

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 31: Battle

“Just because you’ve failed the sonic rainboom a hundred thousand times in practice doesn’t mean you won’t be able to do it in front of an entire stadium full of impatient, super-critical, sports-fan ponies.”

It could be said that I have, on occasion, picked fights with opponents far outside my proverbial weight class. Hydras, Gorgon, Deus, Enclave troopers, dragons, mysterious incomprehensible technomonsters... More or less, I’ve survived with help, luck, wits, luck, unpredictability, luck, and more luck. So pulling my gun on the biggest damn Steel Ranger I’d ever seen while outnumbered three to one and with three of my friends bound and wearing explosive collars wouldn’t actually have been all that unusual for me.

Which, if anything, meant that it was even *less* likely to be a good idea! And, for once, it wasn’t my plan at the moment. “What the hell is going on here?” I asked as I pointed my horn at Lacunae. The purple alicorn caught my eye.

“Step aside. You cannot honestly think to challenge us,” the huge buck said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. He wasn’t the one I was really paying attention to at that moment, though.

“We freed Turnip and helped him recover his armor from a locker in the office,” Lacunae said, her telepathy sending her words only to me. “Unfortunately, when we left, we encountered the large one and his subordinates. They were less understanding of my appearance than the first pair we encountered. Scotch Tape was terrified of him and his demand for her PipBuck. We were outnumbered, and, after so many teleports, I could not get away with the others. I would not abandon them, so I surrendered myself rather than fight. The Goddess is quite put out with my weakness.”

“That cunt!” I hissed, making the Rangers look at each other. I probably looked like an idiot, a crazy mare, or both, but there was nothing new about that. “I didn’t know the Rangers used slaves! Can’t the alicorn just teleport out of the chains and collar, though?”

“The collars are for our protection. Not that it is any of your concern,” the huge buck said as one of the others trotted up beside him. He was saying something about me being the one to drop a building on the Flash Fillies. “When we have done our duty and recovered the young lady’s PipBuck, I will personally escort her to any location she desires!” He looked at P-21. “This one, however, will be submitted to justice by our elder for attempting to place explosives upon my person! And, of course, the alicorn will be treated as is appropriate for a captured enemy.”

“P-21 has examined my collar. It has some sort of proximity sensor and will detonate itself and the other collars if I move too far away.” I frowned, wondering if she could maybe... “And unfortunately, no, I cannot teleport us away and leave the bombs and bonds behind.” She couldn’t? Why-- but then the super hive mind intellect began to tell me *exactly* why! Oh, Goddesses, didn’t she realize that I wasn’t a smart pony? I lasted five seconds before my eye began to glaze... which would be bad, since I had six Steel Rangers looking at me. Fortunately, Lacunae apparently finally realized how far over my head it was and stopped. Was it just me, or was she looking a bit smug? Damned big-horned alicorns...

A little pink pony in my mind caught sight of the blue buck's lips moving as he looked right at me. Geee! I loved smart ponies! "P-21 can disarm it; he is sure," Lacunae said. "But he needs a distraction." There was a pause, then, "He swears, he will not mess up like at Fallen Arch."

I tried to calculate my odds of providing enough distraction for P-21 to get the collars off my friends before somepony pushed a button. Okay. On the other hoof, I couldn't see a detonator anywhere; that meant that it was probably built into the armor. No obvious pony to blast, which meant that the only way out was to get the collar off. So... distraction it would have to be. Well, there was only one thing to do: something stupid. In a snap, I had my shotgun out above me and cocked an explosive round with as much drama as I could muster. "Well, then, I'm afraid that you and I have got ourselves a problem. I want you to let my friends go this instant!"

We were located at the crossroads of two major streets, with the firehouse occupying one corner. The rain had finally let up, and there was cover in the form of several rusted-out wagons. Blasted stores and two- and three-story buildings formed the bulk of the ruins around us. Fittingly, there was a faded billboard that proclaimed: 'Better wiped than striped! Join the Steel Rangers today!'

"Do not interfere with our sacred duty, young mare. We are the Steel Rangers, proud inheritors of a noble and distinguished duty to safeguard Equestria and to reclaim and protect the artifacts of our glorious past!" He rose on his hind legs; I readied myself to jump aside from a super heavy pneumatic stomp, but gaped as he thrust one hoof dramatically into the sky and flexed the other leg. "We are the last protectors of the Equestrian Wasteland, serving to put down monsters, fiends, and villains of all kinds, and we will not stop until we have fulfilled Applejack's wishes for a safe and prosperous future!"

Was he actually... posing?

My gun barrel dipped a little along with my jaw. I pointed at their captives. "Right. Well... um... those are my friends you have there, mister." I tried to refocus myself. "So you best hand them over."

He curled both his legs in front of me and, sweet Celestia, I swore I saw the metal bulging! "I am Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy!" He dropped his hooves to the ground with an impact that cracked the stones around him before turning to look at Lacunae. "This monstrosity is an alicorn, one of an unholy army that has forever waged terrible warfare against my order all across Equestria! The filly possesses a functioning PipBuck, an example of one of the finest pieces of Equestrian technology ever created! And this buck is guilty of attempted assault and interfering in our most sacred duty!" He snorted, and two jets of steam actually blasted from nostrils built into his metal helmet. "We are sworn to take them back to our order."

That helped me refocus myself. "Well, I'm the Security Mare, and nopony is taking my friends anywhere like that. So, like I said, I'm afraid we have a problem. And if I have to take you all on, so be it. You'll be the first to go."

Three more Rangers, bristling with guns, galloped onto the scene. "Of course, in the spirit of love and tolerance, I am willing to negotiate," I added quickly. Then I blinked at the sight of a familiar gun. The armor might all look the same, but I never forgot a gun. "Radishes?"

"Please, Paladin Bo..." Radishes began, and the huge buck looked over with a bizarre, dangerous gleam of his glowing eyes. "I mean, Paladin Stronghoof. This is the mare who helped free Turnip from the Flashers."

The buck with a missile launcher and gatling gun combo coughed. "Yeah. I would have been a complete goner if she hadn't helped."

"And she's been trying to stop the fighting in the Hoof," added Fruit Salad. "Her friend's not a real alicorn. At least, not like the other ones." Okay, so not all Rangers were jerks. I still was not happy with them.

"As you said, which is why I was willing to spare that magnificent and terrible creature from a summary execution. But I cannot disobey my oaths to our sacred order!" he proclaimed, rearing once again and making all of us step back a little. "Oh, such a horrible conflict of two heroic characters!" he proclaimed as he pressed his hoof to his brow.

O...okay. I looked at Fruit Salad, trying to convey with a look that she'd been right: this pony was definitely not playing with a full deck! "Right... okay then..." how to deal with the crazy huge pony in charge? I needed all eyes on me. I took a deep breath and looked at Glory, but she simply gaped back at me in stunned bafflement. Clearly, this was too much crazy for her to deal with.

There was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath and rose on my rear legs. My braces wobbled a little, but I pointed my left leg right at him and grinned as wide as I could. "Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy! I, Blackjack, Security Mare of Stable 99, descendant of the legendary Card Trick herself, challenge you to one on one combat for the safe release of my friends Lacunae, Scotch Tape, and P-21!"

I easily imagined nine jaws dropping at once. I could see at least four...

He looked down... way way down... at me. For a moment, I had a horrible image of those massive piston hooves dropping and turning me into a round black-and-red-maned pancake. And then, faster than I could believe possible, he moved. But rather than smearing me into pony jelly, he swept me up in a massive hug, his speaker booming, "Oh what nobility! What courage! What heroism! Fighting a battle of impossible odds against a vastly superior foe for the safety and wellbeing of her comrades!" Holding me easily in one foreleg he thrust his hoof towards the sky. "This is the embodiment of all things the Rangers should strive for!" He tossed me above the ground, catching me once more in his hooves and shaking me like a doll. "I shall not decline your glorious sacrifice! Truly, this shall be a duel for the ages!"

My head reeled simply from the volume of his speaker. I was just about to tell him that I had reconsidered and would quite happily accompany him to speak with his superior when he set me down again. "Prepare yourself, Blackjack! We engage in glorious combat! Hoof to hoof! Armor to steel! None of the noise and vulgarity of firearms for warriors like us; we shall engage in a battle of gentleponies!"

Wait? No guns? When had I agreed to no guns?! That wasn't in the challenge! He was trotting away from the others, so I really had no idea how to bring it up. I looked at Glory, who hissed at me, "Blackjack?! What do you think you are doing? He's huge and in power armor! How are you supposed to fight that?"

"Working on that part..." I muttered. "Why isn't he freaking out about my PipBuck?" I asked as I glanced at her.

"I don't think they realize it is a PipBuck," she said softly. I had to admit she had a point. It was sleek and black and might have been a part of the combat armor; it barely looked anything like a normal

big, gray, bulky PipBuck like Scotch Tape's. Small favors, I supposed. I just had to be sure to not use it where they could see it.

"Give me a Buck," I said, not wanting to take my eye off her. She balked, and I quickly added, "My legs are jelly and I need all the muscle I can get, and I'm dead sooner or later anyway. Give me a Buck."

"I remember a time when I knew chems were bad for you. Worst doctor ever." She sighed and fished out a tablet. As I chewed, she reached out and hugged me. "Try for later rather than sooner..." she murmured in my ear. "I've got many other surprises I want to show you."

Okay. I could live for that. "Chat with the other Rangers as much as you can. Keep their eyes off P-21." So long as my friends could get to safety... that was all that really mattered. As I walked towards the huge, gold-decorated Ranger, I caught P-21's eye, then smiled and gave the tiniest nod. He could do this. Whatever had happened in Fallen Arch, I knew he wouldn't let me down again. He paused and gave a tiny nod back, then turned towards his tail.

Now all I had to do was put on a good show till they were free.

The Buck helped steady my legs as I trotted before him. I made a show of tightening my braces, and he gave a snort. "You're crippled, I see. Well, that makes this duel somewhat problematic. I suppose that you may be permitted to use a firearm." He sounded so disappointed.

"Oh, no, I don't need guns to beat you!" I retorted, then blinked. Wait, I didn't? Wait... I didn't! I drew my sword and swung it like a baton before me. "Is this acceptable?" I asked with a grin, praying it was because I really didn't have a backup plan. I looked along the razor edge. It was certainly sharp. Damned sharp. Sharp enough to cut through power armor, though?

He nodded once. "We fight till one of us is beaten and surrenders. I'll not rob the Wasteland of so valiant and noble a spirit intentionally!" He reared up and flexed as he thrust his hoof towards the heavens. "We fight for honor and civility itself! Let nothing dare interrupt our most glorious of battles! Pony against pony! Hoof against blade! Steel against steel!" And then he boomed, in an echoing voice likely heard for a mile, "Begin!"

His hooves dropped in a monumental crash, pistons slamming downward with a powerful hiss of steam and a detonation that shook the ground beneath my already unsteady limbs, making me stagger. The stomp was merely a prelude to a massive leap far too elegant and graceful for so colossal a pony! I raced forward and swung the silvery saber, the razor sharp edge pinging against his helmet as he passed overhead. The impact of his landing knocked me from my feet and I rolled twice across the broken asphalt of the road before I scrambled to my feet. He turned, and I saw a definite cut in his armor along his neck.

If I could mark him, then I could beat him.

If I could beat him, then I could kill him.

Wait... what? "Sorry about the nick," I said as I rose.

"I wear it with pride and gratitude! The Stronghoof family armor welcomes a mark from an honorable and valiant mare!" And then I was fighting for my life as he lunged in with lightning fast stomps,

kicks, and thrusts of those piston hooves. It was all I could do, clattering back step after step and trying to deflect those powerful kicks with the blade and finally just trying to stay out of the way. We might have been fighting till one of us was beaten, but one kick of those hooves and I'd be more than beaten, I'd be scrambled!

There was no way I'd stand a chance like this! I had to attack! He reared up, and instead of dodging back, I moved inside his hoof. I didn't see very many gaps in his armor, but from my own barding I knew the joints were my best bet. I slashed the glowing sword at the pit of his foreleg and body. But Paladin Stronghoof reacted faster than I anticipated; clearly, he wasn't completely without thought for his defense! The Steel Ranger closed the gap, and my blade struck off gilt steel leg plates.

"Well struck, but you will have to fight better than that, I assure you!" he said as the massive buck's body slammed me clear off my hooves. My braces clattered and I rolled again, swinging the blade towards his helmet. If I could take out whatever he used to see... but he ducked his head and the blade sparked off the armored ridge along his spine.

I was cutting through his armor, but I was also getting battered to pieces. We danced around in a circle with me giving ground. One of his kicks flipped me right over one of the wagon hulks and into a mud puddle. I levitated a glob of muck and splashed it right across his glowing blue eye panes. In the moment he balked, I slashed at his legs and was rewarded with a hiss of air as one of the pneumatic lines broke. With luck, that would slow him down!

But my advantage lasted only as long as it took for him to toss his head; the goop refused to stick to him! "That's... that's cheating!" I shouted as I backed away. He did seem to be moving slower.

"You've fought well and valiantly. I commend you and ask with my deepest respects that you yield."

"Not happening! Not when my friends' lives are on the line!" I said as I gasped for breath. "You must be getting tired in all that metal." I wanted to kick somepony when I heard one of the Rangers snicker.

"A little longer. P-21 is almost done with our bonds," Lacunae said; hopefully, no pony would ask why the giant alicorn was lying down.

I forced myself to grin as I kept moving back. "Either way, I've got the range and you don't. Eventually, I'll cut something important. Better watch out. I've nicked bucks before."

"A cunning fighter takes stock of their enemies' vulnerabilities! I commend you for the attempt!" he said as he stepped back and rammed his forehooves into the ground. I moved to attack, but then suddenly the ground was lifting underneath me. The paladin heaved the slab of roadbed I was standing on up with all his strength. "However, with sufficiently applied leverage, your advantage becomes a disadvantage!" he cried out as I fell on my side and he kept pushing the slab of roadbed over. I barely got my hooves raised in time as it slammed down atop me.

I barely had time to drink a healing potion before two hooves slammed through the slab, pulverizing it atop me and hauling me up through the rubble! "Don't feel bad! This is a part of the legendary Stronghoof combat technique, passed down for generations!" he said as he lifted me high in his hooves. Somehow, I doubted he planned to hug me again.

Okay! Enough of this! I hit S.A.T.S. and targeted every magic bullet I could squeeze out of my horn at his helmet. Four flashes arced into his armored face. The magical energy tore into it, shattering the steel and visor. He dropped me as he staggered back, and I landed hard on the crumbled roadbed. The hilt of my sword peeked through the rubble and I pulled it free as I turned to my opponent.

Wha...

Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof looked down at me, such a paragon of muscular beauty that I swore there were sparkles dancing about him. Baby blue eyes twinkled merrily as they regarded the dirty bug that was myself. The white coat I could see was utterly smooth. A thick blond mustache sat elegantly above his lip, and a tiny golden lock of mane curled off his brow. Radishes had said that he'd cut off his horn, but she'd been mistaken. For the first time ever, I'd met a unicorn with a horn more compact than my own.

He regarded me soberly. "I see I owe you an apology. It was unfair of me to think less of you for your infirmity." He rose, and with a crackle and metallic popping he shed his armor, revealing more of his impressive musculature. Truly, I had no idea if his armor was powered by magic at all, or if it was all just him! He stepped free, rising up and flexing his legs, making his abdomen pulse with every potent twitch of his body. "But now you directly face the physique that has been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations!"

I glanced over at the others as he flexed his many massive muscles; it was astonishing how even suits of power armor could look stunned in a moment like this. P-21 had a nosebleed. "Oh my..." murmured Lacunae in my head. I managed to make eye contact with P-21, and he immediately wiped his nose and got back to work. Good thing, too; I'd hate to have to shoot him to get him back on track! I did that too much with Rampage already...

"Um..." I sat down, blinking in shock. "You can put your armor back on. Really..."

Instead, he planted his forehooves, twisted around, and blasted me with an applebuck right to the face. I barely raised my limbs in time to absorb some of the blow, but his kick sent me rolling across the torn up ground. My head kept spinning for a few seconds, my vision filled with flexing images of a sparkling, beautiful buck beefcake before I shook it off.

"You should never underestimate your opponent, Security! Others have done that when facing you, and you've defeated them all!" he said as he approached and then once more slammed his hooves into the ground, sending a ripple through the pavement that blasted me into the air. Was he using some kind of freaky magic, or was he really just that strong?

I landed in a heap and hauled myself to my hooves. Then he was once more upon me, and almost all thought of defense was gone as he systematically pounded me again and again and again. It was all I could do to keep myself out of his hooves. I finally pulled together enough focus to bring my sword to bear and got myself a little room to work with. Yet no matter how I swung, I couldn't catch him.

"Damn it! I have to win! They're my friends!" I shouted as he deftly avoided a horizontal slice. How did a buck that big and beautiful move that fast?

"Your devotion is commendable, but it is no greater than my devotion to my oath and order!" he replied as he twisted under a slash, sweeping his hind legs under my own and knocking me over as he

deftly regained his feet. "Yield, I beg you."

"Never!" I shouted as I brought the blade down in a savage killing blow! He rose once more on his hind legs, his massive, majestic hooves slammed together on the silvery blade, stopping it cold as he stood before me.

"There is no shame in defeat, Blackjack," he said as those bright blue eyes gazed down at me. I gasped as he tossed my sword aside, exhaustion finally having scattered my focus. He dropped to his hooves and turned, presenting his side. It was a clear shot in a futile struggle...

But I was just that stubborn! I twisted and pulled back both my rear legs and slammed my hindhooves directly at his side with all my force. He'd be able to block or deflect or simply take it, I was sure. Then he'd punt me clear over the horizon, but I'd be damned if I'd give up before then. But my hooves connected solidly against his left side just below the ribcage.

Instantly, he rolled over, wailing. "Oh no! You've struck my splenic ganglion nerve cluster, a Stronghoof vulnerability that's been passed down for generations! Oh the agony! The injury! Oh, I must yield!" He lifted his legs to protect the spot I'd thumped. Glory was mouthing the words "splenic ganglion..." and looking confused. "Release this noble fighter's friends."

Buh? All eyes turned to P-21 holding Lacunae's bomb collar in his hooves as unlocked chains dangled around the three; his own collar was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at the explosive in his hooves, then back up at the Rangers. He spat the bobby pin back into his brushy tail. "Oh... this is awkward..." I'll say. I kind of expected... not to win.

Then the street exploded. Thank Celestia the street exploded! This was just the right time for an explosion! The blast tossed me aside, but Paladin Stronghoof calmly looked in the direction of the smoking crater and beyond where two dozen ponies dressed all in spiked, red-painted metal armor were charging. Several unicorns were flinging explosive parcels, and many of the earth ponies had flamers already spurting burning sheets apparently at random.

"To arms, Rangers! Our enemies have found us!" Stronghoof declared as he ran to his shed armor. Magically, it reassembled itself around his massive frame, and even his helmet repaired itself around his head. The red ponies were herding some familiar frothing psychopaths ahead of them. There had to be closer to thirty! Maybe more.

Any ponies that would use sick raiders as living weapons weren't my allies.

"Let my friends help you!" I shouted, my magic seizing a tossed explosive and throwing it back at the gangsters.

"You've demonstrated your honor," he replied firmly. "But my order's code refuses accepting the aid of outsiders!"

"We may as well accept their help, Paladin. They're free anyway," Turnip said as he trotted up to us. "Besides, there's no question who's a bigger threat to our technology."

"It seems we have no choice," he said as he curled a hoof, pistons hissing ominously. "So be it! But even with your assistance, I fear that the Burner Boys will not be easily dissuaded. Here they come!" he announced as the racing burners closed in and things started getting toasty. I staggered out of the

path of a gout of flame that washed over where we'd stood. The burning fluid made every bit of exposed skin prickle even as it missed me. The ganger moved closer, twisting to immolate me as he laughed in glee. Until the sword cut through the fuel hoses to his flamer and draped him in a crimson sheet of fire. Then, suddenly, he was gone as the paladin gave the thrashing fireball a kick into another buck.

Okay, I felt my stomach clench as two flaming ponies thrashed wildly, taking way too long to die. I really did not like fire. That was an ugly way to go; give me a bullet any day.

The explosives they threw were on a delay, and I saw P-21 leap upon one and deftly pull a wire out of the thing. He stuffed one of the bomb collars with the explosive, and then another... and another. One of those bombs was impressive enough, but I wondered what twenty of them would do... I recalled what he'd done back in Flank. I knew a bomb like that would certainly convince me to back off!

"Lacunae, get Glory on that roof. P-21, keep doing what you're doing. Scotch, stay back. Rampage--" Crap.

One of the Burners was charging me as Lacunae teleported Glory onto the roof of the firehouse behind us. From the elevated position, she could send a stream of crimson beams to wash back and forth over the advancing Burners. The Steel Rangers had established a firing line, and gatling guns, grenade machine guns, and the thumping Brown Betty were starting to take their toll. The burners were taking cover and throwing smoke bombs.

Frenzied raiders slammed into us with axes, clubs of rebar and concrete, and even a sword made out of a wagon's rear bumper. The earth pony wielding the sword seemed particularly focused on me, the mass and power of his swings slamming into my own upraised blade. I saw an opening as clear as day, though, and my sword turned faster than I'd ever wielded it before. The tip slipped through his spiked armor to his throat, and I felt a supreme sense of satisfaction as I sliced his artery. His blood sprayed over me as he tried a few more feeble swings with the massive sword. As his weapon drooped, I cleanly sliced his head free of his shoulders. Like cutting butter.

Then I realized that I was bleeding too. I'd been so caught up in the fighting that I'd missed it entirely. My opening hadn't been as sure as I'd thought, and he'd cut a jagged tear just above my cutie mark! Another of Keeper's healing potions stopped the bleeding; if I lived through this, I'd have to send him a thank you note and ask where he got fresh healing potions.

Suddenly, I heard the clatter of hooves, and on my E.F.S. a red bar appeared. I balked as I pointed my shotgun into the pall of smoke rolling up the street. It made my eye water, and the reek and rasp of whatever chemicals were in it set me coughing. Suddenly, I spotted a buck racing right at me. He was wearing a gas mask adorned with four dash inhalers screwed in place. The pupils were nearly nonexistent in his infected yellow eyes as he raced right towards me.

Oh, and his barding was made of explosives...

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and had just enough time for one explosive shell to his head. It pulped his noggin, and a moment later the buck exploded. There was no blood or bone; he simply vaporized in a cloud of steel and a sheet of flame where he'd fallen. I was thrown clear off my hooves, rolling across the cracked asphalt. I looked up in time to see another one charge the paladin, but with his astonishing grace and power, he grabbed the head of the suicidal pony and spun, throwing him back towards his comrades.

One Ranger wasn't quick enough, though; the explosion crumpled his armor like a tin can. I

couldn't tell who it was, as their entire front was blown away, launching a smoldering rear half into the street behind us. The heavy, cloying smoke clung low to the ground and filled the street rather than rising up. Every now and then, a fiery red plume sprayed out at us and sent me scrambling backwards.

"Too bad you don't have a gun, Paladin!" I shouted, firing blindly at a red bar in front of me.

"A Stronghoof is never disarmed!" he decreed as he stepped up to a wagon. "Observe the Stronghoof technique that's been passed down for generations! First step!" And once more he stomped with an incredible explosion that rippled and cracked the asphalt, and knocked the entire rusty wagon into the air. "Second step!" He turned around, and a blast from his pneumatic rams and his potent rear legs sent the entire wreck flying down in the direction of the Burner Boys.

I just stared at the fuzzy image of a raider getting smashed by the bouncing debris. "You threw that fight!" I shouted at him.

He snorted, blasting two jets of steam again. "You dare question my honor? The splenic ganglion is a well-established pressure point weakness exploitable by the very few knowledgeable of the Stronghoof lineage. Clearly, you knew of that weakness and thus won our duel fairly, winning the freedom of your friends! How else could you have possibly defeated me and thus allowed me to overlook my oath requiring your friends to be taken to my elder?"

I blinked, then smiled. "Thanks, Paladin Stronghoof." He gave another blasting snort, and I swore that the glowing eye panel winked at me! Then I frowned. "But did you have to hit me with a road?"

In a faintly embarrassed tone, he muttered, "Well, I thought you could take it."

We'd fallen back to the crossroads, where the collision of three rusty wagons offered some cover. The Burner Boys seemed to be falling back, which was good; I really hated that smoke. My eye was watering terribly, and I kept coughing and hacking. There weren't any more bomb-barding raiders rushing us yet. Were they really pulling back? Please tell me that they were pulling back. All my E.F.S. confirmed was that there were still a lot of red bars out there. And over there... wait? I looked off to the side as a little pink pony in my head wearing a green camouflage helmet pointed out a whole lot more red over there.

"Get down!" I shouted as crimson beams flashed into us from the left side, and even the massive buck had to duck for cover from the glaring energy barrage. Apparently, my destruction of the Flashers hadn't been complete. I couldn't count numbers of red bars through the smoke, but at least two dozen Flash Fillies filled the side street with flickers of incinerating death. My hide burned as an enemy gatling beam gun splashed over my side. We were caught in a crossfire!

"P-21, we need that bomb!" I yelled as Glory, Turnip, and Fruit Salad turned their fire down the side street at the advancing mares. He'd finished with one collar and was now working on a second one. If Lacunae could drop the combined charge he was making into the middle of their lines, they might scatter and run. I knew I would!

The smoke and reek was making everything one big confusing glare, so I barely had time to notice the flying grenade before it smacked me right in the forehead. I took two steps from the sudden stab of pain, then one second to lift it up... then it went off in my face!

The blue band flashed once, and an electric tingle ran from my horn to my hooves. And nothing else happened. I blinked and let out a relieved laugh... and then I noticed that Glory was the only pony still firing! I looked over at Fruit Salad, but the mare was just standing there. "What's wrong?" I yelled as I fired wildly in the direction of the red bars on my E.F.S.

"Spell matrix crash!" she yelled from the confines of her helmet. "I can't restart the system! The ejection system isn't working either!" On the other side of me, Turnip was also frozen, muttering expletives over and over again. More discharged grenades rolled around at their feet; the one that hit me hadn't been alone.

Oh shit. "What can I do?" I yelled, popping out the shotgun's ammo drum and loading slugs; those explosive rounds were cooking the barrel like crazy. It was smoking! It was almost brand new, and one drum of explosive rounds had already made it look like it might not last much longer.

"I need a PipBuck spell matrix to restart it!" she replied.

Well... I was busy. But I wasn't the only PipBuck here! "Scotch! Scotch Tape! I need you!" I screamed out, but with all the gunshots and explosions, I knew she couldn't hear me. Lacunae, however, appeared beside me in a purple flash. She had the minigun from the dead Ranger's armor floating above her as her shield appeared around her and the helpless Ranger.

"Go. I will protect her as long as I'm able," Lacunae said calmly in my mind. Then the minigun motor revved as it floated overhead, and the alicorn began to return fire with deadly and precise bursts. "The Goddess is quite keen to put this rabble in their place! After dealing with that... that mare... well..." Her eyes flashed and her voice boomed. "THE GODDESS FINDS THIS VERY THERAPEUTIC!"

"Miffle..." whimpered Fruit Salad. Therapy, Hoofington style.

I loaded Scotch's PipBuck tag and raced across the crossroads. There was P-21 strapping together a bomb that I hoped Lacunae would be able to drop on the Flashers, but where was Scotch?

Hiding in a wagon. The filly was curled up in a ball, shaking. I reached down and held her close. I couldn't ask her to do this. I should ask P-21 to take her out of here. Take her someplace safe. Someplace better. The rusted wagon jerked as a grenade detonated outside, and she gasped, hugging her hooves over her head.

"You can't protect her, Blackjack," the Dealer said as he trotted up next to me.

"I have to..." I whispered.

"You can't. Even if you protect her today and tomorrow, someday you'll be gone. You can't spare her the horror," he insisted softly.

"Why not? Is that too damn much to ask? That she be safe and happy and... and not scared?" I shouted at him. I'd saved one. Just one. And I'd give anything I could to keep her intact. "What kind of sick world goes out of its way to hurt and scare a filly?" I demanded.

He just shook his head slowly. "It's called growing up, Blackjack. And you can't keep her safe from that." Maybe I couldn't... but was it so wrong to try?

Yes, if it meant leaving Fruit Salad to die. Damn it.

I clenched my eye shut as the wagon rocked again from a detonation outside. I looked down at her and sighed. "Scotch. I need your help." She sniffed as she shook, looking up at me with wide, teary green eyes. "There's a Ranger who needs your help. She needs something called a 'spell matrix' restarted. Can you do that?"

"Y...yes..." she stammered, then clenched her eyes shut. "But... but I can't! I'm scared..."

"I know you're scared. I'm scared too. If you stay close, I'll try to keep you safe and sound. Okay?" I said as I poked my head out. A red beam flashed before my eye, and I watched the tip of my mane transform into ash. My lips twisted into a trembling grin. I was fairly sure that Scotch might be the sanest one of us all! "S-see? Nothing to be s-scared of!"

"I'm not scared of the fighting. I'm... I'm scared of the metal ponies!" she said as she shook her head hard. "But... but I don't understand why I'm scared! I shouldn't be scared! I like machines. We tried to hide from the Rangers after Lacunae saved that one buck, but when he dug out his armor and put it on... I... I thought he was gonna gobble me up! It's like I'm a stupid baby or something!" she said as she smacked her temples, shaking even harder.

"But you shouldn't be afraid..." I muttered. Had the memory spell failed? Was it temporary? Or was there some instinctive part of her mind that remembered? Damn it... I knew it had been too easy...

"I know. It's just... It's just stupid. I'm stupid," she sniffed as she covered her face. "You should have left me in 99. Then I'd be with Momma."

I held her firmly. "You are not stupid. Look at me. I'm stupid," I said, thumping my chest for emphasis. "I get hit by *boats*. You're at least smart enough to avoid that." Despite everything, she made a noise, half sob and half laugh, and I held her close. "I know you're scared. Being scared is perfectly normal right now, Scotch Tape. But there're two Rangers who need your help." She curled up even more. "If you can't go... tell me how to reset their spell matrix thingies."

For several seconds, she didn't answer, but then pulled out a strange golden wand thing the size of a pencil and studded with little gems. There was a tiny inscription: 'Property of Rivets, give it the fuck back when you're done'. She murmured softly, "Hold this, link up to the armor, and access System Tools, System Interface: Master Spell Matrix, Spell Matrix Programs, Spell Matrix Restore, and if that doesn't work, Full Matrix Reboot." She wiped her tears. "I'm sorry, Blackjack."

"Hey, don't be," I murmured as I stroked her mane. "You gave me what I needed. Stay safe, okay?"

I ran back to where Lacunae was almost single-hornedly fending off the entire Filly front. She'd not only levitated her own gun, but Turnip as well, her magic manually manipulating the weapons strapped to his armor while also firing deadly volleys of glowing arrows. "DROP A BOXCAR ON US, WILL YOU? TRAP US IN A MEMORY ORB? TOSS A BALEFIRE EGG IN OUR FACE?" she roared with the voice of hundreds.

"Put me down! Put me down! Put me down!" screamed Turnip as I rushed to Fruit Salad and began to try to use the 'System Tools' to restart his armor. I really hoped Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof didn't see... pretty much anything going on over here right now. I didn't want to know what his

oath and honor might force him to do.

Lacunae's eyes flared as she glared at the screaming Ranger. "SILENCE, FOAL! BE HONORED THAT THE GODDESS ALLOWS YOU TO FIGHT ON OUR BEHALF IN THIS FASHION! AND CEASE YOUR WHIMPERING LEST THE GODDESS THROW YOU AT THEM!" Turnip wisely silenced as Lacunae focused down the street. "WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?! WHY DO THEY FIGHT A GODDESS SO?! WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THEIR MADNESS! THEY SHOULD FLEE SO WE DO NOT SMITE THEM!"

"It's not madness, Goddess. It's hate," I shouted as my PipBuck told me all the systems were active and aborted the restart. "They hate so much that they're willing to die if it means they can kill the ponies they loathe." Right now, I wanted to shoot something myself as my 'System Tools' told me that the matrix was active. Was I doing something wrong?

"FOOLS!" she boomed. "FLEE BEFORE OUR MIGHT! RUN! FIGHT US NO LONGER!" Her glare shifted to one of shock as they still came on! "STOP MAKING US KILL YOU!"

'Error.' 'Error.' 'Error.' I wanted to scream. Then something came flying out of the smoke and haze. It bounced twice, but it was much too small to be a grenade. It was just a little hoop of metal.

A silvery ring with a spark battery wired in the middle.

"Goddess, get out of here!" I shouted up at her.

But the Goddess clearly didn't see or realize. All I knew was that that ring increased Enervation and that Enervation was bad for alicorns. Who'd thrown it? Had they known? Or was it just some desperate gambit? The battery flashed, and suddenly the ring began to glow a baleful green. I had a sensation like being caught in that cistern; the screaming was building up and growing and I felt it tearing at me.

The Goddess had a much worse reaction.

The shield distorted wildly and shredded apart; Lacunae struggled to keep herself and Turnip in the air. The alicorn screamed as white tatters and motes began to be drawn out of her eyes and mouth. The wisps were being pulled down through the ring, like the dancing firefly motes in the ruins deep beneath the earth. Now the Goddess was being reminded why her children stayed out of the Hoof. I left Fruit Salad as I felt my insides spasm terribly, aimed my shotgun down at the flickering spark battery, and fired; I got hit with a burst of radiation, but the green glow disappeared and the wisps stopped being pulled away. Still, it was too late for the alicorn. Lacunae collapsed beyond our cover next to the ring, and Turnip wailed as he smashed down on the wagon and thankfully bounced inside.

And the Fillies were moving in for the kill.

I clattered over the wagon as scarlet beams tore into my barding, making my eye tear as I fired wildly, not even bothering to aim but simply trying to pour on as much fire as I could. I bit down on Lacunae's mane and started to pull, but as fast as my fire was, I just couldn't suppress the advancing mares.

But Glory could. And on the fire station's roof, she stood in full view to pour down a stream of red bursts that swept back and forth over the Fillies. They might have been able to ignore individual shotgun

slugs, but not that stream of glowing death. The Fillies balked for a few critical seconds. I grabbed Lacunae's mane and started to pull, firing at any red I could. But even with Glory's suppressive fire, the Fillies were spreading out and moving closer. And damn it, why did alicorns have to be so damn big and heavy?

Two crimson bolts slammed into my chest, and my heart stopped as I fell back beside the fallen alicorn. I lost my focus, the riot gun clattering down beside me as three Fillies who'd been creeping along the sidewalk next to the blasted storefronts popped out. I saw one's lips moving; I think that she was yelling something about Diamond. Maybe some word of revenge or something. It didn't matter, though. I tried to fumble for a healing potion... for something! Glory was firing so long and fast I thought I saw smoke rise from her weapon. I wondered how much ammo she had left... couldn't be much.

The three Fillies pointed their weapons at me: game over.

Then they exploded, and my eye slowly followed the smoke stream up to Fruit Salad standing atop the wreck. Missile after missile streaked down the street, forcing the Fillies back into cover. A few moments later, Turnip pulled himself up as well and joined her in driving the Fillies back. "How..." I murmured weakly.

And then Scotch Tape was there, lifting a healing potion to my lips. She was shaking so badly that she nearly dropped it, and from the smell she was going to have to wash her utility barding. The purple fluid was a bit watery and not-too-pleasant-tasting, but it restored me enough to drag Lacunae the rest of the way around the cover of the wagon.

"How..." I coughed, aching as I looked at the young olive mare. "It kept telling me it wasn't busted."

"Wrong matrix, Blackjack. I think that you were trying to reboot your own PipBuck," she said with a nervous smile. She then frowned and lifted the key. "And you dropped this. Don't you know how pissed Rivets will... would... be?"

"Hey! I'm Security, okay? I handle shooting things and enforcing the rules. Maintenance actually has to do the stuff that matters," I said with a nervous smile.

But I was done for the moment. Those two shots had nearly taken me out. Lacunae was still unconscious, and who knew when... or if... she'd recover? Glory had disappeared from the rooftop. Radishes and Stronghoof were withdrawing as well. Their armor was smoking, and Brown Betty had taken quite a beating. The Burner Boys pushed in from the south. The Fillies from the east. If the Rangers carried Lacunae and me, perhaps we could run for it.

Maybe. Right now, we could only get as far as the firehouse.

"A pity; it seems that we won't have an opportunity for a true rematch," Paladin Stronghoof said as we fell back inside. Glory was in the corner, working furiously to convert her gem cartridges into drums for her gatling beam gun. She saw me, and I gave a wan smile and wave to put her at ease. She nodded. P-21 joined us, a particularly ominous-looking bomb sitting on his back. He'd turned the two collars and the explosives into one large formidable duct-taped wad of boom.

"Where are they all coming from?" I asked as I saw a wall of red advancing. I knew there were

some big gangs in the Hoof, but this was ridiculous.

The huge paladin answered us. "Big Daddy 'liberated' every slave west of the river, gave them a gun, and sent them to fight. The Highlanders are getting involved as well, and the Halfhearts are competing with the other gangs for the most Rangers killed. I understand that they've got fighters from as far south as Flank brought up here, and there's talk of griffin mercenaries to the west. I suppose we should be grateful that those damned Zodiacs haven't gotten involved," Paladin Bombs said darkly as his armor repaired itself around him. Scotch had her eyes closed and seemed to be focusing on trying to help Lacunae by rubbing her shoulder and muttering that 'it would be okay'. "It seems that our order has done little to earn the love and admiration of the rest of the city, and that most will quite welcome our destruction."

"Oopsie," I muttered as I rose to my hooves. Lacunae's eye was open, and she looked at me with an expression of profound suffering. Having a Goddess stuffed inside you and then ripped out couldn't be fun. "So... what's the plan?"

"I will go forth and engage their forces on my own. While they are distracted with me, your friends will be able to escape. Use the bomb to cover your withdrawal when I fall," he said matter-of-factly. "It has been an honor, Security. For the record, I feel you would have made an outstanding Steel Ranger." The Fillies and Burners outside were grouping up for a big push.

"THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY!" a buck's voice boomed from outside, fit to make my teeth rattle. A half-dozen explosions tore into the gangers, making them scatter for cover. A section of wall was blown in, showing us with rubble, and in walked a buck who could have been Deus's power-armored twin; he wore two massive artillery guns just as the former Reaper had. "Paladin Stronghoof, your reinforcements have arrived!" There had to be at least a dozen Rangers arriving from the north.

"Star Paladin Steel Rain!" Paladin Stronghoof said as he rose to his feet. The star paladin's armor was even more fancily decorated than his own, but with silver scrollwork. I wondered if this was a norm for Steel Rangers or just for their leaders. It seemed like a good way to know who to shoot, but then when he had guns like that, I supposed few ponies dared take a shot in the first place, or lived long enough to take a second.

"You have fought admirably, Paladin Stronghoof. You have my thanks for drawing our enemy together so that we may finally end this war once and for all!" He gestured to the door. "Take your soldiers and lead the counterattack. Leave not a single one of our enemies alive."

"Sir, the Oath dictates--" the white pony said before his superior interrupted him.

"That you execute the orders of your superiors quickly and without question. You have your orders, Paladin. Now return to the fight," he finished in a tone that suggested very ugly consequences if Stronghoof argued.

"Very well, Star Paladin," Stronghoof said with a salute, but he was looking at me as he said it. Those glowing blue eye panels seemed to suggest caution to me. He and most of the other Rangers left, and my mane went right to high 'oh this isn't good' status as I approached Steel Rain and the trio of Rangers he'd brought in with him. This was my chance.

"Star Paladin Steel Rain. I'm Security. My friends and I came here to tell you that this war is completely unnecessary." I looked behind me at Glory and then back at the massively armored Ranger.

"My friends and I were passing by the Zenith Bridge. We used a bomb to distract you so that we could slip past. This war isn't the Reapers' fault."

There was no answer, at first, and then I became aware of a deep rhythmic noise inside the armor. I scowled up at him as it built and grew louder.

He was laughing.

"I should thank you, then!" he chortled with glee. "Do you have any idea how many years I've tried to provoke those idiots across the river to attack us? How many times the elder has refused to allow me to wipe out those vermin?"

Uh oh. "You wanted this war? Your own soldiers are dying, and you're happy about it?" I shouted at him as I stood, making damned sure I was between him and my friends.

"Of course not," he replied in that amused tone. "But I won't deny that, when I heard about the fighting, it felt as though Hearth's Warming Day had come and I'd been a very good buck. Finally, the Hoofington chapter has the opportunity to show the Wasteland just what the Rangers should be about."

I glanced in the direction that Paladin Stronghoof had gone before looking back at him. "Why do I have the feeling that you don't think that it's about protecting ponies?"

"Paladin Stronghoof's naïve and adolescent fantasies of honor and protection hardly interest me. He inspires fools to waste our technology for the shallow and worthless admiration of others. Really, what do I care if some useless primitives live or die?"

P-21 slowly approached him. "You think that technology should be hoarded, then? Stronghoof told us that your elders believe that."

There was a frustrated growl from the armor. "Yes. They do. They would have us hoard weapons and technology like dragons, clutching our findings with paranoid hooves while we cower in our bunkers and bases." He turned to the side and gestured to the gun with a forehoof. "This is a one hundred and twenty millimeter anti-dragon cannon built to fire custom engineered concussion, armor penetration, and chemical rounds. It has one hundred and seventy two perfectly engineered parts all manufactured of high strength alloyed steel infused with a magical repair matrix to maintain perfect operation at all times. It has a precision range of over two miles at which shells will still impact with a force of five kilomacs." He looked right at me. "Do you really think that a gun like this should be left in a weapons locker to collect dust?"

Honestly, no, I didn't. But I'd be damned if I'd admit it to this bastard.

"The elder believes that the Reapers started this war and so it must be fought, and I will do everything I can to extend it as long and far as possible. We will destroy the Reapers, subjugate the Collegiate, drive off the Enclave, and conquer the Society!" he proclaimed grandly, standing and spreading his legs wide as if he wanted to give me a hug. "And you started it all! Thank you!"

"And now I'm going to stop it however I can!" I replied sharply. If Elder Crunchy Carrots really didn't want this war fought, then perhaps she could end it?

His happy tone cut off as he snorted and swept his hoof to the side. "This is the time of the Steel

Rangers. Right now, to the west, our Manehattan chapters are reclaiming one of the largest and most advanced stables in all the Wasteland to be put to our use. Abroad, other operations are taking place to reassert the fundamental truth: technology is to be *used*. Hoarded, it is wasted. Used to protect worthless gutter trash, it is wasted. Only when it is employed to assert our power is its true purpose realized.”

He looked at Lacunae. “I imagine Elder Cottage Cheese will be elated to learn that we captured one of these freaks; the acolytes have been quite eager to learn how they’re put together and how to take them apart.” He looked at the gray PipBuck on Scotch’s leg. “Oh... and we’ll be taking that as well.”

Right. “So I guess you won’t be honoring Stronghoof’s offer to let me go.” Figures.

“You have an admirable grasp of the obvious.”

And just like that, the admiration I’d built up for Paladin Stronghoof’s order vanished in a flash of acrid cordite smoke. “Well then, we’ll just be going. Glory, Scotch, help Lacunae back to her hooves.” The pair immediately moved to help, and the three Rangers with Steel Rain immediately pointed their many, many barrels at the five of us.

“And I’ll just hold on to this really big bomb!” P-21 shouted as he nodded his head to the taped-together ball of explosives balanced on his back. “Should be enough to level this whole building,” he added as Steel Rain pointed his guns right the blue pony. My friend didn’t flinch in the slightest. A bomb without a detonator, and I really hoped this ass didn’t know that. The four Steel Rangers slowly started to back out the hole they’d blown in the wall.

“I got the bomb. You handle the trigger,” I said as my horn lifted the... oofff... very heavy wad of explosives. In unison, we backed out of the firehouse into the chaos of the street battle as I kept it levitated right in the middle. He nodded, and I clapped mentally in glee. He should have been an actor or something. I could just see him in a Hearth’s Warming Eve pageant; he’d make a wonderful secretary to my chancellor.

With them backing out the rear and us backing out the front, there’d be a narrow window for us to make a break for it... not north. They’d be expecting that. West. We could...

We were bucked.

In every direction was fighting in a horrible cloud of clinging smog. Rangers fought in groups of two or three back to back as they sprayed the surrounding cover. Crimson beams and sooty flames lit up the smog as they strafed wildly, and the five of us had to crawl just to avoid being shot by accident. It seemed like every bullet, gem cartridge, and flamer tank had been brought to this fight to be fired, spent, and emptied, and now we were caught in the middle of it. Lacunae still reeled; I doubted that the Goddess was going to give her the extra juice she needed to get us out of here. Damn, I wanted to gut whichever pony had figured out how to weaponize Enervation!

The Steel Rangers were clearly having a better time of it than the gangers, though. They didn’t just have the edge on firepower; they also possessed a knowledge of how to fight well, with devotion, focus and discipline. As much as they might be bastards to outsiders, they were dedicated to their order and each other. The Fillies and Burners fought as a ferocious mob, but that mob was dwindling. And as soon as they withdrew, Steel Rain’s ponies would take us apart.

That was... provided Steel Rain himself didn't take us out.

We crawled west along the front of the fire station. The fighting seemed a little lighter in this direction, though there were so many red bars moving around that I couldn't tell where the firing line was. I led the way with Scotch right behind me. Lacunae and Glory came after, with P-21 bringing up the rear. Then there was a 'crump' as a flaming bomb detonated to my left, the heat and glare making me turn my head away towards the north.

To the sight of Steel Rain's barrels as the smoke parted between us.

I kicked back as hard as I could, smacking Scotch right in the face and knocking her into the hooves of Glory and Lacunae. I heard a familiar click as I crouched and jumped, a little blue pegasus shouting at me to go 'Higher! Higher!' I drew up my legs. Then there was another click, and for a moment I felt stuck in S.A.T.S. as the anti-dragon cannons fired. The shells missed, flying under me and past or over my friends to impact the ground and tear a twenty foot line across the crossroads. The shockwave flipped me end over end, and the entire world became oddly muffled as I crashed to the asphalt.

Steel Rain ejected the two spent casings, and I saw them spinning away behind him trailing smoke as the autoloader slid two more shells home. I just lay there as little ponies tried desperately to get me to my hooves. Move! My body didn't. Get up! My body couldn't. Hurry! Everything felt like I weighed a thousand pounds. Two Rangers went straight at my friends on the far side of the torn up section of street; only Lacunae's feeble shield protected them as they fired back.

The star paladin leveled those guns right at me. I think he said something. Somepony was screaming words, but it all sounded like I was at the bottom of a bathtub. I tried to rise, but the brace on my forehoof was busted. The leg just bent instead of supporting me.

Then a familiar pony crashed into the side of the massively armored Ranger. At first I believed she'd been thrown against him, but instead she wrapped her hooves against his armored frame as if giving him a hug. Slowly, it seemed, her legs straightened as she lifted his entire front up before her. The cannons fired high, the shockwave again bouncing me across the broken ground but the shells arcing away into the sky. Once again, my elastic bones saved me from some breaks, but I could barely do more than simply lie on my back in the rut his first two shells had blasted. I stared through the smoke feeling as if my entire body was being drawn away. I felt blood across my muzzle, wetness in my ears.

Then my face was filled with the image of grumpy, worried blue pony buck. His lips were moving but only funny little honking sounds came out of his mouth. Everything was spinning away, and I fought to keep my focus on his face. It was weird to feel spinning as he held my head still in his hooves and pressed his lips towards mine.

Oh, yes. This would be a nice way to go... I puckered up for him...

Then I felt the stem of the healing potion bulb on my lips and blinked. I rolled my eye down to look at the healing potion bottle in his mouth; the flat-eyed look he gave me seemed to say 'Just drink it, you idiot.' Good idea, P-21. I slugged down the potion and felt the pain in my ears subside. When I finished, I lay back in the middle of the battlefield.

Then my gaze connected with a trio of ponies charging a pair of Rangers. It wasn't the number that drew my eye, but their weapons. How many mares around the Hoof fought with a massive hammer,

a chain, and a fire axe? From the west came a charging, whooping, gleeful mob of ponies, many dressed in their genuine ponyhide armor. At their head, a massive black buck bellowed orders to fan out and crush anypony that would oppose the Reapers. Right now I hoped he wasn't including me. I couldn't oppose gravity at this point!

"Is there a plan?" P-21 asked, flinching at a nearby explosion that pattered us with gravel.

"Oh, we are so far from a plan..." I muttered as I looked around. Red bars in every direction. Reapers against Rangers against raiders against gangers. In the smoke I could only make out a few blue bars; the rest was a solid milling mass, like blood. "West...ish." Fuck, was there any direction that was safe? "We've got to get clear of this." I'd go north, but right now I really did not want to get within two miles of Steel Rain.

P-21 rose and waved his hoof. From the wreck of a smashed skywagon Lacunae and Glory ran to the gouge where I'd made my temporary home. Lacunae looked like she was almost fully recovered... but my eye swept back and forth and the blue buck's eyes went wide. "Where's Scotch Tape?" he asked as he looked back at the smashed wreckage.

Glory shook her head. "I don't know where! We ran for cover and she was beside me and then she wasn't..." There was a scream as a Steel Ranger charged us, his minigun chattering bullets off the rubble of our wound in the street. On the opposite side ran the unarmored ponies... Fillies, Burners, Reapers... did it matter anymore?

Lacunae's magic arrows bit deep into the Steel Ranger's armor, and P-21's grenade blasted him off his hooves. Glory and I laid down a withering spray of cover fire. *Save them. Save them.* The words seemed to thrum inside me and gave me the strength to rise to my hooves.

Through the smoke and flame, I saw Radishes... or, rather, a Ranger with Brown Betty attached to their armor. I never forgot a gun. Her armor seemed to glow with the fires that burned brighter and brighter around her from the flamers. Then from the fires rose the dark form of Brutus, and the massive buck brought his hooves down upon her burning armor heedless of the flame. Just like that, a Ranger who'd helped me... who had accepted me... was dead.

On the opposite side, I saw Mallet's power hammer swinging wildly at the two Rangers pouring on their minigun rounds. I'd been shot by a minigun before. I knew the sewing sensation that miniguns inflicted as the barrage of bullets liquefied flesh. I'd seen one mare torn to pieces by just such a weapon, but she'd vomited forth bullets as she magically regenerated afterwards.

Mallet had no such advantage. When the Rangers stopped firing, she was so much bloody goo. I sat down hard as I looked at the lump that had once been a pony. A pony I'd known. Not a friend. Not an enemy. But a pony killed senselessly. Pointlessly. What the hell was I doing here? Why were my friends stuck in the middle of this fight? "Damn it... Stop. Stop it!"

"We need to find Scotch, Blackjack," P-21 said, but I didn't really hear it.

Everything had gotten lost. "Stop it!" I shouted as I tried to fight my way out of the hole on my broken braces. I could barely stand, let alone walk, but I had to end this. I had to end this right the fuck now. "Stop! Stop killing each other!" I screamed from the lip of the hole as I began firing, ignoring my friends around me. "Stop it! Stop it!" I didn't know who I was attacking any more. With the smoke and the flame and beams I didn't care. If it was red, I shot it. Shoot me, not each other. Shoot a pony who's

dead meat anyway! Just fucking stop! I was shooting and crying and screaming as I whirled from one to the next to the next. Bullets bit into my blasted barding; it wasn't going to last much longer at this rate, not without some serious repair. That was okay, though. If ponies were shooting me, then they weren't shooting each other.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop!" I screamed till my throat was raw, my legs were staggering and flopping around as they slipped out of my broken braces, and my barding was slick with blood. Most of it wasn't mine, at least. I'd shoot till no pony else was shooting! I didn't want to see another Radishes. I didn't want another Mallet. I didn't care if they were enemies! I was sick to death of ponies dying to stupidity.

And then a buck stood before me and filled my vision once again as my barrel pointed right at his face. His familiar, stern, blue face... and the gun clicked on an empty chamber. He didn't flinch as he looked right along the barrel into my eye.

I'd almost killed my best friend. His eyes, hard and angry and confident, mirrored my own. He knew that this was fucked up. Pointless. Worthless. But he wasn't freaking out. He wasn't screaming like a lunatic and blasting ponies in a fit of rage. He just looked right in my eye along the gun that had almost taken his head off.

I'd nearly killed him. Nearly killed... Oh Goddesses, what was happening to me?

"It's just... so... stupid..." I sobbed as the spent shotgun clattered beside me. I swayed back and forth; I'd gotten shot by more than a few ponies in that little shooting spree. "I can't make them stop," I sobbed. Then he reached out to hold me steady as Glory's beam gun blasted bursts at the fighters around us while Lacunae touched her horn to my wounds. Now that I was aware of it, I realized just how much I hurt. "Please... tell me how to make them stop killing each other..."

He held me without flinching or revulsion as I pressed my cheek to his neck and closed my eye. He smelled nice, too; even if he was a grouch. "You can't stop them," he said, sharing the horrible truth I knew all too well. "No matter how much you try and get them to stop fighting, you... you can't make them stop."

"I'm sorry..." I whispered in his ear. "I thought I was strong enough." But now I knew better. Now I had a clue of just what war really was: a fight so massive and all-engulfing that no pony... not Security, not Marauders, not Ministry Mares, not even Princesses... could stop it. I'd faced monsters and threats I'd never imagined a month ago... but finally, I'd encountered a monster so vast that no amount of bullets would kill it. That monster was war, and I couldn't slay it.

Suddenly I had a great deal more sympathy for those mares so long ago... and remembered two Princesses meeting in a tent. *'We invented it...'* And it had been birthed here. Here in this horrible city.

"It's not that you're not strong enough to stop it. The amazing thing is that you care enough to bother," he said softly before he pulled away. "But we can't stop this fight now. We need to find Scotch and get out of here. Can you find her PipBuck tag?" Because that was something I could do. Something that I could accomplish.

I sniffed and nodded. "Yeah. If you have any duct tape left, can you tape up my braces? Damn things broke." Damn things had busted from Steel Rain's two near misses. I'd have been Blackjack foam if he'd actually hit me! I loaded the tag for Scotch's PipBuck. Don't think about what you almost did.

Don't stop. Just get Scotch Tape and get out of here.

Then I looked at the shotgun and hesitated. I'd almost blown my friend's head off. Would I be safe with it? Would they be safe if I had it? As if reading my mind, he scooped up the weapon and pressed it to my chest. "Take it. Just stay with it, okay, Blackjack? If you lose yourself, we're all lost."

"Right. Yeah. Good point," I said as Lacunae finished her healing. The purple alicorn looked as if she'd been put through the wringer; apparently even alicorns had magical limits. The PipBuck tag was to the northeast, back at the fire station. A good place for cover. I looked at my duct taped limbs; this was rapidly approaching pathetic. "Let's get her, quick."

Together, we kept low as possible as I click-clacked my way back towards the building. The roof was on fire; there was something ironic about that, I thought. Get her, get out, don't get dead, and get north to talk to Crunchy Carrots and stop this insanity. There. That was a plan I could do. I pulled my head together as we moved between puddles of burning chemicals. I wondered if there was some mysterious force resupplying the Burners with flamer fuel and the Fillies with gem cartridges and magical energy weapons? Arming... arming... arming... just waiting for a spark.

Then a shape lunged out of the cloying, swirling smoke. It was all fangs, claws, and a great stabbing scorpion tail. I looked at the swooping manticores and felt something shrivel inside me. "You got to be kidding me..."

Glory knocked me on my side as the beast swooped low over us. The monsters were dropping out of the sky, ripping into gangers and Rangers alike. Any semblance of an organized fight was transformed into a chaotic melee. I loaded a drum of flechettes and, lying on my side, pumped four blasts into the monster's flank. It roared, stabbing wildly with its tail as it brought its face around to bite. A fifth blast liquefied its features. I stared at its great gouged-out eye sockets as its mouth spread wide. A sixth blast tore down its throat and it finally, finally collapsed.

I swapped to slugs after that, forcing myself to my hooves. "You can move faster than any of us," I told P-21. "Get in, get her out."

"Right. Then do you want me to set off the bomb?" he asked. I blinked in confusion. Maybe I had more brain damage than I thought. He waved his hoof at the building. "The bomb! The great big honking bomb we left in there!"

"Are you saying that that thing works?" I gaped back.

He rolled his eyes. "Do you really think I'd rig something like that and leave the detonator in their hooves?!" Right. Because he was a smart pony. He gestured to a detonator he had taped to his forehoof. "When you talked about me handling the trigger, I thought you knew!"

"Right. Of course I did. You get her and we get out of here." Because this was just getting ridiculous. Who the heck was I supposed to shoot now? He nodded and disappeared into the smoke as Glory, Lacunae, and I moved back to back. She levitated a grenade machinegun. "Are you going to be all right?" I asked her

She smiled thinly, wanly. "It is hardly my weapon of choice, but I will make do. I've succeeded in giving all of Unity a splitting headache due to that infernal contraption. The Goddess decrees that, when all of the Wasteland has been converted to the alicorn race, the first megaspell we perform will be to push

the entire city of Hoofington into the sea.”

“Right. I might just join in on that one, if you don’t mind,” I said as I looked at Glory. “How do you like your new gun?” I asked as I swapped to Vigilance and the sword. I needed headshots, and the riot gun wasn’t exactly built for pinpoint accuracy.

“It’s very... flashy. It’s also going through gem power drums like crazy!” Glory said as she looked around for incoming fire. “I’ll be fine!”

“Good,” and that was all I had time to say as the next wave of manticores struck. The leonine monsters dove towards our group, and I could barely duck aside on my tottery legs. As deadly as their fangs were, they seemed to want to grab a pony like a mouse, so I kept my eye open for their claws. In the calm of S.A.T.S., I used the accurate pistol to blow out their foreheads and turn them into tumbling missiles as they passed. Of course, as insane as fighting manticores was, we were still open targets for anypony else who wanted a piece of us.

Then a Steel Ranger darted out from a storefront and pointed her missile launcher at us. I brought out Taurus’s rifle, but, fast as it was, I didn’t think I’d get it up before she got a missile off. I opened my mouth to yell to take cover when a glittering, steel-armored pony dropped down upon the Ranger. She wrapped her hooves around in a hug that bent steel and crowed, “Pony in a can! Good thing I got a can opener!” She grabbed a familiar chainsaw knife in her mouth and bit on the grip. The blade whirled as she jammed it into the neck of the Ranger; the power armored pony struggled, but the Reaper just crushed down even more as the blade chewed up the side of her armor. Suddenly, red began to spurt out through the jagged tear in the metal as the pony within the metal shell screamed and then fell silent.

Then Rampage tossed the Ranger aside. Her armor showed hundreds of dents from minigun rounds and her hoofclaws were blackened by fire. Blood smeared her helmet’s blade and the jagged spine along her armor. “Hey Blackjack.” She grinned widely as she trotted towards us. “This is wild, huh?” A manticore swept in and she leapt up to meet it, using her weight to flip it over in midair. The manticore crashed to earth before us as she finished the flip and rammed her armor’s foot long spines through its sternum. “I don’t think I’ve ever had such fun!”

I just grinned like as idiot as I trotted towards her while she pulled herself off the carcass. “Rampage, I--”

Then she was on top of me, smashing me down and pressing her hoofclaws to my throat. “Big Daddy told me to kill you on sight. So you have one chance to say something. Say it,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Get off her now,” Glory shouted as she brought the gatling beam gun to bear. “Or I will give you another childhood!”

“Right. I’ll get to you in a second, turkey. This is between me and Blackjack.” She looked down at me. “Well?”

I closed my eye and said, “I’m sorry. You were right.” She didn’t tear out my throat, so I continued. “We should have helped Scotch through it. I shouldn’t have tried to shelter her.”

Rampage sighed softly as I looked up into her pink eyes. Then she thumped my head softly.

"Technically, I'm only supposed to let you live if you agree to fight for us, but I'm really lousy at following orders like that." She climbed off and helped haul me to my feet. "You look like shit, Blackjack."

"Appropriate. I feel like shit," I replied as I stabilized my wobbling legs, looking around. "Where the hell did all these ponies come from?"

"Are you serious?" she asked with a little smirk. "You don't think that Big Daddy's only big in with the Hoofington Gangs, do you? Soon as the fighting got serious, he called in favors across half of Equestria. More are coming west every day. This is the greatest stomp in the history of the Wasteland; the Rangers are finally getting everything they deserve. It's wonderful." Then she pointed at the dead manticore. "These are a bit much, though..."

Gangs from all across Equestria. "It's insane. Why? What the hell are they coming for?"

"What? It's not like we're the only ones. A contingent of Steel Rangers arrived by boat this morning from Trottingham. There's fighting in the south with the Pecos and Flank against zebras out in the badlands. Red Eye's forces are picking fights with the Society ponies. I'm amazed the Enclave and the Collegiate haven't started shooting. Hell, the only part of the Hoof that isn't crazy is the northwest."

And that was because I gassed my stable, preventing the Overmare from leading a cannibalistic crusade across the Hoof. "It's not a coincidence," I muttered weakly as I looked around at the fire and smoke. "I get EC-1101 out of Stable 99, and suddenly everything explodes? It can't be a coincidence."

"Well, it's not just here, either. Apparently the Rangers are stomping some stable outside Ponyville. There's war in Fillydelphia. Red Eye has an army that's moved in around Tenpony Tower. All of Equestria is going nuts! It's amazing," Rampage said with a grin, then looked to the side. "Hold on to that thought, Blackjack." And she crouched and leapt on to the back of a manticore savaging three unarmored ponies.

"At least we can trust the Enclave to stay out of it," Glory said as she coughed. "There's no way they'd stick their wings in this mess." I gave her a skeptical look, and she said stubbornly, "Nopony up there would be dumb enough to mess around with things on the ground right now. Okay?" But she still looked worried. The Enclave might not do anything against the surface... but what about against its own?

I looked towards the firehouse. This was taking too long. Had something happened to Scotch? Had they gotten caught? Killed? My mane crawled at the possibilities. Right between my shoulder blades... maybe I was paranoid, maybe I'd finally cracked, but I flopped over to the side. For a second I felt like a complete idiot...

And then the monsterpony swooped by over me. The mare's scorpion tail glanced off my barding as she flapped her bat wings wildly. Then she dug her claws into the asphalt as she slid to face me. "How'd you hear me coming?" she asked, her tail stabbing at the torn up street, her blue eyes glaring at me as she bared her fangs. "Oh well... at least we can finish this."

I hauled myself to my feet. "Yeah. Let's end this, Jetstream," I said as I looked at the tawny combination of pony and manticore, not taking my eye off her as four more manticores landed around us.

Then she blinked her blue eyes in confusion. "Jetstream?" Suddenly she burst out laughing. "I'm not Jetstream."

I blinked. "Well... aren't you?" Had Sanguine altered her memory? Had the fusion megaspell robbed her of her identity?

She looked at me with a smirk. "What the hell are you talking about, Security? My name's not Jetstream. You couldn't pay me to be that stuck up. Before my change, my name was Brass."

"Brass?" That... that mare who'd fucked with Doof? I stared at her. "Then how'd you become..."

"This?" She gestured to herself with a clawed hoof. "Oh, I jumped on this the first chance I got. A leg up on the food chain, wings, and command over these dumb critters... what was there to not love? True, they stuck me in stasis when the file was locked down, but I got to admit, I like the Wasteland a whole lot more!"

I looked at her and then pointed a hoof. "So... you were a soldier, volunteered to become this, and couldn't be happier?"

"That's right!" she said with a chuckle, snapping her tail.

"No angsty back-story? No regrets? You're perfectly happy being a monster?" I said as I smiled.

She scowled at me, her claws scraping the broken up pavement. "Absolutely!" Then she growled as I burst out laughing. "What's so funny?" Glory and Lacunae looked at me in concern; understandable, given that I'd been running around screaming like a maniac just a few minutes ago.

I sat hard on my haunches and looked to the sky, extending my legs as if thanking the Goddesses themselves. "Finally! I finally have an enemy to fight that I don't have to feel sorry for!" I said, tears running down my cheek as I loaded a magazine of hollowpoint rounds into Vigilance. "Do you have any idea how many times I've had to fight a monsterpony only to guilt and whine and angst about it afterwards? But you? You're a complete monster, Brass!" I said as I slashed the sword in front of me. "Do you eat foals? Tell me you eat foals and rape helpless little ponies. That'll be the icing on the cake!" I laughed in mad glee, doing a shuffling little dance with my taped up legs. "Woo woo! No regrets... no sir... no regrets... not for me... woo woo!" I sang as I danced around in a strutting trot.

She roared and charged, and then just as suddenly danced back on her claws as my sword sang in a slash before her. Back and forth the blade slashed, inches from her face as I charged at her. "No angst! No moral dilemmas! No wondering if I did something wrong! Hold still!" I shouted in glee as I raised Vigilance, slipped into S.A.T.S. and queued up four shots. It was a testament to her speed that she was able to raise her clawed hooves to shield her face as the bullets blasted great big bites out of her hide.

"You're insane!" she shouted. "Fury, damn it! Kill her!"

From my blind side a mare said in a bored tone, "You're such an idiot, Brass." And I turned to see... a mare on fire? No. It was an earth pony with a mane and coloration that resembled crackling flame. "And don't use that stupid 'code name' on me. Honestly, what are you? A filly reading comics?"

"Just shut up and kill her! Where the hell is Precious?" the manticore pony yelled as two of her beasts came to shield her from my gunfire.

"Who cares?" the orange and red mare drawled. "Get clear." Now that's never a good thing to

hear.

I brought the gun around and pointed it at her head. "Get back." She didn't. "Get the fuck back!" I did not like how casually she strolled towards me or how the tawny manticores were moving away.

"Yeah. Add a few more expletives. See if that works for ya," she said as she started tossing bits of junk and garbage onto her back. "So. Sanguine wants it bad. In fact, he wants it so bad that he's started cutting power to our stasis pods for more help. So you can come with us and give it up, or we take it."

"Or you tell him no dice," I replied as I backed away from this weird mare, trying to figure out her thing. What was she fused with? Given how the other was moving away, I gestured for Lacunae and Glory to move away too. Neither looked particularly happy about it, especially given that they each had a manticores snapping at them. Beam gun bursts and magic arrows kept the monsters back, though, as the mare kept on picking up pieces of junk.

"Look. Deus wouldn't have been after it if Sanguine hadn't had his hooves in the fire. And Sanguine wouldn't be after it if something didn't have *his* hooves in the fire. So just give it up," she said as she looked at me dully. "You know what? Fuck it." The flame mare closed her eyes as she started to glow.

And she exploded.

You know... I was rather sure that I had completely surpassed my quota of explosions for today, and it wasn't even noon. The junk she'd tossed on herself became deadly shrapnel that whizzed past me as I slid across the ground to come to a halt against a dead Ranger. Then the pile of ashes glowed, and from them reformed the flame-colored mare. "Ow," she muttered with a hiss of pain, looked at me, and started trotting towards me again with an annoyed look. "Wow... most ponies don't need to see this a second time," she said as she started to glow once more.

Rampage darted in front of me as the mare flashed and exploded again, the flames washing over her armor and cooking her striped hide as she shielded me from the blast. "Toasty!" Rampage yelled, the blackened flesh already beginning to heal. "I got this one, Blackjack."

"Rampage? Are you back with us?" I asked and saw her pink eyes hesitate.

"Is Scotch okay?" she asked, biting her lip.

"I... don't know," I admitted, looking towards the firehouse. What was taking them so long? I could see the tag and the blue bars.

"Let me know when you do," she said as she turned towards the regenerated red and orange mare. "Okay, Sparky, let's see it again!" And she charged the startled-looking mare, who glowed as Rampage bulldozed her off to the north. Then the mare exploded again, and I heard Rampage laugh in glee.

"Okay. This is getting surreal," I muttered, then grinned at the manticores pony as I struggled to my hooves, tottered, and fell flat on my face. Well, I wouldn't let that stop me. "Oh Brass..." I sang as I lifted the glowing sword. I felt... drunk. Like I'd shot down a whole bottle of Wild Pegasus. My hide was

numb and my mouth kept slipping on my words.

"Blackjack, shouldn't we be getting the heck out of here?" Glory asked, her red beams peppering the annoyed-looking manticore; clearly, her gatling beam gun didn't pack the shot per shot punch of her beam rifle. Still, she had a point. If I could only think. So many blasts and crashes and impacts left my brain feeling like it was so much mashed jelly.

"Right! Right!" I said as I picked myself to my hooves. And the tag was moving again, towards us? Yes! Towards us. But the smoke and fire and monsters and brain damage were all adding up on me and I managed four steps before everything went sideways and I collapsed on my face again. I rolled onto my back, looking at the smoke pouring up into the sky, and I stretched my hoof towards it for a moment, as if I could just push the clouds away and see the blue beyond.

Sweet Celestia, I was messed up. How many times had I been blown up today?

A grenade drove off Glory's manticore and announced that P-21 had arrived with Scotch in tow. He looked more frazzled than usual as Persuasion thumped and the precisely aimed grenades blew the monsters back. Scotch Tape looked sullen, though. "I can't believe you wouldn't let me bring her with us!"

"Not right now, Scotch," he replied in the middle of loading another grenade.

"Stop talkin' at me like you're my mom. She saved me from those Ranger ponies!" she insisted as she pointed back at the fire station. Who saved who from what? Oooh... head hurt.

As they argued, Lacunae exhausted the ammunition in her purloined grenade machine gun and tossed the bulky weapon away. All she had was her magic, and not even that seemed inexhaustible. Then two Rangers slammed into the beasts she faced, distracting them. One had to be Paladin Stronghoof; I thought I saw him looking towards me as he smashed the beast like a stuffed animal. The other was Turnip, firing a missile at the manticore at almost point blank range. Rampage fought the exploding pony. Other Rangers shot at her. Fillies and Burners fired at them.

I could see the Dealer standing beside me, and part of me noticed that my crazy had gotten good enough to make it a bit harder to see him through the smoke. "Do you understand now, Blackjack? Do you understand what you're trying to stop?"

Lacunae took the opportunity to return to me, lowering her horn and applying a trickle of healing magic to my head. My PipBuck labeled it as 'crippled'. That explained a lot. "Yeah. But I got to... got to... do... something to stop it..." All we needed now was the Enclave to sweep in, and I'd wave the white flag. It couldn't get any worse than this...

And then the roar sounded.

It was close, deep, grinding, and loud enough that everypony around stopped fighting and looked about. Again it sounded, sending a shiver along my mane. "We need to go..." I said as I struggled to my hooves. That seemed to be a growing consensus as everypony started to back away from the burning fire station. For a few seconds, there were only the sounds of crackling flames and the more distant fighters. Then a rumbling crash grew louder and louder as the roar became a growing scream from the northeast.

The firehouse exploded. No, not from a bomb or the like. Instead, the flaming structure was pushed completely over as a massive monster of metal half crawled over and half burst through the structure. I'd seen a machine like this before, half rusted and buried in a hillside. This one wasn't rusted; it was operational, mobile... and much bigger.

Just what this fight needed... a tank.

The huge vehicle was covered in black and white stripes and coated with flaming debris. Everypony with a gun pointed it at the steel beast and opened fire as they fled in any direction they could that was away. Its heavy armor plates were barely scratched by the heavy weapons of the Rangers. Steel Rain might have been able to do something, but he was nowhere to be seen. Smart pony.

Two huge barrels swept across the battlefield as the turret turned, shaking off heaps of rubble like a dog. Smaller gun barrels recessed at the corners tracked back and forth for a moment, and then belched out streams of gunfire that tore through everything equally, pony and power armor alike. The exploding pony was hit and exploded, but didn't reform immediately. Dead? Waiting? Brass was hitting the clouds. I hoped she ate a lightning rod. Rampage blinked, was blasted off her hooves by a spray of high power machine gun blasts, and came to rest near me. "Oooo... That is one big can."

Those turrets now all pointed right at me, and the mechanical beast let out a long low rev of its engines. Its treads started to grind through the firehouse rubble as it moved towards us.

Of course it was after me. Everything was after me! I was wondering where the zebra infantry was. Then I looked at P-21 staring with his jaw dropped, looked at his bare back, and glanced at the rubble. Well... it'd be a shame to waste it. I reached out with my magic, flicked up the guard, and pushed the red button.

You know, this was turning into a regular thing with me today.

The bomb buried in the remains of the firehouse ripped up directly underneath the rear corner of the tank. Its left tread flew apart as the entire back end of the vehicle crumpled. For a moment, I was sure that there was going to be a secondary explosion, but the tank just lay there like a busted toy. Bricks and dust and flaming bits cascaded down upon us as we huddled on the ground. I slowly rose to my hooves and took a few steps towards the war machine.

Then I looked back over my shoulder at my friends and grinned. "I win."

Then the engine growled to life and a pink glow began to spread along the damaged vehicle, the metal bending back into shape, knitting together, and reappearing. The guns began to move in their sockets, and all together we rushed away to the west, disappearing into the smoke. A minute later, the tank's engine let out a roar that echoed across the battlefield.

* * *

We didn't stop running for almost ten minutes. We spotted one or two Reapers, but they were scattering too fast to give us any trouble. Finally, we tumbled into an intact basement bar and spread out. Everypony was covered in a mat of blood, soot, dust, and sweat. We reeked of smoke and flamer fuel. My brand new shotgun was in dire need of a new barrel, and Glory's beam gun barely had enough charge to function as a flashlight.

But me? I couldn't be happier. We were alive. No pony was missing body parts. Well, no pony except me, but, still, I hadn't lost any more. And we were all together again!

Lacunae used her magic to recharge our remaining potions before we drank them. I was still far from top notch. Now that the shock had worn off, I was one throbbing nerve head to hoof. P-21 and I both took a Med-X. Scotch had gotten over her shock at the tank and was now telling Rampage about an odd filly she'd met in the firehouse who had saved her from Steel Rain's Rangers. Glory tried to repair my braces with something more effective than duct tape; hard to know how she'd manage that.

Me, I just smiled as I drank a room temperature Buckweiser and looked at my five friends.

"You look happy..." P-21 said as he sat opposite me. He'd taken one drink of the tepid beer and grimaced. Wuss. But that was why I loved him. He still looked mixed about Rampage rejoining us. Glory remained cool, now that things had calmed down. There was no doubt we needed her, but it'd take a while before Glory forgave her for leaving us back at the Collegiate.

"I feel happy. I look like shit," I replied as I looked at the dusty pool table. There were bones around it. Well, that was a downer. I wondered who'd been playing when the bombs fell. Who'd been winning. Had they been having fun getting one last game in as the air sirens wailed? There had once been pictures all over the walls, but most had fallen to the floor and were ruined by mud and moisture. From the few that remained, it looked as if this had been a hangout for the soldier bucks at the naval base. Most of them were smiling at the camera, or grinning like idiots, or raising bottles of beer in salute.

I lifted my bottle to the pictures that remained. Having had a taste of war, though I admitted it had been a small taste, I knew they deserved all the respect I could muster.

Especially when I knew one of these ponies.

Twist and a zebra sat at the bar in one grainy photograph, and I carefully levitated the frame off the wall. There was a news article taped inside the frame.

Barroom Brawl Becomes Battlefield.

By Ace Buckley.

Chaos reigned yesterday night in Progress at Billiard's pool hall as a group of sailors from the Ironmare Naval Base encountered several soldiers from the Miramare Air Station. Sergeant Twist, formerly of the now infamous Macintosh's Marauders, was sharing a drink with Shujaa, one of the elusive Proditor zebras still fighting on behalf of Equestria, when the sailors arrived and took umbrage with the presence of the red zebra. Sergeant Twist told the sailors what they could do with their anchors in a quote we cannot reprint, and the fight was on.

When soldiers from the air station learned that the sergeant was in trouble, they immediately rushed to her assistance. All told, almost two hundred off duty soldiers rushed to the scene to assist their side. Though there were no casualties, Colonel Cupcake at Miramare said that there would be severe punishment incoming. Some observers, however, have expressed concerns that the former Marauder enjoys special privileges due to the attack on her last year. The

question has also been raised of whether the sergeant's open intimate relationship with Shujaa is a conflict of loyalties. Few zebras remain in the Hoofington region, and most of those who do are inmates of the Yellow River internment camp.

Billiards, owner of the establishment in question, has said that anypony wishing to fight on behalf of the Princess and Equestria was welcome, striped or not. He assures his clientele that his bar would be reopened in just a few weeks.

I looked at the pair in the photograph, holding hooves and resting their heads against each other. It could have been Glory and me in that photograph. Looking at Twist, I glanced over. There were some differences... they had different grins. Different eyes. Then there were the stripes. And the zebra simply looked exotic with that 'not-quite-a-pony' look they had. I turned it over, and there was a little note: 'Twist + Shujaa' with a heart drawn around the words. Should I tell her about it? Would she freak out? I didn't want to shoot her in the head again, especially not with Scotch Tape watching.

Not remembering sucks. Shit...

"Rampage..." I called out.

She looked over from Scotch. Her armor had holes in it she hadn't been able to patch yet. I could only imagine how she'd gotten another suit. Had she gone down into the tunnels for the armor we'd been forced to leave behind? Maybe she had a second suit left with Big Daddy.

"Yeah? What's up?" she asked as she trotted towards me.

"I found a picture," I said softly. "Back at the Museum a few days back, when we were fighting zebras... you said that your name was Shujaa." I tapped the overturned picture. "I found... I think I found a picture of her."

Rampage sat down hard. "You mean... one of the ponies... inside me?" I nodded slowly, and she clenched her eyes shut.

P-21 slipped off of his seat and trotted to Scotch. "Let's get you washed up. There's got to be some clean water somewhere around here with all this rain."

"Hey, I want to stay with Rampage!" the filly protested as he shoved her towards the stairs.

"She's not going anywhere. Now move," P-21 said firmly as he shoved her up the stairs.

Rampage took the picture and looked at the little note. Shaking wasn't a good sign. She slowly turned the frame over, reached out with her hoof, and ran it over the glass, as if caressing Twist. "I... I don't understand these feelings..." she said as she started to cry. She gave me a snotty sniff. "I feel... I feel all... all mixed up! This... this is me!" she said as she looked at me with wide eyes. "And... and I love her so much..." And then she pointed at Twist. "But this is also me! I know it... I... I see it. And... and I love her... I love her so much it hurts! And yet... I hate her too! I'm so angry at her!" And she dropped the picture and hugged herself. "But why? I don't know these ponies!"

"Two souls in one," Lacunae said softly.

Rampage's hooves dug into her sides. "I don't understand... I... am I Twist? Am I Shujaa? Am I

both?" She sniffed and shook her head. "I don't understand at all. I feel... I want to rip open my chest. I want... I want to save her... but I don't understand why. None of it makes any sense!" She stared at me with her wide, pleading eyes. "Who am I, Blackjack? What am I?"

I knelt down and hugged her, hoping that she wasn't going to crush me like a bug. "I don't know, Rampage. Arloste? Twist? Shujaa?" I stared at her. "I wish I were a smarter pony. Then I could figure all this out." I looked up at Lacunae, wondering just how many souls you could fit in one pony.

My whole life, I'd always been Blackjack: maybe not the smartest pony in the stable, but still me. I had a mother who raised me better than other ponies I knew and I had never had to question who or what I was. The sight of the Reaper looking at that picture with such an expression of confusion and pain... Her jaw grit as she looked from pony to zebra and back again. Finally, she pushed the picture away as she sniffed. "If Big Daddy could see me now..."

"How do you feel?" I asked, and she hiccupped and rubbed her nose.

"I feel... Goddesses... I'd say messed up and crazy, but apparently that's not how crazy works. I look at the pictures, and part of me says 'that's me', and other parts say 'no, it's somepony else' and they're fighting with each other. And part of me loves what I see... a part of me hates what I see... and... it's just wrong. I want to apologize to myself... and kill myself... and cut out my heart... and... ugh... just crazy!" She looked at Glory plaintively. "Are you sure that I'm not crazy? Positive? It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

Glory sighed and gave a small, comforting smile. The gray pony just didn't have it in her to hold a grudge. "No. If you weren't aware of the conflicting impulses... maybe then it might be some sort of personality disorder... but since you are... Sorry."

"Eh..." She took a deep breath. "It's how I normally feel. Little impulses and urges and conflicts inside me and all of them screaming for attention. Sometimes I feel like a schoolteacher or something and my head is a kindergarten." She groaned. "Mint-als help me focus on what's what... keep it all straight."

"Well... sorry I can't help more," I said with a sigh.

She just laughed weakly, shaking her head. "Blackjack... before I met you, I didn't think that I could be helped at all. Nothing made sense. Now I know the name of at least one pony inside me. Maybe two. At least I've got some hope that I can figure it all out. There's nothing worse than being a stranger in your own skin, feeling different parts of yourself battling it out."

"Do you think you're still a threat to Scotch?" I asked with a concerned frown.

"I don't know," she said as her smile disappeared. She hung her head with a sigh. "Now that I know... I felt that urge. I won't lie. Like a pressure inside me wanting to snuff her out before she could hurt more. But I didn't let it lock me out this time." She rubbed her head. "I think I'll be fine. Just try not to leave her alone with me if you can help it. No reason to tempt fate, right?"

Right. Tempting fate would be the last thing I'd ever do. I asked the question I'd been dreading since seeing the Reapers fighting. "Do you think Big Daddy can cut this war off if we get Crunchy Carrots to agree?" More importantly, would he still *want* to?

She sighed. "Maybe. I think so. If we do it soon."

"But why would he want to? I thought that Big Daddy liked a good stomp," Glory said with a small frown.

Rampage chuckled mirthlessly. "He does. But he's smart enough to look past the stomp and figure out that, even if he crushes the Rangers, he's not going to have much left afterwards. Big Daddy's always been about encroachment. Squeeze the Rangers out block by block, month by month. He never wanted a war; he just fought because they shot first... well... somepony else shot first."

That gave me hope. "Okay. Well then, we'll keep going to meet with Crunchy Carrots. You can say that you're Big Daddy's ambassador or something. It'll sound better coming from a Reaper than Security anyway. We'll explain how we started things, apologize, and hope she can rein in Steel Rain."

"It should. It takes a lot for Rangers to break ranks," Rampage agreed.

"But you can bet Steel Rain won't just let us meet with the elder," Glory chipped in.

"Correct." I sighed and looked at Rampage. "Do you know the naval base at all? You've been all over the Hoof."

She nodded and walked to the bar, digging around a bit before coming back with a piece of scrap paper and a pencil. She drew a rectangle and pointed a hoof at it. "This is the naval base itself. Mostly a bunch of reinforced warehouses. Whole place was lousy with radiation for years, but I guess enough of it washed out or wore off for the Rangers to move in. West of it are a whole bunch of docks. That area's one massive rusty tangle. East of the main area, there're these big factory buildings where they used to make ships and stuff." She drew a scribbled mess on the left side of the rectangle and a smaller square to the right.

"South of it is Ironmare Town. Mostly ruins. There used to be squatters, but the Rangers stomped them years back. Still, that area is probably thick with Ranger patrols." She drew a great big backwards capital F above the central rectangle. "This is the breakwater and pier. Not sure how much cover or stuff there is." And then she drew a lozenge shape on the bottom of the lower arm of the F. "And this is the *Celestia*. The Steel Rangers have made it their fortress in Hoofington. It's the big reason the Reapers haven't tried a war before. No pony knows if the big guns work. No pony wants to find out what it'll take, if they do work, to get Crunchy Carrot to use up any ammunition for them."

Finally, underneath the square, she drew a circle. "This used to be the headquarters for the base. Big old building; guess it used to be a bunch of offices. But..." She drew another circle, this one made of a dotted line, to the right of the headquarters. "This is the Ironmare crater. The bomb missed the base outright, but you know what they say..."

"The only time close matters is horseshoes, grenades, and balefire bombs..." I muttered.

"They really say that?" Glory asked with a confused frown.

"Spoken like a pony who's never gotten a ringer," Rampage chuckled.

"Balefire bombs ring?"

I waved my hoof. "Okay. So... if we can get through the headquarters building, then through the

factory, we should be able to find somepony to set up a meeting. Maybe Stronghoof, if he survived.” And it’d be hard for me to think of anypony who could kill that stallion!

“I smell a whole lot of ‘make it up as we go’ coming off this plan,” Glory said with a resigned sigh.

“Of course. Wouldn’t be fun otherwise,” I said with a smile. I looked at Rampage, who was looking at the newspaper clipping. “You want me to hold on to that for you?”

She jumped, looked at me, and then nodded once. I carefully removed the picture from the frame and slipped it into my saddlebags. I’d keep it safe. It was one of the few things I could do for her.

* * *

We all took a few minutes to rinse off the grime and grit from the battle. Already I was missing the last time I had wondrous hot water cascading over me with a mare scrubbing my flanks. An unoccupied bathtub would be wonderful, too. I had never appreciated how a hot shower was a hallmark of civilization. It seemed so simple, but right now I could go for a weeklong soak... which would give me a few more weeks to get stuff done before I died.

Tick tock tick. As we set off, I imagined the taint battling with my cells, slowly advancing and encroaching on healthy tissue. Building up bases and fortifying tumors. Staging raids and assaults on my intact organs till it completely controlled the territory of my body. I could swear I felt little explosions inside when I moved wrong. Twinges like gunfire. A general burning in my rear leg like flamers at work. And, every now and then, I imagined a bomb inside me going off that would make me pause and gasp.

“Well, you were all running one way, but I couldn’t run. I was so scared. And those mean Ranger ponies were laughing about how they should just cut off my PipBuck and figuring how to disarm his big old bomb. Then this purple and green filly walked in. And they seemed to think she was one of my friends or something and went to grab her. Well... she opened her mouth wide and SHE bit HIS leg off. And then the other one started to shoot her, but the bullets? They just bounced right off. And then she breathed fire at him! Green fire!” Scotch looked at us. “I’m not making this up!”

I smiled as I clattered along beside her. “I didn’t say you were, Scotch.”

“You had the smile,” she said sullenly.

“Smile?”

“That ‘I don’t believe you but I won’t say so’ smile,” she said crossly, then looked at Rampage. “You believe me, don’t you?” There was more in her tone and expression than just that. She might as well have been asking ‘You’re not angry with me, are you?’ or ‘You’re not going to leave again, are you?’

Rampage looked at her a long moment and then gave a crooked smile. “Sure kid. I knew Gorgon. Freakiest damn pony you ever saw,” and her smile slowly faded away. “And one of the nicest.” I recalled him turning my friends to stone but kept my silence.

“Who hired him to up production at the mine?” I asked as I trotted along. We were making our way north, more or less trying to keep off the streets and always watching the skies. We may have killed off a bunch of Brass’s flock, but I didn’t think that we’d gotten all of them. “I mean, it seemed pretty sudden, from what I recall.”

"Dunno. Apparently, some buyer wanted every last gem they could claw out of the mine. Basically took it over. Funny, because normally those gems would get converted into flamer fuel or gem cartridges, but they were going somewhere else." I frowned, my head throbbing.

"I know that look," P-21 said as he limped up beside me. "What are you thinking, Blackjack?"

"Just... ugh... everything is happening now. I get EC-1101 out of 99. Gorgon gets sent out to mine gems. Everypony starts killing everypony else. What triggered it? What's behind it? Who wants the gems so much, and why?" I pointed in the general direction of the battle. "And that monsterpony said that somepony was really pushing Sanguine to get EC-1101. So why now?"

Rampage looked at me. "No offense, but why not? Things are finally organized enough for groups of ponies to tear each other apart."

"But that's part of it too. The companions come out east and just happen to weed out all the dozens of little tribes so that they could get five competing organizations? And one of the companions goes up to the Enclave to get them involved too through the VC? I can't believe it's all coincidence. It's like there's something... something sweeping all this along. And not just in Hoofington. Why does the Stable Dweller shake everything up now? Why has Red Eye come to power in Fillydelphia now? Why is everything happening now?"

"Maybe it *is* all just one big coincidence?" Glory suggested. "I mean, it's all circumstantial."

She was probably right... but I couldn't help but feel the niggling sensation that all of this was connected. That things that happened two hundred years ago were happening now.

I looked back at Lacunae trailing behind us as Glory and P-21 began arguing over coincidence versus pattern. Well, that was fine; I'd raised the question, so now the smart ponies could argue over it. I dropped back and gave Lacunae a little nudge. "How are you feeling?"

"The Goddess was hurt... very badly. I do not think Unity has ever been so threatened before." She shivered. "She has cut me off as completely as she can. I have been forsaken. I can hear the others... but next time I am threatened, she will let me die. She will not endanger everything for just me."

"I'm sorry," I said with a sigh. "I guess... I guess you and the Goddess would have been better off if you'd never met me."

"Why do you say that?" Lacunae asked with the ghost of a smile. "You are... in many ways... the most fascinating pony the Goddess has ever encountered. Tenacious. Foolish. Brave and cowardly. Painfully devoted to those in need. Had ponies like you lived two centuries ago, perhaps things might have been different. At the very least, you have inspired the Goddess to a radical plan."

"Radical?"

"Yes. The Goddess knows a dire enemy is coming to us. We will... treat with her. Seek to use her rather than destroy her outright. Allow her to achieve mutual goals in the hopes that our great biological problem can be addressed."

"That sounds dangerous. What if she betrays you?"

"That's a great concern. But as you have pointed out... two centuries of Wasteland has

accomplished little.” *Two centuries of Watcher and the Enclave hasn’t accomplished much either*, I thought. “We do not know if this will work, but we are becoming increasingly aware that old methods are not succeeding. Things must change, one way or another.

“Are you really cut off forever?” I asked in concern, worried about what it meant for her.

“So says the Goddess, but she’s said so before. Twilight is terribly curious about Hoofington, Enervation, and your own concerns.” Lacunae gave a mysterious little smile. “I have faith that she’ll one day return to me. I’ve lost Goddesses before...”

That was an odd thing to say, but when she mentioned that name, I gave a half smile, “Is she... is she really in there?”

“It’s... complicated,” she said with another faint smile. “It’s like... music. The Goddess is the conductor, and we are her orchestra. She selects the music, but we must play the notes. Some of us play well, some softly, some with amazing skill. Twilight is one such musician, perhaps the best in the orchestra, but the Goddess still picks the music. And I think that she is glad to yield the decisions to the Goddess... the choices of her time as Ministry Mare were not easy on her. It was a time of much pain and regret.”

“Funny how she wants to add us all to her band,” I muttered dryly.

“We once thought to make it optional, but the process was too slow and painful. The acolytes of Unity were too vulnerable to the predators of the Wasteland. And it seemed somewhat cruel to leave the poor and ignorant and fearful to die when they could be saved in Unity. Once they were part of us, they would know it was a better state.” She gave a tiny shrug. “It is a matter of perspective. For us, it would be monstrous not to offer Unity to all.”

I didn’t think about it like that. “What was it like for you?”

She gave me a sad smile. “I don’t know. I didn’t go through Unity,” she replied, and I kicked myself. It was so hard to remember that she wasn’t actually a pony, that she was just a collection of thoughts and regrets. “I have memories, though. A cup of golden fluid... vats of rainbow lights... catwalks... why catwalks?” She sighed and shivered slightly. “Then falling into a great dark filled with whispers and motes of light.”

“And then?”

“Learning to play. Some fight it. But I think, on some fundamental level, we all long for harmony.”

“Harmony, huh?” I looked in the direction of all the smoke. “Somehow, Hoofington doesn’t seem to know how to play along.”

* * *

Two hours later, we’d left most of the industrial section of the city behind. Crumbling factories gave way to a narrow band of yellowed grass, dead trees, and smaller patches of tract homes. In the middle of this band were a parking lot, a foundation, and a sign proudly proclaiming ‘Horizon Laboratories’. Beneath that, ‘Proud Subsidiary of the Ministry of Arcane Science’. Everything else had been scraped away by a balefire bomb, given the crater beside the building. It’d probably been blown out

into the bay.

"Well. That's disappointing," Rampage muttered. She pointed at the junk scattered over the slab of blasted foundation. "Was this someplace important?"

"It might have been a place with some answers," I grumbled. Now it was no place.

"If you don't mind, I think I should take the opportunity to replenish myself," Lacunae said as she looked yearningly at the red radiation emanating from the bowl-shaped depression.

"Have fun. Keep an eye open for Rangers... Reapers... manticores..." I sighed and hung my head. "You know what? Just keep an eye out for anything that isn't us." With a flutter of her wings, she trotted happily towards the wan glow of the crater.

I walked across the slab, finding the elevator shafts completely choked with rubble. There were a few smashed and rusted bits of office equipment; most of the concrete was burned to a crisp and still gave slow clicks on my radiation meter. We met back in the parking lot.

"So... nothing here, then?" Rampage asked as she drummed her hooves on the rusted hulks.

It looked exactly that way. A small parking lot for wagons... a big empty slab. Wait... Small. Big. Slowly, I turned around and faced away from the building. Nothing that way either. A few smashed homes. A gutted recharging station. A lot of ponies must have worked here, and to do that they must have had some way to get here. There.

A subway...

Slowly, I trotted towards it. The blue sign was pitted with rust and largely illegible, but my PipBuck navigation icon told me what it had said. 'Horizon Station'.

"Bingo," I said with a little smile.

Scotch balked. "You... you want to go down there?" she said as she looked at the rusty doors that hung half open at the bottom of the stairs.

"Just a little way," I said as I looked at her. "You don't have to go, if you don't want to." I glanced at Rampage, but she shook her head slowly. "P-21 can--"

"I'll go with you. You might come across a lock or a terminal," he countered flatly. Damn it.

"I'll stay with her," Glory volunteered, as if there was somepony else willing. "Who knows? It could be fun."

"Yippee," Scotch muttered as she walked away from the subway stairs. "Babysat by the world's most boring pony."

"I'm not the world's most boring pony! We can braid manes... swap stories... um... pillow...fight?..." She chewed on her hoof for a moment and looked at me. "I'm not really the most boring pony, am I?"

I looked at her and thought that outright deception was called for. "Absolutely not."

That brightened her up. "Come on, Scotch. I'll show you the principles of beam rifle technology!" she said as the two headed back towards the center of the parking lot.

"Someday you're going to have to tell her what happened," Rampage said from the doorway of the subway station.

"She's fine. She's dealing with it," P-21 muttered. "Last thing she needs to do is go remembering anything else."

"But why is she remembering at all?" I asked as I looked in at two rusty escalators dropping into the earth. I took that for a good sign and slowly started down with Vigilance and sword out.

"Memory spells remove memory," Rampage said from behind me in a slightly off voice. I glanced back. Her walk was less... stalking. More normal. Another pony inside her? "However, mental trauma is rarely so black and white as good memory, bad memory. Stripping away an unpleasant memory may prevent the mind from actively recalling the event, but it doesn't necessarily remove the countless subconscious reactions to the trauma itself. If a pony falls into a river, the memory of the fall and nearly drowning can be extracted, but the anxiety around water and the phobia of drowning can remain. True memory therapy takes years of work to adjust those subconscious problems." I looked past her at P-21, seeing his eyes wide in surprise. Rampage muttered softly, "What a dreadful station."

"Yeah. Somepony should call maintenance... Doctor...?" I guessed. The emergency lighting still flickered and danced as we followed the escalator lower and lower into the earth.

"Octopus," she replied with a crooked smile. Really? "Yes, really. I was quite grabby with my magic as a colt." I didn't hesitate as we continued down lower into the earth. "I quite like my name, actually. It's one few ponies forget. After a while, all the hoof-this and wing-that blur together, don't you think?" I saw the red marks on my E.F.S. below and lowered my voice.

"Right. And what do you do for a living, Doctor?" I asked, trying to divide my attention.

"Senior psychiatrist at the Fluttershy Medical Center," she said, and then frowned. "At least... I was. I think. Has something happened? I feel dreadfully out of sorts."

Not crazy, but not entirely here and aware of what was going on. "Nothing major," I said softly, wondering how a pony like this ended up in Rampage. "What was the last thing you recall clearly, Doctor?"

She curled her lip as she stepped over several bodies, not seeming to recognize them completely. "I... believe I was attending a lecture on methods of psychological deconstruction and reconstruction in Manehattan. There was an accident... I think. A dreadful accident." She suddenly looked around. "What's going on? This... this has to be some sort of hallucination!"

"Please... Doctor. Focus. You said an accident... did it happen after Big Macintosh's death?"

She looked at me and her panic increased. "Why are you asking an old buck about that horrible affair? This must be some sort of stress-induced break from reality."

"How long ago was it, Doctor?"

"A year... I think..." she said in a trembling voice. She reached up and touched her forehead, her pupils shrinking. "Sweet Luna protect me... am... am I... is this real?"

"I..." I looked at P-21 helplessly. He just gave a tiny shrug. "Yes. I'm afraid you're not dreaming, Doctor. You're... you're inside a mare named Rampage." I prayed she wasn't going to freak out, but, though she seemed disturbed, she didn't become violent. Instead, she reached up to her eyes and then blinked.

"Ah... no glasses... My word. Well, I suppose that, unless I've gone completely off my nut, I may as well accept what you say at face value," she muttered as she looked at the decaying station. "Though it seems as if something has gone quite terribly wrong?" she asked with a worried smile.

"It's been two hundred years. And yes, something did go quite terribly wrong," P-21 said quietly. "You're a buck, Doctor?"

"Well, I was," she said. "And I was a unicorn. Really, how did this happen?"

I sighed. "You tell us, Doctor?"

"As I said, I haven't the foggiest idea. I was... asleep I think. It was dark, certainly. Unpleasant. Then I recall some folks discussing memory manipulation. I was quite keen to join the conversation... but unfortunately, I couldn't quite wake up. Then it happened again just now, and suddenly I was... well... in this odd state. I didn't feel myself at all..." she replied as he looked at her hoofclaws. "My... how positively horrid. The future isn't at all what I'd anticipated."

"Did anything unusual happen to you? Anything to do with the Office of Interministry Affairs or their secret projects?" I asked with a smile. "Anything you can tell us would help."

"My dear, I was living a life of constant referrals and anticipating more time with my grandfoals once I retired. I was never a big supporter of the war or the ministries and certainly not involved with anything secret," she said with a sad shake of her head. "I wonder... did my grandfoals... what became of them?" she asked with a look of terrible worry.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. They probably died," I said softly. "The war... there were bombs..." I stammered and dropped my gaze. "I'm sorry."

She put her hooves on my shoulders. "No, my dear. *I'm* sorry. I'm sorry we didn't work things out. I always knew we were developing too fast. Changing too much. Too much pride and too much anger... but nopony was interested in the opinions of a buck who fondly remembered steam trains." She took a deep breath. "Now, if you'll excuse me... I think there's somepony who wants... something. I'd best go back to wherever I was."

She blinked, and suddenly her eyes popped wide. "Tell me I didn't kill her. Please tell me I didn't kill her!"

"You didn't," I assured her. "Actually, we talked to somepony who was... Well... actually pretty nice, if a little confused."

We trotted down to the station; I was relieved to find it intact. However, there *were* some ghouls

shuffling around aimlessly. I was glad that the doctor was gone; I'd hate to have to explain all this to him. It was surprising how casually we dispatched them when they charged us; after a battle like earlier, it seemed almost foolishly easy. The train tunnel ran north and south, right towards the fallen Horizon Labs.

"What are you hoping to find?" P-21 asked as he stuffed his saddlebags with some semi-decent salvage. There was always a need for more duct tape, Wonderglue, and scrap metal.

"No idea. The professor said that this place was involved with the O.I.A." I said as we stepped off the platform and walked along the tracks. I kept looking up, to the sides, and all around.

"This is a bad idea," P-21 muttered. "We don't have any healing potions left..."

"As I recall, you volunteered," I said as I looked at him with a flat look and even smile. Then I spotted the door in the wall, a terminal mounted next to it. I rapped on the glass monitor. "And good thing, too." He scowled sullenly at me before getting to work.

"What was he like?" Rampage asked.

"The doctor? Well... he was a grandfather. A professional. Cared for his grandkids. Didn't mention a wife... seemed to think he was dreaming or something at first. And he was a psychiatrist of some sort," I said with a smile and a shrug at her baffled look.

We were silent for a few minutes as P-21 worked on the terminal, muttering under his breath. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked softly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think I'm real?"

I blinked in surprise. "Real? What are you talking about?"

"I mean..." she hugged herself. "What if... what if there is no Rampage? Or Arloste? Or me? Am I just... just a collection of ponies all blended together?"

I bit my lip, not sure how to answer that. But P-21 snorted, "You're real, alright." He looked at the striped mare sharply. "I have no idea who that doctor was. Or Shujaa. Or Twist. Or anypony. I just know Rampage. That's all I think of when I think of you. I don't know if you're crazy or possessed or what... but you annoy me, so you must be real."

Rampage looked at him, her eyes growing wide. Just as she started to move to hug him, he pointed a hoof at her face. "Hug me and I'll put enough C-4 in your bed to launch you to the moon."

Rampage stopped mid-hug, giving me an awkward smile. P-21 looked at the terminal and hit a button. There was a beep and then an electrical click, and the door swung open. "Well, there's probably something bad here," he said as he looked at me.

"Why?"

"The password is 'Trottenheimer'."

* * *

I wasn't sure what I'd expected from the basement of Horizon Laboratories. 'Arcane Solutions to Magical Problems' seemed to be their motto. The basement offices were neat and tidy, if slightly dusty. There were no bodies lying around, and while the walls were cracked, they were still mostly intact without too much rubble. A number of posters of Applejack and Twilight Sparkle could be found, along with pithy motivational posters.

What there wasn't a lot of was paper.

"Something's wrong here..." I muttered as I checked the twentieth desk. No clipboards with financial reports. No papers. No office supplies. There was more stuff in the utility closet than in the whole of the office combined. Where were the coffee mugs and the bottlecaps? There were always bottlecaps.

"This place has been cleaned," P-21 said quietly. "And not recently, either."

"No bullet holes..." I said. So this wasn't a raid like at the museum...

Then we found the doors and, pushed against them, a crate filled with strange yellow suits. Bright purple tape was stretched back and forth across the doors, and a sign reading 'Biomagical Contamination Level 5. Quarantined by order of the M.A.S.' had been hung in the center. I looked at it and nodded my head to the door. "What do you want to bet all the interesting things are through there?"

"Of course. Because I'm travelling with the only pony who wants to go into a place marked 'Biomagical Contamination, Quarantined'," P-21 muttered.

"Why are you bitching so much, P-21?" Rampage asked flatly as she cut through the strips. "You could have stayed outside... you know... with your daughter."

"Shut up," he growled as he rubbed his leg. "I didn't ask for this. Any of this."

"So what?" Rampage replied. "I didn't ask to have a doctor, a zebra, and a foal killer inside me. Glory didn't ask to lose a wing. Scotch didn't ask to lose her mother. And Blackjack didn't ask to die of cancer. But we're sucking it up and dealing with it as best we can."

"Rampage," I said, trying to head this off.

"Yeah?" P-21 said, ignoring me and glaring at her. "Well, this is me dealing with it."

"No. This is you running away from it. Because you've got family right here in front of you and you're terrified of actually having a relationship," Rampage said firmly.

"You know what?" He rose to his hooves. "I really don't need to hear this from a mare who ran away and left us to go join her marauding friends. You deal with your shit your way. I'll deal with my shit in my own way." He started limping towards the exit.

"Wow," I muttered.

"Urrgh..." Rampage snorted and smashed a table hard, denting the metal with her hoof. "I really

need to pick my timing better.”

“You think?” I arched my brow as I pushed through the door. Beyond... here was what I was used to. Walls blackened by fire. Partially melted glass airlock. No bones yet, but there were orange drums marked ‘Biomagical Waste’. I gave them a wide berth as my rad sensor began to tick. I fished around in my saddlebags for some Rad-X and even drank a little RadAway for good measure. Looking back at Rampage, I smiled a little.

The fire damage became more intense the deeper we went. These labs had held equipment and terminals. I didn’t see much in the way of cages. Then I found my first body... well... something like a body. It was a bright yellow suit with a strange bubble-like helmet. I’d seen it in the dream I’d had: an environmental protection suit. This one was empty, though, the faceplate shattered. I detached the recorder from its belt.

Unfortunately it’d been damaged... somehow. Beaten? Battered? Chewed on? It crackled as I tried to get it to play back.

“...kzzzzzt... responders cleared out all the aboveground personnel. Up to us to clean up the mess. Of all the fucking times for Twilight to go to a fucking party in Manehattan... dzzzzzt... grade five contamination everywhere. No clue where the bodies went. Contacted the new O.I.A. director but he’s fucking worthless. Probably just tell me whatever they were working on was classified. Who knows what we have to deal with down here...”

We moved to a second set of reinforced airlock doors; these had been twisted and bent away. “What do you think are the odds that this place is unhealthy for me?” I asked with a small smile.

“You? With your luck?” Rampage answered with a soft snort.

“Yeah,” I replied, looking ahead. Then I turned around abruptly. “Be right back.” Rampage sat down, watching me trot down the hall to wiggle into one of the suits. I couldn’t fit it on over my barding and sighed as I removed my armor and left it by the crate. When I finally got the suit sealed up, it filled with magically supplied air from a blue talisman on the leg. I trotted back and looked at the smirking Rampage. “What? Some of us aren’t immortal.”

She just smiled and shook her head.

We went in deeper and found a staircase that took us down a level. “Kkkkzzzz... real mess here. I don’t get how these folks got their hooves on this stuff. All the materials here look legit. I’m not seeing anything contraband anywhere. First honest lab in Hoofington, I swear... Fzzzk...” I looked at the puddles of rainbow sludge and felt my pulse quicken. “...Celestia... what the hell happened here? There shouldn’t be this much... fuck...”

I stepped around the glowing heaps and strange shimmery pools that I was completely certain wasn’t water. The metal walls seemed melted, but the distortion was all wrong. It was as if the metal had softened and deformed, but there wasn’t much in the way of soot. “Dzzzzt... No fucking bodies anywhere. About fifty researchers were supposed to be in here. What the fuck happened to them all... Buttercup? Pickets? Hey, where are you guys?”

I reached a lab with a flickering terminal and slowly stepped past. The rest of the terminals were deformed and twisted almost beyond recognition; the screen of this one was warped too, but I could make

out a few words: 'Silver Bullet test in cryogenic lab'. "Cryogenics? Why would they need to freeze a fucking bullet?" the recorder said through the buzz. And why couldn't they just call it a 'freezing lab' instead of making up a fancy word?

That was when I noticed the sign above the door to the room; apparently *it* was the cryogenics lab. It didn't look frozen. Actually, it looked as if the entire lab had been made of wax and then heated just enough to distort but not enough to melt completely. Everything around me seemed fused into one solid surface. "That's it... kzzzzkkk... I'm getting the fuck out of here... wait. Pickets? Is that... stop fucking around..."

I turned slowly, and then I saw the pony standing in a suit. A suit just like mine... I approached, step by step, cautiously. My hooves found the floor sticky. "Uggh... what is this stuff?" Rampage asked as she looked at her hooves. "Blackjack. Let's get out of here. This place is way too messed up for me."

"Just a second." The pony in the suit was leaned right up against the wall just inside the door. Slowly, I trotted closer and closer, leaving Rampage to scrape the goo from the floor off of her hooves.

"Kkkkkkzzzztt..." the speaker crackled and sputtered as I looked into the lab, my eye drawn into the middle by a familiar object.

The entire room had been liquefied. In the center was a sort of pedestal. It rose like an organic growth in the center of the room, holding the only solid object in sight. A deformed metal arm dangled above it like a skeletal appendage.

I'd seen the object before; I had one sitting in my saddlebag right now.

Lying on the pedestal was the split-open shell of a silver bullet. It'd been mostly hollow, a thick silver casing around a softly glowing white stone core. A faint rainbow residue coated the interior.

Slowly, I backed away as the recorder crackled. "Pickets? Pickets?! Fuck! Pickets!"

I turned to look at the pony; she wasn't leaning against the wall. She was a part of the wall.

And she was staring right at me.

She opened her mouth and began to scream.

And the rest of the lab joined her.

Footnote: Level Up.

(All glory and praise to Kkat for creating FoE in the first place. Huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending half a day polishing this to something readable. And thanks to everypony who leaves comments. Also, if you can spare a few bits, donations can be sent to David13ushey @ gmail. com through Paypal. Thank you.)