

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 27: Salvage

"Bah! Trixie is exhausted from performing feats beyond imagination. Begone with you until morning!"

The halls of 99 echoed around me with the screams of a dying stable as I lay in the center of the atrium. A thousand years seemed to pass, the wall rusting before my eyes, the bodies moldering, liquefying, black fungus spreading from their corpses as the metal pitted and corroded. Acidic water hissed and bubbled in pools that slowly ate their way through the floor and covered the walls in a caustic sheen.

Through it all I lay there. Not dead. I didn't get that blessing. I couldn't move. Didn't want to move. I simply listened to the dripping. The hissing. The groaning of stressed metal. The clatter of breaking glass or tumbling ceramics. The pressure forced the burning chemical I'd unleashed into every pore of my body like countless fiery razors. Still, I lived. I didn't deserve to die. That was for better ponies... like my friends.

I wasn't alone, though. Not alone. He was here too, with his hat and watery pale eyes. He hadn't come for me. He wouldn't take me. I'd broken, but I still wasn't gone. I just wanted to die, move into the everafter... become whatever ponies became when life was over and done with. But he wouldn't take me. My stable. My mother. My friends. But not me.

"Is this Hell?" I whispered.

"If so, does that make me the devil?" he asked in return.

There was nothing to say as the pressure built more and more. Nothing to do but wait, lie there for another thousand years. I dropped like a rag doll to the level below as the floor rotted out beneath me. And the level below that. And the next. Then, finally, I landed in the liquefied remains of Stable 99. Only the pitted feces-colored metal shell of the stable remained, the armor keeping the Wasteland out and the poison in. Submerged talismans still bubbled, still faithfully pumping out more and more of the gas.

The Dealer sat on a long jagged spur of metal resembling a severed gray wing. That vast shell groaned and creaked above me. Beneath me. Within me. From far above, a massive stable door, sealed by centuries of corrosion, gave. A hurricane wind blasted the rubble-choked tunnel beyond clear. A shriek like the screams of so long ago. The wind slackened, and died.

With one final bending, breaking, tearing cry, that armored shell gave way, and the hilltop collapsed inward as if under the hoof of an angry goddess. *Finally*, I thought... annihilated with a smile.

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"She's waking up? Sedate her!" some mare cried distantly.

"We did! She's not responding to the Med-X!" another answered. Distant blurry lights entered my vision. And pain, but I was used to pain by now. I reached for that blur, pushing through the darkness. If I was alive, then Glory might be as well. All my friends might still be alive! I couldn't lie here and do nothing!

A wave pushed me back towards the black, but I refused to succumb. "Sweet Celestia, she's still

waking up! Bluebell!"

"I already cast it again," the mare panted breathlessly, "it's not working!" I could see faces now. Bloody faces in paper masks. Unicorns. They had scalpels and little bloody scissors hovering over me. My chest and gut burned as I pulled together my focus. One unicorn's horn flashed, trying to push me back into Stable 99. I fought that urge to sleep. To dream. I'd kill them all. Teal eyes widened in shock as I stared back into them, pulling together a bullet spell as I slowly sat upright. "What is she doing? Hold her down! Get her under, now!"

"Won't... let... you..." I choked around a tube in my mouth, my horn glowing white as I readied a shot right at her head. Then hooves grabbed my shoulders and forced me back down. I saw bucks in filthy white coats stained and spotted in blood. "Glory..." I rasped around the tube. "Glory!" I shouted, then choked.

"Get a memory orb!" The unicorn mare ordered as I struggled. I felt something inside me tear, but I ignored it. It didn't matter how much I hurt now. I had to get free. I had to save my friends. "Security! Calm down! We're trying to help you."

A lie. They were Enclave. Or Sanguine. Or somepony that was going to sell me out... betray me. My horn flashed as I struggled, and one of the bucks yelped as my bullets bit into his flank. Somepony blinded me with a rag across my eyes. I fired wildly, desperately. Another sedating surge washed through me like a blanket, the lethargy blurring away the rest of my senses.

A glassy sphere was pressed to my horn but I resisted... fought. I had to get free! I had to help my friends! Glory! I had to help Glory.

"Come on you stubborn idiot!" the unicorn mare said, grinding the orb against my horn. "Let me save you!" Not me, you idiot! Help her! Her wing... sweet Goddesses, her wing...

Please...

I tried to fire another bullet, but my concentration slipped away. There was a spark... no, Glory! I had to find Glory and all my friends. "Gluh... Ree...!" I choked, feeling myself cut open and my organs exposed to the chilly air. Then my horn spasmed, and the connection was made. The world faded away.

Glory...

oooOOOooo

I didn't want to be here in this mare. I wanted nothing to do with this place. I needed to find Glory and put her wing back on. I needed to find Rampage and discover just what was inside her. To do something to help Lacunae recover from that horrible doll-like state. But instead, I was stuck here. And worst of all, I felt two wings.

"I can't believe we get to go to the Grand Galloping Gala!" Twist squealed. She was wearing a green dress which, despite the mint leaves around the collar, looked vaguely like forest camouflage. "Oh, I get to wear the pretty dress and have the pretty mane, and look! My hooves are painted!" she squealed as she danced on the sparkly ruby hooves in glee. "Best! Night! Ever!" I could only wonder how much brushing and blowing it'd taken to get her curly mane to lay flat. I suspected that magic was employed.

"Famous. Last. Words," Vanity replied, smiling indulgently at the ladies and making Twist pout a little. The handsome buck wore a pristine white dress uniform. "If your night is pleasant, then consider yourself fortunate. The Gala has a well-deserved reputation for driving mares to drink."

"Do we all have to attend?" Psalm asked softly, shuffling and fidgeting in a deep midnight blue dress decorated with tiny enchanted flecks of sapphire. Her white mane obscured her face as she looked worriedly out the door, chewing softly on the end of a lock. Twist sighed and brushed it out of her mouth, making the delicate black unicorn blush slightly.

"The Princess herself is decorating us, so the answer is probably 'yes'," Jetstream said as she stood before the mirror and carefully nudged her dark hair into place with a brush. The orange and gold dress made her look like she was on fire. A bit too garish for my -- what was I thinking? Why did I give a fuck about her dress right now when Glory needed me! Besides, when had I ever worn a big frilly party dress? The blue pegasus grinned over at Big Macintosh and Applesnack standing calmly in crisp pressed uniforms. "Besides, half our boys are escorts of the Ministry Mares. It's not like they can just skip out." She looked over at Stonewing, who seemed to positively vibrate in anticipation, and gave a soft sigh.

"I can't believe you set me up with your sister. She's going to hate me!" Applesnack muttered as he brushed his shaggy tan mane aside. "Couldn't you have been your sister's escort?" he asked the big red buck with a frown.

But Big Macintosh just gave an easy chuckle. "Anope. How'd it look if she was escorted about by her big brother?" He rolled his green eyes towards the door, his grass stem still sticking out his lips. "Besides, she needed me with one of her friends."

"Still don't see why I don't get no Ministry Mare," Doof muttered dully. It was like seeing a cinder block in a dress uniform, and his perspiration was already starting to show through. "It'd be nice to go out with a pretty mare like them." Half the Marauders shared a look, and thankfully nopony laughed.

There was a knock on the door, and a lilac mare poked her head in. "Is everypony ready? I need you gentlecolts to come with me, please. The Princesses are about to make their entrance." Macintosh, Applesnack, and Vanity all trotted out. Stonewing brought up the rear, still almost half-flying, half-vibrating across the floor.

"Um... I- I- I'd like to go to the G- G- Gala with a Ministry M- M- Mare too," Echo stuttered; the yellow buck, looking positively tiny out from under the heavy communications equipment, was nearly stepped on as Doof snorted angrily and plodded out the door.

"Trust me, Echo. Those mares are nothing but trouble," Jetstream said sourly. "And they're missing out by not having a great guy like you at their side." He brightened up immensely at that.

"Well, we should probably get to the party too," Twist said, sashaying after the others.

Jetstream trotted to Psalm, giving the black unicorn a little nudge on the flank. "Come on, Psalm. It's just a party."

"I'd rather not. I haven't done anything that deserves honoring," she whispered, her silver eyes looking up into Jetstream's. "Are you sure I can't stay here till it's all over? I don't like... crowds."

"It won't be so bad. Vanity says that it'll probably just be boring aristoponies talking to one another. And once you have your decoration, you can go."

"All right," she murmured. "I'm sorry, though..."

Reluctantly, the pair exited the room together.

The Grand Galloping Gala was a positively spectacular affair that I might have enjoyed a great

deal more if I hadn't been trapped in it while my friends... Mentally, I was climbing the walls, trying to find some way... any way... to get myself out of this memory. I needed to help them. To beg for forgiveness. This was almost worse than leaving them to die. They'd been hurt following me.

I'd never seen more stuffed shirts and fancy dresses in my life. The Gala was clearly the social event of the year. Even more so given that, from the snippets of conversation rising around us, this was apparently Luna's first. It seemed that there was more than a little apprehension from the aristoponies that the Gala would devolve into a common carnival slog. 'Could you imagine?' 'How gauche!'

We trotted past a unicorn buck with a unicorn mare on either side of him. I wished I could plunge a sword into his heart and save two lives and one soul. "How dare she pick him over me! I'm the eldest. It should have been me!" he muttered to the bored-looking mares to either side of him.

Trumpets blared and formal processional music began to play. Twilight Sparkle entered in a splendid gown of purple and swirling silver galaxies. Macintosh trotted at her side, his eyes steady and his lips curled in that casual, confident smile. They approached the wide central throne dais. Applejack, dressed in surprisingly normal businesslike attire, entered alongside Applesnack, the former doing her best to smile as casually as her brother while the latter did his best not to be sick. From the doorway flew Rainbow Dash in a dress that could almost pass for a uniform, a grinning Stonewing beside her. There was some applause and cheering from the crowd, which the Ministry Mare obviously relished. Jetstream gave a little sigh.

Pinkie Pie bounced in on her hooves with an escort on either side. The buck and a mare were decorated as formally as two clowns could possibly dress, but the rainbow wigs still killed it. Then I was astonished to see Fluttershy enter in a simple white gown decorated with pearls and rubies; the design was vaguely reminiscent of a nurse's uniform. At her side, walking with pain evident on his face, was the scarred Goldenblood. More than once he broke stride, coughing for breath as she waited patiently with a concerned and tender expression. Of course, that was how she always looked.

Rarity and Vanity entered with a fanfare, and almost everypony save one gave a collective gasp of approval at her exquisite gown. The only pony who didn't share their approval ground his teeth furiously behind Jetstream. Vanity, a familiar sword belted at his side, somehow made the white dress uniform even more splendid. For a few seconds, he gazed straight at Jetstream, and I knew that he would have rather had her by his side than the magnificent unicorn mare. Every noble muttered in complete approval, for here were two equines that embodied the image of all that was good in the noble lineage. Truly, there were no finer nor more lovely ponies in all the world!

Or were there? The lights dimmed as a great glowing orb and a shining silver sphere drifted from on high to land side by side at the entrance. Celestia looked as she always had. Perhaps a little more tired and wan, but glorious as ever. Beside her, looking young and vibrant and confident, stood Luna. And, side by side, the Princesses walked through a procession struck dumb with adoration. There was Rarity at her finest, and then there was this! Together, they moved with utmost dignity as everypony in attendance bowed before them. Not out of fear, but out of love and respect. They were Celestia and Luna. There was no other like them in the world.

When they mounted the dais, Celestia gave a formal bow to her sister and then moved to the far right of the stage. Clearly, this was Luna's show, and Celestia refused to upstage it. Twilight Sparkle stood at Luna's right, giving concerned looks at the former monarch. Goldenblood looked as if he was struggling to stand, supported by Fluttershy at his side. I was no expert, but it didn't look like an act. Luna gave him one concerned glance, then looked across the gathered masses of Equestria's finest. She took a slow, deep breath, and when she spoke it wasn't in some blasting clarion but with a strange projection, as if she was talking to me and me alone.

"Ponies of Equestria. For twelve long years we have struggled... we have sacrificed... we have

toiled against an enemy without reason or remorse. And, despite our pain and hardships, we have risen to these challenges with determination and vigor that would make the stars themselves tremble in awe." As she spoke, the volume slowly rose, as if the castle itself were speaking to us. "Regardless of the troubles we have faced on these long and uncertain nights, today we take comfort in our traditions and celebrate our dignity, our unity, and our strength! Therefore, it is with humility and thanks that your Princess welcomes you to this most glorious of nights, and declares: let the Grand Galloping Gala... commence!" And with that word, it felt as though Equestria itself was giving the speech, and the crowd broke into cheers.

With a gleeful squeal, Pinkie Pie rushed to a bellpull dangling nearby. A gong resounded, and suddenly velvet drapes were yanked up to reveal dozens of clowns, acrobats, jugglers, tumblers and singers. A cascade of fireworks exploded outside with such energy that, for a moment, it seemed like day had returned. Streamers descended like rain, and a cloud of countless balloons rose from cleverly hidden boxes about the throne room. The stunned aristoponies suddenly found themselves swept up in a party two short steps removed from a riot.

Jetstream, Psalm, and Echo made their way down the stairs and to the dais where the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the other Marauders were meeting with a few other select individuals. "A bit much, wouldn't you say, Pinkie Pie?" Rarity observed as a pie-juggling pony in a loud checkered suit rolled by on top of a large ball.

"What do you mean? I just made the Gala what it should have been! Ponies playing, ponies dancing...!" She fluttered her eyes at the unicorn with a cheeky grin. "Would you rather it be like the first time?"

Rarity took one look at Blueblood watching sullenly and shuddered. "I'd rather not."

"Excellent speech, Sister. I'm glad you modified the traditional Canterlot voice," Celestia said with a fond smile. "I never found much use for it."

"You used it for two hundred and sixty three years," Goldenblood rasped, sitting with his eyes closed while Fluttershy held a hoof to his brow.

"You should be back in bed. You're still not well," the yellow mare fussed softly.

"Oh, I should last another hour or so," he said as he looked at Rarity. "Wouldn't you say?"

"Well, it would get their attention elsewhere," Rarity said with a small worried frown. "But only if you're sure."

"I'd hate to cause a spectacle," he rasped, coughing into a handkerchief. Fluttershy pulled out a healing potion from the dress; apparently, the similarity to a nurse's uniform didn't end with the style. For just a few seconds, he was the focus of a great number of ponies as he drank the restorative draught.

"The Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Peace, dressed as a nurse, is giving aid to a member of the aristocracy," Vanity said softly from beside Jetstream. "Very well done, nephew." The look Rarity was giving Goldenblood was far less admiring. In fact, it looked like a faint expression of unease.

"You're not staying, Princess?" Twilight Sparkle asked as Celestia turned away, walking towards an exit behind the throne.

The rainbow-maned alicorn looked back at Twilight and shook her head with a sad little smile. "No. I'm afraid my heart isn't in celebrations. Besides," she said a touch coolly, glancing at Goldenblood coughing pink and red flecks into the handkerchief, "I wouldn't want to detract from my sister."

Goldenblood gave a mirthless smile as he looked up at Celestia before clenching his eyes in another fit of soft coughing. He almost looked... ashamed.

Celestia extended a hoof to Luna's shoulder and said as if sending her off to battle, "Good luck, Luna. Stay strong. The Gala has broken many great and powerful ponies before."

"I think I can handle some aristoponies at a party, Sister," Luna said, as if a touch insulted at the implication that she couldn't.

"You'd be surprised at just how they can push you if you're not careful," Celestia warned as she looked at the crowds.

"Oh, like the one hundred and thirty first Gala, where you transformed half the attendees into frogs and the other half into pigs?" Twilight offered with a kind smile. At her friends' looks, she flushed. "I was curious whether our experience really was the worst gala ever."

Celestia shuddered. "Yes. Exactly like that one. I don't think anypony looked me in the eye for two years after that." With that, the Princess gave Twilight a parting nod and smile and walked quietly towards the exit.

"I suppose we should mingle and chat things up with folks?" Applejack asked, looking as if she'd rather chew tacks than waste time talking to all these snobby ponies.

Pinkie Pie bounced along with a crowd of performers, giggling wildly. "No, silly! We should have fun!" she said with a squeal. Fun was certainly a relative term. I'd been known to get a little crazy from time to time, but never on the scale that Pinkie Pie operated on. I wondered if, in the time since founding her ministry, she'd opened a school for clowning specifically to have the number of performers needed for the Gala. They were everywhere, and the aristocrats seemed stunned, unable to figure out what the proper actions were. No pony would dare leave with the Princess in attendance.

The Ministry Mares and their escorts started to break up into clumps and mix in with the chaos. Jetstream was left with Echo, the pair having the dubious distinction of being the least interesting ponies to talk to. Other than Doof, who saw the buffet and never looked back.

"...I'm telling ya, they're all a bunch of lying, cheating, no good snakes, the whole lot of 'em," Applejack complained bitterly to a knot of aristocrats (and one mime doing her best to imitate Applejack's scornful looks and motions behind her back) as we passed. "They'll take whatever you give 'em, then they'll sell for twice what it cost 'em in the first place!"

Rarity coughed delicately, commenting, "Applejack, I think that's what we call 'profit margins'." Behind the orange mare, Applesnack grabbed the mime in a hooflock.

"Really? It's what I'm callin' profiteerin'! And greedy shenanigans. I'm trying to keep 'em honest by putting some kin in charge and seein' if that helps straighten' 'em up. I got no complaints if they make a bit or two, but they ain't gonna get away with what they done before," Applejack said with a firm stomp that coincided perfectly with Applesnack punting the mime clear over the crowd.

"Well, surely there must be some you can work with. You're putting Braeburn in charge of Ironshod Firearms," Rarity said with clear concern.

Applejack gave a sheepish smile. "Um, Rarity, not sure you noticed, but Braeburn's got a few tumbleweeds in his acre."

The white unicorn nodded thoughtfully. "Mmm, yes. He does seem a bit distracted at times."

"And he's family. The rest of 'em... Hippocampus, Flash, Boom... I walk into a room and it's like they're just nodding and waiting for me to leave so they can continue their shenanigans! I feel like I'm foalsittin'!"

"I wish I could make some recommendations, but I'm afraid most of my contacts are limited to my own ministry." Rarity gave Applejack a sympathetic smile.

"Oh, Goldenblood's suggested a few business ponies, but I can't tell them from the snakes." Rarity looked decidedly unhappy with the mention of the sickly pony as Applejack went on. "Horse is the only one I've met who doesn't seem to give a damn how many bits he can pull out of this war. Cares more about his gadgets than making money. But Golden told me I should be careful with him. Careful."

"Well, as useful as Goldenblood might be, I don't need him to tell me how to run my business," Rarity declared firmly.

"Oh? He's meddling in Image too?"

Rarity opened her mouth, then balked. "No... no, he really isn't. He's not telling me things that I wouldn't have done myself." Her lips pressed together as she looked across the room towards Fluttershy. "But I still don't like him. He's..." But whatever he was fell out of earshot as Jetstream strolled away. Normally, I'd have been fascinated, but right now all I could do was wonder if my friends were alive. I knew better than to hope that they were okay.

Jetstream wandered through the crowd, clearly looking for the gray pegasus. Pinkie Pie was dancing on the piano in one room, grinning with an expression of 'have fun or else.'

"I was just wonderin' if I could ask you somethin' about Miss Maripony," Big Macintosh said in his low, confident voice. He was standing with Twilight Sparkle in an alcove off to the side, and Jetstream peeked a little closer, her ears twitching. I'd be curious, too, if I wasn't thinking about Lacunae following me about like a broken doll. When was this stupid memory going to end?

"Who?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion.

"Maripony?"

Twilight Sparkle suddenly started. "Oh! Yes, Maripony." She laughed awkwardly. "I... ah... I get her confused. You know... with the Splendid Valley site. Happens all the time," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Well... I was wonderin'... has she mentioned me at all? I mean, does she talk about me?" Big Macintosh looked so uncertain and concerned that it was quite touching.

Twilight blinked, then smiled. "Well, yes. I suppose she does, now that I think about it. She wishes she could get away from the ministry more to see you. Everything's so crazy."

"Really? Huh..." Big Macintosh looked baffled and even a little worried.

"Did I say something wrong?" Twilight asked in concern.

The large red pony sighed. "It's just... she's so much smarter than me. I just... I don't understand why she likes to be around me. She's such a clever, nice little mare. Don't see what she sees in a pony like me."

Twilight blinked and then smiled a little. "Oh, don't worry about that. Really." She sighed as she looked at her polished hooves. "At the ministry, everything is crazy. I mean, you throw so many eggheads into one room, and there're so many ideas flying around that, by the end of the day, you feel fried. A pony like you, who's..." She trailed off and he smiled down at her as she fished for a word.

"Simple?" Big Macintosh offered, and she blushed.

"Easygoing," Twilight countered with a smile. "It lets a pony like her unwind and relax from all the pressures we deal with at the ministry." Twilight sighed as she looked back at the crowded room. "Trust me. Being smart isn't a guarantee for being happy." Then she returned her gaze to him with a smile. "And you make her happy."

Big Macintosh's mood quite obviously improved as his casual smile returned. "Well, thank you, Twilight. I hope you'll tell her I look forward to seeing her again. I was thinkin' on taking her to a hoofball game with some of the other Marauders."

"Hoofball?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion and a little unease. "Um... well... I don't think she's ever been to a hoofball game." The purple mare rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Sure! It'll probably be fun!"

"Ayup!" he agreed with a nod. "Then I'll be sure to ask her. Thanks, Twilight."

Twilight Sparkle seemed to start, then slumped a little. "Oh. Yeah. Sure. No problem."

Normally, I would have been interested in the pair and curious about the implications, but at the moment I was simply wondering if I'd be trapped in this memory for hours... days? How long could a memory orb last? It wasn't a bad memory. In fact, compared to many memories I'd experienced, I'd normally enjoy the party and the obvious fun. Pinkie Pie had taken the stuffed aristoponies and forced all her gaudy, gauche, glittery gala games into their dreary dignified lives. Clearly, it was not what they were used to, but no one dared to complain with the Princess doubling her fun.

There was joy and laughter, too. Two gorgeous tumbling fillies kissing Echo's cheeks simultaneously, making the young buck blush to his hooves. Doof had found the cheese tray and its unfortunate digestive implications to anypony downwind. Stonewing flew through a solid wall, much to the amazement of the onlookers, including Rainbow Dash, and the chagrin of Big Macintosh. Vanity and Rarity drifted through as a respite and a focus of calm and civility.

The Gala culminated with the Marauders getting medals for their work at securing some coal mine or another east of Hoofington and holding it against overwhelming odds. Finally, the party started to wind down... and Jetstream heard a mare cry out. "Help! Someone! Please, help!"

My host took to the air and swooped down the hall like a comet. She found Fluttershy in an alcove with a collapsed, coughing, and rasping Goldenblood. She was pressing a hoof to his throat. "Your heartbeat is irregular and very weak! We need to get you to the hospital." She looked at Jetstream. "Get Twilight! She can teleport him! Or maybe Rainbow Dash can fly him there. He's not heavy!"

"On my way!" Jetstream said at once, readying her wings.

"Stop!" Goldenblood gasped as Jetstream turned to follow Fluttershy's instructions. The blue mare froze, looking back at him as he struggled to rise. He coughed again, blood speckling his uniform. "Please. Stop. I'll... I'll be fine."

"You will not be fine! Your heart is failing," Fluttershy insisted, but he raised a hoof to her mouth,

silencing her.

"My heart... has been failing... for years. I'll be... fine," he said in wet, laborious tones. "Just another hour. Then... Luna will have retired... and the... important... ponies will... have gone home." He spasmed and hugged his scarred chest, wet coughs rasping softly in his torso. "Everything must go perfectly tonight. Right... to... the end."

"But why?" Fluttershy asked in concern, brushing his sweaty golden mane from his scarred forehead.

"Where the nobles... go... the people... follow. Luna... is changing things... they have to accept her. Accept the ministries. Support both," he said in snort, breathless gasps. "Confidence in Luna... is all that matters... now. If the nobles believe... the people... believe. And they will fight for her... because... they will believe in her..." He panted as she held him closely. "An hour, and I'll go."

Fluttershy's gaze hardened. "I'm not going to let a patient of mine die. We're getting Twilight."

"Twilight... needs to... be seen... with Luna... now!" he insisted as he held her foreleg in his clammy grip. "Half an hour. Then... everypony... will be... leaving. The attention... can go... off Luna." He squeezed her foreleg. "Please, Flutter... shy... My life... doesn't matter... compared to... you seven. Please..."

"I can fly him!" Jetstream said confidently. "No one will miss me. I got my medal. I can fly him to the hospital, and you can follow me."

Fluttershy looked down at him with a gentle smile. "We're going to the hospital, Goldenblood. And I'll find some way to make you all better. And you are not going to argue. Understood?" Jetstream shed the frilly dress and, with Fluttershy's help, carefully got Goldenblood on her back between her wings.

"You should... stay here. The six... with Luna. Symbolic..."

"Does he always talk this much?" Jetstream asked as she adjusted his weight.

"He is a very bad patient," Fluttershy said quietly as, together, they flew out of the side of the palace. The shadow and firework flashes hid them as they moved together out over the city.

"And not... a very good... escort... I'm sorry..." Goldenblood murmured with alarming weakness between gasps as they flew into the night amid fireworks and sparklers.

"That's okay. I'm not very good with big parties, anyway," Fluttershy replied as she flew close beside him. "But I'll take care of you, Golden. I'll take care of you."

oooOOOooo

As the memory faded away, I was left lying on my back in a bed, a blindfold wrapped across my eyes and tied in place. I lifted a hoof to push the blindfold away, only to find it restrained by a hoofcuff. I jerked all my limbs once, finding them all strapped down. I jerked again and again.

"Like the memory orb?" a mare said to my side, and I turned my head in her direction, my horn starting to glow to remove the blindfold. Something heavy tapped against my horn. "Don't. You hurt two of my nurses. Take off that blindfold and I'll smash your horn, then dump you outside for the ghouls. Understand?"

"Where are my friends? Who are you? Where am I?" I asked. If this was the Enclave, then I

was going to take them all apart or die trying.

The mare sighed. "Your friends are alive. Some of them are still in serious condition. My name is Doctor Triage. You're at the University. You're a guest of the Collegiate." There was a pause. "I'm going to remove your blindfold. Please stay calm. We almost killed you trying to sedate you earlier."

I felt the blindfold slowly tugged away, my eyes--my right eye; there was a bandage over my left--trying to focus on the mare before me. Everything was blurry, and sparkles danced in the corners of my vision as it struggled to focus on the grey unicorn with a blond mane. Her doctor's coat was speckled with blood. I gave a tug on my cuffs and she arched a brow skeptically. "Are you going to be able to follow my instructions and stay in bed?"

"I want to see my friends," I said as evenly as possible.

She sighed again. "Why does nopony ever listen to their doctor?" Walking to the door, she pushed it open. "I need a wheelchair, please," she called down the hall before returning to my bed. "Now, I want you to stay calm. We went through some rather extraordinary measures to try and save you. If you hadn't helped us at the Fluttershy clinic... well..."

"How is Glory?" I asked softly. See? Look at me being a picture of calm.

"She's stable, and in better shape than you are. You have severe biomagical contamination. The damage is extensive. We had to place you in the autonomous healing booth just to stabilize you long enough for surgery to remove the necrotic tissue and put you back in for a second run. Be glad the professor likes you. I don't recall her allowing anypony two trips through the tube before." She lifted a key with her magic. "I'm telling you all this because it took nearly six hours to put you back together. I don't want you to ruin all that work with an overdose of stupid." One by one, she removed the cuffs.

"I need to see my friends. Now," I said resolutely as I slowly rolled out of bed and onto the floor. Then I fought the urge to scream as my legs bent under me and I collapsed onto the yellowed tile. My legs bowed before my eyes! They weren't supposed to bend like that!

"You really need to listen to your doctor," she said as her blue magical glow wrapped around me and laid me back down on the bed. "Several of your bones have transformed into something the consistency of thick rubber. We're trying to find a treatment to strengthen your limbs. Fortunately, your spine, skull, pelvis, and ribs are still largely intact. Your legs, however..." And she gave a non-committal shrug as a white earth pony buck with a pink heart cutie mark trotted in pushing a wheelchair.

"Tell me Glory's condition. Were you..." I swallowed hard. How could I just ask if they could get her wing back on?

"We were able to stop the internal bleeding in the four of you. The alicorn... well... I won't hazard a guess as to her physiology. Rampage recovered on her own. She was the one who found us. Went right to the professor," Triage said as she carefully lifted me once more and put me in the chair. With my left eye covered by the bandage, I had to keep turning my head to see things. We exited into a far grimmer hospital hall than the Fluttershy clinic... but at least this one didn't have 'PLAY' written on the walls. She trotted ahead as the buck pushed me along. "Believe it or not, your injuries were by far the most severe. Physically, at least."

"Blackjack!" Rampage shouted, rushing down the hall and shoving aside anypony who got in her path like a filly avalanche. She slid on the tiles, and only Triage's magic stopped her from slamming into me. "How are you? They said you were stable, but... but... how are you?" she asked, her eyes huge and round. She put her weight on my knee, and I gritted my teeth as I felt it bend. She jerked her legs back, and the expression on her face somehow made the sensation even worse.

"I'm fine. We're going to check on Glory," I said as I brushed her mane. From the horrified look on her face, my heart began to thud limply in my chest. "What happened, Rampage?"

"I don't know. I don't remember anything after we went down those stairs. When I came to, we were on an elevator that opened up at a construction site near the university. I came straight here for help."

"She was very insistent," Triage said softly as she trotted ahead of us, "I think she swore a personal, unending, and eternal war of annihilation if we didn't help you right away. Fortunately, the professor agreed."

"I woulda too," Rampage replied with a scowl. Triage simply rolled her eyes with a huff.

"Rampage, how is Glory? You've seen her... haven't you?" I asked, and she quickly looked away as the orderly stopped pushing me. The other staff in the grimy ward watched me warily; given that I could shoot them with a look, that wasn't much of a surprise.

"I haven't been to see anypony except P-21," Rampage said softly. "I didn't want... you know... anything to happen." She bit her lip. "Since I woke up, I keep feeling... I don't think I'm safe... you know?" She looked at me with shame in her pink eyes before she quietly stepped back. Magic glowed around the wheelchair as Triage pushed me the last few feet into the dirty, dim, dank room.

Oh, Glory.

I wanted to weep as I saw her lying still in the decrepit hospital bed. A magical monitor beeped softly as she lay on her stomach with a blanket around her haunches. One gray wing lay slack at her side. The other... wasn't... I shook as I stretched out a hoof towards her, tears running down my cheeks as I watched my outstretched limb slowly droop as the muscles cramped. I hugged my leg to my chest as I looked at her, unconscious.

"You couldn't save her wing? Put her in the magical restoration thingy again..." I muttered thickly with a sniff, my body starting to shake. This was my fault. I had caused nothing but pain and misery in her life. "Do something! Please!" I said as I twisted and grabbed Triage's dirty medical coat between my hooves. "I'll do anything you want. Just fix her!"

The doctor just sighed. "We can't. When her wing was separated from her body, putrefaction began immediately. All that reached the top of the lift was bone, dead meat, and feathers."

"Give her Hydra! Something!" I begged, gritting my teeth as I felt my forelimbs bend. "I... I can't leave her like this."

Triage grunted in annoyed resignation. "Even if it could work, the amount of Hydra we'd have to use would probably induce such massive amounts of taint contamination that she'd be dead anyway. Just like you," she said as she lifted a clipboard.

"Contamination? Me?"

"I haven't seen taint corruption like yours in a long time. You should have seen your heart! We removed at least a half dozen tumors in your lungs and lymphatic systems. I can't even begin to guess what it's doing to your skeletal structure." She poked me in the chest with the clipboard. "You know what? Forget your bones," she said as her lips curled in an angry smirk, "I can't even begin to guess how it's fucking with your brain."

"My brain?" I muttered dully, receiving a look like I'd just proven her argument.

"The brain's an organ, and your organs are fucked. I'm having trouble finding biological systems that aren't compromised on some level. Muscles. Epidermis. Looks like your reproductive bits got lucky. That's about it, though," she said as she looked at the clipboard. "You know, a rare few might get exposed to taint and get some decent benefit from it like regeneration or the like. But most, like you, just die. Normally I wouldn't give a damn, but I spent a lot of time, energy, and good chems trying to piece you back together. The very least you can do is try to pretend like you're going to try and keep that hulk of meat you call a body in something vaguely resembling working condition."

"You don't get it," I said softly as I stared at Glory's unconscious form. "This is my fault. Going through the tunnels was my idea. I cost her her wings." Her wings. I might as well have lit her on fire and called it a day. "I have to make this right."

"You have to take care of yourself. You've got six months to live. Maybe a year. We removed the most blatant taint tumors, but there are others inside you, and--" I silenced her with a hard shake.

"Don't you understand, Doctor? I don't matter! All that matters is helping my friends. I die in a year, so what?! Glory will have to spend the rest of her life stuck on the ground because I took a tunnel and she followed me in." I clenched my eyes shut, trying to control my shaking. "I have to help her fly again. Tell me there's a way."

Triage staggered back out of reach, and I tumbled right out of the chair and sprawled on my face. "Incredible. I've heard DJ Pon3 talk about you, but I never thought it could possibly be true," she said as I tried to get my limbs under me. Triage lifted my chin with her hoof and stared into my eye with wonder. "How the fuck aren't you dead yet?" Her tone was one of marvel and sick disgust. "You're telling me that you seriously... sincerely... don't give a damn about yourself? That you're willing to die and rot so long as you're helping others? We should have just let you die and save ourselves the materials."

"Funny... I thought helping others was a good thing," I muttered, "you're the second doctor I've met who thought I was stupid for hurting myself to help others."

She stared into my eye and shook her head slowly. "What good is your help if it kills you? You think ponies won't need your help after you're gone? That your friends won't need you? If you don't take care of yourself, then all you're doing is a sick, masochistic suicide. And I don't waste my skill and effort on suicide cases."

She shoved me away, stood, and levitated me back into the chair. "As to your friend, I've only had two pegasus patients before her, neither with severed wings. I suggest that, if you want a more informed opinion, you can just crawl down the road to the Skyport and ask the pegasi there if they have some treatment for regrowing a wing, because I don't." And with that, she trotted out of the room.

I sat there for the longest time using my magic to nudge myself closer to the bed. I reached out, gently stroking her choppy amethyst mane as I dreaded when she'd finally wake. It was growing out quite fast. Pretty soon, it'd be thick enough for her to hide behind again.

A soft clearing of the throat made me look over at P-21. Rampage was curled up outside the door, looking as lost as I felt. "Hey," he said softly.

"Hey yourself." He looked wary. Scared. Worried for me. But I also noticed something else: he wasn't limping any more. I looked back and saw the brace was gone from his rear leg. "They fixed it?"

"Apparently, that regeneration booth is some heavy duty magic. Removed the scarring; I finally feel like I can walk without my leg falling off, which is good, because that Enervation almost fused my

entire leg," he said with a mirthless smile. "Scotch Tape and Lacunae are in a bad way. Scotch Tape had some major internal bleeding. I think, being younger, she was more susceptible to the magical fields. She's... not talking to anypony. And Lacunae just stands there. She'll follow you if you lead her, but that's about it." I closed my eyes. I didn't know how I could possibly help them. But I had to... I had to help them all.

"At least you're still with me," I said with a smile as I reached over to nudge his shoulder with my limp limb. But his sad smile melted away as he looked off to the side with a worried frown. "What? What is it?"

His blue eyes looked away at the wall, the door, Glory... anything that wasn't me. "I'm... I'm not sure I can keep doing this, Blackjack. I don't know why we keep throwing ourselves into harm's way over and over again. 99 is done. Throw EC-1101 in the river or down that shaft or something and let's go back to Chapel and have some kind of life again with no monsters or killing. Just a quiet life for as long as we can." He closed his eyes. "Priest is there. Sekashi. The Crusaders. Even Charity." He pressed his lips together and gave a snotty sniff. "I found someone that makes me feel whole and complete and... I don't want to lose it again. I was down in that hole and... I was going to die. I was going to lose it all forever and I almost let it happen. And if you keep on doing this..."

"You will," I said softly, feeling as though my rotting, worthless heart had been ripped from my chest and only a void remained inside. I closed my eyes, feeling the ache.

And what hurt the most was that he was right. I was cursed. I was like a walking ball of pain and misery, and everypony I encountered... good, bad, or otherwise... was smashed apart as I rolled along. I used to think that, if I kept my friends close, at least I could take the hurt myself. Catch the bullets with my damn hide. But I couldn't do that anymore. I'd tried to be strong, but I wasn't strong enough. I'd tried to be tough, but I wasn't tough enough.

Hell, I couldn't even take care of myself anymore.

"Well, then... as soon as you're all feeling better... you should go," I said. "Head back to Chapel. You're smart and clever; they'll need you if they're going to build that place right. Take Glory and Scotch Tape with you. Lacunae too. And Rampage, if they'll let her."

"But you won't be coming with us?"

"I can't," I said softly, closing my eyes. "There's something bad in Hoofington. Something... something bad that started a long time ago. Goldenblood did something... some plan or plot involving EC-1101." Besides, if I did go to Chapel, the trouble would follow me there, too.

"What does it matter, Blackjack? It was two hundred years ago."

"It matters!" I snapped, glaring at him. He looked shocked at my reaction, and I drew a shaky breath. "One thing I'm absolutely sure of is that Goldenblood didn't do anything that didn't matter. And I know... I just know deep in my soul that it's bad. Maybe it was that thing I shot with Folly. Maybe it's whoever Sanguine serves. I don't know. All I know is that somepony needs to stop it, or Hoofington will just keep killing. If the killing isn't going to stop, I can't give up."

He just stared at me with that sad-eyed gaze. "You're incredible, Blackjack. You really are... but I'm not. I'm sorry," he said quietly as he hung his head again.

"Don't be. It's the smart thing to do," I murmured quietly, "and you know me. I'm an idiot."

He sniffed as he rose to his hooves and quietly left the hospital room. I simply reached forward and stroked her cheek again, trying to ignore the bones bending in my leg. He was doing the right thing. He was a smart pony.

* * *

I don't know how long I sat there alone, listening to the monitor that beeped out her vitals minute after minute, hour after hour. Then I saw the tiny shift of her head. The hairs falling across her eyes as they slowly opened. She didn't look at me. She didn't have to. Her right wing lifted only an inch or two and fell back. Her left... the bandaged stub moved slightly. Her eyes slowly closed again, seeking that solace of oblivion as she started to weep broken, gasping sobs.

She'd taken the betrayal of her people, the loss of her cutie marks, the abandonment of her family; she'd suffered humiliation and terror and endured my selfish self-destructive desertion. Now she'd lost her fundamental self. I'd only ever reached the point where the Wasteland *almost* won, but that was me. Now the Wasteland was attacking my friends, and it was winning.

I stretched a hoof towards her, and she rolled away from me, pressing her face to the mattress as she wept as silently as she could. Slowly, I withdrew my limb, clenching my eyes shut as I felt a little ball of pain and rage constrict more and more inside me. Glory had fallen for real, and I had to find some way... any way... to make her better again. Drawing a slow and shaking breath, I stared at the back of her head.

Ante up.

I used my magic to turn the chair and wheel it back out into the hall. Rampage immediately jumped to her hooves. "How is she?" My look was answer enough. I'd been told I had a shooty look. Right now, I expected I had a balefire bomb look going.

Unfortunately, the orderlies didn't seem to quite catch on as they trotted up. "Doctor Triage said to take you back to your room."

I didn't look at him. I was too busy trying to burn a hole through his chest with my stare alone. "I need my gear, now."

He laughed. "Your gear? You can't even support your own weight. How..." And then my horn flashed and blasted the wall beside his head. He staggered to the side, staring at me in shock. "You're crazy!"

"Then don't fuck with me. My gear. Get it," I said as I rolled the wheel chair past him. He, however, seemed to feel the need to play hero and kicked over the chair, sending me sprawling. He yelled for help as I rolled onto my chest. He hadn't been wrong; my legs weren't supporting me. They bent and flopped as I tried to rise. Oh yeah, and they hurt... a lot. "Rampage, can you find my stuff?"

"Sure, Blackjack. But what are you going to do?"

"What my doctor recommended," I said as I looked down the hall. She trotted off quickly.

If I couldn't walk, then I'd crawl. I opened each door and checked the contents. Bathroom. Bathroom. Office. Locked. My horn reached out to the next lock and twisted without finesse, but it clicked open. My luck seemed to be holding for now. Opening the door, I looked at the medical supplies in nice neat rows. Including a metal box with four leg braces. I tried not to smile as I saw that one of them had a tag reading 'Stable-Tec: #99'. Carefully, I buckled each brace tightly on its appropriate limb.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered as I lifted myself to my hooves. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't comfortable. It wasn't easy, but at least I was standing on my own.

P-21 and Rampage appeared in the doorway. "What do you think you're doing?" P-21 asked me as he saw me standing in the braces.

"Going to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I replied as I levitated my barding and started to strap it into place over the braces.

"You're going to the Enclave?" He stared at me as I nodded and checked my shotgun. "Is this a suicidal relapse?"

I loaded the weapon with buckshot, slung it, and moved on to check Vigilance. "Nope. I'm coming back. That's part of the plan. There's only one thing I know that will help her, and it isn't me," I muttered softly as I pointed the pistol and scowled. My depth perception was all futzed up. I tore off the bandages, but it didn't help. Then I saw the horrified looks on their faces. "What?"

"Your eye," Rampage muttered.

I trotted past them into the bathroom and stared in the mirror. The right side of my face looked fine. The left... raw red lines formed a Y meeting right over my eye socket. A raw and bloody hole lay where my eye should have been. I sighed as I stared at myself; I didn't even look like Blackjack anymore. I looked like some old, scarred Wasteland raider. "Well, fuck," I muttered. What else could I say?

"Blackjack, don't go. Take some time to recover," P-21 said softly.

"I thought you were going back to Chapel," I replied as I walked past him, the braces clicking beneath me. *That was a cheap ass shot, Blackjack.* I stopped, bowing my head a little. "I have to go. I have to help her. Don't you see? If we'd just let her go after we left weather station four... she never would have gotten hurt. She didn't deserve any of this. So I'm going to find the only thing in the Wasteland I think can help, or I am going to go stark raving mad." I glanced back over my shoulder at him. "I don't expect either of you to come with me. In fact, you should be going back to Chapel. The further you are from me, the safer you'll be."

Without another word, I left my friends behind. Where they were safe.

* * *

Nopony tried to stop me on my way to the exit. I drew every look, though, as I stepped out into the foggy day. Great, as if Hoofington's normal drizzle wasn't bad enough. Six gray four-story granite buildings rose around a yellowed rectangular field filled with scrapped military vehicles, tents, and cargo containers. Barricades had been built across the gaps with bits of steel and rubble. Turrets atop the corners of the buildings pointed out at the Wasteland, moving slowly as they tracked for hostile targets.

"I think you might be the second worst patient I've ever had," the doctor said as she trotted out after me into the rain, pulled a cigarette from her pocket, and put it between her lips. A little flash ignited the tip. "You know, there's at least three ponies here fighting for the chance to get first dibs at studying your corpse? I don't think we've ever had a pony exposed to the degrees of Enervation, radiation, and taint you've been."

"Sorry to disappoint them," I said as I continued through the clammy gray mist. "Which way to the Skyport?"

"The Skyport?" Triage's eyes narrowed. "You seriously think the Volunteer Corps is going to help you? Your friend is a Dashite. I saw the brand." I gave her a shooty look, but, to her credit, she didn't look away. Maybe it was only half as effective with one eye.

"I only need help from one of them. They'll tell me where to find them," I said, my braces clattering softly with every step. "If not, I'll make enough noise that they'll come find me. Now, which way is it?" I asked as I looked around... though it wasn't as if there were signs saying 'Enclave this way'.

Triage just took one long look at me standing there before her and sighed as she pulled out the cigarette and pointed the burning tip towards a scrap metal gate. "Go out the north gate by the planetarium. Watch for ghouls. When you hit Celestia Boulevard, go east. It's about five or six miles." She put the cigarette in her mouth. "You're really going? Alone?"

"I'm not going to get any more ponies hurt following me," I said firmly.

She just sighed, and her horn pulled a black eyepatch from her coat pocket. "Here. Put this on. At least try to keep an infection out of that socket," she said as she floated it in place and tied it over my missing eye.

I smirked, then started as a pony trotted abruptly into my field of vision on my left. Okay... this was going to take some getting used to. "So, I guess this makes me a one-eyed Blackjack."

"I think that taint's given you some hardcore brain damage," she said as she looked at me with a shake of her head. "Fine. I'll just let you know that the professor wants to talk with you before you go. Chat with her or don't. She's in the planetarium, if you care. Second floor." She trotted back towards the 'School of Medicine' building behind me.

I sighed and made my way across the muddy field towards the large domed structure on the north end. I stopped by a merchant working out of a burned out bus and converted most of the junk in my saddlebags into specialty ammo for my shotgun. The healing potions in stock looked absolutely pitiful, but they would probably be okay for a few more days.

No time to waste; I'd talk when I got back. The guards at the gate were pathetic, but I had to admit that the energy turrets they had rigged looked formidable enough. They gave me incredulous looks as I passed by. "Good luck," one of them muttered just before the door slammed shut behind me.

Once past the razed ruins around the Collegiate's base, I found myself almost lost in the mist. Grim gray buildings were simply dark patches till I moved close enough to their shattered remains. Broken statues reared in silent poses in the mist, and I could swear that they were watching me. There was other debris, too, largely in the form of rusting sky carriages. Cold gray patches of water sat like glazed mirrors between the crumbling buildings on the edge of the campus.

Then I heard a shot. And another. And another. Distant and... hard to tell the direction in the muffling mist. Then there was an inequine scream. And another. And another. Suddenly, I heard the splashing... much closer. I twisted my head in time to see a mottled black-and-red boiled pony lunge out of the fog at me. I brought my shotgun up to its neck to block its lunging bite, forcing me to push back with my forehooves as its splintered and jagged teeth chomped at the air before my face.

S.A.T.S. and two magic bullets exploded that head with a spray of rotting matter. I whirled in time to face two more as I set my braced legs and focused on blasting instead of running. My shotgun roared, the buckshot ripping into their soft, pulpy bodies and stripping rotting flesh from yellowed bone. As soon as they dropped, I reloaded, bringing out the sword as more raced at me.

I didn't really know how to fight with a sword, so I treated it like a baton. A disturbingly sharp baton. The razor edge cut into them quite nicely, and once or twice I was even lucky enough to hew off limbs. The shotgun rendered their skulls to bloody goo. My braced legs clicked and strained under my barding as they bit and snapped at any limb they could get their mouths on.

"Why..." I shouted over the hissing and snapping. I brought the sword down and split the leathery hide of one ghoul's face. "Are ghouls..." I cut the blade horizontally across another's throat and was rewarded with its head arcing off completely. "Always..." I pressed the shotgun to another's chest and, with a sickening pop, blasted rotten guts and rancid organs out of its torso. Another shot to the face finished it. "Hungry?!" I yelled as I emptied the last two shells into one trying to chew through both brace

and barding on my hind leg.

More and more came at me, and soon I was forced to move as they flanked me. Whatever the reason inside their feral brains, I was food. Better still, I was slow food! I just couldn't move as fast or smoothly with the braces on. Their undead jaws and broken hooves pummeled my already not quite intact body, and I was firing as fast as I could reload while slashing wildly behind me with the sword. I was lucky I didn't cut my own tail off! The flechette rounds, however, proved my salvation. The razor sharp darts shredded the pulpy flesh even more efficiently than buckshot! With their gray flesh rendered to reeking goo, they fell one after the next.

Then, as fast as they had appeared, the last one fell. I gasped for breath, turning this way and that. There were red bars still in the fog, but for the moment I wasn't being attacked. I wiped their gunk off the sword, reloaded with flechettes, and continued along the broken road north.

I wasn't alone anymore either. The Dealer trotted along beside me. "You sure about this, Blackjack?"

"It's not like last time. I'm not going to die. I'm going to get help for my friend," I said as I trotted along a flooded street through the fog. There were more gunshots ahead, more ponies I'd probably have to kill.

"Alone?"

"It's better this way. This way, the only pony who gets hurt is me. I have to walk it alone," I replied, feeling the hollow inside me. "P-21 knows it. He's the only one brave enough to admit it."

For a while, he said nothing as we walked side by side. "You ever think... maybe you should just accept what happened to her?"

I really wished that I could shoot him. Really. "Accept what? That Glory will never fly again? No. I can't accept that." I kept my eye locked straight ahead. There were more red marks that way, too.

"Maybe you'll have to."

"Shut up!" I screamed at him. "What is the point of you? I'm fucked up enough in the head without having my stupid brain telling me what I already know. I've accepted that I'm the cunt that cost her everything. Now I'm going to give something back to her. The only thing that I can give back to her."

The gunshots were becoming louder, and then I came across them: two ponies trapped on a second story ledge accessible only by a thin ramp of debris. It was the only thing keeping them alive as a dozen or so ghouls slowly crawled up towards them. Their low caliber rifle was barely adequate for radroaches and bloatsprites, and feral ghouls... Soon as they got tired or ran out of bullets, they'd be ghoulish chow...

I didn't care.

As I stared at the scene... I realized that I didn't care that they were going to die. I didn't know those two ponies. I didn't need to help them. I didn't want to help them. I could simply back away, go around, and get to the Skyport to help the one pony that did need my help. Even if I did help them, they would probably shoot me. Or I'd have to escort them back to the university. Or worse... they'd want to hang around me.

In that instant, I stopped being Security. I was just another Wasteland scavenger, tainted and corrupted and putting myself first. I might not have had a clue what my virtue was, but at this moment I knew I didn't have it. I slowly backed away, looking for a way around. A blue pegasus inside my head was very put out with me. They all were. This was the antithesis of awesome.

I heard one of the mares calling for help. I clenched my eye shut, tapping the barrel of my gun against my forehead. "Yup... She's right, Blackjack. You're brain damaged... it's the only explanation!"

With a scream, I charged... okay, trotted rapidly towards... the mass of ghouls, firing cones of razor sharp metal into the wheeling, hissing creatures. A few of the glowing variety received S.A.T.S.-guided magic rounds into their noggins. The rest were slowly abraded away by shotgun flechettes. The swinging blade kept them at bay as I reloaded and resumed tearing out chunk after chunk of dead pony flesh.

Finally, I blew the legs out from under the last ghoul. My horn throbbed so badly that I wondered if it would go the way of my eye and just explode or something. Then the pink unicorn mare poked her head out, levitating the rifle at me warily. A bloody earth pony mare peeked out next to her.

Then so did two foals.

"Thank the Goddesses. It's Security. Security saved us!" she exclaimed as she lifted the rifle from me. With a clatter my legs gave out beneath me and I fell soundly on my rump as the four scrambled down the narrow ramp towards me. The brown earth pony mare's battle saddle had gotten twisted and fouled, the hunting rifles pointing uselessly beneath her. The pink unicorn paused, looking worried again. "Are you all right, Security Mare?"

No. I almost let you die. I nearly trotted off to let you and her and your young become lunch for ghouls. "Yeah. Sure. No problem. No big deal for me," I said with a grimace. "Are you heading south?"

"Mhmmm," the brown mare said with an enthusiastic nod. "The Eggheads have a book bounty; one hundred caps for any pre-war book that's undamaged. It's tough to find books that aren't pulped, though."

"Well, I fought a bunch of ghouls a little bit ago between here and the college. If you hurry, it should still be clear." I looked at the brown mare's rifles. "Want to trade rifle rounds for shotgun shells?"

"Twenties?" The pink unicorn asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "Twelves."

"We don't have many twelve gauges..." the unicorn said as she levitated out a half full cardboard box. "Just buckshot..."

"I'll trade you thirty rounds of hunting ammo for them." Almost two for one, but who was using math?

"We've also got fresh food from the Enclave," the brown unicorn added. I felt a chill go down my spine.

"I'll buy every bit you have. Three bullets each," I said without hesitation. I had plenty of ammo... and hopefully they hadn't eaten any of it. Looking confused, they agreed. The four hurried to the south, eager to get to the shelter of the Eggheads. I waited till they disappeared in the fog and dumped four apples, three carrots, and a head of lettuce into the mud. Then narrowing my eyes I smashed them all to mush.

Maybe they weren't contaminated. I wasn't going to take that risk. I wasn't going to let there be another 99. Checking my shotgun, I continued my path north.

* * *

The fog never lifted so much as thinned into tattered swirls and chest-high banks. The mucky,

broken road underhoof sloshed with every step. This area had a different feel from the ruins around Riverside. There were smaller homes of stone and rotten wood instead of the large apartment buildings. Upscale, but not nearly as opulent as Blueblood Manor. This region hadn't suffered a direct hit from a bomb, but there was more than enough radiation in the water to prohibit long term habitation.

Oh, yeah. And there were leeches.

Every few minutes, I'd have to flick them off my barding with the sword. Their chisel teeth gnawed at the ceramic plates, and every now and then they were tenacious enough to get at my hide underneath. It didn't matter how many of the things I killed, more were always wiggling through the water. Thorny briars wound around the stones, and there were strange mushrooms growing in the cracks. Deep croaks periodically shot out, making me jump. The skitter of radroaches and the buzz of bloatflies were everywhere. I'd finally found a place around Hoofington teeming with wildlife, and all I wanted was to drop a balefire bomb on it.

Wait... teeming with life?

I paused, feeling something nibbling at my hoof. Maybe a little bit of Glory had rubbed off on me, but I levitated out a healing potion and held it before my eye. In my experience, a healing potion only lasted a few days after being brewed by a unicorn with the healing spells. It'd been milky purple when I'd purchased it. After three hours, I expected the color to fade a little or maybe for it to become more transparent. Instead, I found it still milky purple.

I looked to the west; here, it was impossible to tell where the river ended and the marsh began, but the black towers of the Core were still visible. Conventional wisdom was that Enervation was the result of magical contamination, that too many experiments and spells and bombs and worse had just created this energy that sucked the life out of everything. If it didn't kill you, it'd sicken you till something else did. But what kind of accidents or magical contamination could have produced that cave with Enervation so strong it made Glory's wing simply drop off?

Ow... I lifted my hoof to see a black leech the size of my horn chewing into the base of my hoof. Flicking it off with my sword, and batting its friends off as well, I kept moving. My depth perception was lousy. Past twenty or so feet I was all right, and inside three feet I could guesstimate, but between those two, things were off. I wondered if it'd been the taint that'd gotten my eye, or the Enervation..

The Enervation was strongest within the Core. Maybe something had happened that made it originate there? The magic shields or something reacting with the megaspells going off under the city. Maybe one of those megaspells had been an Enervation spell?

Except Chapel... the Arena... this bog... they were practically next door to the Core but had green things still growing. Meanwhile, places like Flankfurt were miles and miles from the city but were virtually sterilized by the Enervation fields. Could a megaspell nuke the city core itself and splash across the entire area at random? I couldn't envision it. And one would think that, after two centuries, the Enervation fields would weaken; it would require some sort of heavy duty megaspell-level magic to keep them going after all that time. "But I never hear DJ Pon3 talking about Enervation away from Hoofington. So it's not something natural, either..."

I rubbed my eyepatch. Maybe having my brains rotting was making me smarter? How's that for irony? "If it's not accidental... and not something that happened in the Core... there must be some other source of Enervation." But what? Even my taint-riddled brain wasn't figuring that out.

Then there was a splash as a frog twice the size of my hoof landed next to me. It swam onto a grimy rock and climbed atop it, facing me with green glowing eyes as it let out a low croak.

"Ribbit to you too," I muttered as I kept walking.

It followed, hopping from rock to rock as it kept pace with me. I stopped. It stopped. I moved. It moved. "Okay. As Scotch would say, creepiness factor rising." My mane was giving it a 6.2 on the itchiness factor. It let out another long low croak, and two more swam over to climb onto the stones. These two were even larger than the first. In unison, they let out another long croak. Creepiness factor approaching shooty levels...

Then a pair of briar bushes were shoved aside, and a massive frog easily the size of four ponies pushed its head out. "Braaawwoorrkkkk!" it croaked, and then opened its mouth wide. Long yellow fangs glistened as its tongue shot out and connected with my barding. It stuck fast, and I was nearly dragged completely off my hooves as the muscle contracted. My hooves slid through the muck towards that pony-sized maw.

"I do not need this right now!" Sword met tongue in desperate slashes, but the flesh was almost as tough as cable. I'd nearly been dragged completely into its mouth before the tongue severed. Steadying myself, I brought the shotgun up and blasted it, but the peppering darts didn't seem to do more than irritate the monstrous frog.

Its bloody tongue disappeared into its mouth and, with an enormous splash, it launched itself into the air. If the meal doesn't come to the froggy... My braces clattered as I barely staggered aside and reloaded flechettes. These didn't appear much better than the buckshot. As I watched, yellow bile seemed to ooze from the frog's wounds, and they were healing almost before my eyes! Okay. Shotgun wasn't working. I couldn't get enough range for the rifle. I had no idea where its weak points might be.

Crap.

The giant frog gave a short hop and rammed me. The yellow ichor burned where it touched, and I kept moving back more and more. The water was getting deeper, and it was moving me around towards the river, its bulbous green eyes never leaving me. It knew exactly what it was doing; once I was swimming more than walking, I'd be easy prey.

Well... since they were the only things I could see... I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted a blast at each round eye. But as I fired, the eyes retracted into the critter's skull! "Cheater!" I shouted and pulled off a hoof-sized leech, then tossed it into its mouth. It bit down, and I watched the black slug nearly liquefy instantly in its acidic spittle. Glad I hadn't tried the 'let it eat me and shoot it from the inside' plan!

"Not good," I said as I tossed leech after leech into its mouth. Okay, technically this was feeding rather than fighting, but so long as I wasn't eaten myself I was still okay. I even managed to scramble into shallower water, but the giant frog looked like it was getting bored with appetizers.

Its tongue flashed out again and smooshed against my chest, the tip fully healed. I dug in my hooves, but it simply waddled towards me, ignoring my frantic shots.

"Get down!"

My ears swiveled behind me; it couldn't be! *Thump...*

I dropped into the muck as a grenade flew over my back and into its mouth. Its eyes bulged, "Brrrooo..." And then it exploded in great bloody chunks. I rose from the churned water, a leech wiggling across my face looking for something to bite for a second before I tossed it aside. Then I looked back behind me at P-21 walking through the chest-deep muck. He slung Persuasion as he trotted through the muck at me.

"Are you okay?" P-21 asked as he put a hoof on my shoulder. I stared at him for a long moment, then hugged him close.

"I thought you were doing the smart thing and going back to Chapel?" I sniffed.

He flushed, looking away. "You're not the only one who's allowed to do stupid things."

"But..." I looked around at all the mud and fog around us. "How did you find me?"

"I didn't," he said softly, "she did."

I looked back at Scotch Tape rising from some rushes, looking at her PipBuck sheepishly. She looked shaky and scared but trying to keep up a brave face. "Well... like you said. We're all... all messed up. I just didn't think you should be... you know... messed up alone."

I looked at the rest of the weeds and thorns. "Is Rampage..."

"Staying behind with Glory and Lacunae," P-21 finished. Then he bowed his head as he pressed his lips together. Finally he said softly, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry I was weak."

I stared at him, and some hateful, petty part of myself wanted to rub it in. Hurt him. Four little ponies went to work beating the living snot out of that shameful part of myself as I walked to him and nudged his shoulder with a smile. "You weren't weak. You were smart. Being around me will get you killed." We trotted back to Scotch.

"Anypony can die," Scotch Tape muttered as she looked at the mucky water beneath her. "Even Mom wasn't safe in the stable..."

"But... I led you into those tunnels. It's my fault..."

"You led, Blackjack. We followed. You didn't make us do anything." He took a deep breath. "Chapel will be there whenever we're done. Till then... well..." He gave a shy smile and a helpless little shrug. Then he blinked as he caught the look of disgust on my face. "What?" Then he looked at the matching expression on Scotch Tape's muzzle. "What is it?" He suddenly blinked and his eyes went flat. "There's a leech on my butt, isn't there?" We slowly nodded. "More than one?" Another nod. "Big ones?"

"Uh huh..." Scotch said weakly.

He looked back. A blood curdling cry echoed through the mire.

"We have got to get you some decent barding," I muttered, launching a black bloodsucker into the mist. Once we had them all off his rear, Scotch Tape hopped onto his back and we continued north, passing by the corpse of the giant frog. A dozen smaller amphibians were already having a cannibalistic feast. "Enjoy your lunch," I called out to them.

"Thannnnks," one of the larger ones croaked in reply. I think that all three of our manes stood on end before we raced away from the scene as fast as my clattering legs would carry me.

* * *

"So, that's the plan?" P-21 said skeptically as we walked along the Celestia Boulevard.

"It's all I could come up with," I replied, keeping my eye on the long ago looted shops and smashed cafés. We weren't quite clear of the bog or the fog banks.

Scotch Tape blinked up at the mists. "Why is it so foggy and rainy here at the same time?"

"Probably the Enclave," I replied, glad it didn't obscure my E.F.S. I hadn't seen anything red in

fifteen minutes.

"It would make it harder for somepony to take pot shots as they fly in and out of the Skyport," P-21 speculated. "Also, nopony would be able to keep track of them."

"Yeah, but it's still depressing," Scotch Tape said, and then started as she pointed to the side. "Somepony's over there!"

I looked at the blue bars. "Relax. They're not hostile." Not yet, anyway.

The bars belonged to four bedraggled mares and one buck. They had filthy sacks and patched saddlebags filled to bulging with more junk than I could imagine. "Stay back!" the buck warned as the mares readied flimsy shovels, pry bars, and a cracked baseball bat. They also looked ready to run for their lives.

"No trouble!" I said, making sure my guns were away.

"They're Red Eye's slavers!" one of the mares squealed, "they found us!"

But the buck looked at my barding. "No. That's Security." At once, the five relaxed, and the tension left the three of us as well. "Sorry. We... I... um... never thought we'd see you."

"We're on our way to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I said, trying to look as friendly as I could. "You thought we were slavers?"

The buck cleared his throat. "Ever since Red Eye took over Paradise, the slavers have been out in force. You join him willingly, and he gives you a gun and sends you to the Everfree. Otherwise... well... you disappear for good in Fillydelphia. Scrapyard was completely wiped out this morning. Even with three VC soldiers, we couldn't fight them."

"VC soldiers fighting Red Eye?" I asked. Gasp, were the Enclave really doing something to help? Something that actually *mattered*?

"Well, they were when we fled, though Red Eye's griffins were all over them. I don't think Scrapyard had a chance," the buck muttered darkly.

"You're from Scrapyard?" I asked, looking at their bags of junk. They nodded warily. "Where are you going?"

"The pegasi trade food for ordinary junk," one of the mares said, sounding somewhat baffled. I squirmed inside, but seeing how slat ribbed these five ponies were...

"Do a lot of ponies eat the Enclave food?" P-21 asked.

"It's the only food if a pony wants to avoid taint. You can eat hoppers and leeches, but you'll be tainted in a few years," the mustard-colored buck said with clear distaste. "Otherwise, it's preserved food or Society food."

P-21 nodded thoughtfully. "With taint in the water, any plants that live get contaminated. That eventually builds up in whatever eats the tainted matter." I sighed, remembering a lone dragon with the only hope to someday rid Equestria of that poison.

"Ugh. Why does anypony actually live in Hoofington? This place is like a butt and butt sandwich with extra butt on the side," Scotch Tape groaned.

"I'd go back to Gutterville, if I could... not sure if it's still there, with Red Eye, but still... better than here," one of the mares opined. I had to agree, though my home was currently saturated with chlorine

gas.

* * *

"Food trade, medical aid, or other business?" the bored puce pegasus asked from behind her counter as we shuffled through the Skyport gate. The huge rusting hulks of several massive skywagons formed an impenetrable wall along the remains of the chain link fence. If it took two pegasi to lift a Vertibuck, then I imagined it would take teams of pegasi to pull one of these from Manehattan to Hoofington. I'd thought that the fog would lighten up the closer to the airport we got, but everything here was shrouded in mist so thick that you couldn't see twenty feet in front of your nose. From the blue bars on my E.F.S., I could tell there was somepony overhead. It made my mane twitch.

"Food trade," each of the ponies from Scrapyard said in soft, respectful tones. "And medical... please." The puce pegasus pressed her lips together tightly as she issued them each a green collar and red collar.

"Follow the green lines to the trading station. Follow the red lines to the medical station. Next!" she snapped, sending the ponies following lines painted on the cracked tarmac. Then her eyes took one look at me and widened in shock. "You! You- you- you-"

I trotted to the counter, leaning against it, eye staring into hers as she stammered. "Other business," I said with a grin.

"You... you can't be here. You're that... that terrorist," she said as she licked her lips. I could make out vague outlines in the mist atop the skywagon hulks to either side of the gate.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," I said in an even, calm, civilized, not-going-to-shoot-you-unless-I-have-to voice.

"What are you here for, then?" she asked, swallowing and looking at P-21 and Scotch Tape as if they were going to suddenly pull out death rays and start blowing things up at random.

"I'm looking for the pony in charge. If you'll tell me where to go, I'll get out of your mane and let you get back to boring everyday work." I smiled as comfortably as possible. Okay... maybe there was just a little shootiness in my grin.

She looked at two other mares processing the visitors, then swallowed and pulled out three yellow collars. "Please put these on." I glanced at P-21, levitated them over each of our heads, then smiled at her again. My cooperation seemed to disturb her even more. Sometimes, you just couldn't please a paranoid pegasus pony. "T... this way," she said as she left the counter and followed a yellow path painted on the ground. I had to admit, it was an efficient way to manage ponies. Anypony on the wrong trail would get noticed right away.

"Thank you," P-21 said softly, but the puce mare jumped anyway.

"Come again?" she asked in confusion. A Vertibuck landed beside us in eerie silence, and Scotch Tape gaped at the missile pods and energy cannons.

He glanced at me and Scotch. "Thank you for helping these ponies," he elaborated.

"Oh. That." Her nervousness gave way to a little irritation. "You're welcome... I guess." She looked sharply at Scotch Tape. "Stay clear of the Vertibuck, please."

"Something the matter?" I asked, watching as the pegasi started to load the Vertibuck with what appeared to be heaps of scrap metal and other junk.

She shook her head a moment as if trying to think of something to say that wouldn't get her shot.

“Just.. not how I imagined it. Always hungry ponies... always sick... dirty... smelly... a lot of them crazy or violent,” she said, then swallowed. “I just thought it’d be... I dunno... different.”

What did she expect? A nice orderly stablemeet? “This is the Wasteland. And this is the Hoof. Worst of the worst. I almost got eaten by a giant frog just an hour ago. A frog. How crazy is that?” And before that, I was nearly eaten by a mechanical abomination. She looked a little uncertain, and I gave a half smile. “So, if there’s any place in all the Wasteland that needs your help, this is it. It’s really appreciated.” She brightened a little, and while she wasn’t exactly friendly, she stopped twitching at my every move.

The yellow line led to the terminal, and once inside, I felt my spirits lift immensely. That perpetual fog was gloomy, even for Hoofington. Once inside I saw a number of terminals, monitors, and, of course, pegasi of all colors flying around the large open-aired building. Somepony had hung a banner across the ‘Rainbow Dash’ part of ‘Rainbow Dash Skyport’ that now read ‘Thunderhead’. A cloud split in half by a lightning bolt motif was on every crate and terminal.

There were also flaws. Most of the ponies I saw looked tired, unwashed, and strained. Weapons were of poor quality and everypony wore threadbare uniforms. There was a general feel of malaise and frustration in the air.

I saw a grand total of three suits of power armor, and they were looking more like they were keeping an eye on the pegasi than looking for trouble. More than a few looked almost afraid of the scorpion tailed armored ponies standing above them with their beam rifles. I also wasn’t much of an engineer, but the Thunderhead power armor looked... fancier than the power armor of the Neighvarro Enclave. More little flashy bits and a shinier finish made me wonder if their armor was newer.

I had to admit, the disintegration rifles following me really made me wish they weren’t nearly so fancy.

The puce pegasus led me to an office door marked ‘Security’; that made me smile. “Lieutenant? That... um... it’s the... ah...” She glanced at me. “Terrorist? The one who attacked Miramare?”

“Terrorist. You blow up one Vertibuck, and suddenly everypony’s convinced that you’re a complete monster,” I muttered dryly.

“You did *what*?” Scotch Tape and P-21 asked in unison.

“Didn’t I tell you about that?” I blinked at their surprise. Then again, with everything I had to tell him earlier, I might have left that little detail out. “They shot first, you know. I was merely defending myself,” I said primly.

“Funny. Didn’t you geld a buck ‘defending yourself’?” P-21 asked. Scotch Tape gawked, covering her mouth with her hooves as she blushed and started giggling.

I tried to maintain my dignified posture. “That was different. I was drunk. And singing. I got carried away.”

“You do that a lot,” a mare said from within the office. The puce mare stepped aside as I slowly trotted into the office. It couldn’t be...

The navy mare behind the desk narrowed her eyes as she looked at me evenly. “Sergeant Wind Whisper,” I greeted her. The puce mare stammered her farewells and quickly stepped out, closing the door once we’d entered. Behind the sergeant flashed a dozen screens showing various sections of the Skyport. I was disappointed not to see the pony I was after in any of them.

“It’s ‘Lieutenant’, now, though being a lieutenant in the Volunteer Corps is like being captain of a

griffin dung cleanup crew. After Miramare, a lateral transition was called for by my superior," she said as she glanced at P-21 and Scotch. "I don't see your Dashite friend. A report was filed that she was dead, but, oddly enough, every report on your activities always has you in the company of a gray Dashite with a purple mane and matching eyes."

"You've been spying on me?"

"After all that you've done?" She laughed, "Of course. I have a pony on staff whose job is to keep track of all five of you. You destroyed a Vertibuck with an unknown weapon of frankly terrifying destructive power. I'd be an idiot to not keep track of you," she said as she stood and trotted to the fridge to get a small wire basket with six Sparkle-Colas. "Not an easy job, since our last report had you in Chapel yesterday, and yet here you are. I'm dying to know how you and that Dashite travelled without being detected," she said as she passed out one to each of us. "Really? Chopping her mane, putting on some barding, and calling herself 'Fallen Glory'?"

"Yeah, I guess that wasn't the best of disguises," I agreed, rubbing the back of my head awkwardly as I popped the caps off our bottles and swept them into my pouch, adding sternly, "But she's not a Dashite, Wind Whisper. She's still loyal to the Enclave." I looked at her steadily. She seemed to be staring at me. "What?"

She frowned as she rolled the bottle back and forth between her hooves. "Nothing. You just seem... different." I wondered if it was the mud, the fact that I had more scars on me than a masochistic raider, or the leech holes chewed in my armor.

"It's the eye. Once you lose an eye, it throws everything off," I replied with a snort.

The corner of her mouth twitched in a half smile. "Not that. When we first met, I thought you were an idiot."

"Can't imagine why," P-21 muttered.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now... I can almost believe what that radio personality said about you," she said as she leaned back a little.

Habazawa? "What did DJ Pon3 say about me? When?"

"Two days ago," she replied, looking surprised that I didn't know. It wasn't like I always kept my radio tuned to the station. She reached over to the terminal on her desk and started typing. A moment later, DJ Pon3's voice crackled to life. "You know, I'd go to jail for listening to this back in Thunderhead," she said as she sat back.

"...like to take a moment to talk about a word I hear thrown around a lot. 'Hero.' I know. I know. I can hear you from here: 'But DJ, you use that all the time.' I know, my little ponies, but let me tell you exactly what I mean when I use the word. In Postapocalyptia, everypony struggles to stay alive and to protect whatever they can. Sometimes it's all a pony can do to get by for themselves, let alone their children. And it's even tougher if they can survive while preserving their sanity and decency. Not everypony can.

"But, every once in a while, a pony comes along willing and able to give something of their own to help preserve the life of some somepony who can't make it. Sometimes, it's nothing more than a bottle of purified water to a thirsty soul. Sometimes, it's a kind word to somepony who's been living hard and rough for too long. And sometimes... just sometimes... it's a pony willing to take a bullet so somepony else doesn't have to. Who deals bloody vengeance to anypony who thinks that other ponies are fair game. Who's willing to give their life, just because they can.

"I know you probably think I mean just the Stable Dweller, but she's not alone. There's her friends as well, fighting the good fight beside her. There's ponies from Trottingham to Stalliongrad willing to give their own pain and suffering to make life a little better. And there's some ponies called to sacrifice things that you or I never imagined. Some of you may recall a few days back about an army of psycho raiders rampaging all over the northwest corner of Hoofington. I know most of you get the jitters just thinking about them, but when we're talking Hoofington raiders, they won't kill you. They'll eat you, and worse. That's right. A hundred or more bloodthirsty, pony-eating psychos spreading out with nothing to stop them.

"Nothing, that is, but the Security Mare. She went right to the heart of their territory and stopped them cold. Now I know what you might be saying: 'give me a few crates of ammo and some guns and I'd do the same.' But what you folks don't realize... what I didn't realize... was that those raiders weren't just a bunch of psychopaths. They were a stable full of hundreds of ponies all looking to treat the Wasteland as their personal buffet. And not only that children... you see that stable? It was Security's home.

"She didn't just stop hundreds of ponies willing to kill, rape, and pillage. She stopped her friends. Her family. Everypony she'd ever known before leaving to bring justice to the Hoof. All to help ponies who a few days earlier had hounded and hunted her for a whole mess of bottlecaps. And that, my little ponies, is what I mean when I use the word hero. If there are ponies able to do that then what excuse do any of us have not to give a bottle of water if we can spare it, or a kindly word if we can share one?

"Food for thought, children. This is DJ Pon3, bringing you the truth... no matter how bad it hurts."

I stood there a moment, stunned as Wind Whisper just watched me. That wasn't the truth! She'd left out that they weren't raiders yet! That I tried to kill myself along with them! What the hell, Homage, how can you call that the truth?

"It's true," Scotch Tape said quietly and I jerked, looking at her with my heart pounding in my chest and feeling my breath catch in my throat. "They all went crazy... killing and eating and... worse. And she stopped them."

No. That's not how it happened! I murdered them! I killed foals!

"And I doubt even the Enclave could have stopped them. They were set to sweep all across Hoofington," P-21 said quietly as I bowed my head, shaking and making the braces clatter. I clenched my eye shut. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't. I was just a stupid mare too dumb to die, too stubborn to kill myself, and stupid enough to throw myself in harm's way over and over again.

"I see," Wind Whisper said in a softer, less cynical voice. "Well then... in light of that... what can the Enclave do for you, Security?"

Think of Glory. Remember the plan. Pull yourself together and do it right for a change! I fought to get my heart and breathing under control, but the organs weren't quite working like they should as I looked at the blue pegasus in her black uniform. "My friend is hurt. Badly. She... lost her wing."

"Impossible!" Wind Whisper blurted, looking disturbed, her own wings fluttering a little behind her as she scowled at me in disbelief. "You'd need a chainsaw or something to..." And her disbelief fell away as my eye drilled into hers.

"I remember a pegasus at Miramare missing her wings," I said slowly. "So don't tell me it's impossible."

Wind Whisper frowned at the mention of the airbase, but also absently stroked the tip of her wing. "I apologize. It's just... not something a pegasus wants to think about."

"No different than a unicorn losing her horn," I replied, feeling a belated stab of guilt to Roses.

P-21 glanced at Scotch Tape. "Gee, I'm so glad that earth ponies like us have nothing integral to lose." That drew a little snort from the olive filly.

"She's hurt badly, and I need some way to help her," I said softly, trying to keep my calm and civility. "Do the Enclave have any way to restore a wing?" The question seemed to almost nauseate the navy blue pegasus.

"I... maybe in the tower. But that's only a maybe. Usually, a pegasus dies before their wings come off. I only know one mare who's ever lost her wings and lived to talk about it." I felt a stab of hope, but it died at the look on Wind Whisper's face. "She killed herself... stepped off the clouds." She gave one last shiver and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Security. I don't think I can help you. I'm sorry."

"Yes, you can." My tone brooked no argument as I stared at her. "I need to find a particular pegasus..."

* * *

"I can't believe there wasn't anything she could do for her," P-21 muttered as we left the Skyport. I'd felt my spine itching the whole time the power armored ponies watched me. Most of the Volunteer Corps appeared equally relieved to see me go.

"You heard her. Pegasi just don't break their wings. They must have used a chainsaw on that poor Miramare pony's wings." I shivered, glad I'd fed Minty to that raider... and wishing that I could have added Lighthooves as well. Still, hopefully I'd get to take care of that soon. "At least she told us where to go."

"Scrapyard. Only two miles, too." He looked at my legs. "How do you feel?"

"Sore. These braces chafe," I muttered, then flushed as I looked at him. "But you know that, don't you?"

"I have to admit, I'm glad to have it off," he admitted with a chuckle. "Funny, but the doctors seemed surprised that I didn't have a problem with that booth. In, get magicked up, and get out. Wish we had one in 99."

Scotch Tape didn't seem to share his carefree feelings on the subject. Indeed, she looked horrified. "I... didn't like it," she said grudgingly, shivering. She caught my concerned look, and her ears folded back. "I thought... I thought it was going to eat me..."

P-21 snorted, and I smacked his rump hard with my tail, making him jump. "Scotch... it's all right now. I don't know what that thing was, but I shot it with the strongest damn gun in Equestria. It's gone." She shivered and nodded but didn't look particularly convinced. I supposed it was hard to believe that monsters didn't exist when you were nearly eaten by one.

Walking due south through the Enclave's fog bank, I was glad to be heading uphill and into drier land. We still couldn't see farther than twenty or thirty feet, but I suspected we were entering some sort of industrial district. We passed by one of the yawning entrances to the Green Line, giving it a wide berth. There were tons of railways here, and rusting train cars had dumped heaps of black rock all over the place.

There were also red bars out here.

Scotch Tape and P-21 moved quietly on their hooves. Me? I clicked and rattled and clattered with every step. I glanced at them and nodded for them to hang back a little. I really wanted to get some

barding for him. She at least had that utility barding. Softly, I started to whistle about cleaning up winter as I trotted slowly towards the bars.

The bars moved in the fog, fanning out along the train cars. I heard hooves tapping softly on rusting rooftops as I whistled to myself like I didn't have a care in the world. The fog swirled around my hooves as I took step after clicking step. I saw the vague shapes in the mist. I was completely and totally surrounded.

"You there," a mare said from the fog, "throw down your weapons. You have been selected to serve in Red Eye's glorious rebirth of Equestria." Step by step, a creature emerged that I'd only seen in a memory: one half a predatory bird and the other a powerful cat. She'd decorated her plumage with bright red dye, and the power armor she wore was decorated with a bright red eye. A pair of miniguns pointed right at me, and I doubted that my dinged up armor would last long. Why couldn't I ever have cool power armor, huh?

"Yeah. Sorry. Can't do that. I got a friend to help," I said as I picked out the other half dozen red bars. There were also two blue bars. "Maybe next time."

She scowled at my response. "Maybe you don't understand. We're not giving you a choice!"

I looked at the griffin and then smiled. That seemed to make her even more unnerved. "What's your name?"

"I... you don't need to know my name! Now throw down your weapons!" Her gun's motors hummed as she revved them threateningly.

My eye locked with hers and I repeated in an even softer tone, "What's your name?"

She glanced up at the ponies ready to blow me away. "Scarlet."

"Scarlet? Lovely name," I said as I kept staring at her. Clearly, I wasn't following the script. "Scarlet, my friend is hurt and she needs my help and you are slowing me down. I'm the Security Mare. I've killed hydras, blown up Vertibucks, and put a monsterpony through a rock crusher. And *you* are in my way. So, please, go away." I glanced to the side where P-21 peeked out from under the train with Persuasion gripped tight in his jaws.

Unfortunately, the glance seemed to break the spell. "K...kill her!" she shouted.

At that, both of us were blasted by three bombs set around us as her paired stream of rapid fire death went high and wide. A heavy thump filled the air, and she barely took to the sky before the grenade launched her end over end to arc out over the train cars. The last two struggled to recover as I rose to my hooves and gave each a faceful of buckshot. In less than ten seconds, the ambush was annihilated.

I frowned at P-21. "Is it just me, or are we getting really good at this?"

"Well it's not like it was hard with all of them staring at you," he said as he dug through his bags for another brick of that gray explosive.

I trotted to where Scarlet was starting to pull herself out of the heap she'd landed in. "You... you are... dead... so..." she said as her blasted armor smoked. The minigun motors ground horribly as they jammed. The griffin's red eyes went wide as I pressed the shotgun to her chin and she gulped.

"I'm not an executioner," I said softly, "I just want to help my friends. You've slowed me down. I take it there are more of you at Scrapyard?"

"I... I won't betray Red Eye!" she stammered as she clenched her eyes shut. I could tell she was expecting imminent death. I could hear the cards.

"I can respect that," I replied, pulling the gun from her head. If she was really willing to die rather than tell me, I wasn't going to be able to force anything out of her. Besides, she'd already told me what I needed to know. Her eyes looked at me in shock and disbelief. Then I smiled. "But I can't have you follow me, either."

Five minutes later, we continued on our way. "I'll kill you! We will have our revenge. I swear, I'll get you for this if it's the last thing I'll do!" It'd taken two rolls of duct tape, a broom handle, a plunger, and a half dozen tubes of Wonderglue, but I doubted that she'd be getting her revenge any time soon. I know it was silly, juvenile, and an utter waste of time... but the three of us enjoyed a good laugh. Four little ponies in my head joined in as the Dealer sulked in the back of my mind.

* * *

"Okay. This might not be so easy," I muttered without a smile on my face as I stared at the village of Scrapyard. It'd apparently been a junkyard even before the war, and half-ripped-apart skywagons were stacked up as ad hoc apartments next to a large factory-style building. There had to be twenty ponies on the ground, and three griffins were watching from the roof of the factory. Gunfire cracked from the ponies in the thinning mist towards the open building. It was returned with pink disintegration bolts. There were a couple bodies and a few heaps of pink sludge, but I didn't think they were slavers.

I scanned the compound with my scope and located two ponies guarding one of the locked up skywagons. Jail? The ponies we'd met had said that the slavers were taking everypony they could get their hooves on. No sense in slaughter. I looked at P-21. "Okay, I need a smart pony now."

"A smart pony would be back at the college," he muttered as he peered through his binoculars. "Looks like the Enclave isn't done putting up a fight just yet. Those griffins are keeping them grounded. Probably waiting for them to run low on ammo and try to make a break for it. That skywagon's filled with prisoners, I think. And that one is probably holding their commander, judging by those runners going in and out." Oh, that was a little detail I missed. He looked at me. "Do you still have that spell thingy?"

"I have many thingies. It's sometimes hard to keep them all straight," I said as I showed him my inventory. He smiled a little. "Is there a plan? That looks like a plan!" I asked with a grin.

He frowned back at me. "There is, but you're not going to like it." And he explained it to me, drawing it out in the dirt.

"Forget it!" I shouted, stomping my hoof on his diagram.

"Unless you've got an extra PipBuck on you, she has to," he said as he pointed a hoof at me. "All she has to do is get it there." I seethed at him for even suggesting this! This was bordering on 'following Blackjack' reckless! Scotch wasn't looking very sure about it either.

"P-21, this is your daughter we're talking about!" I said, gesturing to her with a hoof. How could he suggest that she--

"What?" Scotch Tape gaped at him, her eyes popping wide. Aw *crap*... P-21 closed his eyes and shook his head as he clenched his jaw. I could almost see the curses he suppressed. The olive filly just gaped at him, then at me. "You're my..."

"Sire," he said flatly. "And that's it."

"P-21..." I began, but then he gave me his shooty look... it was better than mine. Scotch Tape stared at him in amazement, but he refused to look at her. Slowly her eyes drooped along with her ears.

"But... I mean..." Scotch Tape looked at her hooves. "Why... why didn't you tell me?"

The blue buck sighed. "To avoid all... this..." he said as he gestured around the three of us. "And of course Blackjack picks now of all times to bring it up."

"I thought you'd forgotten," I said, feeling worse for Scotch than I had before.

"I... you... I... I mean... Momma always talked about you," she said as she stared up at him. "She said she loved you."

"That's nice," he replied, glancing at her with a scowl. "I didn't love her. She could teach me what I needed to escape. She was... tolerable. But she just used me just like every mare did in 99." He sighed. "Forget it. I'll do it."

"You don't have a PipBuck," I reminded him. "I'll do it, and then..."

"I'll do it," Scotch said at once, silencing both of us.

"But..." I began, but she gave me a hard, hurt look. Short of tying her up, there wasn't any way I was going to get her to not do her part of the plan.

"Fine. I'd better hurry, then," P-21 said as he took off his saddlebags and dumped out the contents. He fished out some wires and a spark battery and started to work. He focused with such a great severe look that Scotch Tape just sat back with her eyes on her hooves. I kept my eyes open for more Red Eye patrols.

At least that way the only ponies I'd hurt would be the bad guys... I hoped...

* * *

Two saddlebags lighter, I took position as close to the factory as I dared. I set up in a notch behind a tub and a refrigerator and took sight at the ponies firing away at the pegasi trapped within the factory. The griffins were looking bored, and there were fewer and fewer disintegration bolts coming out those doors. I didn't think it'd be long now.

Looking through the scope, I watched as a few faint hoofmarks appeared in the dirt approaching the scrapped skywagon that looked like it was being used as a headquarters or... or something. There were ponies coming and going at regular intervals, bringing out more ammo. If it wasn't a headquarters, then at least it was an important building. I had no idea how long the StealthBuck lasted... was it five minutes or three? I didn't think it muted sound...

It didn't matter, though. She was determined to do it. If I'd just kept my mouth shut about P-21 being her father...

"Come on, Scotch." I looked at the jail. Two of Red Eye's ponies had brought another struggling young mare with bloody flanks and tossed her inside a few minutes ago, confirming P-21's theory about the building's function. P-21 was somewhere over there... I knew better than to even bother trying to look. I swept my scope back to the first building, licking my dry lips.

Then the door opened, and out came a mare with an ammo box in her jaws. The door swung closed behind her, but then bumped open for just a second before closing completely. I stared at the door, feeling lightheaded. Then an orange pony bucked my brains and reminded me not to be an idiot and forget to breathe! It'd been three minutes... it had to be! I checked my PipBuck. No, two and a half. Damn it, Scotch, get out of there.

Ammo Mare trotted back towards the door. She shoved it open with a hoof... just as a buck was exiting. I almost relaxed, but then I stared at the two just standing there, talking in the doorway! "Come on, in or out... Damn it..." I muttered as I stared at the two. It had to be a hundred feet, and if I started

the party early with the rifle...

I narrowed my eye. I'd never tried to take a shot with my magic bullet at a range like this! Pressing my lips together, I focused like I never had before. I pressed my hooves to my temples as I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted her rear leg. I wondered if I'd already passed my stupidity quota for the day! "Aw... fuck it..."

The magical bullet streaked across the space between us with a sharp crack and smashed right into the rear of her leg above her hoof. I fell back against the scrap, feeling like I'd just got bucked upside the head and had a basket of apples tumbling out of my nose. Oh... never mind. That's blood. From the yells and screams, confusion raged at the door. No one seemed to be screaming for a sniper, though. I poked my head up and peered at the ground next to the skywagon.

A tin can lying on its side just seconds ago was now upright. The signal that she'd gotten clear.

I looked at a Sparkle-Cola bottle on top of the refrigerator. All I had to do was set it upright. Just... set it upright...

Something exploded in my head, and stars danced in my vision as my horn flared and went dead. I lifted a shaking hoof to my brow, checking to see if my horn was still there. I swallowed as I lay back. Apparently, that last spell had been too much for my little horn to manage. I stared at the bottle just three feet above me, trying to focus. The pain just built and built inside my skull while the bottle didn't budge a hair.

Oh crap.

Slowly, I shifted onto my hooves, the world spinning as I moved my head. I had to set the bottle upright. Every second I wasted was a chance for Scotch's presents to be discovered! I stretched up the rusty side of the fridge and carefully fumbled for the bottle. I bumped it, fumbled with it... and knocked it off the far side of the fridge. Rover'd been right! Thumbs were better! I looked around for another bottle.

"Hey, is somepony over there?"

Oh... crap...

I fumbled with the rifle, trying to get the mouthgrip out and in my jaws. Ugh, when was the last time I cleaned this thing? My jaw struggled to keep it steady as I propped the rifle on the bathtub, steadying it with my forehooves. How the hell did Lancer DO this?

Then a deep throaty roar of flame, shrapnel, and pressure erupted as the satchel charges within the command center went off. I'd thought I was a fair distance from the blast. I probably would have been too, but I'd ignored what a mare bringing ammo out meant. And there was a lot more than just bullets inside. The secondary explosion a second later rained flaming shrapnel over everything. Taurus's rifle was dropped as I jumped into the fridge a second before half the flaming skywagon rained down over Scrapyard! My ears kept popping every time I opened my mouth.

Then something slammed into the fridge and sent it flipping over down the slope. With a crash, I was flung flat on my face surrounded by at least a dozen stunned and concussed ponies in a very bad mood! I rose to my hooves, staggering stiffly on the braces. Then I pointed my hoof at the lot of them. "You! You're... all under arrest! Drop your guns and weapons and lay flat on the ground." I stared as hard as I could, willing their surrender!

The moment lasted for all of three seconds. "Kill her!"

Fine! My horn... fucking hurt as it refused to drag out Vigilance! Something snapped inside me. "You fuckers are keeping me from Glory!" I screamed and, braces or not, charged right into the nearest

spear-wielding pony. I didn't kick or bite her; instead, I threw my entire body at her and bit hard on the haft of the spear as we went down together. Her teeth were rotten brown lumps. My teeth had the benefit of modern dentistry. Twisting hard, I tore the spear from her grip, rolled atop her, and drove the tip under her jaw, putting all my weight on the haft and driving the tip out by her ear. Twisting, I yanked the spear free as she thrashed and screamed.

No time to finish her off as I rose, barely setting myself for the charge of the next three ponies. The first caught the tip in her chest, my shove driving it clear into her sternum as her momentum impaled her on the shaft. Then I was the pony slammed off my hooves by two earth pony mares far better suited for fights like this. I bounced across the field as more ponies came around to ponypile on Security.

My mouth burned as my teeth clenched down on a smoking piece of skywagon and slashed it across one mare's face while my horn failed over and over again to do something as simple as draw a pistol! The mare yelled as her partner jumped on my back, driving my rump to my hocks as she stabbed at my shoulders with a carving knife. The plates kept the edge at bay as her head jerked again and again. I threw the scrap at the mare before me before rolling and thrashing wildly.

Either she'd gotten lucky, or I'd just impaled myself with that roll... either way, my left shoulder burned horribly as I knocked her free. I twisted my head, barely caught the handle with my teeth, and pulled it free. Oh... now I was bleeding too. Well, no time to worry about that now! I fell atop the tossed mare, ramming the carving knife into her windpipe and tearing as hard and brutally as I could. Something arterial split, and hot blood spurted across my face. I grinned despite myself as I felt my own blood running down under my barding.

They were getting the message. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. "Shoot her!" somepony yelled, and from the shotguns and rifles being lifted, they were happy to do so.

I screamed around my clenched teeth as I staggered at the face cut mare, throwing my hooves around her and jamming the knife into her shoulder. I wasn't trying to kill her... yet. I twisted as hard as I could to put her between me and her compatriots as they opened fire. She screamed. There might have been a "stop" involved as I fought to keep her upright. Shots that penetrated her thumped off my barding as they sprayed lead at both of us. New holes opened in my hide as she finally went limp and fell out of my grip.

My armor glistened from the blood of three ponies covering half of it, and my eye glowed as if I could annihilate them with my glare alone. They stood in an arc before me, staring in horror as I rose. The braces pinged beneath my barding as they gave way. Only the broken remains kept me upright as I stood there and bled. "You! Can't! Kill! Me!" I bellowed each word at them as they scrambled to reload.

The griffin begged to differ as she flew over me and drew a line across my rump with her minigun. I sat awkwardly as my legs shook. My horn flickered as it fought to pull out a weapon. A healing potion. Something! I clenched my eye shut. I was going to fail. She was going to be trapped on the ground forever. Because I wasn't tough enough. Wasn't good enough. A second line drew over my shoulders, and only my locked limbs kept me upright. The griffins were hovering over me now, interested in just how long they could draw out using their miniguns before I expired.

They were reloaded. They were ready to put down the crazy mare that defied them. I took the deepest breath I could and screamed out, "Glory!" Every eye was on me. Every eye wasn't on the factory...

Then one griffin melted in a flash of pink goo as a trio of pegasi in dinged and pitted armor flew from the factory and sprayed pink disintegration bolts and slicing red beams. From the opposite side came a roar from two dozen recently freed ponies armed with every weapon we'd picked up. They closed on both sides like a manticore's jaw, a griffin falling from the sky with her feathers aflame while another was blasted from the sky by a grenade shot that bordered on art. One mare bleeding to death was

forgotten as they scrambled to their own defense.

I felt my body giving out as my useless limbs fumbled weakly for a healing potion. I managed to get one out of my bags, but the glass bottle slipped out from between my bloody hooves and landed before me. I fumbled with it, the broken braces fighting me as my softened bones bent. I slowly started to fall over. I couldn't die now. I still needed to help her! And Lacunae! And Rampage. Everypony! Death could wait, damn it! But my body couldn't keep up any more. Looks like I didn't need to worry about that taint after all.

Then two hooves pushed me back upright, the pain on my shoulder from the shove snapping me back from the fuzzy blackness. "Hang on!" Scotch Tape said through the sounds of the battle around us. She grabbed the bottle in her mouth and flipped it into her hooves, biting the stopper and pulling it free before holding it to my lips. "Here!" she shouted, and I drank the milky purple potion. I wasn't sure how much it helped, but I wasn't feeling any deader.

"Let me get another!" Scotch said as she dug at my bags. But I sighed.

Sorry Scotch.

I shoved her away as one of Red Eye's raiders charged with a spear, the tip cutting the olive filly's flank as it punched through my failing armor and drove deep into my side. "You die! For Red Eye!" the mare screamed before biting the haft to pull it out, determined that if they were going to die, she'd take me with her. And the filly as well.

I bit hard on the spear in my side, jamming it inside me. She might kill me, but I wasn't going to make it easy for her. She wouldn't kill anypony else for as long as I was alive, even if that was just for a few seconds! Get clear, Scotch. Sorry I didn't tell you about P-21 sooner. Sorry... Glory...

Then there was a loud bang beside me. Scotch Tape stared in shock at the hole that had opened in the mare's neck. The mare released the weapon, staggering away. Another twelve millimeter hollowpoint blasted out another bloody chunk. Then a third, and the mare fell limp beside me. I slumped over as I saw something die inside the teal eyes behind Scotch's goggles.

"Sorry..." I murmured softly.

Then she noticed me, and the gun tumbled into the dirt. "Blackjack! I'll... I have... please... please don't die!" she begged around her tears as she grabbed the spear in my side with her jaws.

"No... don't pull..." But then I felt it pull out as I fell on my side. Then she was pouring healing potions down my throat as fast as she could pull the stoppers. I think I just about cleaned her out as the fighting slowly died around us. She cradled my head as I stared up at the sky... really wishing I could look somewhere else. "Did we win?"

"We won," P-21 said. Slowly, I looked at the dozen or so ponies still standing, at the bodies of Red Eye's ponies lying amid smeared heaps of pink goo and piles of ash. Two pegasi stood apart, seeming at a loss for what to do at this moment. They kept their guns pointing in my general direction as I gritted my teeth and shifted slowly on to my hooves, the broken braces struggling to keep me upright. "Blackjack! What are you doing? Wait and rest," P-21 said as he tried to push me back down.

"No. I need to talk... now... before she flies off." I took step after step towards her. I tried not to have my shooty look, but after being nearly painted in blood, I supposed any look of mine was pretty creepy. P-21 kept me on my hooves as I swayed and then sat down hard. "Hello, Dusk."

She tapped the side of her helmet, the armor retracted, and hard dark eyes stared at me suspiciously. "How did you find me?"

"Wind Whisper," I replied. "Luckily, you were nearby." I took a deep breath. "You owe me. Agreed?"

"We could have..." she began, but then she looked at all the ponies lying around me and glanced at her companion. Her lips twisted sourly and she shook her head. She sighed, narrowing her gaze as she glanced at me. "I guess I do."

I nodded once. That was one hurdle I was glad to be past. "You can repay me easily." The dark pegasus looked at me skeptically. "One. Help me back to the college. I'll tell you two when we get there."

She certainly didn't look happy. Right now, she probably could have turned me into a glowing pile of goo. Heck, right now, I was so shot up that a hard sneeze would turn me into goo. "Alright. But how are we supposed to get you there?" she asked with a small frown. I glanced at their equipment.

"I thought they called it power armor. Not pussy armor," I replied.

* * *

Funny. I never thought I'd fly Pegasus Airlines again, but here I was slumping against Dusk as the pair winged their way through the cloud ceiling itself. Scotch Tape did all she could to keep me on the flying mare's back while P-21 rode Dusk's companion, a mare named Lightning Dancer.

"So, what was all that about?" I asked as we flew by a particularly... solid-looking?... cloud. I looked at the spire of white tipped with glowing amber talismans. A lightning rod, I presumed. "I mean, why were you fighting Red Eye?"

"We're not. We have no interest in surfer politics," Dusk said firmly.

"Well, then, what were you doing in Scrapyard?" I asked, and was quite proud of myself for not insinuating they were spreading tainted food.

"Buying scrap, obviously." She glanced back at my incredulous expression. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but clouds don't have much metal in them."

"But what does Thunderhead need with lots of metal?" I asked with a smirk.

"Stuff," was all she said, and I doubted that I'd get more than that.

"So if you don't care, why fight?"

"They attacked the town while we were negotiating salvage rights," Dusk answered sourly, "we would have withdrawn, but their griffins forced us to bunker down inside that factory. They attacked with a full wing but left those three once we were cornered." Leaving them in big trouble till I came along.

We flew through a fissure that nearly reached the bottom of the ceiling; looking up, I could see a band of distant blue. Maybe it was blood loss, but I was finally getting over the urge to vomit as we made our way along. Then, through the fissure, I spotted a huge shape of odd uniformity above the rest of the clouds... like a giant flying donut with its main axis perpendicular to the ground. The interior of the donut had been removed and replaced with tier upon tier of buildings. "Is that Thunderhead?" I panted, marveling at the size of an actual city like long ago. Not a village of a few dozen or even hundreds of ponies, but tens of thousands.

"You're the second surface pony to see it," Dusk replied.

"It's amazing," I murmured. Then we were at the other end of the already-closing fissure, and the

sight was replaced by more gray.

I imagined a smile from the pride in her voice. "Yes, it is."

Scotch Tape gave a sniff as her hooves tightened on me, making me wince. She hadn't said much since we'd lifted off. "Are you okay, Scotch?"

"Wha... yeah... I'm fine," she murmured in a perfect 'not fine' voice.

"What is it?" I asked.

She sniffed, pressing her face to my bloody, stiffening mane. "... I killed a pony. ... I didn't even think about it. I just... I pointed and... and..." She shivered behind me. "It wasn't like shooting the robots."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, thinking back to that raider I'd killed with the broken tip of a rusty knife. I'd been so carried away that I'd never thought about it. "I know it hurts," I said softly, reaching to pat her with my floppy hoof. "It'll always hurt. It never gets any easier."

"That's not true," Dusk replied evenly. I really wished I could have smacked the pegasus without falling a long way to my death. "Once you've killed enough ponies, it's easy. Point, pull the trigger, and dead," she said quietly, and for a minute I'd thought that she'd decided to stay silent for the rest of the trip. She did, after saying quietly, "You kill enough ponies... and you can kill anypony..."

* * *

I slowly opened my eyes, looking at an oddly familiar filthy ceiling. "If this is the afterlife... I'm not impressed..." I murmured, trying to shake chlorine dreams. Slowly, I started to rise, and then my body gave out and I fell back against the gray sheets. The windows were dark; night, or close to it. It'd been a busy day, and I wasn't even halfway done. "I must have passed out on the flight back..."

Slowly, I rolled onto my belly and looked back. The bullet holes were gone, only Leo's scar remaining. I still felt... off. And sore, but whether that was from taint or injury, I couldn't tell. I suspected I really owed the Collegiate. I also doubted that they were healing me out of the kindness of their hearts.

"Congratulations. You've set a brand new record," Triage said as she trotted in, her horn glowing as she lifted the clipboard in front of her. "Punctured lung. Torn muscle. Thirty two different gunshot penetrations. Probably a nasty case of magical burnout. Two liters of blood lost... Luna only knows how you didn't die from shock... and the first pony in history I think to go through the autonomous healing booth three times in one day." She adjusted her glasses. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Huh?" I muttered as I looked over at her, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth as she looked dully at the clipboard.

"Well, if you ask me the scientific conclusion is inescapable," she said as smiled at me. Suddenly, the glowing clipboard swung through the air to smack me upside the head. "You! Are! Not! Bulletproof!" she shouted, smacking me with each word. "If you can't do this heroic shit without getting holes shot in you, then you need to quit and retire!" She pointed the clipboard at my nose. "If you're so set to die, then do it somewhere nice and quiet."

"What does it matter if I'm dead from taint in a year anyway?" I shouted back at her, anger providing a wonderful stimulant.

"It matters because every halfwit with half a brain hears all about your noble sacrifices and next thing you know they're getting shot, stabbed, gutted, and killed by ponies who have spent their entire lives preying on the helpless. And I'm the one who has to put their bodies back together! Even when they're

rotting, drugged, or undead, I still have to put them back together again," she said as she jabbed her cigarette at my face. "It's crazy ponies like you who make my job difficult."

I just stared at her. "What... you'd prefer it if I'd let ponies die and get enslaved?"

"Of course not," she said with every bit of as much contempt as I felt for her. "I'd rather ponies stopped relying on heroes like you and the Stable Dweller and saved the Wasteland themselves. Because every time that DJ starts to gush about how brave and wonderful you are, eventually... inevitably... you die, or worse, you become just as bad as the ponies you're fighting. Ever hear of the Iron Mare? How about Strider? Ranger Steelhooves? Big Daddy? Each one a hero till they broke down, gave in, or gave up. One day, the glorious Stable Dweller and Security Mare will fail too. It's a fact of the Wasteland," she said as she glared down at me. "Any idiot with a gun can kill for a cause and get shot up for their trouble. How about an idiot who builds a school? Or runs a clinic? Or makes machines work? Oh, no heroism for them. They're just the poor schmucks who should be grateful for the brave hero till heroing gets too tough."

"If you think it's so easy, you do it!" I countered.

"I don't think it's easy. I think it's stupid. You can get shot ten ways to Celestiday, but how does it make the Wasteland any better?" She pointed a hoof. "Your pegasus friend is still critically depressed. That alicorn thing is catatonic. That filly is probably traumatized for life! You can't fix that with bullets."

Glory! I rolled and scrambled out of bed and cried out as my legs buckled beneath me. "... there was a pegasus... in power armor..." I gasped as I tried to lift myself to my hooves. They buckled again, and I sprawled on my side. "I need... I have to talk to her..." I broke off in a cry of pain as my limb bent at a right angle and I rolled onto my back, feeling the rubbery limb slowly straighten.

"Stop!" Triage said sharply as she wrapped my hoof in her magic and tugged it. "Why do you do this? What masochistic messianic moronity makes you try and walk when you can't? Why do you have to do this?" she demanded as my limb slowly straightened.

"Because I have to. Because I owe her," I said as I said there, eyes closed. "I hurt her. I was stupid and selfish and... and I got her hurt. I cost her her wing."

"Enervation rot took her wing. And unless she's a foal, getting hurt is a part of life. So why are you doing this?" Triage asked, looking at me with the ghost of concern in her eyes.

"Because I love her!" I shouted. I took a slow, shaky breath. "I never loved anypony but myself. Never. But she's always been there with me. Even when it cost her her cutie mark. Even when it cost her her family and career. I've been beaten and battered and broken almost daily since I left the stable, and she's always trying to keep me going. To help me in my stupid, fucking... *quest!*" I said as I lifted my PipBuck and slapped the screen with my other hoof.

I went limp and sighed, staring at that ceiling like it was a soiled sky. "EC-1101 is meaningless to her, but she still believes in me enough to help me crawl along no matter how much it hurts her. And... I have to help her. I have to help all my friends. I'm tired of ponies getting hurt just for helping me." I clenched my eyes shut as I started to shake, and nothing was stopping it this time. "She shouldn't get hurt for me. I'm not worth it..."

Triage stood there with a half-lidded mask of an expression before she took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a sigh. "Wow. Two hundred years ago, I could have written a paper on your particular brand of crazy." She turned, and her horn glowed as she steered in a wheelchair. "Well, your pegasus friends have been waiting for you and making everypony really nervous, so the sooner they're dealt with, the better."

"They haven't been causing trouble, have they?" I asked with a worried frown.

"No, but it's no secret that if you want healing, you come to us... or the Enclave. Folks are thinking they're here to trash the place or something. Makes everypony wonder, you know?" She lifted me into the wheelchair and made me promise not to throw myself out of it this time. "Is your horn working again?"

I looked at the chair and concentrated, then winced as magic sparks shot from the tip of my horn. "Owww..." I tapped it with a limp limb. "I think I broke it."

"Just burnout. It happens. Next time, don't push it so hard." Triage waved down one of the nurses. "The pegasi outside, could you escort them up here?" The nurse glanced at me sitting there looking like I'd been thrown down a few flights of stairs, and I gave her a smile.

"Can you take me to Glory's room?" Time to do this.

"She's been completely non-responsive," Triage said quietly as her magic pushed the wheelchair. Did everypony in the Wasteland have stronger telekinesis than me? "She won't eat. All she's asked is for us to leave her alone."

"She's badly hurt," I said as she pushed me to the door.

"Well if she doesn't recover soon, we'll have to toss her out." Triage caught my glare and returned it. "Wasteland. Limited space. We fixed her flesh. Mind and soul... that's outside my specialty. So I hope you can help her."

"You do?" I asked, a little sarcastic. For some reason, cynical healers were really aggravating.

She arched her brows coolly. "Just because I don't appreciate cheap heroism doesn't mean I don't want to help ponies. I can't help her. I hope you can." I just dropped my gaze, chewing on my lower lip.

Dusk and Lightning Dancer appeared in the hall, approaching with wary steps. Dusk's dark eyes stayed locked on mine while Dancer's citrine ones looked around a bit more curiously. "So... what's the second favor? Let's get this over with."

I just nodded towards Glory's room. "I need you to help your sister."

Her pupils constricted as she jerked away from me. "Go fuck yourself."

Damn the promise. I launched myself from the chair and tackled her as the wheelchair went clattering down the hall behind me. Throwing my hooves around her neck, I counted myself lucky she sat down hard as I slumped before her, staring into her eyes. "Listen!" I hissed in her face, glaring like I could vaporize her with rage alone, "I don't give a fuck about Enclave politics or tradition or your own fucked up issues with pride or honor or whatever you pegasi call it! Glory is in there and she needs your help."

"If she wanted my help she shouldn't have become a Dashite!" Dusk yelled in my face.

I kicked her as hard as I could... which was honestly pretty pathetic as my limb bent under the blow. "She lost her wing!" I shouted back, and that statement shocked her far more than my physical assault. "She got injured and the Enervation rotted it right off her body! So here is what you are going to do..." I growled as I pointed to the closed door. "You are going to go in there. You are going to talk to her. You are going to smile. You are going to make her happy. I don't care what you have to say, how you have to lie, or what you have to do... you are going to find some way to make her want to live," I said as I clenched my jaw, tears running down one cheek. "Because I can't..."

Dusk closed her eyes. "You don't understand. If anypony found out she's alive..."

"Wind Whisper already knows. She doesn't care. Don't you get it, Dusk?" I said as I felt my legs slowly give out beneath me till I was sitting, "I've been where Glory is right now. It almost killed me. It would have if I hadn't forgotten about the gun's safety! And the only thing that snapped me out of it was someone giving me something... anything... to live for." I bowed my head shamefully. "I can't do it... I... I'm the one who hurt her. That's all I do... and she needs to live." I took a deep breath and stared into her eyes once more. "You're going to do this. And do you know why?"

"Why?" she asked, so stunned that the anger and attitude were momentarily abandoned.

"Because she's your sister, you love her, and you're a good pony," I said, trying to convince myself as much as her that it was true. "You're her older sister. You have to help her..."

Dusk finally relaxed with an angry sigh. "Fine. I'll... I'll try..." Then she jabbed my chest with a hoof. "But after this, we're even... no matter what happens! Got it?"

"Just... help her. You're the only one who can," I said as I finally crumpled. This was it. This was all I could do. With a sharp glare at me, Dusk opened the door to her room and stepped inside.

"Hey, Featherbrain..." Dusk said before closing the door behind her with her scorpion tail. I bent over as all the stress and strain of the day poured out of me. When had my life turned into near daily dramatic trauma?

"You okay?" Lightning Dancer asked as she returned with my wheelchair. She used her scorpion tail to scoop me up and help me take a seat. She gave me a casual, easygoing sort of smile. Her citrine eyes and brilliant orange mane contrasted with her stark black power armor.

I rubbed my face with my hooves and sighed. "I haven't seen okay in a long time. I used to be okay. Heck, I used to be happy. Then I started thinking, and it's been all downhill from there."

"Eh, what can you do?" she said with a shrug, nudging the wheelchair. "So, you going to just hang out here? 'Cause if I know those two, they'll be at it for a while. Dusk and Morning never could fly in formation together."

"No... I..." I sighed and laid my head back, looking at the ceiling. "Yeah... I need to see Lacunae. I don't have a clue how I'm going to help her..."

"The big purple pony? She's down the hall, I think," she said as she hooked her tail on the frame and trotted towards the far side of the building.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're not like most Enclave I've met," I said with a little smile.

"Oh you mean the serious, devoted, lightning-rod-up-the-rump attitude?" She glanced back at me and grinned. "Yeah. They were fresh out of rectal rods when it came to me. Cost me some advancement but, eh... Dusk's more hardcore about that anyway. Who needs the stress?"

I stared at her for a moment. I'd almost forgotten what carefree looked like. "I... I envy you." Her brows arched in surprise, and I explained, "You just seem... happy. I used to be like that, but now everything's gotten... weird..."

"You and Dusk..." the yellow mare chuckled. "Well, don't worry about it. Dusk is always a hardass, especially when it comes to Dashites. The only time she actually unwinds is in bed. Usually takes a good licking, too."

I blinked and flushed a little. "You and her?" Glory had mentioned something about being like her sister. Dancer just grinned. "Huh... Is this going to really cause problems for the rest of her family?" The yellow pegasus arched a brow, and I elaborated, "I mean Glory being alive... and branded?"

Lightning Dancer rolled her eyes. "Oh, that. I told Dusk to let it go, but of course she just couldn't." She rubbed her chin in thought. "I suppose it's a big deal 'cause of what happened with her mother."

"Her mother?" I blinked in shock. "What about her mother?"

"Oh, her mom, Dawn, went Dashite ten years ago," she said calmly. Then she noticed me gaping in amazement. Lightning Dancer cocked her head in confusion. "Hasn't Morning Glory told you about it?"

"No... she hasn't..." I said quietly, glancing at the closed door. No yelling. No shooting. I hoped that that was a good sign. "She told me about her father, but..."

"Well, it was one hell of a scandal. It started when Thunderhead was attacked by Fiendfire. He's the only dragon who actually managed to damage the city. During the fight, both her dad and the dragon fell to the surface. He was found by a surfacer pegasus. She came back with him. Oh, but wasn't that a load of bad wind!"

"You mean her mom wasn't Enclave?"

"Nope." She seemed amused by my surprise. "What? It happens. Sometimes Dashites have foals, or you'll get a throwback or something. Most of them last long enough to fly up and get hit by a lightning rod." She gave a shrug. "For the best. This place has so many diseases and mutagens... well, I had to get two dozen shots just to be down here, and I'll have to be in quarantine for a month before they let me back up top. But he brought her back and threw all his weight around to bend the rules. Once medical cleared her, they got married. The dragon slayer and the surface mare," she said with a sigh and a shake of her head.

"But she went Dashite?" I asked. Dancer nodded, looking a little uncomfortable. "Why?"

"Well... Dawn was always funny. I mean, she never really fit in with Thunderhead society. She was always talking about how much we could help and telling stories about the surface. Somepony actually took a shot at her at a speech she made at the university. Finally, somepony planted a bomb in their home. Didn't kill anyone, thank goodness, but soon after that she went back down. Huge disgrace for her family." She looked over at the closed door with a worried frown. "Hit Dusk hardest, I think, being the eldest. We were both finishing school when her mom left. Councilbuck's wife going Dashite... it was pretty bad for her family for a while."

"And Morning Glory?" I asked as we reached the room. Lacunae stood as still as a statue in the corner.

"She was hurt more than angry. I mean, she was just a filly, and suddenly her mom was gone and everypony was calling her dad a traitor. I think she believed in her mom... and Dusk didn't."

"And what happened to her mom?"

"It's a big Wasteland. Who knows?" Lightning Dancer said as she looked at Lacunae closely. "So this is an alicorn, huh? Never seen them around the Hoof before." She hovered in front of her, frowning. Then she wagged her head back and forth. "Wagabawagawagah!" she said, her tongue flopping back and forth as she rolled her eyes. Then she followed it up with three more goofy faces before her citrine eyes widened. "Woow... she is so out of it."

"Out of it..." I frowned up at Lacunae. "Maybe that's what happened to her..."

Lightning Dancer looked at me. "This is a unicorn thing, isn't it?"

"Something like that," I muttered, wondering just how I was supposed to do this. "Can you boost

me up? I need to touch horns with her.” It was a shot in the dark, but it was the only thing I could think of.

“Isn’t that unicorn foreplay?” She grinned as her tail wrapped around my waist and lifted me up on her back. Her wings lifted to keep me steady as I stretched up and touched my horn to Lacunae’s. I had no idea if my horn would even work in the middle of burnout, and looking into her empty eyes didn’t build confidence.

Nothing. “Come on, Lacunae... I know you’re in there...” I tried to concentrate, but there wasn’t even a flicker from my horn. There had to be something... some way to make a connection. Something that linked us.

Then it came to me. I closed my eyes as our horns touched and began to hum. It’d only been two days ago, but it seemed like forever. Softly I hummed the notes she’d played in Star House. I felt a tingle in my horn, and the world fell away.

oooOOOooo

I stood on a black plain, the ground scoured bare of everything save shiny stone. A gale tore at me in one constant and unending gust. Only the stones provided any respite from the storm that cut at me with every second. The stone itself had been eroded into drawn out spears of glass that shattered with the slightest pressure. In the distance were the black spires of Hoofington...

I could hear the screaming from here. I couldn’t tell if it was the wind or something else. Embers were swept along in the gale, but I had no idea what their origins were. Everything was rendered in shades of gray, and I took a look at myself. Instantly, I wished I hadn’t. My body was translucent white, but there were black blotches that seemed to crawl and creep slowly within me.

Okay. Freakiness established. Now... where was Lacunae?

I trotted across this hellscape for who knew how long before I spotted them. A tree. A street lamp. A chapel... one that I knew.

Slowly, I approached the building, my normal colors returning as I stepped inside. Something was definitely off, though. Things seemed to blur and run together in the corners of my vision and only come into focus when I looked directly at them. The building seemed off, as well: larger and better built than I recalled. It was late, the room lit only by candles and the city glow through the window.

“Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another. Dearest Luna, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another,” a young mare whispered as she sat on a small pillow beside me. She was jet black with a cutie mark of a lit candle. She rocked slowly back and forth, head bowed as she murmured the lines over and over again.

“Lacunae?” I asked softly as I stood beside her. No response. Then I reached down and stopped her rocking. She blinked, then slowly looked up at me. “Psalm?”

“Who are you? You shouldn’t be here. The chapel is closed until the Goddess wishes to return.”

The gale outside made the building rock and creak. “Psalm... this isn’t real, is it?”

She shook as she dropped her gaze to her hooves. “Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another...” she began again, shaking as she clenched her eyes shut.

I stopped her again, the whole building rocking and groaning in the wind. “Psalm... you’re the Marauder, Psalm.” She gasped, her eyes going wide. “Macintosh’s Marauders?”

Before my eyes, she aged to the black mare in body armor. She hugged the sniper rifle, bowing her head. “This is my penance.”

"Your penance? For what?"

"For us," whispered a host around us. I turned my head, and dozens of zebras appeared around us... and ponies too. "Why did you kill us, Psalm? Did your Goddess forgive you for our murders?" they whispered in unison. Each one had a perfect ring in their head, with matching holes blown out opposite sides.

"Sweet Celestia, please forgive me..." she prayed desperately. I looked at the dead. The zebras I could understand, but why ponies? Why... young ponies?

"Psalm... what did you do?" I asked softly.

"She took the shot. Pulled the trigger. Ended our lives. She deserves to go to Hell. Eternal punishment. Not forgiveness."

"No!" Psalm cried out as she hugged the rifle tighter. "The Goddess forgave me! The Goddess took me in Unity!"

"The Goddess cut you off! Unworthy! Blood soaked hooves!" wailed the host. "You killed my family. You killed my children! You killed me!" shrieked the undead host around her as the building continued to creak and shake like it was about to come apart.

I stared at Psalm. Doof had been a rapist. Vanity had worked for Goldenblood. What had happened to Psalm after the Marauders split up? Slowly I knelt, reaching out to hold her. "Psalm... I know what it's like to do the wrong thing. I know what it's like... to kill... because it's all you can do. Because you have no choice," I said softly.

"She had a choice!" roared the slain. "She chose to pull the trigger!"

"F...F...Forgive me... for... for I..." she stammered softly.

"I do," I said quietly. "I forgive you." I pulled the plug. I pushed the button. I knew what it was like to damn myself. For all I knew, Psalm was a monster worse than Deus, but right now she needed my forgiveness. After all, there was no way she could forgive herself.

The room around me turned into glowing yellow embers and whooshed inside me. For a moment, standing on that tortured plain, I knew exactly how much forgiveness she needed. I'd killed forty with the push of one button and four hundred with the push of another.

Psalm had been one hell of a sniper. She'd killed one... by... one...

I looked at the remaining two structures, smelling chlorine and thinking about headshots. Slowly, I approached the second, the street light. Somepony stood beneath it, and as I approached I heard the strange city sounds building. Slowly, the mare came into focus. Her blue hide was a perfect match to P-21's, but her mane was a pale blue-white. She wore a gauzy dress of faintly discolored white lace that drew more attention to her intimate bits than concealed them. And there was shame, empty shame in her soft lavender eyes as she looked at me with a hollow smile. "Hey... want to see a trick? Twenty bits." As I stared at her, her smile trembled at the edges. "I mean... fifteen?"

I was completely baffled. "Who are you?"

The question was a knife through her. "I'm... ah... Trixie... cause I can do... you know... tricks..." I supposed the look she was trying for was 'sultry' but delivered 'pathetic'. "Twelve bits? Please?"

Trixie? Who the hay was Trixie? I opened my mouth... reconsidered... then forced a smile.

"Sure." I never saw a unicorn look so relieved to earn so little. I'd found that many bits just sorting through the trash.

"Thanks... you... you know... I'm really good... so maybe you might... um... pay more? If I am, I mean?" Somehow, it didn't seem to register that I didn't have any way I might be keeping money on me. Either she couldn't tell in this... memory? Projection? Or she was just really bad at this! She led me to a nearby motel just down the street.

"Rent's due, Trixie," the sour lemon buck said without looking up from his television. "Better fuck a gold mine out of her."

I wanted to shoot him right then and there for the shame on her face. But she didn't say a word. No comeback comment. Nothing. From the shame in her eyes, it was clear she was hoping to get a goldmine out of me. So to speak...

The dingy little room had a musty, musky smell to it, and the sole bulb painted everything in amber. Still, there were posters on the wall, aged and delicate things showing a mare on stage while bold letters declared 'Behold the Great and Powerful Trixie!' There were pictures of her animating a rope, of summoning a swirling lightning cloud. I looked away from the posters to ask about them.

She was trying to do a striptease... and was so bad at it that I hadn't even noticed. "So... do you like what you see?" she said as she climbed onto the bed. I didn't. I didn't want to have sex with her. I wanted to hug her... but a hug would kill her. Still, I went through the motions with her.

It wasn't good. This wasn't good. No amount of sex should have that many quiet tears.

When we finally gave up and lay there together, she stared at my chest. I stroked her mane; it needed a good washing. "So... um... again? ...baby?" she added as she dared to meet my eye. I killed her with a look. My expression crumpled her like a tin can as she shook. "I'm sorry..." she whispered.

All I could be was kind as Trixie clung to me in that filthy room surrounded by walls of failed dreams. If things had been different... But I stroked her softly. I'd maimed her with my pity. "Not even worth one bit..."

Worthless. I knew that feeling. I knew what it was like to feel undeserving. Unwanted. Unneeded. To think my life amounted to just a legacy of murder and death. I cuddled with this strange mare, wondering who she was. How was she in this nightmare of Lacunae's? I touched my horn to hers. "I don't think you're worthless," I whispered in her ear, kissing her softly. I wanted to take her away from here. Protect her. Prove her wrong and find out about that mare in the pictures.

But I was two hundred years too late...

The room dissolved in a cloud of blue sparks, and I was left on that wind-scoured stone. As they disappeared inside me I felt the slow decay of a mare's life... failure after failure... till all that was left was turning tricks in a dirty motel room. I wondered what had happened to Trixie... Had she died in that place when the bombs fell? No... she must have survived long enough for Unity... somehow. How else could she had been inside Lacunae?

I had self-loathing and self-worthlessness coiled inside me. I looked at the tree with trepidation. What was Lacunae, a toxic angst dump?

As I approached the tree, I saw it wasn't just a tree but some kind of building. I ran my eyes over the sign out front. Ponyville Library? "And the weirdness just keeps on coming..." I said as I took a deep breath and slowly pushed the door open.

I would have loved to have seen something bright and clean. Really. But the library looked as if

it'd been ransacked. Dozens of books lay in disarray. Some piled in heaps, others scattered and ripped. "Spike? Is that you?" a mare called from the stairs as she walked down with slow, unsteady steps. The middle aged mare levitated a bottle of wine beside her as her purple eyes narrowed, then relaxed. "Oh, good..."

Twilight Sparkle?

Gray shot through her mane in premature aging, and wrinkles were forming creases in her face. She looked... tired. And drunk. "If you're here to check out a book, I'm afraid you're out of luck. EC-102... the book review... all books are to be reviewed for appropriateness to the conduct and wellbeing of Equestria." She scowled at the empty shelves and dirty piles. "I used to love this place..." she said with a scowl before taking a drink from the bottle.

I approached cautiously. "You're... you're Twilight Sparkle."

"The one and only!" she said with a bitter twist of her lips, spreading her hooves wide. "Or a piece of her. The garbage that doesn't matter," she said as she waved the bottle around the building, "Nice endopsychosillutory projection, huh? I wonder what all this represents? Huh? The loss of my friends? My hypocrisy?" She saw me staring blankly and sighed. "Figures... first pony I get to talk to, and she's a moron."

Okay... that stung, but still. Getting pissed at a 'projection' wouldn't help. "Hypocrisy?"

She scowled at me. "Oh, don't be stupid. I was the biggest hypocrite in Equestria." She pointed at a picture of herself hanging askew on the wall. "Read! Only it's kinda hard when I stood by and did nothing to stop Rarity's Image from sucking every remotely seditious phrase from the shelves of Equestria." She sighed, took a long pull off the bottle, and stared down at the sloshing contents. "For ten years I did everything I could to try and help ponies. Luna. Fucking Equestria! Everypony except the five ponies who really needed it." She took another drink and grimaced. "Ugh... I'm glad I never actually drank this swill."

Okay, this was approaching critical levels of 'huh'? "What do you mean? You mean, you know you're not... well... real?"

"I'm a part of a mare who was, and all this is a reflection of that part. That's all I am. The worst parts," she said with a twisted little smile, then shook the bottle at me. "Twilight never drank. She should have... but she didn't. No, she just condemned her friend who was consumed by addiction. Covered for her. Lied for her. Let everypony manipulate her. But she didn't drink herself." She set the bottle on the stairs.

"The other parts... they didn't seem to know," I said as I trotted towards her. "How are you... here?"

"It's called poetic justice," she said with a snide little laugh. "I'm getting everything I deserve. See, when I failed... again and again... to win the war for Luna, I got a little bit desperate. We were close to hitting the million mark for pony casualties... fuck only knows how many zebras we'd slaughtered. Then Trueblood came to tell me about a highly classified project."

"Chimera."

She blinked and smiled. "You know about it? Huh, I didn't know about it. Goldenblood had shit going on that I couldn't imagine. It was crude and unfinished... but the second I read it, I had the idea: an army of alicorns! Unstoppable! I'd finally accomplish something. I perfected the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion from Chimera's crude mutagenic gunk." Her eyes peered at me. "I can see you've already had a dose of it yourself."

"What?" I said as I looked at myself, then at her.

"You call it taint," she said as she slumped on the stairs. "So even my crowning achievement is a grotesque failure." I frowned at the naked self-pity before me... this wasn't Twilight Sparkle. This was a part of her. The worst part. She looked up at the dirty ceiling. "I found a mare I knew I could manipulate into taking it. See? I'm soooo much better than Rarity... I trick mares into being my test subjects rather than use criminals. I located Trixie, who'd just barely clawed her life back together, and gave her an offer she couldn't refuse. Power. Glory. Fame. I might have thought I was helping her. Really, I was just the final nail in her coffin."

I thought of the blue mare I'd laid with and couldn't argue. A mare in that state... "So, what happened?"

"Bombs fell. Everypony died," she said with a shrug. "More specifically, they fell right in the middle of the test. But, good news... my potion worked! Trixie got her power. Her glory. Her fame. And, in thanks, she saved us by pulling us all into her... one after the next. Glued together in that... being. That monster I created."

I stared at her with a small frown, trying to figure out the pity party. Or was it self-pity? "What about Gardens?"

Her eyes stared away and she took a slow pull off the bottle. "Gardens was a dream. I made a few experiments. Got the restoration megaspell to work in Tenpony... the arcanum nullification matrix was tricky... then there was the contagion devivification spell that had to be added..." Then she sighed. "All for nothing. Goldenblood talked me out of it... Luna wouldn't tolerate anything that would suggest she'd failed. So two and a half years of my life wasted. And tens of thousands of ponies while I wasted my time with a pet project that'd never come to pass."

I stared at her in shock. She really didn't know! Goldenblood hid the truth from everypony but Spike, and Spike had kept it to protect Twilight Sparkle. "Probably for the best..." Twilight muttered, "if I had created it, the Goddess would do everything to make sure it's destroyed. After all, if alicorns are perfect to survive in the Wasteland, she'd have done all she could to destroy something that could save the wastes. Or worse, she'd have me corrupt it."

My words died in my throat. Was that true? "It... it wasn't a waste. Maybe... maybe someday, somepony could finish it?"

"Yeah. I'm sure that'll be a mistake, too," she said with a sniff. "I should have listened to Goldenblood back at the beginning... I shouldn't have been responsible. None of us should have agreed. We should have found another way. Any other way. Such a mistake..." she said as she grit her teeth. "Pinkie Pie... why didn't I stop you? Why didn't I realize what Fluttershy had done? Why didn't I keep Rarity from... from gutting so many books? One of a kind books...! Why didn't I do the right thing?!"

Why hadn't I gone another way? Why hadn't I convinced Morning Glory to leave Miramare? Why didn't I leave forty foals alive till somepony could help them? I should have... I'm sorry...

Regret.

Lacunae was a dump. A place where the Goddess had dumped all the memories and feelings she hadn't wanted. If Lacunae was going to be separated, why not rid yourself of things you didn't want to feel?

I trotted to Twilight and did what I did best: I hugged her. "I wish I could tell you more, but your life wasn't one big mistake. There were better parts to it." We don't always see the good we do. "I know you mattered to other ponies... and your friends. It wasn't all a mistake."

"I wish that were true," she murmured softly as everything around us fell away.

The ruined library dissolved into purple motes, flowing inside me. And now more motes were floating from across the blasted landscape towards me, in spite of the wind. They came with the shame, guilt, and angst of broken ponies. The repairpony who neglected his wife and kids till they left him and died in Manehattan. The raider who had let her foals starve to feed herself. The green unicorn twins' shameful incestuous relationship because neither could love another as much as they loved each other. More and more.

Lacunae: something missing. I'd thought that Lacunae had been a pony whose memories had been taken away. She wasn't. She was a collection of the pain and angst of hundreds of ponies. Their shame. Their regret. Their guilt. All collected into one vessel sealed off and tossed into the one place they couldn't be heard. I wondered what such a being would be... stripped of all its misery and doubt. No mistakes. No confusion...

Suddenly, the stories of alicorns abroad being complete monsters made a whole lot more sense.

With that, the motes were gone. "So... now what? Is something supposed to happen? Are we done here?" I asked as I turned around to look at the windswept field. For once, I actually wanted the Dealer to show up and provide me with a clue.

Instead, I got a mirror?

Slowly, I approached it. Just a simple standing mirror. A bit fancy. Maybe I'd seen it in Blueblood Manor... or maybe it was something from the countless memories inside me. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I trotted towards it. "Okay... horrible mind rape or emotional crush time incoming. Bring it on." I stood before my battered, bloody, bleeding self. "Okay! Bring it on! Evil twin combat? Mind messing? Some horrible self-revelation? I can take it."

But... nothing. Just me. White hide. Two bright red eyes. Clean. Goddesses, how long ago had it been since clean was normal and muck, mud, and blood an aberration? Neat security barding. Old normal PipBuck without some damned megaspell program inside it. Happy. Goddesses, I looked so happy! Well fed. No worries but to deal with the next shift and the next game.

I stared at my reflection. Really? What was the point of this? I narrowed my eye, gritting my teeth. "What? I get it! I was an idiot then! What's your point?" I yelled at myself, then reared up and shoved the mirror back. It shattered... no... not the mirror. Me. And when I looked again, there was the mirror... and there was me...

Bloody, battered me on my weak limbs. My one freakish glowing eye staring back at me. Goddesses... did I look this hurt to everypony? I turned, looking at the bullet hole scars dotting my hide. The ugly splash on my chest. The mar on my face. My hide looked like it was starting to become diseased. I was so dirty that I'd never be clean again; the dirt and blood seemed part of my hide. Mutated limbs bending before my very eyes... like I was turning into some sort of pony leech hybrid. Even my teeth were going yellow, my ribs showing. I didn't even look like a stable pony any more.

"I get it! I suck! I'm dying! What's the fucking point?" I screamed, shoving it over again and seeing myself shatter in bloody bits.

The mirror... I didn't want to look in it now. I was sick of this place. Sick of these mind games. Sick of always being hurt...

The pony in the mirror...

I screamed as I shoved the mirror away, clenching my eyes. I wasn't that. I wasn't going to be

that! That pony belonged in a cave! I was going to be dead in six months... a year at the most!

Please... let me be dead...

"You still want to die..." whispered a mare inside me. It sounded like Trixie.

I closed my eye, lifting my head as I fought the despair inside me. Even after Gardens... Even after finding out about Marigold... I didn't want to live if it meant turning into that thing. I was becoming a monster. A bloody, brutalized, beaten monster. The Wasteland was molding me into another Gorgon or Deus with all the finesse that Sanguine could muster. I fought the sob in my throat. "I'm scared..."

And that was it. Fear. I was afraid. Afraid I'd hurt my friends. Afraid of what I was becoming. Afraid of what would happen to everypony if I died. Better for me to hurry the process along. Fall apart. Push as long and hard as I could before I fell apart for good. Death was easier. I sobbed there in that dark emptiness, ignoring the contents of the mirror as it wept too. "I don't want to die... I don't want to... to become that thing!" I said as I pointed at the mirror with a limp hoof. "I want to live!"

"Then live," Twilight murmured softly inside me. "Live for your friends. Live for Gardens. Live for something you want to live for. Don't make my mistake... Don't live for something you hate."

I sniffed, looking at that thing. It couldn't look back at me. "And... what if..."

There was silence for a moment, and then Psalm said quietly, "That's what friends are for."

I sat there a moment, blubbering like an idiot. The fact that I was going to inevitably die young looked back at me. Twilight's taint was slowly and inevitably transforming me into something monstrous.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered to that thing in the mirror. To those mares inside me.

"There's no shame in fear..."

"The shame is in letting your fear control you."

"You have to keep faith, even when you're afraid."

"You gotta giggle at the ghosties, even when laughing's the last thing you want to do!"

"Don't let being afraid stop you from being awesome!"

"Don't let fear turn you mean and hateful."

"Be honest with yourself. Lying never changed nothing."

"Ante up..."

I finally looked at that thing that was once a happy and healthy mare and sighed, "I'm going to be dead soon... or I'm going to be a monster." And then I smiled a little. "Well... guess I better make the time count. Now... how do I get out of Lacunae?"

"Just ask..." the mare replied, complete and whole within me. I heard the soft hum. My own humming. And I hummed along with myself. Maybe I was doomed. I was afraid. But I wouldn't let fear destroy me. I had too much to do.

oooOOOooo

I gazed into Lacunae's eyes as they focused on my own. She blinked, then looked down at Lightning Dancer holding me up. "Ah..." she said delicately, "I assume that there have been..."

developments?"

"You could say that," I said, and the yellow mare nodded and deftly placed me back in the wheelchair. "Thank you, Lacunae," I said as I settled back, looking up at her with a soft smile. "That last bit... with the mirror. That was you, wasn't it?"

The alicorn fidgeted a little and gave a sheepish smile. "It only seemed right. You pulled me out of the dark and put me back together again."

Virtue isn't something inherent. The Goddess and countless ponies within had shoved their flaws and weaknesses into the equivalent of a closet and created a mare who was gentle and kind, who had learned from her mistakes. Who was better for them. You couldn't have empathy if you anesthetized yourself to the pain of others.

"You get a horn, and suddenly everything's all magical and mystical," Lightning Dancer said with a teasing grin, looking at Lacunae curiously. Clearly, anypony with wings was an okay pony to a pegasus.

"Yup. It's a great, mysterious world for us horn heads," I replied with a grin. Lacunae lifted me easily with her horn, adjusting me in the seat. I had to admit, I felt a bit foalish being lifted around like that.

"Well, if you're done, I'll go wait for Dusk. She's probably going to need some cloudberry wine and a good cry after all this is done," she said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. "The tougher the mare, the bigger the softie inside." Deus must have been stuffed with down fluff, then. She trotted off back towards Glory's room.

"That is a very interesting mare," Lacunae said softly.

"Ponies keep surprising me," I agreed with a smile. Then I looked up at her. "I need to find P-21 and Scotch... and Rampage. Push me? My horn isn't really working right now." I frowned, screwing up my face. There was a sparkle from the tip, then a zap like the blowing of a light bulb. I rolled my eye, looking at the char barely visible on the tip of my horn. "Yup. Still not working." I pouted. Stupid little defective horn... humph.

* * *

It took a bit of time to find them in the 'School of Literature'. One classroom had been converted into a kitchen. The fare was distinctly basic, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Most of the Eggheads sat around with books, talking about their ideas, problems, and plans. Scotch Tape stared at a Sparkle-Cola slowly going flat before her. P-21 read an arcane science book like his life depended on it. Rampage was explaining in exact detail the best way to snap a neck to two horrified-looking research mares.

She gets turned into a filly, deals with a tech abomination, has at least three different mares inside her, and goes on without a tick. I owed her a hug. Later. Right now, I pointed at P-21 and Lacunae steered me to his table. He glanced at me, glanced at the alicorn, and returned to reading with a focused stare that implied that either he didn't want to talk or he was trying to levitate it with his earth pony magic. Somehow, I doubted it was the latter.

"I didn't realize it was a problem for you," I said softly.

"Well, given that I didn't tell her, I would have thought you'd have picked up on it. Silly me," he replied in an acid tone.

I supposed I deserved that. "So, why is it a problem?"

He finally looked at me. "Blackjack, what does the word 'father' mean to you?"

I hadn't exactly thought about that. "Well... um... when a buck and a mare love each other very much..." I said lamely, but he clearly wasn't in the mood for jokes. Definitely in grumpy pony mode. "I don't know. I never really thought about it. Textbook told us that they helped mares care for foals back before the Incident." And that we didn't need them any more with the breeding queues.

"Well, to me it means 'sperm donor'," he replied flatly.

"I still don't see the problem," I said.

He clearly fought to repress what he wanted to say. Then he said, in low, even tones, "Scotch Tape now thinks of me as family. As her 'father'." He sighed and closed his eyes and he sat back. "Her mother always went on and on about us being a family once we were out of the stable. Living together. Having more children. Love..." He sighed and rubbed his face. "All I wanted was to escape. Now she expects me to be a 'father' to her... I doubt that she knows what that means either."

"Maybe not," I replied softly, "but here is what I do know. Over the last month, that filly has lost more than you or I. She's lost her home... her mother... and today she lost her innocence. Now, maybe she does have expectations of you that aren't fair, but you are twice her age and she needs all the help she can get. We're all she has in the world!"

"You don't understand," he hissed, clenching his eyes shut as he rubbed his face. "I can't be her father... it's... I just can't!" I'd seen that look in his eyes just a few days ago. There was more to this than just unexpected relationships.

"All right, but I hope someday soon you can at least tell her why," I said softly. I wouldn't press further... not right now anyway. I could still see the angry ring around his neck. I nodded for Lacunae to wheel me over to Scotch Tape.

The filly didn't look up from her bottle. "Hey. Rubber hoof brigade, coming through," I said as I wagged my limp limb at her. "Wooga wooga wooga."

She narrowed her eyes, leaning away from me. "You are so weird, Blackjack!"

"I'm trying to get you to smile," I replied,

"I'm not a foal," she said with a huff, returning her gaze to her soda. I glanced at P-21 sitting in the exact same pose. Dear Celestia, their obstinacy was genetic!

I gave her a flat look. "I'll have you know that I have body tackled raiders, Enclave power armor, and monsterponies." Oh, now she was looking at me like I was disturbed. I grinned. "So tackling you and tickling you till you cry probably isn't impossible."

"You wouldn't!" she gasped.

I did, and to hell with everypony who stared like I'd lost my mind! I didn't stop till she was laughing and gasping and begging for mercy. I was laughing, too. And from across the room, I thought I saw a ghost of a smile on P-21's face.

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said softly once she'd caught her breath. "For caring..."

"We all care about you," I said as I shifted and shoved myself into sitting upright against the wall next to the olive filly.

"He doesn't," Scotch Tape said. "He hates me." Three guesses as to who she's talking about,

Blackjack...

"P-21 doesn't hate you. He's just... he's just like that. He's serious about everything," I said as I gave her a patient smile and brushed her mane out of her teal eyes.

Her smile didn't last. "I screwed up," she said softly.

"Come again?"

"In the office?" she reminded me as she stared at her hooves. "I was so scared I just froze up. I think I wet myself a little..."

"Well, it was dangerous..." If it hadn't been for my clattery leg braces I'd have done it myself.

"Not that," she said softly, pressing her limbs together. "I saw... it. The monster from the tunnels." She drew a trembling breath. "There was a heap of scrap in there. Just a pile of junk... but I knew it was going to come alive. It was going to eat me... eat us all. I would have stayed there till I reappeared if some mare hadn't brushed against me. I nearly got caught anyway..."

She shook, and I put a leg across her shoulders. "I see it all the time. I hear it in the walls." She pointed at a Sparkle-Cola machine in the corner. "I... I think its in there, and any second it's going to pop out and eat us all."

"Scotch, it's gone. I shot it with the strongest gun in Equestria. It's not coming back," I said, but I saw she wasn't convinced.

Triage trotted in and immediately approached me, four new leg braces floating beside her. I broke into a wide grin. "Finally! I am so tired of being pushed around like an old gray mare."

"Oh, no, old gray mares are *much* better patients than you. Speaking of which, the professor wants to make sure that you speak with her before you run off again." Funny, she didn't seem like she was very happy about that. My mane was starting to prickle.

"All right, just let me check on Glory first..."

"I'm afraid that that wasn't a request," a buck said from the doorway. The unicorn levitated a bow and arrow, the black arrowhead glowing with an inset talisman. Looming behind him was a massive sentry bot with a white crab painted on the front. A zebra mare bearing a scorpion cutie mark-- were they still called cutie marks on zebras?-- and carrying a rifle the spitting image of Lancer's skulked on his left, and a white pegasus mare with two needle rifles on her battle saddle stood to his right. The buck with the arrow glared right at me. "Professor Zodiac will see you. Now."

Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Made of Stubbornium -- You just don't know when to up and die! When reduced to 25% or fewer hit points, you gain +6 DT and regenerate 2hp/sec till above 25% hit points.

Quest perk added: Magic Bullet (rank 3) -- The range of your magic bullet spell has increased by a factor of five.

((Huge thanks and admiration to Kkat for creating FoE. Massive props to Hinds and Bronode for spending TEN hours making this decent! And thanks to everypony who leaves feedback! You make this possible.))