled as she planted her forehooves and swept her rear hooves in an arc that knocked my legs out from under me. I flipped in the air as she halted and blasted me into the air with a double hoof rear kick. Suddenly, I was getting a much better view of the roof before I came back down in Glory’s grasp. Only my armor had kept me from getting disemboweled by Rampage’s hoofclaws.

Glory beat her wings furiously to keep me aloft as I coughed and hacked, “Get us... outside...”

With an electric crackle and a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared out in the rain next to the subway stairs. I slipped from Glory’s hooves just as a very pissed off Rampage yelled something in Zebra and actually somersaulted into the air to bring her hooves down in a fearsome blow. I dove to the side, rolling across the broken asphalt. I really did not need this right now; Lancer could be setting up an attack, or worse, getting away. I really wanted to check another enemy off my list.

Unfortunately, Rampage had entered a spinning, kicking, thrashing frenzy against us. “You will not harm her!” she swore in an oddly accented voice. P-21 was raked by her tail; when was I going to force him to wear some barding? Sneakiness be damned!

She launched herself, rolling in a ball and bringing her razor spines down at my face. I rolled completely on my back, all four hooves and every bit of magic I had in my horn pushing against her. The tips of her blades nearly perforated me from pelvis to sternum as I shoved her back into the air. I could only watch in amazement as she unrolled, twisted in midair, and landed on all four hooves. “Fuck me...” I muttered.

She reared above me and brought her forehooves down in a crushing blow. I lifted my sword horizontally, catching her hoofclaws as she glared down at me with murder in her eyes. I didn’t have Mallet’s magical strength and had to press my forehooves to the flat side of the single-edged blade. She was stronger and heavier, and her head tilted down to point that helmet saber right at my throat.

“Rampage,” I rasped as Glory and Lacunae alike blasted at her thick armor. P-21 and Scotch Tape watched helplessly as my legs slowly bent under her weight. “Sorry about this...”

“Eta?” She blinked as I levitated the gun to her chin and stared into her eyes.

“Sweet Celestia!” P-21 swore as Rampage’s body went completely rigid, a cascade of blood, brain, and bone splattering onto my face as she fell. Scotch Tape screamed in horror as she backed away. Glory landed and started to approach when I gave her a warning look. I hoped Rampage would be back, but I didn’t want to take risks. I wiped a leg across my face and pointed Vigilance steadily at Rampage as pink light shone. Even Lacunae seemed at a loss as I waited for her brains to regenerate.

She opened her pink eyes and glared at me as I held the gun less than half an inch from her left eye. “Are you in control?” I asked softly over the hissing rain.

“You had no right to interfere!” she spat, muttering something in Zebra.

I heard the crash and roar of the bombs going off, felt the pressure blast against us, and saw the scintillating light of the fireball flood through the parking lot. Firelight from the burning ruins bathed us both, but I didn’t blink. Neither did she. Not even with chunks of the building raining down around us. Lacunae blocked the largest pieces with her shield as Rampage and I kept our gazes locked. “Getting us away from that gave me the right.”

“You think that because I can heal that I am eager to get shot? You think that because I volunteer to fight against my own, that you can just gun us both down!” she said, hissing in rage. “You ponies... I gave my oath of loyalty! I swore my allegiance to my home! And you shoot me!” She spat in my face. I didn’t blink or wipe it away as I kept the gun steady.

This wasn’t Rampage. I wondered what cutie mark was under the armor. Thorns? Tentacles? Something else? “What is your name?” I asked as I moved the gun off her eye a little.

Confusion entered her eyes as she started to look at us. “Shujaa,” she said as she straightened a little. “Did you miss the red stripes? Are you colorblind?” She looked at my barding in suspicion. “You are not with the army.”

“No, I’m not. I’m sorry,” I said as my mane prickled. “Shujaa... do you know where you are?”

She blinked and looked at the blasted remains of the museum. Then she looked to the east to the green glow around the black towers. “Hoofington, of course. Near Miramare, I think. Were we overrun? Where are my friends?” Confusion and distrust were etched on her face. “Where is Twist?”

“Shujaa. What is the last thing you remember?” I asked softly.

She scowled at me. “I owe you no answers!” I racked a fresh round into Vigilance’s chamber without blinking. I wasn’t going to take another chance with a pony capable of smashing any of us to goo. She pressed her lips together, then said slowly, “We were scouting a zebra encampment south of Brimstone’s Fall... We were... ambushed. Wounded. Twist...” She blinked in shock. She froze as she stared into my eyes. “Is this a dream?”

“I don’t know,” I replied softly. “What about Twist?”

“No!” she said sharply as she backed away. She looked around in a panic. “Twist! Where is... she... Twist!” She screamed in shock and started to babble in zebra talk. I didn’t know if she was going to attack, cry, or run.

I sighed as I lined up the gun, jumped to S.A.T.S., and shot her with three hollowpoints.

“Blackjack!” Glory said in horror as I waited for Rampage’s brains to regenerate. “You don’t do therapy with bullets!” she said sharply, jumping between me and Rampage.

“You do when you’re dealing with a regenerating mare who thinks she’s a crazy zebra,” I replied, watching carefully as I loaded a fresh magazine into the pistol.

But it didn’t seem to be necessary; Rampage rose and groaned, clutching her head. “Oh, dear Luna, stop the hammering,” she muttered as she blinked up at me in confusion. “Where’d the zebras go? How did we get outside...” Then she looked at the flames leaping out of the gutted remains of the museum and gave a half smile. “And did I do that?”

I sighed and holstered Vigilance. “Nope. A zebra named Lancer did.”

She gave a sour frown and rubbed her temples. “Good. I’d hate to think I caused that and missed it.” She hissed softly and muttered, “Why does my head hurt so bad?”

I glanced at the others; their looks ranged from horrified to concerned to shocked to disapproving. “You were out again. I had to shoot you.” I flushed a little. “Repeatedly.”

Her eyes shot wide. “Is Scotch Tape alright?” She immediately looked around, but sighed and slumped a little in relief as she saw the confused young mare.

“Rampage, does the name Shujaa mean anything to you?” Rampage shook her head in confusion. “What about Twist?”

“Twist?” Rampage frowned. “I think...” she began, narrowing her eyes as she thought. I watched her eyes as she errantly pulled out a pack of Mint-als and licked one up. Then she sighed. “Sorry. It sounds familiar, but I’m not sure who that is.”

“Right,” I said as I scanned the night with my E.F.S. No red bars. Nothing.

So why did I feel even worse?

* * *

As much as I wanted to go straight to the Green Line, we had to take a little detour to Chapel first. I was blasted and battered and we were all wet and tired and it was late afternoon. To be honest, I wanted to go to Star House and sleep in an actual bed. My mood was as lousy as the weather. I kept glancing back towards the burning museum, expecting a silent bullet to come out of nowhere.

The Remnant had wanted those space rocks (Glory had had to explain the concept of ‘shooting stars’ to me... twice) for some reason. I could have screamed in frustration. Why did I have to get hit by every single mystery of the Hoof? The Remnant. Thunderhead. Sanguine. EC-1101. Goldenblood... fucking Goldenblood alone, who seemed like he’d set all this up two centuries ago just to fuck with me!

“Why does the not smart pony have to figure all this out?” I muttered as we walked through the rain towards Chapel. But I knew the answer: as stupid as I was, I was also tenacious enough to keep plodding along.

When we reached the grassy slope leading down to the town, I was stunned at the sight of the place. The tiny village was expanding in a big way. There were two wagons loaded up with scavenged lumber, metal sheeting, and other building supplies. While the Crusaders were everywhere, there were at

least a dozen more fully grown ponies as well. As we approached, a bony shape appeared from the sky, and Harpica landed before us.

“Careful, ma’ams and sir. There’s mines buried around the town now,” the ghoulish pegasus rasped.

“Gya... ya... ya...!” Scotch Tape stammered as she waved a hoof at the ghoulish. “It’s a... a...”

“Ghoulish. Not a zombie,” Glory finished firmly. I supposed I couldn’t blame the olive filly. After all, I didn’t have a clue what ghoulish were till I met Harpica and Ditzzy Doo. And Silver Spoon...

Harpica led us around the edge of the minefield to the road. An impromptu tower had been erected with a machinegun mounted on a pivot. It took at least three Crusaders in oversized combat helmets to crew the weapon, but it would lay down an effective field of fire... so long as their position wasn’t hit by a missile.

“You’ve been busy,” I commented to the ghoulish pegasus mare. Scotch Tape looked ready to climb on top of Rampage at the sight of ghoulish foals chatting politely with the more rough and tumble Crusaders.

Harpica nodded. “Indeed. It would seem that Blueblood Manor held items of significant value to the Society. They’ve been most generous in exchange for simple trinkets.” She then looked at me and added, “However, the salvagers have not disturbed Master Vanity.” I smiled, relieved at that.

“Welcome back,” Priest said as he trotted up the road towards us. “You and your friends are always welcome in Chapel,” he said... to P-21? I think the blue pony was more surprised than I was.

“Even me?” Rampage asked in worry, looking cute as she fidgeted in her spiked armor. Priest looked at her solemnly for a long moment before he sighed and slowly shook his head. “Right. Sorry. Should have known better.” She dropped her eyes. “I’ll just go wait up at the Star House.”

“I’ll be there soon, Rampage,” I promised. She just gave a sad half smile before she trotted back the way she came. I turned to Priest. “She’s gotten better.”

He looked calmly back at me. “Are you willing to take responsibility if she kills another foal?” I winced at that; I wasn’t. Heck, now I knew that she also had a zebra inside her who took poorly to getting shot. Well... honestly, most sane folks did that. He smiled that sad little smile of his before he stepped up to me and pressed his horn to my shoulder. The glow of magic heralded the delicious sensation of healing. I wanted that spell... why couldn’t my horn manage to do more than go bang? Was that too much to ask?

“Are you going straight up to the house as well?” Glory asked as she waited in line for her own healing. We were all battered up; of course only Lacunae looked decent. After all, her horn could even conjure a mending spell for her damaged dress. Stupid big horned alicorns... my horn was plenty good enough. It wasn’t little! It was... compact!

“I need to talk to Sekashi,” I said with a little frown. “I think she knows more about the Remnant than she let on.” Lancer certainly knew and cared more about her than he would about any simple zebra.

P-21 looked less curious than Glory. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll head back to the house. After all, somepony’s going to have to pick the lock and let her back in.”

Priest smiled at the small blue buck. “Actually, I was hoping to talk to you after I was finished healing your friends.” That definitely piqued our curiosity, but none more so than P-21 himself. In fact, he

looked almost wary of the black unicorn, but he nodded anyway.

“Well, then I’ll see you later, P-21,” I said as Priest’s healing spell saved us from using our freshest healing potions. Maybe Sekashi would have a fresh batch. I floated out the key to the cottage and passed it to Glory. “Here, you can let everypony--“

“Chaaaarrrrge!” screamed a group of fillies and colts as they raced out of the post office and pony piled upon me. “Crusaders collection agents!” shrieked Medley as she leaped upon my back while Allegro and Adagio seized my forelegs. Sonata gave a much more reserved headbump against my flank. “You owe Charity for six spark batteries and a bottle of Wild Pegasus! Cough ‘em up!” Medley declared as I wailed and collapsed beneath the four, thrusting my PipBuck into the air before I disappeared from sight.

* * *

“And to think, I once recommended her to Spike to be the Element of Generosity,” I said to myself as I limped to the house provided to Sekashi and Majina. Sure, I’d had the seven hundred caps, but sending young colts and fillies to beat the money out of me? Okay, it’d taken Sonata’s big sad eyes look to make me cough up the money, but still. “No cap in the Wasteland is safe from her greedy hooves, the little capmonger!”

There was an odd little wooden mask on the door, and I felt my insides squirm softly as I knocked. Majina peeked out the window at me, and a minute later Sekashi opened the door. “Ahh, greetings, Guardian! Come in. Come in. I will prepare something fair to eat.”

“I’d love to have some of that cold medicine too,” I said as I looked at more half-carved masks.

She looked back in concern. “Oh, is one of your friends ill?”

“Nope. But that stuff is pretty tasty,” I said with a grin. “Mix it with Sparkle-Cola and a radscorpion egg and it’s even better.” I could see Sekashi wasn’t exactly 100% with me on my opinion of what makes for a great drink. She moved into the kitchen and began preparing a tray. The deaf zebra handled the knives with skill a unicorn might envy as she chopped the greens for the salad. We sat at the table, and Majina tucked in with gusto. “Where’d you get all this fresh food?”

“The Society ponies have been quite thrilled with our wares of late. One in particular was overjoyed at the dresses we collected and has compensated us well in food and wealth. The Finders bring in all sorts of other delectable goods with the building materials.” And trade saves the Wasteland.

The salad might have tasted fine, but it could do with some RadAway to give it that citrusy zing. “I ran into an old friend of yours a few hours ago. Quiet buck. Likes to shoot helpless zebras.”

She touched a puckered scar on her shoulder. “Ah. That one.”

“Yeah. And,” I said somewhat hesitantly, “after chatting with him, I got to thinking that maybe you weren’t being completely honest with me before.” Her ears folded back as her eyes turned wary. “A zebra like him wouldn’t have spent all that time trying to kill thirteen zebras just because their tribe mocked the Remnant. They’d let the mine break them. Lancer was there to make certain you and the others died.” I stretched out a hoof to touch hers. “In fact, I think Lancer was there to kill you, specifically.”

She closed her eyes and sighed softly. “You are correct. He was not there to kill the others. He was there to kill me.” She opened her sad green eyes and smiled. “There is a funny story I know: once upon a time there was a young zebra who was a member of the Remnant. She trained in the Zenith style

of combat, learned her potions and poison, and the art of wind... of infiltration and stealth. She was skilled, and drew the eyes of the leader of the Remnant, Legate Vitiosus. He took her as one of his wives.

"But, one day, she was on a solo mission scouting the lands around the black city when she fell in a storm. She was wounded and lost, and feral ghouls were closing in. Then she spotted through the clouds a single star. She promised anything she could to escape that horrible night, and the star accepted her promise." She sighed softly and bowed her head. "But it also exacted a horrible price, for in her heart doubt was seeded."

"What happened?" I asked when our eyes met again.

"She questioned the need and goals of the Remnant. What was the purpose of fulfilling the wishes of a Caesar two centuries passed? Were the stars truly evil? She used her position to learn lore of the stars, a forbidden subject to all but the most trusted zebras. But, eventually, the zebra became foolish, and the Legate learned of her studies. His rage was... profound." She looked at the numerous scars on her hide. I knew now that not all of them had been received in the mine.

"She took the knowledge she had learned and with her child she fled her home. His rage redoubled, for a wife to flee her husband was the gravest insult. He ordered she not be allowed a moment's respite until she was captured. His hunters were skilled. Dreadfully so. But none more than his son, trained in the midnight style of combat. The son named for the slaying lance. So keenly, so quietly did he pursue that she found a group of zebras destined to toil in the earth and joined them to escape his bullets. Still, he found her, but in his haste he missed the shot that mattered most. Now dead in the eyes of the Remnant, she sought sanctuary in the shadow of the most dreaded of cities."

She gave a sad little smile. "Have ever heard something so silly? Such a silly mare for wishing upon the stars."

I rose and walked around the table to hug her. I knew she couldn't hear, but I whispered anyway, "She sounds pretty courageous to me."

When we parted, I asked quietly, "Why do zebras hate Hoofington so much? I mean, I hate all the things that happened here two hundred years ago, but that was ponies messing stuff up. What's the zebra angle?"

She shivered. "To explain that... you must know of the Eater of Souls."

* * *

The stars are capricious, fickle, powerful, and mysterious. To some, their interference may be malevolent, but such malevolence is reflected only in our desires and wishes. Others see inspiration and feel the hoof of destiny in their patterns and movements. However, by and large, their actions and motivations are beyond our understanding and knowledge. The wise leave the business of the stars to the stars. The foolish call upon them. The damned demand of them. Such is the nature of such things.

But there are stars who are malevolent. Stars evil and cruel who are cast out from the skies to turn into hard and crushing destruction. When they strike, their destruction is absolute. Their wrath and poison are unimaginable. Their hatred knows no limit and their cruelty possesses no bounds. Cast from on high, they fall with terrible wrath. Such stars are truly the monsters most zebras dread.

Once a great zebra city spread out across this valley. Its towers rose to the heavens and its tunnels plunged into the earth. Its occupants were wise and its armies strong, its markets filled with fields of plenty and its fields green and flowing. Gold and silver and gems decorated all from the highest prince

to the lowest slave. It was every bit as fine as the ancient zebra capital of Roam.

But for all its greatness, pride gnawed at its belly. In its desire to surpass all others, the city turned to folly and wickedness. Hearts hardened, minds closed, and its wealth was squandered. Its scholars and sages whispered their vile and poisonous worship to the skies and tainted the heart of a star. And so they attempted a terrible ritual. Ten thousand zebra magi carved the talismans of the city into a glyph stretching for miles in all directions. Rare, potent, and dark reagents were prepared. And in unison, they cast a spell that united their powers... magnified it... and magnified it again.

And they called down a star: The Eater of Souls.

Perhaps they meant to capture it for their own. Perhaps they erred and meant for it to fall upon glorious Roam instead. Perhaps they knew not what their great spell would do, only knowing it would be wondrous and terrible. Regardless, the star fell. It shattered the great city, blackened its foul towers and ancient libraries. Its fires scorched the fertile fields and turned them to ash. The city's great wealth was buried, its knowledge lost. And so was the dread city lost for all time.

* * *

The candle on the table had burned low by the time she finished, casting flickering orange light over Sekashi's face. "Or so we thought. When ponies came to this land, we tried to warn them of the star's evil. We told them that fallen stars only sleep within the earth, not lie there dead, and that which sleeps may dream. They would not listen. And so they built a new city atop the old. And so they repeated the folly of the old."

"You really think there's a fallen star under Hoofington?" I asked softly, feeling a little skeptical.

She smiled. "I know ponies do not think so. Ponies do not believe in curses, hexes, and zebra hocus pocus. They dug and searched, and though they found the bones of the star, they thought them little more than rocks. But dark things are ever associated here; it was here Nightmare Moon rose to challenge Celestia. Here the long night was darkest. Here where the great towers rose and the great battles were fought. And the towers stand still, a headstone to the land that was slain in its war."

"It makes for a good story," I admitted, "but it's not proof." She shrugged helplessly, her smile sad. How do you prove a story from so long ago? "So why would the Remnant be looking for meteorites?"

"Perhaps he simply wished to dispose of them. When we find bones of the stars, we hide them in deep caves, bury them in desolate deserts, or sink them far at sea. It is a great honor for any zebra," she said matter-of-factly. Still, I'd bet my itchy mane it had to be something else.

I groaned, burying my face in my forelegs. "Do these stars also produce horribly convoluted plots and mysteries that are supposed to be solved by the most immensely unqualified ponies in the world?" I asked as I looked at her plaintively.

She reached over the table and patted my head in consolation.

* * *

Walking back to the Star House, I had to admit that I felt a little disturbed at the thought of stars, great and powerful entities, manipulating me and countless others. I simply couldn't accept that we were all puppets of these terrible beings; it was too overwhelming. Fate was something I simply couldn't accept. Was I fated to kill 99? To wander the Wasteland with EC-1101 on my leg? Finding a virtue was hard enough; being a plaything of vastly powerful beings was more than I could handle.

Sekashi had told me that the Crusaders had left a path through the minefield up to the house, so I headed to the little gate in the makeshift barricade by Chapel's chapel. All I wanted was to save ponies and help my friends... and find out what Project Horizons was about... deal with Sanguine... and Lighthooves... and Lancer... and now fallen stars too, apparently! It made me want to stick my head in a hole and scream.

Then I heard a suppressed giggle. It wasn't the giggle itself that caught my attention, though, so much as who it sounded like and the fact that I'd never expected to hear it from him. Carefully, I trotted to the corner of the chapel and peeked around behind it. Yes, P-21 and... oh... my...

Priest and P-21 sat together in each other's hooves, the smaller blue pony resting his head on the black unicorn's shoulder. It wasn't just that they were cuddling that was shocking, though; it was the smile on my friend's face. "This is nice..." he murmured. "I haven't felt like this... happy... in a long time."

"You deserve some happiness. All of you do," Priest said softly.

"I don't," P-21 murmured as he reached up to touch his neck. Priest silenced him with a kiss that turned his whole face red. I started to pull away, but what I heard next made me linger.

"Do not start talking like Blackjack. You both deserve to be happy. It makes me want to thump you both when I hear you talking like you don't," Priest said firmly.

P-21 flushed and touched the scar around his throat again. "She saved me. She *keeps* saving me. Everypony does. Over and over again." He closed his eyes. "I can't understand it. I'm not her. I'm no hero trotting around the Wasteland. I don't even like most other ponies. Sometimes, I feel like I *hate* everypony in the world. Especially her." He pressed his face into Priest's neck. "Especially me."

Priest didn't recoil or pull away but simply held him. "I'm glad she did. I like you, P-21. You're serious and you're focused and so determined. And you have a lot of reasons to be angry with the world. I hope that I get to give you the kind of love and attention a pony like you deserves." He sighed gently. "You have no idea how hard it is to see so many ponies you want to desperately help... but know that they're just going to finish their pilgrimage and rejoin Celestia."

P-21 looked towards the bridge a little longer than I liked, but then he shook his head. "No. I don't think I'll do that now." Then he pulled away and gave the black unicorn a little smile. "So... if you like bucks... why..." He gestured vaguely in the direction of Star House.

"You mean Arlostee? I was barely older than a colt and an older, powerful mare took me into her bed. And she was like you... confused and hurt... so there was no way I could tell her no. I won't say it was forced, but she was the first mare I was ever interested in. And the last." Okay. That was my cue to go!

"Not even Blackjack?" Or stay! Damn it, P-21. Why'd you have to ask that?

"No. No offense to Blackjack, but I could never be in a relationship with her. She's far too... self-destructive," Priest said gently, but with a firmness that made my butt hit the floor. Another kiss, and I started to creep away, face burning in embarrassment. I definitely didn't want to hear any more. Then... "Do you like Blackjack?"

I dashed back as silently as a zebra, poking my head around the corner to peek at the pair again. Okay! Maybe I should hang around a little while longer. Just in case. I bit my left foreleg just to make

sure I didn't speak as my ears twitched. He couldn't. He wouldn't...

"What's not to love?" P-21 sighed. *Habazawah?! "She saves ponies. She'll save the entire world if she can. I can't even make it on my own for ten minutes."* He closed his eyes. "I just wish I didn't hate her so much." That made my blood chill till I heard him choke and he curled up a little. "I just wish I understood what I was supposed to feel! I'm used to hate. I hate so damned much. And I feel horrible for hating my friends!" he said as he pressed his face to Priest's neck. The black pony hugged him gently. "I'm such a bad pony... and she's... she's so good it hurts! But she killed him, though... I *should* hate her! Shouldn't I? You can't forgive and love somepony who killed somepony you loved! That's... messed up..."

Then Priest calmly looked right at me! My eyes popped wide in shock and embarrassment. But he slowly shook his head with a little smile. "The first step towards healing hatred is admitting it. Get it out of your system... don't let it fill you up until you're drowning in it. You feel what you feel. You do what you do. And you don't let fear, shame, and hatred control you." He stroked P-21's mane. "I'm sure you can tell her how you feel..."

But P-21 clenched his eyes and shook his head. "I can't. Not to her. Not till... not till I can look at her without wanting to kill her. Not till I can... without feeling... shame..." he said softly and trembled. "She... she saved my life, and a part of me *still* wants to kill her..." He cringed as he curled up against Priest. "What is wrong with me?"

Priest just patted his back. "You're in the Hoof, P-21." And that was all that needed to be said. "I'm sure that when you're ready... she'll be happy to listen to you," he said as he looked at me with a firm gaze that demanded I treat P-21 with far more care than I had. Still biting my lip, I nodded. I'd never bring it up... not till he was ready. Priest sighed, stroking his mane as he looked back down at the buck in his embrace.

P-21 sniffed quietly as he looked up into Priest's eyes and Priest gazed back. "He told me... he told me that meeting me was the luckiest day of his life."

"I know the feeling," Priest said softly. And once more, their lips met and their eyes closed, Priest's in kindness and P-21's in desperation. I was pretty sure that that was my cue to leave. I trotted silently away.

* * *

For once, we had a nice night in Star House. Priest had stopped by with P-21, the two nudging rumps more than a few times as they stood close together. Medley brought some purchases for Glory, mostly ammunition. Glory made dinner. Rampage pretended to be poisoned by it. Everypony was laughing. Medley gave Scotch Tape the 'stable ponies don't know nothin' routine when asked about where the bathroom was. Scotch Tape complained bitterly about having to use an outhouse, the filly promising to bring proper sanitation to the Wasteland or die trying. I teased her about having a toilet for a cutie mark, and she looked so embarrassed that she checked immediately. Lacunae quietly watched from the periphery with a sad, lonely little smile.

Until I asked her to do some magic tricks. Suddenly dragged into the middle of our attention, the alicorn couldn't seem to help herself. The 'Great and Powerful Lacunae' summoned a little thundercloud that zapped Rampage's rump, animated a rope that prompted a bondage joke that had me blushing and Glory grinning, and made little neon illusions of my fight with Psychoshy. I grumbled a little at the crotch shot; my nethers were twinging in reflex.

Then somepony suggested I get Octavia's contrabass and play for them. Lacunae and Scotch had never heard me perform before, and so I pulled it downstairs and stood with the bow. Both Priest

and Medley still seemed faintly amused that I'd use an instrument instead of magic; apparently, you just weren't a real unicorn musician if you didn't use your horn to play... I really didn't know what exactly I was playing as I started to drag the black horsehair bow across the strings, but apparently it was good enough to earn stomping applause. Then Priest stood and moved next to me. His horn glowed, and a violin began to play alongside me. I noticed that the magic music was a little tinnier than that produced by the actual instrument.

Side by side we played, me horrible and him more than making up for my little mistakes. Medley listened before she rose to her hooves and joined us with a second, higher violin noise. She was definitely far more snarky and playful as her music danced and flitted about Priest's more serious notes. When we ended the song, I looked at Lacunae with a speculative little smirk.

"No no no... We couldn't. We shouldn't!" she stammered. "The Goddess... erm... I mean... I don't play!"

"You know the spell, don't you?" Priest asked calmly. The purple alicorn nodded once. "Well, then, we'd love for you to join us. But you don't have to."

"Don't worry, Lacunae. You can't be worse than me," I said as I rested my cheek on the neck of the instrument, feeling oddly like I was hugging somepony. "So don't worry if you're not good."

Slowly, she moved to stand behind the three of us. I levitated one of the books of music over and flipped through. "What should we play?" I asked as I looked at the titles. Then one caught my eye. "Canon D? What about A, B, and C?"

"A fine choice," Priest said in approval.

"Oh, yeah. That's one of my favorites. Won't be the same without Sonata's kazoo, though," Medley added.

"Yes... We... I know it well," Lacunae whispered solemnly in our minds.

I took a deep breath as I gripped the bow, looking at the music. Slowly the notes began to roll out across the living room. I took some comfort in the easy pacing for my instrument as it rose and fell as casually as breathing. Then Priest began to play in careful, calm, considerate notes, his horn glowing steadily as he closed his eyes, playing by ear. A few seconds later, Medley joined in, her notes prancing after his with little variations that mixed nicely with his steady playing.

Then Lacunae started to play. She wasn't good. She wasn't even decent.

She was spectacular.

Her violin, sounding deeper and richer than the other two, rolled out beneath Priest and Medley in a sweet, sad melody. With Priest and Medley, we heard music. With me, we heard noise that might have been mistaken for music. What rose from Lacunae's horn was pure soul. As she played, I imagined a little purple alicorn sitting all alone, playing the only instrument that gave her joy.

Lacunae had said parts of her were missing. I'd eat my tail if this wasn't one of those parts. Lacunae, alicorn or not, was a musician. I was sure of it as our four notes blended together into one whole. The contrabass hit the eight notes with regularity, providing the foundation for the other three. Harmony. It might not be Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, or Loyalty, but as sure as the stars in the sky and overhead, it was Magic.

* * *

That night, Star House was full once more. We doubled up the beds since there was so little sleeping space. I'd given Glory a grin, but her face mirrored Midnight's to an unnerving degree as she trotted to her own room with Medley. Priest and P-21 slipped into the room they'd both claimed. Rampage took her bed with Lacunae in the living room. That left Scotch Tape with me. She didn't seem very happy with it, but there was nowhere else for her to sleep. There was more than enough room as we settled in for the night.

My dreams were normal, full of chlorine and screams, rooms full of foals with a softly singing lullaby, and a hanging friend. I wasn't sleeping on exhaustion, so every few hours I woke, looked at the sleeping Scotch Tape, and drifted back to sleep. Once, I woke to her crying in her sleep, patting her shoulder softly as she called out for her mommy in her dreams.

Then I woke to a very unexpected sensation of warmth on my side. I smelled the ammonia smell and jerked almost completely awake. Scotch Tape blinked as I floundered. I breathed more heavily than I had while getting shot at by Lancer, my heart flopping like a giant leech inside my chest.

All because Scotch Tape had wet the bed.

The olive mare just wrapped the blankets around herself as she hung her head in shame, doing all she could to not break down completely. I kicked myself for my reaction; I'd dealt with far worse. She didn't need me freaking out now. Slowly I trotted around the bed to sit next to her. "I'm sorry..." she sniffled. "I guess I'm just a big... dumb... foal..." she muttered as she shook.

I hugged her close. "No. You're a filly that's had horrible things happen. That doesn't make you dumb or a baby," I said, repeating almost word for word what had been said to me. She let out another sob as she broke down, vomiting out all the pain she'd been trying to hide.

"I miss her so much! I miss them all so much!" she wailed into my chest as she held me tight in desperation.

I sniffed softly, my tears slower and more practiced. "I do too. I dream about them every night."

It took about ten minutes for her to calm down. "I'm sorry. I thought... I thought I could be tough. Not a cry baby. Peeing the bed..." she said in disgust.

"Hey, it could be worse. You could have been me. I wet the bed till I was almost as old as you... only I didn't have anything bad happen to me. I just couldn't be bothered to wake up," I said, exaggerating the facts just a little.

She laughed despite her tears and I lifted the sheets to wipe her eyes. "Ewww... gross, Blackjack."

"I'm serious. It was so bad Mom requisitioned yellow sheets. Almost had medical check me," I said with a grin as she laughed.

Finally she slipped out of the bed and stripped off the wet blankets. "Thanks," she said softly.

"We're all damaged, Scotch. All of us. Even Priest. Probably Medley. You don't have to pretend like you're the only pony in the world too tough to be messed up," I said as I bundled them up with my magic. Quietly, we trotted downstairs to where Lacunae was mending the rips and tears in her dress.

She could teleport, shoot magic arrows, shield herself, use a minigun, play beautiful music, and sew... what couldn't she do? Apparently laundry. We found a bucket in the closet and filled it with some

detergent and water, my magic scrubbing and rinsing the sheets clean with water from the pump behind the house. We'd just finished as the others woke up.

Glory looked at the sheets in confusion. "Um... isn't it a little early to be doing the wash?" she asked as I strung them out on some low hanging branches. It'd be a miracle if they ever dried in Hoofington's weather. Scotch Tape flushed as she looked away; Glory looked at the olive filly questioningly.

I took a deep breath, trying to think of something to say. "I wet the bed!" I blurted. She blinked in shock. "Terrible. Absolutely terrible," I added, going more and more red as Glory just stared. "I think the mattress might be destroyed."

"You *what?*" Medley said from the doorway, her eyes going round with glee. So much for last night earning me some respect or bonding from the chartreuse filly. She raced towards Chapel, laughing. If only I had Taurus's rifle... I could claim it was an accident. A terrible accident...

"You know you shouldn't drink so much before you go to bed," Glory said, adding, "and always make sure you go potty before going to sleep if you think it'll be a problem." I was pretty sure my hide matched the red in my mane.

"What's going on?" Rampage asked as P-21 and Priest stepped out as well.

Oh, sweet Celestia, would it ever end?

* * *

Priest had agreed to shutter the house and finish the laundry. Of all my friends, he seemed to have guessed the truth, but if he had he'd decided to keep it to himself. Well rested and restocked with food and ammo, we were ready to take on the tunnel. I expected it to be dangerous. I expected it to be dark and creepy.

I hadn't expected it to be huge!

The tunnel was wide enough for four tracks to disappear into the earth and high enough that even Glory didn't appear too claustrophobic. Hanging overhead were immense winches and cables that still remained taut despite the rust and corrosion. An entire freight train loaded with heaps of rusting crates and boxes was still connected to the apparatus, kept from plunging down the steep grade into the earth by what looked like solid rust.

"What were those for?" Glory asked as she looked at the cables overhead.

"Probably to help the freight trains up and down the grade into the tunnel," P-21 said as he pointed down into the musty depths. The walls of the tunnel had been painted a noxious green, and over the entrance were the words 'Hoofington Industrial Access Tunnel #1'. Beneath that, 'Restricted Area' and beneath *that*: 'Protected by Aegis Securities'. P-21 pointed at the hulking engine at the end of the train. "That doesn't look like the steam locomotives in our books."

"It's not," Rampage said as she trotted past the immense vehicle. "At the end of the war, almost nothing used coal besides the power plants. This probably used a spark generator to power the train."

"I wonder how train flats from Brimstone's made it through here if it's so dangerous," I muttered.

"Oh, that's simple. Ride down into the tunnel without brakes and throw a few slaves off to feed the ghouls. Works every time, I've heard," Rampage said with a mirthless smirk. "Getting through the

tunnels is tons easier when you've got some acceptable casualties with you."

"Bottlecap says that Dusty now just stops at the tunnel and hoofs everything over to Chapel. She's buried in business now. They don't even try the tunnels anymore," Glory added as we slowly trotted down the steep tracks. I wondered why they didn't use a gentler grade. Great, another addition to the millions of questions I'd likely never the answers to. Maybe Rover knew...

The subway tunnels had been a mess of broken trains, crackled walls, and collapsed concrete. In comparison, the green line was almost completely intact. The concrete didn't show the slightest bit of cracking, and even the metal surfaces showed barely any corrosion. There was far less rubbish down here, too. There was the occasional tin can or barrel, but for the most part the trains sat silently connected to taut cables, waiting for the control or command to get them moving again. When the grade flattened out, we moved through an immense green switch yard beneath the earth. A low thrum surrounded us, and I could feel a dry, warm breeze blowing from deeper down.

"It still has power," Glory marveled. "We could do so much with Hoofington... you know? If the radiation level's not too high and we could solve the Enevation problem, we could do so much for Equestria."

"But where does the power come from?" I asked as I looked at the green lights set in the ceiling. Each one cast a wan circle of light spaced along the tracks, but many of them had broken, leaving sickly spots of light amid cloying shadow.

"The dams," Rampage replied. "At least, that's what the Steel Rangers think. If they hadn't been so fixated on the HMS *Celestia*, they probably would have set up shop in the dams. Of course, the Eggheads are the only ponies that can actually get the damned power where it needs to go."

"So why don't they work together?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Because that would be sane and sensible," Rampage replied. "But the Steel Rangers want to control technology. Eggheads want to fiddle around with it. Not a lot of compromise between the two."

I floated out Rover's map. "So, we need to find the G-3 tunnel," I said as I looked into the gloom.

Something flitted through a distant patch of light.

Out came Vigilance and my new sword. Nothing on my E.F.S. Not a sound to be heard, either. After the museum, however, I wasn't trusting bars. Everyone else had frozen too. "What is it?" Glory asked as she hovered above us.

Then I heard the soft clicking sound. Faint, rapid, and soft. And all around us. "Something bad..." P-21 muttered as he loaded a grenade. A low and unnatural growl echoed through the cavernous chamber. "Make that really bad."

Suddenly, the clicking doubled, and with my night vision I saw a faint shimmer charging right at the six of us. "Here they come," I shouted as I raised Vigilance and fired at the racing blur. The bullets clanged as they struck metal, and there was a magical flash as my target leapt the final distance. I rose, my hooves meeting the mechanical monster as it rammed into me. Claws ripped at my armor and pneumatic jaws hissed as they snapped closed inches from my face. The canine was almost entirely metal save for a gray blob of brain matter in a jar atop its head. I'd heard about robot ponies with brains, but this was a first.

Then, as I struggled with the first, a second raced forward and bit my hind leg. A jerk and the cyberdog had pulled my leg out from under me! I went down, kicking and screaming, as the mechanical

monster on top slowly twisted its head and opened its jaws for my throat. All around me, my friends opened fire as more and more of the cloaked robots appeared and attacked. Green lightning flashed from the robot's glassy dome, and my vision blurred as the world twisted around me for a moment. It was all I could do to magic its jaws apart.

Then Scotch Tape jumped on its back, squeezing tight with all four hooves as she beat on the dome with a wrench clenched in her jaws. The dome cracked, popped, and finally shattered as she pulverized the gray wad with the end of her wrench. The dog gave a spastic jerk and tumbled off me. I sat up and my horn flashed, three magic bullets shredding the transparent brain casing of the other one.

As big a weakness as a targetable brain was, they could have done with a few more. The machines were strong, fast, and worked together. They also had those disorienting brain zaps. When not engaged in combat, a blue talisman in their chests would flare and they'd disappear. Glory and Lacunae fought together side by side, Lacunae strafing the open areas around us and Glory sending emerald beams of death into any shimmers that appeared. I worked with Scotch Tape, more shielding the filly than I liked to admit. I wasn't going to have another Scoodle on my conscience! Rampage freely engaged three or four of them at a time, ignoring the friendly fire from P-21. After his grenades hit, she mopped up what was left as her own injuries healed.

"Why are you... nunngh... grinning like that?" Rampage asked the blue pony.

P-21 laughed as he popped open Persuasion and loaded a new grenade. "Oh, this is very therapeutic."

Then four of the cyberdogs fell upon Glory and Lacunae. I had no idea if they'd jumped or could run on ceilings. One of them clamped its jaws down on Glory's wing and began to pull. The jaws worked, chewing and crushing the appendage as she screamed and tumbled. Lacunae teleported ten feet up, leaving the cyberdogs to crash beneath her. The minigun swiveled down and blasted at the fallen canines, eroding them with a pillar of fire and bullets. Then two more glued to the support pillars raked the alicorn with their brain lightning.

"Glory!" I shouted as I raced to her, slipping into S.A.T.S. to blow the dome off the cyberdog. It died with its jaws clenched on the wing. "Hold still!"

She grimaced with pain as she trembled beneath it. "I'm not going anywhere."

I tried to pry it open with the sword, but it wasn't moving. "Scotch! I need you!" I called, returning my attention to the fighting. The olive filly raced up with two snapping at her flanks till I split one dome with the sword and blasted my last three rounds into the dome of the other. "Free her, quick!" I said as I shoved the second one away. It wasn't quite getting the message that now it was supposed to die!

As Scotch Tape worked, I saw things weren't going well. I had no idea how many of these things there were. Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? P-21 was trying to use the heavy barrel of the grenade launcher as a bludgeon, his shoulders bleeding from claw lacerations. The canines were now blasting Lacunae almost continuously with their green zaps and Rampage was all but buried beneath them. Then one of the dogs bit me and ripped at my armor so hard that the saddlebag split and dumped half my possessions across the floor. I shouted and struggled without success.

Then one bit a forehoof. Then one bit a rear hoof. And then I knew exactly how Scoodle felt as they started to pull! We were about to be ripped to pieces by robotic brain dogs. Could it get any worse?

Did I actually just think that?

A mechanical growl cut through the cavernous space, echoed and magnified. Suddenly, the

cyberdogs went still. My legs were released as they cautiously backed away. From the gloom approached a massive beast of metal. This was the Deus of cyberdogs. Armor plating covered every inch of its matte black form. Its red eyes glared balefully at the six of us as two shoulder mounted cannons pointed right at me. This wasn't a cyberdog! This was the size of a bear!

It opened jaws big enough to crush my head as it snarled in my face. I swallowed as I stared at grinders inside its throat. Who the hell had designed this thing?

Then it closed its mouth, red eyes staring down at me. Slowly, it turned as if inspecting the battlefield. Its heavy metal claws scraped at the stone as it walked to the fallen Ministry Mare figurines; it stepped right on Rainbow Dash, but the figurine was apparently too awesome to be pulverized by mechanical death beasts.

It stopped and then stretched down to bump its muzzle against the tiny orange form of Applejack. From within the beast came a low little whine. Again and again it nudged the bucking figure before it sat down and raised its head in a long low howl. Looking at the figurine one last time, the giant mechanical beast turned and stalked back the way it had come. One by one, the remaining cyberdogs rose and trotted after it on softly clicking claws. Just like that, they disappeared back into the recesses of the tunnel.

"What the fuck was that?" Rampage asked as she adjusted her armor.

"I..." Was that... "I don't know," I said as I levitated the little orange figurine, sitting and hugging it as I looked in the direction the security cyberdogs had gone. I found myself imagining that the tiny Applejack was crying, though.

* * *

We found the tunnel we needed, moving quickly and quietly along the wide open space. There was no debris blocking our way, which also meant that there was no cover. Twice turrets dropped from the ceiling above to rake the tunnel with flashing pink bolts of disintegration magic. Without cover, we had only moments to destroy them before they destroyed us. And we didn't always succeed...

"Don't laugh," Rampage muttered as she trotted beside Scotch Tape, the striped filly cursing under her breath in decidedly unfillylike fashion.

"You shielded me," Scotch Tape said awkwardly, "I'm not going to laugh. I just... I wonder why you're this old?"

"Huh?" Rampage blinked as she looked at the olive filly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you look like you're five or six... right? So why don't you regenerate as a newborn? Or my age?" Scotch Tape asked. "Why five or six?"

Rampage opened her mouth... then closed it with a small frown. "I dunno. I never thought about it," she said as she cocked her head. "I mean, I'm fifty or sixty years old... but I don't know why I'd pop back to this specific age every time." She rubbed her chin. "Now that you mention it... I don't age up older than twenty or thirty-ish."

And *another* to the hundred or so mysteries we were dealing with. Right next to 'what was the source of all this radiation?' It wasn't a lot, but it was consistent. Everypony except Lacunae had taken a dose of Rad-X. I supposed that she was benefiting from it... but even she seemed definitely... off. It was almost as if she were in pain.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I nudged the purple alicorn. She flinched and bit her lip, shaking her head firmly.

“The screams are... strong. Very strong. I don’t want to stay here,” she said in a whimper in my head. “Please, let us hurry.”

But we only got a hundred yards further when we came to an immense door that completely sealed off the tunnel. ‘Hoofington Core Access #12-411J.’ “This must go to the Core,” I muttered as I thumped the door. Heavy as concrete. “I don’t suppose you can pick it?” I asked P-21 with a grin. He gave me a look that suggested that that question opened up whole new worlds of how stupid I was if I was serious. I consulted the map. “Okay. Good news, we don’t have to get through the door. Look for Sewer Access 12-99. It should be in that wall.” I pointed to our left.

Glory had found it. Her wing still wasn’t right, even after taking a healing potion. Of course, the hatch was locked, but P-21 got out his pins and got to work. Two tries later, he had it open. This tunnel was far ranker, the air heavy and wet. Oddly, there wasn’t any mildew or rot down here. I supposed the radiation killed everything. There were also no lights, so I turned on my PipBuck lamp. Scotch Tape did the same. Lacunae’s glowing magic illuminated the rear as we entered the tight tunnels. Everything curved, so I couldn’t see how far we had to go.

“Think you can get DJ Pon3 down here?” Rampage asked. “All this quiet is freaking me out.”

“Doubt it... but...” I turned on my radio and set it to search for a signal. Static. Static. Static.

Then a mare spoke in a rush, “...is Team Delta. We’re trapped in Adjunct 33-99B. The shields are up. Please lower the shields. We’ve got critical information from Canterlot. The Sun has risen. The Moon has not been freed. The Stars are still in play. I repeat, team leader, the stars are still in play! This is Team Delta. We’re trapped in adjunct...” And the message kept looping over and over again. I looked at Rover’s map but couldn’t find an Adjunct 33-99B anywhere on it.

“One of those teams, you think? The ones who knew about the bombs?” Glory asked from behind me.

“I suppose,” I said, wondering if that broadcasting had been looping for two centuries with a message that had never reached its recipient.

* * *

“I think we’re lost,” I muttered after half an hour. I turned the map over in front of me and squinted at the faded lines. “I don’t know if we’re supposed be going in this direction or not.”

“Lost?” P-21 said as he nudged in to my left to look at the map.

“No... I think we’re supposed to keep going this way,” Glory said, pointing with her uninjured wingtip as she squeezed in to my right.

“I thought it was right at that last tunnel,” Rampage said as she squeezed in under me, looking at the map.

“No, this is the right way. See?” Scotch Tape had wiggled in next to Rampage and was pointing up with her hoof.

“But then shouldn’t we already be at that factory thingy?” Rampage asked.

"I believe we should," Lacunae agreed, leaning over my head to look down at the map.

"A little personal space, please!" I shouted. I immediately winced at the echo sounding off through the tunnels, but at least my friends fell back enough to let me breathe. Looking at the map, I poked a little square marked 'HMF'. "If this is the right way, then this place should be just off to our left. Look for some sign of 'HMF', whatever that is."

We spread out a little bit, but the further we went, the more certain I was that this wasn't where we were supposed to be. Why did this tunnel look... burned? A distance past that, we did find a door marked HMF, but, instead of being tightly sealed, the entire thing was twisted in its frame. The burn marks were very prominent here, especially on the wall opposite the door and the floor and ceiling near it. I squeezed through and found a deformed metal-lined passage; the walls of the tube looked like they'd melted slightly and then resolidified. My radiation meter suddenly started to click a lot more urgently. I proceeded down the tunnel cautiously, but it seemed safe. Well, relatively. Nothing down here but drippy-looking metal.

"Come on through," I said, peeking out. I helped the others squeeze through, and then only Lacunae was left outside. I looked expectantly at her, but she took one look through the gap and flashed through to the far side. I looked at her, the gap, and then at her again; okay, yes, expecting her to squeeze through that was not one of my better ideas.

The alicorn immediately took a deep breath and smiled blissfully. "Oh, this is better."

I took one look at my radiation meter spiking and swallowed. "Yeah. Better." I shared a look with the rest of my friends and we immediately took another Rad-X.

We advanced down the passage and found... it looked like something in another chamber had half blasted, half melted through the tunnel's wall. Twisted debris had been melted into the walls, and the floor was covered with what looked like hardened flows of mixed liquid metal and rock. The tunnel continued a bit farther to a short flight of stairs leading up to a heavy door, but that had melted into its frame. If we wanted to continue, we'd have to go through the hole.

The hole looked like something a giant bullet would punch in a metal target, except that whatever had done this had blasted through rock and two layers of metal. On the other side, there was a drop to the 'floor', but there was enough congealed molten ruin for us to scramble down. The room was one massive pile of slag. Whatever had happened in here, it had melted every surface into a frozen landscape of dripping metal. Blackened steel stalactites dangled down above us, and we had to take care not to step upon or trip over lumps and spikes extending from the floor like alien and dangerous works of art. In the very center of the mass was a large hunk of cracked, blackened rock; I looked up at the ceiling, but there didn't seem to be anywhere the rock could have fallen from.

"What the hell is this place?" I asked as we spread out a little. There were red bars in my vision in all directions, but for all I knew they could be above, below, or through solid rock. Still, I gestured for everypony to have their guns ready.

"Someplace bad," Scotch muttered, drawing her wrench. I couldn't disagree. There was a runny doorway, sans door, in the side of the room; behind it was a stairway leading up. Fortunately, the stairs had been dug as a tunnel rather than built in a vertical chamber and were still mostly intact. At the top

was a room full of fried terminals and scattered scrap. One wall of the room had what looked like large windows in it, but blast shields had lowered over them... and been melted through. Now the twisted voids looked out on the room we'd just come from. Burned out talismans and crystals were in abundance. Whatever had happened here, it hadn't been good.

There was a door in the wall opposite the windows; on the other side, two identical-looking metal corridors led off at angles. The damage here wasn't as bad; these looked more like the entry tunnel I'd squeezed into than the liquefied blast chamber. At random, we picked left.

At the tunnel's midpoint was a melted-shut metal door that was probably the one leading to the tunnel we'd entered through, and at the tunnel's end was an intersection identical to the one we'd found outside the melted chamber. This one's terminal-filled room was more intact, though, and had a large #5 painted against the far wall beside the observation windows. Sooty ash and burned bones lay everywhere around the observation room, but the chamber beyond the windows wasn't burned at all. In fact, except for the glass of the windows, everything in the room on the other side, including the large gray rock in the middle, looked as if it was covered in frost!

"Hey, this one is still active," P-21 said as he sat before one terminal and started to type. Then he frowned. "Okay. Definitely going to take a while."

"Do we have a while?" Scotch Tape asked as she looked at her own PipBuck.

"Let's look for a way out while he works. Scotch, can you give him a hoof?" I asked from the intersection, peering down the other passageway. She nodded, looking grateful to be staying behind with the blue buck. We broke into pairs and split up, Rampage and Lacunae continuing in the direction we'd been going while Glory and I started back to investigate the other corridor at the melted room intersection.

We found a T intersection and, after discovering going straight ahead would take us to another identical junction, turned right instead. Glory looked a bit pained as we walked, that savage bite to her wing still bleeding a little.

"How are you holding up?" I asked softly as we trotted past storerooms filled with knocked over, twisted shelves of scrap electronics, spark batteries, and Wonderglue. Most of them were fire damaged, but here and there were ones that didn't look that bad. I made sure to pocket all the reasonably intact-looking ones for when we got out of here.

Glory peered down the hallway before she glanced at her injury with a worried look. "I don't know. I've never hurt my wings before."

"Never?" I asked in surprise. They looked delicate. Fragile, even.

She gave me a crooked little grin. "I know I'm not a flier like Dusk, but trust me. Pegasus wings are tough. Once a pegasus is airborne, well... there're stories of pegasi during the war flying full speed straight down into zebra formations. That's why Rainbow Dash was always trying to get pegasi to sign up." She swallowed as she looked nervously at the bite. "That dog gave me everything it had. If it'd bit my leg like that... or my throat..." She gave a nervous little shake of her head and smiled. "Lucky me, it bit the toughest part of me."

"Still," I said as we continued along the metal hallway, "I'm sorry you keep getting hurt following

me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m tough,” she said as she looked through a doorway and frowned. “What is that?”

It was another mostly-intact monitoring room, this one lit with a strange, sharp arclight glow. Side by side we moved forward, me with my slug-loaded shotgun ready while Glory hovered above with a look of sharp discomfort. The lights weren’t just sharply defined... they were moving. And what a coincidence, the red bars moved with the light. Step by step, I shuffled closer, and...

Was that a unicorn?

It might have been a unicorn once, but its flesh had melted away and left only the glowing skeleton. Its tattered and burned uniform still hung on its brilliantly glowing bones; a nimbus of glaring white light was emanating from the skeletal remains. They didn’t walk so much as hover silently over the ground as the light flickered around and through them. They looked more like milky crystal than bone. The... thing looked right at me as the green glow within its sockets flared.

Oh, fuck this. I entered S.A.T.S. and blasted four rounds into its skull. Shining bone and tattered cloth exploded around it. It let out a scream so high it was almost beyond hearing but nearly floored me in pain. The bones flickered and went dark, though, and the skeleton collapsed in a shattered heap.

Too bad it wasn’t alone.

Two more floated into view, and from the horn of the first a line of distortion wavered through the air and swept across the passage. It had absolutely no effect on the walls, my barding, or my flesh.

It did, however, shatter every bone in my legs as it passed through me. I fell into a screaming heap, tears running down my cheeks as I fired round after round into the floating skeletons. Glory’s emerald beam seemed far less effective than my crude but brutal shotgun slugs. I lunged to the side, feeling the broken shards digging into my flesh as another bone-shattering beam sliced vertically past me. The second one shattered in a shower of bone, and finally our combined shots transformed the third into a heap of glowing ash.

I lay on my side, feeling four crippled limbs sag against the floor. “What was that?” Glory asked as she pulled my barding aside to look at the smooth, uninjured skin and the broken bulges beneath it.

“I don’t care, so long as we can kill it,” I groaned as I lay back. I saw the hesitation on her face. “What is it?”

“I... Our healing potions aren’t much good down here. I don’t think...”

“Give me a Hydra,” I replied without hesitation.

“Blackjack, remember what Rampage said! Enervation plus Hydra equals liquid Blackjack. And there’s the taint in it to consider.”

“Don’t go Lacunae on me and start quoting fancy math,” I replied with a shaky smile. It felt like all four of my legs were being dipped in fire. “Dead Blackjack here or dead Blackjack when we run into more of those things. You decide. If you have a Hydra, give it to me.”

Glory closed her eyes and fished out the syringe. The gray goop went to work at once, and I did all I could not to cry out as I felt my shattered limbs regenerate. The shards were pulled into place piece by piece and reformed. Oddly, the pain suddenly slackened to a dull ache, and I blinked as I rose to my hooves. Was it just me, or did I actually feel... good? “Huh. It looks like that did the trick.”

"It doesn't hurt?" she asked in confusion, and I shook my head. She didn't say anything else, but she looked troubled as I walked to one of the large observation windows. There was an odd rainbow glow shining through it.

The chamber beyond wasn't melted at all. At the center of it was an immense diamond as large as a pony's head and shining with a corona of light. Arranged about it in an almost a perfect ring were a dozen unicorn skeletons. Four more trotted around, moving as if checking the equipment along the periphery. I didn't think that any of it looked functional; it was as if the bones were simply going through the motions.

I glanced at Glory and forced a grin. "Let me guess. That's just a really big gemstone and has nothing to do with all the spooky glowing bones, right?"

Glory shook her head. "No, I think it's a direct cause, Blackjack." I resisted the urge to facehoof. At her next words, I found that very easy. "I think that that's a megaspell chamber."

"A what?" I shouted. Then I clasped my hooves over my mouth, but it looked like the bones down there still hadn't noticed us. "That's a megaspell?" What idiot puts *megaspells* under a *city*?

Glory nodded. "I've seen diagrams in textbooks. The spell matrix amplifies a spell exponentially with every unicorn that's channeling the spell. The diamond is sort of like a giant spark battery; it stores the spell until it's triggered. Or the storage framework destabilizes; they don't last that long--usually," she added with a curious and worried look at the chamber below, "--which is why fully staffed bases like this had to be built." I frowned as I looked closer at the circle; I had seen something like this before... when I was inside Stonewing getting fused with a cockatrice. Over the glare I could barely make out a magical symbol floating inside the huge diamond. "That glyph is a representation of the stored megaspell's effect."

"Effect? I thought that they just went 'boom'," I said with a little frown.

"Well, there were megaspells that exploded. The very first weaponized megaspells were ignition spells amplified by a million, like lighting a billion candles all at once. But there were tons of other megaspells developed that were a lot more insidious. Like one that was supposed to make every zebra in an entire city want a worthless rock to the point of killing each other. Or one that was supposed to transform everything in its volume of effect to water. I understand that one megaspell actually was supposed to made every zebra affected swap sides and be loyal to Princess Luna."

I shivered at the thought. "Mass mind control... yay."

Glory gave a wan smile. "Better than killing them all, right?" I wasn't exactly sure about that. Glory looked pensively at the room below for a moment. "This spell shouldn't have stayed stable for anywhere near this long. I think that when it started to degrade... it probably animated those bones, and they've been restoring it since. It's a feedback loop."

"Wow. You know, I think I like the tunnels of Hoofington even more than Hoofington itself. We really should bring everypony down here for tours," I said as I backed away from the window. Knowing my luck, I'd sneeze and set it off.

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. This place is far too hazardous for..." She caught my arched brow and smile. "Ah... right. Could you please warn me when you're going to be sarcastic?" she asked, hanging her brow and looking a little sheepish.

"Of course not. That'd ruin the fun!" I said with a chuckle. Then I heard the faintest whirr. For a

moment, I thought it was just a fan of some sort working, but then a sharp-eyed pink party pony poked my brain and pointed out a camera no bigger than an apple set in the corner. And as I moved towards the exit, it tracked to follow me.

Somehow, I doubted that it was Spike...

* * *

Over the next half hour, we'd come across three more megaspell chambers, but these were dark and dead. Their diamond cores had transformed into lumps of ugly gray stone. We'd also come across several more unicorn remains trotting about their business. One lot's horns fired pink disintegration bolts that nearly had me turned into a pile of pink goop. Another, to my infinite chagrin, fired powerful magical bullets at me in a near exact copy of my own signature spell! That just wasn't fair!

And every camera we passed followed us.

There was other fun, too. Protectaponies and turrets happily opened fire the moment they could target us.

I had to admit, getting attacked by a table was a little weird, but Glory had reduced it to emerald dust before it'd rammed into me. Neither of us could figure out how or why it had suddenly come to life.

Finally, we came to what looked like a large control room of some kind. 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences Hoofington Megaspell Facility' was written over a large emblem of a unicorn in profile against a starry sky. It had the same charred look as most of this place: not melted, but definitely not what I'd call intact. A massive monitor covered one wall, the screen blackened and slightly warped but still displaying an image. A... map.

"There! Look. That's Hoofington," Glory said as she pointed at a little mote along a river. To the east and south were all kinds of other names but few that I recognized. The entire map was covered in transparent blotches of different colors. Most were green or pink.

"Who marked up the map?" I asked with a smile as my eyes looked at the names. Canterlot. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Roam. Slowly, my smile faded and my eyes widened as comprehension dawned.

"Megaspell targets. Balefire strikes," Glory breathed softly.

Not dozens. Not hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands. They crawled over the map like a fungus, peppering more of the world than I could have ever imagined. In that map was reflected the insanity of two races unable to stop themselves from mutual annihilation. In that map were the deaths of tens of millions of ponies, zebra, and other creatures swept up in their conflict.

What have we done? The little ponies inside me couldn't answer that.

"Blackjack! Glory!" Rampage squealed as she charged into the room. A somber-looking Lacunae followed her at a more sedate pace. "We found the way out. It looks like it leads exactly where we're supposed to go."

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Let’s get the others.”

Then Lacunae said softly inside my mind, “Shouldn’t you do something about all that blood?”

“Blood? What...” But my words failed as I looked at my forehooves. The black material between the plates glistened wetly. Bloody hoofprints marked my passage perfectly. Fortunately, Glory was too occupied with Rampage’s tales of fighting skeletons to have noticed. I forced a grin at the purple alicorn. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not bad. Doesn’t hurt at all...”

Not at all.

Together we left the control room, the cameras watching us all the while.

* * *

Meeting back up with P-21 and Scotch Tape, I transferred what files remained on the terminal to my PipBuck so we could get out of here. We’d already spent far too long underground. As we moved back into the tunnels marked on Rover’s map, I brought up the files.

Hoofington Megaspell Facility Status

Matrix 1> Discharged. Target 114.5 N, 13.4 E Gallows Crossing
Matrix 2> Discharged. Target 119.1 N, 17.6 E Redstone Train Spur
Matrix 3> Discharged. Target 103.9 N, 19.2 E Grayridge
Matrix 4> Discharged. Target 140.0 N, 17.8 E Okambo
Matrix 5> Discharged. Target 112.1 N, 4.5 E Longrun
Matrix 6> EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR!
Matrix 7> 5% charge remaining. Target not selected.
Matrix 8> 100% charge remaining. Target not selected.

I sure hoped that the one Glory and I had found was the 100% one. I dropped to the next file. There was a lot more corruption, but I managed to find a few more bits of information.

Spell Matrix 5> Details: Refrigeration. ERROR. Data Corrupted.
Spell Matrix 6> Details: Combustion. ERROR. Data Corrupted.
Spell Matrix 7> Details: Come to Life Spell. ERROR. Data Corrupted.
Spell Matrix 8> Details: ERROR. Data Corrupted. ERROR. Data corrupted.

The last bit of useful information was a simple list.

18.41.99> Hoofington defensive alert issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.
19.05.23> Martial Law issued for Hoofington region; auth. Gen Stormbreak.
19.15.10> Stable-Tec Emergency Broadcast issued: Hoofington region; auth. STec VP Scootaloo.
19.26.11> Redoubt Priority Evacuation issued; auth. ERROR.
19.45.32> General Emergency Evacuation issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.
19.50.54> Megaspell Release issued; auth. Princess Luna EC-1010.
19.51.01> Spell Matrix 1: Discharged.
19.53.08> Spell Matrix 2: Discharged.
19.55.19> Spell Matrix 3: Discharged.
19.57.49> Spell Matrix 4: Discharged.
19.59.28> Spell Matrix 5: Discharged.
19.59.35> Hoofington Defense System activated; auth. Gen Stormbreak.
19.59.59> Emergency shutoff override issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak
ERROR ERROR ERROR ERROR

It looked like trying to raise the shield to save the city while firing off megaspells wasn't the smartest of moves. I could barely imagine the chaos: trying to give warning, trying to fire back, trying to defend themselves from the falling bombs. And something bad had already been brought here by the zebras. Some weapon that had killed everypony in the city.

Or Sekashi was right and an abomination from beyond the stars did it...

Great. Now I *really* loved being down here.

One thing was certain: the longer I was here around Hoofington, the more I wished that the balefire bombs had destroyed everything. This place had so much creepy history that it felt like the city itself was just waiting to finish killing everypony off.

* * *

Yes, that's definitely what it felt like. All of us, with the exception of Lacunae, were suffering from the radiation. It wasn't getting stronger, but it wasn't getting weaker. Slowly and steadily, it poisoned us with every little click of my PipBuck. Lacunae had another problem: her magic was failing her, the screams wearing on her. She could barely lift the minigun and had been forced to balance it between her wings.

We'd finally found the subterranean factory; in reality, it felt more like a stable than anything else. There were dozens of small rooms interconnected by conveyor belts. The stillness of the place made me shiver. Rover was right, this place did feel asleep. I knew that Glory was excited by the idea of machines helping the Wasteland, but I didn't want this factory running. I didn't know what it made. I didn't want to know. Every second we were down here, I felt more and more... watched.

Then we reached another large door sealed up tight and I swallowed hard as I looked at the map. It wasn't marked. Either Rover had forgotten, or... what did it matter. The heavy door needed power to open, regardless. Otherwise it was just a lot of wall. A wall covered with a large Robronco logo.

All of us looked tired, despite the fact we hadn't had much of a hard trip in the tunnels. We'd passed a few pony corpses, salvaged what we could from them, and continued on our way. The tunnels simply sapped our strength as quickly as the radiation poisoned us. Suddenly, there was a sharp pop, and Glory yelped as the reek of rotten eggs rolled across my nose. She dug out a healing potion. It wasn't just spoiled, but looked like boiling ink inside the bottle. Quickly, we removed our remaining healing potions; every single one of them had spoiled. Some of them appeared to be turning toxic.

Not good.

"Let's see if we can find a control room or a button or something that can get this door open," I said as I rubbed my nose. The too-dry air was starting to make my nose all scratchy.

We fanned out in pairs, me with Lacunae. The poor alicorn was in such distress that she finally just dropped the gun. I grunted as I lifted it and slung it across my back. Ugh, how the heck could she fight with a weapon like this? I felt panic nibbling at my spine at the slow creep of death working its way inside me. Every minute, the rad meter crept a little higher. I didn't think we had enough RadAway to get out of here now. It was like suffocating.

"And that's a pretty deep hole," I muttered as I came to a raw rock wall with a diagonal shaft descending even deeper into the earth. It looked like the factory had been expanding or... or something. Power cables plunged into the earth along a metal stair. I felt an unnerving sensation of being drawn into the hole, despite the fact that the breeze blew out from it. I heard the slow shuffle of cards in my mind.

Okay, now I definitely didn't want to go down there.

"Blackjack! I think I need you!" P-21 shouted from within the factory.

Lacunae seemed in such a daze that I sighed and nudged her. "Stay here. I'll be right back." I trotted along with the Dealer following me. "What are you doing here? I don't have time for crazy. I have enough scary."

"Somepony's looking for you," he said softly.

"Lots of ponies are looking for me," I said crossly as I looked around for him. "It's been a running theme these last three weeks. Deus. Sanguine. Now zebras. I'm sure that, any second now, the Zodiacs are going to appear too." I was so glad that my paranoia was giving me a memo. "If you don't mind though, I'm in a hurry!"

It took me a minute to find him in some sort of control room. "I think you might be able to unlock the door."

"Uh, you're the one that knows terminals, P-21. Not me," I said warily, looking at the screen.

>EC-1101 Authorization pending.

"It wants EC-1101?" Did that mean that this factory had something to do with one of the projects? Or was it something else?

"I don't know, but it looks like all the systems are shut down until it receives a signal from EC-1101," P-21 said as he worked the controls. "That includes the doors."

"Okay. So... how can I do this?" I asked as I lifted the PipBuck.

"Go to your broadcaster and see if it can contact a Robronco terminal. I'm hoping that just contacting the locked program will be enough to access the system. Otherwise, we're just dying in here."

I accessed my PipBuck and opened the broadcaster function. "Oh, wow... um... that's a lot of Robronco terminals." And Hoofington Defense terminals. Hoofington Stable-Tec networks. Then my eyes widened. O.I.A. access node?

I glanced at P-21 as he typed on the terminal, trying to do whatever he needed to do to get us out of here. I selected the access node.

>EC-1101 Access Required. Proceed? Y/N

>Y

"You sure you want to do this?" the Dealer asked, the old buck staring hard at me. I glared at him as I pressed yes once again.

EC-1101 suddenly flashed and gobbledygook and strange numbers scrolled past faster than I could see.

Then my PipBuck went black. "Uhhh... P-21?" I tried to hide the rising panic in my voice.

Then the lights went out in the factory. The ventilation fans stopped running. The silence that settled became overwhelming. Then a long, deep unnatural voice crackled through the air. "YOU!"

Every monitor in the control room flashed on, each one showing a staring eye. Each one looking at me as that voice crackled through countless speakers echoing throughout the factory. "EC-1101! GIVE IT TO ME!"

"What the hell! What the hell is that!?" P-21 shouted as he staggered back. Why was the room turning... green? A green light began to replace the darkness as green electricity crackled along the walls and machinery. The engines began one after the other, but instantly began to scream and smoke. Alarms started to ring out as the monitors showing those staring eyes popped one after the other. The wires within were moving!

"Running! Running now!" I screamed as I scrambled out with P-21 and Rampage. I had no clue where we were running to. All around us, the machines were going crazy. At first I thought that they were going to start making killer robots, but then I saw that the machines weren't making anything. They were moving. A housing burst apart as the metallic guts spilled out, rearranging themselves and creeping towards us. Green lightning flickered and danced along the writhing mechanical surfaces as they formed claws and tendrils.

"GIVE IT TO ME!" those thousand voices screamed at once.

That was a face... the machines were forming a massive pony face! It was slowly pushing out of the machinery as if the gargantuan monster was being birthed from the equipment. Green light blazed from its eyes as it opened its mouth and vomited dozens of electrical cables that crackled and snaked towards us.

We weren't getting out the door. The door was becoming a part of... of IT! There was a scream of metal as an entire assembly line lifted like an immense skeletal hoof towards us. I felt cables snaking around my legs. There was nowhere to run. Every part of the factory had become a part of the abomination. My friends screamed and struggled but our weapons were nothing. I didn't think a missile launcher would help against this thing.

But something else might. I reached into my pouch and withdrew the massive pistol, cracking open the breech. The silver bullet hovered in front of me.

And then the abomination froze. Its green eyes widened in shock. "YOU! YOU DARE USE THAT?!"

In reply, I slammed the bullet into Folly and clacked it closed. Instantly, the cables tightened, the lightning coursing along them burning me through my barding. "DIE!" it screamed through a thousand electrical mouths.

"You first," I gasped. I glanced at my PipBuck, seeing it active once more. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Once more, strange arcane marks appeared on my E.F.S. as the weapon interfaced with my PipBuck. I waited impatiently in the magical stasis for the words to appear in my vision.

>PipBuck synchronization: complete.

>Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

>WARNING: Biomagical pattern contamination at 25%. Please seek immediate medical attention.

>Magical field analysis: confirmed.

>WARNING: Esoteric threshold exceeded by 98.9%!

> *Authorization confirmed.*

> *Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.*

> *Do you wish to fire? Y/N?*

I had no choice.

> *Firing.*

The magical field spread over all of us, holding us in place and stopping that horrible constriction. The abomination reeled back, raising its forelegs as if it was a pony trying to shield itself.

The world disappeared in a roar of white light.

* * *

I choked and gasped, feeling half dead as I sucked in the smoky air. My whole body screamed in protest as I sat up and stared at the collapsed half of the room. Nothing remained but slightly glowing rubble. I had electrical cable wound around half my body, but I was able to carefully disentangle myself as I looked around for my friends.

Scotch Tape was in a bad way. She'd curled up completely, staring straight ahead with her hooves clamped over her mouth. Glory wasn't much better, rising on her trembling and shaking hooves. Rampage was more together; at least she wasn't shaking. P-21 simply looked right at me and asked, "What did you do?"

I raised my hoof defensively. "Hey, don't blame me for summoning that... thing. I just used EC-1101 to access a terminal. I have no idea what that... thing... was..." I looked at the melted rock and tried to take a step. My legs felt like rubber. Not weak... soft. I almost didn't want to take another step for fear that it'd bend. I was trying to keep myself together. We still had to get out of here...

One problem: no doors.

"Lacunae?" I shouted, praying that the alicorn could stand. I had no idea how we'd get her out if she couldn't. Fortunately, the purple alicorn stepped out of the gloom on unsteady legs.

There was a static crackle inside my head that made me wince. Then she swallowed, her mouth opened, and she said in a surprisingly high and steady voice, "Impressive."

"Thanks. I aim to please," I said, trying to joke through my panic. "We need to keep going. We need to get... out of here. Now." At this point, I wished we'd tried to swim across the river. Hell, I'd have happily blasted my way through the Rangers... signed up with Big Daddy.

Goddesses, I could feel my bones bending with each step! I drew a desperate gasp to hide my panic as I stretched down to shake Scotch Tape. She only whimpered and curled up tighter. I looked at the others, then said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Lacunae, but I can't carry her and your gun and ammo."

"It's only a gun," the alicorn replied simply. I shrugged the minigun and ammo drum aside and carefully laid Scotch Tape across my shoulders. I should have left her with the Crusaders. Why had I let her come with us? I took a step, feeling the give in my bones. Another. Another.

"Are you okay?" Glory asked me, her injured wing dangling beside her uselessly. It was a

phenomenally silly question. Right now, none of us were okay.

“You betcha,” I said with a grin. “Right as rain! Just a little wobbly-legged.” I forced myself to keep smiling. And step. Step. Step. In the only direction we could.

Down.

* * *

Stairs were not high on my list on things I wanted to try right now. I slumped against the guardrail the whole way down. While my legs could support me, they felt as if they might buckle at any wrong step. I did all I could to not drop Scotch Tape. Glory walked with slow, pained noises as her bloody wingtip dragged beside her. P-21 was slumping against Rampage. Lacunae seemed capable only of walking. She moved like a zombie as we continued down. And down. And down.

And I heard the screaming.

It wasn't a scream as if from a pony's throat. It was almost like the memory of a scream that I couldn't get out of my head. And this wasn't a single pony... it undulated and rose and fell and was mixed with hysterical laughter, babbling, crying, and pain. I couldn't shut it out or shut it up. Scotch Tape whimpered on my back, shaking. She'd broken at the sight of the abomination... what was a little more grievous psychological damage?

It'd almost be more merciful to let her die down here...

I misstepped and staggered, my legs giving out beneath me as I smashed my face against the guardrail. Stars swirled in my vision as I struggled to catch myself. Fortunately, I hadn't dropped her. I slowly took a deep breath and stood.

Then I proceeded to beat the everloving snot out of myself for daring to ever think that. Security saves fucking ponies. And even though I had fucked up... and fucked up... and fucked up... I would die first before I ever killed her in some fucked up gesture of mercy. I could swear I could feel Rampage's eyes on me, and I was suddenly very glad she was a filly.

“Too old” or not, I wouldn't be leaving her alone with Scotch Tape again.

Why were there stars underground? In the wan light of my PipBuck, I saw countless motes of shimmering light below us. Step by step we descended, closer and closer to those lights. Not stars... these were moving.

“What the...” I rasped, then coughed, tasting blood in my mouth as I stared at a wonder ahead of me.

The cavern was roughly triangular in shape, perhaps a hundred feet high and longer than I could see. Buildings of ghostly white stood silently in cracked decay. All around us swirled and drifted countless glowing motes of shimmering gold. They floated in and out of the stone at random. A flat plane of dark water reflected the countless floating lights. Knowing my luck, I'd plunge into a hole and drown. Step by step. I walked forward between the smashed and crumbling buildings.

A tiny mote drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

The glorious white unicorn looked particularly splendid in her rubber boots and coat as she surveyed the smashed artifacts and statuary with distaste. "Terribly gauche, wouldn't you say, Goldenblood? The marble is positively chilly. Really. What were they thinking?" she asked as she tossed her magnificent purple mane.

His chest burned horribly as he gasped for breath. "Likely... that they wouldn't be... a quarter mile... underground..."

oooOOOooo

I nearly fell on my face as the memory flashed out again. The mote continued on its way. I coughed for breath, feeling blood dripping out my nose. "Memories... they're memories..." I said as I looked back at my friends.

It didn't matter what they were now.

Lacunae looked as empty as a doll. Rampage looked even more unstable than usual. Her cutie mark shifted so rapidly it simply looked like a smear. P-21 hobbled on three legs. And Glory...

I stared as the skin holding the wing slowly stretched like taffy and then broke, the wing splashing softly into the water beside her.

I stared at her standing in a daze. She didn't know. "Glory..." I rasped, blood dripping down my chin. "Your wing..."

She looked at it lying there beside her. She slowly picked it up and held it in her hooves. "It fell off..." she said with a whimper, like a foal who's favorite toy had broken. She started to shake, at first with tears... but then she threw back her head, laughing hysterically. "It fell off! It FELL the fuck off!" And with bloody tears she laughed and sobbed at the same time. "We're going to die! We're going to die! Please let us fucking die!"

I turned to face her... a light drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

"We're safe! We're saved! Sweet Celestial! We're saved!" the earth pony mare I was in sobbed in relief as she hugged her children. Green fields of magic rose up in all directions around the city, and the bombs flashed against them without effect.

Then her nose began to bleed. Her foals began to wail. Her sight dissolved in a red slurry as her body collapsed, but the scream went on and on and on...

oooOOOooo

"We... we are not going to die." I gasped, coughing and spitting up more blood. I felt like my heart was going to stop at any moment. "Just... keep walking, Glory! There's a way out. There's got to be."

"I'm not even a pegasus now! I'm not Enclave. I'm not anything," she wailed as she broke into bloody tears, hugging her wing to her chest.

I used my magic to pull her mane down and make her look me in the eyes, not daring to try and

hold her for fear that I'd drop Scotch Tape. "Listen to me. Listen to me!" I croaked as I stared into her eyes, stopping her sobs for a moment. "Wings don't make you Glory. The Enclave doesn't make you Glory! Not giving up... that makes you Glory! Keeping going... makes you Glory! And you have to keep going. We are going to get... out..."

P-21 just slumped, and I wondered if his leg would drop off as well. "He kissed me... he kissed me..."

I shook and suddenly puked a torrent of blood and worse into the water at our hooves.

oooOOOooo

"All these artifacts will have to be removed at once," the unicorn mare said regally as we walked between the broken buildings. "We don't need any more protesters or resistance on trying to get the new zebra laws implemented."

Goldenblood walked after her, rasping and coughing. "These ruins are proof that the zebras were here first. Something happened to bury these ruins. They should be investigated, Rarity."

Rarity simply sniffed disdainfully. "Oh, very well. See that these artifacts are collected, catalogued, and sent to that ghastly building they're erecting up above. Remember, these artifacts are supposed to be tippy-top secret."

Goldenblood smiled thinly. "But of course..."

oooOOOooo

I drew another shaking breath as I stared at P-21, forcing myself to grin. "You're going to... you're going to kiss him again. And... and you're going to show him your real cutie mark... and... and you're going to do... do... whatever colts do. And you're going to be happy. But you have to keep walking. You hear me. Keep. Walking."

Rampage collapsed, her body shaking and muttering. The tiny motes seemed to be drawn to her, slipping in and out of her tiny striped body. With each one, her cutie mark flashed... a bird... a bike... two horns... I reached down and bit her mane and started to drag her further between the ruins.

oooOOOooo

"What's going on?" a pegasus buck demanded as he stood before a panel of equipment. "What's happened?"

"Cloudsdale. Maripony. Manehattan... they've been... there's been an attack, sir," a mare in an army uniform said in shock.

"Raise the shields immediately. Seal the city! I want this city sealed!" the buck demanded as everypony worked furiously. There was a green flicker.

"There's not enough power for the shields! We're only at 10% capacity!"

"Where's the rest of the power?!" He charged to a terminal, smashing buttons furiously with his hooves. When the picture came up at a smirking green image of a pony, the pegasus roared, "Horse! You bastard! We need those shields, now!"

Horse looked perplexed. "Why? Is something happening, sir?"

“The zebras...it’s an attack! An all out attack! We need more power.”

“Well... the reactor’s on standby. We can increase its output at any time.”

“Do it!”

oooOOOooo

“Momma...” Rampage sobbed, “I want my momma... where’s Momma,” she gasped as I dragged her through the water. She suddenly stiffened and purred, “I’ll help you find your momma...” She spasmed and shook. “You have the right to remain silent...” Then she sobbed once more. “Apple Bloom...”

Step. Step. Step. We walked through those broken ruins. Step by step. Broken ruins. Broken ponies. Going on because we had to. A mote slipped through my horn.

oooOOOooo

Rarity stood facing me, and I knew that rasp. “I know what you have, Rarity. I know where you got it. And I know what it is.” I felt my lips curl in a thin smile. “And I know what you’re doing with it in Hightower.”

“You know nothing,” she hissed as they stood together in the garden-atrium of the Fluttershy Clinic. But there was fear in her pretty blue eyes. “Leave me alone, or I’ll destroy you.” She started to step past him, but he blocked her passage with a wheezing laugh.

“Is it starting to talk to you? It is promising you secrets? Offering you ideas?” Goldenblood whispered in that horrible rasp. “I know it didn’t talk to Celestia. I know Celestia gave you the benefit of the doubt that you’d try and destroy it. I don’t think Luna would be so understanding.”

I didn’t think it possible for a white mare to look paler, but somehow Rarity pulled it off. “You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want it. I don’t need it. I’ve got my own sources. You might have snatched it before I could retrieve it from Zebratown... but it was hardly the only one of its kind,” he said with a sure smile.

Uncertainty was etched in her face. “What... what do you want, then?”

“Anonymity. I want you to wipe... hide... and bury every story about the O.I.A. You do that... and I will forget about just what you have.”

“And do you have one?” she asked in return.

He just smiled. “Of course not. That would be treason. And we’re not treasonous ponies... are we, Rarity?”

oooOOOooo

Step. Drag. Step. Drag. Step... I stared at them. My friends. I’d led them here. I was responsible. I was to blame. Call it self-centered. It was. Call me a selfish cunt. I am. I got them killed. I cost Glory her wing. I was the one responsible.

“Is this it?” the Dealer rasped softly in my ear.

I choked my reply, blood dripping from the corner of my mouth.

“Is this when the Wasteland breaks you?”

“I... I can't...” I gasped, feeling lightheaded from all the blood I was losing. This was it. This was when the Wasteland killed us.

“Take two more steps,” he said softly.

“I... can't...” I whispered. “I can't move... I think my heart stopped...”

“Your heart is too strong to quit. Now take two steps!”

“Why...” I asked I sat in the cold water. “Why the fuck... do you care?” I asked as I shook. “You're not real!”

The old buck smiled at me. “Just because I'm not real doesn't mean I don't care. Now. Take two more steps.”

Slowly I took one step forward.

Slowly... I took another...

And saw the elevator sitting right around the corner...

* * *

Together, we climbed onto the steel platform, one by one. Broken. Bleeding. Dying. Alive. I reached over and slapped the talisman, and then my rubbery weak legs gave out and I collapsed next to the limp Scotch Tape. The machine gave a grind. Then, slowly... and faster... and faster... we began to rise.

Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Forged in the Hoof -- You've sucked up more Enervation than any pony should live through. You suffer 25% less Enervation damage, and your healing items decay half as fast while in your possession.

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