

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 46: Caper

"I dunno why we have to wear these things either..."

"Aren't we wearing them for fun?"

I backed away from the still body of Tulip as the Meatlocker security mare approached. Her milky white eyes were narrowed as she looked down at the scene. "Willow! I can explain! Okay... I really can't explain, but I didn't do this! I wouldn't do this, I mean... I'm pretty sure I didn't do this. I can't say I've never killed somepony while out of it, but..." I stammered, pointing back behind me with a bloody hoof. "I was just in Mortuary. My friend... erm... a griffin... ah... Mr. Shears can prove it!"

"This is why I fucking hate tourists," she repeated as she circled the body. Then she looked at me and my clothes closely. "You say you just came on the body like this?"

"Yeah. And like I said, I was just down in the Mortuary," I said in a rush. "I swear, I didn't do it!" Now I was going to have to prove my innocence! Maybe bust out of jail! Could I handle a jailbreak? Oh sweet Celestia, please don't tell me I'd have to kill ghouls to get out of here. I liked ghouls!

The earth pony sat, slipped a cigarette into her mouth, then calmly lit it with an old lighter before she said with an annoyed grunt, "Yes. I figured you didn't."

"I promise... I swear... I..." Then I stopped stammering and just gaped at her. "Really?"

"No blood spattered on you. Just a bit on your hoof from stepping in the pool." She stepped close and slowly lowered her hoof towards Tulip's shattered head. "While I know you probably could do a wound like this, it would have been messy. Bits of blood and bone all over the place. Your clothes are still clean." She peered down at the slain ghoul with a little groan. "Damn... Tulip was a nice girl. Hopeless merchant, but nice."

"Well, thanks," I said in a bit of a daze. I was so used to being in the middle of the proverbial shitstorm that somepony cutting me a break was depressingly novel.

She took a long pull off the cigarette and let the smoke shoot out her nostrils. "You're a lousy suspect. From what everypony was saying, you got along well with Tulip. Can't be a sour deal because you paid in advance. Hell, you haven't freaked out at all. That's pretty exceptional for a breather." She glanced over at the canvas bag. "Can't be robbery, the goods are still here. Wasn't a feral attack; no bites or other injuries." She stared at me a moment, eyes narrowed. "Might be crazy. But if it was you, you're the neatest psychopath in the Hoof."

She sighed and moved closer to the body. "Sorry, 'Lip." And then she started pressing on the corpse's ribs. There was a dry, crunchy noise as Tulip's side depressed. "Busted ribs." Willow carefully removed the saturated clothing to reveal two dark, round distortions. "Hoofkicks. Somepony knocked Tulip right off her hooves."

"Like an applebuck," I remarked, drawing a look. It might have been approved, but with a mare

like Willow, how could you tell?

"Yeah, but see? The one on the left isn't as deep as the one on the right. I'm guessing Tulip was kicked while she was turning. Maybe running for help? The kicker was strong enough that she was knocked on her side, and then..." She mimicked the hoof coming down again on Tulip's head. "She didn't even have a chance to get up. See?" She pointed at the blood spattering across the body. "All round, gravitational drops. No movement or smearing. Instantly dead."

"You seem to know a lot about this stuff," I commented, getting a smoky snort from the mare.

"Yeah. You could say that," she said, taking a moment to chew on the cigarette. "Sometimes I wish I wasn't a part of Windclop's jerky squad... that's what I call his security ghouls. Too much of a joke for me. We're supposed to let everyone in so long as they're not Red Eye or Remnants. I just keep an eye open for trouble, like you, and hope for the best."

I noted that Harbingers were okay. "Were you in the military? Looks like you know your way around firearms," I said with a look at her assault carbines.

"Law enforcement, actually. Which makes shit like this all the more annoying." She glared down at the body, flicking ashes from the end of her cigarette. "Three days from now, nopony's gonna give a fuck. 'Lip deserves better."

I looked at the dead ghoul and back at her. "So, what do you think it might have been?" She scowled at the body, the blood, and mostly at me, then took a long pull off the cigarette and let the gray smoke out in a long plume.

She sighed as she returned her eyes to the crushed mare. "If it wasn't robbery, wasn't a feral after a nibble, and wasn't personal, she might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time." She pointed at my reinforced barding spilling from the sack. "She might have been coming to deliver your barding and come across something worth killing over."

"Something illegal? Maybe that Ahuizotl had something to do with it?" I suggested, and got a sullen look in response. "What? The guy's a creep, and not because he's a ghoul."

"Yeah. Except there's nothing illegal about being a creep. We don't have much in the way of laws, anyway. Pretty basic, really. And while I don't put it past him, Ahuizotl's a weak little shit. He gets other ponies to kill for him if he can get away with it. He couldn't have killed her like this." She groaned in irritation. "Fuck... knew it would come to this. Fucking breather tourists..."

"You don't like smoothcoats?" I asked in concern.

She shrugged. "I don't like unknowns. Hate 'em. Don't care if they're alive or dead. I think we should screen who comes in here. Keep our own safe. Windclop wants everyone to just pretend we're all alive, like the rotted hide is just a bad rash. And Ahuizotl wants us one step up from feral so we'll all keep drowning in booze and Rainboom." At my clueless expression, she snapped, "Super strong Dash." She took another long pull on her cigarette and sighed, shaking her head. "But more folks want the chance to trade and to pretend like we're normal, so they'll let every freakshow into this place." She shot a pointed look at my mechanical legs.

I popped out a finger and scratched out a booger, making her squirm in disgust when I flicked it

away with a grin. Freakshow *that*, Willow. "So... now what?" I asked, stepping away from the body a little.

"Now?" She looked surprised. "Well now you take your armor -- you paid for it after all -- and go fuck yourself for all I care. I'll make sure she gets incinerated. Windclop will auction off her stuff for the town. Somepony else will come and sell barding. Life goes on," she muttered darkly. "That's how it goes, isn't it? Somepony gets murdered and great if you can catch 'em but 'oh well' if you can't."

Damn, that was a lot of bitterness. "What do you mean?" Willow glared at me a moment. Clearly there was something gnawing at the ghoul. "I'm just curious, is all." She made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat and rolled her cloudy eyes.

"Once upon a time, I was with the Hoofington Guard. Investigations. Seems like another life... 'cause it was, I guess. Always busy trying to keep order, keeping the Pinks happy, and trying to solve cases. Most were usually pretty simple, but we had a few that were just nasty. Hoofington's always been a little heavy on the weirdo population like that. Sofheart and I were assigned to catch the Angel of Death serial killer," she said as she trotted away from the body a bit and took a seat.

"I... read about her," I said as glanced at the stairs that led down to Mortuary. "Targeted foals?"

"Mhmmm. Real piece of work. Turns out she was an M.o.P. nurse. Snapped under the pressure. Thought it was more merciful to kill kids than let them live in this world. So we finally caught her... and we handed her over to the M.o.P.," she muttered bitterly.

"Wait. Why?" I asked in confusion.

The ghoul rolled her eyes. "Because she was fucking ministry. Fuck... don't you get it? Back then, if you were with a ministry, there were a million special rules about what we were supposed to do. We caught Nurse Candy, then handed her right over to Fluttershy who 'Pinkie Pie Promised' us that they'd make her better." She hissed in disgust. "Three months later she was out and doing it again. Only this time, she knew how we'd caught her and changed her habits. Sofheart drove herself nuts trying to stop her; she loved kids. And the Angel loved toying with us. The Angel would leave notes on the bodies of her victims to me and Sofheart."

I used a bit of canvas to wipe the blood off my hooves. "So what happened?"

"Angel slipped up. Sofheart had a kid, and the Angel went after her. Too much for the Angel to resist. Nasty fight. The Angel nearly killed Sofheart. Shoved a length of wrought iron fence through her chest. Anyway, I trotted her giggling ass all the way back to Hightower myself. Of course, then Image got involved and we were fucked. I was sure the Angel was going to disappear again. I filed paperwork. I made calls. I screamed my stupid head off." She let out a long, rattling sigh. "And then the Angel dies in custody!" she spat, stomping her forehooves in rage.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, and got a glare in response.

"That's exactly what my fucking superiors said!" she snarled, jabbing her hoof at me. "But she was killed in custody and I don't care if it was the Angel of Death or Princess Celestia; a crime is a crime! Then I dug some more and found out there was a whole *slew* of ponies killed in Hightower. No investigations. No *nothing*. Others had gotten hit by some sort of mind-sapping magic attack -- all fatal.

And nopony was investigating! Somepony was covering it up, but I had no idea who.”

She snorted, looking back at the body. “Softheart snapped. Couldn’t take it. Maybe it was her injuries or something, but she couldn’t let it go. Said she could feel the Angel inside her. Woke up in her daughter’s room with a knife. Finally jumped in front of a subway train. Suicide. Case... fucking... closed.”

The mottled green mare slumped. “I was taken off investigations. Put behind a desk in Flankfurt filing paperwork. Would have quit, but... hrmph, what else was I going to do?” she said with a shrug. “Bombs fell and paperwork was pretty much moot. Lasted a year before ghoulfication set in. Fortunately, I kept my head together. Nopony gave a shit about justice anymore, but I could shoot better than most of the scum around the Wasteland.”

Then she suddenly blinked and groaned, covering her face with her hoof. “Oh, shit. I didn’t just do that, did I?”

“What?” I asked in concern.

The mottled green mare just adopted an expression of self-disgust. “Don’t tell me I actually gave you my whole ‘when I was alive’ sob story. I hate that shit.” She snorted and spat her cigarette butt into the shadows. “Ghouls always have one whiny story from when they were alive. Promised I’d never share mine. They’re always so pathetic.”

“Sorry. But it was an interesting story,” I said. I considered her a moment, and a slow smile spread on my lips. I adopted as casual a tone as I could. “You know... I’m going into Hightower.” I tried not to look too interested, but the ghoul could clearly handle herself.

“Are you joking or crazy?” Willow asked, and I grinned widely at her. She looked back at me flatly, leaning away as if my crazy was contagious. “Blackjack, I don’t know you. Why in Equestria would I follow you into a deathtrap like Hightower? Much as unlife sucks, I’d rather not lose it.”

I looked at the skeptical ghoul and then smiled. “Because you have questions about the things that happened in Hightower. Niggling little things you want to know. Even if the answers don’t matter, you still want them.”

She glared at me for a long moment before she snorted, “Not that bad. Now get out of my mane. I need to get Tulip cremated and tell his mayorship to clean up the mess.” I felt like she’d slugged me. Mysteries! Potential answers! How could she pass that up? I sighed and just nodded, gathering up the reinforced combat armor Tulip had made for me before starting back towards the Afterlife club. “And Blackjack,” she called after me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder at the ghoul as she added grimly, “Keep your eyes out for somepony that can crush a skull with one blow.”

* * *

Given there was someone in Meatlocker who would kill a mare like Tulip, I found a bathroom and checked it for occupants and red bars before removing the clothes Velvet had generously given me. I sighed and, for the first time ever, carefully folded my clothes and packed them into the bottom of my saddlebag. Tulip had done well. The reinforced combat armor was a mottled gray like concrete, and the usual ceramic plates had been replaced by some sort of metal I couldn’t quite identify, so I chanced a little nibble. It tasted like caramel and was lighter than steel. Still, this was definitely some heavy duty armor.

'Security' was etched on the back in black letters, and she'd even painted my filly in place. I felt guilty seeing it after Boing. Sighing softly, I pulled the barding on.

Tulip had done *really* well. It fit like a sock. I debated putting on the helmet for a moment, then remembered what Willow had said. The helmet went on immediately; I had no idea how reinforced my brain was and would prefer to not have to find out. I stood like a zebra, winced as the armor pinched like mad in the crotch, and carefully tugged it so that I could go bipedal comfortably. No need for the boots on my forelegs. I wasn't sure what the S.W.A.T. spray-painted out had stood for, though. 'Security Whines A Ton'?

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I turned my thoughts again to the task ahead. If I was going into Hightower, I'd need a strong team. Rampage, Lacunae, and Stygius were solid. Psychoshy might have conflicts, but I was pretty sure she'd follow him. That wasn't quite enough though. At the very least I'd need somepony who knew the layout of the prison. Somepony who could deal with robots and turrets. Somepony who could keep us all alive. Somepony good with locks. Shears was an unknown; I hoped he had some combat skills.

I was halfway to the Afterlife club when I heard shouts coming from the front of the hospital. "Get out of here! You're not welcome, Stripe!" I heard somepony bellow. "No Remnants here! Step off!"

I started towards the entrance when I heard a familiar mare cry out, "Oh Maiden of the Stars, why have you cursed me so!? I beg you, return and finish me off! End my torment!"

I trotted out on to the front steps and beheld a filthy, rain-soaked, wretched-looking Xanthe. The zebra mare's eyes popped wide as she stared past the scowling ghouls and at me. "Oh, sweet sun above, I *am* damned." Then her golden eyes rolled back in their sockets and she flopped to the ground in a faint. I looked at her for a minute, then at the ghouls. "Hundred caps to let her in?" The pair looked at each other a moment, scowled, then shrugged and nodded.

Then a muddy bundle on the zebra's back shifted a little. I frowned as I stepped closer and carefully lifted the flap. Curly pink mane streaked with filth and dried blood met my eyes, and then two bright and terrified blue eyes peeked back at me for a moment before I shared a scream with a filly who was supposed to be dead.

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I'd like to think there were different levels of awkward. Saying your mom's flank is perfectly sexy when she turns out to be standing behind you, for example, is a beginner's level of awkward. Then there's trying to convince the pony you love to be your special somepony, only to discover they're taken, not interested, only interested in being friends, or that they would be interested if you were somepony else. That's a nice middling sort of awkward. Then there's finding out that the filly you thought you'd killed in a psychopathic rage is still alive, badly battered, possibly crippled, and utterly scared to death of you. Boing was with Doctor Wheelbarrow right now, who'd Pinkie Promised he wouldn't study her too much.

Xanthe was almost in as much shock as Boing. I reminded Windclop that I'd just made a generous contribution to the community and I'd really appreciate if he could let her in. He'd smoothed some ghouls' nerves enough for Carol to let her use the shower, and Velvet was nice enough to loan her a cloak, after I'd managed to pry her away from something they were all doing with Lacunae in the corner of the ER. The garment didn't completely conceal her, though. There was just something about the way

a zebra moved that you couldn't quite hide. Most of the ghouls made a point of pretending we didn't exist.

I was too preoccupied to really enjoy the music in Afterlife as I spoke with the spooked zebra at one of the club's tables. "So, you couldn't get to the Collegiate and have been wandering around on your own since you left Yellow River?" I asked Xanthe as she held a cup of tea between her hooves. Her eyes were darting back and forth between Nurse Graves and me as they had ever since she'd woken up in the care of ghouls. Apparently, while there wasn't exactly a rule against them, there were lots of old grudges against zebrakind in Meatlocker. Windclop had grudgingly allowed her inside; I think the sight of Boing was enough to let him make a special allowance.

"Yes. Since you cursed me, I wandered through the rainy night seeking my way. The pegasi flew away with their injured comrade. I was rained on most terribly and slipped in the mud several times. I finally returned to a tunnel where I discovered that poor filly battered within an inch of her life," she said with a shake of her head. Returned? I started to ask... then I wanted to ask about Boing's injuries... then I felt really guilty and shut up, so she went on, "I could have left her, but my spirit is already tainted enough by your curse. I didn't need ghosts haunting me as well, so I helped her as I could and sought aid." She shook her head with a sigh. "The Harbingers... they had no help for me, as they only sought you. I could only head south and hope I found the Collegiate you mentioned, but I was lost. I followed the mountains too closely, and this was the only community I knew where she might get aid."

"Good thing I cursed you, then. I thought I'd killed her," I said as I looked at my hooves. Funny; *almost* killing her in a frenzy was somehow worse than killing her outright. Somewhere in this hospital was a filly who was terrified of me, and rightly so. If Xanthe hadn't found her and gotten her to somepony who could help, she would have been dead...

No, Blackjack. Life is better than death. A few exceptions, of course: Steel Rain, Lancer, whatever was running the Harbingers. But it was better she lived.

"She'll recover. She has a skull fracture, three broken ribs, and a broken pelvis. Severe damage to her legs. Punctured lung, too, but fortunately Xanthe administered a healing potion in time. Doctor Wheelbarrow will have her up, if only to run a few tests. Harmless tests, I promise," Nurse Graves added quickly as she caught my eye. "Doctor Wheelbarrow has a theory that the magic which turned us into ghouls can somehow be reversed." She gave a miniscule shrug. "It's a pleasant theory." She sounded almost dismissive of the idea of being alive again.

"You don't *want* to be alive?" Xanthe asked in shock.

"It would be nice, I suppose, but there really isn't much difference between the living and the unliving. Happiness matters far more." A moment later, she gave me a significant look. "There's a rumor that you are going into Hightower soon."

"That's the idea. Mr. Shears says he knows a way in that won't result in us getting dusted right away. Once we're inside... well... we'll be exposed to Enervation, so we charge through as quickly as possible." Okay, that didn't sound any better out loud than it did in my head. But if we were fast enough...

She closed her eyes a moment, tapping her hooves on the tabletop. "If you go, I would like to go with you. I have medical expertise and a knowledge of the prison."

I stared a few moments, making sure she was serious before asking, "Not that I'm not grateful for

the help, but why? You spent a really long time trying to get out of there. Why would you want to go back?"

"I don't. Every thought of that place fills me with dread. But if you are going, I want to make sure that that horrible place doesn't take any more lives. Plus, I know where there is a large stock of Rad-X and RadAway and other medical supplies, and you'd need me to access it. Without it, I doubt you'd have the time to get in and out again."

Windclop looked over from the bar. He'd been keeping a nervous eye out like a mother shadowing her daughter's first date to the atrium. He slipped from the bar and approached. "Graves, you know you don't have to go in there."

"Yeah, while I appreciate it..." I started, but the nurse shook her head.

"Thank you, but if you are going, then you will need me. I have to make sure that horrible place doesn't get one more soul who doesn't deserve it." The nurse smiled sadly at the pegasus ghoul, who clattered his bony wings nervously and looked around.

Suddenly he turned and marched to the robot hovering behind the bar. "Cerberus! I've got a mission for you. You're going to escort Nurse Graves on her expedition."

The floating robot lifted its flamer and spat a small plume of fire into the air. "Oo-Rah! Yes sir! Turn off this combat inhibitor and I will defend her from every last stinking ghoul in Equestria! Including herself!"

Windclop scowled at the robot. "Your combat settings should be just fine as they are, Cerberus."

The robot sagged and let out a synthesized sigh. "Fine. Stupid ghoul-loving ghouls and their damned combat inhibitors."

Stygius and Psychoshy trotted towards me. The batpony seemed a bit uncomfortable, but I couldn't tell if it was because of his company or something else. "So I heard you unkilld a foal. How'd you pull that one off?" Psychoshy asked me. Then she noticed Xanthe and began sizing the zebra up as if trying to think of some sort of cutting remark, but upon seeing the terrified look in Xanthe's eyes, she turned back to me with a clear 'You're not worth the effort' snort.

"Xanthe here saved her life." Hopefully the filly would forgive me for attacking her... somehow...

"Well, aren't you a hero," the yellow pegasus said sarcastically to the zebra. Then she glanced over at Stygius, saw his disapproval, and blinked and forced a grin. "I mean, way to go!" Stygius just sighed and looked away. Psychoshy's grimace melted into a worried, uncertain frown.

Rampage materialized out of the crowd. "Ugh... remind me not to eat soap next time I'm looking to get drunk," the striped mare said. She grimaced and clenched her eyes shut, then belched out a small stream of bubbles. Sticking her tongue out, she held her stomach a moment before spotting the shocked-looking zebra. "Ave," she said formally.

"P- P- Proditor!?" Xanthe stammered in shock. "Te imploro non me occide!"

"Your accent is terrible. Please address me in Pony," Rampage said in that oddly formal tone

that suggested Shujaa was at the helm.

"Is there going to be trouble between you two?" I asked in concern.

Rampage regarded her a long moment, leaning over to glance at Xanthe's covered flank as if hoping to see her glyphmark. "Your tribe? You are Orah?" Xanthe flushed and shook her head. "Propoli?" Xanthe gulped and gave the tiniest little nod. "Ahh... certainly not warrior or priest. Farmer?" Xanthe shook her head. "Crafter?" A little nod. Rampage looked at her coolly, then gave the tiniest smile. "Ah. Well, better than a merchant." The zebra stiffened a little and even gave a ghost of a smile along with a tiny nod. Rampage looked at me and said with a smile, "No trouble." Then she groaned and blinked, letting out another belch of bubbles.

Why she didn't let Xanthe answer for herself was beyond me. Zebras were weird. "Are you okay?"

"Meh. I'll live," she said with a little smirk, but it quickly disappeared. "I heard Tulip was killed."

"What?!" Psychoshy gasped. "Who? How? She was like... tiny." The pegasus actually seemed shocked. "That is just... messed up."

"In the hallway near the Mortuary," I explained. "Somepony crushed her head in one blow." The yellow pegasus glared sharply at Rampage, and I added quickly, "Somepony other than Rampage. I'd left her in Mortuary before I found Tulip's body." I glanced at Xanthe. "Could a zebra have done it?"

"One of the Achu could have done so, easily. If there were any left. Their Fallen Caesar technique of fighting put them on par with your Steel Rangers, but their mountain homes were destroyed by pony sorcery." She sighed softly. "The ability to kill even an enemy in steel armor is little help against a volcanic eruption. Still, there have been tales of their tribe surviving far from their shattered lands."

"Is it just me, or does anyone else find it funny their tribe sounds like a sneeze?" Psychoshy asked with a smirk, looking at the ponies gathered around the table. Deadpan expressions looked back. "Just me then? Kay..." she said with a flush.

"I've seen zebras fighting hoof to hoof." And I'd seen Shujaa capable of the same. Still, she couldn't have been in two places at once.

Nurse Graves shook her head slowly. "But zebras aren't allowed in Meatlocker. Too many bad memories and old grudges." She smiled apologetically at Xanthe. "And the Remnant haven't done zebrakind any favors over the years." Xanthe's ears drooped, but she wisely omitted that she'd been a part of them till I'd cursed her.

'Power Armor?' wrote Stygius on his slate.

"Well, Steel Ranger armor isn't exactly what I'd call stealthy," I muttered. Enclave armor, on the other hoof...

"As much as I liked Tulip, it's not exactly our job to catch her killer, is it?" Psychoshy said, staring at me and waiting for an argument. I didn't give her one. I glanced over to see Willow scowling at her. "Didn't you say you were finding a way inside Hightower that didn't involve our immediate deaths?" the pegasus went on.

"I found it. Mr. Shears says he can get us in using EC-1101," I replied, tapping my PipBuck foreleg. I looked around. "I just wish there was something we could do about that rocket."

"It shouldn't be that hard," Xanthe said casually as she looked at Cerberus. "Depending on the condition of the warhead, you could just have the robot slice the lateral struts and pull the whole thing off."

We all shared a look and then looked back at the zebra, who suddenly seemed apprehensive. "You know about balefire bombs and rockets?" I asked.

"Well, I... it's not my specialty at all. But... yes." She looked nervously at her hooves, tapping them together. "That actually isn't a rocket at all; it's a missile that was fired from Dawn Bay. Shorter range, flat flight path, and more difficult to intercept."

"Propoli and their toys," Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes.

"Propoli? What does that mean, exactly?" I asked, pointing a hoof at Xanthe.

"Propoli were the tribe behind the founding of Roam. Big advocates of city, technology and abandoning the old ways. Pushed rocket, missile, and robotics development. And balefire bombs," Rampage explained, looking flatly at Xanthe. The zebra shrank back. "Also established the trade agreements with Equestria prior to the war and were blamed for bringing down the great pony curses."

"That... that was a very long time ago," she muttered quickly. "We learned our mistake. Today we are simply trying our best to rebuild and prepare for the coming of the Maiden." Then she noticed my scowl and flushed, looking at her hooves and tapping them together again, muttering about curses.

I reached over and patted her shoulder. "I promise, I don't hold you accountable for what your grandparents ten times removed did. And neither should anypony else," I added, looking around the table. Xanthe flushed, not looking up from her hooves. "Is there anything you can do about that missile, though?"

"Well. You could cut off the warhead and dump it outside. That would cut off the radiation. If the purge system is intact, you might be able to disarm the warhead. Or you could try and set it off." Then she looked up at the stunned silence as everypony stared at her. "Well... not while we're inside, of course!"

"Not at *all*, please." Windclop shivered as he looked up at the roof. "While I think the hospital would survive, a balefire blast would do a nasty number on the neighborhood."

I sighed, then smiled and patted Xanthe's shoulder. "Right! You're coming with us. You're our resident balefire missile specialist."

"Huh?" Xanthe blinked. "But I... I can't... I mean... shouldn't... I mean..." I just smiled at her as she stammered on for a minute or two and then said in a whimper, "I'm the most cursed zebra ever."

"Yup," I said as I put a hoof around her shoulder.

"Associating with a damned dirty stripe! Damn this combat inhibitor!" Cerberus snarled.

I popped out my fingers and started counting, getting plenty of stares from around the crowded table. "So, that's me, Lacunae, Rampage, Psychoshy, Stygius, Mr. Shears, Nurse Graves, Cerberus,

Xanthe..."

"Excuse me..." came that nasty purr that put my mane on edge. "Security?" We all looked over at the smug smirk of Ahuizotl. "I'd like to speak to you about your upcoming endeavor?"

"What are you doing here, Ahuizotl? I thought you said you'd rather be turned to glue than set one hoof in here," Windclop said with a scowl.

"Things change," he replied in his slimy, wet voice. Then his eyes turned to me. "I understand that you're going to Hightower. I'd like to offer the assistance of my employee, Carrion."

That brought a look of shock from Graves and Windclop. I looked at the smirking ghoul and frowned. "No offence, but you're about as trustworthy as a radroach in a pantry. Why in Equestria would I take him along with me?"

"Last time I checked, none of you had power armor. He'll be a formidable asset against whatever you encounter," Ahuizotl purred silkily. "If you're worried about him shooting you in the back, just put him in the front. I promise you, he'll not betray you." I looked over at the frowning Windclop and worried Nurse Graves.

"Well?" I asked the skeptical-looking ghouls.

"Carrion is pretty formidable, I admit it. And if Ahuizotl orders him not to double cross you, he won't," Windclop said with a frown. "I still wouldn't take him without knowing why Ahuizotl wants him to come along, though."

"Can't I be doing it out of the kindness of my heart?" Ahuizotl simpered. Then he sneered at me. "Fine. There's a cell. 755. I want Carrion to rifle through it. No interruptions, no questions, no interference. If he finds anything inside, it's mine to keep."

"755? But that was in the maximum security level." Graves frowned a moment, then her eyes opened wide in shock. "Oh my! That's Kingpin's cell!"

Ahuizotl purred like me trying to get in Midnight's bed, "The most infamous mob boss in all of Equestria during the war. Murder. Smuggling. Theft. Vice. He did it all. He also never turned over his fortune when he was arrested for tax evasion. M.o.M. raked his memories for months, but he'd already extracted every single incriminating one before they'd gotten to him. I'm hoping there's something in his cell that will tell me where some of his fortune was hidden."

Okay. That I could buy. And it would also mean at least Carrion getting out again. "Right. Well. Fine. But don't blame me if he gets torn apart or blasted or something."

"Of course not," the ghoul said with a broad smile that gave me a head to hoof shooty feeling. "I'll tell him to get ready, then." And with that he trotted away, whistling brightly and making my coat crawl even more.

I stood up and looked at Windclop. "Is there a... I don't know... someplace we can all meet?"

"There's a conference room on the second floor nopony uses. It's big enough," the pegasus said, rubbing his nose with his long, thin, bony wings.

“Right. Rampage. Why don’t you go get Shears and Carrion? I’ll go find Lacunae. Psychoshy and Stygius can follow Windclop there... and you can make sure Cerberus’s combat inhibitor is good?” I added. Windclop nodded, and the robot gave an angry mutter.

Nurse Graves looked at Xanthe. “Why don’t you come with me down to radiology? There are some hazardous materials suits that should offer some of you and your friends more protection from the radiation.” Still muttering about curses, the zebra followed along in a daze.

I had some decent talent. Now we just had to do the whole planning thing. I sighed as I rose and trotted back towards the marketplace in the ER. When I’d been in there before, Lacunae had been in the corner surrounded by ghouls, and I hadn’t wanted to interrupt beyond getting a cloak for Xanthe. Now I trotted up towards the crowd of ghouls, trying to get at the alicorn in the back. Had they done something with her mane?

“Excuse me! Pardon me! I need to get through!” I called out as I nudged my way forward. I’d hoped that whatever they’d been doing with Lacunae, it wouldn’t be too embarrassing for the purple alicorn. I wondered if it would be leather or lace. Then the crowd finally parted, and...

Goddess...

For the first time since I’d seen alicorns, I saw one that didn’t look like some cheap knockoff of Luna or Celestia. The golden silk dress with burgundy panels she wore was what I imagined a sunset should look like. Her brushed and curled mane seemed to blow in that ghostly wind. The traces of lip gloss and the golden glitter in the corners of her eyes gave off just the right sparkle. Burgundy ribbons and the gold wire that I’d traded to Tulip had been woven around her hooves. They’d even fashioned a tiara for her from the wire. The collected ghouls stared on in joy as she stood there before us all. If Celestia were the sun and Luna the moon, Lacunae could be sunrise and sunset.

“I fear they got carried away,” Lacunae said bashfully as she blushed.

I looked at the beaming Velvet and Snowflake and then back up at her. “They didn’t. They really didn’t.” I took a few seconds more, amazed at the sight, then sighed. “But unfortunately, we’re getting ready to plan our next step.” It seemed such a shame for her to put the outfit away.

“I see,” she said with a gentle smile at the surrounding ghouls. “Well, I wish to thank you all for your kindness. It really is a lovely dress.”

Velvet just blushed. “Well, it’s nice to make something special,” she said with a little sniff as she looked up at the mare. The ghouls nodded, and a few even seemed to give little bows towards the alicorn. “Please. Take it. I always dreamed of making something for royalty. I think every seamstress does. You’re as close as I’m ever going to get.”

“I... thank you,” Lacunae said solemnly, clearly taken aback by the attention and generosity. Finally, she sighed and carefully removed the amazing garment. “But I don’t know how I could take it with me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Velvet assured her. Her horn glowed as she took the dress, and then there was a flash of magic and the garment was bundled up neatly in burgundy ribbons. “There. That should be easier to carry.”

Lacunae nodded and slipped the bundle into her bags as she took off the rest of the decorations, passing them to the gray ghoul. She still looked magnificent. Where they'd gotten the makeup was beyond me. Finally, she thanked them all once again and trotted out of the ER with a blush on her cheeks. "What?" she asked, looking down at me and my grin.

"So... spill. You liked that, didn't you?" I teased. She flushed a little more and pointedly looked away, but still smiled.

"It gave them some joy," she said quietly.

"And I bet the Goddess just loved all the attention," I added, but instead of smiling at my teasing, she just looked sad. "Lacunae?"

"She did... at first. And she enjoyed my humiliation." She dropped her gaze. "But as it went on, she cut contact. I fear their sincere devotion was... upsetting."

That was certainly odd. I regarded my purple friend and nudged her shoulder. "You've changed, Lacunae."

"Pardon?" Lacunae blinked in surprise as we trotted along. The alicorn still drew looks from the ghouls we passed, even in the wan glow of my light spell.

"You. When we first met, you were... well... a little creepy. You never talked, and half the time when you did, you were the Goddess. Now you're... you. You let ponies dress you up because it makes them happy. Is that because you're different or because the Goddess is?" I asked as we moved along.

The question turned her smile more wistful and regretful. "The Goddess cannot change, Blackjack. I wish she could. When she formed, a balance was struck between the egos of the dominant mares. Anything that could disrupt that balance is diverted into me. Hope. Friendship. Joy. The feelings and opinions and memories of hundreds of ponies are placed within me. If I've changed, it's because she refuses to. She remains convinced of her own superiority and the manifest destiny of her children."

"But, why wouldn't the Goddess want to feel good things?" I asked, finding that positively crazy.

"Because it empowers the part of her that is Twilight Sparkle. The self-important ego of the mare that became the Goddess still remembers petty slights made against her many years before the war. And so long as the Goddess feels misery, doubt, and self-recrimination, Twilight cannot assert herself or threaten Trixie's domination." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Sometimes I think she's stripped away so much of Twilight that there's more of her in me than in the Goddess herself."

"Is that why you're... well... good?" I asked.

Lacunae gave me a long look that made me wonder if I'd somehow insulted her. "The Goddess must maintain control of all within her. To that end she strips away memories that are good and strong and places them within me. The things that cause her shame, discomfort, or lack of control. If the ponies within her remembered who they were, she could not maintain the kind of restraint over them she now requires."

"But is the Goddess, overall, good or not?" I asked, nudging her hip.

"She is the combination of hundreds of souls and memories. She has good ponies and wicked ponies within her. Virtuous and craven. Kind and cruel. The segregation she imposes to maintain control is a mistake, I feel, but one that is unchangeable." The purple alicorn sighed as we walked past Stonewing's memorial. "I believe one thing, however. She can do better."

We followed the babble of voices to the second floor conference room. Rampage, Psychoshy, and Stygius sat on one end of the long lozenge-shaped table. In the middle on the left side, Xanthe sat next to Nurse Graves in a yellow hazmat suit while Cerberus floated behind her, muttering obscenities. The nurse had two cardboard boxes in front of her and was counting out bottles of Rad-X in one while Xanthe examined pouches of orange RadAway. Opposite them were Willow and Windclop, talking to each other in low voices. Carrion lurked in the corner along with Ahuizotl, who looked much too happy about this. The far end of the table was occupied by the ragged form of Mr. Shears.

"Ah, welcome. I'm glad you decided to quit playing dress up and join us," Shears rasped.

"Right," I said as I looked around at the assembled people. "We're all here because we're going to do the impossible: break into Hightower. I know it's an irradiated fortress filled with automated defenses, feral glowing ghouls, deadly radiation, and soul sapping Enervation, but working together, I know that we can get in, get what we need done, and get out again. If anyone wants to quit, now's the time to back out."

I looked around, but the only person looking ready to bolt was Xanthe. Yet she remained in her seat. I wondered if she was too scared to leave or if she simply had nowhere to go.

Psychoshy raised her hoof. "So... not that I'm scared, but, like, what's our goal?"

"Three things. First, to get to the top floor and reach the broadcast network. Second, to find cell 755." Ahuizotl chuckled and nodded. "And..." I looked at Mr. Shears.

"What I'm looking for is in the attic," he said, his filmy eyes peering into my own over the rag covering his face. "It's right next door to the broadcast center on the top floor, so it shouldn't be that much of a problem." From everypony else, the response was just shrugs, but I remembered what Razorwire had told me the first time we'd met. *'Took me up to the attic. Put a bullet in my head.'* And then, as if reading my mind, Shears said, "I've been waiting an eternity to get up there."

Yeah. We were definitely going to have a chat.

"Well there's quite a bit of peril between here and there. So how do we get all the way up there?" Lacunae asked.

There was a blue glow from under Shears's hood, and a moment later lines of light burst into being above the table. They organized themselves into a glowing green outline of the prison. "I've had a lot of time to review and study the ways into and through the prison. Two centuries actually." The rotund ghoul stood on his chair, hooves on the conference table. "Hightower is stacked in three sections, with subsections between. In the basement are storage, generators, and all the infrastructure for supporting the building. Hightower has its own shielded reactor. It's rather like a stable, in its own way.

"On the ground floor are the cafeteria, gymnasium, library, and classrooms." I must have looked surprised, because the fat ghoul chuckled. "Oh yes, the prisoners had to do something with all that time on their hooves." On the illusion, the lowest of three blocks flashed from green to red. "The medium

security cells are here. Then medical. Then high security cells. Then the security center and armory. Then the supermax cells. At the top are the warden's office and central command. Then the attic, communications, and the rooftop access."

"So they put medical and the armory between groups of prisoners? Whose stupid idea was that?" Psychoshy sarcastically asked with a roll of her eyes. Shears glared back at her with his filmy gaze.

"The design is such that, in the event of a riot, the three sections of the prison could be locked down and isolated. The elevators only go from the bottom to the top of each section, so there's no clear path to travel from the very top to the very bottom. When in lockdown, there's no method of travel between blocks at all, and if a pony is stupid enough to get into the central shaft, there's numerous automated and reinforced turrets inside."

"And the whole building's been on lockdown for two centuries," I muttered as I looked at the glowing tower.

"Indeed. Unlike other prisons, Warden Hobble was not about to release his charges. He activated all the building's automated defenses. The guards and staff were every bit as trapped as the prisoners. Then the missile impacted. Radiation killed everypony quickly, and then the Enervation field appeared." I thought of the ring in Tenpony Tower and how Helpinghoof reported that it had weakened the healing potion when the pony Helpinghoof treated died.

"How many ponies were in Hightower when the missile hit?" I asked, looking at Nurse Graves.

She stared at her hooves and murmured almost too softly to hear, "We were over capacity. Around three thousand."

Three thousand? I thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, that had died at Silverstar Sporting Supplies. *Three thousand?*

It must have shown on my face, because Shears snorted, then dug out some .308 shell casings and tossed them on the conference table. "Please. I've taken steps for that. These talismans will ward off the Enervation for several hours. I suggest you not lose them, or you'll get an intimate lesson in what happened to everypony in the Core."

"Right," I murmured as I passed them out to everypony coming with me.

"I thought nothing could affect Enervation," Psychoshy said skeptically as she held one to her ear and shook it, making something inside rattle. "How do we know these even work?"

"You don't. That talisman is the product of ancient zebra magic. If it doesn't work, you'll find out quite quickly."

"Starkatteri magic?" Xanthe said at once, looking at the shell in horror.

Mr. Shears simply shrugged. "I can never keep all your tribes straight. Suffice to say they work, and if they don't this expedition will be over before we leave the basement." Xanthe took the shell casing as if she expected it to turn into a radroach and bite her. A red dot appeared in the basement. "We'll enter here, take stairs up to the ground floor, and make it to the elevator. We'll have to physically force

our way into the shaft and up to medical.”

“I still remember my access codes. I don’t know if they’ll override the lockdown, though,” Nurse Graves said softly.

“If not, I can,” Carrion growled; it was the first thing the griffin had said in the meeting.

Nurse Graves continued, “In medical, there are a number of ghouls, robots, and turrets. Patients and staff who were trapped there... We didn’t have time to use up all the medical supplies, so there’s a large stockpile we can use to purge radiation.”

“The second level is a bit more problematic,” Mr. Shears said. “The high security area has more robots and turrets. The warhead is our biggest problem. Its magic has produced ghouls of... substantial strength. And while it is there, I doubt many of the living will last long.” He looked at Cerberus and Xanthe. “If the robot can follow her instructions and dump the warhead out the hole, we should be able to get up the elevator to the armory and guard station.”

“And if that’s under lockdown, how do we get inside?” Rampage asked, looking at Carrion. “More manual persuasion?”

Shears reached down under the table and lifted a metal case, setting it on the tabletop. He flipped it open, and at once my PipBuck started clicking. I’d seen the round glowing orbs before lining the interior of Discord’s containment. A balefire egg.

“Oh, you know it’s bad when that’s your key,” Rampage groaned, burying her face in her hooves.

“Once inside the armory, we have to get our hooves on the captain’s pass. That should get us into the supermax level. However, it is physically impossible to travel from the supermax into the top of the prison during lockdown except via a highly secure emergency access. To open that, two keys must be turned simultaneously: one in the armory and one in the warden’s office.”

“So how do we get into the office to turn the key?”

“There’s an air shaft. In the event of a riot in the supermax, the air could be flooded with tranquilizer gas,” Mr. Shears said, the hologram turning to show a vertical tunnel leading from the armory to the top of the building. “The secretaries in the warden’s office always complained about the smells being blown up from the armory. Fortunately, we have numerous fliers to get us through.”

“And once we’re inside the warden’s office?”

“Get to the warden’s desk. Deactivate the lockdown to shut off the external turrets. Step out onto the roof and fly to safety, after we take care of our respective goals. Easy,” the ghoul said with a shrug.

“Clearly ‘easy’ must have meant ‘freaking impossible’ two centuries ago,” Psychoshy muttered, and Stygius nodded.

“It’s not impossible, but it will be a challenge. If you want to sit this one out, I wouldn’t blame you,” I said as I looked at the yellow mare. Rampage gave a taunting ‘ooooh’.

She jerked as if I’d slapped her. “Sit this one out? Me?” She glared and jabbed her pinions at me. “Why don’t *you* sit this one out? Chill out here. I’ll take care of EC-1101, and we’ll be done twice as

fast for it.”

“Sweet! Let me know how it went!” I said with a grin and started to rise, an uneasy chuckle rising from most of the collected ponies. I sat back down, looking at the assembled ponies, zebra, ghouls, and robot. “I know it will be tough. Get your weapons.”

Willow raised her hoof into the air. “Um... I think you’re missing a step. How exactly are you getting into the basement?”

Mr. Shears shrugged. “A simple access in a maintenance room on the Luna blue line. It is, however, sealed and can only be opened by her program.” I shivered; tunnels in Hoofington were never ever good.

“The subway? As in the subway that’s full of feral ghouls? Dozens of ferals? Hundreds?” Willow pressed. “There’s a reason we sealed the subway access to the hospital. There’s just too many down there.” She glanced at me, her expression hard. “With all the radiation from the bomb, lots of ponies that took shelter in the subway turned to ghouls. The population down there is ridiculously high. Even a pony in power armor would be torn to pieces.”

“I doubt they’d bother...” Mr. Shears began, then looked at me, Rampage, Lacunae, Stygius, and Psychoshy. “Oh.” Yeah, it would be a pony buffet if we went down there.

“We can just carve our way through them,” Carrion muttered.

But somehow the thought of trying to blast our way through hundreds of ghouls had put quite a damper on everypony’s mood. We fielded a few ideas, like Stygius offering to fly through as bait, then poofing away. Windclop couldn’t spare the jerky squad to clear a way for us. Psychoshy suggested getting a few other gangers, but an army of meal tickets would just draw more ghouls.

“Too bad we can’t just tell them to get out of our way,” Rampage muttered, then belched and blew a big soap bubble.

“Yeah. Ferals may leave normal ghouls alone... and occasionally we can herd them up and persuade them to move... but they never actually do what we say,” Nurse Graves said with a sigh.

I sat there a moment, feeling frustrated. It’d take days to thin the population or try and move them. If we barged in, we might lose somepony.

I flipped open my PipBuck and activated the routing for EC-1101. A little navigation tag appeared on my E.F.S. *‘Come and get me,’* it seemed to taunt. *‘Risk your life... risk your friends’ lives... come and get me... and then I’ll send you somewhere even more dangerous.’* Maybe it would be better to simply give up. Take EC-1101 far away from Hoofington and give up the idea that I would ever find out what Horizons was or what Goldenblood had planned to do with it.

It was the smart thing to do. Maybe it was time I wised up. The ghouls weren’t going to go away just by me being nice and telling them to.

Then I blinked and slowly straightened. Rampage noticed at once. “What? What is it? You’ve got that look, Blackjack.”

"What look?" I asked with a grin.

"That 'crazy idea' look that means peeling ghouls and wearing their skins or something like that," Rampage said warily.

"Well..." I slowly looked at all of them. "Depending on how much radiation Lacunae's got sucked up... I might know a pony who they *will* listen to."

* * *

The tunnels beneath Hoofington were bad; there was just no way to think otherwise. We trotted down to the hospital's subway access just past the Mortuary and the reinforced doors. All of them were covered except for a small metal one marked 'Emergency exit. Alarm will sound.' Willow pushed on the bar. I'd expected a groan, or worse, a squeal of hinges that'd alert everything for hundred miles. Instead I got a soft whisper of air blowing in from the tunnels. So much for the alarm.

"It'll lock behind you," Windclop said nervously. "We'll stay a few minutes. In case your plan... doesn't work."

"It'll work," I said, looking back at our newest member. No pony else looked nearly as confident. They'd spent the time I was gone making sure they had what they needed. Everypony with a pulse besides Rampage and Lacunae had a half dozen doses of Rad-X and RadAway; I'd raided Bonesaw at Megamart, since I was in the area. Everypony else had loaded up with what they needed.

I'd almost gone to Chapel; I really wanted to, but... I couldn't. Not till this was out of the way. Same with checking on Boing. There was just too much guilt to face that right now.

I started to step out and then paused, looked at Willow, and asked, "Keep an eye on Boing, please? She's... really hurt and it's my fault and..."

"I got it," the ghoul muttered, rolling her eyes. "Keep your eyes on Carrion. Something's going on in Meatlocker, and I don't like it one bit." I nodded and stepped through the door.

We slowly walked out on to the subway platform. A few flickering emergency lights lit the tunnel as we trotted down towards the rusted hulk of a subway car. Skeletons were curled on the seats. The engineer dangled, half ejected from the front car. My light spell burst to life, casting the ruined subway in its cold white glow.

"Spooky..." Psychoshy muttered. Water trickled in a sheet over the tile mosaics that lined the walls: colorful pony families gleefully riding the subway, the happy scenes now cracked and spotted with mold. Green light emanating from behind us reflected off the streams and gave the tunnel an eerie luminescence. The sound of trickling water was everywhere, and my imagination was transforming the trickles and splashes into voices murmuring from far away.

"I've seen worse," I replied as I walked to the end of the subway landing. I looked over at Nurse Graves as Cerberus floated above us. "Will feral ghouls actually attack you?"

"As a rule, no, but when they're agitated, we're every bit as much targets as the living," the mare replied. She had two armored cases loaded with healing potions from Megamart. Hopefully they'd last a while before they spoiled. Lacunae had filled them full of every last bit of healing magic they could hold.

“Wheelbarrow theorizes that there’s something in the way non-ghouls move that triggers an attack response. Or perhaps it’s just the effects of the magical contamination. Sadly, once a pony goes feral, there’s little chance of coming back from it.”

I gestured for Carrion to take point, and the power-armored griffin did so without complaint. I didn’t trust him, but his pair of miniguns would be our best defense if they swarmed. I really, really didn’t want to get swarmed.

“Like, these tunnels are so disgusting! Somepony really needs to clean them up!” came a mutter from the back of the group. I sighed, rolling my eyes.

Nurse Graves looked back with a worried frown. “Are you sure about bringing her?”

“What?” I asked with a grin. “She’s coming along, isn’t she? She’s happy to help her friend.”

The ghoul frowned, and my smile slipped a little. “But does she understand what we’re doing here?” the nurse asked.

“She understands enough. I know she’s not all there, but she’s our best chance for getting through the ghouls without getting torn to pieces.” I glanced back as well but then quickly changed the subject. “I was wondering, though: what keeps a ghoul... well... together?” I asked as I looked at the nurse.

She still didn’t look very happy about my choice, but answered, “It’s... hard to explain. It’s like there’s a thing inside you that’s you. Like a tiny guttering flame. If you’re careful and protect it, then you can remember who you are. But if it goes out...” She shook her head. “Wheelbarrow believes there’s some life magic in the living that keeps that flame protected. Like... glue. But in ghouls it’s much weaker.”

“It’s your soul,” Mr. Shears said from the middle of the group. “A pony can continue living so long as they have the tiniest fragment of their soul. Without it, we’re mindless animals at best. We might have a brain, but we would have no will to suppress our aggressive urges.” His cloudy eyes glanced behind us. “Retaining one’s soul is easier when you are alive because your living flesh has a strong natural bond with your spirit.”

“Fragment of a soul? You mean souls can break?” Psychoshy asked as she looked around for confirmation, hovering above us. Stygius, flying alongside her, just gave a shrug.

Mr. Shears gave a sharp little hiss. “If you know what you are doing, yes. Just as you can use a single candle to light others, you can divide a soul into different vessels.”

Xanthe muttered something about curses. I looked at Nurse Graves’s stunned expression and asked the question on everyone’s mind. “How do you know this?”

“Because I am Equestria’s premiere expert on souls.” He sounded pompous for a moment before he snorted, “Not that it matters much anymore. Souls won’t keep a raving Reaper at bay, and guns are infinitely more practical.” I looked at Graves in concern.

“Weren’t you concerned about being ripped to pieces an hour ago?” Carrion grumbled from the front of the group, his miniguns’ motors whirring every few steps. “I’m sure the ferals are just fascinated

by all this talk about souls.”

“Oh, yeah. That.” I flushed as I looked ahead as we walked along the middle of the tube. Water flowed around our hooves. Gaps appeared in the tiled wall showing rebar and deeper voids within. And there were red bars on the other side of that wall. Lots of red.

“Where are they?” Graves asked, her voice low and tense. “This should be an irresistible meal.”

“They’re here,” Carrion growled. The ghoulish griffin’s tatty wings ruffled. “They’ve been surrounding us since we left the station.” I happened to glance at a gap in the wall and saw a momentary flash of a mottled hide.

“I thought they were mindless,” I muttered, growing more apprehensive by the second, lifting the riot shotgun and making sure I had it loaded with antipersonnel flechettes. Over the sound of running water I could just barely make out the sound of hooves in nearby tunnels and a low hissing.

“Soulless,” Shears corrected. “Ferals have minds of a sort, but they don’t have personality. They’re undead animals... but even animals can show cunning.”

Ahead was another station. A flickering sign above the platform read ‘Hightower’. In the wan light, I could see that two more tunnels ran into this one, forming sharp angles. Everywhere I looked was red, and yet I couldn’t see any ghouls! What were they waiting for? I swallowed and slowly approached the stairs onto the platform. The flickering ‘Hightower’ sign kept filling the area with shadows and light so fast my eyes struggled to keep up with the changing illumination. The green ghostly glow behind us didn’t help either as it reflected off the water-slicked tiles. Two subway trains lay smashed together under the high vaulted ceiling like abused toys, their occupants now nothing but bones.

“The maintenance room is on the far side of the station,” Shears muttered softly. “It was a way for us to come and go clandestinely and to do our work in private.”

“And what was that work?” I asked tensely as the hissing increased. Water had built up into scummy pools around the broken, twisted cars. My radiation meter was starting to go ‘click click click’, and those of us who needed it took a Rad-X tablet immediately.

“Pony immortality,” he said grimly. Rampage looked over at the little round ghoul, her eyes inscrutable pink pools. I tensed, but she only looked away again.

As we walked onto the landing alongside the pools, the water sloshed underhoof. Part of the wall had collapsed, and filthy cold water poured out of it and across the tiles. The exit was a solid wall of rubble. Dozens more bones were mixed in the debris; ponies who had sought safety had found death. A bridge crossed the subway lines to the platform on the far side of the tracks. ‘Do your part for Luna!’ demanded a ragged, decayed banner.

Psychoshy and Stygius flew over the twisted wreckage of the cars as we made our way towards the far side of the station. Maybe we were going to luck out? Maybe we were too heavily armed for them to risk it?

Then the pool directly beneath Stygius exploded, a feral launching itself up ten feet into the air. Its hooves wrapped around the batpony, jagged fangs locking down into his throat as the broken hooves

pinned his wings to his side. The two tumbled down into the filthy frothing pool, disappearing from sight!

“Stygius!” Psychoshy screamed, but then two ghouls launched themselves from the bridge, leaping down upon her. One missed and landed, hissing and baring its shattered maw, next to me while the other landed squarely on her back. Fangs began to snap at her neck. Psychoshy slammed up, ramming the ghoul against the underside of the bridge. “Get! Off! My! Ass!” Finally she scraped her back against the cracked underside, showering the pools below in grit and ghoul before the monster broke apart.

None of us had any time to go to Stygius’s aid. No sooner had I blasted the head off the ghoul that landed beside me, than four more leapt out of the twisted wreckage and were upon me. I’d always thought feral ghouls to be mindless, pitiful enemies. My hazy memories of my adventure with LittlePip involved ghouls and a subway train, but I wasn’t sure on the particulars of that night. I raised my metal hooves, and their mouths chomped down on the enameled limbs as my magic swung the gun to the next target. But instead of biting and biting again, the two ghouls bit down and jerked me forward. I got one shot off, blasting off a chunk of rotten flank, before the third pounced on my floating gun and started to gnaw on it, ruining my aim. And the fourth? Well with me largely immobilized, it lunged straight for my face!

My magic bullet spell flashed from my horn; the ghoul’s head exploded in a detonation of bone and grisly flesh before it could ruin Glory’s work. Two more magic bullets were needed to destroy the ghoul on my left hoof. Then I slammed the limb into the face of the third ghoul over and over again. On the fifth blow, the battered head burst apart in rotten chunks. Now free, I reared up and slammed both steel hooves into the feral’s face as it turned towards me and started to lunge. The blow smashed it into a twitching heap.

I was doing better than most. Rampage was dealing with a horde spilling out of the drainage pipe. She had more than a half dozen trying to tear her down as she bucked, stomped, and bodyslammed the ghouls with such force that some of them exploded between the wall and her armor. She had her razor-wire-wrapped tail looped around one’s throat and was slowly sawing through it as she thrashed wildly. Even she looked terrified... after all, this wasn’t too much different than the mêlée that saw her become a buffet for 99.

Lacunae and Cerberus floated above, the former completely annihilating the heads of her enemies with shots of her AM rifle while the latter sprayed flame down from above, punctuated with the occasional blast of disintegration magic and insults like ‘Take that, maggot farm!’ and ‘Proud to be an Equestrian! Oo-Rah!’ Perhaps those two could have saved our hides, except for one fact... ghouls could jump! I watched as they raced with eerie grace along the tops of the trains and launched themselves into the air towards the pair. Lacunae’s shield, so effective at stopping bullets, was useless at stopping a relatively slow-moving ghoul. They bit and scratched wherever they landed, biting down on her purple wings.

“Get yer stinkin’ hooves off me, you damned dirty ghoul!” Cerberus shouted as he struggled to keep aloft with three ghouls clamped down on his limbs.

Carrion seemed to ignore the carnage around us as he pointed his miniguns down the tunnel and poured a constant stream of fire at the flood of ghouls pouring towards us. Their screams almost drowned out the resonant purr of his miniguns as he kept us from being completely overwhelmed. The

ejected five millimeter brass sparkled brightly in the glaring muzzle flashes.

Xanthe, Graves, and Shears stood back to back, fending off their attackers. Xanthe muttered over and over, "I'm cursed! The stars have damned me! Utterly cursed." Yet while she wasn't fighting near Rampage's level, her hooves were keeping the undead attackers at bay with strange flashing kicks and stomps that allowed her to deflect the ghouls' snapping fangs. Graves held the strap of one of the armored medical cases in her mouth and swung it like a bludgeon, or maybe an incredibly stout purse. Shears had pulled from his robe a pair of large, wicked-looking magic-powered hedge trimmers. Every time a ghoul lunged forward, the clippers snapped, and more than one ghoul fell back missing a leg or head.

There was a shadowy flash, and a bloody Stygius appeared on the landing, bleeding heavily from several bites to his neck and scratches to his wings. The pool frothed as two ghouls clambered out after him. He opened his mouth wide and let out a squeal that seemed to stun the ferals. They slumped on busted legs, shattered bones poking out of their tattered hide, before he kicked out and pulverized their skulls. Four more emerged from the pools in the meantime.

There was only one pony who wasn't getting attacked. One who was squinting at a rancid advertisement for mane curlers, oblivious to the battle. I took a deep breath and bellowed as loudly as I could, "Spoon!"

The glowing gray ghoul looked up, blinking her luminescent green eyes from behind her deformed spectacle frames. "Oh! Sorry! Coming!" she yelled as she trotted towards the fight. The glowing gray mare snorted at the ferals. "Hey! Stop that! Get off them right now!" she said as she trotted into the middle of them. "If you don't stop fighting, I'm going to report you to Pinkie Pie!" The ghostly green light emanating from within her seemed to brighten, and the ferals hissed and slowly backed away. She nodded primly. "There. Knew that'd get them to behave."

Psychoshy landed next to the bloodied Stygius. "I need-- I need-- potion. Healing potion! Quick!" she stammered. Graves trotted over immediately. Lacunae shook the ghouls off and darted next to the medic, her horn glowing as all three mares treated his injuries.

The ghouls weighing down Cerberus detached and backed away as Silver Spoon trotted around the perimeter. Their hisses dropped to almost nothing as she passed, and I was astonished to see red bars turning blue. Carrion stopped his fire, gun barrels raising steam in the wet air as he looked at the gray glowing one in shock. I had to admit I was pretty impressed too!

"Oo-Rah! Like fish in a barrel!" Cerberus cheered, then pointed his disintegration talisman at one and fired. Instantly the ghouls let out a hiss in unison as one of them collapsed into a heap of green goop.

"Stand down!" I shouted as the ghouls pawed at the shattered floor tiles with their broken hooves.

"Need to frag this maggot-loving superior officer... Damn combat inhibitor!" he muttered darkly.

Silver Spoon looked at the hissing ghouls and snapped, "Oh just stop it right now! Honestly, blank flanks today." She trotted towards me, my PipBuck ticking even more. "So, like, ready to go, Tiara?"

"S...sure, Silver Spoon. And nice job with those gh...er... ponies," I said, giving her a grin. She

flushed, her cheeks going even more green, but then her face turned a little more worried.

“Are you sure everything’s okay, Tiara? I mean, you’re like being totally nice. It’s weird.” I got the impression that Diamond Tiara hadn’t been the most pleasant of ponies to be around.

“Yeah. Sure. I’m just glad you’re helping me get back into my office. It was so embarrassing to be locked out.” I grinned sheepishly, and Silver Spoon nodded slowly with sympathy.

“It’s okay. I’m so glad to be able to, like, do anything with you! The M.o.M. has been such a total nightmare since Goldenblood was replaced.”

“Oh?” I asked as Graves got Stygius back on his hooves. The healing magic was closing the injuries in his wings surprisingly quickly. “Um... was he that big a deal in your office?”

“Well totally. I mean, Pinkie Pie might be in charge on paper, but everypony knows Quartz and the O.I.A. call the real shots. I mean, everypony at the M.o.M. either hates Pinkie’s guts or is scared to death of her, but we all gotta smile smile smile!” the ghoul said with an exaggerated grin before she slumped. “I think I should have followed your lead, Tiara. At least you were away from the nuthouse out in Shattered Hoof.”

“Quartz?” I frowned.

“The O.I.A. liaison? You know Quartz. Everypony in M.o.M. Law Enforcement does.” She snorted, “The mare that, like, keeps Pinkie Pie from arresting half of Equestria?”

“Oh... ah... really? Wow.” I looked nervously at the others as we started moving towards the far side of the landing. “I really didn’t know she’d gotten that bad. I mean... was Goldenblood really running the M.o.M. behind Pinkie’s back?” It seemed a bit much, even for Goldenblood.

“Well, he’s probably not *personally* running it, and definitely not the whole M.o.M., but he totally has his hooves all over the law enforcement branch. I don’t think he cares about party reservations, balloon research, or theme parks, after all. But we totally know who assigns our Hearth’s Warming Eve bonuses, and you just don’t go behind Quartz’s back.” She glanced at me from over her warped glasses frames with a serious look to imply what happened to ponies who did.

“So, Quartz calls the shots then?” I asked as I glanced at the others, who looked a tad impatient.

“Oh it’s nothing *that* direct. Like, whenever Pinkie Pie orders all the ‘bad ponies’ in Equestria to be arrested, we look at Quartz two minutes after Pinkie leaves the room, and she nods or shakes her head... usually shakes... and we just stall till Pinkie Pie gets distracted by something else.” She rolled her eyes. “If it weren’t for Pumpkin and Pound, I think they would have cut her out completely, but those two can usually handle her when she’s raving.”

I looked on with a tense smile. “Wow. I’d forgotten how... interesting... things are at the Manehattan hub.”

“Oh trust me, I, like, haven’t even gotten to the juicy stuff.” She smiled for a moment but it didn’t last. She sighed. “It’s never been so... tense... as right now though. When Goldie was kicked out last month, I totally thought Pinkie Pie’s head was, like, going to split in two, she grinned so much. Sent him a box of her PTMs as a present.”

“And since then?” I asked as we reached the maintenance room. Four ghouls stared from the corner as we trotted past towards a set of shelving loaded with junk. Shears’s horn glowed under his hood, and the shelves slid to one side, revealing an alcove concealed in the back wall. Directly ahead was a solid-looking door with the O.I.A. symbol carved into it and a small terminal mounted beside it.

Silver Spoon sighed and rolled her glowing eyes. “Oh, business as usual in the party sectors, but totally a mess in the law enforcement branch. I mean, Quartz is still there, but she doesn’t seem to know what’s going on anymore. I mean, she seemed to be really close and devoted to Goldenblood, so maybe she’s just hanging in there while Horse settles in. I dunno. No pony does...” I wondered if Horse even knew what Quartz did at the M.o.M.

“As awesome as catching up on stale M.o.M. gossip is, I’d really like it if we could get through this door,” Shears said impatiently, pointing at the terminal. The machine had clearly been scratched up, as if somepony had tried to pry the front plate off.

“Do I know you?” Silver Spoon asked Shears in an annoyed tone, but the round little ghoul refused to meet her eye.

I moved up to the door, and my eyes started to do the crazy data streaming stuff, matched by data on the terminal screen. Finally it concluded with:

EC-1101 Confirmed.

Unseal Project Eternity: Y/N?

Project Eternity. The search for eternal life. I looked at Mr. Shears; his glossy white eyes seemed to drink in the words on the terminal screen. “This is what you’re after?”

The question made him balk. “What? No. That’s simply history. You probably have far more interest in that than I do.” His annoyance seemed so sincere that if he was playing me, he’d probably been a performer in another life. I peered at the screen, then looked around. Yup, there was the Dealer, his weathered features pale and grim as he watched me. I looked at him for several seconds, sure that he was going to give some possibly insightful and probably annoyingly cryptic comment, but all he did was shrug.

Vaguely disappointed, I sighed and then hit the ‘Y’ button on the terminal.

My vision exploded in data that moved in a blur. I staggered to the side, hit the wall, and nearly collapsed. My friends and the dingy maintenance room disappeared as streaming letters and numbers filled my vision and everything went white.

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I hung looking down from the ceiling of a tastefully but luxuriously decorated penthouse apartment. The elaborate white marble masonry gave the whole room a classy and sophisticated look, and the front windows provided an absolutely magnificent view of what could only be a royal palace of some sort. Below me, on an elegantly-crafted table, was a glass box that held a dozen colorful little puffballs with diaphanous wings. Then the door opened and in walked Rarity. Her purple mane was working its way out of its gorgeous curls, and her brow was furrowed with anxiety.

She trotted in and set her bags on the counter top. Then the phone rang, and she sighed with a little growl of annoyance before levitating the receiver to her ear. "Rarity!" she answered, her voice gay and bright, even as she slumped at the table. Then she sat up a little more. "Oh, no no no, Fluttershy. Not a bad time at all, dear. It's been such an absolutely miserable time, what with Macintosh's funeral and all. There was a little business I had to take care of in Zebratown... nothing major," she added as pulled out a familiar black book.

She lifted the lid of the glass box and called out, "Dinnertime, sweeties. Mommy's got something special for you!" She tossed the book inside the glass box, closing the lid quickly after it. The colored puffballs began to flit and hover around the book, opening their mouths, hesitating, then tentatively nibbling at the pages and licking the ink.

"Oh, no, Fluttershy, I was talking to the parasprites. I just couldn't do the job Luna asks without them." A pause and a sigh. "Yes, yes, I remember Ponyville. I wouldn't want a repeat here in Canter..." Rarity trailed off and sighed, "There there... there's no need to... I mean... I'm sorry, Fluttershy. Go ahead. Cry if you need to." She trotted to a divan next to the table and flopped back on it, nodding every now and then. "I can be there if you need me to. All right, if you're sure..."

"No, Darling. You're not being silly at all. When I think of you... of any of our friends... getting... well, you know... Remember how close Pinkie Pie came with that nasty bomb in Hoofington? If it'd been anypony else, I dare say they wouldn't have been so fortunate. I keep thinking about it over and over again." She snorted softly. "Yes, I know Goldenblood promised to triple our protection. It's hard enough to get work done as it is." She paused again with another frown. "Yes, I know Twilight is researching new spells to keep us safe." Finally she gave a little huff, her expression irritable. "You don't understand. I feel like... like I need to do something. I need to make something to keep you all safe."

Something was happening to the parasprites in the glass box. They were changing from their bright colors to muddy brown. Their eyes bulged and they banged against the glass as if trying to escape from the case.

Rarity continued on in a soft tone, "I've been researching my own sources. Twilight may have the most premiere collection of magical tomes and Goldenblood his own squirreled-away rare volumes, but I still have my hooves in every library, newspaper, and publisher in Equestria. I've been particularly intrigued by zebra myths of 'soul silk', capable of being stronger than steel. Can you imagine such a thing?" She sighed softly. "Well, of course I'd use it to help soldiers like Big Macintosh. After all of you are safe. And the Princesses, of course."

The parasprites went black and tumbled down around the large book that was bound in what looked unsettlingly like darkened zebra hide. The yellowed pages slowly turned one by one behind her back as if invisible hooves were slowly finding a particular one. "Yes, Dear... yes... yes... I'm sorry you feel so rotten... yes... I know... I love you too. Right. Good night, Fluttershy. Yes, I'll see you at the spa. Promise... try to get some rest." Her magic hung up the receiver and she sighed.

Her azure eyes lifted to stare up at the roof, and for a moment she looked old and scared. "It could have been Celestia. Or Twilight. Or Fluttershy. I have to do... something. Something to protect my friends."

A few seconds later, she rolled to her hooves and approached the table with a wide smile. "And how does Mommy's little helpers like their din-din, hmmm?" Then she saw the crumbled black balls

laying like lumps of soot around the book. "What... what is this?" she demanded as her eyes widened. To her credit, she didn't scream. Slowly, she opened the lid of the case and lifted the book out. The parasprites collapsed into little heaps of ash as she set the volume, still open, on the table before her.

Rarity stared raptly at the text. "Soul silk?" she whispered, taking a step back from the table. Then suddenly she narrowed her eyes and glared. "I don't know who you are or what you are, but I know when somepony... er... book... is trying to play me for a fool!"

But though she glared at the book, there before her eyes was what she wanted. Her magic slammed the book shut with all its force. "You might have killed my poor parasprites, but we'll see how you do when Twilight gets her hooves on you." She picked up the phone and started to dial, then paused and looked back at the book. Little beads of sweat popped from her brow. "Now Rarity, just look at it! It's clearly a wicked thing! I mean, it's made from a zebra! How grotesque!" She continued dialing, but more slowly now, her eyes drawn back to the horrible text.

"I need to do something myself. Something to save my friends..." she murmured.

"Hello?" came Twilight's voice, distant and tinny from the receiver. Rarity's blue eyes stared at the piles of ash and then back at the book. "Applejack...?"

She slowly pressed the receiver to her ear. "No no, Twilight. It's Rarity. I just..." She paused, and her eyes turned concerned once more. "Twilight... I... yes, I know. I'm sorry. I know... Oh Twilight, please don't cry." Rarity curled a little around the phone, her eyes returning to the closed book. "Yes... yes... I know... when I imagine it being one of you..." Rarity sniffed and scrubbed a tear from her eye. "Yes... I know. Try... try to get some sleep. Ask for some time off if you need it. And if Luna doesn't like it, tell her to take over the M.A.S. herself."

Rarity's eyes lingered on the dark tome one last time, then said in low tones, as if afraid the book might hear, "I might need your help. Nothing major... certainly nothing that needs to involve Goldenblood. Just need... some friendly advice. Right... good. Please take care of yourself, Twilight."

The receiver returned to the cradle, and she stared at the book for the longest time, biting her hoof. Finally, she approached it as if it were a snake. "Well... it wouldn't hurt to know the details..." she murmured as she carefully straightened the book and opened it slowly once more.

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My vision returned, and I slumped against the terminal, almost collapsing again. Ugh... you'd think that opening a magically-sealed megafire of arcane whatsit would be easier. I picked myself up and looked back. "How long was I out?"

"You were out?" Psychoshy scowled in confusion.

Rampage wore a worried expression. "Are you okay, Blackjack?"

I forced a grin. "Oh yeah, sure. As okay as I ever am." The worry turned a little more sympathetic, but she didn't pry.

Wow... that was way faster than usual. Was it because the recording was sealed, or something else? I shook my head hard to clear out the disorientation, idly wondering if there was a single other pony

in the Wasteland who'd had as many hallucinations and visions shoved into their head as me. No time to ponder that now, though.

I peered down the narrow, rusty pipe-lined hallway that extended before us. It gave the impression of a bloody shotgun barrel, the air filled with a reek of sulfur, water, and rust. A chill filled the air and made my mane prickle. I looked back at the others. Some eyes were filled with confidence, some with fear, and others with calm resignation.

And I was about to lead them into the deadliest place I'd ever been.

This was different than storming Hippocratic Research. Then, there'd been the drive to get my PipBuck back and stop Sanguine. Here, I was going in because I chose to. If they died, it'd rest squarely on my shoulders.

But the only alternative was to give up.

I couldn't do that. Not ever. It'd mean losing.

I took one step, then another, and made my way down the tunnel in the front of the group; if I was leading them into a deathtrap, then I would lead. The passage was barely wide enough for Carrion's armor anyway. The radiation was clicking very slowly; just one rad per second. We'd been exposed to more than that in the subway station. I suspected the source was our glowing companion in the rear. Still, it was something to keep an eye on. When Stygius was through, the door closed with a solid thunk behind us, yet inexplicably I could feel a sensation almost like a draft blowing coldly over my hide. My E.F.S. flickered a few times. More recordings, or something else? The list was too long for me to worry about now.

I felt a sensation like trotting through a sheet of ice water, and my E.F.S. suddenly went down completely. "Ugh... what just happened?" I said, looking around the suddenly barless world around me. "My PipBuck isn't working right."

"You just entered Hightower's magic dampening field, but I suspect it's been badly damaged by the balefire bomb and time. It affects different magics differently," Shears said from behind me. "Teleportation is no longer an option. I had no idea it'd affect your PipBuck too, though..."

I looked way back at Lacunae; the tall alicorn was having to duck her head to keep her horn from scraping the ceiling. She looked quite agitated. I supposed being trapped underground without the ability to just teleport away would be quite disconcerting. Fortunately, I'd been without my PipBuck's E.F.S. enough that it didn't make me hesitate more than a few seconds. I'd just have to do things the old fashioned way.

"So... you were involved in Project Eternity?" I asked as I moved down the tunnel with the shotgun ready to give something a very bad day.

"Several lifetimes ago, yes. Hardly matters now," Shears muttered.

"What was it? Specifically?"

"Specifically could take all day. Here's the abridged version. I was brought in at the beginning. Rarity needed unicorns that weren't affiliated with the M.A.S. Twilight Sparkle had virtually cornered the

market on every unicorn with spell or talisman talent. So she went looking for other unicorns. We... I... was working at a steam cleaning store in Bucklyn when she found me."

"Why you?" I asked with a frown as we came to steps leading down... the direction opposite the one I wanted to go. Still, there hadn't been any forks yet, so down it was.

"I suppose it was little things. I'd... failed... to join the M.A.S., she knew me from Ponyville, we were both interested in tailoring, and..." He muttered something too low for me to hear.

"What was that?" I asked with a frown.

"I... won an award for magic... once. Stupid little thing. But Rarity needed us and she had a way of wrapping any stallion around her hoof. So we helped her. Compared to what our lives were before, staggering from one failure to the next, we were happy to do whatever she required of us," Shears said quietly.

There was a door ahead. I could hear the sounds of water sloshing around and gestured everypony to wait a moment. "Water recycling and the reactor should be here," Shears pointed out from behind me as I pushed the rusty door open, looking warily through.

I beheld a lambent, radioactive nightmare. Slowly, as if in a daze, we stepped out on to the catwalk and looked at a room I could barely imagine. The space reminded me of the reactor in 99 and the water pumps that kept the vital fluid clean and circulating. Here, however, was a scene that would have terrified Scotch and given Rivets a seizure; two hundred years of neglect and corrosion had turned the reactor into a solid lump of rust, the few windows in the hulk filling the dripping room with its harsh green glare. Water sprayed from countless cracks and breaks, sloshing around the rusted pump housings in a sea of bluish-green fluid. The moisture had transformed the catwalks into fragile spans of rust. I wasn't even sure if the reeking, sulfuric, foamy sludge below could technically be called 'water' anymore.

"I don't think this was in the plan!" Psychoshy shouted. She'd donned the yellow hazardous materials suit and didn't look happy to have her wings stuck inside the protective wingcovers.

"Where's the way through?" I yelled over the squealing, pumping machinery and growling, hissing reactor. Please don't be... please... but the ghoul simply pointed across the room to the far side of the catwalk. Of course it was all the way over there! I took three steps out on the metal walkway. It groaned ominously beneath me, and I tried not to breathe too deeply.

Then Stygius flashed next to me and tapped my shoulder. He pointed to his eyes with a hoof, then down at the water, and made motions of something swimming around. No... way... Still, I made sure my gun was ready as I started across. Really, if Carrion was here to kill me, he'd have no better chance than right now.

"I hate this place. I hate this place! I hate this place!" I shouted and started to trot quickly ahead. There was just too much radiation to linger. The catwalk cracked and popped, swaying with each step. Jets of fluid shot from leaking pipes along the walls and ceiling in lovely, deadly blue arcs, and I bent and twisted to keep from getting hit by them. As I crossed the room, I shivered at the unearthly cacophony coming from the reactor. I could only marvel a moment at Stable-Tec engineering; even so dangerously neglected, it was still running.

Psychoshy and Stygius followed after me, radioactive water droplets dripping off their suits as they crossed. They'd nearly gotten completely across when one of the pipes gave a sharp bang overhead and fluid the consistency of fecal matter began to dribble from it and pile up on the catwalk. I stared in horror as the bluish heap began to lunge up and wiggle. It thrust out two hooves towards me and a dripping equine head emerged. Then a second slimepony began to form and started shambling towards Stygius and Psychoshy.

Oh this so wasn't in the plan! I pointed the shotgun and fired two flechettes into the mass; they passed halfway through its body and then disappeared with an acidic hiss. I backed off as it formed hind legs and started to shamle towards me.

Stygius pulled off his helmet and backed away as a third slimepony began to coalesce from the cascading sludge. He took a deep breath and let out an ultrasonic scream, making the entire blue mass jiggle wildly, and then it suddenly popped and sprayed goop everywhere. He let out a high-pitched, barely-audible shriek of pain as the spray began to blacken and smoke where it contacted his skin. He shook himself furiously, trying to get it off as it ate into his hide. Psychoshy brushed at the slime frantically, trying to get it off before it made its way through her suit.

Out came the sword, but it passed through the slimepony with no effect at all. As another slimepony started to form, the catwalk let out a long, ominous groan. It probably wasn't built to take this much weight.

"Carrion! Lacunae! Blast that pipe!" I shouted, pointing with my sword further down the corroded span. The ghoul responded immediately by blasting a long stream of fire, soon followed by the resounding boom of the alicorn's AM rifle. The bullets started to chew through the metal and sent a few splatters of goo falling into the mess below, but more was still vomiting onto the catwalk. I swung the sword and shoved the slimepony in front of me with my telekinesis in futility, being forced steadily back. Finally, there was a resounding crack as the corroded pipe split, releasing a torrent of goop into the frothing pool. "Lacunae, clear the way!" I bellowed as I gave ground.

My rear leg punched through the catwalk, and I fell through all the way to the hip. The slimepony's hoofsteps made the catwalk hiss as it shamled towards me. Lacunae hovered in the air, her horn glowing as her telekinesis flung the writhing masses into the muck below. But it'd take her a few seconds to reach me.

That was a few seconds I didn't have.

In desperation, I plunged my forehooves into the gloppy mess and screamed as all kinds of alerts flickered in my vision. My legs might have been metal, but the enchantments on them made them feel fiery pain as if I'd shoved them into boiling water. The white enamel hissed and began to flake away almost immediately as the slimepony just slurped its way up my limbs towards my face. Oh damn it. Glory just fixed that!

Then there was a flash of yellow as Psychoshy was there, almost hugging the acidic monster. Her hazmat suit hissed as the material fought its corrosive effect, and then she bucked the slime away, the power hooves' crackling impacts flinging it back into the pool. "Psychoshy, you saved me." I gaped up at her as I pulled my leg free.

She suddenly blinked behind her helmet and looked uncomfortable, turning back to the rest of our friends crossing towards us. "Oh... yeah... right." She and Stygius raced past, and the pair started

struggling with a rusted door.

"Like, I think that this place totally needs a major inspection! Somepony isn't doing their job at all, Tiara!" Spoon yelled as she raced across with Nurse Graves. For a second, I was certain that they were going to make it.

Then I looked down.

The glowing sludge was starting to heap up underneath the catwalk. The immense mound formed a huge, dripping maw that reached up to devour them both in its acidic cavity. I could only watch in horror as it closed on the catwalk and with a ripping and shredding of metal pulled it down into the glowing depths below.

"Like... I wanna go home. I wanna go home right now, Tiara!" came a call from above. The glowing forms of Graves and Silver Spoon hugged each other tight as they were held aloft by the hovering Lacunae. Carrion and Cerberus followed along through the air, the robot's disintegration gun blasting the slimeponies as the blobs started climbing the walls towards us. Shears rode the floating robot's round body, hugging the top for dear life. Carrion, however, caught a faceful of blue slime pouring from the busted pipe along the roof. The helmet of his armor was hissing from acidic goop, but he passed by without complaint. The huge slime head was starting to rear again as Lacunae landed.

Shears got the door open, and the group funneled through into the next room as Lacunae stood majestically before the immense head of slime. "You! Shall! Not! Hurt! My! Friends!" she shouted as her eyes glowed with power. Each word was punctuated by an arrow of furious silver magic that exploded on impact, blasting out huge gobs of the monster's mass. It still came on, more and more goop surging towards the alicorn.

I stumbled to the door, the last one through save for Lacunae. "Lacunae! Come on!" The alicorn's horn flared, then died. Then flared and died again... No! "You can't teleport!"

Her purple eyes popped wide in shock as the mass bore down on her. I supposed that, for her, not being able to teleport was almost like Psychoshy not being able to fly; she'd been so used to it that she'd forgotten. Instead, a shimmering bubble enveloped her an instant before the slime mouth chomped down and swallowed her whole. The purple light of her shield flickered and disappeared as I stared. No. No no no... please no...

Then the purple light flared, a bubble swelling in the center, and the mass exploded outwards as she erupted from the slime behemoth. It began to pull together immediately, reforming a new head and mouth, but by then Lacunae was swooping towards the door. As soon as she was through, I pulled it shut with my now-gray fingers. A moment later an impact made the entire wall bulge inward with a cracking of stone and bending of steel. Everypony just stared in shock for a moment, then watched as blue slime began to trickle through the bottom of the door. "We should get going. Now."

"Tiara! What is going on?" Silver Spoon asked, staring at me through her blackened frames.

"Not now, Silver Spoon." The long, high room we were in had pipes running up several dozen feet, and from the water and radiation, we had no time to waste in here before slime began to come after us. Indeed, it immediately started dribbling through holes in the pipes, and slimy, pony shaped globs began to ooze after us. The stairs leading up to the room's only other door were a rusted, jumbled mess. Lacunae lifted Graves, Xanthe, and Silver Spoon as she floated up. Rampage cleared it in a single leap.

Psychoshy flew awkwardly upwards, her wings weighed down by the bulky suit with Stygius at her side, the two of them together struggling to raise Shears. Carrion departed without a word, swooping up towards the top of the shaft. I leapt up and wrapped my fingers around Cerberus's arms as more and more goop began to fill the room.

"Damn, you are one heavy maggot lover, aren't you?" the robot asked as it struggled to lift me up towards where the others were gathering at another sturdy hatch. Blue slime coated the floor, and it was starting to make mouths beneath my hooves.

"Up! Up! Elevation! Altitude!" I shouted as acidic mouths began lunging and gooey hooves waved up at me. But apparently I was just a little over his weight limit. My rear hooves blackened and hissed as they kicked the yawning mouths. In desperation, I returned to shooting them with my levitated shotgun to try and get them down, but all it really did was splatter them a little. Behind me, the slime was building in a wave. And then that wave raced down the room towards me.

"Buck up, soldier! Equestria wasn't won by bellyaching!" Cerberus said as he floated beneath the doorway.

"And it wasn't won by getting digested in a pool of blue slime either!" I yelled as the cresting wave grew a mouth!

Then a purple glow grabbed both of us and lifted us up just as the wave rolled beneath my dangling rear hooves and crashed into the wall with an incredible splash. We were hauled up through the doorway as the goop surged beneath us. My corroded limbs scraped at the doorjamb as the slime gathered itself up once more. Purple, blue, and white magic gripped the door and slammed it shut. There was another thud. A second. A softer third. Then nothing.

"Funny. I don't recall pony-eating slime in the plans," Psychoshy said as she looked at Stygius. "Did you hear something about pony-eating slime? 'Cause I sure didn't." She pointed a wing at Shears. "Hey, Mastermind. Why didn't you mention the pony-eating slime? I think that should have definitely been brought up in the planning stage." Carrion snorted as he pulled off the helmet of his power armor; the acid had etched and damaged the visor. His head was less eagle and more ravenlike, beak chipped and cracked and once-glossy plumage now looking like a beaten feather duster.

"Clearly," Shears muttered as he looked back, "there's gonna be unknown stuff to deal with."

I looked at the gray pitted steel of my forelegs. "Yeah. Besides, what could we have done if we had known? Bring a couple tons of gelatin?" I gave a weak grin to the others. Most of them looked decidedly unamused, but Rampage didn't let me down.

Smirking back at me, she tapped her cheek thoughtfully. "Acidic pony gelatin monsters. Delicious as they are jiggly." That got a few more nervous smiles.

Nurse Graves stared at the sealed door. "I can only imagine what begot such a creature. Perhaps hundreds of corpses of ponies trying to escape through the basement. Soaking in magically tainted water until they dissolved into that radioactive slime..." she murmured as she started passing out packets of RadAway to all of us. We slurped it down at once, and I watched as the needle on my rad meter dropped back into the green. Still, it was click click clicking.

I rose to my hooves and looked around. The hall was made of gray cinder block and ran straight

ahead. I glanced at the pipes running along the ceiling, but aside from drizzling water, nothing blue made an appearance. Not that blue, faintly luminescent water was *too* reassuring... "So, now that we're past the... um... Slime... Ooze..."

"Smooze?" Xanthe suggested, and every eye turned to her. She dropped her eyes sheepishly. "Sorry..."

"Where do we go now?" I asked, watching as Lacunae touched her horn to the raw burns on Stygius's face. The healing took much longer than usual; a sign that Enervation was nipping away at us. Silver Spoon looked positively spooked as she sat down. I chewed on my lip. When I'd remembered the ghoul and how she mistook me for her friend, using her to get past the ferals seemed innocuous. But even she was realizing something was wrong now.

'Hey Silver Spoon, long time no see. Think you could help me get into my office and help me with a little problem?' Just the asking had seemed to surprise the glowing ghoul. She'd been so glad to be reunited that she hadn't questioned... anything, really. She didn't seem to realize my friends were hardly usual for Equestria before the bombs dropped. She'd actually teased Lacunae for being a blank flank while ignoring the rest of the alicorn!

"Tiara! Talk to me. Tell me what's going on? You found my glasses, but... but everything seems wrong. It doesn't make sense." She gave a nervous little smile. "It's a joke, right? A joke on those blank flanks, right?" Her voice cracked as she reached up to touch her glass-streaked face. I just looked at her shamefully as she begged, "Please tell me it's all a joke?"

I wanted to smile. I'd planned on smiling. Get through Hightower and leave her with the other ghouls in Meatlocker. Use her... damn it.

"Blackjack, what's going on? Why does she keep calling you Tiara?" Rampage asked in a low voice.

"Cause, like, that's her name! Duh..." Silver Spoon said with a little snort. "Tiara, why does Twist keep calling you Blackjack?" She gave a long stare at my corroded metal legs and the little pits the slime had eaten into the steel. Her eyes met mine as they slowly widened. "It's a joke. Please... it's a joke!"

"It's not a joke, Silver Spoon," I said quietly. "I... I don't even know who Diamond Tiara was. I just remembered how you controlled those others when we first met. I needed your help... and I hoped I could get it without you realizing that I was lying to you."

"But... Bump... Bump..." she muttered weakly, raising her hooves at me. This time I didn't complete the little ritual I'd lucked in on last time. "No... no no no..."

"Are you *trying* to make her a feral?" Shears asked as he trotted past to the gray ghoul. "Hey, Spoon. I'm sorry Blackjack's so mean. She should have told you she wasn't Tiara."

"Something bad happened, didn't it? Like, something really bad?" Silver Spoon sobbed as she hugged her head. "I... I think it did but whenever I think about it..." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head hard. "I just wanted to find Tiara! She... she could tell me what to do. She always told everypony what to do." She sniffed and rubbed her nose. "She's, like, my only friend, and I'm hers. She

totally needs me..."

"I know, Silver Spoon. I remember," Shears said as he patted her shoulder. The glowing ghoul sniffed as she looked at him curiously.

"I'm really sorry for misleading you," I said, a touch defensively. I had asked her to help. She just hadn't realized what was going on. "But I did really need your help. And... I didn't want to just leave you behind in those tunnels."

"I don't want to think about this. The bad things... the bad place. It's totally... totally wrong!" she cried.

"I really hate to break up this latest installment of 'What the fuck, Blackjack,' but four of us are slowly dying here," Rampage said with a snort at me.

"Dying?" Silver Spoon blinked in confusion.

"There's radiation here. It's slowly poisoning us," I said, getting some stink eye from the undead contingent. Finally I sighed, sat, and threw my forehooves into the air. "Look! I'm sorry, okay? I wish I was your Diamond Tiara or whoever you're looking for, but I'm not. I needed your help, and I lied and tricked you to get it. I'm a bad pony! And when we make it out of here, I promise I will do whatever I can to make it up to you. But right now we don't have time to fully delve into what kind of a cunt I am for tricking you. So please... come with us, Silver Spoon. I'll introduce you to Velvet. I think you'll like her."

She looked at me for a few seconds, then slowly nodded.

"Bad pony." Psychoshy smirked, poking my shoulder before trotting past.

The rest trotted past with her, except for Lacunae and Rampage. "I just needed her help..." I said lamely as I looked at the striped pony.

"No question," Rampage replied as she trotted past. "You need a lot more help than I realized."

I just sighed and slumped as everypony trotted down the hall without me save Lacunae. "Well?" I asked, looking up at the alicorn.

"Well what?" she asked curiously.

"Isn't the Goddess going to chime in or something?" I asked dolefully.

"Blackjack, there's a lot of Enervation here. The charm is somewhat effective, but it's still horribly strong. The Goddess isn't listening in or watching. You needed Spoon's help. You got it." She nudged me with her wing and we started walking. "The problem is that your idea hurt somepony who didn't deserve it. In the scale of Wasteland crimes, it was probably around the level of littering. But you set such a high standard for yourself in the eyes of others that when you slip, it seems so much worse. Most ponies in the Wasteland would simply kill Silver Spoon. You tricked her. Pretty nice for the Wasteland. Pretty horrible for Blackjack."

I sighed as I followed along behind everypony else, "So what do I do about it?"

"Getting her out of here alive would be a good start," the alicorn said, patting me on the head like

I was a filly.

I smiled sadly. Rampage had been wrong. I wasn't the goodiest goodest pony in the Wasteland...

* * *

The basement of Hightower brought back fond memories of security patrols in the depths of Stable 99. A lot of the equipment was identical to what I used to trot by every year of my life. The boredom, the tediousness, the silent roving through the level... and above all the twisty-turny nature of travelling through infrastructure designed around pipes, vents, and power generators rather than ponies. Except that while 99 had just been on the brink of falling apart, this place gave me ideas of what the stable might eventually look like if Stronghoof's Rangers couldn't restore it. Rusted stairs had fallen down shafts. Elevators were corroded shut. Water trickled everywhere. Every now and then we came across raw cables stripped of their insulation, still humming with power. I gave those a wide berth. Last thing I wanted was to get a shock that shut me down for a few hours.

Because every second that radiation meter ticked up a little more.

Shears's great plan had clearly not accounted for things like doors that wouldn't open, stairs that weren't there, or hallways that had collapsed. Nor had he accounted for the translucent radioactive killer slimeponies that silently stalked us. We couldn't kill them, short of Cerberus disintegrating them outright. We simply had to run and hope they didn't ooze up a vent we stood on or dribble down from a pipe. Every time Shears tried to point us in the right way, it came to a dead end.

I also got the feeling that we were being followed. I occasionally saw something in the distance, but when I looked again, it was gone. I'd had too much experience with wonky vision to trust for sure that I had seen something or not.

Slime below us and an impenetrable ceiling above. The plan was not going smooth.

Since his knowledge was proving uselessly outdated, Shears occupied himself helping Graves deal with Silver Spoon. I'd gone from her best friend to the monster that had shattered her illusion and placed her in peril for my own gain. Funny, but I seemed to be slipping a lot recently.

Do better. Hadn't I once tried to do better all the time? Hadn't it once been... easier?

It'd been a while since I thought of my virtue; what I needed to do to keep myself on the side of good. I'd thought that it'd meant being a good pony and doing better. Virtues were supposed to be like cutie marks... but I had no idea what mine was. Ruthlessness? That hardly sounded positive.

I'd once tried to help out Flank for the heck of it. I'd turned over Brimstone's Fall. I'd tried to stop a war. I actually stopped P-21 from killing the bastards that raped and mutilated me. And then I'd died...

Had I come back... different? Had I come back wrong? Was the reason I wasn't affected by Enervation anymore because I wasn't like the rest of my friends? Even ghouls had to worry about Enervation... I wished I had Professor Zodiac to talk to; maybe she could answer this. Maybe... my soul had broken, or been lost entirely? Could that happen?

I slurped down another pouch of RadAway, sitting on a lump of rubble as Shears stared up at a

sign, trying to remember directions. He kept looking at the sign, down the hall, and then back at the sign. "Something up?"

"I think I've found another way up," Shears said in a low voice, as if he was afraid the others would hear. "But I am loath to take it. There should be some other way up to the library."

"Shears, we've been down here for almost an hour. The RadAway isn't going to hold out forever." I nodded my head towards the passage he'd been considering. "What's down this way? Is it something worse than a room full of radioactive acid monsters?"

"It is something more... shameful," he said as he stared down the hall. "Have you ever heard of a soul jar?"

"It's something you stick a soul inside. Makes it invulnerable." My answer clearly surprised him, but I remembered what Lacunae had told me about them. See? Blackjack could pretend to be a smart pony from time to time.

"You are correct. One of the first things Project Eternity attempted was to create soul jars. The idea was simple: make armor, or even clothing, turn it into a soul jar... and be protected from all harm." He licked his lips with a cracked, boiled tongue. "That was the idea. The reality was far different. Far more disturbing. The project was a failure, and those failures were locked away down here. They were too unpredictable to move."

"So... what's down there?" I asked as I peered down the hall.

"Soul jars. Our... learning curve," he said in a rush. "Hopefully the magics we used have worn off." He didn't sound like he expected that to be the case, though.

"Examples?" I prompted. "Can we shoot them? Kill them?"

"I don't know. I hope there will be nothing in there but empty shelves or rubbish. Still, we shouldn't take anything from inside." He kept his eyes straight. "I thought this would be so much... different."

Well, that was reassuring. "Me too, but... welcome to Hoofington," I muttered. "Don't forget your complimentary bag of suck."

"It's easy to blame Hoofington, the Wasteland, and long dead ponies. Far easier than blaming ourselves." He turned towards the others, saying to me, "I don't know what we'll find, but I doubt it will be peaceful." Then he trotted back to tell them he'd found another way out of the basement.

Cryptic ponies. Was there something about being two centuries old that made ponies unable to give straight answers? I mean, really, once you got past a hundred years, was it all that hard to just spit things out?! I sighed, prepared a magazine of explosive rounds, and led the way down the hall.

There were some dead-end storage rooms full of some useful salvage, but no way out. The air was disturbingly still and quiet. Even with almost a dozen people, conversations became more muted and indistinct. The glow from the wan emergency lights and my light spell flickered and dimmed to the point I could barely see my hoof in front of my face. Then we reached at the very end of the hall to find another door and terminal like the one before. I held my PipBuck up, and once more the terminal and the

device in my leg had a chat.

Then the door opened with a sigh. A cool breeze began to draw into the dark room beyond. I reached over and flicked the light switches next to the door, but no matter how I flipped them, the room remained dark. Nothing on E.F.S. I tried to get it to work, but the targeting spell kept having red and blue bars flicker in and out of view as the system shut down every time I got it on.

'Click click click' went my radiation meter. No time to waste. "Okay... be ready for... anything. Don't touch anything."

"I love the specific warnings," Rampage muttered as we slowly began to advance. My light spell barely illuminated anything in the silent room. Goosebumps prickled on my hide as we came into view of some dusty shelves and my light slowly illuminated a stuffed pony. Its glassy black eyes stared back at me. Next to it was an umbrella. Beside that was an old pony-in-the-box.

Junk. The shelves were full of strange knickknacks, toys, pieces of clothing, and other innocuous objects. So why did I feel like the room was full of ponies? Like they hid just beyond the reach of my light spell, holding their breath, watching.

"Cursed. This room is cursed," Xanthe whimpered. "It is full of ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Psychoshy said nervously. "Ghouls, monsterponies, and alicorns, sure. But no ghosts."

"We experimented on all these objects. First we tried using animal souls. Then some volunteers. Mules. Poor ponies that wouldn't be missed. But necromancy was an unknown art. Twilight and Celestia both disagreed with Rarity about it, so she went to Goldenblood behind their backs. He knew Hightower would be perfect. Large population. Accidents happen all the time here. Violent offenders with few family who'd not be missed." He stared at the shelves. "Sometimes nothing would happen. Sometimes... something unpredictable would happen... and sometimes we actually succeeded at making a soul jar. But we never could tell for certain what precisely we'd done."

~ ~ ~

A monochromatic Rarity looked at me with a tired but happy expression of her face. Behind her, two gray unicorns in robes paced around an earth pony mare lying on a table. "Hmmm... now, how best to do this? 'Dear diary' sounds dreadfully unscientific. 'Journal log?' 'Eternity project entry one?' Ugh..." The gorgeous mare sighed, shaking her head. "I thought that this would be so much easier. Twilight makes it look so effortless."

The curly-maned mare sighed with a small frown. "Twilight Sparkle. I wish she could have understood. I wanted to be able to do this with her. But after Celestia's examination of my little guidebook here, she was adamantly against it." The mare lifted the black book from her bag and tapped it lightly. She narrowed her eyes a little. "I've never really been jealous of her skill and ability, but it's insulting for her to suggest that I shouldn't pursue magic simply because she says so. I too am a unicorn, am I not? And if there's a possibility that I can turn this sorcery to protect my friends, how could I not even try?"

"So," Rarity said as she turned and trotted towards the table. "Is it finished?"

"Oh yes your most beautiful beautiness," the tall, skinny one drawled slowly.

"Yeah! The most beautiful beauty in all of Equestria!" piped in the short, fat one. His horn lifted a large square of silk. "We put the soul in here just like you instructed. Soul silk!"

"Oh my!" Rarity breathed as she lifted it in her hooves. "It's gorgeous... such lovely texture." Then she grabbed it in her mouth and began to yank and pull. "Heeee! And it's strong, too! Exactly as it's supposed to be." She floated it over to the pair. "See if you can damage it." They immediately began to play tug of war with the cloth as Rarity tried to cut it with her scissors.

"Well... being uncuttable does make it a challenge to work with, but I think I'll be able to manage," she said as she set the scissors down. "You can get up now, Petunia," she said to the mare on the table. The mare didn't move. "Petunia?" Rarity turned to her with a worried smile. "Tunia, Darling. This is hardly the time to take a nap!" The worry grew to fear as the two stallions stopped fooling around with the silk and looked on. "Petunia?!" Rarity shook her with her hooves.

The body shifted slightly, then came to rest with a limpness I knew all too well.

The skinny stallion pressed his ear to her chest. His eyes widened. "She's... she's..."

"What? No! No no no!" Rarity scrambled to the book. "Put it back! Put her soul back! There must be a way to put it back!" she cried as her horn glowed and she turned the pages of the black book frantically. Her pupils constricted and she beat the text with her hooves. "Tell me how to put it back!"

But whatever answers she sought were not to be found. Her lips screwed up and tears ran down her face.

Nothing happened, and Rarity slumped over the book, weeping. A minute later she sniffed, dabbing her eyes. "I... there must be a way. We'll just have to be... be more careful. Yes... more careful. I won't let her sacrifice be in vain." She suddenly looked at me and seemed to realize that I was watching. Flushing, she reached out to press a button on a keyboard and everything went black again.

~ ~ ~

The sudden flash made me trip and fall on my face. My armor rattled and banged against the shelving as I sprawled on my side. That wasn't a vision like I'd experienced before; maybe when Eternity had been unsealed there'd been a number of video recordings transferred to me, and now they were just shooting off in compressed bursts?

Hadn't it been wonderful when my life consisted of normal eyes that only saw the usual Stable-Tec-approved augmented vision?

"Are you okay, Blackjack?" Rampage whispered. I hardly blamed her. I hated this room; I'd have rather dealt with more slime ponies. At least they were a threat that I could see and sort of understand. But I looked at a small porcelain rocking horse and felt its eyes staring at me.

"Fine. I'm fine," I muttered as I looked back at Shears. "Every one of these is a soul jar?"

"No. Most are failures of one sort or another, but all of these have been touched by souls in ways we could never expla--" He was cut off as Cerberus opened fire through the stacks.

"Hostile enemy movement!" the robot shouted, spraying green bolts and a sheet of fire through the shelves. Carrion turned, strafing as well. I fired wildly, hoping to hit something... anything... that might be a threat. For ten seconds the room was an explosion of gunfire.

"Stop! Stop! Cease fire!" I yelled, and one by one guns stopped firing. Three rows of shelving lay in heaps. Some of the objects were broken. Some were utterly untouched. We all stared at the devastation we'd wrought against some simple wooden shelves. The fires ignited by Cerberus's flamer dwindled before my eyes, then went dark.

Behind us, a music box began to play. I knew the melody perfectly; my mane stood on end as I turned to stare at the tiny porcelain box with two dancing figurines slowly turning above it. *Hush now, quiet now...* I licked my lips, staring at it in apprehension. "Okay. Who turned that on?" No one spoke. My magic glowed and I turned the little lever at the side to off.

It didn't turn off. It began to scream; not a scream like I could hear with my ears. This was like the wail of Enervation; the hysterical scream was in my head. Toys rocked. Books fluttered their pages. Dozens of voices babbled all at once.

"Shut the fuck up already!" Psychoshy screamed and she swept her hoof over the shelf, knocking the music box and some of the other objects to the floor beyond.

"No!" Shears shouted.

"Why not! What the fuck are they going to do? Rock at me?" the yellow pegasus yelled.

Suddenly a swath of silk shot off the shelf and coiled once around her throat, once around a metal support beam, and yanked tight. The pegasus went silent, eyes bulging as her hooves clawed at the silk swath. Her legs lifted up, kicking out at the air as she struggled to get free. Rampage moved up on one side, ripping at the silk with her hoofclaws in a desperate attempt to try and cut through it. An umbrella opened, rolled to face me, then closed with a snap, launching itself and plunging into my neck. I gasped and fell back against the shelf, blood spurting from the hole as the umbrella thrashed wildly.

I wasn't the only one in trouble. Carrion had a teddy bear latched onto his face that seemed to be trying to crush his skull. Xanthe curled up in a ball as four floating boots slammed and stomped on her. A cowpony hat had forced itself over Nurse Graves's head and seemed to be trying to twist it completely off. Meanwhile, a floating screwdriver was doing its best to try and take Cerberus apart as it dodged and stabbed and spun. One of Cerberus's eyes popped free, dangling by a cable. "Oh, you are going to pay for that, you subversive tool of zebra domination!"

I got my hooves around the umbrella as it closed, but then it opened with unbelievable force and drove its spike even deeper, forcing me onto my back as if a strong stallion was pushing with every bit of his strength. Finally, it snapped closed again, and I moved as quickly as I could to shove the handle into the narrow gap between the shelves and the floor. As it tried to open, I yanked back and pulled the metal tip from my neck. The umbrella thrashed, making the heavy shelves rock as it struggled to free itself. I pressed my hooves to my neck as blood began to gush, hoping I could regenerate fast enough not to bleed out.

Lacunae's shield did nothing to protect her from a pair of ghostly shears jabbing at her and snipping out lines of flesh. Stygius ignored the music box slamming into his helmet as he scraped and fought to free the struggling Psychoshy. Shears and Silver Spoon had managed to get Graves's head

free of the twisting hat, which now swung down, beating and smacking at the three with brutal force. I never wanted to believe somepony could die from being hit with a piece of clothing, but the cowpony hat was definitely making an effort.

I rose, moving to try and help Psychoshy, when one of her power hooves lashed out and blasted me straight in the face. I flew clear through the shelf, sending splinters of wood everywhere, crashed through the next, and landed in a heap. I struggled to keep conscious, trying to shake off the disorientation. Blood trickled out my nostrils and ears as I lay there. Well, at least she hadn't *shot* me! Still, I really couldn't do much besides lie there and regenerate a little.

Then I saw a suit of strange light recon barding slip off a shelf. It trotted towards me, limp and swaying as if caught in a wind. I struggled to rise, but it didn't attack. I slowly lifted my head towards it, and it pointed its sleeve towards the corner of the room.

I looked over at where Stygius was trying to flicker flash away, disappearing and reappearing in place. It was clear that he couldn't take Psychoshy with him. His own teleportation, while functional in the dampening field, wasn't like Lacunae's.

"The silk," I choked out, tasting blood. "Styg! The silk!"

He looked back at me, then grabbed the scarlet cloth cutting so far into Psychoshy's neck that I wondered if it was trying to decapitate her instead of just strangle. With a flash he disappeared, taking the silk cloth with him, and the yellow mare collapsed into Rampage's hooves, coughing and spluttering for air. The red cloth immediately snapped out of his hooves and looped around his throat. A flash and he disappeared before it could draw tight. Again and again it sliced through the air, trying to catch him in a loop of fabric.

Lacunae blasted the floating scissors with her horn, but aside from knocking them spinning away from her, did no damage to them. Her horn flared as she struggled to keep them away as she shouted, "We have to get out of here!" Then a hoofball whizzed through the air and smashed her upside her face, deflecting to crash into the back of Rampage's head. From there it rocketed straight at me. I raised my hooves, popped my fingers free, and caught the oval brown ball. It spun so hard in my acid-etched grip that I smelled burnt rubber before it finally halted and tried to launch itself away again.

The barding waved again and pointed to the corner once more. "This way!" I croaked, staggering in the direction that the suit had indicated. If it was leading us into a trap, it couldn't be any worse. Carrion's miniguns sprayed blindly as the teddy bear worked its little arms into his eye sockets. "Rampage!" I pointed at Carrion.

"Good thing you're already ugly!" the mare shouted as she charged and smashed her hoof into his face with a crunching sound. His deformed features twisted grotesquely as Rampage hooked her claws around the bear and pulled. With a grind of bone and a ripping of skin and feathers, she pulled the teddy bear free. It struggled, wiggling its ghoulish gunk-covered plush arms at her as its mouth opened and closed silently, but a ghostly voice screamed in rage in my mind. "This way," she said as she looped her tail around his neck and guided the griffin towards me.

Xanthe lifted her forehooves to run, and the boots attacking her suddenly reversed, putting themselves on the ends of her forelegs. "Oh no..." she whimpered as they yanked her up, and the other two jammed themselves on her back legs. "Help me!" she screamed as the boots yanked her to her

hooves and send her galloping straight at a solid cinder block wall!

Lacunae levitated the zebra, her hooves racing in midair. I brought out my sword and ran over to her. There was no clean or nice way to do this. I dropped into S.A.T.S., targeted her closest hoof, and said a little prayer to Celestia that I wasn't about to make her a stub. The spell executed a single stroke that bit into the boot's leather. A moment later I heard a sharp cry from the boot as the leather parted in a gash a few inches long, and instantly all four boots jerked off her legs and scampered towards the far side of the storage room.

I looked at the sword, and then a manic grin spread across my face as I sliced it at the cowpony hat. It took a swipe at me, but I nicked the brim. The hat gave a similar shriek and at once backed off as if caught in a gust of ethereal wind. The red scarf stopped trying to choke Stygius and instead looped itself around the next closest pony, wrapping itself around her neck and crushing her throat!

Nurse Graves gave a slightly annoyed look at the silk around her neck and trotted in the direction of the corner of the room. A door had been pushed open, and we were slowly making our way out one by one. Now that they could be hurt, the cursed items were keeping their distance, though I did have the surreal experience of dueling with the floating screwdriver as I gave Cerberus a chance to withdraw with his bolts intact. I was last through the door in the corner, pulling it tight behind me as the objects started to rally.

The next room had the same cold feeling as the first, but instead of shelves, this room had ten smashed display cases with a broken modeling dummy in each. From a tiny gem fixed into the top of each case shone a cone of cool, stark light that illuminated their naked ponequin occupants. I looked at Nurse Graves and the silk swath that was trying to choke her to death. "You know, that's not going to work. She doesn't need to breathe." The ends of the scarf seemed to flutter in frustration. Nurse Graves looked at me coolly, arching her brow as her neck indented. I floated the sword towards the silk. "Now, let her go or we'll find out just how sharp my sword really is."

The silk released her and floated in the air a moment.

And then coiled tightly around the handle of my blade!

With a great wrench, it pulled the blade around and began to slice wildly at us. I jumped into the path of the razor sharp edge, the steel biting into my metal limbs and actually cutting through the exterior. I popped out my fingers, grabbing the blade as my horn struggled to control the deadly weapon. Three different colors of magic danced on the blade as we struggled for control. The metal scraped and gouged my fingers, the steel giving way to the sword's edge as it pushed me back until I smacked into one of the empty display cases. Then the blade began slipping through my grip.

"My magic can't get a grip on it!" Shears shouted. "That sword wants to kill!"

The tip began to work its way through the chestplate of my barding. Then I felt it prick my skin. Then it slowly pushed into me, even as my fingers clamped down as hard as possible. Rampage threw her hooves around the hilt and started to pull, but it made no difference. I assumed every iota of the spirit possessing the cloth was focused on taking a life like hers had been taken.

"Damn it, Petunia! I didn't kill you!" I shouted. Was it just me, or did the sword stop pushing? I had no idea if she could understand me or not, but it was the only chance I had. "I'm sorry you died! It was wrong. But killing me won't bring you back or change anything!" I closed my eyes, the blade

humming under my fingers. "Please. Tell me you were a good pony once. Be a good pony now."

The blade suddenly reversed and went flying out of Rampage's grasp as the cloth uncoiled around the grip. The crimson cloth unfurled, hanging in the air in a shape as if it were an anguished mare's face. Then it disappeared back under the door into the storeroom.

I lay there for one second, staring at the bottom of the door, then finally flopped over on my side with a groan. "That's it. I give up. Hightower wins," I declared feebly. "Killer possessed silk is where I draw the line." Psychoshy was curled up, concentrating on breathing as Graves and Stygius tended to her. Lacunae's wounds seemed to be healing before my very eyes. Radiation did an alicorn good.

"Too bad the giant killer ooze monster, the room of cursed toys, and a thousand hissing ferals are between us and the way back," Rampage said as she knelt beside me.

"I need some Cram. And rubies. And scrap metal," I said with a groan. "Please tell me we're somewhere safe for five minutes."

"You tell me?" Rampage replied as she turned and pointed at the suit of light gray barding sitting in the corner. It shrunk back, hiding behind one of the smashed display cases and peeking out at me. It had to be one of the oddest suits I'd ever seen. It looked to be mostly black but had a luminous white chestpiece and strange white circuitry stripes along the side.

"Are you okay?" I asked, feeling slightly odd talking to a suit. What counted as 'okay' to a soul jar suit of barding?

It reached down to a small speaker on its belt and there was a hiss, and then a synthetic mare's voice said, "Combat ended. No healing or chems needed."

"Oh, you can talk?" I asked, and the suit shook its head.

"That's all. You're my best friend forever. Sneaking now, shhhhhh," the suit said seemingly at random. Xanthe slowly crept closer to get a better look.

"Oh, you can only say things that suit has programed into it?" I asked, and the collar of the suit went up and down as if nodding.

"Is that a..." Xanthe began, then glanced at me nervously before looking at the strange barding. "I think it's a zebra infiltration suit." Then she looked up at me. "But... they're supposed to self-destruct if they're ever removed from the wearer without the proper tools and procedures!" Then the zebra drew back and muttered, "And why is it speaking in Pony?" The suit shook its... collar.

"We *didn't* remove her from it." Shears glanced at the infiltration suit, and it shrank back. "Naturally, the zebras were curious about what we were doing here. But one, at least, never reported back. Rarity, of course, always the designer, attempted some modifications to her suit," he said as he rose to his hooves, looking at the other display cases. "But this was Eternity's first failure. The soul armor. Creating invulnerable, eternally powerful armor with a complete soul bound within." He looked at the armor with disappointment. "We assumed that, without a mind, a soul was just... a thing. Something special that made a pony a pony, or a griffin a griffin. When we transferred a complete soul to an object, however, it began to manifest... peculiar powers. Even brushing a soul could bestow strange effects on

the tool.” He looked back at me. “Worse, the soul within could affect the mind of the wearer.”

“What?” I asked as I looked from him to the armor.

“The wearers would feel uncomfortable. Watched. They’d exhibit personality changes, growing closer to the captive soul,” Shears said quietly as he circled the armor. “And since most of the souls we used were maximum security prisoners...”

“You created monsters,” I finished. Carrion’s crippled face was slowly pulling itself together, but I had no idea if that was from healing magic or radiation.

Shears nodded. “I think that that can be summed up as ‘Oopsie’,” Rampage said.

I counted the display cases. Eight total. “You’re saying that there are seven more suits of indestructible soul armor roaming around this place?”

“Yes. I suppose so,” Shears replied.

“But... why didn’t you use them?” I asked, and everything went white again.

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I heard Rarity’s voice and saw a pristine suit of combat barding on a charred corpse. “Test one... armor failed to protect from enemy flamer.” The same combat barding on an intact corpse, minus a hole through the stallion’s face. “Test two... armor failed to protect from enemy sniper.” A piece of gray combat armor with a helmet and completely intact faceplate. “Test three... armor failed to protect from crushing blows inflicted to throat.” The same armor, this time Rarity speaking with frustration. “Test four... armor failed to protect from poisoned rations!” A lacy purple gown with veil on a pink unicorn mare with a blackened face. “Test five... armor failed to protect from being garroted by her own scarf!” A smashed and broken stallion wearing a tuxedo. “Test six! Armor failed... again... to protect from being pushed out a window!” Finally, a suit of dirty power armor. Rarity’s voice was now tired and frayed. “Test Seven... armor failed... to protect... when buried alive... in a landslide...”

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The recording faded and my vision returned to normal. “The armor didn’t do what Rarity wanted,” Shears explained. “What she needed was armor to keep the occupant safe. Just like how Applejack was inspired to create power armor after the death of Big Macintosh, Rarity was inspired to create a flawless form of protection for herself and her friends. Some foolproof method of defense.”

“But her tests failed,” I replied, and I got the feeling I’d surprised him. “Even if she could make armor to protect from bullets, there would always be a way for somepony to kill the wearer.”

“How could you know that?” Shears breathed. I didn’t answer. Really, considering how often I saw things nopony else did, there wasn’t much point. Then he composed himself and went on. “Yes. When we first created the armor it seemed perfect. Invulnerable, and it seemed to go out of its way to protect its wearer. But then we moved on to field testing and began to notice inexplicable accidents. Soldiers blundering into ambushes. Thoughts of suicide or murder. They were relatively rare and hard to pin down as coming from the armor... but regardless, they were unacceptable.”

I rubbed my hooves as the repair and healing talismans slowly worked their magic on me. “So

what happened then? What did Rarity do?" I asked.

"She locked up her failures and moved on to plan B--" Shears began, but Psychoshy flew over us and interrupted.

"Hey. Tick tick, remember? Or click click click. As cool as ghouls are, I really don't want to be one!" the yellow pegasus said. I looked over at where Nurse Graves and Lacunae were administering healing and more pouches of RadAway to those who needed it. Carrion was sitting next to them, his eyes already regrowing and his face twisting back into shape. Hopefully he was using some sort of healing magic, because if the radiation was that strong...

"Right. We should get moving," I murmured.

"Wait! What about her?" Xanthe asked, gesturing to the possessed infiltration suit. "We can't just leave her."

I looked back at the others and then at the infiltration suit. Her? "Um... I'm not a zebra, but doesn't possessed armor count above a 9.0 on the standard scale of curses?"

Xanthe chewed her lip a moment and cast her eyes downward. "I've been touched by the Star Maiden... I don't think I can get any more cursed than that." Then she looked at the zebra armor. "At least this way I won't be cursed alone."

"Well... it's your call. But if the armor possesses you..." I said in worry. The armor had helped us get out of the other room; I wasn't terribly worried about it being evil... but still.

"If it does, I am already damned," she said in a near whisper. I couldn't help myself; I gave her an impulsive hug that made the zebra go rigid. I supposed getting a hug from the most evil being in your mythology might be a little disconcerting. The poor zebra certainly looked uncomfortable as I released her. She removed the hazmat suit, and the infiltration suit immediately opened up. A minute later it zipped up completely, latching itself in place.

"You're my new best friend," the armor chirped, making the zebra mare actually blush. The black and white armor was just tight enough for her to pull the hazmat suit back on over it.

"Okay! Which way up?" I asked as I looked over at Shears. He pointed towards the far end of the room where there was another door; this one had been kicked open. Stairs led in the direction we wanted. Leading the way with shotgun and sword, I ascended.

Rampage hummed softly behind me, singing to herself, "Nothing can stop... the smooze..." I glared back at her, and she blinked then gave a grin in return.

The door at the top of the stairs had also been kicked out and opened to a charred library. Blackened books occupied scorched shelves; probably a good indication they weren't going to start flying and trying to kill us. The far side of the library was lit with a ghostly blue glow that flickered and danced through blackened windows. Slowly, we walked through the stacks towards it. As we did, we spotted the flickering blue flames burning on the concrete floor in little hoof-sized puddles. Their tongues danced and writhed, making my PipBuck spike with every flare. The heat wasn't like that from a fire; I could almost swear I could feel it moving through me.

Far worse, though, was the screaming.

It wasn't just the unnerving trill of Enervation. Hundreds of undead throats howled in rage. Hooves beat against bars. Some of them screamed words in the distance. They pleaded to be released, bellowed insults, cried out in pain or for help, and snarled threats. And under it all was the banging and hammering of thousands of hooves on hundreds of bars.

I walked to the library door and slowly pushed it open.

And stepped into Hell.

The vast central shaft of Hightower rose ten stories above me. Midway up, like a fiery dagger plunged into the heart of the structure, the missile jutted out into the middle of the space. Blue fire flew off the tip in volcanic eruptions that sprayed the sticky blue flame in glowing arcs. The unnatural blaze continued burning, no matter what it landed on, and the middle of the shaft was awash in a ring of radioactive fire. Inside every cell, blue-glowing shapes screamed and hammered against their restraints. Sentry robots rolled around the walkways, their metal bodies bent and warped by the tremendous heat.

From above, six hovering robots like Cerberus dropped down. Each one had an oversized terminal screen on a swivel arm; the six moved their screens together to make one massive screen, which flashed to life, bathing us in cold blue light. A gargantuan charred face appeared, wreathed in blue flame as it glared down at us. From a dozen loudspeakers all around us boomed a crackling voice. "Hello, convicts. I am Warden Hobble, administrator for this facility, and your host for the duration of your sentence for crimes against Equestria. I look forward to making your stay here as... comfortable... as possible." He gave a ragged, mocking laugh. "Welcome to the Tower!"

I stared up at that immense, burning leer on the screen for a moment, and then Psychoshy muttered, "*He* wasn't in the plan either..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: Believe it or not, this chapter was supposed to be only 30 pages or so... hopefully next chapter is brief. Cross your hooves. Anyway, I really would like to thank my editorial team this chapter. We had some hitches and problems, but I want all of you and them to know that without them Horizons wouldn't be the story it is. So please stomp your hooves for Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for devoting hours of their lives for months on end for making this story the best it can be. Also thanks to Kkat, of course, for creating FoE in the first place. Thanks for everypony who reads and leaves feedback on the forums. And lastly but not least, thank you ponies who slip bits in the tip jar so I can pay my bills. If anypony else would like to help support the author, tips go to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you again for sticking with me.)

(OH! July 2nd is PH's birthday. Send art to Seth. :P)