

(Advisory Warning: This chapter contains a brutal scene which may be disturbing or upsetting to some readers. I've discussed this scene with others, and they've convinced me that, bad as the scene is, it should be included. I will provide a link bypassing the scene at the end of the second memory orb sequence. NOTE FROM HINDS: The link takes the form of a blue memory orb scene divider. If you're not sure how to use the link...well, actually, I only figured it out just now myself, so I'm not sure how much help I'd be. Good luck with it if you decide to use it. If not, good luck reading through the scene.)

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 33: Black

“ ... ”

Since leaving the stable for the first time, I'd felt that my life had become one great struggle. Against enemies, or mysteries, or simply my friends' unhappiness, it was always a contest about when the Dealer would finally deal me my last hand, when the Wasteland would break me in two. It'd tried. It succeeded in 99. It'd come pretty close a few other times. Within the push of a safety toggle. But I always got dragged back. Of course, I could have just let go and allowed myself to die, even then. But I couldn't, really. I knew that I hadn't atoned yet. I still had hope that somehow I had something else to give. Some comfort. Some peace. Anything to draw a bit more of the Wasteland's attention to me so that it would leave some innocent alone for a bit longer.

And I wasn't broken yet.

The *Celestia*... or a part of it... had fallen atop me with a grinding metallic scream punctuated by thumps, groans, and booms. The impact pushed me down deeper and deeper, the cold depths squeezing me as my injuries burned in the salty water. My braces were now weights taped to the ends of my limbs, my tattered barding pulling me down. This was probably where I was going to die...

But not yet.

Swimming really wasn't a part of my skill set, and right now, as the water rushed around me, I didn't even know which way was up. For all I knew, I was flailing deeper and deeper into the water. I just knew that I floated in the bathtub and so hopefully the direction I was going was the right one.

Then I smashed into armored hull. The metal vibrated with terrible force; I could feel the strain humming through the plates as the *Celestia* tore herself to pieces. I could hear distant explosions. My lungs burned as I felt my way along the surface. Up, a primitive instinct screamed at me. Breathe! Bubbles started to leak out my nose as I crawled like a bug.

A little longer...

Then my head broke through into a pocket of air, and I gasped as the groans and screams of metal were mixed with those of ponies. I felt sorry for that. I knew there had to have been acolytes and other initiates who hadn't deserved to die down here with me. One thing was for certain, though; Steel Rain would never get the *Celestia* to fire another shot. If he'd managed two, I didn't see anything

stopping him from firing two hundred more.

But still, I hadn't wanted them all to die this way.

I had no way to tell what I was in, or where. Suddenly, a pony surfaced beside me, screaming hysterically as she gasped for air as well. Her flailing hooves grabbed me and shoved me beneath the water again. Wildly kicking hooves smacked into my head, and I nearly lost my precious lungful of air. I could have gone back up, fought her for the ever precious bit of oxygen left in that space, but I let her have it. Good luck. I scuttled along the overturned ship, hearing swooshing water racing in somewhere. I'd probably put one hell of a hole in the bottom of this thing. I came across a pocket of air no deeper than my muzzle, but it held just enough for me to cough and sputter as I tried to get one or two more breaths.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer...

There was one last detonation, and the plates above me jerked and hammered into my head. Now I was pushed against the wreck as it started moving in the direction opposite of floating. I suddenly had an image of the upside-down ship slamming into the seabed and squishing me into paint! I wiggled and kicked and struggled as I tried to find any direction that was 'away'. Then I felt myself thrust into a slimy morass that oozed into my every nook and cranny as the ship gave a final tired groan. The sludge was being squished like the inside of a radroach, and I was squirted out into water.

My legs worked slowly, trying for some progress as I felt the silt swirling around me. My mouth worked slowly... I had to breathe... I had to... Bubbles slipped, and I felt my rear legs sink down into the sticky gunk. My rump touched down, and I sat there as a burning sensation roared inside my lungs... and then coolness spread through my chest. This wasn't so bad... Disemboweling was worse... I felt as if I were drifting away.

You win, you bony son of a bitch. Now let me rest... I'm so... tired...

~ ~ ~

It'd been a while since I'd had a nice long nap. I yawned and stretched, then blinked... and blinked again as I looked at the interior of a glassy egg. I gaped at the end of the weird little pod I occupied, opening one eye and closing it. Opening the other and closing it! I winked a few times just to make sure I wasn't imagining it! "Yes!" I cheered and pumped a hoof... a white smooth hoof that neither flopped about nor bulged with growths! And no PipBuck...

I was alive. Whole! Complete and intact and for the first time in weeks feeling healthy and alive. How long since I'd had this kind of energy? I saw a little red button in the wall that read 'release' and hit it. I had to wonder what kind of miracle was responsible for my—

The door swung open into the stripped-out remains of Vanity's bedroom. The bed was a filthy mat, and the desk had been pushed against the doors. I was in an egg-shaped pod similar to the ones in the Fluttershy clinic. A little jury-rigged magical generator pattered and hummed beside it. What was I doing here? I looked around in astonished worry. Where were my friends? What had happened?

A corpse on the bed moved. No. Not a corpse, but a pony very near becoming one. Dark hide was covered head to hoof in scars. His cutie marks had been deliberately torn away. 'Trick Pony' had been branded in their place. Slowly, he crawled out. Goddesses, he was skinny. So very skinny. "P-21?" He flinched away, then slowly shook his head. A filthy mane, so dirty I couldn't even tell what

color it was, was pushed back from faded, golden eyes. A bloody stump of a horn marred his brow. He looked at me as if he were staring at a ghost, and then his lips curled in the smallest of smiles. "Priest..."

The wasted stallion just nodded once.

I approached him, and he backed away almost fearfully. "What... what happened? Where are my friends?" He shuddered, walked slowly to a blasted-out window, and pointed down the road. Pointed towards Chapel. An unwholesome hum filled the air, a single note that went on and on. "But..." He shook his head and then opened his mouth wide. Nothing remained of his tongue. He gave an apologetic little shrug.

"How... How long...?" I murmured in shock. Slowly, his hoof rose and fell as he tapped out fifteen steps. "Fifteen... weeks?" He shook his head. "Months?" Again. "...Years." At that, he nodded. *Fifteen years?* I staggered but tried to focus as I stared at the swaying buck. "But... why am I here? What happened? Where are my..."

He lay down on the ground, one golden eye looking up at me. His lips moved silently, then he closed them. He took one breath and let it out forever...

No. This was wrong. This was very very wrong! I needed guns, barding, and my friends beside me now! I shoved the desk away and threw open the doors.

Hoofington had risen.

The rest of Blueblood Manor was a leveled ruin. Only a thin ramp of debris and the corner remained. I looked out directly at the Core. The clouds were gone, but so was the sky beyond. From horizon to horizon, a solid wall of baleful green illuminated the skies in an oppressive monochrome. The Core was awash in green light, the center of the green nimbus that spread over everything. Shadowbolt Tower rose like a dagger pointed at the heavens, and the land around the island was lit with thousands of fires. That droning buzz rolled on and on as if the city itself hummed.

I kicked my way down the debris and raced along the cracked road towards Chapel. Where else could I go? I passed the first empty and wretched camps. Then a few with earth ponies. Then a few with earth ponies and pegasi and unicorns. Then there were zebras. Griffins. Sand dogs. All together around the guttering fires. No one spoke. No one moved. They simply hummed that single resonant note or sat silently, staring at nothing. At least they weren't killing each other...

The graveyard had been torn up; it looked like somepony had tried to plant crops, but they were strange and bloated things. Chapel sat empty and half-finished, its defenses long ago shattered. I peeked in one building after the next, but only emptiness and that droning sound filled them. Finally, I approached the shell of the chapel itself. 'Hoofington Rises' had been spray-painted over every available inch.

Slowly, I stepped to the door and was hit by a palpable wall of stench. Yet, though I hesitated, I took a step in. And another. Another.

I'd found where everypony had gone.

From the heaps of tiny bodies emerged a larger one. A withered, yellow filly's severed head was kicked past me as she worked herself free. Bits of gore cascaded off her as tiny pink pinprick eyes

focused upon me. It was hard to tell what were stripes and what was dried blood and dangling viscera. Her lips curled wider and wider as her hooves hugged a tiny dead infant... one with red stripes. One of a dozen lying around her like so many scattered dolls.

And then Rampage spoke. "Shh... baby finally finished crying... but she's sleeping nice and peaceful now..."

I backed away. I wanted to scream. Everything was screaming as Rampage laughed. "Come back! I'll help you sleep too!"

I turned and fled, not towards the city but to the last refuge I knew. The only refuge I knew anymore. I ran past the reeking camps up the hill towards Star House. To my immense relief, it seemed intact. That horrible message had been spray-painted on every surface, but there was a mare stepping out.

An olive mare with green eyes and a blue mane. "Scotch!" I shouted happily as I raced up towards her. But she turned and looked at me in shock and fear. I saw her pregnant, distended belly as she stared at me like I were a ghost. Then I slowed. In place of a cutie mark, I saw slashed scars... and the word 'BREEDER' carved into her rump. There were nine marks under that violation, three pink and six blue.

"Blackjack?" she murmured softly. "You're awake... finally awake..."

"Scotch! What happened? What happened to... to everything?" I asked as I sat down hard.

She sat down slowly, rocking back and forth. "You... you died. Or nearly died. The seaponies fished you out of the water... Lacunae and Glory got you breathing again." Her eyes darted left and right. "Glory... Glory swore she'd save you. She did. She... she gave EC-1101 to Sanguine. And he made you a new body... but he said it would take years for you to... to mature. So we were just going to have to wait. And we did..." and she started to shake and sob. "And... and everything went bad!"

I reached forward to hold her, but she just smacked my hooves away. "There was a war, Blackjack. And another one. And another one. For a time, things seemed to get better. The Stable Dweller and her friends did great things... got the skies fixed... cleaned the earth... but they didn't get how bad things were out here. How terrible. Hoofington rose. The city woke up... and nothing could stop it."

I took a deep breath. "What about our friends, Scotch? I saw Rampage," I said as I looked back at the distant little building. "Where's Glory? P-21? Lacunae?"

"Glory..." Her eyes turned to the door. "I... I bring her things to eat... as a breeder, I get a little extra..."

I looked to the door as well, but she was shaking too much to say any more and simply hugged her stomach with one leg as she backed away. I slowly pushed the door open. The room was dark. I could still hear the hum, but it was muted as if heard from far away. Something was eating from a basket in the corner. Something gray. I saw a wing. I saw two. A smile started across my face. I saw a third. A fourth... Fifth...

Purple eyes opened, one after the next along the side of her neck. Of course Sanguine had tried to fix her too. Maybe he'd experimented. Maybe this was intentional. But those purple eyes widened in

shock before they clenched shut. "Don't look at me..." she rasped, low and heavy.

"Glory... how...?" was all I could mutter.

That hulk of flesh and feathers shivered, tears running down her neck. "I didn't have you... I didn't have anything. So nothing mattered. Nothing..."

She'd... let him do this...? "Glory... I..."

"Why did you have to leave? Why did you have to be a damned hero?" the gray... pegasus... said in an inequine voice. "You left me behind... always... always..." She closed her eyes again. "Leave me... or kill me... I can't survive being with you, and I can't live being without you, so I'm dead either way."

I backed out. "I wish I'd never met you..." Glory rasped. "I wish you'd never saved me..."

I fell back over my hooves as the door slammed shut from a powerful gust. I just sat there and stared at it. There had to be a way to fix this. To make her... right... again. I'd find Sanguine, and I would beat a way of fixing her out of him! Scotch Tape sat nearby, rocking and humming that slow single tune. I rose to my hooves. "What... how did this happen? What did you mean by 'Hoofington rose'?"

She started to walk slowly towards the bridge. "With EC-1101, Sanguine took the city. The Overlord came to power and used the factories under the city to make weapons. Everypony who'd lost everything in the war came to fight for him. Any mare that could bear foals was a breeder. Any stallion, a warrior."

"What about the Stable Dweller? The rest of the Wasteland?" I asked as we walked side by side. I couldn't believe she would just... let this happen!

"They tried to fight. They did. They sent hurricanes and tornadoes and terrible spells... but Hoofington had the megaspell facility... and with EC-1101 they got it working again. Megaspell... after megaspell... after megaspell. You joined the Hoof... or you were destroyed. Ponies. Alicorns. Zebras. Griffins. Dragons. It didn't matter. With EC-1101, they could do everything. So you came to the Hoof, or you died," she said softly as she walked. "The Overlord killed the Stable Dweller."

"What?!" Oh, I was going to go plan D on this 'Overlord' all over the place. Maybe I could get through to Rampage... or somehow Glory could help... or... I looked at the swollen Scotch Tape, and she quivered. *Stop using us in your stupid fight*, her eyes seemed to beg me. "What about Lacunae? P-21? Where are they?" If I could find some way to get EC-1101 back... some way... some... something!

She looked at me and trembled. "This way..." she murmured as she hung her head and walked slowly towards the bridge.

I followed after her. She seemed so... drained. So empty. I thought being a mother was supposed to be a wonderful thing. "Um... congratulations? Who's the father?" Then she looked at me and I shut up. I'd never talk about her being a mother again. There was such despair and hopelessness in her eyes that I knew I could never bring it up.

"The Overlord... Majina and I are his favorites..." was all she said. Oh... damn.

Time to shut the fuck up, Blackjack, and start concentrating on putting as many magic bullets as

possible into this bastard the second I see him.

We walked together, side by side, towards the bridge. A trickle of people were already walking one way or the other across it. Earth ponies, unicorns, ghouls, sand dogs, and others. All humming a common note and moving around as if half dead. If this was peace, then it was at far too high a price. Severed heads adorned the bridge, all species butchered equally and ground down under the Hoof. The walls of the Core were painted with the words 'Hoofington Rises' in streaks of vivid red.

The humming made my head hurt. No, not just a hum. It was like a drill trying to get inside me. It hurt to think about anything. I stared at the glassy-eyed creatures moving as if they were so much machinery. A few ranted, screamed, fought, and struggled... but they were ignored. From the few others who showed expression at all, it was clear that these people were more annoyed than disturbed by the outbursts.

The towers rose, seeming to stare down at the insignificant meat funneling through their dark canyons. The cracks and breaks in the towers bled green light. Purple lamps and yellow flares made glaring contrasts that hurt my eyes. It was as if every appearance of the city were designed to inflict pain! Who could be the Overlord? Sanguine? Maybe... Steel Rain? That seemed more likely. Somehow, he'd gotten his hooves on my PipBuck... been able to use it. My stomach churned and I coughed. The very city itself made me feel like crap.

Then I spotted Lacunae. The purple alicorn stood by as silent as a statue. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I raced to her. She glanced at me, then stared straight ahead again. "Lacunae?" There was another purple alicorn standing by, staring. And another. And another and another. I looked at Scotch standing quietly by, waiting. There was a lump of black rubble beside Lacunae; I stood on it and I stretched up to touch my horn to hers.

I felt the world blur away... except for that annoying hum. I felt the same vast space that had been here before, but, instead of a seething mass of whispering voices dominated by the Goddess, now there was only the same hum. It was everywhere. Inside everything. In the alicorns themselves. "Lacunae?" I asked... and the word was a discordant jumble echoing and ripping through that single note. "Lacunae!" I shouted into the humming darkness.

Then, soft as a lover, the darkness whispered back, "There is no Lacunae. There never was."

I staggered back and fell off the lump of stone and onto my rump. Scotch was walking away, and I hurried to catch up. My eyes turned to every single still alicorn; I was surprised to see a few males, but I supposed that Sanguine had made them with Chimera. There was no life in any of them. They were simply living machinery now.

We passed under a severed purple dragon head hanging from chains. Spikes had been driven into his eyes... I didn't appreciate the irony. Beneath it was written in harsh words that hateful slogan. "Goldenblood is the Overlord, isn't he?" I asked, pressing my lips together. It all made sense. He'd know about Spike. He'd known about Hoofington. He had secrets; he'd probably found some way to survive, and now he was in charge of this nightmare. It'd probably been his plan all along.

It looked like I was about to find out... except...

I puked a deluge of foamy water; I guess it was the only thing I had in me. Suddenly, I was feeling... wrong. Really wrong. But it didn't matter. I was almost to the Overlord. We were in the great

plaza where the ministry buildings rose like headstones. The plaza had been torn up by the balefire blast, and horrid green light shot up through holes in the paving slabs. Every building... every person, pony or otherwise... they all hummed that single uniform note.

I wanted to sing. I wanted to scream. I wanted to do something... anything... to break up that monotonous note. But I couldn't... my chest flared as I moved slowly forward through the crowd. There was a sort of throne there. Good. That'd make shooting this Overlord much easier. There were mares up there, all of them pregnant. I spotted Scotch on the left side of the throne. I saw a young zebra mare on the right. And in the middle...

"Hello, Blackjack," P-21 welcomed me, the crowd falling back as my blue friend stared down with undisguised malice. With my PipBuck on one foreleg and Folly cradled in the other, his gaze blazed brightly. "Welcome to the future," he said coldly as he loaded a silver bullet into the breech and clapped it closed. I couldn't shoot. Of all the ponies ever, he had the right to shoot me. I just sat there, my chest burning as I was pierced by his hatred. "Goodbye." Then he raised the gun, and everything went brilliant white. The scream went on... and on... and my world faded to black.

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"Is she alive?" Scotch Tape asked shrilly.

No. I wasn't alive. Life wasn't this. This was another nightmare. My lungs throbbed like they were on fire as they sucked in watery air, spasmed, and coughed again. My stomach clenched as it tried to void itself yet again but had nothing to bring up. I felt hooves holding me down as I jerked and coughed and gasped yet again.

Life wasn't black like this.

"Sweet Goddesses, her eyes," I heard a mare say... Oilcan, I think.

"Give her a Hydra. Give her one right now," Glory demanded. I remembered how, weeks ago, she'd gone on and on about how horrible Hydra was. How damaging to my systems it was. But there was something different now. Something had changed. With this last firing of Folly, I felt as if something... something vital had been touched. Something integral had been corrupted. And as the Hydra helped soothe the searing pain in my face... the blackness endured. Glory started to sob. "Give her another. Please..." I felt her wing on my wet cheek.

"It... won't do anything..." Oilcan protested weakly. From the faint swoosh of the water talisman and the rocking, I guessed we were on the *Seahorse*.

"Give her another Goddesses-damned Hydra!" Glory screamed at her. She collapsed over me, weeping as I gasped for air, holding me tight. I lifted a hoof... no... it didn't feel like a hoof. I didn't know what that appendage was, but everything about it moved... wrong. Other voices started to raise their concerns as my condition changed from 'dead' to 'not dead'.

Lacunae had shown me. I'd stared into the mirror. I'd seen what I was becoming. A thing. A thing that used to be a pony. And as I lay there with all the panicked chatter, I heard the soft whisper of Lacunae in my mind now. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I thought softly back at her. Then I cleared my throat. "Stop... no more... please... no

more.”

Glory held me even tighter as she shook, and hot liquid trickled down my cheek as she cried for me. “Blackjack...”

“What happened to the *Celestia*? To the Rangers?”

“Who gives a fuck what happened to them?” P-21 snarled. “They’re dead, or they should be! Every last one of them!” I winced at the anger in his voice, trembling and tight.

“I give a fuck, P-21,” I said as evenly as possible.

“The ship blew up and rolled over,” Lacunae said softly. “Capri and Pisces were in the water. They looked all over for you. The Rangers had to fall back to the *Applejack*. Reapers had finally breached the base, and everything was blowing up. I don’t know who else survived.” Was it me, or was there additional worry in that soft mental voice?

“Where’s Rampage?” I asked as I strained my ears.

P-21 said, in a slightly less furious voice, “She chained herself to the front of the boat. She says not to let us let her get within twenty feet of you...” Oh, yes, I imagined that the murderess in her was just aching to give me peace.

“And Capri and Pisces are okay?” I asked, then coughed hard again. I still felt like I had water filling my lungs. Ugh... drowning sucked. I gagged and choked and fought for every breath.

“P-21 got us out while you were getting shot at,” came the slightly distant voice of Capri. “We just did what any seapony should do...” she said softly.

“Shoo be doo...” Pisces echoed quietly.

“But how’d they catch you in the first place?” Scotch asked.

“We came down to get some sort of navigation thingy for the Orions. But this time, there were Rangers salvaging shells off the *Luna*. They had spearguns with tethers, and I got harpooned.”

“I got caught trying to save her,” Pisces murmured.

“They said that we were spying for the Reapers, and that Steel Rain bastard said that we were enemies of the Rangers. They were going to shell the Collegiate next. Said they were going to use a balefire shell.” A what?! What, had everypony discovered megaspells and balefire bombs and shoved them into everything they could? What was next, balefire artillery? Balefire tanks? Your own personal balefire gun? Balefire armor? Balefire snack cakes?! “You... you saved us all. The professor... my family... all of us,” Capri said amid the splashing.

“Thanks,” Pisces sniffed.

I lay there in Glory’s hooves. “Consider it payment for Gemini and Taurus.” From the waves came a sad snuffle, then a splash.

Tarboots cleared his throat. “Steel Rain must have been planning a coup like that for months.

He couldn't have used the gun with the elder still in charge. You just forced everything out into the open. I'm pretty sure the Hoofington Rangers are finished now. They don't have a base to fall back to, and will probably have to pull back to Trottingham or Manehattan."

I sighed at the stupidity and waste. I'd seen what the Rangers could accomplish at their very best. A hoofful could save the lives of dozens if they were inclined to do so. And some were. I was glad I'd met Paladin Stronghoof, Fruit Salad, and Crumpets. That I'd seen the decency before the callousness and cruelty. I'd wanted to end the war, though, and it looked like I'd succeeded.

Yay...

"What about the Reapers?" I rasped. I imagined I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth that I'd even ask about them.

"I don't know. Some of them were shooting up the base. After the gun fired, though, I think... I think they're pulling back. I don't know," Oilcan murmured. There was a long silence. A terrible silence.

Finally, Scotch asked, "What are we going to do now?"

Glory gave a little gasp. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to take Blackjack to Sanguine and give him that frigging PipBuck, and he's going to fix her! That's what we're going to do!"

I wanted to protest, but the water still in my lungs turned my objection into a spasm of coughing and hacking. I struggled to tell her not to do it. "No..." I managed to get out. I'd seen what would come of that. Maybe it was a nightmare. Maybe it was something more. I couldn't let her.

"Yes, Blackjack! We are going to make you better! We're going to fix you! And you are not going to argue with me on that!" Glory insisted as I started to thrash about, struggling. I coughed harder and harder. "Relax, Blackjack. It's the right thing to do!"

I'd wished that I'd been left down there. I wished that they hadn't found me. If I were dead, my friends would move on and not accept Sanguine's damned offer. But worse, I was sure that there was damage done to me that he couldn't fix. He might replace my organs, but the taint inside me would just corrupt the new ones too. Something inside me had changed, and this wasn't a solution.

I felt something against my horn... something smooth and round. No, not right now... but I wasn't exactly with it as I coughed and struggled. Once, I'd fallen into memory orbs by accident. Then I'd had to fight my way in. Now I fought to stay out, but some treasonous part of me made contact as I heard Glory and P-21 begin to argue... Don't do it, Glory... please... just let me go...

oooOOOooo

Once more, I was in a memory orb that I didn't particularly want to be in. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't worth it. But unlike those other times, I was simply too tired to even try and attempt the impossible task of breaking myself free prematurely. I simply sat back in the mind of some other pony and took a little solace at being able to see again, even if it was through somepony else's eyes.

At least it was somepony familiar. I knew this buck well now. His stride. His horn. He felt older, though. Tired and a bit sore. He walked through the halls of Blueblood Manor with a slow and ponderous step. Downstairs were the worried shouts of dozens of concerned ponies. He stood in front of the mirror.

There were touches of gray in his emerald mane and shadows around his eyes. Distantly, I could hear the soft wail of the Hoofington air raid siren. He pulled his dress uniform into place, sucking in his gut before letting the belt out a notch. Finally, he nodded with a sigh.

As he walked back out and slowly down the hallway, the door opened and a young pegasus mare in a white uniform peeked out at him with worried blue eyes. "Master Vanity, everything is going to be all right, isn't it?"

He smiled softly at her. "Of course, Harpica." His eyes looked past her at the foals sitting together in a nervous circle. "How are the children?"

"Frightened, Master Vanity. Terribly so," she said in a meek little voice. "As am I. I'm telling them all about Wigglehoof and the Wandering Wolves. They worry about the shouting, though."

"A fine story, Harpica. Keep them quiet. Stay inside," he said softly, then stepped closer to the door and addressed the fillies and colts. "I expect all of you to be on your absolute best behavior. Listen to Harpica, little ones. She will keep you safe." He beamed a smile at them and received several nervous smiles in return.

"Y... yes Lord Vanity," they replied, nodding obediently.

"Keep them safe, Harpica," he said, giving her a little nuzzle between the eyes.

She sniffed and nodded. "You are better than your name, Master Vanity."

Step by step, he made his way down the stairs. The entrances had sandbags and ponies with machineguns in place. From outside, over the wail of the siren, rose the roar of an angry mob. They were screaming to be let in, their shouting filled with frequent insults. Walking away from the entrance, he trotted further in. The shouts dwindled to nothing, and the air raid siren was barely audible over the sound of the orchestra playing. The ballroom was filled with fancy ponies gathered in knots and groups and talking together in low tones. The fear was evident in all their faces.

A dapper buck with a snowy mane trotted out into the hall. "I say, that mob outside is getting quite unruly. Shouldn't we be evacuating to the stable?" A blue unicorn mare who looked like she was barely a quarter his age moved up beside him. "The Skyguard ordered us to land before we could reach Canterlot. My little Rosette here is quite terrified." He sighed, levitating a monocle as he looked down the hall at the barricade. "I fear that everything has gone quite wrong."

Vanity sighed softly. "I'm sorry, Fancy Pants. I'm going to look into that right now." He gave a polite nod to the pair and continued down the hall. Soldiers hauling boxes of ammo galloped by.

He trotted into a study. "What do you mean you're not coming?! We've given you a fortune for this very occurrence!" Blueblood yelled at the terminal on his desk. Like his younger sibling, his mane was shot through with gray. "You can't do this! I demand to speak to the director immediately, Garnet!" On the screen – a color terminal? I guess it made sense for someone as rich and stuck up as Blueblood to have something like that – was a ruby red mare who wore a decidedly smug smile.

"The director is otherwise occupied, Prince Blueblood. As am I," the mare said with a snort and an annoyed look that slowly turned malicious. "Save your own ass, Blueblood."

"You dare--"

Her laugh cut him short. "Of course I dare. I've wanted to see this look on your face for years, and now I finally have a chance. By the way, did you like the memo I sent the locals? Have they broken down your door yet?" The crimson mare's lips curled gleefully. "I hope they all live long enough to string you up." Blueblood stared at her in stunned silence.

Her dark eyes turned to Vanity, and her sneer faded. "Prince Vanity."

"*Lord* Vanity!" Blueblood snapped. "I am the prince of this family."

Both ignored the seething stallion. "Garnet. Am I correct in understanding that you will not be evacuating us to the Redoubt?"

"That is correct, Prince Vanity. The director apologizes, but he is seeing to other needs of the kingdom."

"You understand that there are children here?" He didn't shout; he kept his voice even, low, and calm.

She smiled again. "Certainly, but this is a crisis. We can't save--"

"There is enough room for thousands, Garnet," he interrupted, his voice hardening as he stared at the screen. "Are you saying you are leaving children here to die? We can send them to you."

A black earth pony mare ran up behind Garnet. "We have to go! Now!" she said, then darted away.

Garnet sighed, waving a glittering red hoof. "Coming, Onyx." Then she frowned and then looked back at Vanity. "We're sealing the Redoubt. I'm sorry. Don't come here, Vanity. Go die somewhere else." Then she reached forward, and the terminal went dark.

"This is outrageous! I must contact Auntie Celestia at once! She'll set this right!" Blueblood stammered as he started to hit keys with his magic. But there was a green flash, and the elder prince was knocked away from the terminal. His round eyes looked up in astonishment. "Vanity? What are you doing? We must..."

"You must go do whatever you must. As must I." He began hitting keys on the terminal.

A purple and blue icon of three gemstones appeared on the screen, and the terminal began to speak in a familiar voice. "So terribly sorry, darlings, but I'm out of my office at the moment. Leave your message, and I promise to get back to you as soon as I can."

Blueblood stared in shock as Vanity took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Rarity. It's Vanity. I'd hoped to speak to you before now. Tell you what I wanted to say. It appears that our time is up, though. We've been betrayed... all of us. If you get this message... I've gone to Elysium. If you can meet me there, then I'll tell you what I should have years ago." The screen flashed and went blue, and a message appeared at the bottom: '>Connection interrupted.'

With a sigh, Vanity rose to his hooves. Blueblood stared in shock. "You... you and my Rarity?"

You betrayed me?"

Vanity looked down at his older sibling. "She was never yours, Blueblood. She was never anypony's. She was far too precious for that." Then he looked at the door. "Now, I suppose I must give some bad news," he said with a soft sigh. Without another look back, he walked out the door and towards the ballroom. The musicians played and the aristoponies in their fancy, expensive outfits chatted as if this was simply another party and not the ending of the world.

Vanity walked through the crowd and stepped up onto the platform upon which the quartet was playing. I recognized one of them: a gray pony with an elegant charcoal mane and a familiar instrument. Sadly, though, Vanity looked away from Octavia to the crowd below him. I was glad she got to play somewhere again before she returned to Flankfurt to die.

Dozens of concerned faces stared up at him. "Fillies and gentlecolts," he began slowly. "Five years ago I, my brother, and my nephew came to you with a plan to establish a sanctuary for the elite of the country. Let the bureaucrats scamper away to Stable One; we would have a shelter of our own design and comfort. A place where the Princesses and the aristocracy could retire and live until it was safe to return and rebuild Equestria. You gave generously. Some of you even had the privilege of seeing plans of what we were creating. The majesty and grandeur befitting Celestia and Luna."

He paused for a long moment, then said evenly, "We are betrayed."

Murmurs broke out, cries and shouts. Vanity simply stood there before them, looking out calmly as he surveyed the crowd. That calm demeanor seemed to spread through the assembled aristoponies; they quickly composed themselves, far more quickly than I might have guessed they would. "The Redoubt is sealed, and those who have taken shelter in it have set this mob upon us for petty revenge. And while we may defend this place for a time, eventually, this manor will fall. There are simply too many ways in. Therefore, I propose that you utilize Fancy Pants's airship to relocate to the Elysium Resort. It is both defensible and well provisioned. Perhaps there, you will be able to weather what is to come."

The old buck stepped forward. "I'd be more than happy to, old boy. But... I noticed that you didn't say 'we'."

Vanity pressed his lips together for a moment before sighing softly. "I will remain here. Somepony must pay for this failure. I accept responsibility."

Fancy Pants's monocle popped from his eye, and he chuckled. "I say, but that's the most rubbish I've heard in ages. And I've listened to your brother," he said as he shook his head. "Somepony is going to have to lead us and get us situated, and you seem to have a good horn on your head. Now, if whoever double crossed us would like to step forward... well... I would happily leave them here to rot. But you? You've only ever wanted what's best for Equestria."

Vanity's mouth worked, but then there was a scream from the kitchens as the work staff raced into the ballroom, a group of shouting, rampaging ponies following on their heels. "Find the stable!" some bellowed. "String up the nobles!" roared others. A cluster charged the stage, wielding knives, improvised clubs, and the occasional firearm.

Vanity's magic reached out to seize the nearest, largest object he could find: Octavia's contrabass. The green light surrounded it as it slammed into the charging four like an immense club; the heavy instrument sent them all falling away, and for an instant the invaders' momentum was broken as

the huge bass rammed horizontally into the group. One last mighty swing knocked another outshoot away from the aristoponies fleeing the room. From the screams and shouts and crashing glass and gunfire, though, bedlam had erupted in every corner of the mansion. Some of the invaders turned their guns to the stage, but the contrabass rose, the bullets pinging off the wood.

The white unicorn blinked and then looked at the stunned musician. "Quite a sturdy instrument." He levitated two dropped revolvers from the floor and began to carry out careful and deliberate headshots; faced with such opposition, most of the attackers retreated back to the kitchen. He paused a moment to float the contrabass back to Octavia, who hugged it tightly. "Do you have anywhere safe to go?" he asked as Fancy Pants and his filly walked to the door, the elderly unicorn lifting a dropped sledgehammer.

"Does anypony?" she said softly as she looked up at him with dark, sad eyes. Then the chaos flooded back into the ballroom and she was lost; Vanity turned away and raced to join Fancy Pants. The guards were still trying to fend off the surging masses, but the battle had turned as they were overwhelmed and their weapons seized. As the aristoponies raced about, there was an immense crash and explosion that shook the immense manor; the screams built as the chaos spread even further.

Fancy Pants and Vanity reached the upstairs hall where a line of sandbags and furniture still formed a barricade. "Get over! Get over quickly!" Vanity shouted at the panicked servants and aristoponies scrambling for their lives. A few he lifted up and over with his magic as a wave of raging ponies raced up the stairs. Vanity and the few guards left held with bursts of fire from small machine guns for a minute. Then one of the guards ran. Then the other two.

And still they came on. They tore at the barricade, their bullets shattering the elaborate mirrored walls and gouging holes in the fancy furniture as they chopped at the obstruction and tore at it with their hooves. Perhaps it was his control and poise or simply that their fire was wild and undisciplined, but, even as bullets skipped around him, not one found Vanity's hide as he kept his place.

Then he looked over as the door to the nursery opened and a terrified blue eye peeked out. Their gaze met for one second, and then he looked at the mob. "You will not pass!" he yelled as his magic reached out for every dropped firearm and wrapped it in his green glow. At once, every single weapon around him levitated into the air and pointed at the head of the stairs and the stunned faces of the mob who realized too late their folly. Then the guns roared in unison as a stream of bullets and gunfire tore the attackers to pieces. More were coming, though, and, one after another, the floating guns clicked on empty chambers. Bloodied, maddened, they came yet again! Vanity lifted a broken chair leg to meet them as they rushed the barricade.

Then a glowing sword swept through the throat of one of the attackers as Blueblood calmly trotted forward to stand beside him. "Touch my collection, will you? Trample your mud all over my home, you filthy peasants! Get my coat all dirty?!"

Vanity smiled. "You've been working on your swordplay, Brother!" And, side by side, they bashed and sliced the attackers till finally the assault crawled away back down the stairs. Vanity let the chair leg drop as he panted. "Now... let us get the children to the airship—"

A sharp pain tore through his belly as a foot of steel buried itself in his gut. Vanity fell to his side, hooves hugging the wound as he stared up at the bloody sword floating beside his sibling. "You should have kept your hooves off her, Brother. Rarity was supposed to be *mine*. She was supposed to marry

me.” He swung the blade and wiped off the blood as he trotted back down the hall.

Slowly, Vanity pulled himself to his hooves. He magically removed the uniform and pressed it to his injury as he looked at the terrified eye peeking through the nursery door. Slowly, he smiled. “Keep them safe, Harpica.”

“Master Vanity, you’re hurt...”

He took a deep breath, his guts on fire, and lifted his head high. “This? ‘Tis only a scratch,” he said as blood trickled down his back legs. “Now, keep the children silent and safe, Harpica. They’re counting on you. Leave when you think it’s safe to go.”

“But...”

He raised his hoof to her lips. “Any pain... any injury... any indignity... is a small price paid in the defense of an innocent. Remember that,” he said with that shaky smile. He nuzzled her gently between the eyes again. “Now, close the door and don’t worry about me. I think I’ll retire to my room. I have a very sternly worded letter I need to write.” He kept the smile, standing there patiently with that calm expression before she finally closed the door once more. His head drooped as he grimaced in pain and trotted back to his room. He tossed the rumpled bloody uniform into the trash as he finally took a seat at the writing desk.

The sounds of shooting were dying down now. Through the window, I thought I saw some kind of boat thing suspended from a gasbag making its way east. It was already starting to snow as he drew out a piece of stationery and began to carefully write, the blood from his injury soaking slowly into the seat of the chair.

“I doubt you’ll ever get this, Rarity,” he said softly as he folded the letter and took out a small empty orb. “I don’t know if anypony will ever see this memory, but it is something that needs to be said,” he drew a slow breath as he started to shake, his body growing chill. “I am to die. Let me say that. Let me begin with that. Then let me say that, had things been different we could have been the greatest of lovers. If you were not a Ministry Mare and I not a prince, we could have had a better life. A life that you deserved. I know the mistakes you made... your many regrets... and I will take them all with me into the hereafter.”

He groaned at the throbbing buried deep in his gut. “For any other who sees this, I pray that you will forgive a fool. I joined the project with the best of intentions... to save lives. So much money... so much material... and now what does it all matter? I am dying... my brother is mad... Rarity... sweet Rarity... I did it to protect others against the inevitable. My nephew once said... it seemed to him that the only way to save Equestria was to destroy it. I thought he was joking... in one of his moods. He so loved this country. Loved more than any other, I fear. Now all is undone. And damn me... I helped him.”

“The Redoubt... I don’t know what will become of it now. Perhaps Garnet and the rest of the O.I.A. cower in there still?” He shuddered and closed his eyes. “I am sorry. I wish I could tell you more. Miramare. My old locker. Regret... I am sorry.” He opened his eyes to look at the glossy surface of his desk, at the tears that streaked his cheeks. “Goodbye, Rarity. I pray we meet again... in better... lives...”

The world swirled away, returning to darkness.

oooOOOooo

I heard the faint swoosh of the *Seahorse's* talisman and the tap of the rain on the roof. Smelled the acrid sweet stench of the bilge and felt the cot around me. My legs felt... like something other than legs. The muscles moved all wrong as I shifted in the bunk. But that was nothing compared to my heart. My lungs didn't feel like they worked right anymore, either. I wondered if I was turning into some sort of sea creature. Some blind thing that crawled in deep dark places not fit for ponykind.

My PipBuck was gone.

"Glory..." I rasped, my voice throaty and raw. I felt sick, and coughed and hacked as I turned my head about, as if just twisting my neck might magically regenerate my eyes. Then I overbalanced and flopped down onto to the *Seahorse's* wooden deck. "Glory!" I rasped again, my chest clenching in pain as if I were trying to expel my own lungs.

Then I heard a terrified little sob, a filly's sob. She sniffed a snotty nose. "She's... she's outside, Blackjack."

"I need her. I need to talk to her," I said as I turned towards the sound of Scotch's voice and extended a limb towards her. I felt a leg under my... and I heard her scream a little and jerk away. I shivered as I pulled back. She gasped and sobbed as she shuffled away from me. I simply lay there before saying quietly, "I'm sorry, Scotch. I'm not a monster. I'm not... even if I look like one."

She sniffed again. "I'll... I'll go get her." She trotted for the exit, her clopping hooves receding into the distance. I dragged my body after her. I didn't get very far before more hooves trotted back towards me.

"You're out? Don't worry..." Glory said from nearby, "We'll get you another orb and..."

I then wrapped my legs around hers. "Stop... I'm going to die."

"No!" she snapped. "No! We are not talking about this. We're going to Sanguine and getting you fixed!" She tried to pull away, but I simply held her as she started to shake.

"Glory. I'm going to die," I repeated, and I was amazed at how calm I felt. It wasn't that I wanted to die. There were so many things I wanted to do that I'd never get to do... but that was the way of things. You got your life until you didn't any more.

"Don't say that, Blackjack. Don't..." Hot tears falling on my cheeks. I smiled as I nuzzled her chest... her strong heart. So very strong.

"Let me say it... because it's true, Glory." I took another burning breath. "I don't want to, but I am... and I'm not going to give Sanguine the most dangerous piece of technology in the Wasteland just to save my own life." She shook her head as she sniffed. "And I know how damn much this hurts, Glory. I know because if it were you... I'd move heaven and earth to find some way to stay with you. And I know that you... you would tell me not to. And it'd hurt like hell... but if you asked me to... I wouldn't do it. So I'm asking you: don't trade saving me for EC-1101. I'm not worth the harm he'll do."

Maybe it had been a nightmare... or maybe something else... but I remembered a row of purple eyes weeping along a gray neck.

"I can't... I can't just do nothing. I can't..." she whispered in my ear. "I love you too much... I wanted to do... to do so much with you." She sniffed as she shook. "Don't tell me to do nothing and watch you die."

"Well, you could just dump me in the river. One more piece of junk in the water; who'd notice?" I said with a little smile.

She gave a curious little hiccup before muttering, "You're unbelievable, you know that?" She kissed softly right beneath my horn. "I won't just... give up. You never gave up on me... on any of us. You always came for us. Please... let us try and find some way... any way... to take care of you."

"All right," I replied softly, making that concession. "No Sanguine, though..."

She sighed as she carefully lifted me onto her back and then into a cot. "No Sanguine," she replied as she laid me on my side. "I'm sorry Scotch was..."

"I guess I look pretty bad. Did I at least regenerate my cutie mark?" I asked as I smiled again. "I mean, losing eyes is like... whatever... but having my flank shot off? Horrors!" She made another hiccupping laugh and sniffed.

"Yes... but your eye..." she said softly as she nuzzled my cheek.

"Hey. The only thing that sucks about not having eyes is that I can't see you," I said as I nuzzled her back. And that I couldn't see my enemies. And that I couldn't shoot anything. And that I felt the panic slowly chewing up my brain. I fought to keep it away, because if I fell apart right now, I might as well pass EC-1101 to Sanguine myself. If a cheesy line kept us both together... well... she made another of those hiccupping, laughing sobs.

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard, but really, I can't believe that's the only detriment to being blind. After all, you can't..." and since my hooves were limp noodles, I shut her up with a kiss instead. To be fair, it was a very nice kiss. Finally, though, she pulled her mouth away. "We're going to find some way to help you." She had to say that. Just like not thinking about what had happened to me was holding me together, the thought of saving me kept her together. I couldn't deny her that.

"Just no Sanguine," I repeated. She sighed, then nodded against me, and I smiled. "And bring my PipBuck back. I feel naked without it."

"Uhhh, Blackjack, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but we don't normally wear clothes."

I nuzzled her cheek as I said, "You might not normally wear clothes, but I've gotten shot enough to consider barding clothes." Was she always so soft and sweet? Yes, yes she was.

"Okay. I need it just a bit longer. Then I'll bring it back," she swore before finally pulling away.

I sighed as I lay back in the bunk and I listened to her light hoofsteps recede out of the wooden hold. Then my ears twitched as she said, "She doesn't want us to go to Sanguine." Given that I couldn't peek in on their conversation, I could at least eavesdrop.

"Well, duh. 'Cause she's an idiot," P-21 retorted. "He's our best and only bet for saving her life. You saw her legs. You said yourself that it's only a matter of days before gangrene sets in."

"Her blood circulation's getting pinched off in her extremities. I don't know if that's from the taint or the cancer, but after firing that last silver bullet..." Glory grunted softly. "Why did she have to do that?"

"Because it was the only way she could win," Rampage answered. Apparently she'd felt with it enough to let herself be unchained and join in the conversation... I was glad. She didn't deserve to be treated like a monster, even if she thought she was one herself. No pony did.

After a long silence approaching the realm of awkward, Glory sighed. "Well, between the cancer, the... growths... and the brand new case of infection... we don't have much time. We're losing her."

Somepony stomped their hoof in irritation as P-21 said, "Then we go to Sanguine and Blackjack can just suck it up." A long pause, silence broken only by the rain drumming overhead. "Glory, you said it yourself. There's no other way. Unless you're reconsidering the pods again."

"It might stop the progression of the cancer, but it would not prevent the taint from contaminating other aspects of her mind... and soul," Lacunae said quietly.

"Who cares about that? We're talking about her life, Lacunae!" P-21 protested.

"There are worse things than dying, P-21. All of you know that better than anypony," Lacunae replied calmly, a voice of compassion and kindness. The voice of a real Goddess. I pitied Unity for not appreciating what it had created. "You might save her flesh, and that would be a worthy cause, but what about the cost of the guilt and shame she would feel? Would you see her suicidal again? And what of the magical contamination to her soul?"

"Soul..." P-21 muttered in disgust.

"Souls exist," Lacunae said in a firm, inarguable tone. "Your soul is nothing less than your quintessential self... the pure you. To change that is to fundamentally alter your complete being. The corruption inside Blackjack isn't simply biological... it is magical, and that magic is changing her soul into something different from a pony."

"So you want us to just let her die?" Scotch squeaked.

"You should accept the certainty that eventually she will die. Even if she were turned into a ghou or alicorn, nothing lasts forever. We are born, we live, we wear out, and we expire. Our souls move into the everafter, to be reborn or to find another life. That is the natural order of things. When that order is violated, a mistake is created that must inevitably be undone at great cost and sacrifice. That is what makes life precious. Life persisting simply because it is alive is a fool's game bereft of meaning. Souls matter infinitely more." Lacunae said in a gentle, if somewhat lecturing tone.

"Damn it, I don't want her to die," P-21 sputtered.

"Of course not. You love her," Lacunae said simply.

What? Oh, now wasn't this an awkward silence!

"Don't you talk to me like you know me. Don't you act like you know what I feel, you freak!" P-21 shouted.

"You love her or you wouldn't care if she lives or dies. Don't treat it like an insult," Lacunae

replied.

"I love Priest," he said firmly.

"You like Priest because he makes you feel safe and wanted," Lacunae countered. I winced at that; blunt much, Lacunae? "You love Blackjack. Perhaps in a brotherly way. Perhaps in other ways. Regardless, you love her. And that scares you. Or shames you. I'm not sure which."

P-21 hissed sharply through his teeth. "Blackjack killed the pony I loved. She beat him to death in front of me! Did you know that? Did any of you?" A horrible silence descended as he panted. "She handed me... and countless other bucks... back to medical, to be raped again and again. Do you know how often she stopped it? How often any of them stopped it? Never. It never happened. Not Blackjack. Not Gin Rummy. Not even Duct Tape."

I lay there in that eternal black as he panted, then said in a slower, low voice, "I thought... once we were out here... somehow... she'd change that. Blackjack can do anything. And she would have. But every buck in there was resigned to the life they knew. Every mare was just waiting for the freaky outsiders to go so they could stop thinking about it and go back to the way things were. Not one of them had the vision or the decency to admit how fucked up it was. No one but Blackjack.

"I don't love her. I can't love her. Because every time I think about her, I think about how she wronged all of us and I don't know how to forgive that. I don't think I'm capable of forgetting it. But I can't hate her, either. I can't leave her. So I follow her around as she rips herself apart for ponies who are no better than meat, wondering what the hell all of it is for!"

He broke into harsh breathing once again, and for the longest time there was just silence. Then Scotch said softly, "I'm sorry, P-21. I am. I'm sorry I never did anything to help you. I once got in trouble for saying it was wrong to hurt you just because you're boys. I said it was stupid. I got whipped. Mom did too. And we never said it again."

His voice relaxed a little. "You don't know what you're apologizing for, Scotch. I hope you never do. And neither does Blackjack. So don't tell me I love her. I just want to help her so she can keep helping others. Because I can't..."

I sighed, shaking my head as the rain drummed on and the boat rocked on the water. Tarboots coughed, then said, "Not that all this stable pony drama isn't fascinating, but the captain's been unconscious for at least a day. She'll need some unicorn able to snap her out of it soon."

The arguing continued, but it all became fuzzier as I rolled onto my side, coughing hard and feeling knotted muscles struggling and throbbing. My legs hurt like damn and I wasn't even on them any more. Every breath was a struggle, and I sighed. Maybe I'd die in a little bit and spare them all the trouble. That'd be the sensible thing, right?

~ ~ ~

Snow swirled around my black boots as I moved through the drifts towards a massive concrete building... the Fluttershy Medical Center. The light of the city shields painted everything for miles in a baleful green glow that illuminated the still heaps of snow. Thick gray clouds swirled overhead as I moved like a black ghost through the woods and past abandoned wagons towards the distant lights that seemed to beckon ponies for miles. Dozens of wagons lay in the parking lot along with tents staffed with

doctors in yellow hazmat suits who hosed the radioactive snow off the ponies as they straggled in.

I approached the emergency room doors, and a dozen soldiers at once raced to attention, a few pointing their weapons at me. "Hold! Identify..." one with sergeant's bars on his uniform began. Without a word, I levitated out my badge and flipped it open, and immediately they lowered their guns. "Our apologies, special agent." They stepped aside as I walked in.

Inside the hospital were dozens, perhaps hundreds of scared and sickly ponies being cared for by exhausted yet still dedicated doctors. One approached me with nervousness. "Healing? Food? Radiation flush?" he asked. In my E.F.S.-enhanced vision I could see the bright red radiation sickness warning.

"No. Yes. Yes," I replied, my voice thick and muffled by the respirator. He directed me over to a spare IV stand draped with pouches of high strength RadAway. I pulled off the rebreather and began to drink, watching the rads fall away.

"It's good to see anyone from the government here. Everypony's been scared to death since the shield went up. Most of them are trying to hoof it to Manehattan; they heard it was still intact." There was a questioning tone to his voice as he sought some sort of confirmation. I said nothing. I ate a bar of emergency rations and drank the medicine. "What about Fillydelphia?" I didn't answer again, and he seemed to get the hint.

"What are you doing in here with those?" demanded a pink doctor as she scowled and pointed her hoof at my armament. I finished drinking the medicine, then calmly took some of the still full RadAway pouches, levitating them into my saddlebags despite the doctors' outrage. The pink mare's eyes went wide. "How dare you! Get out this..."

The spell was simple. She went completely silent. The next spell was equally simple as her foreleg was twisted two hundred and seventy degrees. She fell to the ground, her mouth opened in a silent scream. The nurse backed away but froze when I looked at him. Finally, I pressed my hoof to the doctor's throat and cancelled the spell as broken bits of bone protruded from her limb.

I looked down at her, then said softly, "My business here doesn't involve you. Do not make my business here involve you." Then I turned to the nurse. "I need access to the generators immediately. I have intelligence regarding possible saboteurs." He just pointed to a door on the far side of the atrium, and I nodded once. "Thank you. Leave her. Let her learn some new realities," I said, and with that I left them both behind.

I slipped around the perimeter of the massive atrium full of scared ponies. The hospital had multiple redundant power sources, environmental isolation, and supplies to rival a stable for at least several years. Theoretically, it could have become one of the last bastions of civilization. I walked to a door, pulled out a small runed rod, and pressed it to the lock. A surge of magic and the door opened. Slipping it away, I made my way down into the basement and then the sub-basement.

The generators were huge affairs, bigger than commercial skywagons and running the entire length of the room. Beside them were massive cables connecting to the reinforced Hoofington power grid. A half dozen ponies nervously watched both, so it was understandable that they missed my entrance. The noise of the machinery made the silencer superfluous, and six shots later, I was the chamber's only occupant. From my black saddlebags I withdrew gray bricks of explosives, pressed the

remote detonator talismans to them, and placed them against the equipment.

I emerged back into the atrium, returning to where some guards, the nurse, and others were seeing to the doctor with the mangled limb. Two turned towards me, obvious anger and confusion on their faces. "What the hell do you..." one began.

"Zebra commandos have infiltrated the hospital. They've killed a half-dozen ponies already and placed explosives all over the place. You need to evacuate these people immediately." The guard's mouth moved silently. I continued smoothly, "Where is Fairheart?"

"He's on the fourteenth floor," he stammered in shock. "Near the hospital administrator's office." I turned away, and he called after me, "Wait! Where am I supposed to evacuate all these people to?" That was hardly my problem, and I trotted towards the elevators and magically activated one set of detonators. The resounding boom signaled the severance of the hospital from the power grid. Everything plunged into darkness. From my saddlebags came four grenades, and I sent them magically rolling away into the crowd. Seconds later, the explosions filled the atrium with screaming chaos. The lights flickered to life as the generators came back on. Smoothly, I left the screams behind as I started up the stairwell.

On the fourteenth floor, nurses were scurrying about. Foals were crying. Bedlam reigned. Somepony mentioned the weather monitoring station to the north. No matter. They made way for me in my black barding and coat. I said the magic letters 'O.I.A.' and got directed to where I needed to go. In the hospital room were two Steel Rangers, apparently ignoring their recall orders, the hospital head, and an elderly buck.

The white mare with the medic's cross was saying, "...backup generators are running and these floors have their own independent power generators if the building's fail..." she trailed off at the sight of my guns. "What are you doing with those here?"

I suppressed the urge to repeat my lesson. "Chief Justice Fairheart?" The sober maroon earth pony buck nodded once. "O.I.A. intelligence. We're scrambling to pull things together, sir. We believe that zebra infiltrators are attempting to assassinate you."

"Balefire bombs weren't enough?" he replied lightly. "I take it the Ministry Mares are dead then, if they're after me."

"Unknown, sir. Applejack may be alive, but we will likely never be able to extract her from Stable Two, her last tracked position. Rarity and Fluttershy were both reported in Canterlot, which is a complete loss. Twilight is still being tracked in Maripony. Rainbow Dash's tracking put her in Cloudsdale around the time of the first strike. Pinkie Pie died in Manehattan." I said matter-of-factly. "Horse's tracking was lost in the Hoof. We're still working to determine the status of the military heads."

"Likely not good. I would have died in Canterlot if it hadn't been for this damned heart surgery," he said as he touched his chest with a grimace.

"Do either of you have experience with explosives?" I asked as I looked at the pair of Steel Rangers. Of course they did. All Rangers did. "There are bombs placed on the building's generators. Careful, though; the zebras are likely still hidden." The pair looked at the chief justice, who nodded, and together they trotted out.

"I can't believe they would attack... why? What do they hope to gain? Hasn't there been enough

death?" Redheart said as she looked out the window.

"The zebras want our total and complete annihilation, Administrator," I replied. "You'd best see to the evacuation."

"Evacuation to where? There're so many... where are we supposed to go? And what about the ones who can't be moved?" Redheart fretted.

"Once the basement is secure, you can return. Right now, you have to get to safety," I said. Safety in the radioactive snow... how ironic. The administrator sighed, chewed her lip, and then slipped out as well.

"How did you learn of the zebra assassination attempt?" Fairheart asked, and then that question was answered by the sight of my silenced pistol. "So. It's a coup after all."

"The O.I.A. serves Luna and Equestria," I replied evenly. "We will not allow it to fall into the hooves of another. I'm sorry, Justice Fairheart."

"Just one question. Who's behind this? Horse? Goldenblood?" he asked. The only answer he received was a silenced bullet clean through the eye. I magically turned his head away, holstered my gun, and trotted out of the room.

Once outside the secure area, I tapped the talisman again. The explosions sounded deep below the building, and another place that could have been a bastion of hope and civility went dark. Using my light amplification goggles, I loaded up on more Rad-X, RadAway, healing potions, and rations from a storeroom. Then I made my way out. I passed by the maimed doctor and the terrified nurse. Their eyes reflected pain, fear, and confusion.

It didn't matter. One more was dead. That just left one other to take care of. Ignoring the yelling and screaming in that radioactive night, I walked back into the darkness. My mission still wasn't finished... not yet.

~ ~ ~

I woke from that doozy with a sigh. Crazy dreams or something else? Given my current state, I supposed I could flip a coin to find out for sure. Had I been asleep for hours? Minutes? I couldn't tell anymore. I never imagined that with the loss of my eyes I'd also lose my sense of time. I couldn't even look at my PipBuck to find out. Well, at least I had my PipBuck back again. Somepony had tied a cloth over my eyes. Better than looking at... well... whatever I had.

My friends were still arguing. No... not arguing. It looked like whatever the plan was, it'd come together. They just didn't like it.

"I can't go and leave her like this!" Glory protested.

"You have to. She's going to need your help. You know what she's giving up for this," Lacunae replied evenly. "Seabiscuit will carry the captain. Tarboots, Oilcan, and Scotch will watch the ship. The sooner you get there the sooner you get back.

"Meanwhile, I can teleport P-21 there and back and get the rest of it," Lacunae pointed out.

“And I will do everything I can to stomp everypony who wants to keep fighting into glue,” Rampage said. “Brutus called a ceasefire, but the Halfhearts are wiping out what’s left of the Flashers. BJ wouldn’t want us to get her her present but let everything fall apart here. So if somepony is shooting, they get rampaged.” So now she was a verb.

Lacunae gave a delicate cough.

“Except for Paladin Studmuffin, provided he’s still alive,” Rampage added.

“You really think you can stomp enough?” P-21 asked.

“Now that I got reason to? You bet,” Rampage said, then adopted a reflective tone. “You know, now that I think of it, I never really was very into the whole Reaper thing. But now that I’ve got something to fight for, I’m actually going to enjoy this. Plus, I’ll be able to sit on Psychoshy. Give her the whole mushroom treatment.”

“Mushroom treatment?” Glory frowned.

“You know... feed her lots of shit and keep her in the dark,” Rampage replied.

“That’s how you get mushrooms? That’s disgusting!” Glory retorted.

“Glory...” P-21 muttered.

“Right! Right. Who cares about mushrooms right now, right?” Glory sighed. “Let me go tell her...”

“Glory, there’s no time, and she’s sleeping. Let’s just get there and back again,” P-21 said impatiently. I wondered if that tapping hoof was his.

“Right... Okay. Please keep her safe,” Glory pleaded. “We’ll be as fast as we can.”

“We will. We’re tied up to the bridge, so short of it falling on us, we should be safe. You just be careful. It’s a long trot out there,” Oilcan said in a soothing tone.

I heard hooves trotting closer and sighed. “So, is there a plan B?” I asked, and there was a little filly gasp.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Scotch said softly.

“Nope. I’m talking in my sleep,” I replied, then smiled. “So... what’s the plan?”

“I... I’m not supposed to tell you.” I tried to move my legs and fold them under my chin, but they were too sore and swollen.

“Scotch...”

“Please. Glory and everypony made me promise not to tell.”

“Tell me...”

"They said... they said you wouldn't like it."

"Tell me."

"But Miss Glory..."

"Tell me tell me tell me!" I grinned, and wondered if I was making her smile or freaking her out.

"All right! She was talking for hours on your broadcaster thingy. She contacted the pegasi and the professor and that big hospital and even a bunch of ponies in some faraway place. I think... they were after some super healy talisman like they had in medical or something."

Another regeneration talisman? Put it in me, disintegrate me, and let me come back? It had... potential. Of course, knowing my luck, I'd be regenerated like this. Something inside me had been touched by the contamination, and now... now I didn't know what I was. I didn't feel like a pony. I didn't feel like anything that belonged in this world.

I sighed as I settled back. I'd told her she could try anything... I didn't like it, but I couldn't deny her that. I just hoped that, once I was dead, my friends could find some way to move on.

"Oilcan gave me a memory orb for you. It's one of the captain's. She said it's a good one," Scotch said from my side. I waited, then smiled.

"Scotch, if I can't see it, then I can't grab it with my magic. You're going to have to hold it to my horn." Then I hesitated. "Or am I really that scary?" Now she hesitated, giving me my answer. I bowed my head. "Sorry."

"It's your legs. They're all black and red and... clumpy." Scotch swallowed. "Glory said your blood's getting all goobered up in there... she said we're probably going to have to... to..." She swallowed again as her voice shook. "Sorry. I'm not supposed to say."

"Thanks, Scotch," I said softly as I stretched my horn towards her. "Well, Thrush's memories should be interesting... Just hold it to my horn."

"Okay..." but again she balked. "Blackjack, are we... bad ponies for what happened in 99?"

I wanted to reach out and touch her... but that'd probably just make things worse. "You're not, Scotch. You're just a filly. You're not responsible for what happened in 99. And neither was your momma. Duct Tape wanted a family. She wanted to end the breeding queue and have an actual life on the surface."

"Blackjack... is P-21..." she started, and I stretched out my hoof... please let that be a hoof... against her lips.

"Ask *him*, Scotch Tape," I said softly. I had enough trouble without eating those rotten food chips. She sighed and a moment later dropped the memory orb into my hooves.

"I did. He told me to drop it. But... he was Momma's favorite. I don't think she ever had another buck on her queue. And he was over a lot... more than any male." The Overmare's bribe, I recalled. "It was like that whole... family thing Momma was going on about." She sniffed a little. "I wish I knew for

sure. Maybe then I'd know why he hates me."

I could scream. She wanted to remember. She was unhappy. But if I told her, then P-21 would be pissed! But if I didn't, then she would be sad... Arrrgh! Was there any way out of this that didn't involve me fucking up? "I... let me talk to him. Okay?" Please please please let me die before that conversation came up!

"Just tell me, Blackjack. I'm not a baby!" she insisted.

Right. I already tried that! It ended in tears, recrimination, and loads of Blackjack guilt! "Let me talk to him. Please."

"Uggh. Why does everypony keep treating me like a little filly? I stopped being one when Momma died." She trotted away, muttering sullenly under her breath, "I wish ponies would stop trying to protect me all the time."

She had a right to know... P-21 had a right to keep his secrets... but it was making her sad... but it would make him mad... but...

Memory orb! Now! With luck, I'd wake to some horrible monster raping my ass or find out they went through with plan A after all. I rolled the orb up my hide till I tapped it against my horn and swirled away into memory.

oooOOOooo

Big earth pony... Red... Buck... Macintosh! I remembered his slow and careful walk, his restrained power and casual grace. He trotted through the Miramare Air Station with an easy smile and saw it respectfully returned from the ponies stationed there. He walked up to an open door and peeked in on half the Marauders clustered around a table. He might not have been... well... anything like me, really, but I really liked being in his memory. It felt comfortable.

"So, what do I roll to hit, again?" Applesnack asked as he frowned at all the funky shaped dice.

The yellow earth pony smiled and pointed at the piece of paper. "Since you're using a heavy gun built into your suit, it's your dee eight agility skill plus your dee twelve steam armor skill. But you have one penalty for the train rolling towards the zebra encampment, so you'd drop one of those one die sizes. Unless you want to spend a grit; then you'd negate the penalty--"

"There has got to be an easier way to kill zebras," the green buck groaned as he covered his face.

Twist grinned across the table at him. "Hey, you were the one who wanted to go after them. I was fine taking the bits, but noooo, Mr. Steam Ranger just has to go blowing them all up." Applesnack snorted as he frowned back at her.

Jetstream sighed from behind a folded piece of cardboard, shaking her head before looking up at Big Macintosh. "Looking nice, Sarge. What's the occasion? Got a date with your marefriend?"

"Ayup. Taking her to Billiards," he said with a nod.

"Nice. Didn't know you were a pool fan. Thought that was more a unicorn thing," Twist said with

a smile as she nudged a little pyramid-shaped die with her hoof. In front of her was a weird sheet of paper with a bunch of lines and boxes and numbers and things on it, including a drawing of a buffalo filly in one corner.

"Well, she likes most anything that takes her mind off work. Guessin' Twilight's got her tying her tail in knots out there in Splendid Valley." He looked towards the door. "So, if that's what makes her happy, then that's what I'll do." Simple as that.

"When you see her can you tell her to tell her boss to leave the magic with the M.A.S.? Last thing we need is more megaspells bringing our enemies back to life," Applesnack snorted. "I don't know what Fluttershy was thinking."

"She wants to save people, same as any decent pony should," Big Macintosh said around the grass stalk between his lips. Applesnack snorted again, bit some of the dice, and tossed them. They clattered across the table and came up '1's.

"Oooh, botch," Echo winced. "Roll your luck! Maybe you'll negate it!" The green buck made another roll. The whole table sucked in their breath sympathetically. "Oooo... critical botch..." Echo said as the green buck groaned.

"Great. Knowing my luck, my armor will turn sentient and crazy, or I'll end up stuck in this stupid can for the rest of my life. Or both." The green buck turned back to Big Macintosh. "Well, you go have fun. I need to find out if I explode or not," he said as he nudged the dice.

The creme-colored, buzz-cut mare chuckled. "Look at it this way. Maybe your gun will explode and kill you and then you'll come back as a Steam Ranger Revenant! Wouldn't that be cool?" Twist asked with a grin.

"Right. 'Cause that's just how anypony would want to spend the rest of his life: an undead pony trapped in a hunk of metal." He snorted as he glowered at the incomprehensible sheet of paper in front of him.

"Hurry up and roll, Snack. Let's find out what happens to Steelhooves. Then it's Smiling Jack's turn," Jetstream said with a nudge of her blue wing. Echo nodded as he flipped open one of the strange 'Wasteland' game books. The pegasus looked up at Big Macintosh as the earth pony began to turn the pages. "Enjoy your date, Sergeant." He nodded and walked away, followed by Applesnack's plaintive cry. Macintosh just chuckled as he headed out the exit.

A short subway ride later, he trotted towards the grand plaza surrounded by the six ministry buildings. Shadowbolt Tower loomed above all the rest, rising like a spire into the evening sky. As he approached the front doors, there was a bright purple flash ahead of him, the blue mare in a simple, practical blue dress appearing from it and looking only slightly disheveled. Maripony shook herself briskly, nudged her glasses back into place, then noticed Macintosh. At once, she smiled and ran to him. "Macintosh!" She held him close and nuzzled his neck. "Am I glad to see you! You wouldn't believe what a day I've had!" she groaned and covered her face with her hoof. "The entire ministry is crazy!"

He chuckled and put his leg around her shoulders, giving her a gentle and careful squeeze. "Well, at least it was nice of Twilight to teleport you all the way out here. Or was that your magic?"

Maripony blinked, flushed, and smiled. "Oh yeah. Twilight teleported me here. Told me to have

some fun. In fact," she murred, kissing him softly, "she insisted on it."

He flushed politely as he said, "Well, I got some decent fun in mind. You should like it. It involves lots of fancy mathematics." Then he paused. "If you're interested in the not so decent kind..." Now it was Maripony's turn to blush.

"...We can do that later," she stammered. Ugh... please let this not turn into another marathon sex orb! I couldn't take another one of those. Not that sex with Rarity hadn't been spectacular, but... damn... why was I thinking this? I took in how happy she looked to be with him. I wondered if that was how I looked with Glory.

The whole trip on the subway, Big Macintosh received a case-by-case analysis of just what was wrong with everypony in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Maripony complained about Luna's constant 'hooves off' approach to governing, leaving Twilight on her own to figure everything out. She complained about Fluttershy keeping her megaspell research secret until a disastrous 'field test' required a battle to be fought twice. She mentioned how Goldenblood should have kept her in the loop. And the meetings. A meeting to plan meetings! Endless talk about projects and programs and spells. "I thought I was going to be able to create new magic! I thought that I'd be a part of something greater. Instead, my whole day seems to be sitting in meetings so that everypony else can talk around me!"

"Well, tell Twilight you want to quit. If it's not making you happy, find something that does," he replied quietly. "Simple as that," he said as the subway train arrived at Horizon station. They rode the escalators up to the street level. Horizon Labs was just a big, dark, glassy block.

Her mouth moved before she dropped her gaze, "It's... not so simple." She looked at him. "Do you like fighting? Does it make you happy?" she asked as they trotted towards the bar south of the subway station.

"Anope. But my friends need me. Equestria needs me to fight," he replied casually.

"Well... it's the same for me," Maripony replied quietly as she hung her head. "At least, that's what everypony keeps saying."

"Mari? Is there something you need to tell me?" he asked with a worried look.

The blue unicorn just shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing." Then she smiled at him and pulled herself together. "Let's just have a great night together. I don't want to think of ministry business or Twilight Sparkle at all tonight." He just looked at her, then nodded as they strolled into town. Down in the pool hall, she at once lit up in glee at the game; in short order, she was lining up shots... and then she magically produced a chalkboard and slide rule and started to work out shots while Macintosh just looked on.

Of course, executing her precisely measured shots was another matter entirely, and more often than not she sent the cue ball bouncing away from where she wanted it to go. Macintosh, on the other hand, simply gripped the stick in his mouth, braced it against his hoof, and took the shot. And, much to Maripony's chagrin, sunk more balls than she did.

"Clearly there's an element I'm not accounting for," she muttered as he bought two plates of daffodil and daisy salads with apple slices. He just smiled, and she arched a brow and gave a little smile of her own. "Aren't you going to tell me what I'm missing?" A small knot of ponies in white uniforms

who'd been playing cards at a nearby table were watching the pair, nodding their heads in our direction.

"I figure you'd rather just figure it out yourself. If you need me to tell ya, y'all ask," he replied as he munched on the clean, fresh food. Oh so delicious...

She looked pleased at his reply. "You know, you're the only person who'll do that for me. Everypony else, if they know I need to know something, they'll trip all over each other trying to give me the answers. They never stop to think maybe I'd like to find the answer out myself."

"Twilight too?" he asked, and instantly her mood was blown. "Sorry. I'd put a word in with Applejack, if you'd like her to talk to Twilight about your problems at Pleasant Valley."

"No..." she sighed.

"Hey, cutie. Is this Miramare mook giving you trouble?" a unicorn buck asked as he trotted up with his three buddies. He had an anchor for a cutie mark.

Maripony looked at Big Macintosh and then back at the four sailors. "Trouble? Not particularly."

"Yeah? Why don't you come over to our table? I know all kinds of tricks we can teach you involving balls and a shaft," he chuckled. Oh... I knew somepony about to get his rump rearranged. I could smell the booze on his breath. Not enough to make him weak, but probably enough to make him stupid and dangerous.

"You need to go back to your game, sailor," Big Macintosh said firmly. "Everypony's having a nice time. Don't need to spoil it."

The brown unicorn scowled up at Big Macintosh. "You listen here. You come all the way to our pool hall, the least you can do is let us enjoy the company of your marefriend. And in case you didn't notice, there's four of us and only one of you."

"Ayup. So I reckon you best go and round up a few more so it's a fair fight," he replied. "You might want to sober up, though. Make sure this is a fight you can handle."

"We should go," Maripony said in concern, looking around. The conversation had suddenly generated a lot of interest from the other sailors.

"Oh, you think I can't handle you? You think *I* can't handle *you*?" the unicorn laughed and grinned at Big Macintosh. Big Macintosh tensed his muscles as the unicorn buck whirled around and smashed his rear hooves into Macintosh's chest. Macintosh didn't budge. The unicorn went sprawling on his face.

"I'll chalk that up to y'all bein' drunk," the red pony said evenly. Eyes glaring, the brown unicorn picked himself up, lifted a chair, and sent it flying at Macintosh. The crimson buck knocked it away with his hoof. "And that to y'all bein' stupid. Ya don't get a third." He nodded to where the sailors been playing. "Y'all go back to your game, folks. Otherwise, this is gonna get bad."

"Oh, it's going to get bad. It's gonna get real bad!" The brown unicorn yelled as he lunged, rearing to smack Macintosh in the face. Big Macintosh caught the descending hooves with one limb and then powered his other forehoof straight into the sailor's gut. The unicorn's breath whooshed out as he

doubled over, wheezing and sputtering, and then became violently ill.

"Let's go, Maripony," he said as others rose to their hooves.

"But... I don't understand? What's wrong with showing me tricks?" Maripony asked, then frowned. She rubbed her nose, looked at the pool table, then at the sprawling buck. Suddenly, her eyes popped round and blue behind her glasses. "That... he... was he...?"

"Ayup. Now, we need to be going," he said firmly as the pair backed out of the pool hall. It was dark and starting to drizzle. "Let's hurry up. Some folks don't have the sense Celestia gave a bag o' beans."

"But... can't you just tell them you're a sergeant and... I dunno... order them to go away?" Maripony asked as they trotted quickly down the street. A glance backwards confirmed that the unicorn and his friends were following.

"There ain't a rank been invented that could compete with Admiral Drunk and General Ticked Off." Big Macintosh frowned. "They'll be right sorry in the morning, but I'm more worried about dealing with them right now."

The pair had nearly reached the subway station when a dozen more sailor bucks trotted up the stairs. They took one look at the pair and moved to block the entrance. Maripony and Big Macintosh were forced into the abandoned Horizon Labs parking lot. "I want you to get out of here, Maripony. Don't worry none about me."

"I'm not going to leave you to a mob!" she cried.

"Get him!" they shouted.

"Sneaky earth pony!" called another.

"He's disrespecting the uniform!"

"Probably a stripe lover!"

"He's a sergeant! He's a soldier!" Maripony yelled, but from the fervor of the crowd and the reek of alcohol, they either weren't hearing her or didn't care as they surrounded him and knocked her back. The shouting sailors piled on all at once. While he knocked them away at first, even he couldn't prevent them from piling on. Still, I was amazed that, despite the beating, he really wasn't all that hurt even as he disappeared under them. Then Maripony let out a yell and all at once Big Macintosh moved.

I'd never felt that kind of strength before as his body lunged and launched half the ponies into the air in rolling arcs. A kick behind him knocked a half dozen flying. Now that powerful frame was all action as he battered the sailor ponies like a force of nature. No. I take that back; there was nothing excessive in his force. For all his strength, he kept his kicks, shoves, and bites controlled and precise. I marveled at the focus and the care he took in preventing severe injury to the sailors.

Then the brown unicorn who had started the whole damn thing lunged at him with a drawn knife. There was a purple flash and a shriek as Maripony appeared between his side and that plunging blade. She staggered, glasses falling as a three inch gash appeared in her shoulder, blood spreading along her

dress as her purple eyes stared at the injury in shock. "Oh... my... that went differently in my head."

Big Macintosh looked at her standing beside him, bleeding, then looked at the buck holding the floating knife. His body came up and his hooves crashed down. The unicorn was struck with such force that he bounced like a ball filled with crunchy twigs. Then he lay still. "This fight is over," Macintosh bellowed. "You've attacked an officer and injured a civilian."

Now there was muttering as sense began to reassert itself and many of the sailors started to realize the amount of trouble they were in. "You three drag that to the medic," Mac ordered before turning back to Maripony. "Okay. That's deep. Take the dress off; we'll have to use it like a bandage."

"Oh no... no no no... you don't need to do that. I'm fine! It's just blood... just... a lot of blood..." she stammered as he stared into her eyes.

Purple eyes.

She dropped her gaze, and he slowly lifted the hem of her dress up to expose a purple and pink starburst on her flank. "Twilight?"

"I... um... I wanted to tell you earlier..." she stammered. He frowned, then looked at the dress. She took it off, folded it over, and pressed it to the injury.

"Don't worry about that now, Ministry Mare," he replied flatly as he looked around at the sailors. "Can you teleport with that injury? Get yourself to the hospital?"

"There's a Quik-Kare back at the corner," Twilight said softly. "Hopefully they won't ask too many questions." Twilight kept her eyes low in shame, her magic holding the makeshift bandage to her wound, as the two walked carefully back.

"So... how'd you magic your appearance? Rarity?" Big Macintosh asked in a low, slightly hurt voice.

"Yes. She's developed a surprising number of spells to alter a pony's coloring and mane. Minor transfiguration magic that... can... ah..." She faltered, her ears drooping as she limped beside him. "I couldn't get it to change my eye color, so I had to enchant the glasses. And no magic can change a cutie mark, so I had to make sure it was covered." He didn't say anything, and she muttered lamely, "Been trying to make a magic decal that would cover it but... ah... it doesn't quite work right."

"And you always kept the lights off when we were together in bed. Thought you were just being shy," he murmured.

"I was being shy, Macintosh," Twilight said with a furious blush on her blue cheeks. "I didn't... I mean... I didn't know how... how any of that worked outside of books. The most I knew about a buck I got from reading the Zebra Sutra. I never... ever... imagined I'd do it, let alone with you."

"Always wondered where you learned some of those positions..." he murmured as they approached the Quik-Kare 24 hour medical service. "So why the disguise?"

"It was the only way I could get away, Macintosh!" Twilight replied, looking up at him with pleading eyes. "You don't understand... every minute of my day is scheduled. Meetings, presentations, openings, project reviews... I'm lucky if I can find a few hours to myself! And if I ever go somewhere on my own,

everypony who sees me recognizes me. I'm not supposed to go anywhere in Equestria without a dozen O.I.A. security ponies around me at all times. It's like that for all of us. Rarity and Fluttershy have to clear a spa meeting with fifty ponies just to have an hour off together."

"And me?" he said quietly. "Why didn't you tell me, Twilight?"

"I... I wanted to..." she said lamely. "I meant to on our first date. A sort of... 'Surprise! Nice to see you again!', but we had such a nice time out, and for the first time I... really enjoyed myself. I didn't feel like I was a Ministry Mare. And you... you were different, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when the Marauders helped clear out Splendid Valley? I came up to talk to you. Asked you how you were doing. Would you like to get lunch," she said as she looked at him, "Do you remember what you said to me?"

"Said it wasn't proper for a soldier to be socializing with a Ministry Mare."

"Exactly. So if I'd told you the truth, would you have kept seeing me? Would you have kept sleeping with me?" she asked pointedly, and his ears folded back as he frowned in worry. Twilight sighed, "Well... I guess that's all over. Funny... I was looking forward to this date for days."

He blinked in surprise as they stepped into the Quik-Kare. The sharp antiseptic smell clashed with the coppery scent rising from the blood. The nurse began, "Welcome to Quik-Kare, for the quickest care anywh— Whoa!" Her eyes popped wide "Oh! Um... this way!" the puce pony said as she gestured for them to come around the counter. "We'll get some healing potion in you lickety split! What happened?"

"Mugging," Big Macintosh said. "I'll file a report as soon as we're done here."

The nurse got a healing potion, and Twilight drank it as Big Macintosh put a pencil in his mouth and started to write on a clipboard. The silence was palpable, and the nurse kept looking from one to the other. "Um... if you don't mind, could you please fill that out outside, sir? We normally only allow patients in the back room." Big Macintosh sighed, held clipboard and pencil in his mouth, and trotted to the waiting room. Ten minutes later, Twilight emerged looking half angry and half confused. The nurse took the paperwork and wished them both well.

"She thought you'd cut me... with how we were acting and everything," Twilight said as she turned to face him. "I almost wish you had... then I wouldn't feel so bad." She closed her eyes and asked the dreaded question I knew was coming. "So... what now?"

"Nothing. You go back to the ministry. I go back to base. That's that, Twilight."

She looked as if she'd been stabbed again. "Oh."

"I meant what I said 'bout it being improper. You're a leader of Equestria and I'm just a common grunt slugin' things out in the trenches. If folks know we're together, then neither of us will be able to do our jobs. I can't be datin' the number three most powerful mare in Equestria. You can't be socializing with a dirt pounder like me."

"But..." she began.

"No. No buts. And I have to admit that I'm mighty hurt this was how I found out. I never would have thought it of you. Rarity perhaps, but not you," he said firmly as he looked down at her. "Now, if you feel up to it, you best get yourself back before they worry about you. And I need to make sure that that brown jerk is peeling potatoes till his horn falls off."

Twilight crumpled a little more as he turned away. "Well... then... I'm sorry. Goodbye."

Her flash coincided with the rumble in the clouds overhead. He got three steps before the hard Hoofington rain began to fall and six before his rump hit the ground and he turned his face to the sky, hot tears mixing with cold rain as he showed his own broken heart.

oooOOOooo

The memory orb ended with me once more in darkness. I stared into eternity as I listened to the gurgle of water around the ship and felt the steady rolling. I let the orb rest on my chest. I could see Big Macintosh in that rain, feeling his heart ripped out as he tried his best to keep up his stoic and calm demeanor. He'd said what he had to drive her away and protect her, I was sure of it. Suffering for the one you love, because caring hurt no matter how you sliced it.

But then, so did bullets.

The gunfire outside was sharp and light. Low power carbines and varmint hunting rifles, but there were a couple of them. I heard the pop of a hunting rifle and the boom of a familiar heavy automatic pistol. The rifle fire increased. We were under attack, and I couldn't do anything.

"Scotch?" I called out as I rolled out of the cot. I didn't have a gun, barding, or any equipment. My legs folded beneath me, and it was all I could do to crawl forward... whichever direction that was. "Scotch? Where are you?" Somepony yelled in agony up on deck, and the hunting rifle went silent.

And then I heard the panicked breaths of Scotch Tape staggering in along with the sounds of somepony dragging their hooves in the door before collapsing hard to the deck. "No... no no... Mister Tarboots."

"Scotch? Scotch, what's happening?" I asked as I felt around. Then I felt the hot blood rapidly cooling on the wooden deck.

"The others are late. And... and there's ponies. Like four or five ponies. They shot Oilcan and... and now Tarboots. He's... he's got a hole in his head..." And from the sound of the hooves on deck, they were coming right here. "Oh... they're coming... they're coming." Her terror ratcheted her voice higher and higher.

"Okay. Scotch. I want you to give me my pistol and point my head towards the hatch. Then I want you to find the hatch to the bilge. Get down there and no matter what you do, don't make a sound. Do you understand?" She panted, and I smacked her. "Understand?"

"Y...yes... but what about..."

"Don't worry about me. I've had ships fall on me. What are they going to do? But you need to

hide. You need to stay quiet, no matter what. Can you do that?" They were almost to the hatch.

"Y..yes..." she replied. I felt the mouthgrip on my lips and bit down. Then she turned my head. "There. That's... that's the door." I patted her once and pushed her away, then sent a bullet towards the hatch as I sat there, a lump of flesh who could barely move. There was cursing and shouting and bullets were fired in towards me. I couldn't risk moving. With the creaking sounds the boat made in the river, I couldn't tell if it was them coming or not. I just used my best guess, firing single shots with enough space for Scotch to get herself hidden.

I managed about two minutes before the gun fired on an empty chamber and I sighed and spat the gun out. A moment later, I heard a buck say, "She's out." Yup. I'm out, genius. I just kept sitting there; what else could I do?

"Afternoon. If you've come to steal the ship, well, I'm afraid the captain won't like that much. And she's the only one who can make it work," I said. Who knows; maybe I'd chanced upon practical bandits who were in a charitable mood and highly gullible.

"Holy shit, is that... that's the Security Mare?" one said with a gleeful giggle. It was a familiar voice. As I remembered, he'd been screaming for me not to kill him the last time I'd heard it. "Well, we come back to Fallen Arch, and not only do we find a nice old boat but my family's murderer too!"

"Seriously? That the bitch that killed Sidewinder?" another drawled.

"Technically, Deus killed him," I said, but these ponies weren't interested in technicalities. The realization of who I was spread rapidly.

"She killed my brudders..."

"Ransacked our home..."

"Took our property..."

"She's the mare what nicked me in the museum!" one shouted.

Oh, this was going to *suck*...

"You're fucking dead," a buck growled as he pushed a barrel against my blindfold.

I swallowed. I couldn't let this be quick. Once I was dead, they'd rifle the ship.

It would have to be *slow*...

I grinned as wide as I could. "Thanks for doing me the fucking favor, jackass. Go ahead. Put me out of my misery!" I yelled as I twisted my head.

Their shouts dropped to a dreadful silence broken by low chuckles. The gun was pulled away. "No... you don't get any favors from us, Security." And it smashed against my face.

The fun began.

I tried to put up a fight. I did. My legs might have been useless, but I could still swing them around, and my mouth worked just fine. They grabbed my flopping legs and hauled me face down over a

crate. "Let's stop her flopping around once and for all!" one cheered, and the others laughed as they pinned down my leg. Then I felt a sharp stab. "Pin her down, Nails." Wait... what?

I didn't scream. Not at the spike of pain that went up my foreleg as the hammer struck the head again and again. Nor did I scream at the second, higher up. No, it wasn't until the third one, just below where my elbow had been, that I cried out, to their laughter. I called them every variant of 'fuckers' I could as my other foreleg was nailed to the floor too. No matter how I tugged, they weren't coming free. Not without leaving my legs behind. My rear legs were hauled apart, and one... two... three... they were nailed to the floor as well.

I squirmed and jerked; I couldn't help it. Every move hurt, which kept me moving. "How's it feel, cunt? You took everything from me." That was the one from Fallen Arch... I was getting better at picking out their voices.

I was barely able to spit out, "I left you your life."

"Yeah. Well, let me pay you back for the favor," he replied. Then my tail was lifted and I felt a tongue. I couldn't help myself, I started to shake. I knew what was coming. I knew damned well. Hell, I was inviting it... any indignity, pain, or humiliation.

Just keep focused on me.

It didn't hurt like the nails. Those had hurt more, certainly. No, as it was pushed into me, I cried out... much to their delight. And as they got going, my own biology betrayed me, easing the violation. I hated it, but so long as I didn't hear Scotch cry out as well, I could endure. I had to. And so I let them fill me however they wanted. And they laughed and called me a slut, as if words could hurt me now. Go ahead, I thought. Take another ride. Shoot another load. I can take it.

I couldn't do anything... But I could take it.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But eventually, even violation gets boring. And then a buck said from nearby, "Finish her up. I'm going to see if there's anything else worthwhile in here..."

The fuck you are. I bit hard on what was trying to choke me, making him cry and pull out. Then I jabbed my horn into the side of the one who'd just spoken.

I blew out his guts all over me with a magic bullet.

Fun time was over.

"Cunt! Bitch! Whore!" Pretty unoriginal, but they were upset as they stomped me. I fired again and again until one of them got a hoof around my neck. I struggled. "Do it! Do it!" they began to cheer.

I felt a sharp metal edge press against the base of my horn.

One blow of the hammer and I screamed like I never had before.

Two blows and I felt blood trickle down my face.

With the third, there was a resounding crack, and I felt a snap within my head like a rubber band breaking. And I wailed like a foal. The pain of the nails was nothing... nothing at all... compared to this. An integral part of myself had been torn away. Finally, I went limp, my body glazed in at least three kinds of bodily fluid as I lay there over the crate. "Enough... fucking end this bitch." My face must have been masked in blood. Wherever Roses was... I apologized to her.

"Come on... I can take... a little more..." I whispered hoarsely, spitting out more than just saliva as I lay there. Just a little longer. Just a little more...

...a little more...

Then I felt a sharp and strangely cold pain erupt in my side. Everything seemed to be oozing out of me. What, didn't I have enough holes? "She's done. Now toss the ship."

"Toss this, motherfuckers," P-21 said. Then there was a dull thud and the most curious sensation... I couldn't move at all. "Stun grenade, courtesy of the sand dogs." Every bit of me was limp and growing colder and colder. "No... no no no..." he muttered softly before he summarized my state nicely with a tell, "Oh, shit! Lacunae! Lacunae, get in here now! She's been stabbed!"

...a little more... I just had to hang on a little more...

There was a faint pop and a presence beside me. "Oh... Blackjack..." was all she said, and her horn touched my side. The warmth of her healing brought home the pain, but the pain reminded me I was alive. It let me hang in there...

"You fuckers! You beasts! You... you touched her! I'm going to cut off every piece of you that you put inside her! I'm going to nail your fucking legs to a rock and see how well you can swim, you motherfuckers!" P-21 screamed, and I heard a dull thump over and over again. My mouth worked slowly as I fought to speak... but it was hard. I was so tired. So sore...

"Shh... lie... lie still..." Lacunae stammered in my mind. "I... I will try and find your horn. Perhaps it can be reattached..."

"Don't..." I rasped softly. I felt her ear on my lips.

"Don't? Don't worry. We won't let them get away with this," Lacunae swore.

"No." I coughed softly. "Don't... kill... them..."

Lacunae didn't move an inch as P-21 continued to rave and stomp my prone attackers. "I don't understand..."

"Let them... go..." I said softly.

Lacunae was so startled she spoke aloud. "Let... let them go?!"

P-21 finished his stomping. "Let them *what*?!"

I concentrated on breathing; it was all I could do. My attackers simply groaned. "Killing them... won't... make things... better."

"Blackjack... look at you! Look at what they did!"

"I know... but I forgive them..." I rasped softly. "... hurt them too... I... understand now..."

"They aren't worth your forgiveness!" P-21 erupted. "They're raping, murdering *meat*! They're scum! They're filth! They need to be wiped out! They need to be killed as slowly as they... they hurt you! How can you spare them?! They killed Tarboots! They almost killed Oilcan. They were going to kill you. And Scotch..." He paused. "Where is she?" he asked in a rush.

I coughed. "Safe... below. Don't let... let her see... still a kid... no matter... what... she says..." I said with each heavy breath. "P-21... I'm... dying. Please. Let them go... for me..."

"Why..." one of my attackers rasped. "He's right. We are scum... and... I don't want to die... but... why?"

"A yellow... pony... once said... do... better. And I... don't want... my friends... to... kill." I breathed slowly a moment. "If you're... dead... you can't... do better..."

"You're crazy..." another of my attackers murmured. "How do you know we won't just do this again?"

"I don't," I admitted. I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth in frustration. "Just... do better... please... just... do better..." I begged. I couldn't give back to them what I'd taken... but I could give them two things... a second chance and my forgiveness. I was probably dead soon anyway.

I heard the sound of Lacunae dragging them out. "I will... remove them, per your wishes."

I saved four more. They might have been scum, completely and totally. They might have been better off dead, and maybe they would do this again. Maybe I'd made a horrible mistake.

But they at least had a chance to do better...

After that there was the problem of removing my legs from the floor. With them gone, Lacunae tried prying the nails out, but they'd been hammered deep and the feeling of them being withdrawn nearly stopped my heart. Oilcan was injured but would recover. Unfortunately, there was no recovering from a case of death. There was only one thing to do.

"Get some rope... and make sure that knife is sharp," I said quietly.

Four tourniquets and some sawing later and I was free. Lacunae set me in the bunk. My whole body wouldn't stop shaking. I thought that my heart would stop at any second as I shivered but couldn't seem to warm. I felt filthy, like some kind of biological discharge.

But I'd saved Scotch and four others.

For that... I could endure.

* * *

Needless to say, when Glory arrived with the captain and Seabiscuit, the shit hit the fan again. There was a whole new round of 'what?!', 'I'm sorry', and Thrush telling me how stupid I was for sparing Tarboots's killers. Fortunately, by then Lacunae and Scotch had washed most of the fluids off me and wrapped me up in a blanket. I'd lost four limbs and Celestia only knew where my horn had gone. Lacunae had healed the gash in my brow and regrown my horn, but it still felt like a useless stub like the rest of my extremities. The Hydra had done nothing for me; I think I was at the point where my body just couldn't heal anymore.

It didn't matter. I just focused on breathing. Scotch had nestled the Fluttershy figurine where my left front leg met my shoulder and let me feel her smooth, pink mane on my feverish cheek. Apparently there were quite a few ponies coming and going all at once. A little bit later, there was talking on deck. Then we cast off again. The motor purred and the water jet talisman whooshed. Octavia played her music on my PipBuck. I felt limbs I didn't have any more wanting to move and join in the notes.

Scotch hadn't said a word since she'd emerged from the hold. She just waited nearby. If I was thirsty, she provided a sip of Sparkle-Cola. I was sick, tainted, and dismembered, but I worried more about her. "Hey, Scotch. What do you call a mare with no legs who's in security? Baton."

She began crying. I sighed... "Scotch... that was a joke. You're supposed to be laughing."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"For what?" Her silence told me exactly what 'what' was. "Look, we were screwed, Scotch. The only way we were going to live was to stall. And, honestly, you got a whole, intact, healthy body. Maybe your head's been fiddled with a little, but you're going to have a long life ahead of you. I'm not. If there's anypony who's supposed to be put through the meat grinder, it should be me. That's just simple facts."

"You were screaming. They were doing... things to you. Weren't they?" she muttered softly, "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Let me tell you a secret. Come here." I heard her move closer and nudge the cot. "No no, closer," I whispered. I felt her breath on my lips. Then I stuck my tongue out and nailed her ear perfectly.

She jumped away and fell over something from the clatter, "Ewww! Blackjack!" I chuckled... because I had to. Because if we all started crying now there'd be nothing left. "You're so weird."

"I'm dying. I'm allowed to be weird," I said softly.

"You're not going to die," Scotch replied. "No pony as boring as her can be wrong."

"I assume you're talking about me," Glory said as she trotted closer. "Blackjack... I'm so..."

"If you say sorry one more time I will soil myself right here and now. And it will be nasty. I mean it! Poop so nasty it'll sing and tap dance," I threatened as I turned towards the sound of her voice.

"She's being weird," Scotch informed her.

"She's always been weird," Glory replied.

"I have been interrogating Scotch for details on your miraculous plan to save my life." And if there

was a hint of Sanguine in them, I was going to find some way to roll myself into the river. "Something about a healing talisman? If it cures taint, then I'm all ears. Really... hearing's all I got," I rasped, my throat still raw from what had happened. I could still taste it. Smell it. I'd almost prefer another deep breath of chlorine to clear it out.

"A healing talisman is involved. We're calling it your birthday present," Glory replied.

"Details?"

"No details."

I pouted. "Aww, why not?"

"Because if we told you... then you'd stop us."

I sighed at her words. "So Sanguine..."

"Is not involved. He's the only pony who isn't." She kissed my cheek. "I made a promise to you."

Okay, good... but it was apparently a plan that I'd still hate. "Okay, now I'm curious..."

"You get to stay curious. For now, we have to take a little boat ride. Thrush says busting her and her crew out of the *Celestia* is worth one free trip."

"Free trip where?" I asked with a smile, playfully. Then my lungs spasmed and I started coughing again. Apparently, inhaling water was a very quick way to get a nasty case of pneumonia... even without tainted organs.

"Shush. Rest and conserve your strength."

"Mmm," I replied softly. "I want Rampage to come with us."

"She's doing Reaper stuff... fighting and... doing what she does best."

"Don't care. Want her here. She's my friend and I want her with me," I said simply and pointed one of my stumps at Glory. "Make. It. So."

She tried to sound indignant. "Just because you're..."

"Beautiful? Charming? Witty?" I asked with a grin. Those were all preferable to the truth: mutilated, maimed, and dying. She gave a hiccup, and I added, "No crying either. I mean it. Epic bowel movement of nastiness if you do." She sniffed and I smiled. "I want her with us, Glory. I know why she left. Me and Scotch on a boat, alone... something bad might have happened. But now we're together and I want all my friends with me. Okay?"

"It's going to be a crowded trip," Glory said softly.

"Make sure you have a proper rotation to check my bedpans. The stench will probably peel paint." I knew it wasn't necessary. I hadn't eaten all day and wasn't the slightest bit hungry. And I was pretty sure my doors were so swollen I wouldn't be able to go without some heinous screams. But I had to be as Blackjack as I could be.

Ah well. I'd just hold it for the rest of my life.

"Alright. I don't like it. But we'll get her," Glory said in resigned tones.

"See, Scotch? You can get anything if you're sick and pathetic enough."

The filly grunted skeptically. "All being sick ever got me was a trip to medical for a shot in the flank."

* * *

I slipped in and out of consciousness. I really didn't know if hours were passing or not. Aside from water and Sparkle-Cola, I didn't drink anything. Glory tried to get me to eat some mashed up and roasted Sugar Apple Bombs mixed with raw egg, but I was too sick for even her cooking. I knew there were ponies sharing the cabin with me, but I could never exactly tell who they were. Soon we'd left the river and were bobbing up and down.

"Are we on the ocean?" I asked nopony in particular.

"Yes," P-21 said right at my side, and I jumped. Well, would have jumped. Spasmed, really. He chuckled softly, "I thought that, when you couldn't see, your hearing got sharper."

"Yes, but you're still one quiet pony," I muttered. "So..."

"I'm not telling you anything about her plan, no matter how badly you shit yourself, Blackjack. I've seen the kind of mess you can really make, remember?" he said with a soft chuckle. "I don't think her plan is going to work... but it's her plan. Even if you'll hate it." He then put a hoof on my brow. "How's the fever?"

"Blargh," I muttered sourly. Why couldn't he be easier to manipulate?

"And the soreness?" he asked quietly...

For just a moment, I was confused. How had he known... but of course he knew. I went a little red. "Hurts..."

"I'd suggest an icepack, but I doubt there's an ice machine in the Wasteland," he replied. "And has it hit you yet?"

"Has what hit me yet?" I asked with a confused smile. But I knew what... I was just pretending. And he knew I was pretending. "It's not a big deal..." But it was a big deal. "It doesn't hurt that bad." It hurt really bad. I started to shake. But I couldn't fall apart... not now. Yet I couldn't stop. "I had to do it. I had to." But that didn't change a thing. I could pretend with Scotch and Glory. I could smile and act like what had happened to me didn't bother me a bit.

But not with him. Because he understood. Because once, I'd done something similar to him; more than once, now that I thought of it. Used him. Sent him back to be used. Sent him back to be the Overmare's trick pony. And then, slowly, I turned. I tried to keep myself as quiet as possible as I rolled towards him and buried my face in his chest. And he held me close and muffled my sobs with his chest as all the pain and humiliation leaked out of me.

I'd done this to him. Now I really, truly, understood. I could only hope nopony could hear me

now. I hurt, and he did all he could to help me bear that hurt. Now I understood why he'd wanted to kill them so badly. To kill anypony who might do this to another. And next time I met those four, or anypony who'd done to another what had been done to me, I prayed to the little yellow pegasus statue that I'd still be able to forgive.

When I finally pulled myself together, I said with utter sincerity, "I'm sorry." And now... I really knew what I was apologizing for. And he knew it too. "And... I'm sorry for killing him. I was scared and... I screwed up. I... I should have done more. I should have done better."

"Shhhh..." he shushed as he stroked my mane. "You know now. You really do... and so... I'm sorry." He sighed. "Every time I see you and Scotch, I'm reminded of that place... of feeling like... like meat. A thing. Being ashamed of my body reacting to the abuse." I shivered. Had I... I had. Goddesses, I had... He stroked my mane some more. Now that we were both broken, he could. He could comfort a hurting mare. "Thank you for saving my daughter from being raped," he said quietly.

I nodded. "You need to tell her that." I coughed and amended, "The daughter part I mean."

"I can't. Everything I feel for her is all twisted up inside me. Her mother was kind... but she used me. She never asked me if I wanted to be a part of the family she wanted. She simply assumed that I'd be there to give her the family she desired. I was never a person. Just a role." He sighed softly.

"That was wrong, but you're punishing Scotch for what her mother did. She's a smart kid. A good kid. She's already figured most of it out. Talk to her."

"Maybe..." he murmured softly. "When you can, get Glory and Lacunae to wash you... that always made me feel better."

But I was already drifting off with a smile on my face. After all, I heard Rampage coming aboard.

* * *

It was nice to sleep without dreams. It was what I imagined dying to be like. Nothing bad... good... or otherwise.

Being woken with a hoofclaw at your throat... that wasn't so pleasant.

"About time," I murmured. "What was taking you so long?"

"You were expecting me?" the Angel of Death murmured in my ear.

"Expecting? You're late. I've half a mind to not let you kill me after all."

"Very presumptuous," she chuckled. "What happened to you calling me a monster? A murderer?"

"Well, now I need a monster. Glory plans on doing something to save me. P-21 knows I'll hate it. So... I need to die before it happens. So. Get going. I'm raped. I'm mutilated. I'm ready to cash in."

There was a silence, and then the hoof withdrew. "No."

You've got to be kidding me. "No? What do you mean no? This is... this is your thing! This is

what you do.”

“I give a gift to end suffering. You spurned that gift,” she purred in my ear. “Take your own damned life.”

Quietly, she left me lying there. I listened to the hum and coughed up a wad of something... raw. Something bloody and dark. “Well... fuck,” I muttered. Why was nothing ever simple?

* * *

I wasn't sure how long we'd been travelling? Hours? Certainly we should have reached the Fluttershy clinic by now. Glory and Lacunae lifted me up and floated me out onto the deck. I heard the waves and felt the wind... and as I floated there in Lacunae's magic, I felt something else. A warmth playing all up and down my body. “What... what is that?”

“What's what?” Glory asked.

“I feel all... warm? But not like it's from a fever,” I said as Lacunae began to wash me with a sponge. I was swollen and sore like damn, but I had to admit that it felt better than lying in that cot.

“That's the sun,” Thrush said.

The sun? But... we must have been far out at sea. “Where are we going?” I asked softly.

“Told you. Surprise. We should be there soon,” Glory said. I was set down on a blanket. As I lay there, despite everything, I felt a little more peeved than usual at the Enclave's cloud cover now that I felt the sun's warmth playing on my hide. “I always took it for granted,” Glory said softly as the engine hummed. I nuzzled up against her, and her wing slowly stretched over me, keeping me warm. I wasn't sure how much time passed like that, but gradually, things began to cool off. Then the talisman slowed and stopped.

“Need to give it a little while to warm up. Starting to form ice,” Thrush explained. We lay there on the back of the ship as it rocked in the waves. I could hear my heart beating. *Thump thump... thump thump...*

“Is it night?” I asked softly.

Glory murred. “Mhmm.” *Thump thump... thump thump...*

“Can you see the stars?”

“Oh yes...”

“A lot of them?”

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

“All of them,” she replied.

"Are they beautiful?"

"Yes..."

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

"Thank you, Glory."

"For what, Blackjack?"

"Trying..."

Thump... thump...

"Blackjack?"

Thump...

"Sorry..."

...

I should have fought. I should have held on longer as she shook me and called my name. But I was so tired, and I could see the stars.

They were calling to me.

I let go... relaxed...

And died.

Game over.

(Author's note: Much thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this horrible chapter readable, and to everypony who leaves feedback. Tips to support the writer can be made through paypal to David13ushey @gmail .com.)

(IMPORTANT NOTE FROM HINDS: The story is not, in fact, over. This is not the end. How Somber intends to continue from here I don't know, but I've been assured that future chapters will exist. I just thought that I'd better add this note to make sure that no one got the wrong impression and stopped reading.)