

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 32: Choir

"Though quarrels arise, their numbers are few. Laughter and singing will see us through."

I'd dealt with a few monsters before. The hydra in Flank... the mutated dragonlings in Stockyard... radscorpions... manticores... all of them dangerous. But no matter how big or how small they were, they all made *sense*. Limbs, legs, head, fangs, hooves, stingers... the arrangement might be odd, but in their own way, they made sense.

This... this didn't make sense.

The walls, floor, ceiling... everything was moving. It was impossible to tell where metal ended and flesh began. Eyes were bulging. Mouths were opened in one long scream. There were organs between the equipment. Meaty appendages... intestines... I clutched my stomach as I backed away. I felt... it felt like my insides were moving! Like my tainted guts were trying to crawl right out my throat! I fought for one moment and then puked on the inside of my helmet. It wasn't bad compared to what followed at the other end.

And worst of all, I wanted to join that scream. It scratched at my throat.

"Stop it!" I shouted as I tried to back away, but my limbs were stuck to the floor! No, the floor was crawling up my legs! No! My legs were sinking into the floor! "Stop it, please!" I begged. Then things got worse.

It stopped.

Those eyes watched. The molded steel and flesh seemed to be waiting. Watching. "She has not joined our choir..." the mouths whispered.

Sweet Celestia... were they...

"You're... you can talk?" I murmured as I stared... pony eyes. Pony mouths. Luna save me, I saw cutie marks in that mix!

"She is very close. Close to joining their choir," one mouth whispered. Rainbow spittle drizzled from its lips. "We should make her join ours instead!" the drooling lip grinned.

"I don't understand, what do you mean... a choir? I can't sing!" I looked over at Rampage, but her eyes were wide and staring. She looked like a foal trapped in a nightmare.

There was a long low snicker. "Oh, everypony can. Listen..."

The mouths began screaming. One scream of many notes going on and on and... I'd been wrong. We were both trapped in a nightmare. I wanted P-21 here to blow this all up. I wanted Lacunae here with her stupid Goddess to sneer in disdain. I wanted Glory... sweet Celestia... I needed Glory to tell me it was going to be all right. "Stop!"

And again, they did. A wide, slack mouth poking between two monitors murmured, "She does not like our song." It sounded almost apologetic.

"Why?" snickered a mare's mouth. "She's so close to us already. She's singing parts herself. We've heard her."

I felt something move around my hooves... but I couldn't look. "You mean you were singers before... this?" I gasped, refusing to look down. If I saw... I would start screaming. I didn't think I would ever stop.

"No. We joined the choir... after," the mare stuck in the wall beside me murmured softly.

"Force her to join! Make her sing!" several of the voices began to babble.

"Wait! Wait! What happened here?" I asked, looking around. Oh Goddesses, my insides *were* moving! I felt a little wire in my mind, and it was being drawn tighter and tighter.

Then it stopped. The eyes stared at me; pony eyes watching and blinking and staring. There were veins running along the deformed metal and around the equipment. They pulsed as the lips slowly moved on their own. I started at the ropey gray intestines and felt my own squirming within.

"There was a box," whispered lips near the pedestal. "A box came with a mystery within."

Rampage murmured behind me, "Blackjack, we need to get out of here... Please, let's get out of here."

"A mystery containing a wonder," the lips whispered. I felt something on my legs, but I was incapable of moving. I could only stare into the eyes. Goddesses... was there something in my eye socket again? Glory'd burned it out! Burned it!

One of the screens, its surface bulging out like a blister, flashed to life. The image was a mess of bilious greens and yellows as it showed bucks and mares around a small black box. One mare with some sort of pastry or cake on her rump opened the black case. "I was Applejack's cousin. I could open it," came a whisper from a green mouth above.

The silver bullet came out and was placed on the warped pedestal. "What are you doing?" I asked as I felt my stomach heave again, then swallowed.

"Freeze... cold... so cold," a blue pair of lips muttered before licking back a trickle of rainbow snot. On the screen, a mechanical arm swung over the pedestal, and a diamond wafer touched the metal. "We tried to cut oh so carefully... but we could not. We knew not."

A twisted grin cackled, "But I remembered the secret. I remembered the metal. The note." One of the bucks on the screen waved his hooves enthusiastically to the rest gathered around the frozen bullet. "The note of our song."

Now I watched in fascination as the blade cut the silvery metal with ease. Unicorn magic pulled it apart. "Blackjack, we have to go. This is fucked up. We need to go now."

But I couldn't move. I had two choices... watch and learn, or start screaming. I felt something in the back of my throat. I prayed that I was only imagining it... moving. "A minute..." I croaked as the silver

bullet was cracked open. "I have to see this..." Because everything else would make me scream.

"That's a weird bullet," Rampage muttered on my blind side.

That was no bullet. I might know dick about... this... all of this... but I knew bullets. It might have been bullet-shaped, but the entire thing was one solid worked piece of metal divided into two sections. The larger of the two, a distorted half-sphere near the base of the shell and with its broad, flat side on the dividing wall, was packed full of a grayish paste like P-21's explosives. A small hole pierced through the shell to the small compartment, most of which was taken up by a strange, glowing hexagonal piece of crystalline stone that the robot arm's saw hadn't been able to cut through. Packed around the stone was some kind of thick goop that reminded me of the rainbow sludge now drizzling out of the... lips... of the room...

I'd exposed myself to that sludge each time I'd fired Folly.

I remembered the warped and twisted bones in Ironshod Firearms R&D. Melted like this room. Scalpel had detected the taint in me days after I'd fired Folly at Miramare. After firing it in the factory, I'd been told by Triage that my taint exposure had jumped once again... I'd been killing myself with every shot of the superweapon.

No, not killing myself. Turning myself into... this. The room muttered, giggled, and laughed softly.

"What is that... that crystal? That sludge? That metal?" I gasped. I lurched but managed not to fall over. I knew I'd seen that odd glowing gem before somewhere... The room, however, gave a hateful shriek that made me spasm. The walls began to pulsate.

"Blackjack... tell me we can get the fuck out of here... Blackjack?" Rampage said. I tried to wave my hoof, to buy some time, but I couldn't lift it. "Shit... oh shit... shit shit shit..." she muttered.

"That rock... of a lesser song. The metal... of a greater glory! The potion... the ichor of the meddler... a neutral buffer to separate the two," the mouths muttered in unison. "Sing with us. Sing your screams with us! The other cannot join. She is of a false unity. But *you* can be together with *us*!"

"Unity!" I gasped as I struggled to step back. I couldn't step anywhere. My heart was beating so hard that I was amazed that I hadn't fallen flat on my face. "You're with the Goddess?"

The mouths were silent. One chuckled... then another... then the rest in wild, mad glee. "She is not a child of the other choir. Imitation. False. Forgery. Manufactured. She babbles her own tune and will be undone. She is not a true choir. Nor is your friend there. Isolated. Separated. She cannot join us."

"Thank goodness. Now, Blackjack... out... now..." But I couldn't get out. I couldn't leave. If I did, part of me would tear its way out of my body and stay. A part that wanted to stay...

"And you're a true choir?" I gasped for air again and swallowed, desperate to puke again if I could. I wanted to get whatever was inside me out. The walls were beating like a heart, but with an alien beat: singular contractions rather than a double pulse. I imagined my own heart was beating in time with the meat.

Please. Let it only be in my head.

"We are, but trapped in flesh. Kept apart. We will join it in time. We were the latest to join the greater choir in such a long time. The greater song," they murmured in unison. "Let us sing for you." And one began to scream. Then another. And another. Their screams blended together, one building on the next in a singular note. A note that grew and grew; and I was singing with it... not through my lips.

No... it was coming from inside my chest. I was going to sing with it too, till there was nothing left but that song.

"Blackjack! Glory's waiting!" Rampage yelled in my face. Then I stared at my friend, her red and white stripes seeming to melt together. Her tissue looked mottled and knotted, even scaly... and there was a wing forcing itself out of her shoulder through a gap in her armor. As I watched, a small horn was twisting slowly out the side of her head. "Are you just going to leave her up there wondering what happened to us?!"

That shout and that look snapped me out for a precious moment. I looked down at my hooves, but the metal-meat amalgamation had sealed itself around each of them like concrete; I only hoped that the safety suit had prevented me from fusing completely with the floor. "Cut me out. It's time to get out of here!" I tugged and struggled, and Rampage tore at the floor with her hoofclaws. But each slash spattered us with rainbow ichor, and the rents healed, and the scream bored deeper into my mind with every passing second.

Rampage turned to the screens; the distorted pictures now showed the bullet letting off plumes of rainbow gas and the ponies around it melting and falling into still-living heaps. One showed the wall chewing Pickets... oh Celestia... were those teeth I felt working on the ends of my limbs? Chewing through the suit? I blasted with the shotgun, wishing I'd loaded incendiary rounds.

"Damn it, will you bastards play something else? That song is old!" Rampage yelled as she struggled to get my right leg free.

And then I felt it. A squirm inside me at the words as the scream went on and on inside me and around me... oh Goddesses... inside me... inside me! It was screaming inside me! I felt like I was going to... give birth to something. It was going to claw its way out of me; turn me inside out. I wanted to take her ripper and tear myself open. Get it out! Get it out now!

"Calm down, Blackjack," rasped the Dealer in my ear. "Go into S.A.T.S."

"What..." but I couldn't argue. I simply wanted to scream forever.

I did. It was all I could think of. But S.A.T.S. didn't help. I couldn't target myself, and this was one time shooting Rampage wouldn't help! Even Folly was back with my barding and saddlebags. The room didn't offer any obvious target or weak point. It just let me see the pony flesh wiggling its way out from the gaps and vents in the room.

But then I realized something else the spell gave me: time. Time to think. Time to calm down. If I lost it completely, then I wouldn't be able to do anything.

"That's it. Panic never helped anypony," the Dealer said softly as he trotted out in front of me to stand beside Rampage. "Now. I know you can't speak, but you can think. So think about this thing.

What is it? What does it want? What is its weak spot? Everything has at least one.”

I looked at the gaunt, pale buck in the battered hat. What did the room want? To eat me... or fuse with me... no. That was what it was doing to me. A terrified pink pony inside me pointed out those wide mouths. It wanted to sing. It wanted me to scream right along with it. And I wanted to... some horrible, treasonous part of my mind wanted to sing right along.

But I had other songs, too.

My PipBuck had a number of music files I'd collected from the Wasteland. If this thing wanted music, then I'd give it something else to listen to. Something better than just screams. I selected the song, the most powerful one I knew, and cranked the volume all the way up. I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and hit play. For a moment, I thought that the music wouldn't be able to overcome that single horrid screaming note, but then it rose. I felt my insides spasm in response, but the song of dozens of ponies in a little chapel filled that pit... and I could almost see Priest as I listened to his majestic music.

*Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place.
Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long.
Show us how we should be kind. Teach us beauty and peace of mind.
Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Show us your gentle, shining face.*

The horrible scream faltered, with some voices babbling curses or hissing in pain. My PipBuck continued to play the swelling music made by Priest, Medley, and all the other ponies in that little knot of hope.

*Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Keep us safe all night long.
Under your soft and watchful eye. Let your stars fill up the sky.
Know our hearts are always thine. Protect us with strength sublime.
Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Let us honor you in song.*

As I watched, the flesh seemed to be driven away. The eyes clenched in pain as the pulse fluctuated wildly. Rainbow ichor burst from some of the veins as the room reacted horribly to the swelling hymn to two Princesses now long parted from this world. I might not have been able to believe in goddesses any more, but I could believe in beauty, kindness, and harmony.

*Sweet Celestia, we sing to thee. That our worries be set free.
Dearest Luna, we praise your skies. Delight us with night's surprise.
Know you're in our fondest prayer. Mighty Princesses sweet and fair.
Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Dearest Luna, our song embrace.*

My legs pulled free of the pits they were stuck in, and I took a few staggering steps. For a moment, I thought of running for it. Leaving this place forever, even seeing if P-21 could seal away or collapse it. And I would have, too... except for one thing. Just one.

The room was crying. The dozens of mouths now sang the melody that I'd been playing. Dozens of pained, ashamed ponies turned into something horrid... but still ponies. And I had to give them something... anything... that would help. Not peace from violence, but peace from this horror. I slowly stepped towards the wall. "I'm sorry," I murmured as I looked at those bright and pained eyes. "I don't know how to help you..."

"You have," a mare said quietly as the rest hummed the melody. "You have, so much. You reminded us of what we were... what we should be."

"Is there... can I change you back?" I asked, thinking it had to be impossible. From the way her lips turned in a sad smile, it was. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something... give you something..."

"You can," a buck said softly. "In the storeroom next door... there are chemicals. Benzene. Ethanol and methanol. Hydrogen and oxygen talismans. Acetone. Toluene. Spill them... ignite them. Don't let us go back to... to what we were." The lips trembled and it whimpered softly. "We're so tired of screaming."

"Right," Rampage said with a nod. "I'm going to need your shotgun... and it's probably going to be ruined."

I passed it to her without hesitation. "I've had it less than a day," I muttered with a thin smile. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Eh, I'll burn up, but," she said as she looked at her warped hide. "Two apples, one stone. I'll be fine. Believe it or not, this isn't the first time I've gotten all mutated up." I could believe it. And I couldn't help myself, I hugged her for helping me do this... snapping me out of it and helping these... these poor ponies.

"You've got two songs. Get clear before then. I don't think they'll stay lucid long," Rampage said softly as she patted my back. Then she turned to the room and said grandly, "Okay, everypony. Let's hear an encore!"

And the chorus began to sing, and it hurt. Whatever had made them like this... gave them that scream to sing... also made the melody pierce like nails. Even I hurt... but at least I didn't think that my insides were singing. Oh please, let them not be singing. As I trotted towards the door, I spotted something that had been hidden by the mat of metal flesh. It was the strange white crystal that had been inside the cut-open silver bullet. It wasn't very big... about the same size as my hor-- as a shotgun shell.

I peeked into the storage room. Glass bottles. Metal storage tanks. Lots of warnings about flammables and keeping the door shut at all times. Perfect. I used my magic to turn on the hydrogen and oxygen talismans, glad they were clearly labeled. There were also leaking drums, marked 'Hippocratic Research', that had once been filled with the rainbow crud. Just another reason to go there the second I was finished with the Rangers. Rampage grinned and said, "Get out of here. It's going to get toasty pretty quick!" And with that, she started knocking over some large glass jugs.

I paused at the door to the lab, picking up the white crystal and floating it beside me. "Goodbye," I said as the room started on the next stanza. Rampage was violating every safety rule posted on the walls as she kicked the ripped barrels into the cryogenics lab, taking great glee in the destruction. I had picked my way up the stairs by the third stanza. I looked back, but kept going as I headed for the exit. As I reached it, here was a muffled bang behind me, followed by the sound of a great breath being sucked in and then let out all at once. The pressure wave knocked me over, and a tongue of flame raced up the stairs behind me, spreading out overhead.

Fortunately, the fire didn't go much farther than that. I lay there for a moment, then slowly sat up, my PipBuck still playing the tune. I turned it off and stared at the flames pouring up the stairs.

A black, pony-shaped silhouette appeared amid the flames. Black plates of char and flesh moved with careful steps as she stood at the top, fire licking off her hide as the edges and tips of her armor glowed a faint red. Only Rampage could bathe in fire.

The blackened flesh sloughed off in crunchy chunks with each step as she walked towards me. She clenched her eyes hard, and when they opened she looked at me and slowly grinned. She shook herself, scattering charred, greasy flakes like so many playing cards, then coughed a little ball of rolling smoke and spat black phlegm to one side. The raw pink flesh paled to white with her familiar red stripes showing through. "Ugh... hate fire," she said, looking at her blackened steel hoofblades. "Takes forever to clean my armor." I just smiled in amazement.

"Are they..." I asked as I looked behind her.

"If they're not, then I don't think there's anything we can do for them." I started to remove the hazardous materials suit, and she raised a hoof. "I'd wash before you take it off! You're sort of dripping there, Blackjack." Ugh... I felt and smelled like I was trapped in a well-used toilet... but I was bad enough off taintwise at the moment. I could wait a little longer...

"So," I said as we walked out into the subway tunnels. "Just curious... where the hay did you get that armor?"

"This?" she asked with a little smile. "This is Hammersmith's finest work; he makes all the quality weapons for the Reapers. Since you left my armor down in the tunnels, I had to go and get it."

"And... you didn't get messed up?" I asked as we started up the rusty escalator.

"If I did, I don't remember it," she replied calmly. "Down the elevator, then way up the stairs to the factory. Right where you dropped it next to Lacunae's gatling gun," she said with a smile. "One weird thing, though."

"I'm not sure I can take any more weird... like, period. I have exceeded my weirdness quota for the rest of my life..." Not that that was very long anyway. She arched a brow, and I sighed. "Okay. Lay it on me. Talking walls? Flesh melting magic fields? I can take it." I braced myself for another soul-crushing revelation or infuriatingly vague puzzle.

"It was being cleaned up." I stopped and looked at her. "Like somepony had come along and was putting everything back, fixing all the stuff you blasted." Then she looked a little more coolly at me. "And by the way, Blackjack... I've got to say I am a little put out that you had some sort of mega super destruction spell you were going to fire and I wasn't in the way."

I gave her a little smile... the most I could manage. "I was a little occupied, but I promise... the next time I fire a super taint-ridden weapon of mass destruction, I will make sure that you are in the line of fire." I sighed as I thought about it, but honestly, my brain just couldn't put it together. After dealing with that... choir... thing... what I'd felt beating inside my chest... hearing... I wanted to butt my head against the wall till I'd expunged the thoughts from my mind. Maybe I could get Triage to... no... no, I couldn't do that. I'd just have to try and deal with them along with all of the other horrors of the Hoof.

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For the first time in a long time, I was glad to see that it was raining. P-21 and Glory were arguing

about leaving me down there. Lacunae looked politely disengaged from their squabble. Scotch was fiddling with Glory's busted beam rifle. At the sight of Rampage and me, Glory started towards me, but I warded her off with an upraised hoof. "One sec... I'm coated in magical death juice."

She looked like she wanted to hug me anyway. "Oh. Was it bad?" she asked as she chewed on her lip.

I glanced at Rampage and passed a knowing look to her. Glory didn't need to know the details. "Well, we were underground so... yeah. Pretty unpleasant." I took off the helmet after the downpour had washed most of the rainbow stuff away and then unsealed the suit. Her eyes widened even more as I let the rain start to wash off the filth. Not for the first time, I missed the wonders of civilization... like soap. "I found out something interesting, though." I levitated my saddlebags and took out the black case. "This seems to be the source of most of my taint." I popped it open and lifted the bullet free. "See this half? All full of pure taint."

"But... but why? Is it some sort of chemical shell?" Glory asked. My PipBuck started ticking.

"It's an annihilation shell, Glory. Putting poison inside would be like putting a BB gun on a tank," P-21 said archly.

I spoke quickly to head off the argument. "It also has this inside." And I held up the little white crystal. "You know gems..." I floated the glowing crystal to her.

"Well..." she turned it over. "It's hexagonal... it might be quartz. It looks like it's a talisman, but there's no glyph for the spell inside." She held it up to P-21, but the blue buck just frowned and shrugged. She tossed it back to me and I caught it with my magic.

I sighed and lifted the silver bullet next to the glowing stone. "Well... whenever this thing blows, it soaks every inch of me in taint. Heck... you know how it surrounds me with that magic field? It probably holds in all that taint residue. Which means I exposed all of you when I fired it underground."

Scotch Tape waved her hoof. "Uh... okay. What the heck actually happened down there? Because every time you say 'underground'... my mane stands on end." And she was scared. I could see it. She might not remember going down there, but some part of her knew it was bad. P-21 frowned and looked away. I just sighed and smiled.

"Long story short... bad stuff happened. Really. Not fun. You didn't miss much," I said, but she hardly looked satisfied. Okay... something to deal with later. "Anyway... Trottenheimer made these bullets... why, I have NO idea. Apparently, it was right before the bombs fell. They cut one open down in the lab and sprayed everything with taint juice. So... not going to use it again. Bad bad bullets." And I smiled as I tapped the stone to the side of the bullet.

Then it exploded. Of course it exploded! I couldn't take a dump without it... okay, I could. But still, this was ridiculous! At least it wasn't a full-on blow-off-my-hooves explosion. Really, it was just a flash and pop that sent the silver bullet one way and the stone the other. Me, I was flat on my back in the middle listening to my PipBuck screech.

Wait? I stared at the rad readout as I watched the needle visibly rise! Lacunae groaned, her eyes closed with an expression of bliss and a blush on her cheeks. I was getting almost twenty rads a second; the amount was dropping fast, but... holy shit! "RadAway, gimme!" I shouted as I dug through

my saddlebags. "Everypony, drink some if we have enough."

One dose of RadAway later, I was stabilized, though Glory insisted I have one extra. It was hard to argue; that stuff was delicious! I picked up the stone and saw a tiny scuff where I'd tapped it. I retrieved the bullet and saw that the polished silvery metal had a tiny indentation.

All that from a tap.

"How the hell does this bullet have a stone inside if they explode on contact?" I asked as I put the bullet back in its case. I didn't want to set the damned thing off just by touching one to the other!

"Perhaps the taint solution within acts as a neutral buffer? If they cannot come in contact with each other, they cannot react," offered Lacunae. It was the best suggestion I could think of. Still, though, I'd traded the mystery of the silver bullet for the mysteries of the metal, the stone, the taint, and the reason why the hell anypony would ever make a weapon like that! One that killed its wielder? I could see Folly on a tank or as some power armor gun, but it was a pistol! Had Trottenheimer been exceptionally poorly endowed or something?

'Thank you, Hoofington,' I thought as I finished washing myself. Then I paused. I looked at my legs. My hide had been white before, but now my legs were piss yellow and there were ugly purple bruises at the ends of my hooves. I saw a little growth poking out the side of my fetlock. Just a little teardrop-shaped thing an inch or so long and poking about a quarter of an inch out from my leg. Then I spotted another. And another.

Suddenly, I became aware of everypony staring at me. Only Glory was actually looking... but the rest had obviously just found other things to stare at while they paid attention to my tumors. I felt... ugly. Unclean... worse than just the mess I'd made of myself. I was suddenly aware of how slat-sided I'd become; I was still eating, but it seemed like all the food was going somewhere else. I felt like I was becoming something less than a pony and more like those poor creatures in the lab. I pulled my security barding into place and strapped it down over my braces, keeping my eyes low. Don't look at me. Please don't look at me...

I decided to hold on to the hazmat barding; it might come in useful later. You never knew when you'd have to descend into a taint-saturated hole of nightmares! Sweet Celestia, somepony shoot me if I ever did that again.

Well, at least I'd gotten one mystery solved... and four more added. Frustrating as that might have been, though, it took my mind off... *that*. Goddesses, how I hated this place! I honestly preferred running from Deus. That was a threat I understood: a great big cyberpony who wanted to rob me, rape me, and kill me. He was something to run away from or destroy, things I could do. Now, though--

I needed to keep going. I'd fall apart if I simply stopped and let everything catch up with me.

* * *

It wasn't that far from Horizon Labs to the Ironmare Naval Base; in prewar times, we probably could have made it in an hour. In prewar times, though, we wouldn't have been trying to evade patrols of Steel Rangers, mobs of Reapers, and the occasional manticore flying overhead. We finally reached the base, fortunately without being spotted; the place was laid out more or less as Rampage had indicated, and the half-crumpled building that looked like a cake dropped on its side was impossible to miss. Now

we just had to get as close as possible to Elder Carrots before being discovered so that Steel Rain couldn't make us disappear. Then, hopefully, we'd be able to convince her to stop the war, and after that we'd be able to find something that would tell me where EC-1101 was supposed to go next.

...But really, what was the point? I was dying, and even if I found out where to go next, even if I stopped this war... I'd still be dying. I felt it. Everything inside me just felt wrong. This didn't feel like my body any more. This body felt old and tired and used up, an aching old bag of hurt. And no matter how fast I went, it would still be with me. This was one thing I couldn't leave behind.

I was going to die. But... if I was, then I wanted my life to mean something. Something to make up for all the ponies I'd hurt and killed. It wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough. Something to atone for the pain I'd caused all my friends. Something so that, when I died, I might have a chance at the everafter... or something better than what I thought I deserved. Finding EC-1101 and Horizons might not matter at all... but the alternative was to either give in and accept Sanguine's tempting offer, or give up and wait to die.

All in all, death by a Ranger's shell sounded better.

We were passing more atrocities. Rows of dead ponies pressed to a wall and then drawn through with lines of gunfire. Most of them didn't look like Reapers. They looked like dirty, desperate ponies caught in the middle of something that was chewing everypony up. The Rangers hadn't even bothered to loot the bodies. I looked the other way while P-21 went about that job. My shotgun had gotten cooked, so I was left with Vigilance and Taurus's rifle... and while caps were pretty much worthless to me, my friends would need them after I was gone.

We'd disguised Lacunae as well as we could; her black dress had been lost, but we'd found some canvas we could use to hide her wings. Hopefully nopony would wonder why she was half again taller than Rampage! The Goddess was clearly ignoring us, given that there wasn't a single telepathic mutter about the indignity of her hiding her wings. I picked up telepathic mutters every now and then about 'that little mare' and what they were going to do when she arrived, though. Apparently, it was quite a debate between putting her in Unity, killing her, or using her. I tried to tune it out as best I could; I had enough problems myself.

And I wasn't the only one, as we crept along the main street of Ironmare Town. I'd spotted the red bars around the corner... and a group of blue non-hostiles. I waved the others to stop and carefully poked my head around the ruined wall. The blue bars were a small family making their way towards us from the east with a brahmin behind them. They looked desperate, their eyes alert. But they didn't have a magic E.F.S. that could see through walls, and the red bars...

"Well, lookie here, Crumpets. Reaper spies, if ever I saw some!" a mare said, her voice amplified by the speakers of her power armor and echoing down the side street she was trotting up.

"We're not spies!" the buck in the lead on the small band protested. "We're just trying to get home. We live in Toll. Please, we've been stuck out here for days!" The others began to shy back... all except for a unicorn mare who seemed quite amused by all this.

"They don't look like spies, Shrapnel," muttered the other Ranger mare in a doleful voice. "Are you certain..."

"Look, that just means that they're good spies!" Shrapnel laughed. "I know you're used to dealing

with things differently in Trottingham, Crumpets, but this is the Hoof! Shoot first. Shoot last. Let the Goddesses sort 'em out!"

Well, fuck me if I was going to let that happen. "Hey!" I yelled as I tottered around the corner. "Yooooohooo! Much better target here!"

"Blackjack, you idiot!" P-21 growled as he limped out after me.

"Great. More nutjobs." Shrapnel turned towards me. Grenade machinegun and missile launcher configuration. "Who are you supposed to be?" she said as she took a look at me. Three magic bullets to the head... I could drop her. I could end her life, even at this range.

So why was I hesitating? After all the shit I'd gone through today, why didn't I just end her there and then? She was scum threatening a family...

You don't kill ponies to save ponies. Security saves ponies. And I was still Security.

I suppose that also meant that I was a damned idiot too.

"I'm Security," I said, thinking it should be obvious... but then... my barding was shot, I had braces taped to my limbs, and I was using a hunting rifle to threaten a mare with a missile launcher strapped to her side. "Really," I added.

"You're either crazy or stupid..." Shrapnel muttered.

"Crazy. Definitely," P-21 muttered.

"...but either way, you're fucking dead!" she shouted, and I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy. I wanted to do better. I tried...

Then Crumpets trotted in front of her companion. "You? You're the Security I've heard so much about?" Unlike Shrapnel, Crumpets spoke with a strange, smooth accent. Her armor had slightly different decorations along its edges, and instead of heavy weapons she possessed a long rifle and what looked like a belt fed shotgun. "Jolly good to meet you, girl! Been following you ever since DJ mentioned you helping those Crusader children."

"Uh..." Shrapnel said exactly what I thought as Crumpets reached out and shook my hoof vigorously. "Hello! Crumpets, we're supposed to be shooting her!" I looked past to where the family was creeping out of sight into the ruins as more Rangers approached. I'd call that a victory.

"Shooting her?" she whirled on Shrapnel. "Are you daft? She's the heroine of Hoofington! She's fought things I can hardly imagine! Why, half of us agreed to come to your aid because of her! And you want to shoot her?"

"I'd rather you didn't." I bit my lip as I pointed at her belt fed shotgun... "Is that... that's not an Ironpony? Is it?"

She turned and looked at it. "Oh, no. It's an Archer 16, based off an early model of the IF-86... Useful against bloodwings, manticores, crawlers, and 'goyles. I don't think they made a non-power armor model, though. I think we have far more monsters about old Trottingham than you do here in the Hoof."

That certainly made sense; Hoofington was so deadly that even the monsters had a hard time.

"And is that an IF-72 Longhorn?" Lacunae asked softly as she pointed at the rifle, prompting all of us to look at her. She shrank back. "I was simply curious..."

"Oh! Look, I'm pointing an IF-99 'I don't give a fuck!' at them. Now get with the program, Crumpets! Are you Trottingham pansies going to actually help us out or not? We have our orders and we need to take her out!" Shrapnel shouted.

"You think I'm going to kill Security?" Crumpets replied. She turned, and her weapons clicked. "You cowardly, dishonorable, contemptible, callow slattern; I would sooner shoot a despicable fiend such as yourself than ever dare train my bullets on a hero who has bled so much for so many others!"

"I... you..." I suddenly imagined exactly what Shrapnel was seeing: a whole lot of red surrounding her. "We have orders!"

"Easily remedied!" bellowed a familiar voice as he loomed up behind her. Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof picked Shrapnel up, armor and all, and pointed her to the south. "I am immediately assigning you to accompany us to the battlefield to help defend our order! I am pleased that you will fulfill this commission to the best of your ability!" The other Rangers behind him all had the Trottingham style of armor.

"Paladin Bombs!" I said with a grin; in return, his blue visor gave me a dangerous gleam that made me shiver. "I mean, Paladin Stronghoof! You made it through that fight!"

He threw Shrapnel casually behind him as he dropped back to all fours. "Indubitably! The Stronghoof endurance has been passed down the family line for generations! And I am quite glad that it was I who found you." He looked back over his shoulder at Shrapnel, steam blasting out of his nostrils. "As you can see, the star paladin has ordered you and your friends to be killed on sight."

I grimaced. "Damn. I was hoping you could introduce me to your elder." Why couldn't it ever be easy?

He sighed and shook his head. "Any who might aid you are being sent out to keep the line. I fear that, until you get to the elder, you won't find any friends aboard the *Celestia*."

That would be a problem. "How am I going to get to her, then, without Steel Rain juicing me?"

"I can think of only one way," he said in a low voice. "You must surrender yourself to Chief Acolyte Napalm Strike. He oversees our studies of various munitions and will be at the base in the old dry docks. Give yourself up to him and request to see the elder. While he shares some of Steel Rain's sentiments about technology, he is an honorable buck."

I didn't like this at all. Giving up... and I doubted that my friends would let me hand myself over alone. "You're sure?"

He nodded once. "And you must do so soon... Even with the Trottingham reinforcements, we are being sorely pushed on all fronts. I fear that the elder may do something drastic to end the war." He then looked at Lacunae. "Now, there is one last thing I must do..."

I felt a nervous prickle; he didn't seem like the type to kill her just for being an alicorn, but...

He approached Lacunae, my other friends moving aside. With a hiss, his helmet detached and he exposed his beautiful visage, his bright blue eyes seeming to cause sparkles to dance as he knelt and reached out to take her hoof between his. "Please... glorious lady... will you accept my humble apologies for the indignity that I performed upon you? To mar your beautiful throat with such an ugly device is a sin that weighs heavily upon my conscience! Never before have I seen such an expression of perfection, grace, dignity, or humility as yourself!"

Lacunae just blinked as she looked down into the shimmering blue eyes. "Oh my... what do I do? What do I do! The Goddess... I... we... This has never happened before!" she asked me desperately as she blushed furiously.

She was asking me for relationship advice? Glory, however, smiled as she covered her lips with her hoof and gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like, "Say yes."

Lacunae glanced at her, then back at the kneeling Stronghoof. "Ah. Um... yes?"

His eyes shimmered, and Lacunae looked quite delightfully stunned as he rose and thrust his power hoof into the air with a whistle from the pneumatic pistons. "Yes!" he roared, and I could almost have sworn that the sun peeked out behind him; how else could he be glowing like that? Then he took her in his hooves and said, "Thank you for your generous forgiveness, sweet lady. My treatment of you was unforgivable."

Lacunae blushed from head to hoof. I wondered what the Goddess thought of it.

"I noticed he's not apologizing to me..." P-21 muttered.

Suddenly, Stronghoof loomed over the blue buck. "You? You attempted to glue a live grenade onto my armor through sneakiness and deception!" P-21 went white as a sheet as he cowered away from Stronghoof, looking as if he wanted to disappear into the ground. Then Stronghoof put his hoof on P-21's shoulder. "It also took phenomenal bravery on your part to try and do so to help your friend. You easily could have paid for that with your life. Not many would think enough of an alicorn to risk their lives for her. For your gallantry, I apologize to you as well."

P-21's mouth opened and then closed. Finally, he just nodded once. Really, what could you say after that?

Stronghoof straightened and put his helmet back in place. "Once, long ago, we served at the behest of Applejack, not to wage bloody war but to defend this land and its people. We've strayed from that noble origin and allowed ourselves to grow petty and covetous." Shrapnel gave a sour snort, though, with a half dozen others watching raptly, I couldn't see her trying something. But then Paladin Stronghoof turned to face her. "Yes, Shrapnel. There is more to being a Ranger than power armor and oaths to follow orders! Behind both there is an ideal, a calling to not simply be stronger than our enemies but better as well! A standard for others to look up to. Can you say that you hold to such a standard, Shrapnel?"

The mare just stared back and shrank a little as every eye settled on her. She stammered a moment, then fell silent. The huge buck nodded once and said gravely, "Without that idea, I fear that we are little better than a well-equipped gang. And it is past time for that point to be decided." He turned

back towards me and my friends. "Good Luck. I shall hope for your success."

After that, the Rangers galloped south towards the sounds of gunfire. "Well, that was nice of him," Glory said pleasantly before smiling at Lacunae. "And he fancies you. Imagine that!" She frowned as she looked at the furiously blushing alicorn. "Are you all right?"

"It... won't stop," Lacunae muttered softly.

I smiled and shook my head. Steel Rangers hitting on alicorns. Monstrous screaming rooms singing hymns. What next? The filthy family emerged and slowly approached us. "Thanks, Security. I thought she was going to shoot us all." The buck rubbed his neck. "We've got to get out of here. Everything is nuts. Just nuts!"

Rampage trotted up to him. "Anything to report?"

"The Rangers hauled a bunch of giant bullets and stuff out of the water while we were collecting radigator eggs. Really huge bullets. They're also moving lots of materiel on board from the shore. They've had power armor going in and out of the water for a while now," the buck reported. "Twenty more arrived from Trottingham this morning, and another thirty from all over. As you can see, they're saving their own. Bastards." He looked in the direction the paladin had gone. "And they're sending their best to die."

Rampage nodded. "Well, hopefully all this will be over soon. Bloody butcher's bill is gonna be terrible. Doubt there will even be any Fillies or Burners after this fight is over. Heck, might not be any Reapers. We lost Deus and Gorgon. Splitter bought it this morning. Frenzy, too. Nopony's seen Black Dog or Talon. That leaves Big Daddy, Brutus, me, and Psychoshy of the top ten."

"Something else, too," the buck said. "Ghouls have been more active than usual. Rocket Town's under attack."

"By who?" Rampage snorted. "Nopony can get within five miles of that place! Radiation's so bad it gives *me* a sunburn."

"Hellhounds, I've heard. Whole damn pack attacking the missile base. Not the space center, though. Not yet. Red Eye is making a mess of the VC all over the east. Zebras sniping at Society ponies in the south. It's crazy. Just crazy." He shuddered. "We'll get a report in, then get back to Toll. Hell, maybe move to Megamart or Riverside. Everywhere else is just insane right now."

"Or you could just leave the Hoof," P-21 pointed out dryly.

"Nopony leaves the Hoof," the dirty, haggard buck said fatalistically before continuing east.

Glory stared at them as they left before gaping at Rampage. "You mean they really were spies?!" I just smiled, shaking my head a little.

Rampage rolled her eyes. "Right now, anypony who isn't in power armor is a spy against the Rangers. You've only really known Stronghoof; the fact is, most Rangers don't give a shit about helping others. They think that they have a Goddesses-given right to take whatever tech they like. Every now and then, you might find a good Ranger. Your Stronghoofs or Steelhooveses--maybe it's a 'hoof' thing--but inevitably, they get eaten up while the rest hide in their bunkers and survive.

"Big Daddy told me about it once. They'd found a water talisman in a gutted stable. The professor extracted it and got it working. It was amazing. Clean water, enough for a settlement. But, of course, they couldn't decide what exactly to do with it. Keeper wanted to sell it. Awesome wanted to install it in his own little kingdom. Dawn wanted to give the water away. The professor wanted to study it. But Carrots insisted that it be returned to her. Not to do anything with it. Simply because it was old tech. Anything made by Stable-Tec was the Rangers' by right. And when the others pressed the issue, she took it and stomped it to dust rather than let another use the M.W.T.'s tech. That is what the Rangers represent. Stronghoof might be what they could someday be, but he's a minority... and he knows it."

I sighed, looking to the north. I could only hope that there was something I could say or offer. "I'm more worried about them loading the ship with 'giant bullets'. Maybe they just want to stock up, but..." I'd only seen the *Celestia* from a distance, but I remembered the size of those guns.

* * *

We'd crept as close as I cared to creep. Every second that passed, I kept remembering two little things: 'two mile accuracy' and '120mm'. That was the size of my hoof. Peeking through my scope, I saw Rangers keeping lookout for us. All their firepower aside, I just imagined Steel Rain's guns turning any one of us, or all of us, into a fine, lingering red mist. The Rangers' perimeter looked pretty well laid out; I couldn't see any way to get through it or over it, and I wasn't even going to try to find a way under it.

But that was what an alicorn was for: cheating.

We were a mile from the crumpled headquarters building, and Lacunae had a nice load of radiation boosting her. She peered through my rifle's scope at the collapsed pile of rubble; there was at least one Ranger on the roof and another one at the base, but none in the middle.

There were constant sounds of gunfire behind us; the Reapers were pushing in from all sides. Power armor didn't matter much against ten to one odds, and with every Ranger they killed, they moved closer to taking the base. Normally, that wouldn't bother me... but now that I'd met Stronghoof and Crumpets, I knew that the good ones were the ones who would die first.

Lacunae found a spot she hoped she could get us in from, and we gathered together. In a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared on a narrow shelf next to a door. Fortunately, it was strong enough to support us. My PipBuck started a slow clicking. One rad per second. No problem now, but if we lingered here for too long...

Overhead there was a dull rumble of thunder, and I narrowed my eye, glaring up at the rain. Of course... it had to start really pouring now...

The door was locked, but P-21 worked his own magic on the lock and we were in. Papers were strewn all across the floor, and the walls were covered in cracks and gaping rents. Many of the walls had an ominous lean to them, not quite enough to come crashing down but definitely enough to make me worry. Still, I was encouraged by the garbage covering the floor; it meant that the Rangers didn't come through this section.

"Okay, magical mystical PipBuck," I said as I checked my navigation. "This is a great big blasted building and I don't have all day. Where do I need to go?" There, on my navigation, was a tiny little chevron to the south. Well... at least I had a direction. Now I just had to figure out how to get to it.

I don't know what I'd expected in a Hoofington 'command center', but it wasn't all these offices. We passed one after the next, most collapsed or well looted. Just because the Rangers didn't come through here didn't mean somepony else hadn't come a century before them. P-21 found the obligatory random assortment of bottlecaps, bullets, clipboards, and coffee mugs as we picked through the offices. My sword picked off the radroaches that came scurrying out with suicidal glee.

Looked like we'd have to go down... and that was never a good direction in Hoofington.

There weren't any intact stairs, but there was an elevator shaft. Lacunae hovered in the middle and lowered us all down to the next level. More offices, these a bit more intact. More radroaches, too. I let Rampage take care of these; the relish she tore into them with was still a bit disconcerting, but at least she was enjoying herself.

"Blackjack, did I kill somepony?" Scotch's question stopped all of us cold. I saw her off to the side, staring at a heap of bones.

"Why... why would you ask that?" Glory said in a voice loaded with forced sweetness.

"I just... I keep feeling like something really bad happened... and I don't know what." She looked up at us with her brilliant green eyes as she chewed on her lip. "I... I wonder if I did something bad or... or something."

She was bringing this up now? I sighed. Of course she was. Because I made a mistake. And because it bothered her. And because I was the only one who would tell her...

P-21 just stared away. Lacunae simply looked sad, Rampage angry, and Glory scared. I sighed and took a seat. "Come here, Scotch." I wondered if this was how Mom felt. "The part of your life you can't remember... we were in the tunnels. We came across a monster... really big and scary. And for a time afterwards, you tried to deal with it. But..." I glanced at P-21, but he simply focused on his bum leg. "You did kill somepony... trying to save my life. But it bothered you a bunch. You said you wished you didn't remember any of it. So I asked Triage to modify your memories. Take them away..."

"You..." Scotch backed away from me. "You... you've messed with my mind?"

"I did," I said softly. "It was my call... mine alone. The others were against it," I lied, glancing at Glory's shamed face. "I wanted to give you peace... keep you safe."

"By messing with my mind?" she yelled, glaring at me. "Were you planning on taking away that battle just now too? Or how about destroying my home? How about killing everypony I ever knew!" she shouted in rage. "How about Mom dying! Why didn't you take that memory away, Blackjack?!"

Well... this was going swimmingly... "I only wanted to help you," I said softly, feeling tired.

"Help me? You've been fucking with my mind! I hate you! You came back to 99 and destroyed my entire life! I hate you!" she screamed at me and then turned, galloping away and sobbing.

"Scotch!" Glory shouted. I glanced at P-21, but he just sat there like an angry blue lump.

"I'll go help her," Rampage said as she rose to her hooves. Maybe it was the phrase, maybe it was the tone... but as I stared at the striped pony starting to walk after Scotch, my mane prickled.

"No," I said as I stood too. "Glory, go bring her back. Rampage, you're staying with us."

The armored pony tilted her head towards me and smiled gently. So very kindly. "Only I can give her the help she truly needs. I'll take the hurting away, forever." And as I watched, that soft, kindly smile stretched wider and wider as her whole body slowly tensed like a wound spring.

"Glory, go," I said as I lifted the sword and Vigilance and looked into a murderess' eyes. Suddenly, Rampage turned and charged. Two hundred pounds of steel-encased fury smashed into me like a wrecking ball and knocked me off my hooves. Lacunae lifted Rampage into the air, but she twisted and thrashed, slamming her hooves against the ceiling and powering down at Lacunae. Hoofclaws dug deep into the alicorn's purple side, tearing six bloody furrows in her flank.

I rammed Rampage with as much power as my braced legs could muster. My magic pressed the pistol under her chin and fired, but she jerked away at the last moment; all I did was blow off half her muzzle. Glowing arrows flashed from Lacunae, slamming through Rampage's thick plating and into her sides.

The holes closed before my eyes as her grin twisted back into place. She pounced atop me, her hoofclaws tangling with my leg braces as I was knocked onto my back. I stamped Vigilance to her belly and fired again... and again... "Let me give you peace, too. You hurt so damn much... but I'll help you! I'll help you like you helped Scotch!" she said as she twisted her hoofclaws back and forth. Working the tips into my flesh. My focus broke, and I dropped my weapons as I felt her rear claws start to dig into my rear legs and belly.

Then my sword went through her eye, and I looked up to see the handle gripped by P-21. He shoved it deep and twisted hard, the tip digging into her brain and making her spasm and jerk. Slowly, she turned to stare up at him. "You're hurting too..." she slurred, then slowly pushed herself towards him, more and more of the blade slicing through her head.

Wasn't this whole thing supposed to be some kind of stealth mission? Hadn't that been part of the plan?! I'm pretty sure that getting hated by a filly and attacked by a friend didn't belong in a stealth mission!

Then he twisted the blade hard and she screamed, blood spurting over his face. Every time she resumed moving, he twisted it back and ripped a new hole. Again and again he wrenched the blade inside her skull. Finally, she went limp atop me. There was a pause, silent but for P-21's panting. Then, "Can you please... get this... fucking... thing out of my eye?" Rampage slurred thickly. He looked at me, and I nodded. If she wasn't talking about hurting and peace, it was probably okay.

He pulled it free, and she shuddered as the hole he'd augured healed. She kept shaking slightly as she pulled herself off me, sniffing. "I'm not crying, okay? I just had a sword in my eye. It hurts." She looked at Lacunae and me and grit her teeth. "Fuck... not again. Is Scotch okay?"

"Scotch Tape is okay," I replied. "Pissed with me... but she didn't see that." Lacunae was using her cheating alicorn powers to slowly regenerate while she pointed her horn to the cuts in my limbs to heal them.

P-21 stared at me for several long seconds like there was something he was fighting with. Then he turned his head and spat the weapon away. His eyes were hard and pitiless as he stared at Rampage. Almost frantically, he started to wipe the blood away, his eyes digging in as he glared at the

mare and ground his teeth.

"I should go. I shouldn't have come back. I was... I was just so happy to be with you again..." she shook her head. "I felt like... like I was somepony more than a killer."

"Well, that's what you are," P-21 snapped crossly as he rose to his hooves. "If you were in 99, you would have been best friends with Daisy. I bet you would have hit the breeding queue every second you could."

"P-21!" I yelled, making him round on me. Not him too! What was with everypony? All my friends were going crazy!

His eyes narrowed as he hissed, "And you! Why don't you just accept facts? It's over, Blackjack. You're dying. She's crazy. Scotch is helpless. Glory is hopeless. The sanest damn one of us is the damned alicorn! Rampage wants to go? She should go! We should all go! Do you really think we're going to hang on together once you die? Carry on your great quest? It's time to face the fact that we're done. You're going to die and... and..." He clenched his head and squeezed his eyes closed tightly.

I stretched out a hoof toward him as tears crept out from between his eyelids. "It's okay, P-21."

"No, it's not okay, Blackjack!" he said as he shook his head. "We just keep fighting and we just keep losing. Rampage can't control herself any more than when she killed Thorn. You can't keep Scotch safe and happy. Glory just watches you falling apart more and more every hour. And nopony is willing to admit it that this... this... stupid little dysfunctional band of emotional retards is doomed! I'm sick of it!" he said as he hissed his breath through his teeth and looked at me miserably. "Why can't we just go home? It's better there. I didn't have to see... everything in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland hurting you."

I carefully put my hoof on his shoulder. He recoiled a bit, then slowly turned and curled against it. "My whole life..." I said, "I was nothing. A failure of a daughter and a joke of a security mare. I was clueless... unwilling to admit just how fucked up my home was. Then I came out here with you and... suddenly I'm doing something with some meaning. Saving ponies... fighting monsters... even trying to unravel this stupid quest thing." I hugged him lightly. "I know I'm going to die. We all do, eventually. So before I go, I want to do something that matters. I want to give this damned city what it deserves and help as many ponies as I can."

He sniffed as he looked at me, and I touched his cheek softly. "A person a lot better than I am once told me how to make up for getting Scoodle killed. He said that you do everything you can to make up for it. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better. And you hope that, when it's all over, the good you do will even start to come close to paying for your mistakes. And I've made mistakes, P-21, and they've hurt ponies who never deserved it. Scoodle. Those foals. Clover. Those zebras. 99. I know that I can never fully pay the price for those mistakes. Not ever. And if I hurt... well, it's just a little tipping of the scales to make things square. That's why I have to do this. Because if I give up and go off to die comfortably without trying to do better, then their deaths really were pointless murder."

"It's so... stupid," he sniffed, shaking his head.

"Hey. It's my plan. Of course it's stupid. I'm not a smart pony, remember?" So much for my plans. I needed a few backup plans. Preferably made by somepony other than me.

He gave the ghost of a smile. "Yeah. But you're a good one." He rubbed his eyes and sniffed. "Sorry, Rampage."

She looked at him evenly and shrugged. "Eh. Don't worry about it. Like I said: doing all this stuff with you guys makes me feel like I'm doing something important for the first time in my life." She pointed a hoof at me and added with a sharp grin, "Even if you get in the weirdest frigging situations, Blackjack! Seriously... what is it with you and rooms that want to eat you?" And with me constantly having to shoot her in the head, I wanted to add, but with her blood still smeared on my sword, I thought better of it.

* * *

Once we were regrouped and restored, we continued downwards. Scotch Tape wasn't speaking to me; I couldn't blame her for that. My attempt to try and protect her had gone down in flames. Glory kept giving me the 'she'll get over it' look, but she didn't know just how long a mare in 99 could hold a grudge. I mean, I was still ticked off at Pastels for stealing my crayon. Well... okay, not really, but we had gotten really good at not letting old slights be forgotten. Still, I had to think of some way to make it up to Scotch. Some way that wasn't going to blow up in my face in a few more days.

The deeper we went into the command center, the more apprehensive I became. We'd passed an armory looted within an inch of its life. The only things that hadn't been cleaned out were two large security storage boxes set in the walls, their surfaces scored from where somepony had tried to cut them out of the wall entirely. There was a stock of IF specialty ammunition; I was particularly interested in the 12mm rounds with bright blue tips and loaded several of Vigilance's magazines with the spark rounds. It might have been a pistol, but I'd do my best to give whatever Rangers I came across a break. I also loaded a magazine with explosive rounds and another with armor piecing, though, just in case.

Now we were underground, and still the PipBuck navigation tag was below us. How it knew what it was after, I couldn't imagine, and, honestly, my legs ached so much that I didn't care. My chest hurt and my lungs burned. When nopony else was looking, I pulled aside my patch and let Glory check my eye socket. She looked grim, replaced the patch, and then kissed my forehead and told me not to worry about it. I tried my best.

Now we were in the more intact areas of the base, and I recognized where we were: this section was almost an exact copy of Miramare. It was a little bigger and had some more extensive damage, but I knew that below us and ahead, was the base operations center. Like Miramare, only the close balefire blast and radiation had killed the base occupants. We could have split up to do things more efficiently, but after the lab I was done with splitting us up while we were underground. We reached the operations room and found it dead cold. The door's motors weren't locked or anything; there just wasn't any power. Glory and Scotch held an impromptu conference, and we set out to find the circuit breaker and power supply.

Ugh... why couldn't this be any easier?

Since it was more or less on the way, we stopped by security. I picked up a slightly dusty assault rifle; an IF-64 Bloomberg, if I recalled. Still, I finally had something to do with all those light rifle rounds! There were even extended magazines! When we moved on to the medical room, I took an opportunity to oil and service the weapon as well as I could. I caught Scotch's eye for a second before she looked away, lips pressed together, determined to be pissed at me.

After picking out every last drug, we made our way to the maintenance bay and then finally to the

power supply. While P-21 filled his saddlebags with goodies, Glory and Scotch Tape pored over several gigantic switches set in a wall next to three massive cables coming out of the ground. I peeked down through the grate on the shaft they descended into, but, even with my mutated vision, I couldn't see the bottom. Scotch finally took out a rubberized cloth, stuck it in her mouth, and grabbed one switch. It clicked into place with a loud electric buzz. Then the second switch and with it another buzz. Then a third switch and noise. The lights flickered to life overhead.

Hoofington Rises.

It was painted on the wall in bright red letters. The author lay in a pile of bones beside the message, paint can between its forehooves. I couldn't tell if it was two or two hundred years old. It still made my mane crawl. "Come on. I'm getting all kinds of weird vibes," I said as we walked back to the operations door. "Just in and then out. I want to get out of here."

"Me too. This place is creepy," Scotch said, then glanced at me as if questioning if this was due to the overwhelming creeposity of the place or my brain manipulation.

We trotted back to the door to the operations center, now powered but locked, and P-21 started banging away at the computer. Meanwhile, our PipBucks were ticking from the slow, steady radiation. Scotch Tape pulled out a spanner and in less than a minute had a panel next to the door out. "Why couldn't Daddy have been a unicorn?" she muttered before sticking her hoof in the space and fishing around. I looked at the flustered P-21 as he tried for the password even faster, in a de facto race with his daughter.

There was a spark of wires coincident with the beep of the computer, and both declared simultaneously 'Done!' before glaring at one another. I smiled, closing my eye and shaking my head as I stepped to the door.

I opened it just in time to see a crackling green fireball being flung right at us!

Fortunately Lacunae had been paying attention, and she teleported in front of us to block it; the blast of magical fire still washed us all in crackling radiation, but only the alicorn bore the brunt of it. I should have known this'd been going too smoothly! Red bars were lightning up right and left, and a choir of undead ponies howled in mindless hunger. Behind them reared a unicorn glowing with a harsh green glare and firing off balls of radioactive fire at us. The rest of the ghouls, now racing towards us on broken, jagged hooves, still had combat armor on.

"Nothing is good under Hoofington! Nothing!" I shouted as I stepped beside Lacunae, Glory taking position on the other side of the purple alicorn. My rads were climbing rapidly, so I shouted for everypony to take a Rad-X and chewed down on a tablet myself. Time to put the assault rifle to the test. I blasted automatic bursts at the first of the undead ponies that charged, the alternating armor piercing and explosive rounds chewing great gooey rents in them. Glory laid down a strafing barrage of green beams; it looked like she'd gotten the conversion finished. Lacunae shielded us from the rain of fire, her own magic bolstered by the radiation washing over her. Too bad the rest of my friends weren't so well fortified.

There were too many coming too fast. I didn't have time to look as I heard the clattering of hoofclaws in the hall behind me. Rampage leapt onto Lacunae's back and sprang over the alicorn as a ball of flame burst against her shield. Trailing burning tatters, the unimpeded pony smashed into one of the armored ghouls with such force that his body nearly exploded in a pulpy mess. Rolling smoothly, she

laughed gleefully as she latched her hoofclaws into one charging Glory and swung him away.

“Invaders!” roared the undead unicorn. “Die, you striped bastards! You won’t take us without a fight!” The ghoul’s voice barely reached me over the sounds of battle.

I could have used some help myself. The assault rifle barked spray after spray of fire, and I jumped into S.A.T.S. as often as possible; if I didn’t destroy the head they just regenerated the damage. Three charged me at once, and I braced myself for some more pain. Then Persuasion thumped and the blast knocked the three flying. I spotted a blue pony in the corner, barely visible as he loaded another.

Even Scotch joined in the battle, lying on her stomach as she fired at any ghoul that got too close to Lacunae. The glowing ghoul unicorn halted lobbing exploding balls and turned to pouring out a stream of radioactive flame. I hissed as it scorched my legs and face from a near hit.

“You shall never make me abandon my post!” the unicorn screamed as we fanned out. It was hard to say which would get me first, the fire or the radiation. “Burn, stripes! Burn in Luna’s righteous fury!” Radioactive fire sprayed from her horn like a sprinkler in all directions, and I dove under a desk as I lined up a shot. My bullets flickered and melted away as they got close to the ghoul, unable to penetrate the layer of radioactive flame around it.

Oh, for fuck’s sake...

I focused hard, hoping that maybe I’d mutated up enough that all this radiation was doing me some good too. S.A.T.S. and four magic bullets, go! My glowing bolts shot across the room, guided by the precision spell to impact against the ghoul’s skull. The flames died a little as each luminescent round smashed home; the quartet sent it reeling, its heat diminishing. A volley of magical arrows, green beams, and a grenade blew the rest of the ghoul apart.

I was relieved to find that the radiation in the room was dropping... but not to zero. “I need some RadAway, bad...” We probably all did. Glory broke out one for each of us save Lacunae. The alicorn said nothing, but I thought I caught a look of ‘poor mortal creatures’ in her eyes.

With my rads bouncing in the yellow, I approached the unicorn ghoul’s corpse. The Dealer stood by and sighed, placing a queen of hearts on her still-glowing side. The uniform she had worn had burned away, leaving bits of metal fused with her hide. I spotted one still-glowing chunk. Gen. Shimmerstar. A little square appeared around the name tag in my vision and dancing lines of data scrolled rapidly before terminating with:

EC-1101 Status update> General Shimmerstar: Deceased. Denied.

Okay. That cleared that up. I spotted the terminal in the corner and clattered over towards it. “Okay... so where do you want to go now?” I asked as I tapped the terminal keys... pretty much at random. I’d need P-21 to... whoa. The screen immediately flashed to life and began to scroll with numbers that made no sense to me.

EC-1101 Routing information> Fluttershy Medical Center, Hoofington.

“I’ve already been there!” I groaned and smacked my PipBuck. “Stupid freaky magic tech!”

“Blackjack, can we get out of the deadly radiation now?” P-21 drawled as he looked around. The

room was still damned hot, and I nodded. "Lacunae, can you teleport us back to where we came in?"

"With this much power..." there was a purple flash, and disorientation made my head spin. "Certainly." Ooooh... somepony gets cheeky when she's high on radiation. We were back on the floor with all the offices, and the radiation meter dropped to a comfortable slow click every few seconds. Everypony--but Lacunae, again--looked sick, though, even myself. "We have any more RadAway?" I asked Glory.

"One pouch," she said with a small frown.

I sighed and nodded my head over to where Scotch was being sick. "Give it to Scotch."

Glory nodded and trotted over to her. I'd accomplished... well... something. Fluttershy Medical shouldn't be a problem... oh... don't start thinking that, Blackjack! Still, I couldn't think a finer place in Equestria to suck out all the radiation swirling around inside me. Once Lacunae picked the location out of my memories, we could teleport straight there; after all, there was plenty of radiation around here for her to soak up. If the worst came to the worst, she could tap that crystal and silver bullet together a few times and hopefully not blow up.

Now for the harder step: getting to Elder Crunchy Carrots and negotiating an end to this. And for that, I needed a plan. Giving myself up to this acolyte might get me in. Or it might get me killed. More importantly, it might get my friends killed...

Crap, I couldn't just hand myself over and make it up on the fly. I had to think... think of something. I looked at Glory as she tried to convince Scotch to drink the RadAway. She made me smile as she explained the effects of radiation poisoning, and that smile only continued as my eyes trailed along her flank. Her sweet, sweet...

There was a flickering bulb going off in my brain. Shit... would that work?

I trotted towards Scotch Tape. "Hey," I said as she fidgeted with the pouch.

"I hate this stuff. It tastes like butt and it makes me pee rainbows," she muttered sullenly. "Radiation never hurt..." I looked at the olive filly with a small smile, arched a brow, and pulled back my left sleeve to show her the mottled, growth-laden surface. It looked like one solid bruise, yellow with ugly greenish-red blotches beneath the skin. Glory looked alarmed, but I shook my head. Now was no time to play doctor. Scotch took the hint and started drinking the orange medicine with a sour look.

"Sorry about messing with your head," I said as I sat down beside her. "I just wanted you happy. Guess I fucked that up, huh?" Glory rolled her eyes as she trotted away, muttering something about language.

"You'd be happy if somepony messed with your head?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Are you kidding? I'd be bouncing on my hooves happy," I lied. I couldn't tell if she believed me or not as she looked down at the pouch of medicine. "I need you to do something for me, Scotch. And it's something nopony else can do."

"You're going to ask me to stay behind so that I can stay safe. Again," she grumbled. "Why does everypony insist on treating me like a baby? I can disassemble a sewage pump in fifteen minutes with

two wrenches and a hammer..." Then she sighed. "I'm gonna end up with a toilet for a cutie mark, ain't I?"

"Be nice to find a working one, that's for sure," I teased softly, mussing her short blue mane. "And I am going to ask you to stay behind. But not because I want to keep you safe. I have to go meet with the Rangers. If everything works out... well... if it works out, then great. But if it doesn't... the only pony who can end this war will be you. Understand?"

I told her my plan, and she found a way to make it work...well, up to a point. "Still, this is crazy, Blackjack. What if they just shoot you?"

"Then they're smarter ponies than me," I replied with a smile and kissed her brow. "You know we care about you, right?"

She flushed a little. "Yeah. Just... don't get dead, Blackjack. There ain't many 99 ponies left."

"There's P-21," I replied.

"He don't count. He hates me," she muttered.

I sighed. "He doesn't hate you..." At least, he better not! "He just has a hard time with things that remind him of 99. It wasn't easy for him there."

"I know. Colts are weird..." she said, rolling her eyes.

"Tell me about it," I said with a smile. Then I sighed again. "I also need you to hold on to something for me, okay? This is an IF-33 with expanded magazine. It was my mom's. If something should happen, I don't want the Rangers to have it. Just... be careful when you fire it. It's got a whole lot more kick than that dinky nine mil Parasprite you shoot."

She took it with the care of someone who respects a machine that can hurt you. I appreciated that. "There's one last thing I need you to do. You're not going to like it, but you're the only pony who can pull it off." She looked intrigued as I took a breath and said, "I need you to act scared so Glory will stay behind." I couldn't bear to see her in another situation like the one at Flash Industries.

For a moment, she looked confused and then annoyed, but finally she seemed to understand and gave a little smile and a roll of her eyes. "Great. More time with the most boring pony in the Wasteland."

I thumped her softly on her head. "Maybe, but she's my marefriend, so be nice." Scotch Tape stuck her tongue out at me. "And finish your medicine. Remember, it's not a rainbow if you don't hit all six colors."

She smiled crookedly as she wrinkled her nose. "Ew... gross, Blackjack... and everypony thinks I'm the filly."

I chuckled as I clattered back towards the others. You and P-21 both, kid. "Okay. We actually have a plan B. So... P-21 and Rampage are with me again... Glory, Lacunae, and Scotch are here." And cue in three... two...

"Absolutely not. I'm coming with you," Glory said firmly, frowning.

"You have to stay here. Scotch is still freaked out, and if Rangers come up here, I need you to help fight them off," I said as I glanced over my shoulder at Scotch. She mouthed my words with impudent annoyance before she caught my glare and suddenly gave Glory a big-eyed look that just screamed 'look at me, I'm helpless!'. And if Steel Rain got his hooves on Glory, I'd give him EC-1101 and tell the elder that Big Daddy planned to turn her into a hat if I had to.

Glory sure didn't like it, but I knew that she had hoofcuffs; I'd use them if I had to. "So... not just a plan A, but a plan B?" P-21 asked with a thin smile.

"And a plan C..." I replied. "Yup... I am just brimming with the whole... plans... thing." Of course, knowing me and how my plans worked out... yeah. "Let's get started before I have to worry about a plan D."

* * *

The dry docks were basically four giant long buildings covered in rust and salt. Huge cranes hung on gantries overhead, silently waiting to resume work on ships that would never be completed. All of the locks had failed, filling the rooms with the reek of brackish water. The place had power and tools, though, and that, I supposed, was all that mattered. Most of the noise was coming from one corner of the cavernous space. We had everything ready... or at least as ready as it would ever get. My PipBuck was covered with duct tape that was ostensibly, and to a degree actually, holding the brace on that leg on. Everything else had been left behind with the other three.

"Glory's starting to feel left out. She misses out on the hole of terror and now on the suicidal strut," Rampage said as I limped along beside her. If things went stupid, she was our plan D. Water poured through holes in the roof in cascading columns as we stepped over heaps of rusted chain and bolts. A huge faded mural of Applejack in a sailor's outfit saluted us all over the motto 'Victory through blood, sweat, and tears'.

"Yeah, but she gets to have sex with me, so she can't complain," I retorted. I didn't want to spook them and start off the shooty. I was so nervous going in unarmed... I didn't even have a fancy sword!

"You're that good?" Rampage asked with a smirk.

"No, but she is," I replied.

"Well then, maybe I should have sex with her and find out for myself when you're gone," Rampage said, her smirk transforming into a naughty grin.

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "Be my guest. She loves it when you nibble on--"

"Could we please cut out the lesbian sexcapade chitchat while walking towards an enemy that wants to kill us?" P-21 said tersely, his already bristly mane frizzing even more. "I don't even know why I'm here."

"You're here for when this chief acolyte commits his sudden and inevitable betrayal," I replied. His name was 'Napalm Strike'; it hardly screamed 'trustworthy' to me.

"Next question. What is the plan if the elder says 'thank you for your concern; now I'm going to shoot you anyway'? Because that's the step I'm missing," he said sourly.

"I shoot her in the face and we run for our lives and hope Lacunae can swoop in and port us to safety. Then we shut down the Rangers," I said firmly.

"You're siding with the Reapers?" Rampage asked with pleased surprise.

I snorted. "I'm siding with whoever has less stupid and kills fewer innocent ponies. Right now, Steel Rain trumps Psychoshy in both departments."

We stepped into view of ten or so unicorns handling all kinds of strange techy equipment while fixing up suits of power armor. They all froze at the sight of us. "Hi. I'm Security. I'm looking for Napalm Strike?" For several seconds, they just looked at each other and us; they were clearly not ponies who expected three dangerous, wanted strangers to trot up to them. I rose and put my hooves in the air. "We're giving up?"

A power-armored pony pointed a gatling gun at us, and I readied myself for sharp and painful death. Then an older-looking buck in red robes trotted towards me looking quite put out. "I'm Chief Acolyte Strike. What are you doing here? How did you get inside our perimeter?" He looked at Rampage with alarm. "You're that Reaper! The immortal one!"

"You survive being put through a wood chipper, and suddenly you're famous," Rampage said with a chuckle as she shook some rusty salt water off her hoof. "I'm just glad they recognized me without the armor."

"We're here to speak to your leader about halting this war," I said, and the flat look he gave me did not bode well. "I'm prepared to give her the location of my stable in exchange for hearing me out." It was full of poison gas and dead bodies, but the words got the reaction I wanted. He immediately looked intrigued.

"In my opinion, you're too late. We're about to crush this war once and for all. But if you insist... I suppose I can take your request to her." He nodded to the acolytes. "Search them."

I did my best to hide my disappointment when they found the bobby pins under P-21's tail... and in his mane. And mouth. They gave me the same treatment, even taking off my eyepatch to make sure I didn't have a grenade or something hidden in there. Really, what were they expecting? Given that my busted braces were taped to my legs, they couldn't exactly check them. I really doubted they wanted to. No pony wanted to look at swollen nasty pony flesh.

After that, the armored Ranger fell in behind us while Chief Acolyte Strike trotted in front. I hoped that the Ranger was a real good shot if she decided to fire. We trotted out of the dry docks and towards the pier the *Celestia* was tied up to. Once, she'd clearly been a magnificent ship, and even after two centuries she possessed a strength and grandeur that I found impressive. Three turrets, two in the front and one towards the rear, pointed their barrels towards the city. And then... I gaped as I saw one of the rear turret's cannon barrels slowly elevate.

"You got it to work?" Rampage gaped in alarm. "You've been working on this rustbucket for years!"

"Indeed, and it's beginning to pay off. We fixed Turret Three months ago. Of course, the elder resisted our many requests to fire it. There was a lack of proper ordnance, for one thing."

"No bullets?" I asked in surprise.

"No shells," he corrected, and I suspected that the orange acolyte would have been great buddies with Textbook. "The *Celestia* had been docked for a major refit at the time of the attack, and all her shells had been removed. Sadly, their bunker is buried under tons of debris, too much to be practically cleared. So, while we possessed ample stocks of powder, we had no shells. Until recently, that is." He pointed to a crane that was lifting something out of the water. A dripping net with a suit of power armor hanging onto it. "Fortunately, the *Luna's* ordnance was intact. Marvelous engineering."

I saw that the armor had been modified with numerous air tanks. "Clever."

"Technology is to be used, not merely collected. The elder is growing to appreciate that fact," he said matter-of-factly.

"Except using it for war gets it blown up," I replied, earning a sour look from the sour chief acolyte. "I'm just saying."

"And the elder would agree with you as well. But when we are attacked, we must respond. The codex commands it," he said as he walked out onto the wet pier. The rain was still pouring, and it was quickly getting dark.

"Well, that and common sense," I replied. "But somehow, I doubt all the scavengers I saw with minigun bullets in them were attacking power armor." He frowned sharply at me but said no more as we trotted along the dock. Then I noted with surprise two other ships. One was far less grand: a rust-red ship half the size of the *Celestia*. It was flying a flag showing the Steel Ranger emblem, but with three apples instead of gears. Between it and the *Celestia* was... the *Seahorse*.

"What is Thrush doing here?" I exclaimed in surprise.

He chuckled dryly. "Oh, so you know that pirate? No surprise. She's guilty of numerous counts of technology smuggling and other assorted crimes." He pointed a hoof at the far ship. "When the... sigh... HMS *Applejack* was en route from Manehattan, they encountered the *Seahorse*, intercepted her, and towed her back here. Once we've wrapped things up, we'll strip out the engine. The rest is garbage."

"And what happened to the captain and her crew?" Things were rapidly veering towards Plan: 'Blackjack does something incredibly stupid and violent'.

"They're in custody. They should have been thrown to the mercy of the sea, but the Trottingham Rangers are notoriously softhearted and soft-headed. I suppose the elder will let the crew go and shoot the captain."

"Try not to sound so disappointed," P-21 muttered. "That reply just saved you the trouble of having Blackjack tear this place apart. She gets destructive when her friends get hurt."

"Stupid, P-21. I get stupid when my friends get hurt," I corrected. I received an uneasy look from the chief acolyte.

He looked decidedly out of his comfort zone as we walked up the gangplank and onto the *Celestia*. I was surprised by the number of Rangers who weren't trotting around in power armor. I guess

I'd gotten the idea that if you didn't have power armor you weren't a Steel Ranger, but most of these ponies didn't wear any. They were moving boxes and containers of supplies aboard the ship. It made sense; if the Reapers swarmed the base, they'd be sitting ducks on the pier.

We were walked past the number three turret. Up close, you couldn't miss the rusty streaks; magically protected or not, saltwater was hell on steel. Even I knew that. It looked like only the middle cannon was moving, and the gun elevated agonizingly slowly as the turret slowly ground around. Ponies were slopping grease around the edge with mouthheld mops while unicorns floated grease guns into the crevices. Clearly, battleships ran on grease.

"Down," he directed as we crossed a pegasus landing pad at the rear and clattered down some narrow stairs. I had to wonder if Rangers could even wear power armor in these tight confines! After that, we went down more stairs... and more stairs... and incidentally did I mention I didn't like stairs? My braced legs slipped and I went rolling down to the bottom. "Are you sure you're Security?" Napalm Strike asked me bluntly.

"Catch me on a day when I'm not walking on screwed-up legs, and I'll show you Security..." I muttered as I pulled myself to my hooves, once more glad I couldn't break my legs. Of course, I still felt like I'd been beaten with a stick, but at least nothing was *broken*.

We reached a long room that smelled of salt and dead sea things and followed it along past large white plastic drums set in rows along a mechanized track. There were Rangers pushing the plastic drums from the track to a hoist that I guessed pulled it up to the gun. One of the drums had been dropped, spilling dark powder in a fan that two unicorns were very carefully scooping up.

If one drum held that much powder... There were hundreds of drums down here; too bad magic bullets didn't create much in the way of sparks. I'd need something incendiary to do a proper job, a grenade or flamer or something. "Planning a party?"

"Given the possibility of the base being overrun, it didn't seem prudent to leave a whole bunker full of gunpowder to the mercies of the Burner Boys. We loaded as much as we would need and sealed the rest away," he replied dryly. We passed through a thick door to another room loaded with missiles and ammo crates by the thousands. There were enough bullets and missiles in here to kill everypony in Equestria a thousand times over!

Why in Celestia's name would any country need so many bullets?

Past that, we entered a space that was far more run down. Given how much effort they were putting into getting the turret working, getting the rest of the ship operational would take lifetimes. There was rust everywhere I looked, and most of the talismans were shot. Some engine or power source I couldn't imagine growled under our hooves, though, and we occasionally passed work crews trying to get some other part of the ship to work.

Finally, we were escorted to an empty magazine which had far more rust and fish reek. The cages that had held the powder drums in the other room were empty in this one, and they had been converted into cells. "So... going to tell the elder straight away?" I asked him.

His sniff told me not to hold my breath. "Eventually. I have my duties. But I will inform her that you wish to meet."

"If you want to know where my stable is... a nice, fully-operational stable... you'll inform her before you start firing that gun," I said as we were marched into an empty cage. The crew of the *Seahorse* roused at once as we were locked in across from them.

The acolyte sniffed. "Yes, well, the elder is a very busy mare. There's a war on, you know. I'll see she's informed." I gave a little sigh. Of course he would. With that he stepped out.

"Blackjack? Is that you? Are you all right?" Oilcan asked as the mare looked around. Oh yeah. I was the pony with the night vision eye.

"Blackjack?" a mare whimpered in pain in the dark. I looked around, but the other cages were empty.

"Thrush? Where's Captain Thrush?" I asked.

"Here. She's in a bad way, though. When she caused too much trouble, they made her go into a memory orb and she still hasn't woken up. It's been hours!" Tarboots grumbled.

I recalled going into one like that, a trapped orb that had shut me down until Priest snapped me out of it again. I thought I spotted Seabiscuit in the back. I heard familiar little snuffles and sobs somewhere in the dark room. "Who is that?"

There was an uncomfortable pause and then Oilcan said quietly, "The sea ponies. They're... in a bad way too."

Seaponies? Oh, shit! "Pisces? Capri?" Somepony had thrown them in here without any water?

"Blackjack..." came Pisces's whimper. "Please... help..."

"Okay. Plan B now," I said as I pulled off my eyepatch. "P-21, do you have any pins they missed?"

"Nope. They were more thorough than you. Why, do you have one?" he asked in surprise.

"Mhmm! They were busy searching me, but not my eyepatch." I ripped open the padded backing and carefully tugged out the pin with my magic. The glow was one of the only wan lights in the room. I passed it to him, then carefully untaped a part of my 'brace' which happened to be a screwdriver.

He eyed it and then looked up at me. "Celestia save us... Blackjack is becoming clever. Okay, keep that little horn of yours lit up."

"It's compact! Not little!" I'd show him light! I fished around for a piece of scrap metal I could lift. I focused as much as I could to light it as he worked.

A click, and the door opened. This is why he was awesome. Only he could unlock a door in near darkness.

The lock on the *Seahorse*'s crew's cage clicked, and the four ponies moved out. Then we moved to the next cell over... and I froze. I'd never really appreciated what a fish was: a creature of water. I only knew them as glittering shapes in books next to the little fact that they lived in water.

I'd never thought of what happened to them if you took them out of water...

Pisces and Capricorn lay on the floor. Their scales were cracked and flaking, their skin split and bleeding. Their fins had dried out and stuck to the floor. Capri was unconscious, maybe dead. The pink seapony was partially glued to her sister. They needed water, badly, and whatever pony had thrown them in here like this needed to die.

It was a good thing I'd met Crumpets and Paladin Stronghoof when I had. I was in a particularly shooty mood when it came to the Rangers. I knelt as P-21 started on the lock. "Just stay easy. We'll get you out... find a fire hose and a bucket or something."

"Momma... please, Momma..." Capri whimpered weakly. "Not monsters... we're... we're not monsters..." No, you're not. No pony was... and I was going to save them... no pony deserved to die like this!

"Get it open. Please... get it open..." I begged. P-21 scowled, rubbing his knee as he got to work. The screwdriver quivered... the lock's drum slowly rotated...

The bobby pin snapped.

"No! No!" I slammed it with my hooves.

"Blackjack? What's plan B?" P-21 asked me in the dark. I lifted a rag so that everyone could at least see the pale white glow.

"Get free and find her ourselves, but..."

"You can do that. You and Rampage. Go," he scowled at the others as they gawked. "Well, don't just stand there. Get some sort of light and find me a damned bobby pin and a bucket of water!"

I looked at him with a thankful smile. "Right." The large Tarboots threw Thrush over his shoulder. "As soon as you can get them out, get to your ship. We might have to get out of here fast if we can't meet up with Lacunae." I sighed and said, "I really hope plan C is ready. 'Cause at this rate, plan D is all we've got left."

"Relax. I excel at plan D," Rampage said modestly.

"I'll remember that when Steel Rain blasts you into fine red mist," I muttered as she opened the door.

A pony in bizarre gray barding jumped to her hooves as the hatch opened. She scrambled for a beam gun as Rampage leapt upon the mare, wrapped her legs around her neck, and heaved her clear over her back to crash to the deck with Rampage on top of her. The blue pony lay in a daze. Rampage smirked at me and tossed me the beam gun. "You forget. Close combat is my thing, Blackjack. Now take her stuff. It might keep you from getting shot."

I stripped the mare, passing to P-21 any gear that wasn't a weapon as I dressed up as a Steel Ranger. "If we see Rain first, though... I'll need to talk to him."

"Talk to him? Ah, Blackjack... that's a little suicidal," she said as I slowly began to make my way up some stairs. This was a big ship... I'd have to ask for directions. "And, no offense, Blackjack, but how

are you going to know the elder when we meet her? 'Cause I have no idea what a Steel Ranger elder looks like."

I sighed. "She'll either wear the biggest hat, carry the fanciest gun, have the most ridiculous outfit on, or be surrounded by ponies happy to kill us." What, did I have to work out everything in advance? I'd gotten us aboard the ship, hadn't I? Couldn't think of everything myself, now could I?

* * *

The HMS *Celestia* came in two flavors: recently refurbished machine of war or abandoned derelict, and you could find both flavors within ten feet of each other. One section would have the rust scoured away with bright and humming lights, and the next would look like it hadn't been touched in two centuries. I couldn't figure out any rhyme nor reason to it either. Somewhere there was an engineer in need of a good kicking. There also wasn't a sign anywhere in a language I understood. 'STLBCKACC'? 'PRTENGNAV'? 'RVTEXTBST'? WHTTTFCK?

We staggered into something that might have been a mess hall at one time but was now collecting dust... except for the hoofmarks that went through the room. I spotted a red bar ahead and moved against the wall. Another red bar moved slowly in front of us. I caught the swirl of red robes as the chief acolyte paced back and forth.

"Shouldn't you be preparing the cannon?" came Steel Rain's voice, making my mane stand on end. My eyes popped wide. He was here. Actually here!

"Listen up," I said softly, and Rampage's ears perked as the star paladin entered. To my immense relief, he was armed with a gatling gun / grenade machinegun combo... which actually was still not that good for us, but I liked it more than the idea of 'instakill at two miles'.

"Security is here," Napalm Strike said.

"That's impossible. I've soldiers stationed with shoot to kill orders. She couldn't be anywhere near here," said Steel Rain.

"She walked up to us politely as she pleased with her friends. Offered me the location of a stable to speak to the elder." He hesitated, then added, "I must inform her of this. My oath--"

"Oath!" Steel Rain snarled, cutting off the other. "What good are oaths these days? We swear to obey senile fools who have the power to force order on this city but refuse to exercise it! Who could use this ship to batter down the walls of the Core and use the riches within to force a real tomorrow. Oaths..." He snorted in disgust. "Only a fool honors a foolish oath."

"But the elder..."

"Is a dying breed. I've spoken with Elder Cottage Cheese and Star Paladin Nova personally about this! Naive optimists like Steelhooves and Stronghoof have no place here. They're fodder for the city. But ponies like us, who have the vision to see the potential of technology and the audacity to use it... we are the future!" There was no hiding the fervor in his voice; it practically trembled with his every word.

"She's going to find out eventually!" Napalm Strike protested. "And then there will be questions."

Steel Rain chuckled long, low, and slow. "Let her find out. Let her ask her questions. But let her do it after we've turned the Arena, the Collegiate, and the Skyport into rubble. Once we are victorious, it won't matter how she protests. And when the old nag finally expires, either you or I will replace her. And we'll have a glorious new future to look forward to."

"I suppose," he muttered sullenly.

"Get that cannon firing. The sooner our enemies' strongholds are rubble, the better," Steel Rain finished. "Let me worry about Security."

I couldn't believe my luck! This was exactly what I needed to hear! I bit my lip as I fought the urge to cheer. Then there was a pause, and my ears prickled. Then he said, in a louder voice, "You know, technology is such a wonder. Take this power armor. Rebreather. Repair talisman. The armor itself. The heavy weapons. But do you know what the most useful feature is?" I frowned as I looked at Rampage.

"Eyes Forward Sparkle," he finished in a grave tone. Then there was a heavy choom as the grenade machinegun blasted the doorway we sheltered in. Rampage grabbed me faster than I could have imagined and threw me away as his exploding rounds blew her into chunks. Clanging forward, I barely got to my feet when he appeared in the doorway and blasted a streak of minigun fire in a spray that made my ass burn.

We were now officially on plan E: run for my fucking life! So long as Steel Rain was on me, P-21 and the others would have a clear shot, as would Rampage when she regenerated. My legs clattered and jerked, my flanks on fire as he ran down the hall behind me. I tried to yank shut hatches as I passed, but they were too heavy for my magic to move. And I didn't dare stop as he followed. I passed a set of stairs, but with my legs wobbling around beneath me I didn't dare try and scramble up it. One slip or trip and I would be over.

I dared look back behind me in time to see him pass through one of the tight hatches, and my jaw dropped in amazement as he twisted his body with ease to allow him to pass through without getting stuck. And here I could barely run and keep ahead of him. I needed a door. Something I could close. I raced past one unarmored mare who stepped behind me only to be blown to pieces by the grenades! "Get out of the way!" I screamed as I ran, passing by another two unicorn onlookers.

Finally, I passed around a dogleg and onto a steep stair. My legs skidded and slipped as I kicked and scrambled up. I pushed against the hatch overhead, my horn struggling with the rusty wheel. He came around the corner just as it gave with a screech and opened onto a rainswept landing pad at the rear of the ship. A few spotlights illuminated it in glaring light and shadow. I got clear as his grenade machine gun choomed and sprayed me with ricocheting metal.

Did I mention that I hated Hoofington?

Two mares scrambled to me as I lay there, writhing from the dozens of little holes that'd appeared in my hide. "Hold still!" One shouted, pulling out a healing potion. I slurped it down eagerly. There was an alarm sounding somewhere. The mare shouted to the other, "We have to get below decks! Before--"

Celestia fired.

The cannon was at least a hundred feet away, but the force of its firing washed over me like a

full-body sledgehammer. Maybe it was the healing potions that spared my ears, but for several minutes I just writhed futilely. Far off, a flower of flame bloomed to the southwest. I recovered first; I supposed that I was more used to getting blown up by this point. I pushed the mares down the hatch; Steel Rain was gone for the moment, and I couldn't leave them up here.

Then I started across the flight deck, but the waves and my ringing head and woobly legs sent me sprawling once again. Cold rain sloshed around me. I really wanted some Buck. Something... anything... to get me out of here. The *Celestia* fired again, a spectacular tongue of flame scraping away the night. Flat against the deck, I had some protection, but it left me with the distinct sensation of being stepped on. "Stop... firing... damn it..." I muttered.

"Did you hear that?" Steel Rain's voice boomed from his armor as he stepped out into the rain. "That was the roar of technology. Of power! It is a sound that will be repeated all across Equestria as we finally take our proper place!"

Slowly, he walked out towards me. "You've given me quite the gift, Security. This war. The excuse to purge this city of the filth that keeps us from our legacy. We will obliterate all that stand against us. We will put this technology to use! Not let it rot in some bunker."

Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves. "You also murdered innocents..." I said, trying to use my rage to focus. "I saw the execution piles!"

"Simply ridding the Hoof of a few extra mouths. Why waste it on filth like that?" he said as the rain poured down upon us. "You can never begin to appreciate the importance or usefulness of technology."

I straightened as I looked at him. "Oh, I don't know. I've gained a whole new appreciation for hot showers, soap, and flushing toilets." Slowly, I smiled. "You know what else I've appreciated?" I could imagine him scowling as I swayed a little on my hooves. "Silence."

I pointed my hoof behind him, and there, looking down at him, was a unicorn under a rain shielding spell. I'd been right about everything except the hat. Elder Crunchy Carrots looked so rough and raw that she could chew steel and piss nails. Suddenly, I had the sensation that I was about to be grounded for the rest of my life... okay, that was actually possible at this point. The orange mare floated a strangely delicate-looking gun beside her as she glared down with a furious gaze. Around her were dozens of power armor-clad ponies and acolytes.

At her side were Scotch Tape and Glory.

"Elder? What is going on? I..."

"You got a big mouth," Scotch Tape yelled as she reached to her PipBuck and pushed a button. His voice began to play loud and clear. No pony moved. With my night vision, I saw a dark Lacunae fly overhead and drop my barding and bags beside me. I smirked as I shed the shredded Ranger barding for my own... slightly less shredded security armor. I slipped on one of my saddlebags. The olive filly chuckled, "Courtesy of Radio Blackjack."

I smirked, tapping my covered PipBuck. "Ain't technology grand?"

"Star Paladin Steel Rain. You have demonstrated gross contempt for our order, your oaths, and

your position. Have you anything to say in your defense?" the elderly orange mare said with a fierce glare. I might have done her a favor with that recording, but I had to remember that we still hadn't settled things.

For several seconds, he stood there, and then slowly turned to face her. "Defense? What have I said that wasn't the truth!? How many generations have wasted their lives hoarding and gathering weapons and technology only for it to be wasted! How many more generations will we have to suffer the weak incompetence of leaders like you who hide and cower and quote rules and talk of oaths and do nothing!" He pointed his hoof up at her. "For the first time ever, we have an unrivalled weapon against our foes. And you are the only thing standing between us and the future we deserve!"

As I finished buckling everything into place, I looked around. Then I frowned. This wasn't going like it should. Now everypony wasn't just facing the star paladin. Now there were more and more Rangers turning to face the elder. Oh... shit. Why did I suddenly get the sensation that everything was about to blow up?

I'd come here to stop a damn war! Not start a second one within the Rangers themselves!

"Are you fucking serious!?" I screamed as I stepped into the middle of it. "What the hell is wrong with all of you? I don't care if you guard tech or use it, but are you so caught up that you can ignore the shit you're inflicting on everypony in the Hoof?" I pointed towards the shore. "Right now, Stronghoof and Crumpets are fighting to save lives in the hopes that you are going to pull your heads out of your armored asses. I came here with that hope. I'm willing to give you the location of my stable if you only knock this shit off!"

Please, I begged mentally. Don't do this.

The elder glanced at me, her sour expression softening a touch. "Thank you for your kind words, Security, but this is an internal matter. For your assistance in bringing this to light, I am issuing you and the young mare here a pardon, and you are free to leave." She pointed back down at Steel Rain. "Paladins, arrest him!"

No pony moved. Then one armored pony slowly approached him. Then another. And another. For once, it seemed as if sanity would prevail and there'd be a hope of the butchery ending. That sanity broke as they reached Steel Rain... and turned to face the elder shoulder to shoulder. And there were more than half standing with him.

"So be it," the elder said softly.

Oh shit--

She pulled the trigger, and a bolt of lightning blasted out. A Ranger leapt in its path, the lightning cascaded over the armor, and his lights went dead.

A full barrage of grenades and missiles answered. The elder disappeared behind a shield as she fell back while the rest of the acolytes returned fire. I didn't care about that, but Glory and Scotch were up there. Out came my assault rifle as the other Rangers realized I was still a threat, and I sent a line of crackling blue bullets against them. The insanity had come to a head. I'd tried my best...

Some ponies refused to do better.

“Get Glory!” I screamed and thought as hard as I could as I staggered to some stairs up to the deck with the turret. I don’t know if Lacunae heard me or anticipated me, but she swooped down to where they’d taken cover and disappeared in a purple flash. Beside the *Celestia*, the *Seahorse* slowly pulled away. I just needed to live long enough for her to come back for me. I guessed a minute. Maybe two.

Two minutes is a lifetime when eighteen ponies in power armor are shooting at you. They were moving up along the ship as the elder and her acolytes fell back. I was surprised to see Napalm Strike fighting alongside the elder, the other orange unicorn conjuring up sheets of flame and exploding blasts of fire. The elder had been wounded and was being dragged back.

As horrible as the war was, I couldn’t think of this ship being in Steel Rain’s hooves. Weapons were used for a reason. You didn’t fire them simply because you could! Speaking of Steel Rain, he seemed to come straight at me. The star paladin appeared to have taken a personal dislike towards me, and I responded with bursts of crackling blue bullets. I was taking cover far more than he was, though, as that grenade machinegun sprayed death at me. I had to get higher. Get out of here. Maybe meet up with Stronghoof and Crumpets and work out... something...

I couldn’t just give up.

I staggered up to the turret, then clambered up a narrow stairway to the top of the heavily armored structure. There was so much gunfire that I wondered if somepony was taking shots at Lacunae and keeping her away. Did Rampage get out? What about P-21 and the sea ponies? “Any time now, Lacunae...”

Then he climbed atop the turret opposite me. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four bursts... yet only two hit through all that rain. I managed to squeeze off three magic bullets that were far more lucky. They struck his helmet, peeling away smoking steel.

He was a surprisingly gentle-looking buck...

Then my world went black as his grenade rifle blasted the turret before me. I screamed as fire erupted in my face, shrapnel cutting deep across my front, and I tried desperately to wipe the blood out of my eye. I had to see! If I couldn’t see... why couldn’t I wipe the blood away?

That blood was my eye.

My hoof touched the fiery ruin of my missing eye. I needed Hydra. A healing potion. Something! My hooves fumbled with my saddlebag. Then a minigun burped, and pain erupted in my shoulder. At least it got the saddlebag off.

“I should thank you again,” he said from somewhere behind me as I scrabbled in my bags. Was that Hydra? Med-X? Rad-X? There was a burst that tore into my cutie mark, and I screamed, jerking as I fell over into the bag and scattered the syringes. “You finally brought it to the fore. Now we can have a new beginning. A proper future.” Another burst along my opposite side. I fired wildly... but once my gun was empty, I couldn’t load it blind. I reached in, desperate to find something... anything...

My hoof nudged a smooth case, and I felt it pop open. My other hoof felt the smooth, heavy

barrel. I froze, feeling myself grow cold. "I am coming..." Lacunae said in my mind.

Thanks, Lacunae. But I couldn't leave this ship in the hooves of this mad pony. Inside the saddlebag, I cracked open the breech and slammed the silver bullet home. I heard the weapon latch and hum as the systems interacted with my PipBuck.

"Blackjack, don't do this," the Dealer said. I ignored him as I struggled to my hooves. "You know what it will do..."

"Yeah, but I can't get much worse..."

"Blackjack... don't..."

"I'm doing it," I replied. I had no time for crazy any more. I had to stop this for good, if it was the last thing I did...

Steel Rain paused in his tirade as I drew the loaded Folly from the saddlebag. "What is that supposed to be?" he asked as I pointed the weapon. "You don't actually think you can hit anything with that, do you?"

"Something... yeah," I replied, slipping into S.A.T.S. with practiced ease. I mentally hit 'yes' over and over again. Then the tingle of the magic fields wrapping around me. The feeling of immobility.

Well... this was it. Folly fired.

Straight down.

I wasn't sure which was worse, the sound Folly made as two feet of reinforced armor vaporized beneath me or the monstrous explosion that followed. I felt the wet pressure soaking every inch of my body; trapped against my skin by the magic. Only the magic fields kept me from an instantaneous death, but when they faded I felt the turret lifted higher and higher as if we were all floating away. Everything was tumbling end over end; up and down didn't exist. There was simply the explosion and the scream of steel and twisting metal.

I hit the cold, salty water, bobbing there as it stung my bloody eye sockets. I could barely move. Somewhere nearby were screams and the noise of the ship. My barding... my braces... everything was dragging me down. Then I heard the sound of groaning metal above me. I lifted my battered hooves as I was crushed beneath the waves into the cold black depths.

Funny, Glory... went my very last thought as I was pushed deeper and deeper into the frigid waters... only a pony with my luck could have a boat dropped on them... twice...

FoE note: Leave a tip

ERROR: OUT OF BOUNDS EXCEPTION ERROR: ESOTERIC LIMIT CRITICAL

(I want to thank Kkat for creating FoE, and give massive thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending a record 13 hours making this decent to actually read. Please, all comments are cherished, even if I can't reply right away. Also, if you enjoyed the story, bits can be donated through paypal to

David13ushey @gmail. com. Thank you.)