

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 42: Reaper

"Twenty stalks? Bean or celery?"

The life of a caravaner must be one not that different from that of a security mare: long periods of boredom, tedious but preferred, punctuated by moments of intense excitement that you'd really rather didn't happen. They probably had experienced eyes used to picking out all sorts of threats and had seen more in their travels than I could imagine. Nevertheless, I had a hunch that the image of me tearing down the road straight at them was something of an alarming situation. They shouted and brandished guns in hasty warning before I leapt and sailed right over one of their pack brahmin.

"Whoa," muttered one head.

"Dude," agreed the other.

I landed, slid to a halt, and spotted the one who was in charge. At least, I thought he was in charge. He had the hat of a pony in charge. I darted right up to him as he backed away into the side of the brahmin. I grinned nice and friendly and friendly and nice. "Hi! Are you the pony in charge, 'cause I need to buy some gems. Yes sirree, any and all gems you have on your person. And cans of Cram! Yes sir, I crave me some Cram. Come on, you are a trader, right? I need to trade. I need to trade right now now now!"

"Get off me you mule-brained idjit!" the pony in the fancy 'I'm in charge' hat said as he shoved me away. The blue earth pony buck snorted, "What is wrong with you, racing up like that? You're lucky we didn't plug you full of holes!" I'd reached the interchange between the Manehattan Highway and the Sunset Highway, standing on the overpass. To the west, I could barely make out a lot of black dots.

That was funny! Very funny, and I laughed to show just how funny it was. "Holes? Holes! Ha ha ha!" I laughed as I turned to the side to show where a few lucky armor piercing AM rounds had caught me since I'd started my run. He gaped at the punctures punching straight through my metal hindlegs. I hadn't realized there'd been almost twenty Seekers set to raid the hospital until I'd darted through their lines. Now I had twenty unhappy and very-well-armed ponies after me. "Oh I'm so holey, I'm the saint of the Wasteland. You bet. Now!" I bucked two suits of combat armor off the bundle on my back. "I will trade you these for every last gemstone, can of Cram, and bit of scrap metal you have there, my good sir."

He looked at me warily and took a step back. Come on, the joke wasn't that bad!

"Whoa, Boss, that is some good surplus gear," one of the ponies said as she trotted up.

"Cram. Gems. Scrap metal. Chop chop," I said, smacking one hoof against the other. Then I grinned. "Oh, and you might want to hurry. I know I do! I got a whole mob of very-well-armed ponies after me."

It didn't take long after that for me to clean him out of a dozen hunks of scrap metal, a small collection of mismatched gemstones, and eight cans of Cram. He also threw in a heap of caps that didn't

begin to cover the value of those two suits, but that didn't matter. I chowed down on the metal and the cans right in front of them, and the whole caravan started talking about how it'd be smart to get moving south towards Megamart... immediately.

"If we run into a... ah... mob... anytime soon, I'll be sure to send them towards Withers. Maybe the Boneyard ghouls can eat them," the blue stallion said as he packed away the armor. Certainly a major score for him. Then he saw me frantically ingesting the can without even eating the contents first, and from the worried look on his face, I was fairly sure he wasn't going to be telling anypony about this meeting, period. Who'd believe him?

I chewed up the metal and meat stuff all at once and popped in a ruby for good measure as I turned and trotted away, leaving the stunned caravan pony to process what he'd just seen. Now that I'd led the Harbingers well away from the medical center, I could take it a little easier. They'd have to find out which way I went from the overpass, so I cantered to the east at a fair clip rather than an all-out gallop, worrying less about the ponies behind me and more about what might be in front of me.

Case in point, a painted warning on the side of a wagon that read 'Danger: Raiders' as I approached a recharging station. Yet there wasn't a single red bar to be seen. Two zebras in ragged shawls picking through a garbage can looked up nervously at me as I trotted by. I smiled at them, but they quickly trotted out of sight behind the building. Hmmm... zebras are strange. What's wrong with a friendly grin?

I knew from the maps of Hoofington I'd seen that the Sunset Highway went from the Princess Bridge in the far south all the way around the city to the Zenith Bridge in the north and then turned into the Sunrise Highway all the way around the city till it met the Princess Bridge again. All I had to do was stay on the highway and it would take me right past most of the industrial ruins of Progress and around to Paradise and Hightower. Easy, peasy, Neighponesey!

That made me laugh. It was silly and stupid, but it still made me giggle. Since I'd left the MASEBS, I'd felt a nervous energy pushing me along and lifting me up. Oddly, I felt good. Really really good. I wasn't tired. I had my face back! Honestly, this was almost as good as being back in Tenpony. "Did you see the look on their faces, Ram..." Ugh... that killed some of my buzz. I was alone, and unlike in Hippocratic, I knew they weren't someplace nearby. My friends were going to rest and recover while I was running around because... I couldn't.

I couldn't slow down and stop, or my demons would get me.

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The highway was approaching the Zenith Bridge, the glorious white arch that ran from bluff to bluff over the Hoofington River looking quite breathtaking as I drew closer. The encampment that the Reapers had set up on this side was now abandoned, the craters and blasted holes a testament to the war with the Steel Rangers. I could still smell the faint tang of cordite. Slowly, I made my way along the stone span, which had clearly been molded with unicorn magic; the whole thing was virtually seamless.

At the apex of the arc, on a pillar between the lanes, was a statue of Celestia and Luna done in white and black marble. I'd missed it from below. They rose on their rear hooves facing the Core, with Celestia holding a sun and Luna lifting a moon. Their magnificence was slightly marred by bullet craters and the crude graffiti covering the base; clearly some ponies weren't fans of the Princesses. The rain let

up to a drizzle, even as the thunder continued to growl every few minutes. And then I noticed something.

"What the..." I blinked as I looked to the north, then clambered onto the pedestal that Celestia and Luna occupied for a better view. Where once there'd been a twisted forest surrounding a building, there was now a massive crescent arc where the entire cliffside had slid into the river (though some trees still did line the upper edge of the great bite in the rock). It had created a great wall of rocks and debris, and muddy water roared over it in spectacular rapids. I hoped Thrush, wherever she was, would be able to get past it. The sides of the slide were peppered with barrels, the tractor things, and specks of blue. Here and there, I thought I could see remains of the Hippocratic building itself, but, by and large, nothing was left of the reinforced structure but rubble. "Did I do that?"

I had... and beyond, I could see the bow of the *Celestia* poking from the water. The Ironmare Naval Base was a scorched ruin; the Reapers hadn't held back in administering a punishment befitting the crime. I'd been responsible for that, too. And over there, past the refineries and industrial buildings, I could see the Flash Industries building where I'd almost lost Glory. I'd done that as well. I stood and looked to the southwest towards the Arena, but where before there'd been a smooth dome, the eggshell was now cracked, one end crumbled in on itself. Still, if, as I assumed, the *Celestia*'s gun had done that, it was amazing that the building was still standing at all. I could barely make out Riverside and Fallen Arch, other places I'd been and changed forever...

"Do you get it now?" Dealer muttered, and I jumped... or rather fell... off the pedestal and landed on my head.

"Get what? That lots of shit blows up around me?" I said as I sat up, rubbing my horn. He sat on the stone railing; normally, I'd be worried, but I doubted that a hallucination-or-whatever was in much danger of falling. I pulled out a minty emerald and tossed it in my mouth, enjoying the tingle of energy. "Figured that out a long, long time ago," I murmured.

"No. That you're responsible for all this," he replied over the gusty wind and hiss of rain on the bridge.

I folded my forehooves on the rail next to him, looking out at the Core. I could see the floating platform of Flotsam down there. "It's your job to officially rain on my parade, isn't it? I feel remotely good for two seconds, and then bam... here you are with something cryptic to say just to make me feel bad." From the pattering from the skies, he was getting some help with that. I sighed and looked down at the foamy brown water below. "I know it's my fault."

"I didn't say that it was your fault. I said that you're responsible for it," he said as he looked out at the rain pouring down into the black city. I was high enough that I could see over the wall to the empty geometric streets and the broken-off towers leaning but not quite falling. "Fault implies blame. I know that in the case of many of these things you had no choice, but you're still responsible for them happening."

"Really? So you're not pointing out my screw ups?" I asked. He snorted softly and shook his head.

"Responsibility isn't 'not screwing up'. It's answering for the consequences of the actions you commit. Accepting the punishment for them." He flipped through the cards and drew one showing LittlePip gunning down three pinned ponies. "Is she responsible?"

"LittlePip? Of course she is! She's... I mean..." I frowned. "She's a good pony!"

"No doubt you feel that way, but is she responsible? Ultimately, who does she answer to? Who punishes her for her misdeeds?" He snorted and tossed the card into the void. "How about her?" he asked, showing me Homage. "Who does she answer to when her comments inspire some stable mare to throw herself into a meat grinder?" The gray unicorn's card went tumbling away. "How about P-21?" he asked as he showed me a card of my friend. "Who does he answer to?"

"Me," I replied firmly. "P-21 answered to me when his problem became too much for him to deal with. Homage must answer to somepony in Tenpony or the Twilight Society. And if Homage is right and LittlePip has gone completely nuts, somepony will put her down or stop her. Her friends... I'll do it myself if I have to... and I'm still around." That was easy to say, though. Just words...

"Really. How generous of you. And here I thought you weren't an executioner," he said, showing the image of the Harbinger in the gravel pit with half her face blown off. Then it went swirling down as well. "And what about you, Blackjack?" he asked as he drew a card and showed me myself. "Who do you answer to?"

"You?" I guessed.

He snorted. "I'm nopony. You don't answer to me." He sighed and tapped the deck against the rail. "The Ministry Mares didn't understand either. Some ponies once told me that, years and years before the war, Pinkie had to babysit two young foals. She said that she was ready to handle the responsibility... but she didn't understand that it was more than making sure that the kids were fed and their diapers were changed. She ended up working things out, but had she failed, she'd have had to answer to the parents." He turned and looked up at the statue of Luna. "Tell me, Blackjack, who did the Ministry Mares answer to?"

"Luna, of course," I said, but I frowned. Something about that felt... lacking.

"Really? You've dug through the O.I.A.'s dirty laundry. You know what was going on, and trust me, there was even more happening that wasn't secret. So where was Luna saying 'Sorry, time out, not doing that'? When did the Princess put on the brakes? Alicorns. Megaspells. Cyberponies. Not one call from Luna trying to rein them in before the bombs dropped. That means that either she was the most sheltered and incompetent ruler in history, or that everything that the ministries and O.I.A. did was with her official approval."

Except for Gardens of Equestria and Project Horizons. Two things that Luna hadn't approved. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood pulling something that Luna hadn't okayed. I thought back to Fairheart's files. "Luna must have had a good reason. She was the ruler of Equestria!"

"Really. Well then, Blackjack, who did Luna have to answer to?" he asked as he looked at me, and I just stared at him. "In the end, we all have to be held responsible," he continued, looked up at the statue.

"Hate to break this to you," I said, "but Luna and Celestia are dead. Goldenblood might be dead. The Ministry Mares are all gone. Everypony you want to hold responsible was punished two centuries ago. They're dead and gone. Everything is." But he looked at me for a long moment, then simply turned and looked out at the valley and the black towers of the Core.

"Not everything, Blackjack. The corpse remains. And if it remains, it can be held responsible," he said.

"You want to hold Luna's corpse responsible?" I asked with a shaky, uncertain smile. "Sure. Go ahead. Blame a pile of bones, if you want."

"Not just Luna or Celestia," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Then who?" I blinked, but he just stared out into the rain with hard, hard eyes as his hooves shuffled the cards before him.

At that very moment, I became preoccupied by the bite of a bullet into the armor plate of my rump. I looked right towards the ... ohhh, wasn't that a whole lot of red? Wow, they must have run their hooves off to catch up with me! From the few I could see through the rain and the wan light, these were not happy ponies. I grinned. "Sorry to run, but some ponies who are trying to kill me have just arrived!"

Oh. Red bars on the east side of the bridge, too. Even being crazy and stupid, I wasn't about to try something like jumping. So there was only one thing to do: out came Duty and Sacrifice, and down the east slope raced me. A half dozen or so Harbingers were in the empty Steel Ranger encampment and were just starting to move out onto the highway. "Coming through!" I cried out in glee over the rain, not caring whether they could hear me or not.

Unfortunately, they had other ideas and started bringing their guns out. I spotted an earth pony stallion swinging an anti-machine rifle on his battle saddle towards me as they yelled and tried to get pointed in my direction. I dove onto my side, sliding on the water-covered asphalt with my metal legs folded in front of me, and crashed into him with a snapping of bone. As he screamed, I twisted and rolled on my back and threw my forelegs wide to brace myself. My rear legs pistoned into his gut as he started to collapse, turning his cries into a cut off squeak. I shoved him to the side to curl up fetally as I rolled to my hooves.

The others opened up, shooting wildly. They might have the guns, but the five millimeter rounds had to pass through my armor and my synthetic parts to hit something vital. I wasn't about to make that easy for them, and I slammed into the nearest, who sprayed wildly as she turned towards me, and hooked my hooves on the chattering carbine attached to her battle saddle. Heaving, I pivoted her around till she was pointed in the direction I needed. She had her teeth locked on the bit as she glared at me over her shoulder and sprayed down her fellow Harbingers with her gunfire; I don't think she realized that she should stop shooting when her guns were pointed at her allies... friends... heck, did Harbingers even *like* each other? They might have had nice armor, but they had far less-resilient vitals beneath it. After a few hits, most went down wailing and crying and curling up like the kicked stallion.

"Give up the key to the Core!" she screeched, "Or I'll pluck it from your fucking corpse."

"Damn, and here I was hoping I could convince you to leave me be though my goody good goodness," I said as I shoved her away. Don't turn. Don't... but she was turning. It'd take her two seconds to wheel around. Two seconds to begin to shoot me if I just stood there. "Fuck," I muttered and jumped into S.A.T.S. Two shots... triggered... and Duty and Sacrifice blasted right through the chest plate of her armor. She flopped down into the rain, rapidly cooling meat.

"I don't want to kill you idiots!" I yelled at the still-alive ponies lying and groaning on the bridge as the thunder growled overhead. "Leave me alone and stay out of my way!" I doubted that they'd listen...

but maybe one would. Maybe that would be a pony I wouldn't leave dead on the bloody road. As the rest of the small army swarmed over the crest of the bridge, I turned, holstered my guns, and tore off down the road as fast as my hooves could carry me.

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I made it about three miles before I had to stop and take cover, choosing some kind of large, two- or three-story industrial building that had all the aesthetics of a cinder block; a row of busted-out windows near the roof ran the length of the north wall and elevated pipes of all sorts spread out from it to adjacent buildings, but beyond that it was bare, water-streaked concrete. Breaking in was as easy as walking through the broken doors of the tiny, gutted office space. Inside, it was all rusting pipes and corroded vats. Lots of hunks of derelict machinery and potential little hideyholes everywhere I looked. Still, no red bars that I could see yet. This looked as good a place as any to seek shelter.

Regeneration and synthetics might mean that I didn't have to rest for hours on end, but I did need a breather to let my holes close up. I sat in the rusty vault and chowed down on scrap metal and Cram. Rain poured through from the countless pipes and the holes in the roof, but there was more than just water swirling around; drums of chemicals were piled where they had fallen, their contents leaking out and mixing with the rain on the floor. An acrid rotten-egg smell tainted the air.

I heard the sounds of shuffling and movement on the far side of the building. Red bars, but only four. If they were Harbingers, then maybe I could get some info from them. Find this 'Prophet' and learn just what they served and how could I thrash it. I thought of what Sanguine had told me, some defense computer going crazy in the Core. That didn't quite fit, though. I couldn't see a computer, no matter how advanced, inspiring a cult to hunt me down. Everything pointed to a pony behind this. I had my bottlecaps on Goldenblood.

Time for an interrogation. Blackjack has ways of making you talk... Of course, mostly they involved me crying and begging, but still... ways. I moved deeper inside, towards the unsuspecting red bars.

The sound of splashing water covered my approach nicely, and, since I wasn't in much of a hurry at the moment, I munched on a can of Cram as I slowly worked my way around the rust-streaked pipes. As I got closer, I began to make out voices over the hiss and the gurgle of the rain. "Fuckin' Reapers are finished, boyo. They're down to, what, fifteen fighters tops? Ain't seen none o' the top ten save Brutus in days. Rampage, Psycho, Deus, Gorgie... they're all gone."

Not Harbingers but gangers. I moved a little closer as a mare muttered, "Yeah, but Brutus counts for five ponies and Big Daddy ten. You can't turn your back on 'em till they're in the ground."

"Big Daddy ain't all that," drawled a mare.

"Besides, Big Daddy says Security's now one of the top ten, Candle. You want to fuck with that mare?" the first mare asked. "She's one pony cyclone. Crazier than Fluttershy. She trashed our headquarters and stomped Diamond Flash good. Dropped a fucking floor on her." That wasn't quite how I remembered it. Still...

The first buck snickered, "Oh, I'll believe that when I see it for my own eyes, girl. Security turned him down flat the first time, and I hear that she had her own beef with the Reapers. The Halfhearts are ready to walk, and I think the Burners should too. Highlanders got the right idea. We should take care of

our own. Fuck Big Daddy.”

I sat down, the cold water splashing around my hooves. I didn't like the idea of ponies that glorified killing and fighting, but the Hoof with Big Daddy was better than the Hoof without him. “I'm pretty sure you're not his type,” I said as I stepped around the corner. If this went wrong, I'd be in for trouble. Actually, that sort of described my whole day... and quite possibly my entire life. Despite everything, I found myself laughing.

The four turned at once, and for a moment I was certain that I was about to get my flanks toasted off by the battle-saddle-mounted flamer the ghoulish pony in red barding reading ‘Hoofington Fire Dept.’ was sporting. The lavender Flash Filly unicorn levitated a beam rifle at me as she backed away warily. The third was a green earth pony buck with a yellow mane and using a sniper rifle that had a weird gold charm of a stylized broken heart hanging from the butt by a chain. He immediately braced the gun on a rusty pipe and sighted me with it, then frowned and hesitated. It saved him from S.A.T.S. Only the blue mare in dirty coveralls didn't jump to her hooves, staying sprawled on her side on an upraised block of filthy concrete.

“Somepony's about to be dust!” the purple unicorn said with a grin. Then she took a second look at me, and the look on her face slowly faded as I gave them a grin of my own, the grin of a pony on the cusp of a bloody killing spree. Right now, that look was easy for me. “What the fuck are you smiling at?”

The ghoulish pony with the flamer leaned over and stared at the filly that Lacunae had painted on my flank. “She's got a Crusader's mark... and that tiny horn... oh shit...” I stared right at the ghoulish pony, and a target appeared right between his eyes. He blinked. Funny, his eyes weren't cloudy. I'd never seen a ghoulish pony with eyes like that. “It's Security. Oh, we are so boned!”

“Tiny horn?” I said in acidic tones as I looked at him, then around at the others. The three stared at me nervously. “Since you know me, why don't you introduce yourselves?”

“Erm... I'm Candlewick, with the Burner Boys,” the pony with the flamer said as he nodded to the weapon on his side. “These are Dazzle and Busted Heart.”

“Flash Fillies and Halfhearts?” I guessed.

Busted Heart nodded and said in a low, somber voice, “May your tears always fall clear.” Ohhhkay. I really didn't know what their deal was. I mean, ‘Burner Boys’ was pretty self-explanatory. Flash Fillies made sense when you saw the beam weapons. But ‘Halfhearts’?

The lavender unicorn with some sort of glitter in her pink mane looked at the remaining pony. “And she's Bluebelle...” Something about the looks the three shared made me wonder.

The reclining sky-blue earth pony slowly rocked up, then grinned as she trotted towards me with lazy strides. The three watched her approach and backed away with smirks of anticipation.

“Ya know, my momma's tits are bigger than that there bump on yer noggin,” she drawled as her darker eyes looked at me in scorn. The other three were looking from her to me, clearly unsure of which of us to back. I thought of trying to appeal to the other three, finding some way to convince her to back down without killing her. I didn't see much promise in that, though. Worse, if they were seeing me as a Reaper and I failed to impress... well... I doubted I'd enjoy ‘immunity’ from the gangs.

I had one group trying to kill me. I really didn't four others against me, too.

"You're a Highlander, right?" I asked. The stallion with the rifle in his hooves whistled a strange little twangy tune with a smirk. The mare just gave him a look, and his little tune became more wandering as he looked away quickly.

"Ayup," she replied. She was one hell of an earth pony. Dirty, but not gaunt or filthy. I doubted her mane had ever been acquainted with soap before. Her cutie mark was a cute cluster of three tiny blue flowers; I hadn't seen any like them before. Her eyes looked over my gear and barding, lingering on the weapons strapped across my back. Then she spat right in my face. "Pussy," she said as her eyes narrowed.

Okay. This wasn't going to go well. I wiped the spit off my cheek. "Hi, Bluebelle. I just want you to know... I have no wish to fight you," I said, and with those words lost every last bit of respect possible. She rolled her eyes, snorted, and started to turn away.

And then I smashed my metal foreleg upside her head. I'd envisioned a simple physical chastisement followed by hauling her in line and the other three with her. That involved my sucker punch knocking the fight out of her. I didn't knock the fight out of her. In fact, I did so little knocking that I might as well have patted her dirty mane.

She looked me right in the eyes and smiled. Oh nelly, time for a ride!

The mare wrapped her forelegs around my neck and powered forward with a shriek of glee shouting, "Let's wrassle!" She might as well have been playing "Let's snap Blackjack in half" as she forced me back, trying to overbear me. Damn, she was strong. Rampage strong! And so I wrapped my forelegs around her neck and up we went on our hind legs and she crushed and twisted against me.

I felt my joints grind and whirr as they struggled to keep me upright. The foul water splashed and surged around my hooves. Our bodies slammed into a thick rusty pipe and it boomed like a gong. The fact was that she was stronger than me, even with my mechanical limbs. It was like wrestling Daisy back in security training; the mare would just use her size and strength to crush me to the mat, then bash my skull in. There was one other disadvantage, too: Bluebelle was a biter! She snapped at my neck, trying to grab my ear as we danced about on our hind legs.

She might be stronger, but I had one trick she didn't. I popped out my fingers and grabbed her mane as tight as I could. She squealed, but jerked around even more as she struggled to knock me off my hooves. I just had to wait for... there! She lunged to one side, and instead of fighting her power I pivoted along with her and twisted my hooves around her neck. It didn't take much, and she overbalanced and flipped onto her back, thrashing in the filthy water. I completed the turn to the side and came down on top of her, straddling her belly as her legs kicked wildly into the air.

I got my forelegs inside hers as I sat atop her and clamped down my fingers on her skull, forcing it beneath the water. She fought wildly, but I kept my head low and made sure she couldn't clip it with her forehooves as she bucked underneath me. She found one finger and bit hard on it, but she didn't have metal softening talismans built into her mouth like I did.

For a second there I was almost sure I'd won, and then her body gave a tremendous heave beneath me and knocked me off balance. In moments she'd kicked herself to her hooves, and I did the same. She spat and coughed as she wiped her wet mane out of her eyes. I'd hoped maybe this would

have been enough. I was damned mistaken.

"I'm gonna scrap you!" she shouted as she charged towards me again. Oddly, I was laughing as she charged. It was so nice not to have somepony after me for my damned PipBuck. Just a mare out to kick my ass because it was there for the kicking!

As she closed in, I jumped right into S.A.T.S. and plotted four blows. The second her face was in range, I pounded it with all my strength. An instant later, I struck again. And again. Again. And while one sucker punch hadn't made much of an impression, four perfect shots to her face brought Bluebelle up short. I didn't waste the opportunity, standing like a zebra and continued to power blows to her face. Now she finally raised her hooves, warding me off, and gave ground.

Or was she? As I reared again, she suddenly lunged and hugged my upright torso in her forehooves. And now I was being lifted completely off my hooves as she hefted me up and arched backwards. I yelled in alarm as she smashed me into the ground; at least the damage wasn't too severe: I landed right on my head.

For several seconds I lay there as my E.F.S. let me know that I was a complete idiot. She lay there as well, gasping for air. Then I couldn't help it... I started to laugh again. Brain damage or fatigue, it didn't seem to matter. And seconds later, she joined me. The other three gangers looked nervously at each other as we lay in the dirty water, unsure if they should join in or not.

"I don't wanna fight you... good one, Security," she said as she sat up. "Ya got me with that one." My head was tumbling like a punted top.

"I mean it. I don't *want* to fight you, but that doesn't mean I *can't*." Oooh, but from the ringing in my ears and the way things kept moving when I looked at them, I'd definitely prefer to not fight her again soon. That body slam had really rung my bell! Cool sloshy water felt good on throbbing headachy head.

She harrumphed. "I guess I can respect that." She sat up. Me, I was going to lie here a bit and collect my thoughts and wait for the world to stop jiggling. "So yer saying you're a Reaper? That it ain't just a lot o' hot air from Big Daddy?"

"I might not like fighting ponies, but I'd rather ponies worked together to help each other. Having the Reapers is better than everypony out for themselves," I said honestly as I risked sitting up, and then lay back down again. Yup, this sloshy nasty water was just dandy to lie in.

"Same old story we've been hearin' fer ever," Bluebelle snorted. "But 'work with us' means 'do what we want ya to do'. All we want is to be left to ourselves and our own."

I slowly sat up, my head aching terribly. "I know the feeling." Bluebelle scowled at me, but I raised a hoof. "No. Really. I do. Stable 99 did a lot of bad things, but even after all I've been through, there's a little part of me that wishes we'd just been left on our own. Solved our own problems and not had Deus come in and start the whole mess. But that's the problem, isn't it? Even if you want to be left alone, you can't guarantee that everypony else is going to respect that." I might not have *liked* that little part of me, but I couldn't deny that it was there.

The blue mare looked surprised. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting me to agree with her. "Yup. So when a feller like Big Daddy comes along saying we gotta follow his rules, t'aint exactly a new tune. He might be the first, last, and only buck ta go hoof to hoof with Momma, but that still don't mean we like

following anypony.”

“I can understand that,” I said as I closed my eyes. “Well, I don’t know what else I can say. These Harbinger ponies, though... if they get their hooves on the Core and ‘save’ the Wasteland, do you think they’ll leave you alone?”

“Why wouldn’t they? We don’t want nothing to do with the Core,” she said with a snort. “They got one of them there priests out saying that, so long as we give them yer head, they’ll leave us be.”

Ah. Great. More ponies after my head! “And do you really believe that? Do you think that if they actually do get into the Core, they’ll just ignore you forever?”

She just frowned, then snorted with a shake of her head, “It don’t matter what I think. Matters what Momma thinks.” She looked at me speculatively, then shook the water off her coat. Rubbing her nose, she finally said, “Tell you wut. You think these Harbingers ain’t no good, tell her yerself.”

“Me?” I blinked. “How?”

Bluebelle gave a casual shrug. “Momma don’t come down into the valley often, but with the war and all, she’s hangin’ round Bullfrog Springs. You trot northeast of here and you’ll find it by the river. Bein’ a Reaper, they probably let you in. Jus’ tell ‘em yer there ta share a drink with Momma.”

I looked past them at the other three. “What about the Burner Boys, Halfhearts, and Flashers?”

The ghoul pulled out a cigar, bit off the tip, flipped it into the air, and caught it in his teeth, swiveling the cigar to the edge of his mouth. A jerk of his head sent a ball of fire rolling up over our heads and nearly got him shot for the show. He took a puff and, then said casually, “If Big Daddy still has fighters like you... well, I guess it can’t hurt to stick with the gnarly old bastard.” The Halfheart stallion nodded his agreement.

“Thanks,” I said as I finally pulled myself to my hooves, water pouring out of my combat armor. I gave a careful shake; oh, ow. Bad movement with a skull fracture. “Oh, I feel like Deus skullfucked me with his guns.”

Candlewick chuckled and put his hoof on my rump. “Heh, somepony should’a told him your other end is more fun.” A shock ran up my spine from the simple contact, my nerves thrumming like a charged wire.

For one moment, I had limbs of flesh and blood. I had a heart that thundered in my ears. Lungs that gasped for breath as my throat was choked. My nethers strained and burned and ached from the force of what had occurred just a week ago. It took every ounce of restraint left in me not to kill Candlewick right there. “Don’t...” I said in a voice so strained it thrummed. Even when he did remove his hoof, I was still there on the *Seahorse*. Still hurting. A little souvenir I’d carry forever.

“Aw, come on, Security. Let me light your fire! You got a swee--” And then he patted my butt again. That was as far as he got before I whirled and leaped upon him, powering him back into the wall. My fingers came out as I hissed in rage, one hand forcing his flamer up and the other crushing his throat. The flamethrower sprayed a plume of fire thirty feet up the side of the wall, the orange licking around the pipes overhead and making the metal hiss with steam. His red eyes bulged as he struggled for breath.

Kill him or he's going to do it again. Kill him or he'll hurt you. Crush him and you can crush the pain. My brain hummed like a high-tension wire as I stared into his scarred and mottled face. I ignored Fluttershy and her plea. I could be kind when I thought I was going to die. Right now, my kindness was tapped out.

But I had plenty of rage. I was going to rip his head clean off! The green stallion and the unicorn mare were trying to pull my metallic hands off his throat. I looked at Dazzle, jumped into S.A.T.S., and targeted three magic bullets. Then I felt a sensation like an icepick through my skull as the spell fizzled badly. I felt the sickening crunch all over again. "I won't let you fuck me again... I won't..." I hissed at her, even though it made no sense. Her eyes widened in shock.

Then the mare said softly into my ear, "He's not one of the ones that ploughed you."

I looked over my shoulder at Dazzle as she struggled to pull my robofingers away and saw the shared look of pain in her eyes. I was about to kill a pony who, while he might be bad, certainly hadn't done what had hurt me so much. A part of me didn't care. A part of me wanted him dead. He'd touched me back there. He'd made me remember it! Made me feel it again! I should rip off his undead head and...

...wait. Ghouls didn't choke, right?

I released his throat, and he coughed and struggled for breath. The flamer cut off and I released it as well, the wall and ceiling above us still burning from the sticky flamer fuel. My fingers were blackened, the tips glowing cherry red. I hadn't even noticed... for once, I didn't feel anything at all. As I backed away, he collapsed in a heap and just concentrated on breathing. He wasn't a ghoul... just a pony who'd somehow been burned badly enough to look like one. I dropped back onto all fours, my hoof hissing as it was quenched in the water.

I turned and looked at Dazzle. I felt ashamed and dirty. Like I really had killed him rather than simply attacked him. Worse, a part of me still growled to finish him off. It wasn't like the Dealer; this was inside me. Something I couldn't escape.

Something that was getting stronger and harder to control.

"You okay, Candlewick?" I asked as he sprawled there.

"Oh, fine," he rasped. "Just... breathing. That's quite a fine thing. I get it now... no touchie."

"Yeah. No touchie," Dazzle agreed.

Busted Heart wasn't watching, though. He looked out at the dark maze of dripping pipes and rusting vats and barrels and said firmly, "You hear that?"

I looked around. I didn't hear it, but I could definitely see it: red bars. I supposed a flamer going off and lighting up the inside of a building would attract some attention.

"Crap. Seekers." I couldn't make an accurate count as the bars kept moving but I assumed it was 'a lot'. "Does this place have a back door? They're only after me. If I run, they shouldn't--"

"Run?" Bluebelle looked at me like I'd said a dirty word. "Yer jokin', right? And here I was just

startin' ta get bored."

I looked at the four of them, then at the red bars. The many, many red bars. "You're sure?"

Candlewick clicked something on the flamer several times. Then there was a soft 'pwuuuu' as a tiny blue flame reignited over the muzzle. He picked up his soggy cigar and sighed before he tossed it over his shoulder. "Well, my cigar's toast, so I need to smoke something." Then he grinned. "Besides, these assholes are trotting all over our turf like they own it!"

The lavender mare nodded her agreement. "We'll show these Harbingers that they got to show the gangs proper respect."

Busted Heart simply shrugged. "Alive or dead, no difference to me."

"Well it is to me," I replied. "Don't kill them if they run." Once again, I got that 'Blackjack is saying crazy things' look. "I mean it. If they run, let them." Please, please run.

There was the bang of a door opening. "She's got to be in here somewhere. Find her!" snapped a stallion.

I nodded towards the catwalks above, and Dazzle and Busted Heart immediately made their way to the stairs up. Being that this was a factory of some kind, there were, of course, catwalks. Having those two up there would be some decent precision support. That left me, Candlewick, and Bluebelle down below. There were all sorts of entrances to the building; we couldn't bottleneck them into any one. I didn't even know the layout of the place.

This was going to be up close and messy. I drew the sword, taking a moment to marvel at its edge. Even after all this time, it still wasn't weakened or damaged in the slightest. Then I drew Vigilance and loaded it with armor piercing rounds. Up above, I spotted Busted Heart taking a position behind some drums.

And then I spotted our enemy. They weren't fighters; they looked like Flank refugees given guns and shoved through the door. Some fucker had given them all brand new nine millimeter pistols and not the slightest bit of armor.

I looked at Candlewick between the pipes. "Hold your fire," I shouted over the drizzle, then stepped out. I had no idea which red bars were real threats and which were these wretched and weak things. I jumped up onto a pipe where they could see me and looked down at them all as I brandished my sword and pistol. "I don't want to fight you," I said calmly.

"We... we have to kill you. We have to... or we won't get into the city," a unicorn said, then peeked over her shoulder. "And... I don't think they'll let us out of here alive if you are."

"Sucks to be you," Candlewick said with a grin from behind me.

"Throw down your weapons and find a way out of the other side of the building." I tried to do all I could to will them to give up. The dirty brown unicorn mare met my gaze and tossed her gun away. A few seconds later, the rest did as well. Instantly, a whole knot of bars went from red to blue. And funny, why were there a whole lot of red bars behind a section of solid wall? As the fodder ran back behind us, I pointed at the wall and ducked behind some pipes.

The explosion blew out a ten foot hole in the wall, and before the dust settled, a half dozen ponies in combat armor stormed through. Unlike before, these ponies seemed to know what they were doing as they rushed in intent on blowing my head off.

Then a column of burning flamer fuel gave them something else to worry about. I'd never really heard a pony scream quite like that as they scattered and some tried to put themselves out in the water covering the floor. The chemicals floating on top ignited in eerie pools of blue and green flame. I didn't hesitate to fire now; a bullet was a greater mercy than burning to death. Busted Heart seemed to be of the same sentiment. One managed to get clear only for Bluebelle to applebuck her back into the blazing flame.

If they wanted my head, they'd need to work for it.

From multiple entrances came shots as they penetrated the interior of the building in pairs and trios. Now they were moving from cover to cover, firing bursts with their assault carbines. Clearly these ponies had a lot more experience fighting, and we backed off into the pipes and vats, the tangled web of machinery and metal forcing them to break up. I charged around a corner and slashed the face of a stallion with the blade while placing three S.A.T.S.-guided armor piercing rounds through another mare's helmet. Then the blade arched and stabbed deep into his chest, and I thought I could almost feel it hum as he died and slid off the tip.

The sticky flamer fuel didn't care about obstructions. Candlewick kept them from meeting up and working together as he sent fire licking around the pipes. Even with all the water sloshing around our hooves, he set lakes of burning flames licking around the legs of our opponents.

A round bit into my back, slamming me face down in the muck, and I heard a mare shout out "Bullseye!" Fortunately, there was a ceramic plate there that absorbed most of the force, shattering in the process, and she hadn't thought to load armor piercing rounds. Still, the impact sent an electric tingle throughout my body and smacked me into the pipes in front of me. Last time I'd gotten shot there, it hadn't worked out nearly so well. I looked back over my shoulder at the earth pony mare with the AM rifle on her saddle, who blinked, realized that I wasn't quite dead, and prepared to rectify that. Then a crimson beam touched her head and a fiery red reaction converted her into a heap of soggy ashes.

"Dusted!" whooped the lavender mare, getting several blasts of gunfire sprayed wildly up at her for her trouble. She scrambled away along the catwalks as fast as she could. I took several precious seconds to give my body a chance to regenerate and recover a bit from that shock to my spine. Whooo, that had been too close!

While their attention was on her, I popped around the corner, carefully sighted, and sent two rounds into the throat of a stallion trying to strafe Dazzle. And as we fought, I began to feel it. We were five very different ponies. I really didn't think we even liked each other that well, and we all had dramatically different styles of combat. But despite all that, we were truly working together. Our enemy was vastly better armed than us and had the numbers, but their imposed uniformity wasn't enough.

We had harmony... and they didn't.

They fell back through the building's entrances, and I made my way to Candlewick. The reek of flamer fuel rose up from him as he pulled a tank from his saddlebag. "Reload me," he said as he jerked his bit and sent the old tank off into the water.

I slapped the new one home in the flamer, and there was a hiss and gurgle. “How are you doing?”

“Making barbeque,” he replied with a grin as he adjusted a knob on the weapon. “These little ponies might have lots of bang bangs, but they can’t beat a solid fwoosh.” His scarred hide stretched as he grinned.

“How’d it happen?” I asked as I gestured at him. He looked around a moment, then at me in slight confusion.

“You want to ask this now?” He seemed a little incredulous. Hey, we weren’t getting shot at just this second, and I hated waiting. He shrugged. “Not all that much to it. Lived in a little settlement out near a place called Appleloosa. Got hit by raiders. We holed up in the farmhouse. They burned us out. Pa tried to charge ‘em and Ma shoved me out the back window. Then she and the rest of my brothers got cooked.” He shook his head sadly before looking at the nearest door.

“So how’d you hook up with the Burner Boys?” I asked as I watched the red bars outside. I imagined them talking about how they would go after me next. Most of the blue bars had disappeared; I really hoped that they’d managed to get clear.

“Natural fit,” he said as he spurted a few little arcs of burning flamer fuel. “I look like a half-cooked ghoul. Every Burner Boy does... even the girls.” He caught my shocked look and grinned again. “What? We ain’t the Halfhearts. We accept any pony that’s maimed, burned, or just butt-ass ugly and looking to give back some hurt. That’s what burns inside us. Doesn’t hurt we got whole tankers of flamer fuel in the refineries around here. So that’s our thing.”

“Yeah... still amazes me, though, that you use a flamer after what happened to you. I guess you must love fire a little to use it like that,” I said as I looked at the burning puddles bobbing on the water.

He scowled at me. “Love it? I fucking hate fire. Scares the piss out of me,” he said as he adjusted the knob. “But if I can face it with this, what the fuck is left in the Wasteland that could possibly bother me?” I really couldn’t answer that. Besides, the red bars were moving again, only what were they doing? Zigzagging back and forth and going... higher...

“They’re going to come in from up above.” I scrambled for the stairs to the catwalks. Bad as those AM rifles were down here, I didn’t want to imagine them firing down and pinning us. I made my way up the catwalk and saw Busted Heart and Dazzle looking down. “The roof!” I yelled, pointing at a half dozen red bars. Instantly the pair turned their sniper and beam rifles to where I indicated.

A second later, there was another cluster of explosions that filled the air with smoke and dust as four holes in the roof were breached. Then the red bars dropped down. Vigilance and the sword went away, and I pulled out Duty and Sacrifice. There wasn’t nearly enough cover for my liking as snipers with AM rifles opened fire; at the moment they were firing blind, but the smoke was clearing fast from the rain pouring in. If these ponies ever got their hooves on some PipBucks, then I’d really be scared.

The sniper rifle ‘pfft’ed repeatedly, barely audible over the crack of the beam rifle. I fired in unison at the red bars and was rewarded by the sight of a pony in combat armor tumbling down into the pipes below. More were coming in from down there; I could only hope that Candlewick and Bluebelle were up to taking them out.

When the smoke cleared enough, I saw the unicorns turning their rifles towards us and unloading with heavy fire. I ducked behind a barrel, a bullet punching clean through and peppering me with fragments as the waterlogged container sent up fountains of liquid. Then I leaned out to the side, slipped into S.A.T.S., and put four bullets into the chest of one of the rifle ponies.

To my amazement, Busted Heart hadn't tried to duck behind cover. He was biting the mouthgrip of the rifle casually, resting it on his foreleg as he leaned against the barrel. The fifty caliber bullets buzzed past us, but he simply sighted down his scope and with a soft 'pfft' dropped one of the unicorns. "Are you crazy?" I shouted at him.

"They're using anti-machine rifles. They're designed to shoot at dragons and war robots, not ponies. They're not even using their scopes," he said in obvious contempt. "They have no discipline. Just big guns."

"What if one of them gets... I don't know... lucky?" I asked as another round blasted the top off the drum I hid behind and drenched me.

He didn't move in the slightest as he sighted again and calmly fired another shot. "Then they kill me, and I've lost nothing. If I kill them, they lose everything."

I popped up and, using S.A.T.S., put four more of the massive bullets into one of the unicorns. "Except that if they kill you, you're dead!"

He didn't blink or look away. "In the fullness of time, we are all dead." A bullet glanced off my helmet, sending me staggering sideways for a moment; okay, Blackjack! Maybe this really wasn't a good time to find out about the Halfhearts!

I stared at Dazzle, but the unicorn simply shrugged. Apparently, this wasn't all that unusual, however incomprehensible it might be. The three of us focused our fire on the remaining unicorns with their heavy rifles. Smaller caliber bullets sparked and chewed around my hooves, fired from below, but a brutal minute later, the fighting was done. We'd killed the ones that had dropped down, and the ones below had pulled back again. Damn, how many were there? According to my E.F.S., the answer was 'lots'. The Harbingers had no lack of recruits. They could just keep throwing ponies at me till one of them got lucky.

I pressed my head against the cool metal rail, letting a stream of water patter down on my it. It felt nice. My head was aching and I felt... wrong. Not pain so much as something else. I felt a hoof on my shoulder, and I looked up at Glory... no. Not Glory. I blinked my eyes and looked at the lavender unicorn. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." It was a lie, and she knew it, but she nodded and wiped her wet pink mane out of her eyes. I frowned up at her. "How'd you know... I mean... what happened to me?"

"Been there. Done that," she replied as she ejected the spent battery and tossed it away. "Most Flashers have... or something like that."

"Really?" I asked as I shook the spent brass from Duty and Sacrifice.

"Oh sure. Ploughed hard or beaten, or both. It happens. If they don't want it to happen again, they join the Flashers," she said as she slipped a fresh power source into the beam rifle and closed the

breech. "My own father ploughed me, then sold me." She gave a little mirthless smile. "I was originally from Fallen Arch."

"You... oh..." I remembered the look on the mare's face before she'd blown into pieces before my eyes.

"Yeah. I heard you finally took it out. A lot of Flashers were glad you did. We'd been planning a stomp sometime after the war settled down, but you beat us to it," she said, giving a little half smile. "And before you start apologizing, don't; I wish that my mom and sister had gotten out of there... but that doesn't matter. What matters is that finally... finally... somepony stopped it. I might wish we got the chance ourselves, but it's better this way. And I know my mom and little sister are happier for it."

"But... what about the whole 'you keeping male slaves for breeding'? How is that any different?" I asked with a little frown, and she snorted.

"Why do people keep spreading those stupid sex slave stories? Honestly!" Dazzle huffed. "We don't. We keep a few males around that we know won't hurt us. A few others we take for a fling and let them go. A few years back we had a stomp with the Long Saddles. Absorbed most of their mares, and, as a joke, enslaved their stallions for a few weeks."

"And then gelded some of them afterwards." Busted Heart kept his eyes on the holes in the roof, but Dazzle flushed. "Sold the rest to the Society."

"Yeah, well, some of them deserved it. Anyway, we got rid of most of the males. Lot of them joined the Burners, and there's been bad blood ever since." Dazzle looked at the Halfheart. "Anyway, I wouldn't say Flashers would never ride a buck, but we don't plough 'em like they did us. We're the best chance for a mare on her own." True, Turnip hadn't exactly been a bloody and bruised mess when we'd saved him... but the rest of what I'd seen and heard at Flash Industries made me think that Dazzle's description might be a bit more rosy than the truth.

I thought of Roses and Thorn. Would she have eventually sought solace with the Flashers? I liked to imagine her turning over a new life in Chapel, but could she have made it a home? Or would she have reverted to slaving soon as I left her behind? Or become a slave herself again? As horrible as what happened to the mare and her child had been, I couldn't imagine a whole lot of other options for her.

I saw Dazzle looking at me curiously. "I got ploughed when I was in a bad way. After blowing up the *Celestia*... I was trying to protect a filly from my stable from getting hurt too. So I kept them on me. And they were more than happy to. My friends got back before they were able to kill me off, but... it was bad. Really bad."

"Damn," she murmured, shaking her head. "Well, I never would have thought Security went through things like that. Guess it can happen to any mare at the wrong time and place." 'It can happen to *anypony*,' I wanted to say. Then she snorted. "I still can't believe you dropped a building on Diamond Flash, though."

"I didn't. Something took over and used the beams in her room and... well... sliced the floor to pieces. I just happened to be there," I said with a sheepish little smile. "Actually, she got vaporized before the floor even fell."

"Seriously? I'm going to have to smack Strobe upside her head. She told me she watched you

drop it on her. Liar.” She snorted and stood. “Well, with all the fighting going on, we evacuated to the wings. Warehouse and offices were just fine so we moved there. Coulda been a lot worse.” She snickered softly. “And you glued Lightstick’s hooves to the floor. Priceless!” I joined her laughter.

Two weeks ago, the Fillies had been trying to kill me. Now she was laughing about the time I attacked her base. It seemed a touch surreal. Would I someday be laughing like this with some member of the Harbingers or the Enclave? I didn’t know if that was something for me to look forward to or not.

“Funny as this is, shouldn’t we be keeping an eye out for their next attack?” Busted Heart asked. Dazzle gave a sour little frown that the taciturn buck ignored. My E.F.S., however, didn’t see them massing anywhere. They were all spread out around us in a half circle.

We needed an actual view outside. I looked at the holes that the Harbingers had blown in the roof. “Want a boost up there so you can see what you can see?” He gave a single nod.

I stood beneath the hole and let him clamber onto my back. He jumped and hooked his hooves on the edge of the hole. Then I lifted him up, standing on my hind legs as I pushed him out onto the roof. I jumped and grabbed the edge with my fingers and, kicking and swaying, clambered up next to him. I tried levitating one of the AM rifles, but my magic flickered and died, the weapon falling to the refinery floor. I still wasn’t completely recovered. The rain beat down on both of us, but he didn’t say a word of complaint as he crept towards the edge.

They were just standing out in the rain, waiting. For what? There were twenty or thirty down there; more than enough for a good push. Maybe they were out of ideas? Waiting for reinforcements? Pegasi? Oh, that was a nice thought, and I found myself scanning the skies. Nothing but rain and flickers of lightning in the heavy clouds.

“So... what’s your story? I mean, I’ve heard of the Halfhearts, but I don’t...” I started, then caught his hard look he gave me before returning to looking through his scope. “Don’t want to talk about it, huh?”

“Why do you?” he asked as he scanned the small pairs and trios of Harbingers. “Why do you care? You’re not a ganger. You’re a meddler. And since you’ve arrived, you’ve been nothing but trouble.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. My ears drooped a little. “Cause... I don’t know... I never heard about it from the gangs themselves. I never knew anypony in a gang before. Not till I met Dusty Trails. I mean, the whole ‘trying to kill me’ thing was bad, but when I got to know them... well... things were better.”

He sighed softly, then said low and steadily, “Fine. Here is all you need to know. Every Halfheart has lost somepony they loved. A wife. A mother. A sister. Every one of us. And so we stay together to make sure we’re not consumed by that pain before it’s time. Because every Halfhearter wants to be reunited with the pony they lost. That’s my gang in a nutshell. And no, you don’t need to know who I lost. That’s private. We don’t share it. Happy? Understand now?” he asked without taking his eyes off the scope. Wow... an entire gang of P-21s... or at least what P-21 would have become without Scotch Tape.

“I guess so,” I said as I looked to the north. I could see why they hadn’t surrounded the building yet; the east and south sides were a tangle of rusted pipe and fallen reinforcement. “I just... do you really want to die that badly?” I asked as I picked my way to the edge. There were a few more options for escape; the pipes running from the roof to the next building over; but that narrow walk had no cover from

snipers.

He let out a soft hiss of annoyance, but then muttered, "More than you can possibly imagine." Then he looked at me and relaxed his eyes a little bit. "But... if I just checked out, it would break her heart, too." The moment passed, and his teal eyes hardened again as he peered through his scope. I suspected that that was all I was ever going to get from him.

Burner Boys taking in the ugly and disfigured? Flash Fillies as a refuge for mares who'd been victims? Halfhearters dealing with the pain of loss to stave off suicide? Things had been so much simpler when they'd all just been Bad Ponies. But they weren't bad. And they weren't good, either. They were just trying to get by in the deadliest city in the Wasteland. I could respect that.

My magic's strength wasn't sufficient to swing Taurus's rifle around, so I copied his style and braced it with my forelegs and shoulder as I slowly panned across the Harbingers amassed outside. Not a lot of talking... just a whole lot of waiting. For a moment, I rested the crosshairs on the head of an unaware mare. I could kill her right now; take out one of my enemies. I shuddered and pointed the gun away. No, I'd never be a sniper.

"See anything?" I asked, feeling a momentary vertigo that made me lurch.

"There's something up on the road," he said with a frown. "What is that?"

I peered through the hunting rifle's scope... Yeah, there was some kind of dark shape up there that wasn't there before. It was hard to make out through the rain but... it moved.

I felt cold pour down my spine. I'd seen a shape that big move like that. Over the hiss of the rain, I heard the low mechanical growl.

The tank was with the Harbingers.

* * *

Busted Heart and I dropped back into the large refinery building, landing on the catwalks. "Out. We need to get out! Right now!" I yelled as I dropped onto the walkway. "Candlewick! Where's the back door?"

"Huh? Why? What's going on? Are they coming again?" the scarred stallion asked.

"They've got a tank!" I yelled as I ran for the stairs nearest him and Bluebelle.

"A tank of what?" he asked back.

"Not a tank *of* something. A tank!" I yelled down at him.

Then there was a half second whine and a wave of air knocked me on my face as smoke, mist, dust, and steel filled the air. The impact, or something, must have set something off in my PipBuck, because suddenly I couldn't hear a thing. A second blast nearly threw me from the catwalk as I yelled for everypony to get out, the tongue of metal swaying ominously. I smacked the leg containing my PipBuck against the walkway to try and fix my hearing.

Instead, it started playing music. Low soft contrabass filled my hearing as the building was blown

apart around me and the four ponies that had fought on my behalf. Shells ripped through the north wall trailing dust and smoke, plugging through the pipes and blasting them in expanding balls of fire, steam, and steel. The catwalk gave way over my head as the north wall began to come down completely in blinding smoke and dust and rain. The chemicals that remained in the vats became creeping pools of fire that spread every which way.

I was dumped face down in the water, bouncing as the catwalk tumbled down atop me. I struggled to stand, looking back over my shoulder as pieces of the building were annihilated bite by explosive bite, the shrapnel flying through the clouds of smoke and dust drawing lines that lingered in the air. I got to my hooves screaming... something. Names, I hoped. My E.F.S. was full of red and precious little blue.

Lines of gunfire filled the air, drawing back and forth as the tank dropped what was left of the ceiling on top of us. Apparently they were simply going to blast me to pieces and fish my PipBuck out of the rubble. Again I was blown off my hooves, flopping end over end before I came to rest in a crater. Water pooled about my throat as I stared up into the gray Hoofington sky. I couldn't think. Couldn't move. I could only listen to the contrabass's soft, mournful melody as hell exploded around me.

A pony in dark green combat armor climbed up to the lip of the hole I was in. I couldn't tell if it was mare or stallion. I could see the water dripping slowly from the barrels of the assault rifles on their battle saddle. Saw the flare of light reflecting off the watery sheen. Saw the jaw tightening on the bit in their mouth.

Saw a blue mare tackle him from the side and knock him back. Bluebelle looked down at me, her lips moving silently as she glared down at me.

Then I saw a spray of red erupt out the side of her chest as a bullet punched clean through. Her eyes went wide as she fell to her knees, and a second spray went out. A third. The pony she'd pushed aside slowly twisted around towards her.

There was one more explosion: me. I lunged out of the water, my sword slipping smoothly into my magic's grip as it speared up through the armored collar of the pony's combat barding and emerged out the far side. I twisted the blade around completely and took their head off. I don't know what I was screaming now. All I could hear was Octavia's music, a piece from her peace concert, if I remembered correctly. I scrambled up the muck and rubble to the lip where Bluebelle lay dying, bleeding out bright streamers of red. Her bar hadn't disappeared. Not yet.

But there were three ponies approaching through the smoke, dust, and rain aiming to change that. I leapt upon the closest before she could react. Her assault rifles chattered away to either side as I grabbed her battle saddle bridle with my thumbs and stared right into her horrified red eyes. Then I stamped Vigilance to the side of her skull and blew her brains out.

She didn't even completely fall as I whirled toward the next. The unicorn was bringing an AM rifle to bear, but at this point I wasn't thinking that far anymore. I charged straight at the unicorn as she tried to use her remaining seconds to kill me. But I lifted a glob of muck and threw it in her face as she fired. I felt a warm wet sensation in my side, and turned to look at the third trying to pump every bullet into me. There was no pain as he emptied his magazines into my barding. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and saw the look of horror etched on his face.

Three shots, executed. I watched as that look of horror was transformed into ground meat. I

couldn't hear anything but the music; could only feel water and blood and rage. I turned back to the unicorn as she tore her helmet off and I could see her crimson gaze. I charged towards her as she brought the AM rifle tip up. Busted Heart had been right: this wasn't a weapon for fighting ponies. It was slow and heavy.

And right now I moved at the speed of death.

Her lips moved soundlessly as I closed the distance. She wasn't going to be able to bring the weapon up in time... it didn't even look like she was trying. The sword glittered in front of me as I charged. She raised her hooves, her eyes wide. Then I plunged the sword straight into her chest up to the hilt. My forelegs grabbed her, ready for a second stab. And a third if I needed.

My ears crackled, and the music disappeared. I could hear the groan of steel and the chatter of bullets and the fwoosh of a flamer somewhere. "I give up..." the unicorn murmured in my ear. I turned to her, watching the blood flowing out her mouth. I could feel the blade humming in my magical grasp as I slowly pulled it free. I could hear a screaming, distant and constant and unmistakable as I looked down at the bloody blade and saw glowing white wisps of mist slipping off the metal.

Just like the starmetal rod.

I stared at it a moment, listening to its tiny little metallic hum. It seemed to be asking me, wasn't I happy? Hadn't this been what I wanted?

I dropped it into the muddy water, the little unicorn on the hilt barely poking up above the surface. That was then... this is ten seconds later...

"Damn. You really are a Reaper," I heard Bluebelle cough, trying to lift herself to her hooves. I ducked under her foreleg and supported her as we hobbled to the corner. "You could have killed all four of us if you'd wanted to, couldn't you?"

"I have no wish to fight you," I replied. She was bleeding out her mouth as well, and I dug into her saddlebags. I found some healing potions, but they were clear as piss and just as useful. My own I'd handed over to Glory back in the hospital; after all, only Rampage and I had regeneration talismans. Why hadn't I tried to get Lacunae to teach me that healing spell? Why hadn't I even bothered to try?

"Glad for that, now," she coughed, looking at my rifle, and then her lip curled in a half smile.

Then Dazzle staggered through the mud and muck. "Candlewick's trying to find a way out. The back doors are all covered in rubble." Her lilac eyes widened at the holes in Bluebelle.

"Can you help her?" I asked, and Dazzle balked a moment. "Can you help her, Dazzle?" I yelled.

"Yeah. Sure," she said as she dug in her bags for a dark purple healing potion, floating it to Bluebelle. The mare drank eagerly, and the bleeding cut off immediately. She pulled out a second and offered it to me, but I shook my head.

"Healing magic doesn't work so well on me. I'll be fine with time." Indeed, my own bleeding had already stopped. We hefted her to her hooves as Candlewick came out of the smoke and haze. A fresh cigar was smoking at the corner of his mouth. "Tell me there's a way out of here," I said to him as I looked around the remains of the building.

He looked grim as he pointed up with his hoof. The pipes that had stretched over to the adjoining building now angled down into this one. One tank shell, even some strafing, and we'd be toast. There was no cover up there. I could hear the war machine's engine revving, the deep, ominous noise now much closer. There were more red bars coming towards the largest gap in the building. "We need time. Can you block that with fire?"

He looked thoughtfully at the gap. "Yup." Then he ejected the tank of flamer fuel. I pulled out a fresh cylinder of the potent fuel and started to load it when he shook his head. "Nope. Pull them all out." I frowned as I did and watched as he handed them to Bluebelle. "Give 'em a toss." And then he turned to me. "Shoot 'em with an armor piercer." I just frowned, but then nodded. The blue mare tossed them with that unerring accuracy that P-21 had demonstrated, and I blasted one with the AP round. Instantly it started to hiss and spurt rainbow fuel wildly. We repeated it three more times before Candlewick nodded. "Light her up," he said to Dazzle as the first Harbingers picked their way into the building.

The unicorn shot the rainbow slick with her beam rifle. Instantly there was a great 'Fwoosh!' as it ignited and created a brilliant wall of flame; already there were a few painful screams of Harbingers caught in the fire. "Ooooh..." I cooed, unable to help myself. Pretty... Then I ducked as the tank and the Harbingers outside began to strafe through the flames with bullets. I just hoped for a few minutes without shells.

"We got around three minutes till that burns down. Maybe less. And we got another big problem..." He started away towards the base of the ramp. Dazzle helped Bluebelle make her way along the unsteady ground. I hung back a moment and looked at the sword poking out of the water. Slowly, I lifted it and stared at the weapon. The water, mud, and blood dripped slowly off as the rain pattered down on it. I stared at the flames dancing along the edge and still imagined that faint scream coming off the metal.

At least, I hoped it was my imagination.

I put it away; I'd have to deal with it later. I followed the others up to the fallen pipes that had once carried fluids into and/or out of the smashed building. There were some kind of metal mesh plates on top of them, a walkway for inspecting the pipes. Only wide enough for one pony at a time. That was definitely a problem...

But, I quickly realized as I saw the green Busted Heart, it wasn't the biggest problem. He reclined amidst a pile of wreckage, eyes closed and lips pressed together in pain as a ton of pipes and metal crushed his hind legs. I scrambled over and started trying to pull the rubble around his limbs away; it was wedged tightly. "Come on! Help me!"

The rest looked at me with a mix of amazement as I struggled to free him.

"Get going," Busted Heart said over the crackle of flame and the popping of bullets against the rock. That engine was getting louder. The others hesitated, but he glared at them. "Go. Now!" Candlewick and Bluebelle started up the pipes.

"Need a flash?" Dazzle asked, lifting her beam rifle. The green pony looked thoughtful, and I rounded on her.

"We are not killing him! We're saving him! Security saves ponies!" I shouted at her. "I'm not leaving another pony trapped!" I could see Dusty Trails all over again! I shoved against the pipes and

scraped at the rocks around his legs with my fingers. Neither moved.

"Security... he's dusted," was all Dazzle said. They knew it. I knew it. The difference was that they could accept it. The lavender mare started up with the rest.

I scrabbled at the rock as he looked at me with the smallest smile on his face. "Gamble." I blinked and looked at him in confusion. "That was her name. Gamble. She was a lot like you. We grew up together. Wandered the Wasteland searching for adventure." He sighed. "We were in a mine... lots of ghouls... really unstable. There was a cave in... she was pinned..."

I shook my head and shoved again against the mass of fallen pipes. Was it my imagination, or did it shift? Maybe a little? A hair? "I'm not leaving you to die!"

"And that's exactly what I told her," he said softly as he stretched out his forehoof and hooked the strap on his sniper rifle, pulling it towards him. The grinding became even louder. Something dark began to move through the flames. "And so I'm going to tell you what she told me. You're going to go. You're going to live. Because I want you to."

I beat against the metal with my hooves before I looked down at him and saw the happy look on his face. "I want to save you," I muttered as the end of the tank breached through the flames.

"Sometimes you can't. Sometimes there's nothing left to save. And sometimes, the pony you need to save is yourself." He sighted at the tank with the sniper rifle, bracing it against the metal pinning his limbs. "She bought me time to escape the ghouls. Gave me a chance." He chuckled. "Now I'm gonna give it to you. Take care, Security."

I jumped on the ramp and looked back at him. "My name is Blackjack."

He nodded once. "Lemongrass."

Then I was scampering up the ramp as fast as my hooves could carry me as the tank rolled the rest of the way into the blasted-out refinery. It was as I remembered: a huge trapezoid of steel with a swept-back turret pointing twin heavy cannon barrels. Two smaller machine guns were mounted in smaller turrets at the front, with socketed cameras above them like spider eyes. The black and white zebra stripes seemed to dance in the flames as it ignored the bonfire. A spotlight on the turret snapped to life and began to sweep along the ruins as little cameras whirled in their tiny sockets. The machineguns started to elevate up towards me.

Then there was a sharp crack, and the spotlight went dark. The engine revved and roared with frustration as the machine fired wildly. The chattering streams of death found the fallen pipes and began to blast along them as the cameras oriented upon me. Then there was another sharp crack, and one of the cameras exploded in a shower of sparks. It reversed the movement of the autoguns and strafed them back along the row of pipes. I was halfway up when I balked and looked back. The green pony had disappeared in a shower of dust.

"No..." I murmured, and then I paid for my hesitation. The tank pointed its remaining cameras at me and turned all its weapons up at me, including its two massive main cannons.

Then there was another loud crack, and another of the socketed cameras exploded. The tank fired low, the shells detonating beneath me. The entire ramp lunged up and then collapsed. I popped out

my fingers and grabbed the mesh to keep from falling. I was now climbing more than walking as I kicked and pulled my way up, looking back at Lemongrass. His left forehoof was a bloody mess, blood darkening his yellow mane and hiding his left eye as he kept his discipline and focus on the tank.

Another burst raked him, and I clung to the grate. The tank growled, and when the dust cleared I saw the sniper rifle was lying to the side, bent and shredded. I looked and saw his green eye meeting mine. Then I saw him look up at one of the unicorns' AM rifles, dangling by its strap from a twisted bit of steel catwalk. He smiled and then tossed a rock up with his free hoof. It knocked the AM rifle free, and it fell right into his outstretched hoof. The barrel thunked down against the pipes and he braced it, biting hard on the mouthgrip and sighting down the scope.

He and the tank fired as one, and two new flowers of fire bloomed. The base of the right cannon exploded out in a fan of fire and metal. The tank engine squealed as half its turret was peeled open and gushed flame. The massive mechanical monster peeled back through the wall, and I saw a few red bars wink out as it tore into the open. Slowly, finally, I reached where the pipes bridged the gap to the next factory over, then looked back.

Nothing remained but a gold broken-heart charm flickering in the fire's fading glow.

* * *

Given the havoc wreaked by the tank on the Seekers, it was no surprise we were able to get clear. Finally, we picked our way back down to ground level and started to go our separate ways. Candlewick would tell the Burners what had happened and that the Harbingers weren't to be trusted. He'd also pass Lemongrass's final act along to the Halfhearts. Something as epic as that needed to be remembered, and I'd buck anypony who said that Security had done it alone. Even if the tank would repair itself eventually, that was still an amazing shot. Dazzle would do the same for the Flash Fillies. I'd go with Bluebelle back to Bullfrog Springs. Even with the two healing potions, she still hadn't recovered from those shots.

Still, there was a little hesitation. For a while, we'd fought together. Maybe not as friends, but at least as comrades. It was hard to let that go. I wanted to return to Chapel and be with Glory and the others again. Let them help me... but I couldn't. I still felt that frantic panic scratching inside my skull like a radroach struggling to escape. The idea of stopping, of slowing down, still terrified me.

"Hope you come by the Flashers again. No dropping buildings on ponies, though. That's like, totally dust," Dazzle told me with crooked smile. She moved close, then murmured softly, "Don't get ploughed."

"I won't," I promised, and then surprised her with a hug. Apparently, gangers weren't big on impulsive sentimentality. She patted my back awkwardly and then backed away and started southeast, trotting towards the Flash Industries building. Candlewick lit another cigar, gave me a salute with his hoof, and headed further into the tangle of industrial buildings to the southwest. I took one last look towards the smoke rising to the west, the thick black-and-gray column cutting through the clouds as it rose.

I could still imagine that faint starmetal scream and see twisted pony faces in the distant rising smoke. I might have survived, but the Hoof had killed dozens more. In the end, dead was still dead, and I had done some of its work. I might not have been to blame, but I was still responsible.

"Come on. Let's go. T'aint far ta Yellow River," Bluebelle said as she started off to the northeast.

"Yellow River?" I asked, my ears perking.

"Yeah. Runs out of the highlands," she replied as she looked to the north and pointed with her hoof. We were right at the lip of the Hoofington valley, and to the northeast the land became less gray and more green and brown. There were mists and watery patches here and there like melted glass. There were also more craters glowing dimly with radiation and more scattered little half-sunken remains of suburbs. Cutting through it was a ribbon of muddy yellow water flowing out of the east. "The Mire. Trust me. Nasty place."

"Geee... nasty places around Hoofington. Who'da thunk it?" I sighed as we trotted forward. "And what particular flavor of nasty does this place have?"

"Cannibals," she replied evenly. "Ponies and zebra alike. Scum that looks at anything with four hooves as a meal trotting around. Hydras and hoppers and giant leeches, too. Radiation and taint and worse... the Quickenings."

Of course. Something worse. Wouldn't be the Wasteland without something worse. "Quickenings?"

"Some sort of zebra curse or talisman or... something. Went off during a battle a week before the bombs fell. Turned the ground to soup. There's no solid land in that bog, and you can be trotting along thinking you're on firm ground when suddenly you'll be sucked down and turned into a radigator snack." She rubbed her nose. "Lotta meat and the like besides. We hunt the edges every now and then."

I looked out to the east at the mountains and noticed something immediately... they weren't eroded like the ones to the west. There would be a flat topped ridge, then a flat valley, then a flat topped ridge, and then a valley, all very regular. As green as the Mire was, the highlands looked a lot more yellowed and bare. To the east of us was a large prewar building of some kind; a three-story horseshoe-shaped structure that looked like a hotel or something. It also looked intact and walled.

And then there was the mountain.

Funny, you'd think a pony would notice a great, big, black plug of stone. The rock seemed glossy and polished despite its rough edges and loomed up a mile separate from the ridges that formed Hoofington's eastern edge. Yet as much as it stood out, I had trouble focusing on any one part. My eyes weren't working too good anyway, though. The radoach was skittering around even more and I was seeing... something... moving in the corners of my vision. Shadows, but in the growing twilight, there really weren't many shadows to cast.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the large building. "It looks important."

"Eh, don't rightly know. Some sort of hospital used by the M.o.P. before the Fluttershy clinic was finished," she said with a dismissive snort. "Lotta robots, and ponies what go in don't come back out. So we stay out." Hmmm, perhaps a hospital where they were making diseases to infect zebras? A hospital Lighthooves might have picked over? I added it to the bazillion places I needed to visit before I died. Again...

"What about that?" I asked, pointing at the huge black mountain behind the hospital.

"What about what?" She blinked in confusion. I rolled my eyes and pointed at the sheer-sided crag again. She just shrugged. "That there is Black Pony Mountain," she said. "Not much else in this corner of the city. Y'all know 'bout Iron--"

"Wait..." I interrupted her. "What about Black Pony Mountain?" She looked at me blankly, and I pressed, "A mountain like that... it's got to have something going for it?" A swampy, soupy bog had some kind of zebra curse on it. The hospital had the ominous 'never leave' thing. There wasn't a prominent landmark in the whole damned city that didn't have some kind of scary, intimidating, or tragic backstory!

"It's big. It's black. It's a mountain. And somepony threw 'pony' in the name. That's about it," she replied flatly, then scratched her head. "A long time ago there used to be a big magic bear or something living in a cave there. I think somepony banished it, though. Or claimed to... I dunno. *Some* nasty critter lives somewhere around it, though. Best just to stay away." She gave a dismissive shrug, and I glanced back at it. As exceptional as it looked, I really couldn't see much else interesting about it. Just a great big black slug of rock.

"It's never just a rock with you, is it?" P-21 said behind me.

Wait, P-21? I whirled, starting to smile. How had he gotten here? Was he really over the Med-X? Maybe the Goddess had magicked...

Nothing. I stared at the empty yellow grass behind me.

"Are you okay?" Bluebelle asked.

I looked a moment longer, hoping that he'd pop out of thin air. That Glory would swoop out of nowhere and be gray and glorious. That Rampage would be here with a snide comment, or Scotch would say something that made Glory stammer so cutely. I wanted to see that kindly gaze in Lacunae's eyes as she watched silently from the edges. But there was nothing but the soft rustle of grass.

"Yeah. Sure," I lied, before putting mountain and voice out of my head. The radroach was getting sneaky as it crept around inside my skull. Still, I just had to hold it together. To try and take my mind off the scratchy feeling in my head, I asked, "So, why do all the mountains to the east look a bit off?"

"Coal minin'," she replied simply.

Wait. What? "I thought Equestria didn't have any coal!"

"You sure are some funny colors o' stupid," Bluebelle replied with a snort. "Of course Equestria had some coal. Little bit. Enough to run old trains and the like. What kind of idjit invents a coal-fired power plant when the coal's half way around the world? Be like inventing a chocolate milk rain bottling plant when there ain't no chocolate milk rain." I looked at the blue pony. She might be crude, but she sure wasn't stupid.

"So Equestria did have some natural coal deposits?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Yup. And ponies thought it was grand to light up all them great big cities, like magic for all pony folk. 'Course there were a mite bit o' confusion on the best way to do that. Hoofington had their dams ta run their power plants, but rivers don't run everywhere in Equestria. So they built a few coal plants. Then

a few more... and pretty soon their little old mines were just played out. So they came out east to the highlands.”

I frowned. “You mean the highlands weren’t a part of Equestria?”

She let out a snort of disgust. “Might have been on some fancy maps in Canterlot, but we’ve never been a part o’ the kingdom. When ponies came over from distant shores to settle Equestria, some earth ponies bucked Puddinhead’s idea and landed here instead. This was our land. No horns nor feathers. And fer centuries, that suited the Princess just fine. We had our mountains and valleys and didn’t raise too much trouble. But... we had coal.”

“So when the coal mines in Equestria got played out, they came to the Highlands?” I asked.

“Course! T’aint no reason to deal with faraway stripes when we were here. And they came with all kinds o’ talk ‘bout the Highlanders workin’ together with the city ponies. Told us they’d give us modern towns and fancy shops and make us all respectable pony folk. Guess that talk turned enough heads, because we let them. Only we found out that the kind of mining they planned wasn’t what we imagined. They blasted the tops of the mountains and dumped them into the valleys. Tossed tailings from the mines into the rivers. And they took the coal and built more power plants.”

“And your people let it happen?” I asked, aghast.

“Fer a time. And when we tried ta stop it, they dug out that map, told us we were subjects, pulled out fancy lawyerin’ words and contracts folks signed with some mighty fine print, and kicked us off our own land. Celestia gave us food so we didn’t starve or freeze, but that just made us feel like bums in our own homes. ‘Course, in ten years, even the highlands were played out. They ran out of mountain tops to scrape off, and while there were still seams deep down, twasn’t nearly enough to sate their hunger fer coal. More power. More electricity to light them big fancy cities. Not one word of usin’ less. Just more more more. ‘Progress’, they called it.” She sighed and shook her head. “Eventually they traded with the zebras. Them stripes have so much coal it’s ridiculous. And they gobbled it up right and left. But... then the zebras cut off Equestria.”

“And it was war,” I concluded as we hopped over a swollen drainage ditch cutting across the hillside. I always thought the idea of an entire nationwide power system rising on a distant resource was hard to believe. It hadn’t been the lack of coal that was the problem but the rampant addiction to comforts and excess in distant cities. The problem had built... and grown... until only trade with the zebras could supply the demand. When that broke down...

“War fer us started long before the stripes.” She spat to the side. “Didn’t have a chance to win, but we fought. Made ourselves a royal pain to tha power companies... Blew up tracks. Stole equipment. When the ministries started, some of us went to the Hoof for work and jobs. Better than getting ‘charity’ from Canterlot that only kept us from starving.” She rolled her eyes. “Course, stripes weren’t any better during the war. They promised us all kinds of things to get us to help ‘em out. Some folks did... damned fools. But stripes killed us no different than ponies did. When the bombs fell, it was the best damned day ever for the Highlands.”

I didn’t want to argue the cost. Really, I’d always thought of the war as being between the zebras and Equestria. I’d never imagined other parties getting ground up in the fighting. “So how have you survived since?”

"Like we did before the war. 'Course, the highlands ain't the same. We got whole lakes o' black water bunched up in choked valleys, and most of the rest up there is yellow with sulfur and lead. The ridges are flat, chewed stone nothin'll grow on. We live in the shantytowns left behind and keep to ourselves. We've had enough o' being a part of Equestria," she said flatly.

As we walked along down the slope, I looked at her. "So why were you in the Hoof?" The question made her look sour.

"Checkin' in on mah brother. He'd been a Reaper once, but I figger he's dead now," she said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?"

"On account y'all are carryin' his gun," she said as she pointed at the hunting rifle across my back. "Dozer loved that rifle... 'course, he loved anything that'd go boom. We used ta sit up on the ridge, and he'd toss dynamite or pick off hellhounds as they snuck outta the mines. Ornery critters," she said with a sigh. "So I reckon if yeh got it, either y'all killed him or somepony else did." Oddly, there wasn't any anger in her eyes. Just a sadness, as if she'd expected to find he'd come to such an end.

"Deus. He was a Reaper that was hunting me. Taurus died protecting me and two unicorns he was with," I said, glossing over the fact he was after my head and PipBuck himself. "He got blown up, though... Deus I mean."

"Darn. Woulda liked to take his head back ta Momma. Oh well... Dozer always was interested in trouble. Hellhounds or something else." She shook her head. "Dealin' with the Hoof is bad. Dealin' with anypony other than kin is bad. You can trust kin. Can't trust no pony else."

"You can trust some ponies," I countered, "and you don't always have to do things on your own."

"No?" She arched her brow, looking surprised. "Why're you out here all on yer lonesome then?"

That brought me up short. "You don't understand. My friends... they needed a break. And I..." I started to pace. "I just couldn't. I can't stop and rest like that. I have to keep going."

"So ya ran to deal with it on yer own. Ain't criticizing. It's what all us Highlanders want ta do," Bluebelle replied.

But... I wanted to add... I wasn't exactly doing so good on my own...

Ahead we were approaching a... something. At first glance, I wondered if it was some sort of base... but it didn't look quite right. There was a great rectangle of rusty, double-walled chain link fence topped with razor wire around the perimeter. There were towers every hundred feet with automated turrets on the top. Thankfully, none of them seemed to be moving around. Inside the rectangle was a squat concrete block building beside the front gate; the other structures inside the fence were all identical rusty buildings that looked like giant metal drums lying on their sides, half-buried in the ground. Each was surrounded by a second barbed wire fence. There were eight rows of twenty-five or so each. Further north, I could see more of the rusty rectangle facilities; most were obscured and sunken into the Mire.

'Yellow River Detainment Camp', read the concrete slab outside front gate.

But the thing that was most interesting to me was a battle going on that had absolutely nothing to

do with me. On the west side of the camp were a half dozen Enclave ponies in black power armor raking beams and disintegration bolts across the cover of a dozen zebras inside the fence on the east side of the camp. Bluebelle just sat down, cocking her head. "Well, piss on my leg and tell me it's raining. First time I ever saw something like this."

"I've seen worse. No manticores this time," I said as I thought back to the battle outside the fire station. I lifted Taurus's hunting rifle and viewed the spectacle. The zebras had snipers who moved like ghosts between the ruined metal arcs, but the pegasi had superior firepower. I didn't see either side gaining an advantage anytime soon. I looked at the large concrete block building. There was a pegasus corpse outside the front door and next to it three heaps of pink glowing residue. I spotted something large and black beside the slain pony: a metal case that had 'Warning: High Explosive' printed on the side.

"Well, best give 'em a wide berth and let 'em shoot it out," Bluebelle said as she rose.

"I need to get in there," I said with a frown as I looked down at the building below me.

"I reckon I smacked your noggin harder than I thought. Whatever for?" she asked with a baffled look.

"If the Enclave want to blow that building up, it's because there's something there worth hiding. If the Zebras want to blow that building up, it's because there's something worth hiding. Either way I want to know what it is. What is this place, anyway?" I asked as I looked at all the rusted huts. They all looked identical, as if they'd been made in a factory or something.

"Some place they stuck all the zebra prisoners of war. Put explodin' collars on 'em. Nothing worth dyin' over, though. Camp's been picked over solid." She frowned at me. "Yer dead set certain on going in there, aren'tcha?"

"Enclave doesn't blow up something worthless," I said with a smile, feeling my mane itch. "I want to take a peek inside there and find out what."

"Well, count me out. Ain't got no nevermind fer turkeys or stripes, and Momma'd spit her bit if I got turned ta a heap of pink goop," she said firmly as she looked past the camp towards the river. "Bullfrog Springs ain't far now. Should be all right by myself."

I looked at the tough mare with the deceptively gentle cutie mark of delicate blue flowers. "Listen, Bluebelle. I know you just met me. I know that I'm an outsider and you've got nothing but shit for working with outsiders. But please talk to your mother about the Harbingers. They won't leave you alone. I don't think they *can* leave ponies alone. They've got a need to suck everyone in." I wished I could explain that hum, the feeling of pulling everypony in together. Alien mind control, supernatural mass possession, or just social manipulation, I couldn't tell which anymore. "There's nothing good in the Core. Don't let your mother be tempted by what they offer her."

She frowned, looking at me skeptically. But then I passed the hunting rifle to her, and her eyes widened in shock. "Yer... You don't owe me Dozer's gun. Y'all had it fair, I reckon."

"Maybe. But he was your family. You should have something of his. That gun was never really mine anyway. I never even knew its name," I said as I looked down at the camp. "I was just carrying it a while till it could get home."

I'd touched her. Maybe she'd convince her mother and maybe not, but hopefully I'd convinced her. If it gave her family some peace and comfort, how could I not give it up? She put the rifle on top of her saddlebags, along her body. "Welp... after that, guess I might as well get my big blue butt in there." When I blinked in confusion, she just chuckled. "Between patching me up after getting shot and giving me Dozer's gun, I owe you enough to help you get out of there alive."

"You don't have to come with me. Honestly, I'm probably going to get shot by one side or the other. Maybe both, actually." Only a mare with a radroach scuttling around in her skull would smile when saying that. And I really, really didn't want her to die like Lemongrass had.

"Nothing doing. I'm comin'."

"But--"

"I done did make up mah mind, Blackjack."

I slumped in defeat. "Okay, but be careful. Don't get killed. And remember, you volunteered," I said, and she grinned like I'd made a joke. I didn't return it.

I was sick to death of getting ponies killed.

* * *

Getting to the camp was easier than I expected it to be. There wasn't much cover besides the grass, not even a drainage ditch to skulk along, so I'd expected to start catching zebra bullets and Enclave incineration beams pretty quickly. However, we were able to trot all the way up to the rusty gate without either side taking a shot at us. I supposed the growing darkness and pouring rain had something to do with that, and the fact that they were both busy with each other. Someone had cut a hole in the gate's chain link, but I suspected that this was recent. Most of the rest of the fences were still intact despite all the rain, though everything metal was almost a uniform reddish color, and everything else except the hut by the entrance was mud-colored.

Everything else except the bones.

They lay everywhere. In heaps and piles and stacks around the half-drum buildings. There were curved ribs and knobby leg bones and chunky vertebrae, though very few skulls. Bones hung on the razor wire surrounding the buildings. Others looked like they'd been perforated by the turrets for trying to escape. Somepony, maybe the prisoners, had painted strange masks and skull-like glyphs on the doors and walls of the buildings with the sticky yellow dirt that lay everywhere. Strips of hide dangled from the razor wire. I felt an ache growing in my chest; Enervation was stronger than usual here.

A bullet pinged off a metal rail nearby, not aimed at us, but there was no telling when one side or the other would stop shooting each other long enough to notice us and change that. We had to get inside quick before some zebra or pegasus decided that a pair of suicidal ponies was a nice bonus target. The explosive package had a strap that I bit and used to tug it onto my back; there was no way I was going to leave a big old bomb lying around for somepony to use while I was inside. Suddenly, I was dancing back as both sides decided that that was foul play!

Bluebelle tried to open the double metal doors leading into the large concrete block structure. They were locked, of course. Then she braced her forelegs and blasted them with four potent kicks that

buckled the metal around her rear hooves and showered us both with flakes of rust knocked off the door. Earth pony kicks were damned scary sometimes! On the fifth, there was a ping, and the doors swung inside. "Highlander lockpickin'!" she said as she rolled back into the confines of the room. I scampered inside as another bullet pinged off my helmet.

Why was everything targeting my poor head today? Stop rattling up the radroach, people!

The door banged shut behind us, and at once the speakers crackled and began playing strange, soothing music. The emergency lighting flickered to life, creating tiny pools of light between the regions of shadow. An immense sign hanging from the roof read 'Processing' next to a zebra glyph. There were large signs in zebra-writing mounted next to Pony translations. White plastic crates lay scattered around the room, many of them smashed or kicked into the corner. 'Place all your possessions in a white tote,' read one sign. 'Proceed down the hall single file,' read another. There was a large door, but it was heavily reinforced. It didn't even have a lock, instead having some sort of fancy card reader thing mounted on the wall next to it. No way we'd be picking that, even with Highlander lockpicking skills!

We moved down the hall; it was only wide enough to go single file. I came to a pair of white doors. There was a hiss and squeal as they popped open, revealing a second pair of doors in a space just big enough for a single pony. I stepped in, and a little voice said something in Zebra, then crackled, "Please state your name, unit number, tribe, and zebra registration number."

"Uh... Blackjack. Sixty-Nine. Stable 99. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten," I said sarcastically. I looked at the signs, but these were written entirely in Zebra. It asked me to repeat myself, and I did. Being a stable pony, claustrophobia wasn't one of my issues, but I had to admit being stuck in this closet-like space was unnerving.

"I'm sorry. We do not have that unit number or tribe on file. Please remain still and we will take you to Special Processing," the voice said. I didn't know if it was the bugs in my skull or a pink pony shouting a warning, but I ducked down as a metallic claw dropped from the ceiling and tried to put a collar around my neck. "Please remain still," the calm synthetic voice said, then repeated it in Zebra. It gave me a zap from little metal studs in the walls that would have staggered most ponies. I twisted around as the claw dropped and lifted a foreleg. The collar was wrapped around it and clicked closed.

Then everything went white.

I blinked several times as vertigo rattled the radroach and sent it scurrying while I faceplanted onto a heap of corpses. These were bodies that varied from rotten bones and hide to a pegasus that was fairly freshly preserved, minus his head. I appeared to be in a room almost perfectly cubical. Above me was some kind of talisman; teleportation? I looked around at a very sturdy door and a cracked window. 'Special Processing', I supposed.

Was it a really bad sign that standing in a room filled a third full with bodies really wasn't freaking me out like I thought it should?

Most of the corpses either wore collars and had bullet holes in the temple or back of the head or were missing necks and head entirely. The bodies looked... chewed. Most of them were ponies, one or two zebras; scavengers, from the looks of it. The concrete walls were pitted and chewed with bullet holes. Somepony had written on the walls, in depressingly familiar black paint, 'No way out' and 'Save me, Luna.' More disturbingly, somepony had mutilated the bodies and made a little hut, big enough for one pony to get inside, from assorted body parts. I had a disturbing hunch that some of these carcasses

were plagued.

I checked the sturdy door, but it didn't even have a doorknob, let alone a lock. Three solid kicks on the window simply shook it. The glass had some kind of wire mesh inside. "Well... this doesn't look good."

Moments later, there was a flash and Bluebelle appeared above me, landing on me with a crash. "Oooh... that was right unpleasant..." Bluebelle groaned. She climbed off me; I had to admit, this was not going quite as I'd planned. Granted, I hadn't planned anything in particular, but this was sure not something I'd expected. I looked back at Bluebelle, at the explosive bomb collar around her neck. There was a bright red light on the front of it. "It got me, didn't it?" she asked, reaching up with a hoof to nudge the deadly ring.

"Yup. Don't mess with it. These things go off quick and nasty," I said as I shook the one around my foreleg off. Bluebelle at least had the decency to lose her lunch at the contents we stood upon. I sighed, looking at our prison. Given the Enclave pegasus in here, the battle might get resolved and we'd still be trapped. I went through the dead pegasus's pockets and found a key card... not that it did a whole lot of good down here. He also had something that looked like a cheap PipBuck on his hoof. Some sort of primitive computer, at any rate. I transferred the files to my Delta. A beam pistol and expended cartridges; from the burn marks on the door, he'd tried to blast his way out.

"Right. So... got a plan, or do we start kicking like crazy?" she asked as she looked at the solid glass. It might have been cracked, but from the number of bullet pits in it, I doubted we could blast or shoot our way through.

"Sounds like the usual plan, huh Blackjack?" Rampage said from the corner. I didn't look.

"Can't shoot. Can't kick." I looked at the explosive box we'd taken from outside. Maybe if I was P-21, I might risk cracking it open. We might not have a choice, though... But I still really didn't like the idea of futzing with a great big box of boom. I frowned and tossed the explosive collar in my hoof... then caught Bluebelle's uneasy look as her eyes followed the rising and falling band of explosives. "Oh, don't worry. The bombs don't go off every which way. They blast inward." Not exactly reassuring, but then I'd seen the effect firsthand.

They blast *inward*. I frowned and twisted the collar a little with my magic. The collars had metal plates held together with springs to allow the whole thing to flex. One side of each plate was covered with half an inch of plastic explosive. A wire ran from one clasp to the other along one side. Break the connection, and boom. I frowned as I slowly levitated it to the glass, and then with my hooves carefully pushed. The outer edge expanded. The inner edge compressed. I kept a careful eye on that wire. A little more... a little more... I bit my lip.

There. It was flat against the glass. My magic lifted a bottle of Wonderglue from my bags and set about adhering the bomb collar in place. Finally, I carefully tied a string to the wire. "Here we go," I said as we took cover in the corners. Bluebelle covered her ears and ducked her head as I gave the wire a yank.

If I'd had normal ears they'd be popping and ringing. As it was, the metal plates blew out and ricocheted around the confines of the room. Bluebelle yipped as one of the springs lodged itself in her shoulder. The smoke obscured everything as I carefully extracted it. I remembered how hours under Hoofington had made Glory's wing drop right off. I hoped the Enervation here was weaker, but given

most of the bodies were preserved rather than rotten, I didn't have much hope.

...especially since the glass was still intact.

"Damn it!" I screamed, then proceeded to smash my hooves against the scorched window. "I've survived Deus! I've survived Sanguine! I've beaten ridiculously tenacious killer robots! Handled whole flocks of manticores! I've had boats dropped on me! I am not going to be killed by a piece of fucking glass!" I screamed as I hammered my hooves against it. Bluebelle joined me, beating the reinforced ballistic glass with her hooves.

Finally... we busted out a small hole the size of my muzzle. Bluebelle panted, and I just looked at my power reserves being tapped low. I suckled on a ruby and glared. Right now, if the professor had given me some kind of killer beam eyes and didn't tell me, it'd be the perfect time for them to pop out.

Then I blinked and spat the half-dissolved gem into my hoof. I looked at the metal wire mesh and the splintered glass and then down at the little red oblong. "Hey... is glass a gem?"

"Uh... I don't think so," she said skeptically. She wasn't looking too good. That injury and the exertion were taking a lot out of her. I remembered the sporting goods store; we'd activated the emergency power when we came inside. As strong as the Enervation was, it was only going to get stronger unless I found that stupid ring and disabled it.

I munched down on the remains of the ruby and a sapphire. "Let's find out." I stood on my hind legs and carefully moved my mouth to the hole. "Come on..." I said as the glass cut my cheeks and ground on my teeth. I normally had to get my mouth closed a certain amount before it would activate.

Or else it wouldn't work on glass and we were completely screwed.

Suddenly, the glass slipped around my mouth and compressed. I got to the internal mesh and there was a momentary pause before that too softened and I was able to chew and swallow. There was some kind of plastic film inside the glass that didn't agree with my 'stomach' at all. The glass itself was flavorless mush, but at least the wire mesh gave it a little carrot hint. Still, my systems were having a hard time of it. I tried spitting the next mouthful out, but the half-liquefied glass hardened on my lips and hung like glasscicles off my chin. It'd work, though... it'd just take time.

To pass it, I played some of the audio files from the pegasus's knockoff PipBuck. "Surveyor Team #5. Audiofile of Swiftwing. We've found this camp of some sort. Looks like it housed prisoners of war, poor bastards. Not sure we'll find anything useful left in the camp, but the processing center looks more promising. Just need to get into the interior secure areas. Everything has card readers. Guess they didn't want to risk conventional locks around stripes."

I gnawed away, Bluebelle pointedly keeping her eyes on the ceiling as I did so, and I mentally toggled the next. "...Swiftwing. Rain Squall found a card that'll work on the front door on a skeleton on the roof; only pony remains we found. Pegasus. Dunno if she was a Dashite or just got killed by the prisoners before she could get away. Somepony shot her in the head. Anyway, the processing center's been looted as well. We came across a dirt pony that was completely psychotic. She was eating herself. Bit Rain Squall. We made sure to save the body, just in case."

"Dirt pony, huh?" Bluebelle snorted. "So much for all their talk of help." I couldn't answer as I ate another mouthful. My 'stomach' wasn't feeling so great. I suspected it hadn't been designed to digest

inch-thick reinforced ballistic glass.

I returned my attention to the next entry. "...wing. Bad news. It was some sort of infection. We found two more in the morgue who were trying to get into the lockers. Good news. Rain Squall doesn't seem infected herself. We've notified Enclave intelligence. They're sending somepony to investigate. I'm going to check back through the processing area while we wait. Maybe we'll find something useful."

I stopped there. I knew the rest of the entries would probably involve audio entries of Swiftwing getting trapped in the room and left to starve before yanking off his collar. I had enough issues without having to hear that. Besides, I'd chewed a big enough hole that, with some liberal stomping and shoving, we could squeeze through! The room on the far side was sparse: a metal table bolted to the floor... and a turret that dropped out of the ceiling with a hiss and began to spray us with bullets!

"Unauthorized presence without collar. Please return to processing area immediately!" the voice crackled over the chatter of the turret as Bluebelle dashed across the floor. There was only one turret and two of us, and I kept myself in the open and made myself its target. I raised my hooves to protect my face as the bullets battered me against the splintered ballistic glass. I levitated out Vigilance and jumped into S.A.T.S. to target four shots. Only two hit. The turret sparked but still chewed rounds into me.

The Highlander slipped under the table and then rolled to her hooves. She dashed at the wall, leapt up, and kicked herself away. She wrapped her hooves around the chattering barrels, biting down on the frame. The turret's motors ground and whined as her weight pulled the stream of gunfire off me. I aimed carefully and put two more rounds into the firing mechanism. Finally it sparked and died. I groaned and flopped on my back.

Bluebelle approached with a frown. "What?" I asked. She didn't have any right to frown at me. She volunteered!

"Do y'all *like* getting shot up?" she asked as she pointed at the holes that had penetrated my armor. I just stared at her as she pointed at the hole in the window. "You coulda hopped through there again, or you coulda taken cover under that there table. Instead, you hung out here and just ate rounds!"

I rose to my hooves. "Look. I'm a cyberpony. Long as I'm not dead and have some gems, scrap metal, and food, I'll regenerate." I looked at the dings in my legs. "Honestly, this isn't really that bad. I get hurt all the time."

"Me too, but I do my best to avoid it." She looked me in the eye. "So do ya like it or something? 'Cause I can't figger why anypony'd go through that."

Did I? I did tend to get shot up a lot. And cut... and smashed... I bit my lip as I felt some other very disturbing sensations crawling around beneath the ache in my body. Being injured should be a bad thing. Especially the kinds of injuries I dealt with. Instead, I felt... odd. "... I... um... I..." I felt myself going bright red as I sat and lifted my forehooves and held them an inch apart. "Maybe just a tiny bit?" I said with a sheepish grin.

She groaned and shook her head. "You're nuttier than barrel of acorns..."

"She has no idea, does she?" Scotch Tape said in my ear, a flash of olive in the corner of my vision.

"No... No she doesn't," I murmured as I trotted to the door. And neither did I.

* * *

The first floor of the processing center was well tossed, papers scattered underhoof. Lots of bodies, too, signs of ponies who tried to use the structure as shelter. As we searched the desks for something useful, we came across a dozen corpses, some desiccated and others fresh. Many showed signs of having been cut or chewed. Spilled blood filled the dim space with its coppery tang. There were red bars, but I couldn't tell if they were above or below or hiding right out of sight.

I'dve been happy if they just stopped appearing and disappearing, though.

My head felt like it was moving, like my brain had mutated into a pulsating bag of mush. The radroach had laid eggs inside my skull, and now the eggs were squirming. I could see flickers in the corners of my eyes, the vaguest shimmers of zebra stealth cloaks. Then I'd look directly at them and they'd be gone. Twice I flung as much garbage and debris as I could manage at where I'd seen the faint movement, only to discover it was empty.

My behavior was drawing more and more concerned looks from Bluebelle as we moved through the offices. I could hear my friends talking more and more, but their words became harder and harder to understand. I could hear fear and alarm in their voices. Shouts of distress and calls for help... I knew it was in my head, but... but what if it wasn't? What if it Lacunae had done some kind of magic to me? What if the Harbingers were attacking my friends? I'd been so sure, so arrogant and cocky and sure, that they'd come after me!

There wasn't anything worthwhile in here. We made our way up to the second floor. Here there were a few larger offices and a conference room. We passed by a door marked 'Emergency Exit'. Funny, where were those back in Hippocratic Research? I heard more voices, but this time Bluebelle's ears perked too. "Hey. Do you hear that?" I really didn't want to mention that I'd been hearing things for a while now.

We found the source in the office next door: a still-flickering terminal that had been hacked, but not logged out, and was playing recorded audio files. The speaker was a deep-voiced, mournful-sounding stallion. I looked around the office and spotted a slashed painting in the corner; a bile-yellow pegasus smirked out of the canvas.

"Yellow River Detainment Camp to Ministry of Peace. Camps B, C, and D are one hundred and forty percent over containment. Camp A is a hundred and sixty percent over. I've got stripes sleeping on the floors here. We need more food and medicine or we're going to be looking at a major epidemic. I've got some stripes that have started eating each other. The only tribe that behaves itself are those creepy Starkatteri, and every other tribe is trying to murder them. We've got to get the population down before something explodes."

There was a click, and the next one played automatically.

"Hey, Shifty. The Ministry of Peace is giving me three hundred more units of healing potions and two thousand pounds of basic food stock. Should turn a mighty profit, huh? Now that Goldenblood's gone, all those surprise inspections and little impromptu investigations are a thing of the past. Morale couldn't find their own asshole with a case of diarrhea these days. I got to get me more stripes in the camps. Heck, we'll put the striped bastards on the roofs if we got to. Oh! And I might have found my

retirement: some stripe was 'accidentally' shipped here. Rumor is she's got some kind of super talisman inside her. Experimental. If you can move it, I'll cut you in for an extra three percent."

I glanced at the canvas. It really could use some more slashes... and maybe being burned.

"Colonel Cupcake, I have no idea what you're talking about. Yes, there have been zebras sent to my camp rather to their family in Zebratown. I understand you are upset. We're merely examining things, and then we'll release them to their family. I'll have you know we've got a major outbreak of some kind of disease here at Yellow River; I've got stripes eating each other. I have to make sure there's no chance of infection. I've had to dismiss all my non-pegasus staff to prevent it spreading. We'll keep her in the morgue till it can be safely released." A moment later there was a muttered, "I couldn't give two shits, Colonel. Where the fuck is it?"

"Fucker," I growled, feeling shooty and getting a look from Bluebelle. "If he didn't want to do the job, he should have quit. Whoever was in charge of this place was the one who deserved to be locked up." I tried to ignore the squirming corners of the room. My 'stomach' was really not happy with all the glass I'd put in it. "Nobody deserved this."

The next recording that played was an automated message in a strange robotic voice. "EMERGENCY MEMORANDUM: ALL PEGASI ARE TO ABANDON ALL GROUND POSITIONS IMMEDIATELY AND RETURN TO THUNDERHEAD. DROP EVERYTHING YOU ARE DOING! COME HOME NOW! LUNA IS DEAD. EQUESTRIA IS FINISHED."

"Fucking turkeys," Bluebelle muttered and spat to the side. I sat down, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the pulsating sensation in my head.

"They didn't all go," I said as I closed my eyes. "I know at least three that stayed down here when everything went to hell. Two of them became ghouls, one died trying to help surface ponies. And Rainbow Dash wanted to help, too." Maybe she lived. Maybe she died. I wondered if I'd ever know for sure.

I used my magic to tap the keys and played the last recording. I looked over at the corner, seeing something move. I brought out Vigilance, tapping it against my knee as I slumped against the wall. The papers on the floor were moving back and forth the longer I stared at them. They seemed to be arranging themselves into the shapes of dead zebras.

Finally, the terminal started playing two voices, they were distant, as if they'd been recorded by accident.

"Director Mephitis, what are you doing?" asked a mare.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Cirrus? Getting the fuck out of here!"

"You can't just leave! There are over five thousand prisoners out there!" Cirrus protested.

"Fuck the prisoners. Fuck every last striped one of them. If they'd just let me shoot them like I asked, then there wouldn't BE a prisoner problem. Now get the hell out of my way! We only have a few hours to get back to Thunderhead!"

"You are not going to just leave them!" Then there was a pause. "Is that money? You're taking

bags of money with you?" There was a sound of bags being cinched tightly down

"Of course, you idiot. I'm not going home to be broke! This is my retirement. The savages are eating each other already. They can take care of it. There were reports of rioting in every prison across Equestria. Hightower's in lockdown. Shattered Hoof let their prisoners free! Not me. Fuck no. Let them rot."

"Just open the gate, deactivate the collars, and turn off the autoguns. Give them a chance!" the mare protested, then said a moment later in a firmer voice, "If you don't, I promise that everypony in Thunderhead will know you left thousands to die! Not even zebras deserve this!"

There was a pause and the buck sighed. "Fine. You care so much? Set a timer to shut everything down. You can use my terminal."

"Thank you, Director. I'll get it set up right awa--"

There was a gunshot. There came the stomping of hooves. I rose and stared at the terminal.

A few seconds later, a buck said, "What the... Director? What happened?"

"Suicide. Just couldn't take it anymore, Gusty," the director said quickly. "Let's hurry. She set a timer to release the prisoners. They'll have to look after themselves, but at least they'll have a chan--"

"You--" I reared up and brought my forelegs down on the monitor as I screamed, "Fucker!" I tried to hit it so hard that it would somehow magically travel back through space and time and make his head explode like the glass monitor did. Even detonating all those collars would have been more merciful than what I'd just heard. I stared at the sparking terminal, then opened my PipBuck. I was glad to see I could still extract the audio files. Then, after I did so, I stomped the terminal into electric scrap and threw the mess at to the obnoxious portrait.

"They just... he just left them to starve?" Bluebelle asked, the tough Highlander looking sick.

"Why? Why the fuck did the good ponies have to die and fuckers like him live?!" I screamed, seething as I followed it up with kicking the desk over. Then I wanted to knock over the file cabinets. Light the whole floor on fire! No, I wanted the blow the whole camp to the moon. The city! The entire fucking Wasteland! I wanted it all destroyed! "It's not fair! It's not fucking right!" I was sounding like a petulant filly, but at the moment I didn't care. I was just so damned angry, and sick, and tired. I fired Vigilance over and over again at a crawling corner as the Highlander shrank back.

Then the shadows screamed as a bullet hit something far more fleshy.

The corner unfurled into a striped shape in a shimmering cloak that threw something shaped like some kind of egg at us. My magic caught it, and since I didn't have a clue what it might do, I tossed it into the far corner by the door. Three seconds later it exploded, and white sticky webbing went everywhere. Bluebelle pounced upon the zebra, who screamed as she curled up, raising her hooves defensively.

"Bluebelle!" I yelled as she reared up.

"She was spyin' on us!" the Highlander shouted.

"I would have too!" I said as I moved in close. She looked a little younger than me. Her eyes

were a soft gold, and they were wide open in terror. Her mane was braided into a black-and-white-striped ponytail; how ironic. "I don't want to hurt you," I said as I lowered my voice. "Do you understand me?" I glanced at her flank where her stripes seemed to make an image of two crossed wrenches. Or bones, but at the moment I was being optimistic. I stared, and her bar went from blue to red to blue again, but I had no idea if that was her hostility or my eyes.

She nodded, then said in slow, trembling words, "Please don't kill me. I am a technician. Not a hunter, not a fighter." If she was acting, she deserved an award; the mare had wet herself in fear. Even Bluebelle seemed disinclined to fight anyone who would do that. The bullet had just grazed her hindquarters, a superficial injury, but still, every injury was serious with enough Enervation.

I looked over at the smashed terminal. "You hacked the terminal, didn't you?" She stared and nodded slowly. "And you heard what happened here?" Now there was a little bit of anger. "Sorry about that." And that anger was replaced by confusion. "For what happened here... to your people. They should have been let go and given a chance."

"Y'all realize they woulda gone right through the highlands ta get back to their own country, right?" Bluebelle asked me with a snort that made the mare flinch.

Now the zebra looked baffled. "You are the Star Maiden..." she said as she took a few hesitant steps back till her rump met the wall.

"Star what?" I blinked in my own confusion.

"The Star Maiden of the fallen city. The one who brings death, chaos, and destruction," she said with a gulp. "The reaper of the lost land."

"Death? Chaos? Destruction? Sounds like a Reaper to me," Bluebelle chuckled.

I gave her a sour look before I examined the zebra. She wore some sort of webbing under that cloak, not even the slightest bit of armor to guard her. The only weapon I saw was a dagger on her forehoof. She was definitely outgunned by both of us. I gave a wan smile. "I don't mean to hurt anyone if I can help it. I'm Blackjack. What's your name?"

She looked from me to Bluebelle and back again. "Xanthe," she said as she slowly moved onto her hooves. "Please... Kill me quickly..."

I looked at Bluebelle, the scowling mare certainly looking so inclined. Then I looked back at Xanthe in confusion. "Um... why would I kill you?" For some reason, that set her on a fresh crying jag as she bowed her head. "Wait! Hold on. What's the matter?" She sniffed and frowned, rubbing her eyes with a hoof before she frowned at me.

"Please... do not toy with me. Whatever curse you are to bestow, please do so quickly," she said as she rubbed the tears from her eyes. "... I do no fear your worst, Star Maiden!" Her face might have looked momentarily fierce save for her eyes, but her shaking knees definitely betrayed her.

I just stared at her for a long moment and then sighed, slowly shaking my head. "I don't have time for this," I said as I turned and started for the door.

"What?" The zebra asked in confusion. "What kind of curse is this?"

"The 'I got better things to do' kind," I replied as I stepped out into the hallway. Nothing much up here. That left down below. I made sure I had the explosive crate nice and secure across my back. "I have no idea who this Star Maiden is or why you seem to think I am her." I expected that to be it, but then she started following us!

"The Star Maiden is she who is born from the cursed soil of the damned city. She will be flesh and steel, touched by the stars and chosen as their champion. Where she travels, chaos and strife will follow," Xanthe said as she trotted in our wake. Why, I couldn't imagine. "It is she who shall bear evil from the ground, usher in the final days of the world, snuff out the sun forever and call down the moon. She shall summon storms, unleash plague, command unholy fire, destroy all in her path and all who follow in her wake. Female shall desire female, male shall desire male, and unholy coupling between the species will commence where she travels."

"Damn..." Bluebelle snickered and leered at the zebra. "I'm getting moist right now just hearing all this." Xanthe gasped as she cringed away and I looked back to see her eyes wide and popping.

"Right. So why are you following us again?" I asked as I started down the stairs.

She blinked, then worked her mouth, and then shrank back, pointing a hoof at me. "You... you have cursed me! Your foul star magics have ensorcelled me!" I looked back... and my hoof slipped and I rolled down to land on my back in the first floor offices. My glass-filled gut gave an unpleasant lurch as I glared up at the golden-eyed zebra.

"There? See?" I snapped as I looked at her from the floor. "Would the dreaded Star Maiden fall on her ass?"

It saved me from getting my skull crushed. The zebra came out of the shadows like a ghost with a wild kick plunging down at my face. Lying on my back, I was able to get my hooves up in time to block it. "No. Do not fight her. We are all doomed! She has cursed us all!" Xanthe wailed from the stairs, then started jabbering in Zebra.

The zebra fighting me, however, wasn't inclined to listen as she backflipped away. I rose to my hooves, drawing and bringing up my sword as the mare charged. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and locked in two attacks, and they still missed. She sidestepped the first swipe, ducked the second, and then did another backflip that smacked me in the face with both her rear hooves. She knocked me standing upright as I staggered back against the wall.

She said something brief in Zebra that I supposed was 'you die now', but it might have been 'eat cream cheese' for all I knew. Then she rammed both her forehooves into my gut.

Now, I have no idea just how stomach-like my stomach was, but when you've overeaten, getting kicked like that is no good at all. I gripped her shoulders with my fingers and felt everything working in reverse. There was nothing I could do as I puked liquefied glass and metal in her face. The clear fluid solidified seconds after it left my throat, freezing to her horrified face in a mask. She fell back, flopping and flailing wildly as I spat aside gobs of glass, struggling to keep upright. That blow had done some major damage to my internals, and every bit of watery glass was brought up.

Xanthe stared at me, her eyes even wider if it were possible. Even Bluebelle was starting to look more uneasy about this. Beatdowns with metal hooves were one thing, but clearly vomiting liquid glass was a whole realm of fucked-upness that only cyberponies could obtain. I wanted to try and break the

dying zebra's mouth and nose free, but at the moment I was dealing with some internal damage. When I could finally move, the zebra's body had gone limp. I sighed and tried to pull off her stealth cloak, but to my amazement, it dissolved in my hooves! The blue gemstone clasp immediately cracked and went dark. No fair sabotaging the loot! I gave the nervous zebra a glare, and she gulped.

"Mistcloaks are woven of shadow spider silk and disappear like morning dew in summer if taken from their owner," she said as she hugged her own to her form. I wondered why she didn't just go invisible and leave. Really, I wasn't inclined to stop her! I searched the dead zebra, found some sort of dried gourd, and peeked inside. Something milky purple and healing-potion-looking.

"Here. Both of you drink this before the Enervation makes those injuries worse," I said as I passed the gourd to them.

"You wish me whole and healthy to suffer ever more, do you not, Maiden?" Xanthe said as she took it and drank it reluctantly before giving it to Bluebelle who, seeing the graze heal, lost her reluctance to drink for her injured shoulder.

"I wish you'd go back to your own people," I retorted, feeling my insides pulling themselves back into place after that blow.

She gave a sad, twisty little smile. "And carry your curse to them? They would kill me at once. And I would not take it to them in the first place. You have doomed me, Star Maiden, and you may doom the entire world, but I will not do your work for you."

"I'm about to doom you with a buck upside your head," I said as I looked around. The terminal recordings had talked about a morgue. That would be the next place I would check before getting the heck out of here. "What are you zebras doing here in the first place?" I asked as I fired a round into a corner where I'd thought something had moved.

"I can't tell you that! You're the Maiden!" she gasped, and I groaned as we moved through the ground floor processing offices looking for a door or stairs down. "The champion of the stars! The bringer of all things evil! With your left hoof you will bring down the fires of the sun, and with your right you will call down the moon!" Xanthe said all in a rush, gasping for a breath at the end. Then she looked at me and continued, "Even if you will destroy the world, you can still be stopped. The last Maiden was. Three times!"

"The last Maiden?" I asked with a smirk over my shoulder. "Who was that? Doesn't sound like she was very good at her job."

"No. It was your 'Princess Luna'," Xanthe replied. That brought me up short. Slowly, I turned and looked back at her. I must have been giving her quite the shooty look... or maybe it was the 'Maiden of the Stars' look for her.

"Excuse me? Could you elaborate on that, please?" I asked as I turned and stood before the shrinking zebra. She quivered and began to whimper.

"You knew her as Nightmare Moon," said a familiar voice from the shadows. My mane went all kinds of squirmy as I saw the shadows unwind and expose the zebra from the mine and the museum. Lancer looked at me along the barrel of his gun with his hard, cold eyes. But I just looked right back at him. If he was going to take the shot, then he would have taken it without all the drama. "It was here, in

this doomed city, that Nightmare Moon stopped the sun from rising. And it was here, on the ashes of this burned town, that your Princess Luna declared she would take the throne her sister surrendered and lead Equestria to victory.”

“So why are you still talking and not blowing my head off?” I asked Lancer as I saw the shadowy depths of the office squirming and creeping. Red bars drifted back and forth in my vision.

“The honor of your death falls to the Legate himself. He yearns to smash your unnatural body with his own hooves,” Lancer said as he stood, keeping his rifle aimed right at my head. “When he does so, this ground shall be razed and all within slaughtered like the vermin you are.” I stared into his eyes. Cold and hard and certain.

“Right,” I said, “well, since he’s not here, and you’re not going to steal his kill, maybe you can take Xanthe here off my hooves and let me get on my way. I want to find out what the Enclave are up to.” I smirked. “Don’t worry. I didn’t curse her. Unicorn magic doesn’t work like that.” At least, according to the primer it didn’t.

He turned his rifle on Xanthe. I barely got in front of her to catch the bullet with my side. It bit deep, knocking me back against Bluebelle and the zebra, who shrank back with a little shriek. I turned Vigilance on him, but he was already moving. When I jumped into S.A.T.S., he continued to move... *everything* moved in a slow smear across my vision. I lurched, and by the time I was out of S.A.T.S. he’d vanished. I knew better than to think he was gone, though.

“You don’t realize it, Security, but you have cursed her,” he said from the shadows... but his voice sounded odd to me. “You have cursed her with kindness. You have infected her with your mercy. And like everything that you touch, she will be destroyed.”

“You bloody... murdering... bastard!” I shouted into the shadows. I saw the darkness moving, forming eyes and mouths on the dim and dingy walls. I fired Vigilance again and again into every shadowy corner. My horn threw a storm of papers and rubbish around me, looking to see it bounce off some invisible assailant. When I ran out of bullets, I drew my sword, swinging wildly as I raced around. “You won’t hurt her! You won’t!” Shadowy ponies parted with each slice, reforming... laughing at my futile efforts. Darkness splattered my vision as I attacked things that weren’t there.

I was grasping at shadows.

Bluebelle and Xanthe both stared at me in alarm and horror. “What?” I shouted, exasperated as I swished the sword in the air and splattered blood across both of them.

Wait...?

Slowly I looked at the blood on the hilt of my sword. Felt the blood that was dripping down my face. I looked down at the decapitated zebra in front of me. Saw another torn open along her side. A sniper lay there with her face a concave hole. Another was dying from three meaty chunks taken out of his chest. I’d killed them and I hadn’t even realized it. Hadn’t even realized that they were *there*. Wounds from more than just Lancer’s round throbbed and burned, yet I hadn’t felt them. The pain was so familiar I hadn’t even recognized it. I staggered and grabbed a kicked-over desk. When had I kicked it over? Had I, or had somepony else?

I shook as I dropped the sword. In Xanthe’s eyes, I was evil incarnate. And Bluebelle stared at

me as if realizing just how deadly I could be when so inclined. I wasn't the mare she'd dropped on her head back in the refinery. My chest ached terribly, like there was a fire digging into whatever now passed for a heart. "Don't look at me like that..." I asked in a low rush. They kept staring. If it had been my friends looking at me that way, I don't know what I would have done. "Don't look at me!" I screamed at them.

I liked it better when I was missing half my face. It was easier than missing half my sanity.

* * *

Finally, I found the morgue. It was, predictably, located in the vicinity of 'Medical', which was marked in great big signs written in two different languages. Like everything else, it had been tossed long ago, but it had a sink. I took the opportunity to wash the blood off my face. It didn't seem to come off though, no matter how much I scrubbed. Then I noticed the mirror; there was a nick below my horn that kept bleeding. It was taking its sweet time healing, but with all the Enervation in the room...

"So. Why are you here?" I asked Xanthe as I dabbed at the wound with a roll of dirty gauze; I'd probably make Glory scream in frustration if she saw me, but the blood was getting annoying. She stared at her hooves and said the 'm name'. "I just took a bullet for you! Tell me!" I snapped.

She jumped and lay flat on the ground. "There was a mighty warrior during the war who could not be felled. A magical artifact preserved her on the battlefield. Somehow she was laid low in a battle in the badlands outside the city. Her body was brought here. We learned from a ghoul who had been alive back then that the talisman had never been removed from the body. So we came here to get it for Legate Vitiosus."

"Shifty?" I asked, and she looked nervously confused. "Was that the ghoul's name?"

The nervous confusion became nervous sadness as she nodded. "I believe so. He bemoaned many opportunities missed," she said as she swallowed hard and looked around. "We arrived but found those pegasi here. We did not know why, only that they had explosives. We could not risk the artifact getting destroyed."

"Right. Because talking things out and working out an agreement suiting both sides is a stupid idea." I sighed and stepped away from the sink, a few rads hotter, and looked at the door to the morgue.

"So if this magic thingy was so powerful, how'd this warrior o' yours get killed?" Bluebelle asked.

"No zebra knows," Xanthe replied quietly as she looked around the medical room at the smashed cabinets and slashed Ministry of Peace pictures. Hunks of meat, preserved by Enervation, were scattered everywhere, lying dry and dark on the gurneys and floor. Bloody bonesaws and scalpels showed the butchery that had taken place here. "No bullet could slay her. She would fall, and then rise again."

"Sounds like somepony I know," Bluebelle said as she looked over at me. "Seriously. He just shot you and you treated it like it was nothing!"

"Regeneration talisman, synthetic organs, and artificial legs..." I muttered as I sucked on my last ruby; when had gems become comfort food? "He'd have to shoot me more than just once to kill me. He might get me with a headshot, though," I said as I put my helmet back on. He said this Legate wanted to

kill me, sure, but I wasn't going to count on him not taking the honor himself.

I couldn't trust my E.F.S. anymore. There could have been two red bars or twenty in the morgue. They kept shifting around on me. Bluebelle had taken the opportunity to grab a battered hoofball helmet left in the Special Processing area; Lancer's promise to spare me didn't extend to anypony with me. I looked at the collar around her throat and then at Xanthe. I wasn't exactly sure where she fell on the smart pony scale.

"Can you do something about her collar?" I asked, trying to ignore the noises that didn't fit. I kept hearing what I imagined to be a dozen exploding collars going off at once. I think bomb collars were my number one most hated device in the Hoof.

"What?" Bluebelle said as she pointed at Xanthe. "I'm not going to let a filthy stripe touch it! Find me some pony who can do the job! I don't need no help from her!"

Xanthe shrank back. "I will not. You may have cursed me, but I owe nothing to ponykind!"

In a flash, I whirled on both of them. "You!" I snapped at Bluebelle, grabbing her shoulders. She suddenly looked like she expected to get a faceful of liquid glass. "The only pony here who isn't disintegrating folks is me! Do you want me to try and get that collar off you? Do you?" She quickly shook her head, and I rounded on Xanthe. She gave an eep and curled up in horror. "And you! Didn't you just tell me that you can't go home now that you're cursed? That means you are stuck here! THAT means that you should put whatever skills you have to use helping ponies and generating good will. Because your alternative is to join the Harbingers, and they really piss me off!"

She backed up and started shaking terribly. Ugh... she'd just been cursed by the most vilest thing her people knew... me... and cut off from said people on pain of death... and here I was shouting at her! I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the distant screaming of my friends. They weren't here. It was just me being crazy. Don't take it out on her. "Look. This sucks for both of you. Neither of you asked to be put in this mess... and that's all that happens around me. I can run into a total stranger and completely fuck their life up just by standing there. But I can't do this all on my own anymore. If you two can help each other... please... help."

I sighed. That was all I could hope for. Then I peeked and saw Bluebelle grudgingly tilt her head to let the zebra examine it. "Just... don't blow my damned head off," the blue mare said as she clenched her eyes closed.

Xanthe examined the collar as I checked the door. Locked, but I had a card. Carefully I opened it and peeked down the short hallway on the other side. Funny... everywhere else was completely disgusting, but the room beyond looked clean. "I... I don't think..." she stammered as she pulled her hooves away.

"If you're not sure, it's okay. Better that than not trying," I said as I looked back through the crack into the morgue. There were gurneys set up like workstations, and along one wall were dozens of steel doors like those in 99's tiny morgue. I always thought they looked like little refrigerators. The flickering lights had been replaced by steadier illumination, and I could see some terminals on a gurney.

I slowly started through the short hallway. "Okay, I know this sounds crazy, but I don't want to fight you," I called out as I moved forward, not sure what was my E.F.S. giving me warnings and what was all in my head. I couldn't believe the morgue would be empty, and after my tirade and the fights above, I

doubted that they were ignorant of us being here.

"In a pig's eye," a stallion muttered in return.

"She ain't red," said a mare, weakly.

"Identify yourself!" drawled a familiar-sounding voice.

"Twister?" I asked, then peeked around the corner at three power-armored pegasi. They'd made an impromptu barricade that would have lasted all of three seconds against a concentrated attack. "What are you doing here?" I asked the Neighvarro pegasus I'd met and ridden from Spike's cave.

She popped off her helmet, her lavender coat reminding me of Dazzle. More purplish-blue but no glitter in Twister's mane, though. "Blackjack... is that..." She took in my appearance in one long horrified look. "What in tarnation happened to you, girl? T'aint no decent reason fer any mare anywhere ta have that much iron in their body!"

"Hoofington happened," I replied with a wan smile. "I saw the shooting. Wanted to see what's up."

The stallion with the missiles growled, "You think we're stupid 'nuff ta think yer stupid 'nuff ta just trot down here 'cause yer curious? Ain't nopony that dumb anywhere!"

"Y'all don't know Blackjack, Boomer." The lavender pegasus looked at Bluebelle and Xanthe with a mix of suspicion and distaste. "What y'all doin' with that stripe? She looks like one o' them that pinned us in here!"

"She met me and her life got ruined as a result," I said as I stepped a little between Twister and Xanthe. Boomer and Sunset--at least, I thought that was her name--looked at each other immediately. "Oh... I suspect you can relate?" The zebra gave me a look that seemed to say 'see?'

Twister finally relaxed. She didn't look good at all; rather wan and sickly, in fact. I suspected it had to be the Enervation leeching away their life. "I reckon we can. Command didn't take kindly to us abandonin' our posts. They were lookin' ta make an example o' all three o' us. I nearly ended up assigned to the wrong side of a firin' squad. But then I told 'em what you told me, that Operative Lighthooves made a plague. That got the leadership mighty curious. Turns out we've got records of a disease like that."

"Director Mephitis?" I asked.

"Mhmmm. One of the oldest medical families in the Enclave wrote about it." I grit my teeth, wishing I could have castrated him with sheer rage. After what he did to Cirrus in that recording... I tried to tone down the shooty look. Sunset and Boomer didn't know me as well as she did, and she barely knew me at that. As I relaxed, everyone seemed to calm down a bit. "Since the three of us were contaminated, we were sent with a surface team to try and find out just what Thunderhead's been up to."

"Isn't that against the treaty Neighvarro has with Thunderhead?" I asked with a frown.

"Very," Sunset said as she struggled with her helmet. After a bit she finally popped the seal, revealing a rust-colored mare with an orange-and-yellow-striped mane. "Officially, we never came back. We're deserters until we complete our mission." She looked at the other two and then at me. "Doubt

them Dunderheads would believe it for a second, but it'll be a handy excuse for why we're down here."

"I see. And did you find something?" I asked as I looked at the terminals.

Twister nodded. "We did. They found the plague preserved in the bodies in the freezer," she said as she gestured to the shiny metal doors. "Apparently it's a zebra disease that makes them eat the flesh of the dead."

Xanthe's eyes popped wide. "Blood hunger plague is here?!" She immediately started to wipe her hooves. "I... this place... we must all leave it!"

"Relax." It's only a disease that drives you slowly insane till you eat other ponies' legs. "What do you know about it?" I asked the zebra.

"A horrible disease that breaks out during terrible famines. When there is no food, a zebra becomes desperate enough to eat their own kind! Then the hunger takes effect. When they are killed, the starving eat their flesh and are infected themselves. No amount of cooking can kill the disease." And nor could stable digesters.

"Is... is there a cure?" Could I have done something to save my home? As messed up as it had been...

But Xanthe just shook her head. "In my home, any village afflicted with the plague would be quarantined and burned. The disease is not like others. It must be ingested. Only in the stomach does it start to spread. But if some of the disease gets on your hoof and transferred to your meal, you can infect yourself or others. One strip of contaminated flesh in a cookpot, and an entire village can be lost." I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Perhaps I should have done it differently, but knowing that I hadn't messed up... that there wasn't a simple cure like brahmin milk or something... was a great relief to me.

"Since it's a zebra disease anyway, why doesn't it affect pegasi?" I asked, and immediately Twister and Sunset looked at each other uneasily. Great, now what?

Sunset frowned. "Pegasi are ponies the most different from zebra. The disease has a harder time getting established in us. But..." She trotted over to one of the metal doors in the wall. I joined her as she carefully opened the door with her hoof. There was a long metal table. Carefully, the rust colored mare tugged the table out.

There were four dead pegasi on it. All of them had the chewed appearance of a raider making a meal of their limbs. "These are all Neighvarro ponies who've gone missing in the last two weeks. Maybe deserters like us... maybe not." Two weeks was long enough for the disease to run its course. Even more disturbing, the ponies had been carved. Great chunks of flesh had been removed, not wildly, but with care. Only their heads were more or less untouched, though their lips were chewed off in permanent rictus grins.

"Those pegasi outside aren't with you, are they?" I asked with a sinking sensation.

"There are pegasi outside? Fighting the zebra?" Twister asked, looking worried as she glanced at the other two.

I lifted the crate of explosives with my magic. "They had this."

"Whoa!" Boomer rushed over to the long black box and flipped it open with far more eagerness than I would have. Inside were a number of containers filled with strange colored fluids and tubes. "Aw yeah! A four part liquid rainbow explosive with lightning detonation system. Spicy!" The stallion chuckled. "Set this sucker off and get ready for some hella rough weather!"

"Y'all know about explosives?" Bluebelle asked at once.

He pulled off his helmet, revealing a bald brown buck who was surprisingly handsome. He had a prominent chin and wide, easy grin. "Well, yeah. Why else do you think they call me 'Boomer'?" He wagged his bushy black eyebrows at the uneasy mare.

"Chili night back at flight school," Sunset said at once with a roll of her eyes.

"Cleared out the barracks for days," Twister added solemnly. "Was mandated by command to never feed him beans, or it'd be a crime against pegasus kind."

"On par with a sonic rainboom," Sunset finished. "From his hindquarters."

"All right! Shut it already," he muttered, ears folding down. He snorted as he trotted away from the box and peered at Bluebelle's collar. Then he reached out, did something with his hooves, and a second later yanked it off. Everypony jumped and Bluebelle gave a shriek. He lifted the collar with a hoof. "Piece a junk." He tossed it into the corner.

"Are you... you could... I..." Bluebelle stammered a moment, pointing a hoof at Boomer.

"Wut?" he asked with a frown. Suddenly she lunged, grabbed his neck in her hooves, and with a heave flipped him over on to his back, power armor and all. She pressed her lips to his in a long, hard kiss that made his hooves kick helplessly in the air. Then, just as swiftly as she grabbed him, she turned him so he was upright once more with a dreamy look on his face. A moment later, his wings stuck straight out on both sides.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile as he went red as a cherry.

"Our little boy's all grown up," Twister said with a smile to Sunset.

However, it was Xanthe that caught my eye. She was staring at a clipboard next to a different refrigerator door. "Are you okay?" I asked with a little smile.

"It's her," Xanthe said quietly. "The warrior..."

I looked at the door and then at the clipboard. Only one thing caught my eye. The name: Shujaa.

Shit. The talisman he was after was inside one of my best friends. I looked at the clipboard.

Field Report: subject (identified as Proditor Shujaa) was found at conflict site 99-1238-J. While no injuries were apparent on the body, subject was deceased. Sergeant Twist, the only survivor of the reconnaissance team, was hysterical and had to be sedated for transportation to FMC for treatment. O.I.A. Image liaison Glass has requested the body and any and all objects on or within the body to be turned over to the O.I.A. for transfer to the Ministry of Image. Said transfer is being delayed by order of Camp Director Mephitis. Colonel Cupcake has formally requested all remains to be sent to Miramare Air

Station for funeral services.

There were maps and pictures attached that made little sense to me. I looked at the door. It was just a look. What could it hurt? I opened it and pulled out the little sliding table...

What was on the table was not a zebra. Not the mare I had seen in a grainy black and white photograph. It was merely so many pieces of zebra heaped around bones. They'd smashed and torn her to pieces; some ghoul had come along and taken some of the remains. Never was I gladder that Rampage was not here to see this; never was I happier to have a really big bomb to give Shujaa the send-off she deserved.

"Looks like you wasted your time coming here," I said hoarsely to the horrified, sick-looking zebra.

"Everything's been a waste of time," Rampage said behind the doors. My chest ached terribly as I sat on the floor.

"Set your bomb, Boomer," I said loudly, closing my eyes. "Set it for five minutes. Let Lancer see Shujaa for himself. There is no talisman... so let us go." Was it my imagination, or was that faintest shimmer the zebra himself? I itched to stab the air as it stepped closer. I stared at the distortion. "Going to shoot us in the back now?"

There was no reply. I wasn't even sure he'd been there at all. I could hear the voices of the dead screaming distantly. My friends were among them. I could hear thousands of zebras wailing as they starved and gnashed their teeth, some giving in to hunger, some lunging ahead to be cut down by the turrets, and some blowing their own heads off with their collars. It didn't matter if it was in my head or not. I rose to my hooves and there was nothing but hate in me. Boomer pushed some buttons, and the rainbow fluids began to swirl together and spark magically as a timer counted down.

Slowly I made my way to the door back into medical, then up the stairs. Behind me I could hear the soft hoofsteps of the living and the dead. We were leaving. Celestia help anypony who got in my way. I stepped into the night rain; the lightning blasted overhead and the thunder rolled through my blood as if the elements themselves had finally seen this blight, this sin... and roared against it.

"Get down, on the ground n--" bellowed the pegasus in the sleeker, fancier-looking Thunderhead armor. Five of them, four on the ground and one in the air. Only five? Then I was on him, racing the short distance separating us as if I were in S.A.T.S. and I grabbed the respirator tubes running to his muzzle. My twisting hands flipped him over as he started firing wildly. The sword flashed in the lightning, glistening in the light. It entered his crotch, and moved till it reached his throat in one terrific slash. Then I heaved him, his bloody viscera erupting from the split armor over the face of the second pegasus.

I saw light. Felt heat. Moved. My hooves raced towards the source of those crimson beams. So hot. Very hot. I imagined myself bursting into flame. Exploding from all the rage and hate inside me. I imagined every one of these Enclave to be the camp director. I was screaming something; the words didn't matter anymore as I closed the distance like I'd taken a hit of Flash. Out came Duty and Sacrifice. Four shots in slow motion chewed through the fancy visor. The fifth shot blew a red fountain of chunks as his beam rifles went dark.

One of the pegasi took to the air. I leapt up, my mechanical fingers grabbing that scorpion tail as we lifted higher and higher into the flashing sky. This was Lighthooves, the sneaky son of a mule who had seen this atrocity and not destroyed it. Who had used it. Who had killed other pegasi just to make

his disease work on his own kind. Glory had once mentioned how tough pegasi wings were...

My sword was tougher.

I stabbed it through the armor covering, and the mare inside screamed. With all the strength I could manage in my horn, I ripped the blade down completely through her wing, and we tumbled together end over end. The airborne pegasus was close... too close. Perhaps he didn't notice her falling wing. Perhaps he was just unlucky. He blasted me with glowing, disintegrating energy, the magic eating into my armor. If I'd been flesh and blood, perhaps I would have died then, transformed into glowing slop.

I wasn't flesh and blood. I was hatred and pain in pony shape.

I leapt the distance and wrapped my forehooves around his neck. He flipped almost completely upside-down, his energy cannons blasting. This close, I could almost imagine I could see his eye through his visor. I had no idea how far up we were. I could hear shouting, but then, I could hear screaming, too. Could hear thunder. Could hear everything except my own heart. Within, I was silent. My fingers gripped his helmet as he shook and shot wildly. My other hoof beat at his face again and again with all the force I could muster. There was a crack, a pop, and then the left side of the visor popped free. I stared into a wide green eye, saw two pinpricks of red reflected in it.

My horn managed three magical bullets before it burned out. The pegasus's wings went limp, and we tumbled down into the rain and darkness. The bones broke my fall, snapping and scattering as they parted beneath me to deposit me on the muddy ground. I should have stayed down. I should have.

I wasn't done yet. I ignored the flashing lights, the warnings that I was crippled and needed to stay down. I pulled myself to my hooves, walked towards a one-winged pegasus that was trying to turn me to ash even as I approached. I might not have had a working horn, but I had fingers. And I had bones. The mare moved so slowly. Too slowly. I plucked one of the scattered bones, a rib, by the look of it, and sprang upon her. Rover was right... fingers were better. Fingers of one hoof seized her armor, her beam rifle flashing past me by inches. I could feel the warmth of the magic on my hide. Fingers of my other hoof drove the broken end of the rib through the hole of the severed wing. It didn't kill her. That was okay. I had another.

And another. And another.

When she stopped firing, I rose and looked at the others through the rain. The last pegasus had gotten clear of the corpse I'd thrown in her face. She saw me running at her. Took to the air... Flying for her life.

She almost made it. My hands grabbed her stinger tail, and we were aloft. She looked down at me and flew by one of the towers with its rusty turret still pointing guns at the building below. I supposed she intended to scrape me off.

No pony was scraping me anywhere. My body slammed into the rusty tower, but I had no lungs to crush or puncture and no heart to falter. My rear legs gripped the rusty rails and my fingers locked down on the tail. Suddenly the pegasus went from accelerating forward to a dead stop, snapping like a rubber band. Then she was going backwards once more as I heaved and kicked off the tower. We flipped end over end as we fell, her wings struggling for purchase with my massive weight attached. We landed square on a curved roof and smashed through the rusty metal plating.

Inside, bunk beds stacked five high shattered beneath us. Bones, hide, and rags snapped and tore as dust filled the air. The pegasus pulled herself to her hooves, turning to face me as I rose and started forward. Had she run, had she fled, she might have gotten away in those seconds.

Not anymore.

The gatling beam guns flashed, each shot seemed to take a minute as I charged. My body was in agony. So what? I was always in agony. Life was agony. I knew exactly how Deus must have felt when he was dropped on those zebras. Hurt. Violated. Angry. Nothing would stop him. Nothing would stop me now. I tackled her neck and drove her into the stack of bunk beds behind her. The structure collapsed upon us, yet I still didn't stop. My rear legs tore up the ground as I pushed forward. I wanted her to break, wanted my body to fail. Wanted this whole world to shatter.

I wanted to kill in the worst way possible.

We moved through the avalanching wood and bone and finally ran out of building. The thin metal wall ripped through with a shriek and dumped us back in the mud. Her fancy gatling weapons were nothing against my rage; as I smashed her into a tangle of razor wire, both her weapons finally sparked and popped and went dark as she reclined against it. Her wings beat frantically.

She wasn't going anywhere.

I stood before her like a zebra and began to beat and pound and rip at her armor. My hooves could repair themselves. So could her armor, if I gave her the time. I wasn't about to do that. I beat and smashed her visor till it popped open. Wide purple eyes stared as she raised her forelegs defensively. I simply smashed and tore into them along with her face. Finally I gripped her helmet with my fingers and began to pull. My motors hummed, sparked, and smoked. My skin stretched and strained as if I were going to tear myself in two.

Maybe I was. Maybe I wanted to.

Then there was a scream of metal as I ripped her faceplate off. I held her head with one hand and drew back my hoof to smash her face out the back of her skull.

Then the lightning flashed, and I saw Glory's face. Not Rainbow Dash's... Glory. Purple mane peeked out. The lightning flashed again; I looked at the red dripping out of her mouth and nostrils. Her lips were moving, but I couldn't hear a thing. Just thunder and screams. My friends and the others were running at me. I saw the pain in her eyes... darker than the pony I remembered...

Not Glory... Dusk.

I was about to kill Glory's sister.

I looked at the three Neighvarro pegasi. The beating I'd given them was nothing compared to what I'd meted out this night. I wondered what horrors or ghost stories they had in the Enclave about ponies like me. Xanthe stared at me in mute horror. The Maiden of the Stars. Even the Highlander, her blue eyes wary... even scared... stared at me with one word on her face.

Reaper.

I threw back my head and screamed out all the hate and pain and rage inside me. I had to or I'd

kill her. Kill everyone. I felt the bugs in my head chewing their way free. I wanted Lancer to hear me in the night. I wanted Lighthooves to hear me wherever he hid. I wanted whatever pony or machine that guided the Harbingers to know that at this moment I would tear down the towers of the Core itself with my bare hooves to destroy them. And as if in agreement, the concrete block of the processing center erupted in a fountain of rainbow flame and a deafening blast that rolled through the camp. I imagined that I was the pony possessed by Shujaa and let the Wasteland hear her rage one final time.

Then the moment passed, and like that burning ball of rainbow fire, my fury was spent. Literally. My eyes darkened and my limbs stilled. I became as inert as the bones around me.

>Primary power systems exhausted. Emergency power supplies engaged.

All I could do was feel. Feel my burned hide. Feel the cold water pour down. Feel Dusk tremble beneath me.

A hoof touched my shoulder. I tried to speak, but my jaws couldn't move. Then I felt a gem pressed into my mouth, a minty emerald. There was a faint hum, then my eyes flickered to life. I looked at the unconscious Dusk beneath me. At Bluebelle beside me. "Thanks," I said. No rasp. No fatigue. Even blasted, battered, and beaten, my body just needed recharging.

Carefully I stepped away, shook out several gems, and ate them, followed by cans of Cram. I kept my eyes down. "Help her..." was all I said, and the three pegasi helped the battered Dusk. No one came to help me; could I blame them?

Thousands of zebras watched me. They may have been ghosts and bones and shadows, but I could see them staring.

I looked at the wary Bluebelle. "You'll talk to your mother?" I asked calmly, barely audible over the rain. She nodded. I suspected she'd do everything she could to keep the Highlanders from helping the Harbingers track me down. I nodded and sheathed the sword. My armor and bags were half burned through, but right now all I needed to do was be able to keep walking.

I walked to Xanthe and looked at her. She curled up, shaking in the mud. She'd said I'd cursed her. I hadn't meant to. I hadn't meant to ruin her life simply by saving her life. But now I had to take care of her.

I was responsible.

"Get Dusk back to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I said low and evenly to the Enclave trio. "If you can't, get her to the Collegiate. Tell Triage to help her. Take Xanthe with you." My eyes moved to the terrified zebra. "Xanthe... talk to Sagittarius and Triage. You're a good, smart zebra... you can have a life there. Understand?" She didn't reply. I couldn't blame her. I ate another gem, waiting for her to nod or voice some kind of acknowledgement. Finally, she gave a little jerk of her head.

I left them, picking the dropped revolvers from the mud on my way. Thousands of eyes watched me. Even the dead were silent as I passed into the thunder and night. At the gate, I paused. I turned and stared up at one of the sentry towers. It was as if a force drew my eyes upwards. There, atop the spire, was the sixth Enclave pony, lit by the flickering flames of the burning processing center rubble. I knew him. It could only be him.

Come down here, I thought at him. *Come down here and let me finish with you what I started with Dusk.*

Soon, I imagined his reply. *Soon.* And then, with that, the armored pegasus launched himself into the dark sky. Alone, I turned as well, walking out into black rain.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Hugs and thanks all around to Kkat, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for being awesome people, helping create FoE:PH, and working their collective tails off on getting this halfway worth reading... then working their manes off making the other half worth reading. This chapter and the next are the result of the reply I got from my question. I can sum it up as "Just write the damn thing, Somber, and we'll get to the ending when we get there!" Anyway, thank you also to everypony that's gives me the feedback to keep this going. If anypony would like to help out the author with tips, as always they can be sent via paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Thank you for reading through this ridiculously long story.)