

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 45: Meatlocker

"These ponies don't want a party. These ponies want a PARRR-TAY!"

"Get the lights," I hissed, waving my hoof at the switch on the far side of the room. There were few ponies that could induce the same kind of bowel-loosening anxiety as the one with the dragon-killer cannons bolted to the sides of his armor. It wasn't the weapons that made a terrified little pony in me scream and claw the walls, though; Deus had used guns like that, but he hadn't induced the same kind of terror Steel Rain did. The Seekers and the other Steel Rangers had both firepower and numbers, but I could handle that.

What scared me about Steel Rain was that he was a smart pony. He didn't just charge after me screaming 'CUNT' and blowing holes in the countryside. He was deliberate and cautious and didn't allow little details to slip by him, and, unlike Deus, he was a plotter and leader in his own right and on a far larger scale. On top of all that, the fact that he had blown my face off once already didn't help.

So as Stygius turned off the lights, I ducked down and watched nervously as the five spread out. Of course, the dimness wouldn't do us that much good; one look at his E.F.S. would tell him where we were.

Or would it? My E.F.S. was useless with all the spritebots milling around; his couldn't be much better. We might have a chance here, slim as it was, to avoid a messy end. Okay... how, exactly? I needed options. Hide somewhere upstairs? He'd search it. Try to bolt out a window? They were all sealed and reinforced. Try to blow him up with the moonstone? I'd used up the flake of starmetal. Barring some exceptional shooting, I didn't have any heavy weapons that would penetrate their armor.

I needed better options.

"Dealer," I said under my breath. "Hey, Dealer! I need to talk to you. Dealer! Please... Come on... you've been bouncing in and out of my consciousness for a month now. This time I need to talk to you!" Stygius gave me a worried look, clearly alarmed by this new crazy.

Outside, one of Steel Rain's Rangers stepped forward, some kind of heavy-duty flamer on one side and a different-looking, longer-barreled kind of flamer on the other. Wasn't one variety of fire-spewing weapon enough? Suddenly, sooty orange flames sprayed out in burning plumes that engulfed the spritebots. Dozens crackled and died by the second, their wings disintegrating in a shower of embers and their round bodies popping explosively. More rushed in to attack fruitlessly and met the same fate. The long grass disappeared in immense clouds of smoke, and the vacant birdhouses blazed brightly before tumbling apart. The fire washed over the windows, and I jumped back. The outside of the house wouldn't catch fire, but that wouldn't do us much good once the Rangers were inside.

"Dealer!" I shouted.

Then I spotted a flicker. At first I thought it might be another vision, but then I saw the ghostly buck appear. He looked older and more gaunt than usual. He strained and groaned as he looked at me.

"Yes, Blackjack? What is it?"

I stared at him; it had never occurred to me that contact might be difficult for him. I'd always thought he just sat in my PipBuck and emerged whenever he wanted to mess with me. That he didn't know what was going on also suggested that he wasn't monitoring me every second. "We're at Goldenblood's house. I found it. But we're about to be attacked by Steel Rangers and I need a back door out of this place."

"What?" His eyes widened. "How'd they get through the shield? Only designated ministry ponies can pass."

"Maybe he's got an Apple relative with him," I countered. Heck, for all I knew Steel Rain himself could be a member of the family, maybe a descendant of Braeburn. Wouldn't surprise me. "However they're here, they're here, and we need to not be."

He closed his eyes a moment. "I really hoped you wouldn't destroy it. Fluttershy loved that house."

He was concerned about the house? "Look, Dealer, I know it's a nice house, but..."

He gave a small sympathetic smile and nodded. "I know. Your enemies seldom give you a choice." He flickered a bit; I wanted to ask if he was okay, but I had no idea how long we had till Steel Rain came knocking. "The T-51 armor has a serious spark vulnerability. It was something they were addressing in the T-54 models, but those never reached deployment. If you overload the generator attached to the water wheel, it should discharge a spark pulse. That should give you a chance to get away. There's an access panel in the kitchen."

"Okay! Great. Sounds like a plan." I turned and took three steps towards the kitchen, then slowed before looking back at him. "And how exactly do I do that?" I asked sheepishly.

The Dealer's legs were fading from view. "Your friend's ultrasonic voice should foul the crystals in the generator." Suddenly he paused and looked at Stygius, then arched a brow at me; funny how he managed to pull off looking parental. "And Blackjack, was *that* really necessary?"

I flushed bright red; I could have died right there and then. Ugh, he'd been... while he... and I... UGH! And he wanted to discuss my sex life *now*? "Yes," I said flatly, fighting the urge to shudder. Celestia, how *did* he do the Look? It was like finding out Mom had spied on me fooling around. And Duct Tape had been so embarrassed too.

He chuckled, shaking his head and smirking. "Glory is going to kill you." I was about to ask why when a patter of spritebot parts against the window reminded us both that this was not the time. "The charge will build up till the crystals explode and let out a spark pulse. Then you run for your life."

"Great. Like that never gets old," I said with a sigh, rolling my eyes a little. I actually got a laugh out of the Dealer.

"Everypony in the Wasteland chases you, Blackjack. It's your thing." More of him faded away, curling off in misty tatters.

"Are you okay?" I asked in concern.

"It's just... hard... to make contact when I'm not strong enough." His voice became more strained as he disappeared from sight. "Please, try to spare the house..."

Stygius was just staring at me with a baffled look. "Okay... something I left out... um..." How best to explain it? "I have a ghost that lives in my PipBuck." Okay... now bafflement was turning to concern. "A helpful ghost of a pony that knows a lot of stuff..." And is infuriatingly slow to share it. "He says your sonic scream thing can foul the crystals in the generator and make it explode." He blinked, scratched his chin, and then nodded with a smile. I could have kissed him. Again...

We found the little access panel in the kitchen in the back wall, hidden behind the stove, after some frantic searching. The door was so tiny I wondered if Goldenblood employed colts to maintain it. I looked at Stygius. "Can you squeeze through there?" Maybe if he took off his armor... The batpony just snorted and waved his hoof dismissively as he nodded. "Okay. Make it overload and get clear." And please don't die.

He struck another noble pose, and I gave him a hug before turning to my saddlebags. "Take care of your--" I said, then looked up for a moment. He was gone. "Self?"

I peeked through the open panel and saw him standing on the far side next to some equipment. Wow. I knew he was flexible, but...

Focus, Blackjack. I pulled out Vigilance, loaded the magazines with armor piercing rounds, and set the weapon on the kitchen island. Next the sword. The Ranger armor had all kinds of hoses and the like that I could target. Then the shotgun. I fished out every blue spark round I had and alternated them with explosive slugs. Hopefully I'd have a weapon left after this. Finally Duty and Sacrifice; well, they might be better than nothing. I stowed each weapon away. Right now I really wished I still had Taurus's rifle. Actually, right now I wished I had one of those anti-machine rifles.

Three pistols and a shotgun seemed pitiful compared to even one Ranger's armament. I popped my E.F.S. on... and saw only five bars remaining. And they were standing right outside the front door. Funny... one of them was blue. I heard the door click and then slowly creak open as I ducked down. Heavy metal hoofsteps entered. All I had was the element of... oh shit. I heard the hollow, staccato rattle of a grenade machine gun going off.

Oh, this was going to suck!

The next instant I was racing around the kitchen island as the grenades exploded, the shrapnel ripping the cupboards into splinters, pulverizing the fine plates and sending the pots and pans flying. The Steel Ranger in the doorway traced after me, the stream of explosions tearing the walls apart, leaving shattered wood and spilling insulation in their wake. Smoke, dust, and powdered plaster filled the air as I floated the shotgun overhead and fired wildly at the Steel Ranger at the door. The explosive rounds blackened the metal and nothing else, and the spark rounds crackled over the armor but weren't enough to shut it down.

It did throw off his aim enough to buy me time, though; I leapt through the door to the library and rolled as two more grenades followed me through. I darted behind the heavy desk as they blew, peppering me with chunks of carpet and shards of metal. The sturdy wood seemed tougher than I expected, sheltering me from the storm of exploding bombs.

Just as quickly as it started, the assault stopped. This was the part I dreaded. "Security," Steel

Rain said calmly. "The M.o.M. was notified of a Ministry Mare trespassing on a crime scene. You have no idea how glad I am that it was you. The Prophet was convinced you were hiding in the Mire or at Ironmare."

"How'd you know?" I asked as I saw two bars moving towards the door.

"I suspected. You've proven remarkably adept at eluding pursuit," he replied evenly.

"Gee, thanks," I muttered. I couldn't risk poking my head out. A red bar slowly moved around to the side; I could feel the hoofsteps through the floor. "Aren't you going to ask me for EC-1101?" The bar stopped.

"I know you won't surrender it to me." I had to stall. I had to hope Stygius could do something with the generator. "However, now that I've seen this place's defenses, I know that there must be *something* worthwhile here."

"How'd you get through the bubble?" I demanded.

"That hardly matters at the moment, correct? As I'm sure you're tired of hearing, the Harbingers want that PipBuck. As a matter of fact, their leader wanted it even before you left your stable. I had to convince them to expand and get more organized. Establish combat teams. Use radios. Oh, what I could do with a year, their resources, and unrestricted command!" His voice strained with equal parts ambition and frustration.

Then he regarded me a moment and continued. "I, however, am willing to cut a deal. It's rather straightforward and predictable, and I know you'll decline, but I feel I should at least offer you your life for the device." My mane was squirming so hard that I could practically feel anti-dragon rounds aimed at the desk. "I'd prefer that it be handed over intact."

He probably didn't know if his artillery would damage it. A saving grace. For now; this was one time when the famed durability of PipBucks was against me. Come on, Stygius, please hurry... "Hmmm, let me think about it..."

The red bar suddenly charged around the corner. I had only the soft huff of flame to give me warning that it was Flamers. As he came into view, I slipped into S.A.T.S. and blasted him with three perfectly aimed shots to the head, two explosive and one spark... that still did pretty much nothing against his armor. The explosions and crackling blue right in front of his face fazed him for a second, though, and that was a second I used to dive between his widespread forehooves just as one of the flamers poured fire beneath the desk!

Rolling out behind him, I stood and swapped to Vigilance. The pistol shots dinged the back of the helmet and hopefully made his ears hurt a little, but I'd be lucky if they did that much. That's it. Next Seeker I came across, I was keeping their anti-machine rifle. This was ridiculous! I kept behind the Ranger with the flamer as he twisted this way and that, trying to line up a shot. At least he couldn't attack me bac--

Oh, wow. Ranger power armor can applebuck. And it was an excellent method of travel, sending me flying like a cyber ragdoll across the room and into the bookshelf. The impact sent down a shower of books atop me as I sat in a heap at the bottom. I shook off the little orbiting Stygiuses in time to see the

flamer pony wheeling around to face me, one of the weapons already starting to fire.

My horn flashed as I pulled every last book on the shelf I could down atop my head while the flamer spewed. The entire wooden cabinet crashed down atop me, burying me alive beneath broken wood and texts. I felt my whole world getting hot as I curled up beneath the books, wondering how many seconds this 'protection' would last. Flamers were really working their way up my list of most hated things ever.

Then the fwoosh of the flamer was replaced by the crackle of burning books and bookcase as the stream was cut off. It was now or never! I exploded out from the heap of burning books and wood. My horn grabbed the flaming debris around me and threw it at the flamer pony in a fiery storm.

Of course, it didn't do anything, but the smoking cloud obscured his vision enough that when he painted the wall with a second sheet of flame, his stream went high and wide; I was on my hooves and running, trailing a cloud of embers behind me. I darted for the door as I leapt through the smoke cloud... and skidded to a stop at the sight of the machine grenade pony standing in my way.

I backflipped away like a zebra -- and how in Equestria did my body pull that off?! -- just before the floor erupted in a burst of small explosions. I twisted in the air and landed on my hooves on the burning desk. A second jump took me to the only cover I could count on in the room: the back of Flamers. Grenades halted his fire as my fingers came out and grabbed the air hoses running alongside Flamers's neck. He began to buck and kick wildly, spraying plumes of fire, but I was high enough on his back and metal enough to not cook... yet.

Grenades stepped back, and then the Ranger armed with miniguns stepped into his place. Suddenly my cover wasn't as safe as I'd anticipated. Minigun opened fire, spraying Flamers with a rain of small caliber rounds that would do nothing to him and plenty to me. Burning was better than being perforated. I rolled off to the side, keeping Flamers between me and him as fire licked at my belly.

This was getting ugly.

Then Stygius appeared, flashing into view and smacking Minigun with all four hooves. It was about as effective as my shotgun, but it did stagger and distract the Ranger for a second. Then he turned to deal with the flying threat, and the danger the batpony had drawn away from me started threatening him. At least he was good at dodging. The thumping chatter of Grenades's grenade machinegun reverberated in the far room. I had a few seconds to try and deal with Flamers. He was turning towards me, spraying a constant stream of fire across the back windows. If he couldn't burn me, he'd simply cook the room.

Wait. Where was Steel Rain? I looked around, and a tiny pink pony in my mind held a little felt (...felt?) arrow pointing at a red bar over in the workshop next door.

Somehow, I didn't see Steel Rain having the same aversion to causing friendly fire that Grenades had demonstrated.

I leapt as far across the burning floor as I could; direction didn't matter. A second later, the wall between the rooms became one of pressure, debris, and noise that snuffed out some of the blaze and tossed me end over end. I didn't know if Flamers took a direct hit or not, but he was buried under a heap of burning rubble. My body ached in pain from the concussion and burns as I slowly pushed myself to my

hooves. I had to press on, a little white pony informed me. Hold on, endure, and be fabulous.

Steel Rain stepped through the hole he'd just blasted, his cannons ejecting the spent rounds and sending them flying back in great smoking arcs and bouncing into the room behind him. "Incredible. Just incredible. I've found hellhounds less tenacious." Those immense guns gave an ominously deep 'thunk', loading another pair of rounds. Trailing smoke and bits of flaming debris, I charged in the only direction left to me: straight at him.

I leapt at him a split second before he fired, the shockwave slamming into me as I wrapped my forelegs around his neck and grabbed the back of it with my fingers. The shells blew out a huge section of the wall; even the reinforced construction wasn't enough to keep the house intact. I stared into his glowing eye panels and floated Vigilance up. Point blank, I emptied the remainder of the clip into his head.

I think I cracked the eye visor for my trouble. What, was his armor even tougher than the standard model?! Steel Rain didn't banter or make some snide comment, nor was he going to let me reload or stay this close. Instead he turned and charged straight into the wall, smashing me through the layer of plaster, wood, and insulation and onto the stone behind. I heard parts inside me crunch and a pressure burst up my throat. I vomited a bloody foam over his face as I struggled to push him away, breathe, or something.

'Something' came in the form of the sword. I slashed at his neck, but though the edge was magically sharp and it did cut a line in his metal, it was far too little. Maybe if I had half a minute of him standing still, I could saw through. He wasn't going to give me that. He reared back and rammed the wall again. I felt my vision start to go black. Then I slashed at the hoses leading towards the muzzle of his armor. The thick rubber, likely resistant to normal damage, parted under the sword's edge like warm butter. I had no idea what harm I'd done to him, but hopefully it was something. I sliced the other one for good measure.

He moved back and charged one more time. I let go, falling beneath him as the Steel Ranger smashed clear through the wall. I fought to breathe; my vision was full of all kinds of damage alerts. I staggered out of the smoky room, needing a breather. Needing help. I found myself in the hazy workshop and collapsed. I had no idea if I could make myself regenerate faster. Probably not...

From the living room came more shots and explosions. Tears ran down my sooty cheeks. I looked at my PipBuck. I set it to broadcast, closed my eyes, and then rasped out, "This is Blackjack. I need help. Please. I'm by Black Pony Mountain. Please, I need help now." I could only pray that the Seekers didn't know Blackjack was Security. Not that anypony else was likely to be in a position to get here in time, but I was out of ideas.

Stygius was suddenly by my side, so abruptly that it was like he appeared from thin air. He was coated in sweat, smoke and ash were spattered across his hide, and he had more than a few small holes in him. He held a healing potion in his mouth and firmly pressed it to my lips. I knew it wouldn't do much for me, but I drank it anyway. It might not have instantly fixed crushed internal organs, but I had to admit that I did actually feel a little better.

"Thanks," I coughed as I glanced around. Steel Rain had us cornered. Two Rangers were by the door and one was by the hole he'd blasted. "Any clue when that generator is going to overload?" The batpony shook his head. Then my eyes moved up and looked at the underside of the workbench. There

was a little button there. Now why would Goldenblood have a hidden button on the underside of his workbench? It'd probably be the last question I'd get to ask, but it was one I could answer. I reached up with my hoof and smacked it.

The floor fell out beneath me and suddenly I was tumbling down a flight of stairs. I finally reached the bottom, looking up at a smoky rectangle as Stygius darted through. I lay there a moment, my ribs aching and my lungs fighting for a few good breaths. On the wall beside me was another button, and I tapped it with my magic. The rectangle closed. Instantly the three bars upstairs began to mill about. Stygius helped me to my hooves.

Well now... wasn't *this* interesting?

I groaned as I staggered forward into a large basement. There were chalkboards on the walls covered with lists, schematics, and numbers. Most were written in code. As my body repaired itself from being cooked and battered, I picked out a few. Zebra relocation and protection program. Infiltration of Dawn Bay base. Tokomare resource allotment. Robronco resource acquisition. M.W.T. mergers. Blueblood's social calendar. How were any of these *important*?

Goldenblood had kept track of a great deal of Equestria; I wondered when he ever got around to sleeping...

In the corner were a number of terminals. When I approached, a little light flashed over one, and then swept over me in a shimmery wave. It passed over my leg, and then locked on my PipBuck. Then the screens began to flash to life one after the next. Four of them just displayed the O.I.A. logo: six circles with a ministry symbol inside each arranged in a ring surrounding an encircled moon. I noticed now how each ministry was cut off from the others, and from the central circle, linked only by the twisting lines. As if the O.I.A. wasn't to bring the ministries together at all...

Then the middle screen went dark, and a few lines of text appeared.

>EC-1101 status: Standby.
>Ministry Credentials Established.
>Equestria Defense Status: Unknown Critical.
>Palace Status: Complete.
>Redoubt Status: Complete.
>Tom: Complete. Charge 100%.
>Warning: Spark Flux Capacitors charge at 0%. Recharge Pending Activation.
>Project Horizons Status: Standby.
>Activate Project Horizons: Y/N?

I stared at the screen for almost a minute. I swallowed as I stared at the Y button. Wow... all I needed was to push one little button, and I'd know exactly what Goldenblood had planned. Just... just push the button... I almost did. I even moved my hoof over it... and a few weeks ago, I would have. But... I knew better. As much as I wanted to know what Horizons was, I didn't want to find out the reckless way, just in case Sanguine was right and it blew up half the Hoof. I typed 'N' and hit enter. A moment later the text disappeared and I sighed. Must be getting old. I watched new words appear on the terminal screen.

>Confirmed. Project Horizons Status: Standby.

>Warning: Project auto-activation in effect pending critical failure of EC-1101. Please update EDS as soon as possible. Auto-activation cannot be terminated if EDS is unknown.

I tapped several keys that weren't 'Y', but nothing happened aside from going back to the first prompt. I wanted to scream! What was the Palace? What was the Redoubt? Who the hay was Tom? What's a Spark Flux whatchamacallit? What the hell was Project Horizons supposed to do?! I reconsidered my choice of not hitting yes just to see what would happen!

Fortunately, sanity prevailed, and I stepped back. When I moved away, the beam hitting my PipBuck winked out and the screen went dark.

I sighed as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. Were there any answers? Or just more questions that lead to more questions that lead to still more questions? "Damn it..." I whispered to myself. Then Stygius tapped my shoulder, and I looked up in time to see more text appearing on the central terminal.

> I KNOW YOU'RE IN A BAD WAY RIGHT NOW, BLACKJACK.

I stared at the screen as a shocked stillness spread through me, raised a hoof toward the keys, and then slowly pulled it away.

> I KNOW YOU'RE HURT, FRUSTRATED, AND TIRED. YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH. MORE THAN ANYPONY HAS A RIGHT TO. THEN YOU STAND UP ON YOUR HOOVES AND MARCH ON. BECAUSE YOU CAN. BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO.

I sat back, and for a moment there was no Steel Rain. No impending panic or terror or frustration.

> I PRAY THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE WHAT THE MINISTRIES FAILED TO DO TWO CENTURIES AGO. I HOPE THAT YOU CAN, BECAUSE SOME PONY MUST. THE SINS OF THE PAST MUST BE ACCOUNTED FOR. THE MISTAKES MUST BE CORRECTED. ATONEMENT MUST BE PAID. EQUESTRIA NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE. RIGHT NOW, YOU AND OTHERS ARE CREATING THAT SECOND CHANCE. DON'T GIVE UP. I BELIEVE IN YOU, AND I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

>SPIKE

I stared at the screen for almost a minute, fully numb. Then the text disappeared, only to be replaced by:

>HIDE.

There was a resounding detonation, and for a moment I was certain that the generator had blown. Then it sounded again. The third time, the doors from the workshop blew inwards. Still, Spike didn't understand you couldn't hide from E.F.S.! No matter where we were in the room, they'd see our...

Wait. In the dark room, there were now suddenly a whole lot of blue bars. If they were blue to me, maybe they'd be red to the Rangers! The terminals stopped showing the logo and started showing scrolling technical data. Weird formulas. Things that looked like weapon schematics. So... that's the plan. I tugged Stygius's wing, and we scrambled behind some chalkboards in the corner as heavy

hoofsteps descended the stairs. The first one down was Grenades, turning this way and that as he pointed at hostiles that weren't firing yet.

Then he looked over at the terminals. "Sir! You're going to want to see this!" a mare shouted. Okay, so it was a little hard to tell genders in those suits.

Steel Rain trotted down, his eyes immediately drawn to the chalkboards and then to the terminals. "What is this?" He breathed... heavily. With those hoses cut, I bet he wasn't getting quite as much air as he would have liked. Slowly he walked over to the other Ranger next to the terminals. With their backs to us, we started inching towards the stairs.

"Wait... this is a trap!" As he shouted, the schematics disappeared, replaced by the picture of a very ugly mule presenting his posterior, grinning as he looked back over his shoulder. There was a hiss and a pop as four turrets dropped from the ceiling, another four shot up from the ground, and all eight proceeded to pummel the pair with heavy machinegun fire!

I ran for the stairs; as much as I'd have liked to stay and finish him off, even one hit from those cannons would paste both of us. And in the hidden room, those cannons were going off in a roaring cloud of slate and shrapnel. I sure hoped Stygius's ears would be okay as we were blasted by the shockwave. Seriously, Rain. Get a minigun or something for indoor work.

Together we burst out into the workshop. Minigun was kneeling next to Flamers in the blasted-out library. The orange mare had her helmet off, blood dripping from her ears and nose as she struggled to breathe. As soon as we emerged, Minigun swiveled to face us, standing between me and the injured Ranger. As much as I'd have liked to leap out the giant hole Rain had blown in the wall, the purring minigun motor dissuaded me. Besides, if she was in the library, that meant that the front door was open! Grinning, I raced into the living room.

Unless Steel Rain had been smart enough to bring reinforcements.

Two more Rangers stood at the front door. One had a missile launcher and a grenade machinegun setup. The other had anti-machine rifles strapped to his sides. Already alerted by Minigun's fire, the pair were bringing their weapons to bear as we charged out of the workshop.

I changed course at once and darted for the first thing in front of me: the stairs. I doubted I'd outrun a missile's blast radius, but there weren't really many options besides running in the closest direction that was 'away'. Then suddenly Stygius wasn't above me anymore. The armored batpony disappeared, reappearing over Missile's head. What was that?! Had he just *teleported*? Kicks rained down, and while he didn't do much noticeable damage, it was hard to aim a rocket with somepony tapdancing on your head! The shot went low, exploding beneath the balcony and knocking me on my face.

I groaned as I lay there, sprawled out. "Really... I just want to check out of this funhouse..." I had a few seconds to compose myself, then the balcony jerked with a sharp crack. "Oh fuck no..." I groaned.

The balcony walkway collapsed with a shredding of wood. I heard a scream beneath me, followed by a crunch, and I rolled several times to get clear of the flying debris, coming with my face towards the ceiling. I spotted Minigun lying there wearing the walkway like a mantle.

"Kill her!" Steel Rain shouted from the workshop. Oh ponyfeathers, he did not sound happy at all. Stygius was keeping Missile occupied, swooping around his head and planting kicks and bucks. Anti-Machine, however, was free and clear to shoot at the mare lying on her back in front of him. Steel Rain came stomping out, and I was fairly certain he'd happily blast all four of us to finish me off.

I needed more gun. ...And I had it right in front of me! I reached out and grabbed AM's hoses with my fingers. Had he lowered his head, I would have been screwed. However, he pulled back, and that yanked me towards him. Kicking and scrambling, I spun around on my back beneath him, putting my hands where his forelegs met his body and my rear hooves to the sides of his pelvis. Setting myself, I grit my teeth and heaved AM completely off the ground!

His legs kicked wildly as I turned him to face directly towards the pony with the cannons and the shot-up armor. I grinned from ear to ear, looking at Steel Rain from upside down. My horn glowed as I reached up to the trigger mechanisms and fired the elevated Ranger's weapons as fast as I could. Even Steel Rain's armor couldn't take that. AM's guns were loaded with armor piercing and incendiary rounds; just right for your local cyberpony. My aim was shit, but my luck wasn't; two shots hit home, biting deep into his chest and neck, and even Steel Rain was forced to take cover as I finally saw blood! Damn, he was a tough son of a mule, though; multiple anti-machine rifle hits and he hadn't dropped? Still, if he could bleed, he could be beaten! He could be *killed*... if only he didn't have a bunch of other ponies trying to kill me first!

"Stygius! The door!" I shouted. I couldn't turn AM the full ninety degrees to shoot Missile as well. So instead I ejected his ammo clips, lowered my hind legs, and gave his nethers a sharp kick to occupy his time before I heaved him off to the side. I really had no clue if I did any harm, or even if AM had anything there to harm in the first place, but it was better than nothing. Just trying to buy myself time. The dusky batpony blinked over to the door in a flash of blackish-purple light and yanked it open, and I rolled and half jumped, half fell outside. I just had to find out how he did that trick! Later... when I wasn't running for my life.

A missile blasted the door closed behind me, and I slowly rose on wobbly legs. Okay, I was outside. Now if that generator would just overload... I could hear some kind of electrical crackle and an ominous hum rising from the water wheel. If I could just get out of here, I'd be one happy pony.

And of course there was another Ranger outside.

"Oh come on!" I shouted as I pointed my shotgun at her and unloaded four rounds before I realized something was wrong. She wasn't defending herself. Hell, she wasn't even *armed*; what sort of Steel Ranger wasn't armed? She just stood there. Was there anypony actually inside this thing? The armor moved, tracking me... so there did have to be somepony in there. But wh--

Unfortunately, the Ranger outside did have one potent weapon after all: she'd delayed me. The front of the house blew out in a great wave of reinforced debris that landed on me and the unarmed Ranger alike with a heavy crunch. Steel Rain stepped out through the dust cloud, his once magnificent armor now quite shot to hell but already slowly repairing itself, pink light smoothing the holes punched in his chest. "You've caused everypony quite enough trouble, Security." He ejected the spent cannon rounds as he stepped out. Stygius landed next to me, shifting the rubble so I could crawl free.

"You're just forgetting one thing," I said as I saw the blue glow coming through the broken wood paneling around the water wheel.

Steel Rain loaded two shells as Missile and Grenades stepped out with him. Their weapons trained on me. None of them were biting...

"The T-51 armor has a nasty vulnerability to spark discharges," I said with a grin. Then I glanced at the corner of the house, where things were glowing and crackling, and then back to him. Standing on the porch, the three glanced at each other. "A discharge... like the one that needs to happen... right now!" Still nothing. The three looked right at me, weapons trained. I sighed and sat, throwing my hooves wide. "I give up. You win," I said in disgust at whatever higher power had missed the perfect chance to blow the generator. "You may now proceed with the gloating and the explanation of your nefarious plot." Maybe humor would buy me the time I needed?

But Steel Rain wasn't in a particularly expository mood. All three pointed their weapons at me. "Try not to scrap the leg."

"Death from above!" came a scream. The Steel Rangers looked up in time to receive a faceful of Rampage. The striped mare smashed into the trio like a wrecking ball. She'd replaced her armor with a suit of reinforced steel and battered, sharpened spikes. She set her hoofclaws into the decking and slammed Steel Rain with a clawed applebuck upside his face that dented his armor. "That's for Mallet."

Then there was the resounding crack of an anti-machine rifle above me, and Grenades reeled back as the side of her helmet nearly came off. I looked up at the shining horn of Lacunae. A PipBuck gleamed on her hoof as she dropped down beside me. "Sorry we are late."

"But how... the shield..." I muttered weakly.

"Damn it. I should let you die, Blackjack! I bet Rampage you'd be crying for help inside a day!" Psychoshy yelled as she darted down and smashed her hooves against Missile. The power hooves on the ends of her legs flashed, knocking the Ranger back through the door. "Now I got to pay this cunt a thousand caps that I don't have! You owe me a thousand caps, Blackjack!"

"Gotta love Psychie's logic," Rampage laughed as she continued to slam against Steel Rain, keeping his cannons off me. "I gave you your power hooves back, didn't I?" she said as she shoved his barrels away from Lacunae and me. He responded by smashing her face with a swing of his armored head. She grinned even wider as the two struggled against each other.

"Only 'cause I called in a favor with Hammersmith. Honestly, Rampage, how you blow up metal armor is beyond--" The mare swooped into the air in preparation for another dive and suddenly found herself face to face with the dusky Stygius. She froze hovering there as she stared into his eyes. "...me?"

Stygius blinked and then gave a small smile. I stared up at the two through the hazy, smoky air as the yellow pegasus actually blushed. She was fidgeting! Right now in the middle of a battle. "Um... hi," she said as she looked at him. "I'm... ah..." and then she muttered something.

"She does this *now*?" Lacunae asked in my mind. She carefully aimed another shot at Grenades, who took cover inside the house. I got to my hooves, my whole body numb.

Missile seemed to feel the same way as she began to fire her grenade machinegun up at the two. They darted away, the yellow mare glaring down at the Ranger. "Hey!" Psychoshy's wings snapped her into a dive that she pulled up from just in time to streak a foot above the ground. "I'm talking..." she

screamed as she swooped up in an uppercut. "...to a really..." she continued as she rose up and smashed her rear hooves into Missile's face. "...hot guy here!" The pegasus pirouetted in the air and brought her front hooves down on top of his head. "So piss off!" she finished as the Ranger collapsed in a heap. Then she darted back up to the stunned Stygius and said shyly, "So... ah... um... What's your name?"

I doubted Stygius would have been able to answer, even if he could talk. But when Anti-Machine stepped out the gaping hole in the front and leveled his barrels at the mare, the batpony darted down as a shadowy blur and tagged all four hooves against his head, staggering the Ranger. From the shades of red the pair were turning as he flew up again, I was pretty sure there wasn't going to be another chance of fun with him for me.

"We need to get out of here," I said as I saw Minigun joining the fight. The instant one of them distracted Rampage, we were going to get hit by Rain's cannons. For a moment, I took in the scorched grass and blackened, blasted-out front of the house. It didn't look all that different from the rest of the Wasteland now. There were fires licking the upper stories. I imagined the unused nursery burning up, and my gut clenched. Nothing stayed good in Hoofington. Nothing beautiful.

The battle was a lot more even now but still precarious. The Rangers had both firepower and resilience on their side, but now instead of running me into the ground, they had to pay some care towards their own defense. Lacunae and I kept up a rain of fire, Rampage struggled with Steel Rain, and Psychoshy and Stygius darted above them and rained down lightning kicks when their guards were down. Lacunae's anti-machine rifle and S.A.T.S.-enhanced markspoonship proved devastating as she stood magnificently within her shield. She and I blasted anypony that poked their heads out at us. They started getting smarter, though, moving in unison and firing at us in pairs so we couldn't keep them pinned.

Then Flamers came around the side of the house and hosed both Rampage and Steel Rain in a sheet of flame. The former's grip slipped a moment, and Steel Rain gave a great heave, smashing her to the ground. Then he turned towards us. "Teleport us out. Now!" I said in a rush.

"If I could do that, I would have before now. I can't teleport through that field," Lacunae said as she turned her rifle on Steel Rain. The Rangers, however, as if aware their leader's guns were about to be brought to bear, came out and fired as one. Lacunae focused, her shield flickering wildly at the firepower pouring down upon it. Anti-Machine and Minigun sent up a barrage at Stygius and Psychoshy; the pair of fliers darted about crazily. Despite their efforts, though, a line of minigun bullets stitched from Psychoshy's shoulder to her flank, amazingly not killing her but still sending her tumbling wildly and screaming as she tried desperately to get away before the weapon pulped her completely.

Stygius jumped through the air, blinking short distances in flickers of shadow to move beneath her and catch her in his hooves. The tough mare turned even redder; fortunately, her embarrassment wasn't going to last longer than a few more second--

Wait... what was that buzzing noise?

From the waterwheel area and the holes in the house's walls came a blue glow and an increasingly sharp, crackling buzz. Even Steel Rain paused, looking towards the source of the sound. Then everything went white.

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I knelt in the middle of a hotel room in a Manhattan skyscraper, wearing a maintenance uniform. "Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins. Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins," I repeated over and over again in a frantic whisper. The desperation in my voice bordered on madness as I rocked slowly back and forth. Then the clock chimed ten, and I rose to my hooves. I turned and looked out the window towards the mountains of Canterlot and the rising sun beyond. "Please forgive me."

I walked to the telephone. My horn glowed, and I lifted the receiver, spun the dial, and closed my eyes. A second or two later, a mare answered in a tense voice that suggested she'd been crying. "Hello? Pumpkin Cake."

"Hi, Pumpkin. It's me," I said in a low, rushed voice. "Listen. I can't talk now, but it's important that you and Pound get out of there now. Get someplace safe, like a stable, right now."

"What?" the mare gasped. "I can't. Things are crazy over here right now. I think Pinkie has finally snapped. She's been ranting about arresting ponies right and left! And they're taking down Four Stars as we speak! Pinkie's trying to purge the M.o.M. now that Teacher's in prison, and we're just trying to hold everything together!" I looked out the window at the great big Pinkie Pie balloons floating above the streets; huge, decapitated heads of the Ministry Mare.

"Listen to me, Pumpkin. Please... listen. You can't worry about Pinkie or Teacher now. You can't worry about anything except getting yourselves to safety. Do you understand? Get out of there in the next half an hour if you want to live," I said with terrible evenness as I looked out at the pink hub building.

There was a tight silence on the other end. "What's going on? Is this an O.I.A. thing? Does this have anything to do with the sabotage in our hub last night? What's happening?" There was a mirror over the desk that I peeked at. I looked into my own sad blue eyes and closed them again. Then, calmly and deliberately, I hung up the phone.

Five seconds later it rang again. I stood there for a half dozen rings, then picked it up. Garnet, her voice edged with malice, said immediately, "You're lucky we're in the endgame and they're not a priority, idiot, or I'd have you kill both of them yourself. Partypooper is activated. Your alpha target was Twilight Sparkle, but our sources say she's in Maripony. So alpha is now Pinkie Pie. After that, confirm that everypony on the list is removed. You've taken steps with the M.o.M. hub?"

"Yes, but--"

"Good. Now do your duty, Agent."

I shuddered. "And then Luna will forgive me?"

"Sure. Whatever. We've received confirmation that the ministries are colluding with the zebras. If we're quick, we can wrap this up without a slaughter. Now get to it and start eliminating those traitors." And then the mare hung up.

What was a few more deaths to a soul stained black with sin? But Luna would forgive me. She was my only hope.

I sighed and stood, trotting to the door. I walked down the hall, through a door, and into a

maintenance hallway. When I reached a cargo elevator, I rode it upward. It pinged, and two more ponies trotted in. Both wore uniforms similar to my own.

"I tell you, something is going on. I heard Stable-Tec put out a priority alert!" the green stallion said cautiously. "You have to admit it, Pokey. This last week has been weird."

"Don't give me more of your conspiracy theories, Evergreen. If you tell me one more story of secret O.I.A. plots, space aliens abducting ponies, or zebra death curses, I swear I'm going to scream," the blue buck said with a roll of his eyes.

"Look, this is different. I mean, a priority alert? That means get to the stables *now*," the green stallion with a pine tree on his flank said, trotting nervously in place. "And Twilight's in Maripony doing something big. How do we know it's not related to the alert?"

The blue unicorn with a safety pin on his flank snorted and shook his head. "Yeah yeah, Evergreen. Just like last month. Just another one of their drills." The unicorn looked back at me, and I froze. "Hey, what do you think? Is something going on, or not?"

I didn't answer. Shouldn't answer. "If you have any loved ones, call them. Tell them to get to safety. Now," I whispered as my horn glowed faintly; barely a shimmer.

They looked at each other. "Hey, I don't know you. You new?" the green buck asked with a worried frown. "I thought they froze all transfers."

"Please. Tell them to get into the stables, underground, or to the M.A.S. hub," I murmured, my voice straining. "Please..."

"I think we need to contact secur--" was as far as the blue stallion got before the knives left their sheathes on the inside of my forelegs. A blade struck with inerring precision into his left eye. The blue stallion jerked as if electrified as the other knife pressed against Evergreen's throat. The first blade twisted in the socket, and the blue unicorn collapsed in a heap. I left the blade in his eye socket for now to keep most of the mess inside as I contemplated the other stallion.

"Oh Celestia... oh Luna... oh please..." Evergreen begged as he lost control of his bladder and wet his coveralls. "I have a son... please... I have a son..."

I hesitated. *Kill him*, training said. *Kill him, and Luna will forgive. Kill him so he can't give alarm. Kill him because, in the long run, what does he matter? What's another life?* Pokey's was over, cut short by me and my inability to compose myself, knowing what I knew, and trying to give warning. Everything I was told me to kill Evergreen. Everything but one small part.

"Get to your son and get to safety. That's all that matters now. Understand?" I said softly. He sobbed and nodded so fast he looked as if he were going to snap his head clear off. I pulled a mirror from my pocket and used it to peek down the hall at a sensor camera. A second later, several wires were unplugged from the back.

"What's happening... what..." begged the stallion.

"Something bad," was all I said. I bit the back of Pokey's collar and pulled him into the short hall. Maybe he'd warn somepony rather than getting his son. Maybe I'd just killed both of them. *Serve*

Princess Luna well, and you will be forgiven. It was my only chance. My only hope.

I pulled Pokey's body to the door leading out to the roof, making sure the blood oozing from the hole in his face soaked into his barding. Once on the roof, I plugged the wires back into the camera. No need to send a maintenance pony if it wasn't broken. Leaving the corpse on the roof, tucked in a corner out of view, I trotted over towards a stack of crates beside the broadcast dish. One was slightly off from the rest. I fished out a key and opened the crate.

Inside was a suit of black riot armor and a rifle case. I flipped it open and looked at the gleaming, finely-machined pieces. The morning light shone off the scope's lens. I levitated out the pieces and with care and finesse slowly screwed them together into a rifle longer than my body. My magical grip didn't waver in the slightest as I trotted to the edge and knelt down. I saw the distant pink tower of the Ministry of Morale hub and opened the breech. The butt had lines carefully cut into it, one for each sin I'd committed. The once-smooth surface was rough and jagged.

The bullets were large, familiar, hateful things. I lifted one and examined the runes that would allow it to bypass normal materials and armor. I slid it home. Magical talismans in the weapon would assist its propulsion and path through the air. My StealthBuck activated, and both I and the gun disappeared. With practiced ease, I lowered the scope to my eye and peered through.

The magical scope peeled away the facade of the building, and I looked through the walls to the ponies within. Their images were so clear, I could almost pick out conversations from the movements of their lips. Panic, worry, and alarm consumed the M.o.M. hub. I swept through the familiar architecture; I'd studied every inch of it. Been inside several times.

Then I found the office I'd wanted. The mare inside, a pink mare with a messy pink-and-gray-striped mane, paced back and forth. She swung her head wildly, her lips working as she talked to herself. I slipped into practiced calm, pushing it all away. She was plotting a coup; Twilight and all her friends were. Their elimination was a sad necessity to secure Luna's rule.

Serve Luna well, and you will one day be forgiven.

I followed her pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth. I timed it. It was something I was always good at; I never had much in the way of magic, but I had the faith to take the shot and the knack of knowing exactly when and where the bullet would be. Back and forth. Back and forth. The familiar stillness passed through me as I put the crosshairs where she would turn. It'd be a second and a half for the complete turn. I licked my lips.

Pinkie Pie suddenly stopped, her eyes wide and staring as she looked around. I'd been warned about this: no doubt she was sensing something. A wobbly leg, a twitchy ear, or a creepy flank... something warning her of her impending demise. I kept the crosshairs on her head as she stared straight ahead, tears running down her cheeks. There was a look of horror on her face I'd never seen before. I had to wonder what it was like to know you were about to die. Would she call for help? She had to die before she could warn Twilight and the others that Luna was moving against them.

As soon as the Ministry Mares were taken out, government forces would take over the M.o.M., M.A.S., and M.o.A. Ponies loyal to the Princess would be installed. Then the zebra forces would be annihilated in an overwhelming preemptive strike. So much had to happen, and in such a short time. If it was true that the Ministry Mares were actually conspiring with the enemy to depose the Princess and surrender to the zebras, there was no telling what might happen. One Ministry Mare had already given

the enemy the means to make megaspells. The M.A.S. hub would be secured rather easily; Maripony would be far more challenging, but the M.A.S. wasn't an army. Even the M.o.A. and Shadowbolt Tower wouldn't stand long on their own.

Pinkie Pie was no longer frantic. She wasn't springing for the phone. In fact, she wore an expression that was almost... happy. She'd taken a figurine from her desk and hugged it to her chest as she looked at me. Right at me! I was so shocked that I pulled my eye from the scope. Then I looked back. She smiled so terribly sadly, her blue eyes shimmering with tears and regret, but happiness too. Her mouth moved silently. For a moment, I almost aborted. I should contact command and confirm.

Then I looked again at the old mare with the candy-cane-striped mane. 'Please.' Her mouth moved as she hugged the little statue tightly, slumped in the corner. 'Please. I don't want to burn.'

I stared for a second longer, looking Pinkie Pie in the eyes. I'd never looked in the eyes of my target and seen into their heart. I took a breath. I let it out. I pulled the trigger. The gun was precisely engineered, enchanted to be completely silent, and accelerated the bullet even more than the explosive inside the shell.

Relief spread across her face in a tired smile. I watched, unable to tear my eye away from the scope. The bullet tore through the M.o.M. shield, weakened due to my sabotage yesterday, and ignored the magical strengthening of the glass in Pinkie's office window. The projectile shattered the massive pane and buried itself right in the pink mare's chest. Her eyes bulged a moment as the round shot through her torso and into the wall behind her. Blood flowed from the corner of her mouth. Then she laid her head against the wall, still hugging the figurine as her eyes closed for good.

I pulled the eyepiece away, breathing harder than I ever had before. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. "Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another--"

A horrible warmth bloomed on my features and I stared -- a second sun lit up the sky, expanding outwards from the direction of Cloudsdale.

No. We were too late. We were all too late. The ministries had made their move.

I raced to my gear and threw it on. The M.A.S. shield rose up to full emergency strength around me as I put on the headset already piggybacked into the EBS network. "Control. Control! Come in please. We have a Celestia-level event in Cloudsdale! I repeat, a Celestia level event... in..."

There was a second sunrise today in Manehattan. A great roiling ball of green and red fire that seemed to seek out the buildings and their inhabitants. It spread in all directions, like burning water gushing through the canyons of the city. The flames swept up to the flickering shield around the tower. *Don't look...* a tiny voice warned me. *Don't look...*

But I brought the scope up and looked. And that tiny voice... that vital little voice... died inside me. The scope filtered out the dazzling glare of the flames so that I saw everything in perfect clarity. I watched ponies burning alive in the streets as they tried to scramble for safety. I watched a mare with mane and tail aflame streaking down the street as her coat burned away. I saw a family cower together in a bathroom as the fire seemed to sniff them out, flooding the buildings and roasting them alive. I swept my scope to the M.o.M. building. The weakened shields had failed at the base, and the fire was pouring in. The shield acted like a chimney, drawing the flame upwards and incinerating everypony inside.

Pinkie had known. She'd known.

There was no reply from Control. Cut off? Destroyed? It didn't matter. I had a mission to do; I'd sworn to serve the Princess. Partypooper was active, and it was my duty to make sure that everypony on my list was eliminated. I'd go to Hoofington first. There were at least two targets there. Then Maripony, if it was still standing.

I disassembled the weapon and packed it away. I had a long way to go before I earned my forgiveness and a lot more ponies to kill in the meantime. I rode the cargo elevator to the basement, ignoring the shouts and screams of the residents and workers echoing through the tower. I reached the bottom, a room full of straining generators, and my radiation meter began to crackle. I chewed down a tablet of Rad-X.

"You there! Halt! Who--" a mare in a maintenance suit shouted. Without hesitating, without even thinking about it, I drew my IF-44 submachine gun and put a three round burst in her chest. A curious hollowness filled me as I trotted over her body and walked to the door, entering a security bypass password that opened to a tunnel filled with magical radiation, reeking smoke, and screams. It was a promise of what was to come if I did not serve and receive absolution for my sins.

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I felt the dream fade away and simply lay there, sprawled on my side. I could hear a distant klaxon blaring annoyingly over the hiss of the Hoofington rain and picked up a mare's voice talking in low tones.

"...just lying there. What if she's, like, dead?" Psychoshy asked.

"For the hundredth time, she's fine, Psycho. You were closer to death than she was. You're lucky Lacunae got to you before you were, like, dead," Rampage said. "She's half machine, and that spark discharge did to her what it did to the Rangers. Lacunae's confirmed she's dreaming. Her systems will repair themselves. If she's not awake in an hour, we'll head over to the Collegiate. Maybe they can do something for her."

I cracked my eye open. We were in another Robronco dealership; the smashed robot displays were everywhere. A campfire crackled merrily in one corner, and Rampage was roasting radroaches over the flames. Water poured in ribbons through holes in the roof and snaked over the filthy tiles between rusting piles of scrap. A strange blue-purple luminescence glowed through the grimy front windows. I looked around at other signs of habitation; ancient graffiti spray-painted on the wall read 'Fuck the Gearheads.' Bullet holes decorated the walls, and ancient Stable-Tec mattresses lay around the fire.

I closed my eyes and tried to think a moment though the staticy, scratchy feeling in my head. Another dream of the black mare. A mare who by now I had a sneaking suspicion was Psalm. Between that dream I had in the canyon, the vision of her in the war room, and what I'd seen just now... it was too much to be a coincidence. The thing was, I had no idea why I would have a Marauder in my dreams. The one back in Goldenblood's house had been a lot more abstract and... dream-ish than this one, as if my brain was trying to do... *something*! It was like Psalm herself been put inside me; more than just a memory orb. Unicorn magic could extract memories from other ponies; could it also put memories *into* another pony? Triage had warned me that mucking around with memories was dangerous...

Ugh... I really needed to talk to a smart pony about this. And take some Med... er... hope the

headache passed quick. I opened my eyes again and slowly sat up. "Sweet Celestia... that discharge packed a punch." I shook my head and then looked at my friends. "Did we win? Tell me you splatted Steel Rain." I knew I couldn't kill a helpless enemy, but I doubted that Psychoshy or Rampage would hesitate to finish off the rogue leader.

Rampage finished chewing a mouthful of radroach and swallowed. "Hey Blackjack," she said. Then, a moment later, she admitted with a sheepish smile, "It was a draw. We were all set to play can opener when the Seekers arrived. Like... all of them. We flew the heck out of there. Then the rain picked up, so we holed up in here," she said as she trotted closer. "So... how are you, Blackjack?" she asked in concern. "When you left, we were afraid you were about to spit your bit."

I sighed, stood, and shook myself. My combat armor reeked of smoke. I was going through armor something crazy; this had to be my sixth or seventh set. I rubbed my face... good, at least that hadn't burned away. Then I saw that my tail was singed short. I sighed again and shook my head. "You were right to be worried. I... I wasn't in a good way, Rampage. At all. I had a lot of junk I was trying to run away from." I sighed and looked at her with a sheepish smile. "Stuff that... well... you were trying to get me to deal with." Psychoshy scowled at me, then muttered to herself as she glared out the glowing windows.

"So... I have to ask... how'd you find me?" I asked, sitting down next to Rampage. "I mean, I really needed help, but I didn't expect anypony to just appear from nowhere. Particularly any of you."

"Well, we had it worked out. Scotch put Glory's PipBuck on Lacunae, and she scooped up a drum of radioactive waste to dump on herself. Your tag thingy was already loaded." Rampage chuckled. "Scotch Tape's been listening for you... for anypony, really, since you left us at the medical center. DJ Pon3 is off the air for some weird reason, so she did something to her PipBuck to make it scan for transmissions. Soon as you started talking, she rushed downstairs crying that you were dying."

"Yeah, but how'd she teleport here?" I asked in confusion.

"Oh, that's simple. You mentioned Black Pony Mountain in your message, and we could see that your tag was nearby. I've been to the area before, so she magicked the location right out of my skull. Then she rolled around in that waste for five minutes, grabbed me and Psychoshy here, and poofed to the other side of Hoofington."

"Yeah. 'Cause I really wanted to help you," Psychoshy muttered, rolling her eyes.

Rampage snorted in annoyance. "Anyway. After that, it was just following your tag to the big pink bubble... and watching all the Seekers swarming in from the north. Lacunae was beside herself when she couldn't get through, but Psycho crossed the barrier no problem."

"It's because her mom was Fluttershy," I said, looking over at her. The yellow mare flushed, turning away in embarrassment. "How's everypony else?"

"Well, we've been worried since you took off. Glory, P-21, Scotch, and Boo made it back to Chapel safe and sound, and since then we've been just waiting for something to happen so we could come running. The Harbingers made only one or two little skirmishes around the air base. P-21 is having it rough. Scotch isn't much better." The striped mare flushed. "It's probably for the best we came. I was feeling nervous around her. I mean, she wasn't sad, but still... better safe than sorry, right?"

Safer than me with Boing. "And Glory? How is she?" I asked at once.

"Exhausted. Tired. Frustrated she couldn't help you. Scared to death you were angry with her," Rampage said in quiet but firm tones. "She's worried you blame her for bringing you back like this." I didn't reply, and she asked evenly, "Do you?"

I sighed. "A little. I mean, yeah... death would have been worse. But... yeah. A little stupid part of me is mad that I didn't get a choice in it. In any of it." I rolled upright, looking at the flames. "But... that's life, isn't it? It's not what happens to you. It's how you deal with it. And I've been dealing by shoving my head up my ass, looking for things to shoot or run away from." Then I looked around. "Speaking of... where're Stygius and Lacunae?"

"On the roof. Your... he..." Psychoshy gave a little snarl.

"So, is Stygius your new buckfriend?" Rampage asked. "Because from the smell when we checked you out for injuries, you two were awfully close."

I flushed at once. What, was everypony sniffing me while I was out? "What? No! He's just a nice guy I had sex with. That's all," I said as I stood. There were streams of data in the corners of my vision; I assumed that was my EFS rebooting. For some reason, both of them were staring in shock. "What?"

"*Just* a nice guy you had sex with?" Psychoshy drawled incredulously.

"Um... yeah?" I asked in confusion as Rampage covered her face with her hoof. "What?"

"Security... slut of the Wasteland. Who woulda thought?" Psychoshy said in her usual snide tones. Oh, she better not pretend like she'd never had a roll in the hay or two for the fun of it!

Rampage paused, as if trying to figure out how to break something terrible to me. "Blackjack... Glory is your special somepony, right?" I nodded. "How could you do this to her?" Rampage asked, looking concerned.

"How could I do what to her?" I asked as I looked from one to the other. "I had sex with him. And... I was able to do it without killing him. I mean... Rampage... I kept myself under control the whole time!" I gave a crooked smile to the striped mare who just stared in shock. My smile became a little more uncertain. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"I... but... You..." she stammered in agitation, her hooves waving in the air... and then suddenly she smiled. "You know what... I'm just going to step out of this sticky little detail, 'kay? This is something that is between you and Glory, and I'll just be watching on the sidelines... with popcorn." Psychoshy gave a scornful snort and looked away.

I never imagined that me getting laid would be a subject of such drama.

I sighed and stood. "I need to talk to somepony real quick. It won't take long." Rampage nodded, and I trotted into the back corner and turned on my broadcaster. I slumped down and thought for a bit about what I needed to say.

"Hey. Scotch Tape. I don't know if you can hear me right now, but if you're picking this up, could you please go get the others?" I sat there a moment, looking over at Psychoshy getting harassed by

Rampage. "Hey everypony. It's me. Blackjack. I hope that you're actually getting this. Knowing my luck, I'm sending it straight to the Seekers. So I'll be quick."

"I wanted to tell you that you were right, Glory. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have run away. I should have been strong enough to face my fears with you rather than tearing halfway across the valley. I know that letting me go off on my own couldn't have been easy, but I want you to know that I'm better now. I have friends helping me and... and I've started to try and deal with my problems. I know... sounds like an impossible task. Shooting things is easier. Running is easier. But in the end, I hurt people who didn't deserve it. New things to atone for... like Scoodle."

My comments cut off Rampage mid-stride, and she stared at me from across the room. I just looked back at her, and her eyes narrowed. Something I'd have to deal with later. I closed my eyes, resting my head against the cool, moist cinder block. "P-21... I want to tell you something. I want to tell you how goddamned brave and awesome you are. You actually had the guts to do something I couldn't. You're doing the right thing. And I hope that you get to have something none of the stallions ever got to have... a family. I guess that makes you unique in two ways." I chuckled with a small smile. "I know you're hurting right now. But I know... I just know... you're tough enough to stick it out. Anypony who follows me around for a month without going crazy can do anything."

I looked down at my PipBuck. Was I even doing this right? Fuck it. At least I'd get it said, even if they didn't hear it. "Scotch Tape, I hope you're helping Glory and keeping an eye on P-21. I know he's not the most talkative pony. I know he's probably frowning right now. But he loves you. I'm sure of it. But please be patient. I know you've waited a long time for him... but it'll still take him a while to open up." Then I smiled. "And yes, Boo. I'm here. I'm fine. You be a good pony too. Don't make a mess for Glory." I sighed and shook my head with a smile. "I know you're a real pony, Boo. You'll show us all sooner or later."

I looked over at Rampage and Psychoshy; they were staring coldly at me. "Glory... I want you to know that I love you. I don't care who you look like. I love you. I always will. And I hope when I see you again I can show you just how much I do." I chuckled again. "I met a guy. He's pretty quiet, but he's nice. He helped me get through what happened on the boat. Real champion in bed. Something about fliers... I know you're not into guys, but I hope the two of you can be friends." I trailed off, then thought a moment and couldn't think of anything else to say. Psychoshy stared at me, mouthing 'champion' soundlessly.

"Well, I should probably get going. I'll talk again soon. Hopefully... everything will work out and I'll be back right away. Take care." And then I turned off my PipBuck's broadcaster and sat back.

"Another Scoodle?" Rampage asked in a sharp tone.

"Yeah. It was an accident, but I'm still to blame." I kept my voice even as I looked at the glowering earth pony. "It's something I'll have to deal with myself. Sorry, though," I said, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sorry?" she growled as she reared up and shoved me back into the wall. "You kill a kid and all you say is sorry? Fucking sorry?!" she yelled down at me. I wanted to fight back, but there wasn't any anger left in me.

"What else can I say, Rampage? It was an accident. I know that doesn't make it okay... but it happened because I was out of it. The fatigue... everything that's going on... I killed her." I lifted my

metallic fingers to my face. "I almost lost my mind that night, after it happened. I deserved to. But some ponies at Happyhorn gave me the help I needed." Rampage paced back and forth in front of me, as if deciding whether or not to stomp me into scrap metal. I wasn't sure if I would stop her if she did. "So... yes. Sorry. If I'd been stronger and faced my problems sooner..." But there was nothing left I could say.

Rampage hissed to herself as she finally looked away. "Then you better get better, Blackjack. Quick. You're supposed to be one of the good ponies. But running off... killing a kid... fucking a guy behind Glory's back? Fuck, it hasn't even been a day and you do all that?"

"Girl moves quick. Nothing wrong with that," Psychoshy smirked, getting a flat look from both of us. "What?"

"Sorry, Rampage. I messed up," I said as I met her eyes. There was a look of betrayal about them. "I'm not as good as I should be... but I'm trying to do better. And I can if you'll give me a chance and your help."

"I... you... but... ARRRGH..." She ground her teeth together, then finally slumped. "Okay. One chance. Not like... Not like I haven't done messed up things too. But Blackjack... not again. Got it? I'll help you, but Celestia save me, you kill another kid, even by fucking accident, and your chances are done. You hear me?" What else could I do besides nod? She sighed. "Fuck..."

I sighed as I picked myself up, getting back on my hooves. Now wasn't the best time but... "In any case, Rampage... I know I have no right to ask you this, but I need your help now." The striped mare glowered in anger as I gave a worried little smile. There wasn't any good way to ask this. "Rather... I need the help of one of the people inside you. I need to talk to Twist."

Rampage took a step back at once, her eyes widening in alarm. "Blackjack...you just told me you... and now you want me to...? Are you crazy?" I could only nod and gave her a sympathetic smile. This wasn't easy for her. "You know I don't like that. I mean... what if she's crazy or something?"

"She'll be in good company?" Psychoshy suggested.

"I've talked to her once before, Rampage. She was fine. Upset, but fine. I need to ask her some questions that will help me... and maybe you too. Can I see if I can draw her out?" I asked as I gave her a concerned smile. "I won't try if you don't want me to. It's not vital."

Rampage groaned and slumped. "You had to play that card didn't you?" She took a deep breath. "Okay... I'll give you a shot. Just... make sure I come back? Please?" The fear was clear in her eyes.

"I will," I said as I looked her in the eyes, trying to remember what I'd seen in memories of Twist. "Sergeant Twist, report for duty!" I snapped with as much authority as I could muster. Rampage gave a little half smile and shook her head. "Twist, Big Macintosh would like to have a word." Psychoshy scowled in confusion as Rampage sighed with a patient smile.

I'd have to do something else. I closed my eyes and remembered the projection in the workshop. "You had a candy store in Hoofington with an apartment above it. You'd go down every morning to make candies. You had a roommate, a quiet black unicorn named Psalm..." I said in a low, soft voice, watching as her eyes gradually lost focus and grew round. "It was burned when the city was attacked after

Littlehorn. And the name of your store was..."

"Peppermint Parlor," Rampage whispered, her eyes locking with mine. "Please... I don't want to be here. Please..." she begged, shaking her head slowly.

"It's okay, Twist. I won't keep you long. But I need to ask you a question about Psalm. Your friend?" I said in low, careful tones.

"Psalm..." She closed her eyes, her smile vanishing. "She wasn't my friend. Not after Shattered Hoof and Big Macintosh." Now there was clear anger in her pink eyes, but she just sighed. "What do you want to know about her?"

"I think I've been seeing her in my dreams. Not just seeing her. It's like she's inside me. Like I am her. Do you have any idea if that's possible?" I asked as I put a hoof on her shoulder.

"Blackjack... I died... and I'm talking to you now. Right now, I think anything is possible. Besides, you're the one with the horn; you tell me?" She had a ghost of a smile on her face for a moment, then looked around and lost it. "She was my first marefriend. I worked in the Parlor with Doof while she worked off at that school. It was... nice. A sweetheart in bed too, but it didn't work out. We were better as friends." She sighed, closing her eyes. "All three of us enlisted together after they razed old Hoofington. I barely escaped with some photographs."

"What happened at Shattered Hoof? And afterwards? The mare I've seen in my dreams... she's a killing machine." My comment made Rampage flinch.

"Psalm... It was my fault. At the enlistment, she shot a perfect score at her trials. She was a natural markspoon. I told her she needed to accept a combat role with me and Doof. It wasn't enough to be support. But... it was different for her. Me... I was fighting for my life. Doof, he'd spray thousands of bullets for fun. But for Psalm, it was personal. She wasn't just fighting the enemy; she was murdering them. They were nearly helpless against her. But Celestia damn me, I told her to keep it up. Even when she had nightmares. Even when she wanted to put a bullet through her own head. I tried to make her toughen up." She shook her head. "Instead... I think I killed something inside her."

"Twist... what happened at Shattered Hoof?" I asked gently.

"Everything. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. Applesnack and Big Macintosh had been fighting about everything. Big Macintosh refusing to reenlist for a sixth tour. Applesnack's zebra bigotry bullshit. The weather was crap, and Jetstream was doing more cloud management than keeping an eye out for trouble. Celestia was there. The zebra envoys were there. They had three times as many guards as we'd agreed. Goldenblood warned us to be on high alert for the zebras attempting to kill Celestia; everything was a mess in the 'backchannels', and he had no idea what they were thinking. But the negotiations started. I was out in the field with the Proditors; they could sniff out a mistcloak like nopony could."

She rose on her hooves and turned to face the grimy, flickering windows. "The talks seemed to be going well at first, but pretty soon there was a sticking point. Something about reparations... I don't know what. Then suddenly some sort of gas bomb went off in the diplomatic tent, and a bunch of zebra soldiers came out of a hidden tunnel right next to it. Everything went nuts after that." She closed her eyes, lifting her head. "Applesnack was screaming. Chaos. Big Macintosh stood over Celestia, fending off wave after wave of attacks. Goldenblood was yelling for Celestia to get out of there, but we were all

busy fighting. Zebras all over the place. Third Battalion, supposed to be guarding the southeast, wasn't responding; we found out later that a bunch of them were traitors. Finally the Shadowbolts blasted in, the zebras got routed... and Big Macintosh was dead. Bullet through the heart, right at the end." She hung her head and sniffed, tears rolling down her cheeks. "There wasn't anything anypony could do. And Psalm... I never saw her after that day except for one time when she was packing up her gear at Miramare. Didn't say a word. Just... left."

I walked up beside her. "She was obsessed with Luna forgiving her," I replied as I brushed her mane out of her face. Stygius and Lacunae trotted in, and the batpony looked at Rampage in concern. Lacunae simply stared out the window.

She looked back at me with eyes filled with regret. "She was convinced she was damned for the lives she took." She made a disgusted noise in her throat. "It was silly; we all killed. It was war. But she never shook it off. She turned her back on all the other Marauders." Twist shook her head hard, then sighed. "Afterwards, we all just drifted apart. Applesnack was sent to Zebratown... that was ironic. Jetstream... they tried to give her Big Macintosh's position, but she cracked. Refused to withdraw from one nasty fight and ordered ponies to search for Stonewing and Macintosh. Vanity just quit. Became some sort of noble liaison or something. Doof... yeah... He rotted in Hightower, where he belonged. For a while it was me and Echo, but he was offered a transfer. Then it was just me. I was the last Marauder. Master Sergeant Twist."

Then she hung her head again. "I'm sorry I can't help you, Blackjack. I wish I knew what became of my friend. I wish I'd been a better friend for her. She was always so quiet that I just assumed she was okay with everything... I should have listened. I should have... should have..." Her voice dropped to a whimper. "I'm sorry..."

Then she shuddered, and Rampage said quietly, "Oh, I hate that feeling..." She sniffed and wiped her eyes as she looked at me. "She's gone, Blackjack. Or she's gone back in. Ugh... I feel like I want to cry for a week, and it's all for junk that happened to somepony else." She looked at Psychoshy and said sharply, "Not a word from you or it's your turn."

I'd expected more from the yellow pegasus, but she gave a dismissive shrug. "Hey. Your crazy? Your problem." Psychoshy glanced at Stygius and started to chew on the end of her mane as he trotted over to the fire. There were definitely some conflicting emotions of her own there. When she saw me looking, she immediately spat the hair from her mouth and pointedly looked out the windows again.

Stygius gave me a hug as soon as he reached me. Was it just me, or could I hear teeth grinding? He wrote 'U ok?' on his slate, holding it up as his amber eyes looked at me in concern, head cocked slightly to the side.

"Yeah. Sure. Just more crazy dreams that don't make any sense. How about you?" I asked, and he pointed at a few holes punched in his armor. Then he pointed at Lacunae with a wing and then waved his hooves in circles before him. He patted where he'd been shot and grinned. "So, you were shot, but Lacunae healed you up?" He nodded enthusiastically. I supposed batponies didn't have much in the way of healing magic. Speaking of which, though...

"So... I got to ask. Can you... um..." I looked at Lacunae and then back at him. "Teleport?"

He blinked then grinned. Then he was gone, and there was a shadowy flicker behind me. A hoof tapped my flank, and I looked back. There was another dark flash and he vanished. A second later he

touched my shoulder, standing in front of me again.

"Impressive!" Lacunae breathed. He flushed and kicked a pebble bashfully. "What is that ability called? What is your range? How often can you do it? Can you take others with you?" He blinked at her, seemingly at a loss. "I can touch your mind directly if that would make explanations easier." That comment made him look positively alarmed, and he waved his hooves in front of him.

He got his slate out of his armor and wrote "flying between shadows". few yards. Lots. No, sorry.'

Lacunae nodded, "Interesting. We always knew Luna's guards possessed mysterious powers, but we never knew if they were bestowed by the Princess or came from some other source. Luna forbade us from investigating what her guards could do." The alicorn rolled her eyes a little. "I must admit that I disliked dealing with them anyway. It is rather difficult to speak with somepony who's always using the Royal Canterlot Voice."

Stygius laughed silently, erased the board, and wrote, 'Uncle's armor has that. Stupid loud.'

"Absolutely fascinating. The things we could learn from you if you joined us in Unity," she said in a musing tone that was getting more and more Goddess-y by the second.

"You don't have to talk about him like he's some sort of specimen," Psychoshy said sharply. I found that odd, given that Sanguine would have definitely treated him as such!

"The Goddess thought his kind extinct," Lacunae said in that haughty, annoying manner. "The Goddess is sur-- impressed that they persist, even today."

I groaned and rolled my eyes. "And how is the Goddess today?" I asked as I looked at Lacunae, trying to change the subject given the wariness spreading on Stygius's face.

She glared flatly back at me. "Do not patronize the Goddess, Blackjack. The Goddess knows that we will never truly be allies, as you failed to deliver Chimera to the Goddess as promised." She gave a rather bitchy little smirk. "However, the Goddess finds your troubles and travails quite a welcome distraction from the Goddess's grand designs and so permits this one to continue to accompany you. The Goddess looks forward with great anticipation to your reunion with Morning Glory."

So... now I was entertainment to the Goddess? I had an image of a great big alicorn beast in a fuzzy pink robe and hoofslippers sitting on a couch with a huge tub of popcorn, watching a terminal of me getting shot up on a daily basis. ...Okay, I supposed that *would* be pretty entertaining. Lacunae continued in a smug tone, "The Goddess awaits the success or failure of the Stable Dweller and her friends in Canterlot. Until then, the Goddess will take her satisfaction in watching your struggles."

"Well, in the meantime, I need to chat with Lacunae, so if you could please put her back at the controls, I'd appreciate it," I replied. Maybe LittlePip and the Stable Dweller were teaming up? I really wished I'd known what Homage had tried to tell me... was it really just yesterday? "Or we can throw around a few more threats about you annihilating me."

"One day, you shall be chastised for your arrogance and disrespect. Oh yes, and we look forward to that day with great anticipation!" Oh sweet Celestia, she was actually rubbing her hooves

together.

I grinned back at her. "Ah, but if you do that, you won't get to watch me getting my rear blown off, now will you?"

She snorted sullenly, and then her sneer vanished. You know, I think I was starting to grow on the Goddess. She'd stopped bellowing at me; that was progress. Right? Lacunae drew a deep breath. "*Must* you antagonize her, Blackjack?"

I nodded primly and said with a smile, "Yes. Yes I must. I figure, if I'm the butt of some higher power's amusement, every jab I can get in on her is me balancing the scales a little bit more." I relaxed my grin and nudged her shoulder. "So how are you, Lacunae?"

The purple alicorn seemed amused by the question. "I am as I always will and can only be. But thank you for asking," Lacunae replied. "What of you, Blackjack?"

I looked around the ruined Robronco store as I sighed. "I'm having weird dreams of a pony who I think was the Marauder Psalm." I shook my head as I glanced up at the alicorn, who wore an inscrutable expression. "This is way more than just a memory orb. It's more than just her experiences. It's like I *am* her. But I can't figure out how or why. Twist doesn't know what happened to her, and from my dreams she must have died two centuries ago." Then I paused and snorted in disgruntlement. "Then again, between Twist, Doof, and Brass, I guess I shouldn't count anything out."

The alicorn just stared off for a minute before answering, "I am sure you will find out eventually, Blackjack. As for your dreams, they do not seem to be undermining your sense of self. It is merely unusual." I frowned, knitting my brows together, but she continued. "Has Rampage told you about Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape?"

Well, that took my attention. Really, I'd meant to ask sooner. "Not much. She said they reached Chapel safely, though. They're all okay, right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, Glory had to remain behind and is seeing to both with the aid of Sekashi. The zebra's healing tonics and stories are quite a balm to all three. Glory shows no signs of reverting to her normal appearance, though, and P-21 is in the midst of terrible pain from withdrawal." She paused and then added, "Scotch Tape is feeling better, however. She wants to install flushing toilets, but she's terrified of getting one as a cutie mark."

"And Boo? She's okay, right?" I asked with a concerned smile.

Lacunae sighed. "I am not sure. I tried reading her mind, but it is... simple. She misses you greatly. She keeps searching Star House and Chapel as if she's trying to find you." I'd have to get back soon. Glory and the others could understand why I left, but Boo couldn't.

"So, what are you doing all the way out here, Blackjack?" Psychoshy asked in irritation from over by the windows.

"Well... aside from getting my butt shot a lot, I need to get to Hightower and find a way inside." I trotted to join her by the flickering blue windows. "Where the hay are we anyway?" I asked, using my scorched tail to wipe some of the grime off the glass. Then the answer became clear.

Oh. Hightower.

The imposing edifice was only a block away; from the sight of the mountains behind it, I guessed we were just to the west of the massive building. Before, it had seemed a stern monolith of gray stone. Now, up close, that looming structure was cracked and broken along the southern face, fractures radiating along the surface. A glaring inferno roared within, and flames of blueish-purple erupted out of the side in bizarre loops and whirls. An unwholesome corona surrounded the broken building. About halfway up the south face gaped a massive hole; metal fins jutted out towards the sky. Surrounding the prison was a decayed concrete curtain wall with towers every hundred feet. Spikes and loops of razor wire adorned the wall, and I spotted strange glowing pony shapes tangled in the wire, wiggling and fighting as they burned with magical flame.

“You want to go in there?” Psychoshy asked with a tilt of her head. “Have fun!”

“What... what happened?” I murmured weakly as I stared at the sight. At least when I’d seen the woods surrounding Hippocratic Research, I hadn’t known just how dangerous it would be. Everything about the prison screamed ‘death trap’.

Rampage answered me. “Direct hit by a giant zebra missile, only the balefire bombs in the warhead didn’t detonate properly. There should just be a crater there. Instead, the bombs have been cooking the inside of that prison for the last two centuries or so.” I groaned and hid my face in my hooves. “Look at it this way, Blackjack: now you’ll get to be an *undead* cyber unicorn pony.”

I sighed. It would have been safer and smarter to walk away. Deal with the problem some other way. Just forget EC-1101...

“So... how do I get inside?” I asked with a grimace.

* * *

One could make the argument that I was learning and trying to take things carefully. One could also make the argument that I wasn’t learning enough since I still planned to go inside. Both arguments were made by Rampage and Psychoshy as we trotted closer. We were still a hundred feet from the curtain wall when I started to get steady clicks from my PipBuck. I glanced over at Lacunae hovering above us. “Well, at least you won’t have much of a problem here, right?”

But the purple alicorn shivered in the rain. It was afternoon, and things were starting to get darker. “I am sorry, Blackjack. While the radiation is quite lovely, the Enervation nearby is extremely potent.” I thought of the silver ring in Tenpony and how the Enervation effect strengthened with deaths. I looked up at the prison that had housed thousands of prisoners and imagined dozens of green glowing rings scattered throughout. Hopefully the two would cancel each other out for her... but it looked doubly bad for Stygius and Psychoshy.

The concrete wall was twenty feet high, but the blast and exposure damage had chewed through the top yard or so, exposing jagged metal supports draped with rolls of hooked wire. Glowing undead ponies were tangled up in it, screaming and thrashing as they struggled. Even after two centuries and a direct balefire hit, Hightower was still functioning as a prison, even if it was a prison of the damned. The klaxons inside sounded on and on, endlessly warning folks of a disaster that nopony was going to respond to.

The tangled, feral ghouls fired some sort of balefire magic at us when we drew too close, and we immediately backed out of range. Well... undead ponies flinging radioactive fire was one hazard, but that was nothing compared to the turrets atop each watchtower. Their size made the energy turrets that Glory had set up in Flank look like beam pistols on tripods. If even one was working, it could probably vaporize any flier.

"Any chance you could just teleport me to the top?" I asked hopefully, grinning at Lacunae.

"Better not, Pink," Rampage sneered behind me. We all looked at her scowling leer and she snorted, "The fucking tower's got nasty spells for any fucker that tries to teleport in and out of there. Oh, you'd port in... right into an interrogation cell. And teleport out into a disciplinary cell."

"Razorwire," I murmured as I slowly turned around to face her. I really didn't know about this. The Angel was *bona fide* evil, but Razor was a criminal too. "How do I get into the prison, then?"

"Oh, spray-paint 'Princess Luna is a mule fucker' on a wall in Canterlot. That should do it," the striped mare said with her disdainful leer as she stepped past me and looked up at the edifice. "You don't break into the tower. You dream about getting out. Even if the only way out is a bullet in the head."

"Right. But how did you physically get into the prison? Is there a gate or what?" I asked as I looked up and down the block the prison occupied.

"What? You want me to give you the fucking tour for dumbasses, Pink?" The striped mare pointed at a smaller, uglier gray building on the opposite side of the street to the west of the prison. "Processing, admin, and visitation. Not that I got any," she added with a scowl as we walked along towards it, careful not to attract the attention of the thrashing, glowing ghouls. "Once they finished putting a hoof inside every orifice, you got your uniform and your soap on a rope and they'd extend a bridge over the street."

It was as good a place as any to start. Processing looked like a miniature prison itself, but the rusty chainlink fence was easy enough to push through, and I stomped down on the razor wire that was set out around the base. A rusted metal mesh netting was strung out over the parking lot; for pegasi, I presumed. The heavy metal doors were intact, but Stygius found a window adjacent to it and peered inside. A second later he disappeared in a flash of black light.

"That is so cool," Psychoshy murmured.

"Does he make you all wet and juicy?" Rampage smirked. Psychoshy flushed and scowled back as the striped mare nickered. "He sure makes me want to ride his pony stick."

"Back of the line--" Psychoshy started to say. Then Rampage hugged her arms around the pegasus's neck and gave an immense heave, swinging her in an arc and slamming her flat on her back on the crumbling asphalt. Rampage put her hooves on her splayed-out wings, pinning them to the earth.

"I set the fucking line! You think you're a badass, don't you, Psychoshy?" Rampage shouted in her face. "You're nothing. You are fucking nothing but a scared little feathercunt! In the Tower, I knew mares that'd carve off your wings and make you their earth pony bitch! You think Wasteland ponies are fucking mean? You think rape and murder is bad? I was locked up with fucking mares that had nothing else to do but think of ways to hurt each other. Killing was for when they got bored or annoyed. You are fucking nothing compared to them! A scared little yellow fuckpony!" she screamed into Psychoshy's wide

eyes.

That was about as far as I let Rampage get before I pressed Vigilance into her ear canal and blasted a round into her head. The armored mare jerked atop Psychoshy, and as she collapsed, I shoved her off. Psychoshy started to shake, then scrambled to her hooves. She hung her head, her mane covering her face.

"Hey, it's alright..." I said gently to her, reaching out a hoof as she trembled.

"No, Blackjack. It's not fucking alright!" she said as she whirled at me, tears in her eyes. "I used to never be afraid of anything! I could kick anypony's ass whenever I wanted. I beat *you*! I was never afraid. Never! Now... now I'm scared of everything! And I've got *you* pitying me! Don't you get it?" She sobbed, grimacing. "I would have rather have died than... than *that!*"

"I'm sorry," I murmured as I said next to her. Rampage groaned.

Psychoshy tilted her head back and snorted angrily. "Oh, just rub it in, why don't you? I can smash a skull in a flash, and it doesn't matter because I think about tomorrow and it scares me to death. And you know what scares me most of all?" I shook my head and she finished in a near whisper, "That it's never going to stop."

Rampage groaned again and sat up, then rubbed her left ear vigorously. "Ugh, what's with this ringing in my ear?" She blinked, then spat out a mouthful of bloody bullet fragments. "Blackjack, we've got to find a better way to snap me out of it. This is just getting ridiculous..." Then she caught Psychoshy's sniff and looked over at the yellow pegasus hanging her head in shame. "Um... 'kay..."

It wasn't always about me. Hoofington didn't just suck for me. It sucked for everypony. Sanguine had watched his family die before his eyes. Psychoshy'd lost everypony that she'd believed cared about her. "I found out some things, Psychoshy. About you. Your mom and dad. I know... I know it probably doesn't matter, but they loved you very much. When they thought you were lost, it nearly broke both of them. They were going to name you Whisper."

She lifted her head and looked at me with a teary eye and gave a little hiccup and sniff. Finally she muttered thickly, "That's a fucking horrible name."

"Better than Go Fish," I replied. That actually got a smile out of her.

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Fuck... I can't believe you actually made me cry. Badasses aren't supposed to cry. You never cry," she muttered.

"I sob my eyes out every other day, it feels like. You should have seen me after Priest and Scoodle... and Boing." That drew a questioning look from my friends, and a dark glare from Rampage, but there'd be a time for that later. "Crying is the soul dealing with pain. Otherwise you keep it all inside and it drives you crazy."

Rampage muttered something about me playing therapist and being doomed. At least Lacunae's nod let me pretend I'd said something profound.

Psychoshy sat a moment and sniffed. "I'm sorry about that. Priest, I mean." I sighed; late but sincere was better than never offered at all. She stood and pushed back her mane. "Psychoshy's a

stupid name, too... and calling myself Fluttershy. I just... everypony loved her. I just wanted that.” She looked at her flank. “Stupid cutie mark. Who wants to like a mare with that on her flank...”

I had to admit, it wasn't a mark that suggested good interpersonal skills. “We are what we choose to be,” Lacunae said softly as the doors to processing began to bang and thump.

I smiled and sighed as I saw her staring at where Stygius had disappeared. “We're not in a relationship, Psychoshy. If you like him... well... do something about it.” She looked back at me flatly, and I added, “He's a good guy. A little bit impulsive, but he means well. Just try and be nice.”

“Blackjack, don't. Please don't.” Psychoshy said as she shook her head. “I'm not a nice pony. I don't know how to be nice. He's not going to like me. First cute guy with wings... ever...” I found the fact that I was talking about relationships with a mare who hated my guts outside a prison that was engulfed in magical fire a touch surreal.

“Like the alicorn said,” I replied as Stygius shoved the doors open a crack, just enough for Rampage to trot up and force open a gap wide enough for everypony. We entered, Psychoshy last. Stygius gave the yellow mare a concerned look as she walked past with her eyes downcast. He looked at me in worry, but I couldn't think of what to do other than smile in encouragement. I wondered if LittlePip had to deal with interpersonal problems as well as massive world shaping ones. Seemed like I just collected problems all over the place.

We made our way through Processing. Between my lockpicking, Stygius's flicker teleportation, and Lacunae's cheating alicorn magic, we were able to bypass most problems. We came to a back office that had been turned into a camp of sorts, a half-dozen ancient bodies clustered around an impromptu fire in a waste bin. I supposed they'd been the staff that hadn't tried to run. Every skull had a bullet hole.

One had left a note. ‘We're sick and running out of food. We can still hear screams and alarms from the prison. The warden has it all on lockdown. They're going to die. We're all going to die. Luna and Celestia are dead. It's the end of the world. The fat one asked to be let back inside but it's too late. I don't even know how he got out. Even if we could extend the bridge, the systems would kill him before he reached the prison building. I'm so sorry, Russet. I hope you and Daddy are safe in Hoofington. Mommy won't be coming home from work, but she loves you.’

I sighed and folded it back up. I'd seen so many, but they still got to me. I supposed that was a sign I was still a pony. I returned the note to the bones of the unicorn and carefully stowed away the revolver they'd used. A .32 caliber; hardly impressive but better than nothing. There was also a twenty gauge pump action shotgun and a box of ammo. I took it apart, replaced the riot gun's firing pin and spring, and ate the barrel. Psychoshy found fifty caps in a drawer, and Stygius located a stash of drugs. The healing potions looked black and acidic in their bottles, but the rest of the chems were good.

The note confirmed my worst fears, though. I trotted up to the drawbridge and took my first peek over the wall. The gap between the prison building and the wall had dozens of ghouls, perhaps more than a hundred, roaming around the concrete space or tangled in the razor wire. One long road completely covered in chainlink led through it to the main doors several hundred feet distant. I couldn't see any way we could get inside.

Damn it... I sat down hard at the edge of the bridge, looking across as my PipBuck clicked. Thanks to my cybernetics I was resistant to the radiation, but I wasn't immune and none of that would

protect me from the balefire of those glowing ghouls. Maybe it was time to throw in the towel?

"We could always go to Meatlocker," Psychoshy suggested.

"Don't think you noticed, but none of us are ghouls," Rampage retorted.

The yellow mare stood. "You don't have to be a ghoul to get in. I went there a couple of times with Sanguine, and they were fine with me. You just have to not be a jerk. That's all." She tilted her head. "Granted, the smell took a lot of getting used to, but it's not really dangerous."

"Right. Till they start eating your liver," Rampage retorted, holding her stomach.

"They don't allow ferals!" Psychoshy retorted, then turned to me. "As long as you've got business, they'll deal with you. And they're not far from here. In fact, you can see the hospital right over there," she said as she pointed at a large, low-built building that I'd almost taken for a granite hill rather than a structure. Like everything in the east part of the city, it was built like a bunker.

I glanced over at Lacunae and Stygius. The latter simply shrugged. It was too close not to check out. "Okay. Well... let's go visit some undead ponies."

* * *

Hoofington Memorial Hospital was a lot larger and more imposing up close. Unlike the prison a block away, it had been built recessed into the ground and resembled a tortoise shell. I wondered if the hospital had been the intended target for the balefire bomb embedded in the wall of the prison. South of the jail, the magical flames cast the ruins in flickering, ghostly images. Even a block away, I was still getting radiation pings on my PipBuck.

We approached the front entrance of the hospital, and immediately I spotted the sandbag barricades in front of the doors and ponies in combat armor standing guard. "Oy! Willow! Breathers!" one shouted as he swiveled a machine gun towards us. Given the ruins around us and the fortified building, it'd be quite a trick to assault this place directly. Two others in battle saddles ran up to give him support.

"Are they wearing red or green or look like they'll annoy the fuck out of me?" a mare called from inside the doors. The ghouls pointing the guns looked at each other, and a moment later the mare blurted, "Oh for fuck's sake. You guys are useless." A mottled green unicorn ghoul trotted out, her filmy eyes narrowing before she scowled in confusion. "Great. Fucking tourists." She pointed to the east. "If you're hurt and got a pulse, head that way. Those Enclave fucks just love helping tourists."

Wow. Unfriendly much? "We're not tourists," I said at once.

"Don't be a cunt, Willow," Psychoshy said as she trotted to the front. "It's me."

The mare rolled her milky orbs. "Yeah. I know. Honestly, I was a hair away from having them open fire on you on general principle." She sighed and nodded to the bucks with the guns. "Stand down," she said with a wave of her hoof before trotting out from behind the sandbags and walking towards us. She eyed Lacunae suspiciously. "Wait. Are you with those assholes?"

"You mean the Harbingers?" I asked with a frown.

"No. Those *other* assholes," she said as she pointed to the south with her hoof. "Those Red Eye fucks."

"We are not affiliated with Red Eye, no," Lacunae said at once.

"Right. Fine then," the boiled green mare said, and then she rolled her eyes and stated in a bored, rehearsed monotone, "Welcome to the Meatlocker. We are thrilled to receive guests from all across the Wasteland. Feel free to shop at Meatlocker Merchandise down in the ER. Enjoy yourself at the Afterlife Club found in the cafeteria. If you actually need medical care or supplies, see Dr. Wheelbarrow in Examination Room B. Beds can be rented in the ICU Inn. If you have any questions, please ask any helpful Meatlocker security ponies who aren't me or see our mayor, Windclop. Is there anything *else* I can help you with?" From her scornful expression, I was pretty certain that it'd be more effective to ask a radroach.

"No, I think we're good. Thanks," I said, and she at once rolled her eyes and trotted over to examine the machine gun on the barricade. We made our way inside, and I glanced back. "She's friendly."

"Actually, that's pretty civil for Willow," Psychoshy replied.

"I wonder why she didn't comment on Stygius, though?" I looked at the baffled buck, who blinked and shrugged his dusky shoulders.

Psychoshy snorted and said to me, "Yeah, he might seem weird to a breather. But when you've been around for a couple centuries, there's not a lot of things that jump out at you." Then, with a smile, "I'm going to head to Afterlife." She started to trot away, then paused and turned around. She looked at me, then at Stygius. "Um... you wanna come with me?"

He blinked at her, then looked at me, then back at her and pointed a leathery wingtip at himself.

"Yes, you. Come on. Afterlife's not bad. Just stay away from the Rainboom and you'll be fine." Her smile became a little strained, fraying with nervousness. I nudged his hip with my own and he jumped, and then trotted up beside her. She relaxed as they walked into the gloomy hospital together.

And it really was gloomy; unlike the Fluttershy Medical Center or even Happyhorn, there was virtually no decoration or attempt to make the interior woodsy or cute. Only a few emergency lights lit the atrium, and there were more sandbag barricades inside, clearly fallback positions in the event of a siege. A few more ghouls with guns looked on warily.

"You've sure been nice to Psychoshy," Rampage observed as she trotted along at my side. "Any reason?"

"Can't I be nice to be nice?" I countered as I looked for a sign or some clue of where to go.

"Ordinarily I'd say no, but you're weird like that," Rampage admitted, and then asked with a little more concern, "You're not doing it out of pity, are you?"

"What if I am? She's miserable," I said with a little frown.

"She deserves to be. Look, I know you forgive at the drop of a hat, but Psycho isn't a good pony. She's vain and selfish and she's so full of hate right now. She hates you for killing Sanguine. She hates

Sanguine for using her. She hates herself for being used. You need to be careful with her,” Rampage warned as she walked beside me. “She’s getting awfully attached to Stygius.”

“So what’s wrong with that? He’s a good guy. He helped me in the way I needed to be helped.” Which was apparently a problem for my friend given how she rolled her eyes. “He’ll help her too if he can.”

“Because now you’re done with him?” she said sharply, then groaned and shook her head. “Ugh, never mind. I said I’d drop it. Look, I’m going to go keep an eye on those two. If you’re going to ask about Hightower, find out from the mayor or somepony.” And then she was gone.

“Ugh... what is with her?” I said as I glanced up at Lacunae.

“Perhaps she feels you’ve had an inappropriate relationship with Stygius, given your affection for Glory. Or perhaps she feels you are using him in a way that is going to hurt his feelings. Or maybe Rampage respects you a great deal and is having difficulty accepting that you are not as perfect as she’s perceived.”

“Perfect? Me?” I tapped my metal leg against a pillar. “Has she seen me lately? I’m the biggest fuckup in the Wasteland!”

“Yet you endure. You persist. You overcome. Even now, you’re here looking for a way into a place most ponies would simply give up at the first sight of. And you’ve yet to sacrifice your virtue for it. You suffer instead.” She smiled as she shook her head. “Believe me, the Goddess is far happier that you are out here running around Hoofington than in Canterlot.”

“Is that why she’s letting you stay with me?” I asked with a smile, spotting a flickering arrow-shaped light on the wall pointing towards ‘ER’.

“That, and I’ve asked her to let me,” she said in a gentle murmur. I flushed a bit, then looked back at her and smiled, giving her shoulder a thankful nudge. The light picked up quite a bit as we reached a pair of double doors marked ‘Emergency’. The ER itself was a horseshoe-shaped chamber with alcoves along the outside wall. The exit doors were choked with rubble, making the chamber a cozy space, and several ghouls mingled around the old nurses’ station. A lively tune was being played over the PA system that made me smile despite myself.

The nearest alcove had a counter built across it with ‘Tulip’s’ painted on the front. Behind it were a number of pieces of barding hanging from old IV stands and a petite unicorn ghoul who might once have been a roseish color. When our eyes met, the young mare gave a hopeful smile. “H-hello. Welcome to T-Tulip’s. My armor is g-guaranteed to keep you safe. If any of my equipment f-fails to save your life, I’ll give you a full r-r-refund!” She tried for an enthusiastic grin but only pulled off a shy, self-conscious smile. I wasn’t sure if she was blushing or not as she stared at my barding. “What happened? Did you r-run afoul a flamer or a dr-dr-dragon?”

“Flamer,” I said with a small smile as I glanced down at the scorched green armor. “Can you fix it?”

“S-sure... but it’s s-stupid expensive,” she stammered as she trotted underneath the counter and walked around me. “Ch-cheaper to buy a n-new suit and r-reinforce it.”

A ghoulish repairman -- mostly low-caliber pistols and bolt-action hunting rifles -- that were laid out on a gurney next door rolled his filmy eyes. "And that's why Tulip's always broke." The small unicorn lowered her head a little.

"Oh, don't worry about him, Hun," a grayish ghoulish mare said to her from browsing the next stall over. She wore a gentle smile, and I was surprised by how well dressed she was and how much of her pink mane was still intact. "Tulip knows her barding better than I know how to work a needle and thread." And given how the gray ghoulish's mottled cutie mark was exactly that, I supposed she was quite good indeed.

"Th-thanks, V..." Tulip murmured.

"All right." I checked my PipBuck and then took out some of the gold and silver I'd looted from Goldenblood's house, my PipBuck calculating their value in caps. How it did so, I couldn't begin to imagine. I held up the spool of gold. "How about this for some quality armor?"

"Sure. I c-can get you something r-right away for that. L-let me use your old a-armor to make sure it f-f-fits. G-g-give me an hour?" Tulip stammered as she scrambled under the counter again. I removed my armor and floated it over.

The gray unicorn ghoulish smiled as I trotted away, Tulip digging through boxes in the back of her stall. "You just made Tulip's day. Poor dear knows her trade, but she's not terribly confident," she said as she led me across the ER to another stall. This one, however, mostly held prewar clothing. "There's no reason to trot around in just your hide like that," she said as she dug through the racks.

I gave a slightly confused little smile as I looked at the salvaged sign in the back of the stall; a bundle of wheat. "No offense, but ponies usually don't wear clothes." Heck, even in 99 we didn't usually wear them if we were off duty. The only mare that had really cared about them had been the Overmare's mother.

"True. But that's no reason to *not* wear them," she said brightly, selecting a plaid green pleated skirt, matching blazer, white blouse, and lacy undergarment. And now that I looked around, it struck me that just about every ghoulish was wearing some article of clothing or another. "Here. A gratuity for being so understanding to Tulip." I felt too self-conscious to refuse the gifts and put them on, surprised at how well they fit.

I flushed a little, looking at myself in a cracked mirror. "Well, don't you look like a perfect student for Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns?" the gun ghoulish teased. I harrumphed and refused to let the jackass get to me. From the look on V's face, I'd done her a favor.

"If I ask," she said as she carefully adjusted the skirt to cover my posterior, "what brings you to Meatlocker? You don't seem to be bothered by us, but you're not a regular."

What should I be bothered by? Okay, there was a slightly off-putting meaty smell about the place, and some of the ghoulishs looked even more ragged than others, but given what I'd seen so far, they weren't anything bad. "Looking for a way into Hightower," I answered, and got a gasp and stare from more than a few ponies.

She adopted a concerned expression. "If you're looking for salvage, there's plenty of other

places to find it. Even we stay away from that place.”

“There’s something I need to find inside there,” I said firmly. The ghouls around us shared significant looks, some rolling their eyes and others frowning in concern. I didn’t want an argument, so I changed the topic. “I’m curious. Why do so many of you wear clothes?”

“What? You want to stare at my jerky stick?” cackled the obnoxious stallion that had jeered Tulip.

The gray mare, V, glowered at him till he got the hint and trotted out of the ER. Then she looked at me kindly. “You have to understand that to stay... well... ourselves, we have to do everything we can to hold on to our identity before we died. So we act civilly... dress civilly... do what we love and try to keep ourselves from slipping away. It doesn’t take much for one of us to go from a normal, albeit dead, pony to a monster.”

“It doesn’t help that so many ponies around the Hoof simply assume we’re brain-eating fiends,” piped up another mare behind a tray of Dash inhalers.

I thought of Harpica and Ditzzy and Sanguine. “I suppose a bored ghoul is feral ghoul?”

“Well said,” V commented in approval. “I’ve been here since the bombs fell. It’s been a challenge. Dying, and then... this.” She gestured around the hospital. “Getting material, finding clients. That silly little prejudice against our kind makes much of that quite difficult.” She glanced at a picture in an old, battered brass frame showing a stallion in a black hood grinning cheekily. Her cloudy eyes settled on the image. “And there are some days we just feel... very tired.”

“It’s not easy living for so long, is it?” I said as I sat. V nodded and she and I shared a sympathetic smile as I lifted my forehoof and extended my mechanical fingers. “It’s something I’m going to have to deal with too. Provided I don’t die in Hightower, that is.”

Lacunae nodded. “It is an adjustment for us as well, though for us the change is far more profound. In Unity, there is often no sense of time at all. A year can feel like a day, and so the changes are far more jarring.”

V looked at the alicorn curiously and nodded her agreement. “You have to keep busy. You can’t just stop and let time slip by. You can lose everything that way.”

“Well... I definitely have something that needs doing. Is there somepony else that might be able to help?” I asked, and the mare slumped, clearly bothered that she couldn’t help me. Then a tan stallion with a stunningly well-groomed white mane approached. Really, I knew living ponies with worse hair.

“Help? My dear, help has arrived! You have no idea how long I’ve waited for a pony with a decent mane to trot across my path!” he announced grandly. He grinned at the pink-maned V. “No offense meant, Velvet my dear.”

“None taken, Snowflake. Celestia knows you’ve worked your magic on me more than once,” she replied graciously, then turned and grinned up at Lacunae. Her horn glowed as she lifted a tape measure. “Now, why don’t you work your magic on her mane while I see to dressing her friend here?” Velvet said with an almost evil smile, pulling the tape measure tight with a snap.

* * *

It can be said that there are times in my life when things take a turn towards the surreal. Getting kissed by a spirit of chaos, dying, encountering a screaming room, and meeting an odd batpony out of the blue all qualify. I had to admit, though, that I'd never imagined that I would be subject to a complete makeover for the amusement and delight of a roomful of ghoulish ponies. The only time I'd gotten this level of attention was at my cutie mark party, and even then the dress had been borrowed.

The entire time I kept my eyes closed, focusing on not killing Snowflake. *He's doing me a favor. Don't kill him. He's helping me. Don't kill him.* After what I'd been through with Stygius, I was able to take some deep breaths and fight the urge to react while Snowflake trimmed my tail. With deftness and care I would have expected from a unicorn, the white-maned earth pony snipped and brushed my mane and coat with finesse and ease. It felt like probably the most feminine moment of my life when Snowflake presented a mirror and I looked at my own reflection.

"Unfortunately I couldn't do anything with your augments, but I think that the smooth transition works quite well, don't you?" the ghoul said brightly as I turned back and forth. He hadn't changed much, but he'd definitely made me look... better. Lots better. I looked almost as cute as Glory now! "Normally a ghoul with a barbershop makes about as much sense as a screen door on a submarine. With the exception of Miss Velvet and myself, most ghouls simply don't have the manes for it."

"Are you certain this is... appropriate?" Lacunae asked in a subdued voice.

I turned, and that feeling of surreality jumped up even more; my jaw simply dropped. The gray ghoul mare had dressed the alicorn in lacy white lingerie from horn to hoof. I wasn't quite sure if the outfit was meant for... one of those wedding things or a honeymoon, but the stockings and the garters and the... wow. The purple alicorn's cheeks blazed as she looked around in worry. I didn't think bridles came in lace! Unless that was some magic underwear, it wouldn't last five minutes in the Wasteland. Still...

Damn...

Velvet narrowed her eyes speculatively. "Mmmm, I suppose not. Still, I've been dying for a century to see this outfit I made for Luna on somepony." I gaped anew. Luna wore something... anything... like that? Ever?

And I was wondering if Velvet had another suit like it in my size. I was really really wondering that. I cleared my throat. "I'm sure Stronghoof will adore it," I said delicately. Oh my, I had no idea an alicorn could turn that shade of red. Was she actually glowing? I was sure the Goddess was just *loving* this. Velvet's horn glowed as she removed the lacy apparel; Lacunae flushed and squirmed in embarrassment.

"Well... maybe..." the alicorn murmured with a small smile.

Velvet looked up at her with a cheeky grin. "Go ahead and take it. I doubt I'll ever have another client in your size. I'd just ruin the garment if I tried to take it in. Go on. I hope your Stronghoof likes it." Lacunae made a little 'meep' and if possible, her blush deepened even further. Yup; she was glowing. The gray ghoul looked over her racks of clothes. "Mmmm... maybe something in red? Lilac? No... ah! Gold!"

"Well... I'm going to go find that mayor now," I said as I stood. "Have fun!"

"Wait... Blackjack! Don't leave me like this!" Lacunae called out as I trotted for the exit.

"Blackjack!"

"Don't move! This'll just take a minute!" Velvet said, working her tape measure.

I gave a grateful smile to Tulip on my way out; the small ghoulish mare was working on a suit of gray combat barding. I heard Snowflake call out, "I call dibs on her next, Velvet! The things I could do with her mane!"

Moving back into the hospital, I was glad my eyes could amplify what little light there was from the few emergency lamps. A few ghouls watched me warily from the shadows, and moved away when I approached them for directions to the cafeteria or the mayor. "What's wrong with them?" I asked, more to myself than anything.

A snide, rasping voice said from the shadows, "Oh just the shock of death and centuries of intolerance, abuse, and hatred from the living. Little things like that." From the darkness stepped a charred-looking earth pony in a black funeral director's suit. His filmy eyes still had a sharp color of red as he smirked at me. "Of course, you wouldn't understand."

"I've put up with plenty of abuse and hatred myself. Who are you?" I asked with a scowl.

"Ahuiizotl," he said with a nod of his head. "I run the Mortuary." At my baffled look, he let out a hiss of annoyance. "The bar? The original bar before that damnable club opened up?" I shook my head slowly, and he glowered. "So, Willow isn't even bothering to tell esteemed guests about my business? I should have known." He tilted an ear in the direction of the cheery music and sighed, muttering darkly to himself.

"Hey, take it up with her. I'm just the tourist," I replied with a frown. "You have a problem with the living?"

He sniffed disdainfully. "Living. Dead. I don't care. You both pay caps the same. But the ambiance of Meatlocker today... well... hardly appropriate." He waved his hoof dismissively. "So take your pretty mane and go... elsewhere. I don't have time to bother with you, Miss..."

"Security," I finished bluntly. "Well if you can point me in the direction of the mayor..."

But the name had an unexpected effect. His red eyes fixed on me, and he licked his charcoal lips with a tongue of boiled leather. "Oh... is that so?" He straightened a little. "Well... if you're looking for our illustrious leader, I believe he was cleaning a toilet in the ICU Inn. Right down that hall there. Make a left."

"I... um... thanks?" I said as I backed a few steps away. My mane crawled as he smiled at me.

"Oh no no no. Thank *you*." With that, he turned away and trotted back into the darkness.

Why did I have a real bad feeling about that ghoulish?

I turned and went down the hall he'd indicated, wondering if there was some kind of trap. However, to my relief, the door on the left did indeed lead to the intensive care unit. Like the ER, the ICU was divided into stalls, but in this case each one had been converted into a sleeping cell. I saw four non-ghoulish ponies sleeping but none I recognized. Holiday music played from a radio on the nurse's desk.

I trotted up to the ghoulish mare behind the counter. "Can I help you, Dearie?" the mare asked.

"I'm looking for the mayor. Something about a toilet?" I asked with a slightly baffled look.

"Oh, yes. He's right over here." She guided me over to the ICU restrooms. "Gotta keep these working for our guests. If you need a place to stay, we have many wonderful beds for rent."

"Thanks," I said with a far easier smile than I'd had with Achoiewhatsisname. There was a sound of splashing from inside the mares' toilet, and I dared to peek inside. A ghoulish pegasus stallion crouched over the toilet with a plunger clenched in his jaws that he worked furiously inside the bowl. His wings were almost entirely skeletal, held together by brown sinew, but they moved as if they were still alive. I just stood at the doorway and watched him work with a vigor I'd only seen in an olive filly. Finally, he pulled the plunger free and flushed the toilet. It gurgled and drained and the stallion gave a satisfied nod.

"Mayor?" I asked, and he turned towards me, water dripping from the red rubber plunger head. He spat it out and jumped to his hooves with a grin. He wore a suit of Stable-Tec utility barding marked with a 1 on the flank. Stable One? Where was that?

"That's me. Mayor Windclop. Engineer, political leader... and occasional janitor. So nice to meet you," he said as he grabbed my hoof and shook it enthusiastically. "Meatlocker is glad to attract as many smoothcoat visitors as possible to our fine community."

Um... maybe he could wash his hooves? "Thank you. You're too kind. I'm Blackjack," I said, then added with a slightly concerned look. "Smoothcoat?"

"Right! Because your coat is so smooth... and tasty..." he added, almost to himself, then he blinked and grinned nervously. "And smooth! It's a better term than 'breather' in my opinion. And we want Meatlocker to be a friendly and open community in the Wasteland. We hope that if we give smoothcoats like yourself a chance, then you'll give us a chance." He pulled a towel from his belt and wiped off his hooves and face and then the toilet bowl. He flushed it a few more times, and I heard a few clicks from my PipBuck. Visiting Meatlocker might be okay, but living here sure wasn't an option. "So, what can I do for you?" he asked as his bony wing stretched out and scooped up a top hat that had been sitting on the sink. It had a gray ribbon tied around the bottom of the hat and a shiny brass button that read 'Vote Mayor ~~Mare~~ without a care!'.

"Well... I need to get into Hightower. I'm hoping somepony here can tell me how," I said with a smile.

He laughed, grinned, smiled, and then realized I was serious. "Break into Hightower? *Into*? Um... no offense, ma'am, but that's crazy. Just crazy. No pony wants to break into that place."

"Well, I do. And I am. But if the ghouls of Meatlocker can help me, I'll be plenty grateful." The pegasus ghoulishly fidgeted a little, his wing bones clattering together.

"I see. Well, it's highly unusual. Nigh unheard of, really. No pony who goes in there comes out again. But... naturally, Meatlocker would be happy to help." He furrowed his brows in thought. "You could talk to Nurse Graves. She used to work there."

"That'd be nice. Perhaps you could show me the way?"

"I'd be happy to, but do you have a light? Some of the halls are pretty tough to navigate for a smoothcoat."

"My vision is augmented," I replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh. Well... wonderful!" he said after a momentary falter. "Well, I'll show you the way. All the twists and turns can make navigation a problem."

"And the lack of illumination doesn't help either."

"Yes, it's a situation we really should fix for our smoothcoat guests. Unfortunately, lightbulbs are in short supply, and don't get me started on illumination talismans. For a while we tried to use lit fires, but the smoke was intolerable. I'm hoping that when we get more guests I can convince the residents to spring for some more light sources. Darkness doesn't bother our eyesight very much, but it's a definite turnoff for smoothcoats. Right?" He looked at the mare behind the counter. "I'm heading to see Wheelbarrow and Graves, Carol."

She gave an errant wave of her hoof, not raising her head from an old magazine on the front counter. We trotted out, Windclop rambling on as we walked. "When I got here thirty years ago, Meatlocker was just rife with poor ferals and a handful of folks wanting to make a home for themselves. It took twenty years to shoo the ferals into the subway and make something of this place. Now we're really trying to reach out to the different factions around the Hoof."

"It doesn't sound like everypony is happy with the changes. I met a ghoul... Yowie... something or other. He seemed damned put out by things," I said as we trotted through the dim hallways.

"Oh yeah. *Him*. Ahuizotl showed up twenty years or so ago. His morbid little bar ran on misery and bitterness. The more depressed folks there were, the more they'd drink and do chems to forget about their problems and the more caps he made. With the club and everything, Meatlocker's a much better place. I'm hoping to change the name to 'Memorial' rather than Meatlocker. Just more positive." He rattled on as he walked. I didn't think I'd ever met a ghoul who was so *animated*.

"So, you're from a stable originally?"

"Mmhmm. Stable One. Originally it was supposed to be for all the government bigwigs and muckity mucks. Was designed even for the Princesses. But... it was a trap. Locked up tight and wouldn't unlock till everypony inside was dead. Of course, Canterlot got soaked in toxic Pink Cloud, and it eventually killed everypony inside anyway. Or maybe it was radiation... dunno," the buck said brightly with a shrug. "Anyway, about thirty years back I had a... ah... embarrassing incident involving the origins of some protein I was fond of and so I sought my fortunes out here." He coughed nervously. "You have to understand, there's just some things a pony doesn't do in polite society and I'd never, ever, have done it if I'd known."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Quite understandable," I said, then tripped over a metal slab thing that somepony had left in the middle of the hallway. "Okay. This is getting ridiculous. My vision's not *that* augmented," I muttered, then concentrated. My light spell burst to life above me, driving away the shadows and gloom. Really, why hadn't I done this sooner--

That's Stonewing.

I stared straight ahead at the sight of the pegasus stallion cast in bronze, one wing outspread and the other snapped off for me to trip over, standing protectively over the prone forms of Jetstream and Applesnack. Behind him were abstract pony figures. The statue was perched atop a low pedestal off to the side with a plaque that read: 'Stonewing Memorial'.

I walked close to it and read the inscription.

'This memorial is dedicated to those ponies who have given their lives and blood for the wellbeing of us all. It was here, during the reconstruction, that the soldier Stonewing valiantly held his position against overwhelming zebra attackers to protect not just fallen comrades but countless helpless patients and injured victims in the hospital. Though forever struck mute by a sniper's bullet, Stonewing's actions speak volumes of the courage and valor of Hoofington's finest soldiers.'

I stared at the statue for a long moment, something niggling in the back of my mind. A note in a Miramare locker. 'Left it in the place where he did that thing that time.' "Is something wrong?" Windclop asked as I slowly circled the statue and the alcove it occupied.

"Just... wondering," I said lightly as I looked around the statue, not exactly sure what I was after. Then I spotted a small vent in the base of the pedestal. "Hey, got a crowbar I can borrow?"

"I can honestly say that that's the first time anypony has asked me that," he said as he trotted up beside me. He pulled out a small, flat prybar and passed it to me, then took out a flat-headed screwdriver and helped me remove the vent cover. It took a bit of work, but it finally popped free. Inside the dusty hole was a canvas bag. I pulled it out, and his eyes grew wide. "What is it?"

"I don't know..." But I guessed it belonged to the Marauder. Slowly my magic plucked the drawstring, and I tugged it open wide with my hooves. Inside was something burgundy and leathery. I carefully tugged out a leather jacket. Despite two centuries, it was still supple. The inside was lined with fleece, and it had numerous snaps and buckles. Two holes were slit in the back for wings. 'Equestrian Skyguard' was printed on the back. Beneath it was a leather cap with goggles attached.

"Amazing..." he breathed as I stood and put it on. There had to be some magic in it, as it fit me almost perfectly. "I don't suppose that you know of any other priceless treasures hidden around Meatlocker that could be put to the benefit of our fair community?" Windclop asked with a grin.

"Sorry, Mister Mayor. I wish I did." I felt in the pockets, and found a small stack of photographs. A signed autograph of Rainbow Dash. Then one of Jetstream as a filly, perched on the edge of a cloud in terror. Another one of her on the beach. One of all the Marauders in uniform, saluting as one. I sighed and tucked them back into the pocket. There was also another pocket loaded with golden bits. I looked at him and then passed over half. "Here. For the wellbeing of Meatlocker."

That sure made his day! He put the money away; I could only hope he'd actually follow through rather than keep it for himself, but he seemed the honest sort. "Still, an Equestrian Skyguard jacket. That's... amazing. I think that's genuine dragonhide!" he said.

"No shooting me to find out!" I said quickly as we continued on our way. I glanced back at the grinning memorial statue and smiled in return.

We reached the examination room, but Doctor Wheelbarrow informed us that the nurse had gone to Afterlife. He made an effort to convince me to allow him some in-depth 'examinations', but something

about his tone set off even more alarms than usual and I declined. The doctor looked quite put out.

We made our way to the club and chatted about whatever came up on the way. He'd been fascinated by technology before the bombs fell and had dreamed about working on immense cloud warships called Raptors before landing a job with Stable-Tec. From his description of them, I imagined smaller versions of the *Celestia* with hulls of cloud streaking through the air and zapping dragons to bits. Apparently being a pegasus in a stable had a somewhat disheartening effect due to the lack of space to fly. That topic led to the revelation that he could actually *still* fly, despite the fact his wings were bones, and this led to a demonstration followed by a discussion of innate pegasus magic. I was so wrapped up in our conversation that I missed the change in music coming from the double doors ahead.

I've heard a wide variety of music in my travels, but this was [different](#). This music was making my hips start to move! I pushed through the double doors and was struck by the sight of a stage built against one wall with almost a dozen ghouls playing, two ghouls on backup, and an earth pony buck with an almost comically wide-brimmed hat singing about the everafter. There were plenty more ghouls dancing around the stage in glee, despite the morbid lyrics.

And I really wanted to join in.

Above the crowd Psychoshy swooped and spun around a slightly bemused Stygius, who was just trying to keep up with her. I wondered how proud Fluttershy would have been to see how strong a flier her daughter had become as she writhed and swayed and twirled around the gray batpony. I sighed; dancing would have to wait.

The ghoulish Windclop pointed out as Nurse Graves nodded her head in time with the music and smiled as we approached. The brown earth pony had only a few wisps of green mane and tail but had kept her nurse's uniform pristine. "Nurse Graves, this is Blackjack. Blackjack, Nurse Graves. Miss Graves, Blackjack wants to get into Hightower. I hope you can talk her out of it." Then he straightened and looked up at a hovering robot behind the bar; it looked like a Mr. Handy, but painted in pinstripes and with a wide-brimmed floppy hat on its dome. "Hey, Cerberus. Can you make me a Monsoon?"

"Right away, Mr. Windclop! I might as well since I can't make you a greasy smear on the ground. Damn this combat inhibitor!" the robot said as it began to mix up the drink for the pegasus ghoulish.

Nurse Graves touched my shoulder, making me jump. I looked at her and then at the robot. "Is that thing... safe?" I asked the undead mare.

"Oh, Cerberus is safe as houses. He's been programmed not to target any friendly visitor or resident," she replied as she looked at the robot. "Aren't you, Cerbie?"

The robot stretched out one of its camera eyes towards me and said in a stage whisper everypony could hear, "Personally, I think they're all a bunch of rotting pony maggot farms and I'd disintegrate them into piles of ash if I could. But I can't, thanks to this damned combat inhibitor! So since I can't dispense fiery carnage to this collection of morbid, wiggling corpses, would you like a martini, you zebra-loving ghoulish hugger?"

"Yeah," I said slowly. "Sure."

I couldn't help but smile and bob my head a little to the music while we waited. "If you don't mind me asking," I said after a moment, "why... this?" I gestured vaguely at the club with my hoof. "I mean, I've

been to Mixers in Flank, but all this seems a bit... well... much."

Windclop shared a long look with Nurse Graves before he looked back at me with a patent smile. "Well, you must understand, being a ghoul is much different from being a smoothcoat. It's more than just the being dead thing. Our eyesight is a little less sharp, though much better in darkness. Though, to be honest, when most of the ponies you live with look like corpses, that's not always a bad thing; there's just a limit on how much prettifying you can do. Our sense of touch is diminished, and our bodies make simple things like eating, drinking, and even intoxication difficult. And the less that can be said about our senses of smell and taste, the better."

"The one thing that remains consistent is our hearing, Dearie," the nurse said. "And one of the things that many of us loved most when we were alive was music. Oh, sure, few of us can sing anything you'd want to hear, but we can all listen. Remember good times..." She looked toward the stage and the band. "And forget bad ones..."

Windclop received his drink, something blue and white that swirled around in the glass, and looked over at the far side of the bar as he pinched the stem of the glass between fragile-looking wingbones. "If you ladies will excuse me, I need to talk to Patchwork about his vote." He tilted his top hat to us and trotted off towards a battered-looking ghoul nursing a Buckweiser.

"Always worried about reelection," the nurse mused. "But I suppose that's better than not giving a damn," she said as she looked at me smiled. "Now... you want to get inside the prison. I used to work there, and I can tell you that there's nothing inside worth your life."

"Normally I'd agree," I replied as I folded my forelegs on the bartop in front of me. The band began to play another [song](#) that had my rear hoof tapping. "But there is something in there I need." Her skeptical look clearly showed she didn't believe me. I opened up the panel in my leg, showing her the black PipBuck. "This PipBuck has a program that's following an old routing path. The next stop is in Hightower."

The ghoul frowned as she looked at me in concern. "Hightower does have a lot of old communication equipment on the top floors... but there's no way to get to it, Dearie. Just getting inside the prison is next to impossible. Once you're inside, the radiation and Enervation will kill you in minutes."

"My body is resistant to Enervation," I replied. "Radiation, not so much, but... well, I guess I'll have to take plenty of Rad-X and RadAway before I go in." Rampage was indestructible; hopefully Lacunae would be okay, too. But that left Stygius and Psychochy at risk.

"Even if you avoid those, there's the ghoul population. The radiation and Enervation have made them terrible, immortal monsters. Every now and then one escapes and wreaks havoc before it's finally put down. Most are mindless, but a few are mad. That they'll kill you on sight is the best you can hope for."

"I'll just have to kill them first," I replied, shrugging. "Maybe decapitation would work? I have a wicked sharp sword," I suggested with a grin. The mare just looked at me pityingly.

"Even if you could, there are other threats, too. The prison is filled with turrets, robots, and defensive talismans." She looked around and then lowered her voice. "And ghosts."

"Ghosts?" I said a little skeptically.

She nodded. "They walk the wards as empty suits of armor, uniforms, or clothing. You can't hurt them or damage them."

Well, great. Ghosts. Robots. Turrets. Ghouls. Radiation. Enervation. When all this was done, I was going to the Core for a vacation! Or maybe Thunderhead! Someplace I could relax! "Maybe if you can tell me how you got out?"

She shivered and shook her head. Cerberus floated over and set down a cocktail glass. "For you, you corpse-loving zebra-humper. If it wasn't for my inhibitor, I'd show you a glorious day in this pony's army!" He then turned to Nurse Graves. "Anything for you, you miserable lump of writhing undead meat?"

"Thank you, Cerberus. I'm fine," Graves replied. The robot returned to the bar, grumbling to itself. I took a sip and grimaced; I wasn't sure if I had a glass of alcohol or turpentine in front of me. "I'm afraid I can't quite tell you. It's all quite muddled up. I was down in the infirmary when the lockdown order came from the warden's office. The prison was in a near riot when the sirens began and the prisoner population went into a frenzy. Then there was an incredible crash as a missile ploughed straight through the south wall! I curled up in a supply closet, and then I heard the most horrible scream imaginable." She shivered as she pressed her forehooves to her chest.

"I think I died then," she murmured, and I barely heard her over the [music](#). "And I felt... a pull. Like something was trying to pull me out of my own body. All I could do was struggle to hold on to myself and keep myself together." She rubbed her face. "... I stocked the shelves. I organized and reorganized the infirmary constantly. It was something to do... something that was me. Every second I was fighting that pull... that horrible scream. Eventually, I couldn't take it. I had to either escape, or I'd lose myself like all the others.

"I managed to get out into the yard where the rocket was poking through and crawled out the hole. The fall broke every bone in my body..." The mare gave a little shudder at the recollection. "After that I was able to crawl to the fence and found a small gap I could climb up. I had enough wits left that I pushed under the razor wire rather than getting tangled up in it. Then I was free. The further I got from there, the quieter the scream was and the weaker that pull became. I came here since my home was long gone. I felt... more me... in a medical setting. I dedicated my unlife to helping Dr. Wheelbarrow cure ghoulistification these last twenty years."

I sighed, covering my face. She was right; nothing she told me helped me get in. If Lacunae somehow could fly up to the hole without getting zapped... ugh...

"Is that EC-1101?" the nurse asked.

I dropped my hooves and looked at her in confusion. She was staring at my hoof. "Excuse me?"

"The program you're following. Is it called EC-1101?" she asked, then chewed her lower lip in concern.

"Yeah..." I said with a touch of apprehension. "Why?"

She closed her eyes, seeming to be contemplating something. Finally she looked at me and said

in a nervous voice, "You need to talk to Mr. Shears."

* * *

The Mortuary was as different from Afterlife as night from day, and it was clear that it'd fallen on hard times to boot. Just finding the damn place had taken me an hour of winding hallways, rooms turned into flophouses, and dead ends. Located in the hospital's basement, the former autopsy room and morgue now had mostly empty tables. Ahuizotl sneered at me as I walked in, and the other few patrons gave me significant looks. Most prominent was an emaciated-looking griffin in power armor who had the bony, rumpled wings of a ghoul. He stared at me from the moment I entered. No music played here; the Mortuary was silent as a tomb.

Surprisingly, Rampage was here. The striped mare looked up from a table bearing half a dozen bottles of alcohol and a box of Abronco laundry detergent. She was mixing the alcohol with the soap. "Hey Blackyjack. What brings you down here?"

"Looking for somepony."

She snorted and grinned. "Of course. You always are. You lookie. You find. And then you lookie for something else. That's your thing. And you never ever ever ever give up. Ever."

"What about you? Are you okay?" I asked in concern.

"I am good and fuckered up." She tapped the side of her head. "I've got ponies crawling around in my head. Razorwire. Twist. I'm trying to wash them out, but they keep muttering." She stared at me, her pupils two different sizes. "You see, if I just drink the alcohol, I'll piss it out before I feel it. Gotta give the body some other shit to deal with so the alcohol can work. Gotta remember that." She frowned at my clothes. "You're all prettified. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," I said as sat beside her. "Why are you in this place? Weren't you going to keep an eye on Psychoshy and Stygius? And wouldn't Afterlife be more fun anyway?" Rampage blew out a snort of annoyance.

"Couldn't watch them a second longer. Too much noise. Wanted quiet. Now all I hear is Razorwire bitching and Twist crying. A few more bottles and I won't even hear that anymore." She swayed and then frowned. "You need me sober?"

"Not right away. Psychoshy and Stygius are in still in Afterlife. Lacunae's still in the market, and I haven't gotten the information I need yet. Take your time if you need this."

"Bitchyshy and Hot Flanks... lucky... why does she get all the luck? Didn't kill her in Chapel. Let her come along. Kept her alive. Now she gets to dance with a nice guy. Not fair she has all the luck," she slurred as her hoof wrapped around a bottle and pulled it to her mouth. She took a long pull off the bottle, draining it entirely. "And how's my luck? Had a kid... dead now. Had a special pony. Dead now too. Reapers got stomped. Now there's just you." She snorted again and shook her head. "Sometime I wonder if I'm like Lacaloonie. Maybe I'm not really a mare. Maybe I'm just a whole bunch of fucked up ponies with no luck squished together. So all my bad luck is like... super concentrated, you know?"

"I know that's not it, Rampage," I said as I patted her shoulder.

She scowled at me. "Oh, you know? That's nice. 'Cause I don't frigging know. I don't know my name. I don't know who I am or who I'm supposed to be. How come you get to know, but I fucking don't, huh? Fuck... you had a soober doober ubergun and didn't use it on me. Fucking hurt, Blackjack. Fucking hurt."

"I want to help you. Not kill you," I said with my own frown as she buried her muzzle in the box of laundry detergent.

"One and the same, Blackjack. One and the same. Next time, fucking vaporize me. That's all I fucking want," she said, her muzzle caked with powdery foam.

I sighed and stood. "Try not to overdo it, Rampage."

Ahuizotl trotted up to Rampage's table with three more bottles of booze balanced on his flank. "Don't you look absolutely miserable. Here. Have another bottle. Maybe tell old Uncle Ahuizotl all about it?" he said to the striped mare, giving a little buck that sent one of the bottles hopping off his rump and neatly onto the table.

"She's fine. She doesn't want to talk to you," I said as I scooped out some bits and set them on the table. "That's for her peace of mind. Don't bother her." He snorted but swept them into his coat pocket anyway.

"They're not caps, but they'll do." He looked at me coolly and then smirked. "Perhaps you have some woes that need drowning, Security?"

"No, but I do have some questions that need answering." Okay, I would have liked a bottle or two of Wild Pegasus, but not from this snake. I glanced over at the staring griffin. "Starting with... what the hell is that guy's deal?" Ahuizotl tapped the pocket he'd swept the bits into. I scowled and put a few more coins on the table.

He swept them up as well before answering. "Who? Carrion? Why, he's just my muscle. That's all. It's his job to turn troublemakers into bloody messes for the ferals. I own his contract." Ahuizotl chuckled to himself with a sly grin.

I stared back at the griffin ghoul. "So he does whatever you say?"

"Pretty much," the ghoul replied with a smile and shrug. "I point at something and Carrion hurts it. He's the best thug a corrupt bartender could ever hope for." His smile disappeared as he said in a lower, more menacing voice, "He never bothers me with his own annoying sense of morality."

Well, as interesting as that was, it wasn't why I was here. "I'm looking for somepony who's supposed to be a regular here. Goes by the name of Mr. Shears." Ahuizotl pressed his lips together as he smiled. A few more bits landed on the table; I was almost out. He swept them into a different pocket. "Mr. Shears is right over there." He pointed at a lump of rags on a chair in the corner.

Then the charred-looking buck trotted to the entrance and said sourly, "I'll be back in a bit. I need to get these tips in the safe." Carrion just nodded his head once and kept watching me. I sighed, hoped that Rampage could sober up in seconds if need be, and approached the heap.

The tattered mass shifted as I moved closer, and I stopped short. "Mr. Shears?"

"Who wants to know?" a stallion replied with a slurred voice from within the filthy rags.

"I'm Security. I was told you know a way into Hightower." There was no reply from the pile, so I elaborated, "Nurse Graves said so."

"Nurse Graves needs to watch her mouth," the buck muttered.

I sighed, feeling my annoyance building. "She said you knew about EC-1101. She said you said it could get you inside."

The name made the heap lean forward towards me at once. "Do you have it? Can it be possible?"

I flipped open the panel on my leg and showed the PipBuck screen, then brought the file up. The heap shuddered once more. "It's true. It's true... after so long... finally."

"So you can use this to get me inside?" I asked with a small frown.

"Oh yes. There is a way. A secret way closed when the projects were sealed. Oh yes," the rags slurred softly. "However, there is a price. I'm not going to tell you out of the kindness of my heart. Oh no." Two rag-wrapped legs rubbed together. "No no no. My price is simple. Take me with you."

"Take you with me?" I blinked, scowling in confusion. "What do you want to go to Hightower for?"

"That is my business!" the heap hissed sharply. "Mine, and no pony else's! Do we have a deal or not?"

I was tempted to turn him down till I got some more answers, but maybe if I agreed he might share a little more information. I sighed and extended my hoof. "Deal." The rag-covered limb reached out to bump against mine.

"Get ready. Even if we get inside, you'll be hard pressed to last long. I'll be waiting right here till you're ready." The heap leaned back in the chair, rubbing his boiled-looking blue hooves together. "Finally... oh yes... finally..."

"So...?" I prompted, hoping for more information, but he just waved his hoof dismissively. I snorted, not liking this, but also not wanting to alienate the only pony who said he could get me inside. There wasn't much else to do besides tell my friends and make some decisions. I gave Rampage a parting pat, then trotted past Carrion and into the hallway towards the stairs leading back up towards the ER. I'd have to load up on bullets, pick up my barding, and convert as much salvage into caps and ammo as I could.

Then I froze as I stared at the concrete steps that led up to the main floor. A line of dirty red crept slowly down them. My eyes were slowly drawn up to the top and I drew Vigilance from my saddlebags. Cautiously, I made my way up.

There, lying in a spreading pool of fetid maroon blood, was Tulip. Her head was crushed, a bloody mess that was utterly destroyed. I stepped in the pool as I moved beside her to check for evidence. The blood was cool... but that didn't mean much for a ghoul. How long had she been lying here? A blood-smeared canvas bag sat beside her and I nudged it open, revealing the reinforced armor

she'd made for me.

"Well now," Willow said from the shadows, stepping into the pool of light with the assault carbines in her battle saddle pointed right at me. "This is why I fucking hate tourists."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: First, I'd like to give thanks to Snipehamster, Bronode, and Hinds for the enormous work they put in to this chapter. Really. They volunteer huge amounts of their time and this story wouldn't be legible without their help. Next, thanks to Kkat, of course, for creating FoE in the first place. Lastly, thank you everypony for putting in the time and effort to read this story and to follow along... I'm sorry it's taking so long to get through it, but we will. Promise. Any tips to help out the author can be put in the tip jar at paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Also, Velvet belongs to [Siansaar](#). The music belongs to Squirrel Nut Zipper, Cherry Popping Daddy, and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy.)