



Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage

Chapter Twelve: Homecoming

"Oh, sweetie, you are turning the most delightful shade of red. It is most becoming."

"Show the proper respect," BARON ordered sternly. "This is lord Red Eye." I intentionally unfocused my implant so it would move and whirr, hoping it would keep her from noticing it was on the wrong side and that my real eye was gold, not blue.

The armored griffin gulped and took a nervous step back and looked me up and down. Please, have never really seen the bastard. Please have never really seen the bastard. Please have never really seen the bastard.

"Of course sir," the Talon finally replied, bowing her head and lowering her wings quickly. "Please accept my sincerest apologies, we were not expecting you and have been experiencing some breaches in security as of late."

"And that is commendable," I said with a nod. I triggered SATS and targeted the griffin's head. It was tempting to just magically burst a blood vessel in her slaving brain, but I opted out, just taking note of what my E.F.S. labeled her. "But while being thorough is commendable," I continued when the spell dropped, "I would hope you could recognize your own employer, Serrish." Oh, the irony of that statement was just delicious.

She seemed a bit taken aback and sunk her head lower. "You know my name sir?"

I walked past her, making sure my coat would billow dramatically behind me. "I aspire to know all those who aid the Unity in its grand mission." Praising the slaving scum still felt like poison on my tongue. "Now, show me what you have accomplished here."

"Right away, sir." The griffin saluted and fell in beside me. "Would you like me to arrange an alicorn escort for you?"

"they have some sort of hive mind that makes them especially potent in groups."

If anything could blow my cover it would be a psychic, false goddess. "That will not be necessary," I replied dismissively. "My own security detail will be quite sufficient." That meant there were alicorns up here and from what I had heard about them...

"...indestructible shields, armies that materialize out of thin air"

I didn't want to deal with them any time soon... Or ever.

Serrish nodded and hustled up to my side. "As I'm sure you've seen, we have made considerable progress in establishing infrastructure." She rushed ahead and opened the station door for me. "Despite several setbacks and damage to our supply lines."

My companions, the Unity griffin and I trotted out of the wood paneled station and out onto a wide, railed balcony that ended in a ramp down to the ground. Small, simple shacks made from riveted sheets of corrugated metal had been set up in a shanty town between the tram station and the nearly sheer mountainside further up the slope. A behemoth saw sat to the side of the camp, sunk halfway up its treads in the snow. A ragged hole had been torn in the rock face that I assumed was Stable 114's entrance.

Nearly a hundred raiders hustled through the camp in thick coats and other bits of mismatched, winter clothing. Pots of boiling porridge hung over a half dozen roaring fire pits,

each one surrounded by groups of cackling slavers. Several armor coated scrappers were overseeing small teams of battered, withered slaves in tattered Stable jumpsuits as they hauled sleds of scrap metal and machinery out of the Stable. A pit near the edge of the camp was filled to the brim with burned and broken bodies in blue uniforms.

I heard Maple snarl as she stepped past me, her jaws tensing on her firing bit. I had to wonder if it had been a mistake to bring her along. On the one hoof, she had just as big a stake in this as I did, if not bigger. But on the other, most of the ponies below had probably been her friends, or at least her neighbors. She had shown impressive restraint when we had infiltrated the timber yard, but this may have been too much to ask of her.

I put my hoof on the security mare's shoulder and pulled her back as hard as I could without arousing suspicion; I barely managed to shift the blue pony's attention. "Not yet," I whispered as reassuringly as possible.

"They're working them to death," the Stable mare growled around her bit, quivering in rage. "We can't just leave them here."

"And we won't," I replied under my breath. "Just wait for the right time, not now."

The Talon turned back to us and removed her helmet. "I beg your pardon, lord Red Eye?"

Aw horse apples! A lie, a lie, blessed Luna, I needed a lie. "I was discussing plans for my visit." Right... now what would those plans be? Something a grease ball like Red Eye would do... "My aid believes that this would be a good location for my speech," I continued, indicating to the white maned mare. No cult leader would pass up an opportunity to hear themselves talk. "But I do believe that the Overmare's office would be a far more suitable venue for my first address."

Maple was still tensed, but nodded, playing along for now. I had to admire her self control. I doubted I would have been a stalwart in her horseshoes.

Serrish bowed. "Forgive me sir. I should have thought to prepare for such an event. Would you like me to announce your presence and assemble the workers?" Without her face concealing helm I couldn't help but notice that she was just a kid; she couldn't have been older than her mid teens. I felt a stab of guilt. In an hour or so this child would be dead or at the very least captured. Could I really dismiss her as a monster? Surely she was just doing what the bigger ponies, er, griffins told her to do.

"And they will tell her to kill you," Icy said bluntly. *"Young or not, she made her nest..."*

"And I'm about to knock it out of a tree," I mumbled to myself.

"My lord?" the young guard asked. Icy was right: if it came down to it I would pull the trigger. I just hoped she would have the good judgment to stand down. Nothing is free.

I waved my hoof dismissively. "There is nothing to forgive. My visit was unannounced." No sense in guilt tripping her.

I gazed across the camp. When the Frostborn got here the Stable ponies would inevitably be caught in the crossfire if they weren't simply used as pony shields. "I would like you to gather the workers in the atrium, but do it discreetly. I want my appearance to be a surprise." I had to get into Goldlight's control room anyway for my part of the plan anyway. The liberation

would be far easier if somepony on our side controlled the doors and other Stable systems. This way I could also lock the room down and keep everypony safe until the battle was over.

"A surprise?" the adolescent griffin asked hesitantly. "Surely you want me to set up some security and keep some slaves to keep working."

I needed another lie, another lie, another lie. Why wouldn't I need security in a room full of several hundred ponies who probably wanted to kill me? ...I got nothing. I guess I'm going to need to, to borrow a griffin term, strong arm it. So much for mister nice buck.

"Are you questioning me?" I replied incredulously, glaring at her and stepped forward. "Are you questioning the will of the goddess?"

The Unity guard backed away from me as I advanced on her. "I-I-I didn't mean..." she stammered with a mix of fear and shame.

"I know you didn't," I sighed and shook my head, driving the adolescent griffin back until her hindquarters bumped into the banister. "You were doing your job." I softened my expression and placed my booted hoof over her heart. "Have faith my friend..." There was a line I had heard the Unity leader say on the radio that would work here. What was it? Ah! "Until everypony is free, nopony should be free. The guards can pull the sleds for an hour or so while the newest members of our family are enlightened." I removed my hoof and waved it to my companions. "My own security is quite sufficient to keep me safe while I bring the words of the goddess to these miserable souls."

The young Talon gave me a warm smile and placed her hand reverently in her chest where I had touched her. "Shall I start now, sir?" she asked dreamily, slowly moving out of the corner I had backed her into. "Or would you rather I finish your tour first?" So, she had a little crush on Red Eye, or at the very least was star struck. That would make this even easier. Who says no to somepony they admire?

"Now is good, thank you." I walked to the ramp with my companions in tow. "I think an unguided tour would better inspire me for my speech." I started down the ramp, but stopped as if I had an after thought. "By the way, where do you think I would find Gellwin?"

"The security office most likely," Serrish replied, sounding almost hurt and nervously running her fingers through her snow white chest feathers. "She doesn't get out much since her accident."

"Accident?"

The griffin teen nodded. "Yes. There was a live grenade rigged in her desk; it took her right claw and damaged her eye."

"Quality cloud is always useful to have around. I also took the chance to leave Gellwin a little token of my appreciation for her hospitality over the past two weeks."

Well done Echo. That was one mare I did not want to piss off.

I shook my head in fake sympathy. "That is tragic, it truly is. I will check in on her when I have finished my speech and official tour."

Serrish looked up and cocked her head, scratching the back of her neck nervously. "Don't you want her to conduct the tour?"

"To be honest, no," I answered warmly, shaking my head slowly and putting on my most supportive smile. "I know she would insist, but I think I would rather have you give me the tour. I don't want to argue with her given the circumstances. Do you think you would be up for it my dear?"

The adolescent guard seemed to melt for a moment, but regained her composure when Rippertini and Alabaster snickered at her. "I mean, yes sir!" she shouted, still a bit pink in the cheeks.

I waved my hoof to the Stable slaves. "Then you had best be about your duties."

Serrish snapped a salute and leaped into the air. "He likes me," she giggled to herself when she thought she was out of earshot; I loved my exceptional ears. I was really starting to feel bad about using her this way. Using a kid's heart to betray her kin just struck me as a low blow. "He called me his friend and actually touched me. I'm never washing these feathers again." Slaver or not, I hoped she would make it through the day.

We pressed on through the camp, letting the impressionable guard start rounding up the slaves. A few of the Unity raiders gave us uncertain looks, but a growl from BARON or, a very unhappy, Maple here and a flash of my robotic eye there dissuaded any further investigation. The key to infiltration was self confidence; act like you belonged and most would assume you did.

Maple grimaced and bit down on her lip as we started passing the work column. The Stable ponies were even worse off than I first thought. Not only were they half starved and beaten, but most were also half frozen in their insufficiently insulated jumpsuits. Weeping, yellow sores and blackened extremities and other signs of severe frost bite coated more than half the bedraggled ponies. Some of them seemed to have odd, blistering burns on their legs and faces.

A limping, strawberry roan mare looked up as we passed. She stopped in her tracks, examining us with a mix of disdain and confusion through her cream, rat's nest of a mane. "Maple!" she bellowed. "You filthy traitor!" Before anypony could react she charged the security mare and slammed into the snow at my azure companions hooves as her leg gave out on her.

Maple knelt down to the livid Stable pony. "Officer Blanket Stitch, I..." She glanced up at me wide eyed, shaking her head and mouthing 'I can't' over and over again. This was tearing her up.

"You left us!" the irate security pony spat at my companion as she struggled to rise. "And now you're in bed with these fiends!"

The light red mare's outburst was drawing a crowd of raiders and slaves. I'm so sorry, Maple, but I can't jeopardize our cover. I let out a throaty chuckle and smirked down at the two security ponies. If this was going to be a spectacle then damn it, I was going to make it my spectacle. "Another broken heart, Maple?"

The white maned mare looked up at me as if I had just struck her.

I twisted my face into an awkward, apologetic smirk and tilted my head to the approaching crowd. "Oh well," I said, resuming my slimy impersonation of Red Eye. "You have served me well. Do you want her?"

Maple stared at me blankly. "What?"

“Do, you, want, her?” I repeated, far more pointedly. “I recall you mentioning interest in an aid.”

Maple looked from the crippled, Stable pony at her hooves to the Unity guards that had gathered around us. “Yes? Yes I would!” she replied with dawning realization. “Thank you, my lord.” She shoved her front leg under Blanket Stitch’s barrel and yanked the other security mare to her hooves. “Lets go, slave.”

The weakened, red and white pony struggled in Maple’s grip. “You know what?! I’m glad Blossom’s dead! That way she isn’t-”

Maple cut her off with a back hoof to the face, sending the other security pony back to the snow with a bloody snout.

Alabaster quickly scooped up the dazed, Stable pony and shoved a leg warmer in her mouth. “We are trying to save you,” the mercenary mare hissed, barely audibly. “Now shut up and come with us.”

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“Oh Officer Sugar, I am so sorry,” Officer Blanket Stitch apologized, wrapping the azure mare up in a tight hug. “I had no idea. I just saw you dressed like that and with them and-and... What was I supposed to think?”

After the security mare’s outburst we had very quickly hustled up to the hole in the rock face. The Stable 114 door itself had once resembled a giant gear similar to the one I had seen on Icy’s flank, but was now sitting against the tunnel’s walls, having been sliced in half and ripped out of its seating. When we had finally made it inside we ducked into an abandoned bathroom and filled the Stable mare in on the plan.

Maple just shook her head. “You couldn’t have known and I would have done the same. Now stand still. I need to treat your leg.”

“Make it fast,” I instructed, trotting in place nervously. BARON and Granite were outside, guarding the door, but that would only keep prying eyes out for so long. “The longer we stay here the more likely we are going to get caught.” That and I was very uncomfortable being in the little filly’s room.

My white maned companion nodded and quickly bound the strawberry mare’s sprained leg, using several paper towel rods and gauze as a makeshift cast for the officer. Alabaster and Ripertini passed the time by bouncing the mercenary mare’s rubber ball against the far wall, though I did need to stop them from taking a shot every time one of them missed.

“Done,” Maple announced, dabbing off the last remnants of blood from the roan pony’s muzzle. “The cast should do for now, but she should get a proper medical brace as soon as possible.” She glanced over to me almost critically. “You really should have gotten BARON to do this.”

I pulled my hood back down so it completely concealed my horn. “You did fine. Besides, given the situation, it was probably better a familiar pony did this than... whatever BARON is.” I put a booted hoof on Maple’s shoulder. “Besides, I knew you could handle it. You have gotten quite good at this.”

Maple smiled up at me. “Thanks... and I was the one who broke her nose.” She turned

back to the roan earth pony. "Sorry about that by the way."

The cream maned, Stable pony shrugged. "I had it coming." The officer turned to me with a concerned look on her face. "I appreciate what you did for me, but what about everypony else? They are freezing to death out there."

I caught Alabaster's ball and dropped it into her pack. "I convinced one of the guards to take them inside for a speech. If nothing else that should give them a well deserved rest. Now, we need to get to Goldlight's office as soon as possible."

Rippertini passed her Shrike hoof cannon to the red and white mare as everypony else composed themselves. "Yur gonna need ta be a slave fer a bit longer," the blue unicorn said apologetically as she shoved the legwarmer back into the security mare's mouth. "Tuck dat gun away fer now. You can shoot some ah dem bastards later."

I almost telekinetically opened the door, but Alabaster beat me to it. That was close. Red Eye was an earth pony, no magic allowed.

The crimson unicorn trotted out between our two scrapper impersonators, looked around and beckoned us to follow. I didn't know enough about the Unity leader to risk being seen leaving a bathroom with four mares.

I followed out without a word and resumed my cult leader façade, everypony else falling in behind me. I brought up the Stable map in my mechanical eye; it was disconcerting at first, but it was better than wandering aimlessly. I plotted the most efficient course to the Atrium that avoided all the corridors I thought giant alicorns could easily fit through.

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We worked our way through the claustrophobic, twisting halls. I passed through a series of corridors labeled 'Residential Two', indiscernible from every other slate gray passage in the shelter. Heavy metal doors dotted the hall, each leading to a ransacked family home. It baffled me how ponies could spend their whole lives in this world of gray. A world with no open spaces to run in, no sweet, rich earth, not even the perpetual overcast that passed for a sky in the wastes.

Maple poked my flank as we passed a residence across from a ransacked schoolroom. "Stop here for a moment. I want to go get something."

I turned my head as the security mare disappeared into the domicile and caught sight of the name card on the door; 'Harvest/Sugar'. I drooped my head. "Take as much time as you need." After what I had cost her...

She didn't take long. After some rustling Maple trotted back out wearing a pair of simple, gold bands above her PipBuck, each engraved with an overlapping flower and shield. "Okay, I'm ready to go now."

"Are you sure you have everything?" I asked, not quite able to bring myself to meet her eyes.

The blue earth pony stroked one of the anklets as if it were a child. "Everything important." She looked back up to me with steely resolution. "Now lets get this over with so we can deal with these bastards."

"Deal with what?" an oddly echoing voice inquired from behind me as I was hit with a

sent that reminded me of rotting fruit; enticingly sweet, but with that indescribable suggestion of poison.

Ugh. I rolled my eye (the synthetic did not respond while I had my PipBuck open in it.). Time for Red Eye to put his hoof down again. "That is none of your concern," I snapped, shaking my head and slowly turning. "Do you know who I am-m-m-m..." Oh crap!

A massive, blue-black alicorn mare towered over me. Her bright red mane and tail flowed around her in an eldridge breeze, flickering as if they were made of flames. "No, we do not." She bored into me with her nearly white eyes. "We demand to know."

I gulped. I'm fucked. I'm fucked. "I'm Red Eye," I squeaked, my voice cracking for the first time in years. Oh, I hoped this worked.

The unearthly demigoddess leered down at me, her expression unreadable. "You are not," she stated flatly. "You are an impostor. You will come with us to be processed or we will kill you."

"I-er-um..." I stammered, avoiding eye contact with the supernatural mare. Say something you stupid git.

"The Unity needs as many smart ponies as it can find. Until then."

"I mean I'm here with an invitation from Red Eye," I corrected myself, forcing myself to look the alicorn in the eye. I magically pulled my hood off and deactivated my PipBuck map, allowing me to focus my implant on the fiery mare. "Though from what I have seen I am far from impressed."

The false goddess cocked her head and just stared at me for a moment. "We do not understand. You will explain."

"Look how easily I managed to get in here with this simple disguise," I scoffed, shaking my head and slowly walking around the huge creature. "It is just sad how lax security here is. If this is the best your 'Goddess' can offer, I fail to see why I should side with you over the Frostborn. Care to explain?"

The alicorn followed me, still quite perplexed. "We do not believe you fully grasp your situation. We are the children of the Goddess. We do not explain ourselves to lesser beings." She stopped and spun me around with her magic, nearly tapping our horns together. "You will now come with us so we may decide what is to be done with you."

I ran in place as the dark mare lifted me off my hooves. "Is this how the Unity treats potential allies?!" I snapped, trying to seem as imposing as possible while flailing my legs in mid air like some newborn foal.

The midnight demigoddess narrowed her eyes. "This is how the Unity treats intruders. Our sisters are certain that you would not consent to join us and that this entire conversation is nothing more than a ru-"

CRACK!

The alicorn's head transformed into a cloud of red mist and I fell to the floor with a thud, coated with arterial spray.

BARON walked over the pseudo goddess' body with a series of crunches as his armored bulk crushed her fragile wing bones. "This conversation has ceased to be productive." He wedged his blood soaked power hoof under me and hauled me back to my hooves.

I just stood there and blinked numbly. Despite my knowledge to the contrary, I couldn't help but see Princess Luna's brains splattered across the floor and soaking into my barding. I trembled, drenched in the viscera of a divine being and mouthing incoherently.

The harnessed stallion prodded me and said something as my comrades moved around me, but I couldn't hear him over my heart pounding in my ears. The alicorn's pungent ichor was giving me a throbbing headache.

"Ocher, move." Icy ordered sternly.

The blood smelled different from a pony's. It was twisted, tainted, nothing like the ambrosia a goddess' blood should have been.

"Ocher!"

This thing was no goddess. This was just some pale mockery of the god-princesses. The edges of my vision faded and the pounding in my head quickened.

"MOVE!"

"Huh? What?" I asked, shaking my head. The tendrils of red receded and I was able to make out muffled sounds again. My three mercenaries and Blanket Stitch had taken up defensive positions. Maple seemed to be in the same 'he just killed a goddess' daze as I was, just walking in circles around the dead alicorn.

"I would advise an expeditious retreat," BARON stated calmly. "The others know what happened and the entire Stable will be on high alert soon."

I nodded dully and brought my map back up. Where could we go that would be safe...ish? I scanned through my PipBuck's schematics as quickly as I could.

Maple came up and poked my chest. "Ocher, did we just kill a goddess?" the blue mare asked hesitantly, still eyeing the dead alicorn.

"No," I replied flatly, still flipping through floor plans. I took a deep sniff of the dead mare, as much to reaffirm it to myself as Maple. "That was only a fake goddess. Don't let it get you worked up. Everypony needs us to be at our best right now." That was hypocritical of me, but I couldn't have either of us freezing up if, (who was I kidding?) *when* we needed to fight another one of these things.

Damn it. None of these places were safe enough to hold up in. Even the rooms with single, small entrances were too easy to get to. The slavers could just bury us with sheer numbers if the scrappers and alicorns didn't take us apart first; BARON was probably the only one who could go toe to toe with the Unity's elites anyway.

"Some time today would be nice," Alabaster hissed impatiently as she nervously orbited a trio of grenades around her horn (Kind of a dumb idea in my opinion. One lucky shot and boom.). "I don't look good in a slave collar."

"I know!" I snapped irritably, flipping through my other tabs in hopes of finding something

that could help. Information about me. Useless. My inventory. Useless. "I'm working as fast as I can. If we make the wrong turn or run down the wrong corridor we are doo..." I trailed off as I came to my log entries.

>I have sent most of the surviving ponies to Shetland. The excavator can't fit inside the Stable and it should take these slavers weeks to get to them without it.'

That was it. "The pod banks!" I exclaimed, bringing up my maps again and plotting a path. "Mayor, er, Overmare Goldlight sealed them. If we can get there we may be able to hold out until the cavalry arrives."

"This way," Maple instructed, taking off down a corridor at a half gallop. "Hurry!"

Without thinking I took off after her. According to my radar the others were hot on my heels. We charged down corridor after nearly identical corridor, the security mare seemingly knowing the way more by feel than sight. The ease with which she could navigate these labyrinthine corridors baffled me. Red ticks danced across my compass, but at the speed we were moving and without Echo being close enough to enhance my radar, my E.F.S. was next to useless.

I caught a whiff of something vile as we careened blindly towards another corner, a mix of sweat, oil and the ozone tang of cheap spark batteries. What would make that smell... "Maple, get down!" I bellowed, tackling the azure mare to the floor as a scrapper turned the corner and fired a burst of spikes down the hall.

As I was scrambling to regain my hoofing and let the security mare under me back up BARON leaped clean over us; an impressive feat given the bulk of his armor and heavy weapon rig. The harnessed stallion slammed the Unity elite into the far wall with a crunch. The Hunter buck had all three hoof long spikes jutting out of his chest, but seemed all in all unbothered by the rusted chunks of metal. In one fluid motion he twisted the scrapper's head all the way around with his hooves.

Maple forced herself back to all fours, lifting me with her. "Thanks." She nodded, shifting me off her back. "How many more do we need to deal with?"

I floated out a magical holdout pistol from a hidden pocket in Dawn Star's coat as I tried to make an accurate guess with my E.F.S.. "About... Ah, fuck it." I lifted my nose in the air and took several deep sniffs. Mare, gun oil, very close, that was Maple. Stallion, chemicals, blood, there was BARON. Vomit, alcohol, the sickly rot of frost burn and a clay smell that I assumed was plastic explosive identified Granite, Rippertini, Blanket Stitch and Alabaster respectively. I also picked out several others, all smelled of smoke, cheap gruel and cheaper booze, but they were all distinct. "Five, one or two intersections ahead, no scrappers."

Everypony looked at me uncomfortably. I already looked like Red Eye, reminding them of what was happening to me probably wasn't my best idea. I could actually smell the fear in the recycled air; it was exciting, but was still disheartening to get from my friends and allies.

BARON cocked his head and nonchalantly slammed the dead Unity guard's head into the wall, readjusting all his harness components at once. My companions all turned to the commotion. As soon as he had their full attention he stomped the slaver's skull flat, extracting cringes from the others. He managed to draw all the ire to him with a single show of pointless brutality... Why?

"They can't be afraid of you," my psychosis induced guide said. "Like it or not, you are in

charge and they need to be comfortable with you; at least as comfortable as possible. No pony trusts him, so a little more doubt won't hurt."

I shook my head. "Thanks, BARON," I mumbled under my breath as the others went to scavenge the dead slaver while giving the Hunter a wider breadth. I gently poked my white maned companion on the back as she passed me. "Look, I know it is unnerving, it scares the horse apples out of me at least, but what is happening to me is a tool we can use. We need every advantage we can get."

The security mare took my booted hoof and pressed it to her chest. "Ocher, I don't know about the others, but I'm not scared *of* you, I'm scared *for* you. Whatever is going on can't be good." She dipped her head and looked back up with a smirk. "Besides, I don't think you could hurt me if you wanted to."

"What would I do without you?" I asked with a smile despite myself.

The blue mare just shrugged. "Freeze and die."

"Fair enough." I took another sniff. The chain smoking alcoholics were getting closer and there was a hint of toxic sweetness. "We need to move. Another alicorn is coming."

The Security mare nodded and turned to the others. "Okay boys and girls, lets get a move on! We are on the clock!" She trotted to the head of the column. "Alabaster, frags around that corner on Ocher's mark."

The explosive mercenary hesitated for a moment, but floated out a quartet of grenades and waited flush to the wall.

I walked up next to Maple and sniffed the air. It didn't take long for me to match up the scents to ticks on my E.F.S. compass. "Now!"

Without a moment's hesitation the four apple shaped bombs lost their stems and disappeared around the corner. A few seconds later series of explosions wracked the hall, accompanied by screams and a spray of viscera.

I immediately switched to breathing through my mouth. The smell was as intoxicating as ever and I couldn't risk loosing control again. "Lead the way Maple, I think my sniffer is tapped for the moment, but we should be clear for a little while."

The defender mare gave me a curt nod and took off again. I nearly slipped on the remains of the patrol we blew up, but other than that I couldn't tell one corridor from the next. Left, left, right, left... I gave up trying to keep track of our path (that was the PipBuck's job anyway) and just followed the bobbing, white tail in front of me.

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"This is it," Maple whispered, sliding to a halt next to a familiar, buckshot dented wall. She looked over to me and jerked her head to the door. "Guards?"

My E.F.S. was still swarming with contacts, friendly and hostile. My scanner was still practically useless, I knew there where guards there, but depending on what floor the contacts were on there could have been anywhere from two to twenty. I didn't want to risk snuffling around again, I hadn't fully calmed down from the last time. Lacking other options, I pressed my ear to the door.

There were raised voices, cursing, and some whimpering. "I can pick out four distinct voices. I think there are also one or two Stable ponies so we can't just blow up the hallway." A grinding whirr of metal ripping into metal. They were still trying to cut their way in.

Maple kicked her loading lever, making her guns click ready. "I guess we are doing this the old fashioned way then."

"No," I stopped them with a raised hoof. "My cover is blown, but you should all still be able to close unmolested. Two of you can take Blanket Stitch and get close. The rest of us can back you up. BARON and Granite could go, but scrapers may be more easily recognized."

Rippertini, to my chagrin, used the opportunity to take a deep swig of 'the good shit' from her flask. I guessed I couldn't expect any more acting from her for a while. Maple and Alabaster could go, though I didn't know how effective the demo mare was without explosives.

"Hi guys!" the inebriated mercenary yelled out, trotting through the door and towards the slavers. Welp, that plan was screwed. "Ah was wondering if you could look at somefin' fer me."

"Um, sure," a stallion's voice came from around the corner. "What can I do for you darling?"

I peeked my head out in morbid curiosity, charging up a flare in my horn for when the horse apples inevitably hit the fan. Three slavers were talking with the blue mercenary in another nondescript corridor. A pair of Stable ponies who were strapped to a saw rig and cutting into the thick set of double doors. If the piles of broken saw blades that littered the floor were any indication, they had been at it for some time.

The blue unicorn sauntered up to one of the raiders, a deep green stallion with a long scar across his face. "Ah found somfin interesting'." She floated up a old hoof file to the raider's face. "Ah want te make ma self all pretty fer somfin special tonight. Does dis file look bent te you?" She brought the file right up to the slaver buck's eye.

"That's sweet of you," the unity stallion replied with a chuckle, tilting his head to inspect the hoof care device. "I don't see anything wrong with it. Where did you find this? My sister would love to get one fo-"

Rippertini cut him off with a surge of magic, sending the hoof file almost clean through the slaver's head. The green stallion collapsed into a screaming heap, clutching his eye; my own cybernetic burned at the sight. Before the other raiders could react to their wailing comrade the blue mercenary spun out a pair of the chainsaw swords pictured on her cutie marks and raked them across the other's throats.

"Impressive," BARON boomed as he lumbered out behind me and examined the drunk unicorn's work.

Rippertini turned and chuckled as she kicked the hoof file, ending the blinded raider's suffering. "Imagine what ah could have done wit a spoon." That was an unnerving prospect to say the least.

I followed the harnessed stallion out, still shuddering at the eye gouging. The Stable ponies, both salmon mares with aqua manes that struck me as mother and daughter, had dropped the saw and were huddled against the mangled hatch. I approached them with as reassuring a demeanor as I could muster, letting my flair charge bleed off as a soft glow. "Calm

down, we are here to help you.”

The older mare shifted around to shield the younger one, who on closer inspection was only in her teens. “What do you want, slaver?”

I sat down and waved my front legs. “No, no, no. I’m not a slaver. I-”

“Rose, it’s okay,” Maple interrupted, shouldering past me and kneeling down in front of the frightened Stable mares. “This is Ocher. He is with me, one of the good guys.”

The older, salmon pony nervously glanced between BARON, Rippertini and myself. “What are they?”

I self-consciously covered my mechanical eye with a booted hoof. If I made these ponies uncomfortable just with my eye how was I going to fit back in with my community when my coat grew out again and I took off my boots? With what I knew I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to. I hadn’t even thought about what I was going to do when this was done. There was no way I could stay here, but after the incident on the cliff, I didn’t know if I could trust myself with Scoop anymore; I didn’t know what I would do if I hurt her.

“Ocher is a pod pony,” the blue, security mare replied as the rest of my group came up behind us. “That is Rippertini, she is a mercenary and just sort of fuzzy. BARON... Okay I don’t really know what BARON is, but he is scary and on our side right now.”

I walked up, carefully stepping over the bodies of the dead slavers. “You know her?” I asked in an attempt to open some form of dialogue.

“This is Rose Bell and her daughter Ruby,” The white maned defender pony responded, indicating to each of them in turn with a soft smile. “They are repair technicians. Rose used to leave my gang treats when I was still a tunnel rat.”

I held out my hoof to the pair, beaming pleasantly. “Nice to meet you. Any friend of Maple’s is a friend of mine.”

I accidentally inhaled through my nose and got a deep whiff of the spreading pools of gore under each dead Unity guard. The very edges of my vision started to turn pink, but I quickly shook my head to clear the sensation. There had been something else in the air other than the iron tang of blood, smells of my various companions and the grease of the two mechanics. The sickly sweetness of the fake goddess was back and a lot closer than before.

I put my hoof back down and drew my gun. “Another alicorn is coming. We need to get moving.”

“Right,” Maple said, kneeling beside the pod bank door controls. “Now, what is the code Ocher?”

“The code?” Right... How was I that dumb? A code or key would be needed to open a locked door. I didn’t know the damned code. And I was supposed to be a clever pony. “I don’t-”

“Eight, nine, five, eight, zero, six, two, six, three,” Icy interrupted.

“What was that?” I asked, cocking my head and getting the expected stares from everypony around me.

"The door code," the delusion replied impatiently. *"It is eight, nine, five, eight, zero, six, two, six, three."*

"How do you kn-"

"Assuming direct control!" an echoing, supernaturally deep, mare's voice resounded down the corridor.

"Just enter it already!"

*** *** ***

Three members of 114's security had met us with an octet of shotguns (six in battle saddles and two more in the magic field of the unicorn officer) as soon as we opened the door. They thankfully lowered their weapons as soon as they saw Maple and Blanket Stitch. The group of guards quickly ushered us in and closed the door behind us.

The inside of the pod bank was much as I had remembered it. The only differences I could see were the new abundance of bullet holes and the nearly solid blood stain on the other side of the door. The Unity had apparently cut off as many systems as they could, shutting down the florescent lighting. The entire area was only illuminated by floor mounted emergency lights, giving the whole place a hellish, red glow.

The unicorn guard, a pinto stallion with a black mane, slung his two floating shotguns. "Good to see you Officer Blanket. Officer Sugar, we thought you were dead." He nodded to each of the security mares in turn. "What is going on?"

The blue security mare patted the pinto on the shoulder. "It is good to see you too, Beetle. We're here with help. We are going to get the Unity out. But first, who is in charge here?"

Officer Beetle pointed down the corridor. "The Overmare's assistant has taken over logistics and calming the pod ponies." Keystone... I still hadn't decided if I was going hug him or buck him in the face when I saw him again. "As far as decisive decisions go, one of the sim ponies has taken charge. Milk... something or other. They tend to keep to themselves except for meal times."

"Milk Thistle," I interjected. "She was the doctor in Shetland." I shook my head to clear the image of the dark green mare looking down mournfully at a crushed, chestnut brown body. "She has helped keep me in one piece since I was a foal."

The pinto nodded, only slightly peeved at my interruption. "Yeah, that was it. Anyway, as I said, they stick to their own most of the time in the lower fifteen banks. The general population is using banks two through ten and the maintenance level. Thankfully the reclamation vats still work so we aren't going to starve anytime soon."

I raised my hoof again. "What about bank one?" I knew it probably wasn't the most prudent question, but I knew it would bug me all day if I didn't ask. "Oh, and if you have access to the machinery why don't the lights work?"

The security stallion rolled his eyes and growled. "When the section was sealed off some monsters that looked like Princess Luna appeared out of thin air. We managed to take them down at considerable cost to the remaining security forces; the horrors used a perverse spell to stopped my officers' hearts." Note to self: do not share my heart attack spell with the security

ponies. "We didn't know how the mildly radioactive, mutant... things would effect the vats if they were recycled, so we just dumped the bodies in the first bank. Obviously we can't have ponies live with rotting, radioactive corpses."

I nodded. "Okay, that makes sense."

"As for the lights," Beetle continued, leering at me. "Do you have any idea how old this equipment is?"

"I would assume two-hundred years," I replied like a smart ass. While alienating a new ally was generally a daft idea I was getting vexed with his attitude.

The security stallion grumbled. "Yeah, and they are falling apart. We don't have the equipment or experts needed to fix them safely and we aren't about risk breaking them just so the lighting is nicer."

"Oh, there was one more thing I was wondering," I went on. "May I ask you another question?"

Officer Beetle looked over to Maple pleadingly. "Must I?" The blue mare smirked and nodded. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Why didn't you seem surprised that Blanket Stitch was alive?" I asked, pretending to notice his obvious irritation. "But thought Maple was dead?"

The security stallion cocked his head and turned to the white maned mare. "First name basis then?" The defender mare nodded again. "All right then," he sighed. "When we first got sealed off from the Unity they tried to get us to let them in. They gave us a list of security officers and other important Stable personnel that they held captive and executed one of them every hour until they figured out that we *couldn't* open the damn door. Officer Blanket was on the list, Officer Sugar was not, simple as that." He trotted past me and magically opened the door deeper into the facility. "Now I assume that the acting chief asked about the ponies in charge because she wanted to talk with them."

Well, that was a shut up and go away if I ever heard one. I just nodded and headed down into the facility. I had no intention to push the point.

I headed off down the hall with most of my companions in tow. Blanket Stitch had opted to stay with the other security ponies as soon as Rippertini remembered to take her legwarmer out of the security mare's mouth. A few ponies poked their heads out as we passed (no pony I recognized), but the halls seemed eerily quiet for supposedly having several hundred ponies in them.

"Who are you?" a familiar, mare's voice asked as we passed the twenty-fifth and final pod bank on our way to maintenance.

I turned to see a thin, older, dark green, unicorn mare standing in the bank doorway. She had a shaggy, white mane that she had attempted to corral into a bun with a bit of wire. She had taken some of the padding covers from one of the pods and turned it into an impromptu smock, half covering her aloe vera cutie mark. Moon Bell, a milky white, blank-flank, unicorn filly with a dark purple mane, and Crescent, a bright yellow, unicorn colt with a curly, green mane, peeked out from behind the mare's legs.

"Milk Thistle," I said softly, "it is good to see you alive and well."

The doctor mare scrunched up her face as she examined me, trying to see through my disguise. The week had not been kind to her: the formally shapely and jovial mare was gaunt, exhausted and seemed to have aged ten years. "Ocher?" she asked hesitantly, her face slowly softening. "Is... is that you?"

I nodded, covered my cybernetic with my booted hoof and adopted my 'welcome to my store' smile.

She rushed up to me and wrapped her front legs around me. "Oh goddesses! What happened to you?! I thought you had been taken!"

I patted the medical mare on the back. "I had a couple run ins with sharp objects, but I'm alright."

"That is a bold faced lie and you know it," Icy interrupted.

"I woke up early and got sent out to find help," I continued, completely ignoring the voice in my head. "They should be here in a little over half an hour. How about you? I hear that you have taken charge here."

The forest mare let go and stepped back, straitening out her smock. "Well, somepony had to, and I would be damned if I let that snake in the grass, Keystone, do it." She stomped her front hoof. "That bastard and Goldlight have been lying to us for years."

I nodded solemnly. "Yeah, I know, even to me..." I looked up at the pod doctor. "Is Primrose okay?" It was nice to see one of the Shetland ponies I actually liked, but I could really use a friend and I didn't know if I could call Keystone that anymore.

"I'm sorry Ocher," Thistle apologized, shaking her head. "She wasn't here... But at least she wasn't among the dead, so there is hope."

"I have sent the ninety-seven new workers directly to the Polychrome Weather Facility in hopes that you will forgive me for this debacle."

Right, hope. How was I going to get into the Harbinger's home base? My disguise would never work again. Racket rather explicitly told me I would never get Flankorage to help me attack the Unity directly. I didn't have any other powerful allies. What hope was there?

I rubbed my temples with my hooves. One thing at a time. We have a Stable to save, the Frostborn are on their way and they expect me to have control of 114's systems by the time they got here.

The two foals finally worked up the nerve to approach me. Crescent, who had been a blank-flank before the attack, now sported a vent grate on his haunches. Poor colt's parents had both been among the dead and now his talent was tied to this dark and dreary place. "Mister Ocher?" the bright yellow colt asked. I nodded reassuringly. "Why are you red?"

"And what happened to your eye?" Moon Bell added before I could answer.

I smiled warmly and magically moved some of my coat to show the gunmetal grey roots; at the rate my coat was growing it would be back to full length in less than a day. "I just dyed it to get past the bad guys." I turned to the little, cream filly. "My eye got hurt, but BARON over here," I indicated to the heavily armored stallion, "made me a shiny new one." I leaned in closer to the

foals and dropped my voice to a whisper. "Don't tell him, because it will hurt his feelings, but I liked my old one better."

That managed to extract a little snicker from the foals as they pantomimed zipping their mouths shut.

I looked back up at Milk Thistle. "How many of the other foals...?" I hadn't seen any dead children on my way out, but that didn't mean they hadn't been taken away.

"They're all here," the green unicorn replied, nodding behind her. "The last four banks have different pods with all the foals in them. I had never noticed, but thinking back we did seem to always have thirty-nine or forty growing ponies at any given time."

I glanced at my PipBuck clock; my hour and a half window had diminished far faster than I had expected. The Chevaliers would be making their way into the secret entrance by Boxx Brown's cave in a few minutes.

I stood back up, gently tussling Crescent's mane. "Thistle, can I ask you to come with me for a few?" I asked seriously. "As you are one of the ponies in charge here and I need to make an important announcement. Plus..." I rubbed the back of my head bashfully. "I kinda don't want to convince everypony I run across of who I am."

The medical mare nodded and gestured to the door at the end of the hall.

"Hey, can I see your doll mister?" Moon Bell asked, trotting past me, over to Granite and his sister. "She's pretty. I really like her mane."

"Sure," the tawny unicorn replied almost paternally, magically passing the doll over, not breaking stride. "Her name is Orchid. She has been with me since I was a little pony." He gently bumped into the red and blond grenadier. "My sister gave her to me as a cutecinnyyerra present."

"And I have regretted it ever since," Alabaster chuckled.

I couldn't help but grin at the sight of the two heavily armed mercenaries playing with a doll and the tiny filly. The sheer absurdity of the image was worth a chuckle.

I magically accessed the door controls for the maintenance level. Now I had to decide what to do when I ran into Keystone again, to hug him or buck him?

*** *** ***

Yep, I opted to buck him.

"You knew," I growled at the tawny stallion sprawled out at my hooves, barring my pointed teeth. "You knew the whole time you slimy bastard."

Keystone hauled himself back to his hooves and magically shifted his bedraggled, dark gray mane out of his face. "Yes, Ocher, I did." He rubbed his slightly swollen jaw where I had kicked him. "You have seen what is out there. Look at yourself, look at what the wasteland has done to you in little over a week. There is no way most of these ponies would survive out there. Why in Tarterous would I tell anypony that their paradise was a lie?"

"Because I was your friend and I trusted you!" I roared, stomping my hoof. I was honestly rather surprised that none of the other Stable ponies were trying to hold me back,

though I supposed my fangs, cybernetic and group of heavily armed allies might have had something to do with that.

My foalhood friend looked up at me with a mixture of anger and shame. "Damn it, Ocher. I still am your frie-

"Save it, Key," I cut him off and glanced around at the nervous, Stable ponies that filled the skeletal, metal catwalks of 114's cavernous underbelly. Pipes, ducts and bundles of wires snaked down from the Stable proper, nearly forty hooves above us, and into massive, thrumming machines that were crammed into the chamber. An iron pony swimming pool sized vat jutted out of the floor in the center of the room, filled with bubbling, light brown sludge. "I can't get into this right now," I continued, readdressing the traitorous buck. "I just needed to get that out of my system so I can save you sorry ass."

I looked away from the tawny buck and addressed the rest of the chamber, walking in a small circle. "There is more help on the way! But they can't do this on their own! I need to get to the Overmare's office as soon as I can if we want this to work! If we are lucky the remaining hostages will be relatively safe in the atrium during the fighting! Now, is there anyway I can see what is going on in the rest of the Stable?!"

"Clutch, the 114's simulation computer, is down the hall to the left," the suspicious voice in my mind said. *"I have already marked it on your PipBuck."*

I pulled up my map display on my cyber eye. Yeah, there was a marker two levels down, labeled 'Clutch' and a new mission objective to access it. "How the hell?" I mumbled to myself. Was it something with my eye that could let a delusion access my equipment? I could use my PipBuck with a thought, did that mean Icy could as well?

"Ocher, we will talk later," Icy scolded. *"You still have an audience."*

I shook my head. "Right." I readdressed the crowd. "Never mind! Now, I am looking for volunteers to help retake the Stable! Anypony who is willing, please speak with Officer Sugar, the King and Miss Rippertini!" I indicated to Maple, BARON and the buzzed mercenary in turn. "They will do what they can to arm and prepare you for battle!" I doubted any of them really knew how to fight, but the S.A.T.S. systems in their PipBucks should be able to even the odds a bit if they were careful.

"I hate to ask this," I apologized, softening my tone and turning to Milk Thistle. "But could you extend the offer to the rest of the town." I glanced over to Racket's mercenaries, who were still playing with the foals. "Alabaster and Granite will help any volunteers prepare." I sighed and looked at the floor. "I am truly sorry, but if we want to win we will need as many armed ponies on our side as we can get."

The motherly, medical mare put her hoof on my shoulder. "I understand."

"I'll be right back," I told my companions. "You all know what you need to do."

*** *** ***

"How do you know all this?" I asked myself as I zipped down through utility tunnels to the 114 super computer. "Because I sure as hell didn't know how to navigate this place."

"Is it my fault that you don't know how to use your PipBuck properly?" the delusion asked snidely. *"All that information was in there and I honestly don't have something better to do most*

of the time."

"Granted," I replied, coming to a door labeled 'Simulation Control'. "But you are more than just a figment of my imagination aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Mind telling me what you are then?" I asked, opening the door. On the other side was the small, white room with the words 'Anti-static Chamber' painted on the side wall in big, blue letters. An identical door was locked on the other side of the chamber; I had the distinct feeling that I wouldn't be moving forward until I was thoroughly de-staticed.

"When I find out you will be the first to know."

I stopped in my tracks and cocked my head. "You don't know what you are?" I asked in disbelief. The door shut behind me and the room started to hum softly, making me jump in surprise.

"No, I don't," the voice replied, sounding a bit forlorn. "The first thing I remember is you waking up from the pod. All I knew was that I had to get help for the Stable and I needed you to do it... Ah! Whatever this room does with static, it is giving me a headache."

My cybernetic was starting to burn, not enough to really hurt, but it was damned annoying. Something struck me, Icy had recognized the pillars from the Little Strongheart mission orb as a mega spell rig. "How did you know about the megaspell?"

I could almost feel him shrug. *"I am not sure to be honest. I just seem to know things sometimes. When I saw the mega spell it was as if an entire encyclopedia chapter just popped into my mind."* He hissed. *"Damn room. Ugh, anyway, one moment I only knew the broad concept of what a megaspell was, your level of knowledge to be frank, the next I knew who built it, how much it cost, how to put it together and exactly what it did; it was a battlefield medicalspell by the way."*

"So... can you tell me anything else?" I asked, scratching the back of my head. "Any guesses or theories about how you got in my head?"

"A few, but I don't have enough evidence to make me comfortable to share them. I know a good part of me comes from you, but for the rest... I have some rather silly possibilities." The room stopped humming and the far door unlocked. *"Oh thank fucking Celestia,"* the arctic delusion exclaimed. *"Come on, we have a job to do and we're on a time table."*

I sighed and walked over to the door. "You are in my head, so I do want to talk over these 'silly possibilities' of yours at some point."

Icy chuckled. *"You do realize that you just set up an appointment to talk to yourself don't you?"*

I rolled my eyes and opened the door to the Clutch. The room was a towering cylinder, its walls covered in layers of pony thick cables that ran down to a monolithic spire of steel in the center. The ceiling was inlaid with a glowing spiral of gold, equidistant decagons of diamonds ran along the coil. A terminal jutted out from one side of the tower, topped with a pony sized monitor and flanked by six others; three to a side.

I approached the monitors and... had no idea what to do with it. Lacking any other bright

ideas, I waved my PipBuck at the computer in hopes that it may do something. "Well, this was your idea, what do we do now?"

"Keep your barding on," Icy hissed as numbers scrolled across my fetlock computer. "I know the numbers, I'm just having a hard time remembering them. After the little flashes of insight it takes me a bit to dig out the useful information."

"Huh?"

"As I told you, it's like an encyclopedia. But after a second or two of knowing all of it, most of the information fades, sort of like a dream, and I need to read through the entry again. I have a feeling that this isn't how it is supposed to work, and due to a lack of other options, I blame you."

"Gee, thanks," I huffed. "How long is this going to take?"

The augmented crazy growled. *"I'll have it as soon as you stop bothering me with your ina-"* He paused for a moment as a chunk of code lit up on the central screen. *"Oh. Never mind, I'm done."* Several folders appeared on the central monitor and streams of numbers scrolled across the six smaller ones. *"Give me a few moments to connect your PipBuck to the security network."*

I decided to take the time to look through some of the options on the monitor. I was never good at waiting anyway. "Let's see what we have here..."

'>Power Levels.'

Boring.

'>Maintenance Reports.'

May as well be written in Fancy, next.

'>Biological Recycling Rates.'

Recycling rates? ...Eww. Next.

'>Omen.'

OoOoOo, ominous. Let's give that a look.

'>Error. Encrypted data. Could not open file.'

"Damn," I grumbled, backing out to the main menu. "That one looked interesting."

'>Population Reports.'

Huh, that could be interesting. It might be fun to look into my family history for a little bit; see if there was anypony famous was in the sim and the like.

"No," Icy snapped a bit nervously. *"I'm done. Let's get moving."*

I rolled my eyes and checked my timer... Aw crap! I was down to a few minutes of wiggle room. I transferred the 'Omen' file and 'Population Reports' to my PipBuck.

As soon as the files finished downloading I took off back towards the Stable proper as fast as my hooves could carry me.

*** *** ***

I reentered the door to the pod banks and kept my hoof hovering over the enter button. I was watching Red Tape and the two dozen Frostborn regulars approach the Unity camp through an exterior camera, waiting for the inevitable conflict.

Between the Stable and Shetland ponies we had managed to put together a small militia, sixty-five strong and to my surprise, Keystone was one of them. All my companions had striped themselves of their Unity armor and donned sets of 114 jumpsuits to avoid confusion and friendly fire. I didn't have time to change, but I was sure my black and pink greatcoat was distinctive enough to avoid problems. BARON had however glued chunks of his scrapper armor to the barding. Nearly all of the volunteers were only armed with pipes and small knives so the armory would need to be one of our first goals.

The plan was to wait for the Flankorage soldiers and Rocksalt's Chevaliers to start their attacks on the slaver camp and secret entrance respectively. Once the Unity committed their forces in earnest we would move out to force a fight on three fronts; all the security ponies other than Maple would stay behind to protect the rest of the population. If all went well, we would make it to the atrium before the Frostborn entered the Stable.

Once there, we would split off into three groups: one would arm the enslaved ponies so they could defend themselves until we got the atrium locked down (according to the surveillance system, it was far easier for fake Red Eye to order all the workers into one room than it was for the other slavers to get them back to work). Maple would take the second to the armory to properly equip our little militia. Finally, I would take one or two ponies with me to take control of the Overmare's office.

A sudden surge of motion pulled my attention back to the exterior camera. Red Tape was yelling her head off and gesturing angrily at the mass grave behind the raider's camp. The other slavers were all standing from their campfires and bedrolls and gathering around the soldier ponies, outnumbering them nearly four to one; I even spotted several alicorns flying in and amongst the griffin guards. I spotted Sabot and Bore's Rouncey lazily floating up the slope on its levitation pods.

The dyed mare waved her hoof for the gathering Unity forces to move aside. Needless to say, they didn't comply, causing her to stomp her hooves in anger. She turned to the soldiers behind her and signaled them to go in. Almost as soon as the New Ministry of Peace mare turned her back one of the scrappers opened fire.

I cringed as the robed pony dropped to the ground with several spikes embedded in her haunches. The wounds didn't look fatal. With what she risked for us I hoped she was okay.

Almost immediately both sides opened fire on each other, with tracers and magic beams streaming back and forth across the ski slope. One of the alicorns, a dark green one, seemed to be forming a bubble around herself, but was blown to pieces by a burst of shells from the rapidly accelerating IFV.

I reluctantly switched to the feed of the pod banks' door. Three blue-black alicorns, one of whom had solid green, luminous eyes, vanished and four scrappers heading down the hall, along with their retainers. That left only one scrapper and a dozen raiders guarding the exit. That

was doable, even without the other Stable ponies.

I took a few deep breaths to steady my nerves and give the other slavers some time to distance themselves. "Okay, everypony ready?"

Maple, wearing a set of security barding with a flower embroidered on the flanks, put her hoof on my back and nodded. "We're as ready as we will ever be," she said sternly. "Lets get this done."

"Yeah, lets."

*** *** ***

Pew! *Pew!*

A raider stallion's head was reduced to a puddle of indigo goop as I fired Dawn Star's novasurge defender into his face.

"That was the last one!" I called back over my shoulder as the headless body slumped to the floor.

We had made it to the atrium with only four dead and half a dozen wounded; S.A.T.S. had done wonders to make up for the Stable ponies' lack of training or experience. The open chamber was packed nearly cheek to jowl with exhausted and battered ponies. The walkways above us were cleared in short order by Granite's rifle and his sister's grenades. The few guards at the doors were also fairly easy pickings.

I pulled up my map and charted the shortest path to the catwalks and the Overmare's office that hung above the common area. "Okay, I need two volunteers to come with me and work our way to the upper level! Everypony else, guard the doors or go with Maple to the armory!"

"What ye need teh work yer way up there fer?" Rippertini asked, a white glow erupting from her horn.

I suddenly had an odd feeling of being wrapped in the coils of some massive snake as I was floated up in the air. "Gah!" I yelled. "What are you doing?!"

The fuzzy, blue mare chuckled, despite the sweat streaming down her face. "Am given yeh da direct route!" She levitated me up to one of the walkways and dropped me in a heap. "Whoa, dat took a lot out ah me. Sorry, but yer on yer own up there! Ah don't have enough booze teh float anah pony else!" How the hell did this mercenary mare equate booze to magical energy?

I pushed myself back to my hooves. Whatever spell she used for levitation may have been far less fun than flying or the telekinesis my mother used to use, but I had to admit, it was efficient. "Alright! Keystone, lead Rippertini and BARON up here! I'll get started!" I didn't bother to wait for confirmation and bolted for Goldlight's office.

I opened the door to a circular office with another door on the far end. A thick window dominated one side, overlooking the atrium. A C-shaped desk encircled a plush, rotating chair between the window and a wall of computer banks. Ventilation ducts were cut into the ceiling above each door. Four machine-gun turrets hung inert from a dome-like bulge in the middle of the ceiling.

I zipped over to the desk and threw myself into the seat; it was indeed very comfortable. A computer terminal was built into the tabletop, directly in front of the chair. I dropped my gun down magically flicked the computer interface on. "Okay Icy," I said waving my PipBuck at the desk to establish a wireless connection. "Do your stuff."

"Working," the technically adept entity replied, causing numbers to roll across both screens. *"I just need to give you permissions and lock out all the others. This shouldn't take too long."*

I heard a door hiss open. Looking up, I saw a large griffin standing on her hind legs in the doorway. In her left talon, she carried a finely crafted sword, nearly as large as she was and covered in griffin writing. Her right arm ended in a bandaged stump just above the wrist and the right side of her face was covered in a web of scars. Gellwin's functional eye glared at me with an unearthly green glow, the other one was milky white and seemed to just drift lazily. Unlike the other griffins I had seen she was completely unarmored and judging from the long scars that covered her body, it was by choice instead of a lack of time.

Everything seemed to slow to a crawl. I glanced to the pistol on the table and back to the angry griffin. Could I get the gun up, aimed and fired before she closed in and cut me apart? My heart hammered in my ears. From the look on her face, she was thinking the exact same thing. Without armor I could kill her with one or two shots and given the size of her weapon my armor wouldn't mean a thing.

Nothing for it. I grabbed for the gun and pulled up S.A.T.S. as soon as I felt the weapon in my grasp. Ah crap! Gellwin's wings had allowed her to cover the distance far faster than I feared and her sword was already swinging towards me. I designated a single shot to her head. I would be lucky to get that one off in time and I'd be screwed if I dedicated more shots, as there was no way to deactivate the spell before it finished its sequence. I released the spell.

Boom!

The Unity griffin's blade fell short and ripped through my gun, causing it to explode in a wash of destructive magic. I was unsure if the miss was a result of her recently lost depth perception or if my gun had been her target the entire time. Before I could figure it out the griffin dropped her scorched weapon and slammed her wing into the side of my face.

My jaw twisted into an unnatural position with a nasty kronk as I was knocked out of the seat and over the table by her brutal wing buffet. I curled up and cradled my face in my hooves, even trying to grimace hurt. Her blow had damaged my implant, causing it to flicker on and off; if it wasn't for the metal plate she may very well have caved my skull in.

"You have stuck your nose in our business for the last time, heretic!" the slaver griffin boomed with a disturbingly familiar echo to her voice as she walked over to me, brandishing her remaining talons. "We shall relish dismembering you," she almost purred. "Claws provide a visceral thrill we rarely have a chance to enjoy."

I struggled back to my hooves with considerable difficulty; most of my right side was bruised. I saw one of the ventilation ducts pop open with my real eye as the clearly possessed griffin passed it. A lock of curly, green hair poked out. Oh no...

Crescent slid out of the vent and plopped to the floor behind Gellwin with a box cutter clenched between his teeth. There was no way I could get to him in time to stop him. I tried to warn him away, but with my jaw hanging uselessly all I managed to do was make unintelligible

gurgling.

The bright yellow colt leaped up on the slaver boss' back and embedded his little blade into her wing joint.

The mangled lionbird roared in pain and flexed her still functional wing, knocking the child off her back. Crescent quickly scrambled back to all fours and dove for his weapon.

"You impudent, little cur!" she howled, catching the foal by his tail and pulled him into the air.

No! Move Ocher, move!

I hadn't even taken a step when she swung the child down to the metal floor with a horrific crunch.

Oh goddesses, please be alive. Please, please, please...

He wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. He just stared up at the towering griffin with empty eyes and a pool of blood spreading out from the back of his head.

"How dare you..." I hissed through my dislocated jaw. My heartbeat quickened as the smell of the murdered child's blood filled my nose. Tendrils of red snaked into my vision.

Gellwin turned to me casually, as if she had just stepped on a bug. She was smiling... The monstrous bitch was smiling!

The muscles in my jaw flexed, forcing it back into its socket with a crack; I didn't even feel pain anymore. "HOW DARE YOU?!" I howled at the top of my lungs. I was pumping napalm through my veins and I felt a series of pops throughout my body. My world became completely red and seemed to slow to a crawl.

I lunged at the murderess, my claws ripping through the boots. My talons hooked into her chest and I snapped at her neck, but was thrown off before I could get a good grip. I went sprawling, but managed to dig my claws into the metal floor and right myself almost immediately.

I was going to kill her and nothing was going to stop me!

The possessed griffin lunged at me with her claw, unsteady on her paws from her ruined limbs and the six deep gouges I had left in her chest. I hunched under her blow and sprung out in a pounce. Already unsteady, I managed to bowl her over and knock her to the floor.

I slammed one hoof into Gellwin's chin, forcing her head up and pressed the other's claws into her breastbone, puncturing one of her lungs. Her talons raked my back again and again, but my flayed flesh barely stung. I opened my jaws wider than should have been possible and sank my fangs into her neck.

Her lifeblood flooded into my mouth and it was practically euphoric. The griffin thrashed under me to no avail.

"Releasing control of this form," a ghostly, mare's voice echoed from seemingly nowhere. The slaver leader's eye stopped glowing solid green and returned to a sickly yellow. She was suddenly terrified. Her pupil contracted and she desperately tried to mouth something as her color quickly drained away.

She was begging. This thing had the nerve to beg for mercy after what she did?! I bit down harder and yanked my head back, ripping out the majority of her throat and leaving her gurgling and grabbing at what was left of her neck.

I got off of her and absentmindedly chewed as I watched her thrash about and hemorrhage all over the office. She tasted so good. I shuddered, feeling the innumerable lacerations across my back start to slowly knit closed.

I had to have more!

Rushing back up, I buried my muzzle into her chest. The tough, gamy muscle, chewy organs and rich, creamy marrow. Every part had a distinct taste and was more delectable than the last. All my wounds were healing almost as quickly as if I had taken a regeneration potion and I felt stronger than I ever had before. I didn't even notice when Gellwin had stopped twitching, I was too enraptured by my feast.

I heard the door hiss open behind me and I reluctantly pulled my head out of the griffin's carcass to look at the newcomers.

A tawny buck and fluffy, blue mare with matching blue jumpsuits stood in the entrance with looks of utter horror on their faces. A much larger, red stallion in an armored version of the same outfit and a large, metal harness clamped on his head seemed more disappointed than appalled. It didn't matter.

I had more prey.

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: -- Cannibal : -- With this perk, you gain the option to eat a corpse to regain Health. But every time you feed, you lose Karma, and if the act is witnessed, it is considered a crime against nature.

New Quest Perk: -- Twice Bitten- .Your beastly nature has developed further. You gain the ability to use your nose to track prey. Your claws and teeth have grown enough to be used as viable, albeit small, weapons. And you gain increased benefits to health and physical abilities from eating meat.

This is a story based off the magnificent work of Kkat ([Fallout Equestria](#))

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