
Fallout: Equestria - Project Horizons

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Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, the virtues of friendship were cast aside in favor of greed, suspicion and war. Finally, the world itself was ravaged by the fires of countless megaspells; civilisation, as it once was, ceased to exist. The city of Hoofington, however, did not die easily. Even with the world shattered, the ominous, irradiated towers of the Core remained standing. Formerly the center of Equestria's wartime research and development efforts, the ruined city now slumbers, a place of poisoned secrets and perilous treasures. One unicorn mare, already burdened by guilt and self-doubt, finds herself thrust into the center of Hoofington's web of intrigue. With a diverse and dysfunctional band of companions at her side, she must unravel a mystery over two hundred years in the making - if the trials of the Equestrian Wasteland don't unravel her first.

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Volume IV

Homecoming

The trials of the Wasteland wear everypony down with time, but with shadowy agendas coming to the fore and EC-1101 approaching its final destination, there's little opportunity to rest. Pursued by the Harbingers, the Remnant, the Enclave, and worse, life just keeps getting harder. And as she faces these challenges, the bearer of Equestria's destiny finds herself doubting the very quest upon which she's embarked. Still, there's no place like home... right?

49. Consequence

“You have a lot to think about.”

There’s something distinctly depressing about being able to compare deaths. You’d think once would be enough for anypony. The last time I’d died it was peaceful. Calm. I’d spent the time beforehand feeling full warm sunshine glowing down on me while I listened to the rush of water against the hull. When I finally went, I’d been lying in Glory’s embrace and surrounded by friends who cared for me, and the actual dying had been like drifting away up to a better place without a fear or worry in the world. My only regret had been that I would have liked to have seen the beautiful stars above me before I departed.

This time, it hadn’t been peaceful, I wasn’t drifting upwards, and I had much bigger worries than missing out on a view of the night sky. This time, I was getting ripped through some sort of murkiness like so much rainwater being sluiced through a storm drain. I’d like to think I’m one of the few ponies who knows exactly what that feels like. Enervation’s piercing scream surrounded me on all sides, and every few seconds I passed through a shimmering, more-loudly-shrieking silver ring that sucked me in and spat me out ever faster. I struggled against the current out of sheer obstinacy, but it was no use; there was no way I was going to get away from it.

And as I was yanked through that gray void, flipping and spinning about, I became aware of a great glow in the distance that I was rapidly approaching. And I wasn’t alone in my travels; even though I didn’t have eyes, ears, or even a body, I was still aware of others being swept along with me as wailing motes of light. I brushed against one and instantly had an impression of a mare, earth pony, ganger... but then she was gone before I could feel more. Then I hit another one: colt, earth pony... I was struck by the smell of brahmin, the jingle of a pack harness, and a sensation of a horrible fever and suffocation. And then he was gone too.

Truth be told, I much preferred the first version to the sequel.

The flow increased as I was carried along, and I brushed against more pony... souls? Spirits? Every contact transferred a little information about another pony. I watched others try and break away and saw one strike the edge of one of the screaming rings as it passed; the light seemed to smear out and freeze in place, trapped against the circle as I swooshed by.

The luminescence grew brighter and brighter as we were sucked through that endless hazy gray gloom punctuated by loops of screaming silver that propelled us ever onward. For a moment I soared upward and had a glimpse of an immense disk like a circular saw blade, the motes of light being pulled through gaps in a colossal, jagged tire-like wall of silver that surrounded that glowing donut. I was sent following the rest. . .

And then the current weakened to a dull tug. Slowly I drifted along in a sea of motes within that immensely large wall. There were strange shadowy shapes around me, things that looked vaguely like walls and tunnels that I passed harmlessly through. From all around me came the wail and babble of untold masses crying out, some calling for Luna or Celestia to save them, others screaming in rage against their imprisonment, and others babbling in zebra. I brushed against griffins, dragons, zebras, and things I didn't even have names for. Over it all, though, was one terrible cry. . . a scream of such anguish and suffering that it dug into me.

Then, green lightning flashed from that immense wall and tore through the sea of motes. Even I screamed as an agony I'd never known flashed across me. It wasn't a physical pain so much as a sense of profound violation. It felt like being nailed back in the Seahorse again. The green lightning flashed again and again into the center of the sea, and the scream peaked once more.

"Awesome magic, huh?" a familiar stallion said from near me.

"Snips?" I asked. I felt him close, but I couldn't tell which of the thousands of motes around me he might be. "But you're. . . and I'm. . . shit. . ."

"Well, I sure am. No doubt about it," Snips replied, "but I suspect that you still have a ways to go before you're dead dead."

Huh? What was I, then? Semi-deceased? Only mostly dead? I was pretty sure this was the point where you turned me upside down and looked for loose bottle caps. "But what. . . Snips, what is this place?" I asked as I looked around the sea of floating lights.

"The eye of the storm. The tar pit. The ocean to which eternal rivers flow," Snips said with an odd hint of merriment. "All poetic names by different ponies. To be honest, we really don't know. It's always been here in Hoofington; maybe it's the product of ancient zebra curses that were beyond even the black book. The writing in the text was particularly fearful of it. I think there's a much more fitting word for it: Hell."

Or... if you believed a certain zebra myth about giant star monsters... but that was just crazy... "Guess I wasn't a good enough pony after all," I muttered; I'd have gulped if I'd had a throat. It just didn't seem fair. Sure, I'd done lots of things worthy of damnation, but what about that colt? What could he have possibly done?

"Good and evil have nothing to do with it," Snips contradicted. "The ancient zebra necromancers were utterly terrified of this sea of souls and its drawing power, but tempted by it as well. They tried to control it with rituals, placate it with sacrifices, and understand it through madness. Their creation of soul jars like the black book was a method to try and escape its pull." He chuckled darkly. "Seeing it, I can understand their feelings better." There was a pause, and then he asked quietly, as if terrified of hearing the answer, "Did you get Snails out? Is he okay?"

"Upset, but okay." I felt a profound sense of relief from nearby and went on. "He told me about what Rarity did... the final step of Eternity." I felt it was kind of ironic, given that I was looking at spending an eternity here myself. Or... maybe not, apparently? "What did you mean 'dead dead'?"

"The curse is designed to sever your soul from your mind and body. What it leaves behind is a shell that will eventually perish without help," Snips said quietly, regretfully. "We saw it several times when we were starting out." I thought of Rumble in Happyhorn, lying there unaware. "Without the soul, you have no motivation or direction. The most fortunate are like animals. They have intellect but no will to use it and no personality or sense of self. But as long as your body is still alive, you have a chance that Snails will be able to summon your soul and put it back in your body."

"But what about you?" I asked with a little frown... or would have if I had lips. The lightning flashed, and that anguished scream rolled out across the sea of souls like a wave.

He gave a light, dry laugh, as if my concern amused him. I guessed it *was* a little after the fact. "Well, my body was either cremated or vaporized, so..." He sighed. "I'd hoped that splitting my soul might protect me, but it looks like I was wrong. Or maybe I just have two copies of my soul frozen in that statue and inside my friend, forever trapped at the moment they were severed. Who can say?"

"Well, this is all very educational," I muttered sarcastically. "I could probably write a manual when I get back. '101 ways to die'."

"Oh, I'd be astonished if you recalled any of this when you got back. This is your soul, not your mind. You are the summation of yourself, but without a mind, how could you remember?" He laughed mirthlessly. "Snails and I... experimented..."

on a few victims on our own, but none of them really remembered anything when he summoned them back.”

Great. . . I looked out at the vast sea of motes and murmured softly, “How many are trapped here?”

“Millions. Perhaps hundreds of millions. Who can say how long this place has been catching them?” Snips said quietly.

“Is this place. . . eating them?” I barely murmured.

“No. I don’t think so. There’d be a lot less if it were,” Snips replied. “I think it’s more that it’s hoarding them, like a dragon hoards gems.” The lightning flashed once more, slicing through the cloud of motes, and that scream rose up from the center of the sea. “I have no idea what that might–

Then I was struck by that emerald lightning again and felt myself torn by its foul magics. This was malicious hate; no reason or purpose. Simply inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting it and nothing more. The motes swirled wildly, and by the time the agony faded, I was left feeling as if I’d been raped and violated all over again. The lightning hurt me on a fundamental level I’d never imagined before, and yet I couldn’t die again. I could only scream. And this time there was no Scotch needing protecting to give me strength; there was only the hope that eventually Snails would be able to get me out of here.

I’d lost contact with Snips with that last attack, and no matter how I tried to call out, I couldn’t get past that terrible scream. The few motes I did bump into were sobbing, raging, or worst of all. . . resigned. To keep myself from going mad, I tried to move, but in this place space seemed. . . uncertain. I felt like I was moving, but no matter which direction I took, I was travelling back inside. The very center of the sea had a hollow; if there was something here devouring souls, then I at least wanted a good look at it.

The closer to the center I moved, the more frequent and terrible that lightning became, but I started to suspect it wasn’t as if this place was singling me out. I was just getting caught by stray fire. Whatever the lightning was targeting lay right in the middle of this sea. Slowly, the motes thinned out more and more until. . .

No. . .

It couldn’t be!

A dozen bolts of lightning struck the center, and for the first time I realized that the scream Lacunae had been hearing hadn’t been a *what*. It was a *who*.

A moment later, there was a hooking sensation, and I felt myself being pulled away. I didn't fight it. I couldn't think at all. If I'd had eyes I would have wept; a mouth, and I would have cried out. Instead, I simply shut down and let myself be dragged away.

I slowly opened my eyes, and the first things I saw were Lacunae's purple ones gazing back into mine. I had a sensation like a red hot poker digging around in my guts. I glanced down at the bandage over the hole ripped right above my navel, then looked around and found myself in a hospital bed in what I recognized as the Hoofington Memorial ICU. Psychoshy was sleeping in the bed across the room from mine, with Stygius snoozing at her side. Rampage lay curled on the floor at the foot of my bed, her pink eyes troubled as she gazed off into the distance.

I had no idea what magic had been used on me; I didn't want to know. I felt dirty and defiled, wronged more profoundly than just a simple betrayal by a desperate Snips. I hurt far worse than the simple wound in my stomach. I started to tremble and Lacunae stretched forward. I curled around her neck and buried my head in her shoulder as she shielded me with her wings. Then I bawled like a little foal. I didn't know why; I just knew that something was horribly wrong and it *hurt*.

Several hours later, it was morning according to my PipBuck. It was always the same time down here, though: gloom o'clock. Doctor Wheelbarrow had my rear legs and hooves strapped into my bed, probably suspecting that, if he hadn't, I'd be out of it confronting Ahuizotl about Tulip's death. Or trying to, at least; one of my forehooves was missing and the other mangled, so there was little chance of me getting away. Which, naturally, made me even more eager to do *anything* that would get me the hell out of this bed and out there doing things. It didn't help that every hour I had another spontaneous crying fit that I was powerless to stop. Sometimes they lasted only for a few seconds, but others went on and off for almost half an hour.

...Okay, maybe I should stay in bed for the time being after all.

Lacunae never left me alone. Rampage was keeping her distance for now, not trusting the Angel inside her not to kill me for shits and giggles. Doctor Wheelbarrow came in, changed the blood bags, and injected me with a shot of Med-X for the pain, giving me a cold look. I'd gotten Graves killed, so I couldn't fault him for that. "It looks

like you'll live," he muttered. "No thanks to me."

"Thank you for. . ." I began, but he silenced me with a glare.

"No thanks to me means just that. I'm not repairing that hole in you. The cybernetic gadgetry in your body is doing that," he said as he looked over to the far side of the ICU at a bed with some curly pink mane sticking out from beneath the sheets. "Pity you can't give that to somepony else."

"How. . . how is she. . . ?"

"Crippled. By you. But alive. No thanks to you. Excuse me." He turned his back on me. I'd cost him Graves; I supposed they'd been close. They'd been colleagues at least, though, and, even if there'd been no personal attachment at all, she was still half of Meatlocker's medical staff. Not someone easily replaced.

The Goddess muttered darkly in the back of my mind about what an embarrassment I was and ignored me otherwise, for which I was grateful. I supposed that at the moment I was another emotional toxic waste dump, and she only wanted to see my misery, not feel it.

Snails returned shortly with Silver Spoon. "You're okay," the ghoul mare said in relief. I didn't correct her. I was miles and miles away from okay right now. I needed. . . something. Something to protect me from from this feeling of wrongness inside me. But she didn't need any more to deal with at the moment.

"What happened? What did you do?" I asked the luminescent-eyed mustard yellow unicorn. I must have been using the shooty voice, because everyone immediately looked a little nervous.

He blinked. "Oh, ah. . . well. . . ya see, I couldn't stop the curse from popping you out, eh? But I was thinking of what could bring you back, like that thing on boats, ya know?" he said slowly, then rubbed his chin. "Ah. . . uh. . ."

"Anchors. He used an anchoring spell," Lacunae said from my bedside.

"So, when the curse went off, I was able to pull you back and put you in your body," he said with a nervous smile. "Snips and me used it once to see the other side. . . but I don't remember much. But my eyes were all glowy afterwards. Weird, eh?" He leaned uncomfortably close, peering at my own. "Wonder why yours aren't. I mean, there's a kinda reddish light in there, but..."

"My eyes are synthetic," I said quietly. I looked at Silver Spoon. She was alive, so to speak; I'd gotten her out alive. A victory. "What are you going to do now, Silver

Spoon?”

She glanced at Snails and gave a little smile. “Well. I’m still around. And so were Snips and Snails. And Twist is kinda around, so we thought we were going to, like, look around and see if Diamond Tiara’s still around too! Not... crazy looking around. Really looking.” The unicorn stallion rolled his eyes a little, but then she looked up at him with a sympathetic smile, and said, “Snails wants to find some unicorn mare he knew back before the war.”

“Mmhm! The Great and Powerful Trixie!” There was a sudden tense silence inside me, as if the Goddess were suddenly holding her breath. It was as if I could feel her peering right over my shoulder at Snails. “She was the most amazing, most talented, most awesome unicorn in all of Equestria... even if she couldn’t banish the Ursa Minor.”

The silence from the Goddess was a welcome relief, but it didn’t last long. “That silly... That... he remembers when... I...” she murmured in shock. Lacunae suddenly jerked and shivered, turning her head away. I got a flash of a blue unicorn, a wagon, two unicorn colts, and a cheering, adoring crowd. “No... no...”

“You don’t have to throw those feelings away, Trixie,” another mare whispered in my—in *our* heads.

“Shut up! Last thing I want is more lectures from *you*!” the Goddess replied in disgust, her voice trembling. “If he saw us now. If he saw me like this... No! No! I don’t want to feel this way.” Lacunae groaned, and then the Goddess said, more firmly, “And I won’t,” haughtiness rising. “And he is right to seek us out. Perhaps in time he may join us as well.”

“Alfalfa smoothies... extra hay...” Lacunae whimpered aloud.

I wanted to tell him not to, but there was a pressure on my mind, like a migraine. I couldn’t get the words out, and in my current condition, I couldn’t even try. “You... might check... Maripony. Out west...” I muttered. The Goddess gave a pleased, throaty little sound, and I felt a ghostly pat on my head. The pair just looked at me in worry, but I couldn’t say more. The Goddess wouldn’t let me.

Feeling doubly violated, I shifted onto my side, curling up away from him. I felt sick, the sensation of wrongness unshakable. I could at least still give him thanks, though. “Thank you, Snails. You saved me. Just like Snips said you would.” I was glad that he couldn’t see the tears of shame streaking my face.

“Um...” Snails balked a moment. “Did you... did you see him over there? Like a

ghost or. . .”

I felt sick again. “No,” I said, not sure, but it felt like a lie. As dirty as lying to Silver Spoon about being Diamond Tiara. “No, but I’m sure he’s okay, wherever he is.” Please go. Please.

“Please, Blackjack needs to rest and recover,” Lacunae told them both gently.

“Oh. . . ah. . . okay then. Um. . . hope you feel better, eh?” Snails said.

Silver Spoon hesitated and then answered, “Yeah. Sure. Get well soon, Tiara.” I heard their hooves trot away just before my body shook and I let out another sob. I wanted to throw up and purge myself, but I had nothing inside me to force out.

“Oh please. There’s no need for such drama,” the Goddess thought at me contemptuously.

“Shut up,” I screamed back at her. “Someday it’ll be your turn! I don’t care if it’s tomorrow or a week from now, some day you’ll get to die too! And if you come back, then we can see how well you handle it!” I shook from head to hoof, the hole through my middle a niggling afterthought. When I came back the first time, I’d felt depressed and suicidal. This time, whatever had happened, I knew I didn’t want to go back there. Not there.

“Shhhhhh. . .” Lacunae said as she stroked my mane. Maybe coming back had driven me crazy? Maybe something in me had changed for the worse? “Shhh. . . . Don’t worry about that now. You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

I wept against her as she held me. “Can you take it from me? Whatever. . . whatever I’m thinking. . . or feeling. . . or whatever?” I shook as I pressed my face against her shoulder. “Please?” I begged, desperate for her to make it all better. “Please. . .”.

“I wish I could, Blackjack. I really wish I could,” she murmured. “I wish I could make it all go away, but whatever happened to you happened at a level I can’t touch. This pain is yours. I wish we could understand it better, make it easier for you to bear,” Lacunae said softly into my mind. “I’m sorry.”

Around noon, I finally pulled myself together enough to get out of the ICU bed. Rampage returned with some Fancy Buck snack cakes, three tin cans, and some minty emeralds. Lacunae started to lift me into a wheelchair, but I waved her off with my mangled left foreleg and simply stood upright on my rear legs, felt the disorienta-

tion for a moment before my body adjusted, then looked at her and Rampage and even smiled at their incredulous expressions. Hey, it might look weird, but at least it wasn't pathetic. After the last four or five hours, and the Goddess, I needed to start building some self-control and confidence back.

My barding had been taken. . . somewhere. . . to get fixed up. Either that, or I'd been robbed; at the moment, though, I suspected the former over the latter. Likewise, Carrion must have helped himself to Kingpin's possessions, because they were gone as well. Oh well; the only enemies I had to worry about in here were the possible zebra infiltrators, and since they'd have been eliminated already anyway, I should be safe-ish even without armor, right?

Psychoshy and Stygius had both gotten some severe smoke inhalation; the former was still bedridden and quite pissed that nopony would let her out on account of her gasping for air every ten seconds. I gestured with a nod of my head for the batpony to come over. "How are you doing, Stygius?" I asked with a rueful smile. "Regretting you came with me?"

He rolled his eyes and waved his hoof sideways with a snort like it was nothing at all. Then he looked apologetic as he nodded over his shoulder towards Psychoshy. "You two an item?" He sighed, his tufted ears drooping a little as he pulled his slate out of his armor.

'Not allowed. Rules,' he wrote with a sigh and an actual pout. Boys weren't supposed to pout!

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Well, one thing I know about her is that she probably doesn't give a buck about rules. Do you like her?" He blinked and looked over at Psychoshy trading insults with Rampage. He closed his eyes, smiled, then looked at me and nodded. "More than me?" I asked with a grin, and he immediately blanched.

"Yeah, Styggie. . . do you like me more than her?" Psychoshy asked, looking over from her bed with a smirk on her face and worry in her eyes. He looked from her to me and back again and bit on his wingtip for a moment. Then he pointed at Psychoshy with his wing and actually flinched! He knew I had Glory, though. . . ugh, batponies were weird.

But it did prompt in me the rare impulse to have fun. "Well, that's good to know. By the way, Stygius, do you think that I've been putting on weight?"

His pupils shrank as he gaped at me, looked at my butt, then back up at me. I just arched my brow expectantly. Then he swayed, put a hoof to his brow, and collapsed

on his back with all four legs thrust into the air, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as his eyes rolled back in his sockets. “Not the worst answer to that question I’ve ever seen,” Lacunae observed.

The sight of everypony laughing at the flopped over Stygius, the fact that they’d all come so close to dying... somewhere I went from laughing to sobbing without even realizing it. Stygius rose as Rampage and Lacunae kept me from falling over as I swayed. “You two... you two are really really good together. Really... really...” The two fliers didn’t know how to respond; fortunately, somepony else did.

Rampage blushed and batted her eyes at Lacunae. “Well, you heard her. Will you be my very special somepony, Lacunae?” The stunned mental babble coincided perfectly with the confused ‘what?’ from the Goddess. And just like that, I was back to laughing... no, crying... no...

Okay... maybe I still needed a little more time before leaving the ICU...

I lay there on my side, feeling the damage to my crippled torso mending. It was rather disgusting, feeling things moving around inside me; it reminded me of when I was tainted. My brain wasn’t just an emotional wreck... it was the fact that I had things in my head that didn’t belong. The Goddess... strange files... I wanted some control back, damn it! I wanted to talk to somepony and not burst into tears. I wanted to think about Project Eternity without getting flashbacks. At least I *chose* to see memory orbs.

I needed somepony who knew technology... or, rather... somezebra. I asked the ghoul in charge of the ICU and then waited. The privacy curtains had been drawn around both Boing and Psychoshy’s beds. I spotted the faint shimmer as she entered. I waited till it was right beside me, then hooked her neck with my remaining forelimb and pulled her in close, smooching her right on the end of her invisible muzzle.

The zebra appeared, eyes wide, cheeks flaming red as she fell back, staring at me in horror. “Why are you being all invisible, hmmm?” I asked, arching a brow. The embarrassment she showed helped me avoid thinking about my own problems.

“Oh... ah... well...” She flushed as she muttered, tapping her hooves together. “I think the suit likes being sneaky... and after those two spies and the Nightstalkers... well... it’s just easier this way.” What and what? Well, I supposed I’d get the full story when I was a little more together. I needed to take care of something.

Something to give me a little more control.

“You should take it off from time to time. I agree it’s a great suit, but there’s such a thing as too much of a good thing.” The zebra fidgeted as she looked away. “Anyway, you’re good with terminals and computers and stuff. I need you to do me a favor.” I turned my head, pushed my mane away, and pulled the cover up so she could see the plug in my temple. “I’d like to see if you can go through and delete any audio or video files that are in my head.” At her incredulous look, I explained how unsealing Eternity had caused all kinds of flashbacks to the recordings. While I found them interesting, I didn’t want them popping up completely at random.

“Oh. Sure. I can do that,” she said as she took Marmalade’s PipBuck and pulled a short cable out of its housing. “Universal plug. . . I’ll just go through and. . . um. . .” She bit her lip as she looked away. “You’re sure you’re okay with letting me in your. . . well. . . system? What if I mess up?”

I wagged my mangled left leg at her. “Xanthe, with all that’s messed up in me, I really don’t see how you could make me worse.” Then I frowned and rolled my eyes. “Well, no. You might make me able to only speak in zebra, make me forget the letter S, or just turn me into a remorseless cyberpony killing machine, but really, I think the chances of that are probably pretty slim.” She still looked uneasy, and I smiled. “And I trust you not to do something bad to me.”

Xanthe sighed, took the plug in her mouth, and pressed it into my socket. I had an overwhelming urge to rub my right eye as I felt something behind it. She then started to tap on the PipBuck keys with the very tip of her hoof. “Wow. Look at all that,” she murmured softly.

“Lot of stuff in there?” I asked with a small frown.

“Yeah. I think this Steelpony audiovisual interface is using your brain as a buffer. That why it’s triggering seemingly at random,” she said as she typed steadily.

“You can’t delete my memories or stuff though, right?” I asked with a little frown.

“Of course not. Memories aren’t data. Well. . . not the kind you can take out by just pushing a button,” she said as she started working. “Wait. . . *mater futūtor*. . .” Well, that didn’t sound good. “I think. . . Blackjack, your eyes and ears have been recording days of information in your brain. And they haven’t just been saving them; they’ve been broadcasting them somewhere as well.”

“You mean somepony rigged my eyes and ears to use for spying?” I gaped, turning my head to glance at her.

“Yes. I can’t tell where the data’s going, though,” she said with a frown. “Do you want me to remove it?” She caught my eye and swallowed. “You want me to remove it.”

“Can you tell how long it’s been doing it?” I asked, frowning as I thought back to when the visions started in Hippocratic.

“Near as I can tell. . . they always have,” the zebra replied. “There isn’t really a log or anything, but I’ve got timestamps going back for days. The earliest is. . . um. . . I think nine or ten days ago.”

That was before Hippocratic. In fact, that was right about the time I. . . “Zodiac. She set them to record?” I frowned – my eyes twitched back and forth as I thought – then rubbed my eyes. Ugh, eyes shouldn’t *twitch*. Then my paranoia began to assert itself. “Or. . . maybe she didn’t. My eyes came from her. Maybe. . . maybe somepony hacked her eyes and ears a long time ago.” Goldenblood? Maybe. I wouldn’t put it past him. Except he wasn’t a technical wizard. . . but then, he certainly could have *had* it done even if he couldn’t do it himself.

“There’s no way to tell. You’d have to ask her,” Xanthe said as she worked.

I lay there, my eyes every now and then flickering on and off. And as I lay there, I thought about why my eyes were spying on things and who was receiving it. And what they could have been doing with it. . . Thank goodness I had the help of somepony who knew all about terminals and robots and balefire bombs and–

Wait a minute.

“Xanthe. . . I’m curious. How do you know about balefire bombs?” My eyes clicked off so I couldn’t look at her, and from her silence she’d either frozen or was running for her life. I hoped it was the former; it’d suck if I was stuck blind, again, till Lacunae got me to Rover. I quickly continued, “I’m not angry. . . I just want to know how you know so much about them.”

The zebra began typing again, and I just hoped I was right about her. “The bunker I grew up in was a balefire launch facility. It was called a dragon’s nest. . . intended for a first strike against Equestria. That’s how I knew about the missile in Hightower. It was probably fired from my home.”

“Well, unless you’re two centuries old, I don’t hold it against you.” . . . Though considering how many people I’d run into who *were* that old, I couldn’t discount the possibility. “And even if you were, I still doubt I’d hold it against you.”

“Really?” Xanthe sounded surprised. My vision popped back on, and I looked at the

baffled zebra.

“Xanthe. . . Twilight Sparkle was creating alicorns. Fluttershy was a traitor. Pinkie Pie’s law enforcement ministry was corrupt. Rarity was dealing in necromancy. There were megaspells aimed at doing Celestia knows what. Honestly, I can’t blame the zebras for using their bombs. If I were in their shoes, I might have tried the same thing.” I sighed, wondering what horrible things Applejack or Rainbow Dash had done behind the scenes trying to win the war at all costs. “We were so focused on winning that we never realized it wasn’t worth the cost.”

Xanthe was silent for a time as she worked, but then she said in a quiet murmur, almost to herself than to me, “The Remnant have one more.” I looked at her as she sat, keeping her eyes down. “You’re right. . . I do know a lot about balefire bombs. There was one silo that didn’t fire. The missile malfunctioned. . . so we had to keep the bomb safe and secure. When the Remnant came, they discovered it and took both the bomb and the zebras who maintained it.”

I slowly sat up, and she flinched away. I reached out and stroked her black and white ponytail. “Do they have a working missile or rocket?” I asked, and she shook her head. That was something. Still, I wouldn’t put it past them to smuggle it somewhere.

“Please. . . don’t be mad at me. This cursed city. . . it is evil and our enemy. It is Starkatter. . . and the home of Nightmare Moon. A place of evil and. . . and. . .” She looked stricken as I slipped off the bed. “I didn’t want to betray my people. . .”

“Xanthe. . . you’re a good person. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have told me,” I said quietly. “Why haven’t they used it if they have it?”

“The last order of the Caesar was for us to fight on until the cursed city and nation of stars were no more. If the Legate is to fulfil that order, the balefire bomb must reach the Core somehow,” she said, looking to the west.

I whistled softly. “Tall order.”

“Yes. That place has automated defenses and magic shields which would protect it from a detonation outside. Before the day of fire, multiple missiles were intended to bombard the city and overwhelm its protections.” She sighed and shook her head. “The missile in my home was damaged, though, and I don’t know where the Remnant would get another.” She gave a sickly smile. “Not that one missile would have much chance at breaching the Core, anyway.”

Maybe not the Core, but what if the Remnant fired it somewhere else? The Society?

The Arena? Thunderhead? “Don’t they have extra missiles at Dawn Bay?”

She shook her head. “No. Your Ministry of Awesome destroyed and stole dozens of our missiles prior to the day of fire,” she said quietly.

“How’d they pull that off?” I asked with a wry smile.

“We’ve no idea. It was one of our greatest defeats; in one night the Shadowbolts and members of the Ministry of Awesome infiltrated the launch facility, made off with two dozen cruise missiles, and destroyed dozens more. More than a hundred guards were executed for their failure.” She looked away. “The ministry sabotaged the balefire bomb stockpile. When the day of fire came, only a dozen bombs were fired from Dawn Bay. Not hundreds, as intended.”

“*Hundreds?*”

“Oh yes. The Caesar’s final plan was to turn every inch of Equestria into irradiated glass. There was some invasion or big attack planned, something made with the help of a collaborator, and if it failed we would have been left with only one solution: overwhelming balefire bombardment.” She said it so casually. . . “Had Dawn Bay and other facilities been intact and ready, it might even have been realized. Collaborators and sympathizers had allowed us to build and hide weapons all over your country. The old launch facilities ran for miles above the base. A forest of ballistic missiles that never flew, thanks to your Ministry of Awesome.” She sounded just a touch resentful.

“So the zebras were going to push a button and wipe out all of Equestria?” I asked in shock. Xanthe’s shamed eyes fell as she tapped her hooves in front of her.

“From documents in my home, I believe so. What alternative did we have?” Xanthe asked, almost begging me to understand. “Even with our superior numbers and natural resources, we could neither overcome you nor push you to surrender. Your megaspells and secret projects were too much for us. No matter how much we stole, infiltrated, or attacked, we couldn’t beat you. Even balefire wasn’t enough! Ponies developed megaspells that turned the sun itself into a devastating weapon. There were predictions that when we struck Equestria, only one out of every twenty missiles would reach their target, and that number grew every month! In another year, it would have been one out of every two hundred. And once we fell, what would stop the Maiden of Stars from taking over the entire world?”

It hurt to think about. The war had gone on for a generation, and here was a zebra absolutely certain that if they hadn’t used tens of thousands of megaspells, they

would have lost for sure. But so what? Wouldn't it have been better for one side to win than everyone to lose?

What if the zebras had won the war? The Remnant had continued waging war for two hundred years to destroy the Hoof. If Equestria had surrendered, would they have just stopped there? While Sekashi and Xanthe proved that not all zebras were bad, I had seen Lancer coldly shooting a dozen of his own kind. Would there have been death squads of Lancers hunting down ponies? Countless balefire bombs annihilating Equestria entirely? I just didn't know. . .

What if Equestria had won? I'd like to have thought that everything would have returned to normal, but honestly, I'd never really thought about what postwar Equestria would have been like. Luna's Equestria. . . I felt a shiver run through my entire body and shook my head. It didn't matter. . . and I didn't want to think of Equestria after a thousand years of Luna, the ministries, and the O.I.A.

I sighed, pressing my thrashed limb to my face. "There's no point in worrying about what might have been. The bomb the Remnant have now is a bigger problem. Do you know where it is?"

"Dawn Bay, I imagine, but it could be hidden anywhere. The original launch facilities were all heavily damaged in the war. The balefire bomb armory is a molten slag pit." She lowered her head, and the suit seemed to hug her, snuggling a little against her. "There is one thing, though. . . before we left for Yellow River. . . they were repairing one of the launchers. In fact, they didn't want me to leave because they wanted me to fix the guidance terminals. I guess they didn't expect me to get cursed. . ."

She pulled the plug from my temple, then tapped the keys a few more times; the deftness she employed with the tips of her hooves astonished me. "There. There shouldn't be any more foreign data stored in your brain. I've transferred all of it to this PipBuck; I don't know if it's useful, important, or just plain garbage." She handed Marmalade's PipBuck back to me. "I tried taking the spy programs out of your system, but it looks like that'd have some unpleasant side effects. . . like permanent blindness and deafness. It's really integrated in your systems."

"Ugh. . . why would anypony even do such a thing?" I muttered as I rubbed the socket cover.

"It's an exceptionally good place to hide data," Xanthe replied casually. "You wouldn't have known things were being recorded if it hadn't played them, so a unicorn wouldn't have been able to extract a memory magically. And most technicians don't think of using a brain to hide terminal data, so they wouldn't think to search for it

there. They would look in the hardware.” She sighed and patted my shoulder. “Still, running the clean and sweep program on this PipBuck from time to time should clear it out.”

“Thanks,” I said with a relieved smile. Then I looked at her as I tucked the device into my bags. “What about you? Do you want to stay with me?”

Xanthe gave me a pained smile. “No. Blackjack, you’re a decent pony, but you face things that terrorize me. I don’t think I could face anything like Hightower again. I still can’t sleep after seeing it.” She shook her head. “I think I need a place to rest and think. . . and decide about the future. . .”

I found Willow and Windclop in the conference room after I’d pulled myself together again. The ghouls from Hightower were there too, along with one or two of the settlement guards. Twitchy, the unicorn with hide like a spoiled pumpkin, screwed up his face in confusion. “So. . . wait. . . run that by me again? We’re. . . dead? As in. . . dead dead? And that’s why everything looks so. . . wrong?”

Blossomforth groaned and buried her face in her hooves. “We’ve run it by you twenty times, Twitchy. You’ve got to get your brain out of the past.”

“I know, I know. . . just. . . we’re dead?” Twitchy began again. “As in dead dead? And that’s why everything looks so wrong?”

Willow sighed and stood. “You work him through it, Blossom,” the green ghoul said, glancing at me and trotting over to the door. When she looked up at me, her brows furrowed. “Do you have to stand like that, Blackjack? You look like a freaky robo-zebra.”

I waved my mangled forelegs at her. “It’s either two legs or try to use these. Sorry.” I frowned a little. “Speaking of zebras. . .” She looked back to the guards and then stepped out into the hall and sat down. Given the serious expression on her face, I doubted the news could be good.

“We got Cerberus’s message,” Willow said grimly.

“And did you find any zebras?” I asked nervously, afraid she was going to tell me about some other pony’s death. Velvet or someone.

Willow snorted. “Oh yeah. Two of them in the old maintenance manager’s office, along with maps of Meatlocker and crates of critters.”

“Critters?” I cocked my head; this was going in an unexpected direction.

“Ever hear of a something called a Nightstalker? Looks like a snake and a dog got frisky? Well, they had dozens of the things ready in cages. Set those critters loose during an attack and we probably wouldn’t have been able to defend ourselves. They were all set to do something big, and soon,” she said sourly as she glared down the dark hallway. “But the zebras were killed and we made sure none of the Nightstalkers survived.”

“So . . . what’s the catch?” I asked as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it. I stared at the yellow flame. When she closed the lighter, I trembled and quickly looked away.

She took a long pull off the cigarette. “Guess who killed them?”

I blinked, and my mood joined hers. “Ahuizotl?”

“Yup. Claimed he was investigating a noise, found them, and got lucky. Surprise, it was right after Cerberus came floating up blasted all to hell. Both were shot dead center in the back of the head, so now he’s a Goddess damned hero to half the town.” She let out a long blast of smoke from her nostrils that put me on edge. I shivered at the smell and backed away, waving my hoof in front of my face. She frowned at me. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Just . . . not good with smoke and fire right now. Hightower was really rough,” I muttered. Willow frowned, then spat out the cigarette and carefully crushed the tip. Taking a smoke-free breath, I moved along quickly. “What about what Xanthe said? Or talk to Carrion.”

“She’s a zebra. It doesn’t matter if she said Ahuizotl was the Caesar himself, nopony is going to believe her. And Carrion’s got that damned contract. Unless he can stand in front of the town and say ‘my boss conspired with zebras to smuggle in nasty critters and take over,’ there’s nothing that can be done.” Willow sighed and looked back in towards the conference room. “At least you brought back some good shooters. This’ll double our security. I knew Blossomforth from before the bombs; good mare.”

I lowered my eyes. “Hardly makes up for losing Graves,” I muttered.

She sighed and shook out another cigarette, paused, and put the pack away with a scowl. “Look, Blackjack, when Graves told us she was joining you, Windclop and myself did everything we could to get her to change her mind, but she wouldn’t think of it. She had her reasons for going back, and they were just that: hers.” The green

ghoul glanced back at the conference room. "And if what I hear is right, if she hadn't gone, none of you would have gotten out alive."

I sighed, frowning in thought. That Ahuizotl was going to get away with it was galling. Wrong. And after what I'd been through, more wrongness in the world was just too much. Then I looked at my wrecked forelegs, and paused. An idea was worming its way through my head.

"You said that the ghouls wouldn't care if it came from Xanthe's mouth." The green ghoul frowned at me in confusion as I smiled. "What if it's from somepony else's mouth?"

The Mortuary was more than just dead, it was closed. I might have broken a few rules picking the lock, but I really needed this little chat. When I stepped inside the bar, I saw all the things from Kingpin's cell heaped over rusty gurneys that had been converted into tables. Ahuizotl dug through the sheets muttering feverishly to himself. Carrion stood in the corner and looked over in surprise as I walked in alone. "Ahuizotl," I called across the room, and the ghoul jumped, overturning the gurney he was working at and falling on his rump. I had only my mangled limbs... and the bag of bits Rampage had found in Hightower.

"Wha... you?! The sign says 'Closed' for a reason! Get out!" he spat as he rose to his hooves. "Carrion, throw her out!" The griffin sighed and put his patched-up helmet back on. I noted he'd kept Xanthe's rigged beam gun.

"I want to talk money," I said flatly, and I jingled the bag at him.

At once he raised his hoof. "Or we can hear the young lady out," he amended at once. He looked over my bare body and my metal limbs. "Your resilience is astonishing. Truly, I expected all of you to get a little ways in and then run out. But to have destroyed the tower... well... it's impressive."

"Well, I do impressive things," I replied as I looked at him evenly. "I need to get into Dawn Bay."

His smile disappeared and his eyes shifted to the large bag beside me. "Carrion. Make sure we're not disturbed." He waited for the griffin to leave, and then his lips curled in a wicked little smirk. "One moment. You're going to have to humor me." He trotted around me, checking to make sure I didn't have anything concealed in my scorched mane or stubby tail. I considered it a triumph that I didn't smash his skull

in as he ran his hooves near some personal portions of my anatomy. "Now... what makes you think that I would be able to facilitate... this request?"

"Xanthe said you fed information to zebras about a talisman inside a zebra at Yellow River." Now he looked suspicious, but I was there in just my hide. No guns. No tricks. Of course, I could have killed him myself, but that would only get me thrown out.

"I know many different people. I've been around for quite a while," he replied. I turned the bag of bits over and let the heap of gold coins pile up on the table before me. His filmy eyes grew wider and wider; the sight of the pre-war money seemed to arouse him. Okay, not something I needed to see. I held up the empty bag so he could see nothing was concealed inside.

"The Remnant have a balefire bomb. I need to defuse it. That requires getting in and out of Dawn Bay. You should know somepony who can help me do that without getting killed or caught." His smile broadened with an expression of bliss that I was certain involved thoughts of taking my money and selling me out. "Oh, and incidentally, if I were caught, Rampage would be coming for you. You know, immortal, unstoppable Rampage the Reaper?"

His smile soured immediately. "I see... yes... well... it wouldn't be impossible," he muttered. "I may have a few acquaintances in the Remnant. They've always been generous to sympathetic, helpful ponies."

"You were a sympathizer during the war?" I asked, and he sneered back.

"You have to care to be a sympathizer. I was an opportunist. I played sympathizer for the zebras and mole for the O.I.A. and made money from all sides. It was an instinct that served me quite well in the Wasteland." He tapped his hooves together. "Such an arrangement is going to have to be expedited, however, if you're to have a chance."

"Why? Do you know something?" I asked with a scowl.

"Why Blackjack, I know many things," he said in his silky, smug purr as he polished his hoof on his chest. "If you pay me sufficiently, you might know them as well."

I chuckled, smirking. "Yeah, you do, don't you? Like those zebra."

He immediately scowled, looking me up and down. Come on you bastard, take the bait. It's just you and me, all alone...

"You knew they were down there when Willow and Windcloak didn't have a clue.

Probably had a chance to clean up anything sticky.” His lips twitched, and I saw pride and greed at war with caution. I lifted a wad of gold coins with my magic and let them tinkle slowly back into the pile. “You can get almost anything done, can’t you?”

“Well. With the proper incentive. . .” he murmured. One coin bounced free and landed at his hooves. He stepped upon it, hiding it beneath his hoof. “Keeping those two out of sight was quite a trick. Their pets even more so.”

I smiled happily. “What I don’t get is why they bothered. It seems kind of stupid to go through all that trouble just to take over a hospital full of ghouls,” I said as I kept the coins tumbling back into the bag beside me. He was actually salivating!

“Well. . . you fail to recognize the strategic importance of the hospital. No pony really trades with us, so a change in ownership wouldn’t have been noticed. From here they could strike at Red Eye at Paradise, the Collegiate, Scrapyard, and the Skyport with no pony ready until it’s too late.” He grinned. “Once I had my pick of the spoils, I’d head on over to the Society and buy my way into their good graces. Or maybe set up an establishment in the Arena,” he said as he trotted behind the bar. “However, things have changed with you here.”

“Because I’m in a position to make you incredibly rich?” I suggested with a grin. . . one which he returned.

“Actually, yes,” he said as he pushed a button on his terminal. Suddenly there were a whole bunch of beeps on the undersides of the tables around me. “If you take one step, I’ll have to sell you to the Remnant as ground pony.” Then he reached under his desk and pulled out an explosive slave collar. “Now, float the money over to me and put this on. I’ve got a little hidey hole in the back room to stash you in till things cool down.” He looked at my glare and laughed, “What? You don’t seriously think I’d believe you want to do business with me? You’re the saint of the Wasteland. I’m sure you’re just here to chat up some evidence to take back to those morons.” He nodded to my mangled leg. “Probably got that PipBuck recording this whole conversation, don’t you?”

Now I was the one grinning. “Darn. You figured me out. Well, except for one thing. My PipBuck? It’s a broadcaster.”

Then the door opened behind me. “Mines!” I snapped. Willow and Blossomforth stepped in behind me, and I carefully lifted the beeping furniture one piece at a time to the corners of the bar with my magic. The pegasus held up Marmalade’s PipBuck with a desiccated wing. In the hall behind her were even more ghouls.

"I take it my servant is dead, then?" Ahuizotl sneered at us, his eyes twitching as he stood on the precipice of disaster.

Blossomforth chuckled. "Got to give it to the stripe, her ability to muck up tech isn't limited to just robots. One spark mine and his power armor turned into a fine bird cage."

Willow smirked back. "We'll get him working once you're taken care of."

Ahuizotl looked from one of us to the next, licking his lips. "Now... hey. Listen. I can explain. I'm... ah... being blackmailed. Zebras made me say all that shit. Cause they got my... my... ah..." He slumped as Willow focused her guns on the ghoul and worked the bit on her battle saddle, chambering two rounds. Finally he slumped, glaring at me in resignation. "Ah shit. Fine. Ya got me."

Willow glanced back at the doorway and then looked back at Ahuizotl. "Ahuizotl, for conspiring against the residents of Hoofington Memorial, we sentence you to exile. Your bar and its contents are to be seized and sold to fund the community."

I blinked and stared at her. "Huh? Aren't you going to shoot him?"

"If you'd gotten him to confess to killing Tulip, maybe. But ghouls don't like killing other ghouls. Even ferals," Willow said as she glared at him.

"You may as well kill me! Where am I supposed to go?" the ghoul pony protested.

"You seem to like working with stripes. Maybe they'll take you in," Willow retorted. "But I can guarantee that if you do go to the Society, or Flank, or the Arena, every-pony will know the shit you pulled here."

"Well. I see... very well then. Return my servant to me and let me gather a few things, and I'll be on my way. Or are you exiling me completely naked?" Ahuizotl asked with a glare.

"Pack a saddlebag and get out, Ahuizotl," the mare replied.

"What! You can't just let him take Carrion with him!" I protested.

Willow frowned in distaste. "Carrion is free to stay or go. It's his stupid contract that's exiling him with this lump of shit." We stood back as Ahuizotl packed up his bags and once loaded up with as much as he could carry, trotted past with his lips curled in malice.

I stood there for a second, and then I looked down at the pile of money beside me. I swept it off the table back into the bag and snatched it up. Outside the Mortuary

there were two dozen ghouls gathered in small groups talking in low tones. I saw Xanthe kneeling beside Carrion, strange arcane devices probing an open panel in his power armor. There was a hum and suddenly the griffin began moving once more. "About time. Let's go, Carrion. We'll leave these fools for the Remnant." The power armor whined and sparked as it struggled to walk, and Ahuizotl gave a long, low hiss of disgust and continued moving, leaving Carrion trying to catch up.

"Wait. How'd you like to have enough money to go anywhere in the Wasteland?" I asked as I jingled the bag once more, slowing him. The effort of resisting the clink of coins seemed to cause him physical pain. Finally he stopped, glaring back at me. "There's enough money in here to start over nearly anywhere in Equestria if you're smart."

The hatred in his eyes was matched only by his covetousness for the contents of the bag. "And you're giving me this out of the kindness of your heart?" he jeered.

"No. I'm trading it to you for Carrion's Contract," I said as I shook it again.

Ahuizotl narrowed his eyes at me. "On the one hoof, with that many bits I could hire three griffin bodyguards and have more than enough left over..." He drew back. "But on the other hoof, I rather despise you, and doing anything you actually propose pisses me off. I should tell you to ram each and every bit right up your ass." He screwed his lips up as his two base natures warred with each other. Finally he snorted, then reached into his bulging saddlebags and rifled around till he dug out a wrapped up scroll of paper. He tossed it in my face, stretched out, and grabbed the handle of the bag and tossed it on his back. "I can't wait till you get what's coming to you, Security."

He started to trot away as Carrion caught up, and I held up the roll of paper with my magic. "Hey Carrion! Look at what I just got." Carrion looked at the paper with blatant shock. "It is your Contract, isn't it? I mean, it's not some garbage he gave me in exchange for the money, right?"

"No... that's exactly what it is," Carrion said, and then smiled. "Excuse me."

I looked at the confused Willow and Blossomforth as Carrion trotted rapidly after the departing ghoul. "Ahuizotl. I've been told that you've sold my Contract and I am no longer in your service."

"That's right, Carrion" Ahuizotl sneered. "Why? Did you come to give me a kiss goodbye?"

"Yes," Carrion replied simply. A moment later a green beam lanced through the

ghoul, transforming him and everything on him into a heap of glistening green goop. “Goodbye.”

I just stared in shock, along with almost everypony else. “What the hell was that!?” I asked as I gestured to what little remained of his body.

“Ahuizotl was an evil bastard,” the griffin replied. “The scams he ran, the lives he ruined, and the misery he inflicted were enough for ten bastards. So long as he held my contract, I was honor bound to do as he commanded and remain silent. But now you are my employer, which freed me to rid the world of that disgusting rat. And now, for good or ill, I serve you.”

“But. . . I. . .” I stared at the heap of green slime as a huge bubble rose in the middle and popped. “Couldn’t you have made him put down the gold *first*?”

While there was no question that Ahuizotl deserved to be rendered into luminous slime, there was enough outcry that Carrion’s days in Meatlocker were over for the time being. To be honest, I had no idea what to do with him. I’d tried to give him his Contract back, and clearly I’d insulted him badly by the way he told me bluntly ‘no’. Apparently, someone else holding their contract was the point of being a griffin. . . and with that, they eclipsed zebras as weirdest species in the wasteland.

Silver Spoon and Snails wanting to look for their friends. Xanthe looking for a future. Carrion needing somepony to hold his Contract. I had ideas churning around in my freshly cleaned out head. A part of me was still thinking about running off to Dawn Bay and dumping that balefire bomb into the ocean. Another part of me felt the siren’s call of EC-1101 luring me off into the sky.

Really, what I wanted more than anything was to see Glory again. And P-21. And Scotch Tape. I wanted to go home to Star House.

But I still had one more thing to do before I left.

Back in the ICU, the ghoul, Carol, was listening to Hearth’s Warming Eve carols on her terminal with the volume cranked up. Lacunae and Rampage were gone. I looked over at Psychoshy’s bed, hearing her groans. She really had to be hurt worse than I thought, but it was best that nopony could overhear me at the moment. Because no matter how I ran this though, it was going to be ugly.

I pushed back the curtain and looked at the pink filly; her mane had lost a lot of its curly bounciness. The single, unbandaged blue eye stared up at me impassively.

Beneath her sheets, her legs bent wrong. I slowly walked next to the bed and sat on the floor, looking at her. Suddenly, my brain felt as if Xanthe had scrubbed out too much, and now I didn't have anything left to say. 'How are you doing?' Well, she was alive, in pain, and crippled. 'How've you been?' Better. 'Sorry...' for what? Not killing her? I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Finally I dropped my eyes. "Please, forgive me," I muttered as I looked at my mangled forehoof. After a minute, I looked back.

Boing didn't say anything. Her pale blue eye just drilled into me. I was waiting for it. She'd say no... or call me a murderer... or a monster... or Nightmare Moon or something. And it would hurt like hell. But she didn't. She just looked at me, and I could feel myself getting wound up. "I was... I was really out of it that night. I was exhausted and... fighting. Sweet Celestia, fighting for so long. I didn't see who you were till it was too late... and..." Again, she just stared at me. Was she drugged? Had I deafened her?

Finally, she said in a voice barely audible over the music and Psychoshy's groaning, "What for?"

I swallowed and lowered my eyes again. "For... for attacking you. For hurting you. For killing your friends. For getting Scoodle killed and..."

She closed her pale blue eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'..."

I blinked and stared at her as she gave a sad little smile. "What do you think happened to Scoodle and me before you and yer blue friend showed up?"

"I..." But I knew what had happened. I knew exactly how horrible it was. I'd seen 99 and felt it on the Seahorse. "You girls got raped, didn't you?"

"Yup. Ploughed good," she said quietly, simply. "Wasn't the first time, neither. First time was Daddy makin' a mare out o' me while Momma stood by. Reapers got him good. Momma tried sellin' us to the Society, but I wouldn't sign so she just dumped me. Ended up in Chapel." I swallowed in horror. "After we split with you... well, lost Friskyhorn two days later to an angry radhog. Giblets got too many rads, puked up her guts, and never woke up. The others run off. I met those two with a plan to scav some bunker; figured why not? Make enough caps to get out of here. Probably planned on killing me once we found something worthwhile." She swallowed and closed her eyes. "Then you smashed me good. Doc said you damn near killed me."

"I'm so sorry..." I muttered.

"And that's why yer stupid," the filly countered. "You think my daddy was sorry?"

Or my momma? Or them raiders? Them ghouls? Was the radhog sorry? Or the radiation?" She gave a little snort and closed her eyes. "Not a one of them was sorry. So why are you coming here askin' me to forgive you? What's the point of that?"

"Because... because I am sorry. What I did to you was wrong. I shouldn't have done it," I said as I sniffed. "I'm trying to be a good pony... I'm trying to do better..."

"And that's where you done fucked up. There ain't no such thing as good ponies. Not a one in the world. I ain't a good pony. You ain't neither. We're all just ponies," she said as she sighed and closed her eye again, shaking her head. "You just want ta feel better than the rest of us by playing the big hero. Well, ya ain't. So if you feel like scum, congratulations. You are. And someday you'll accept that. Then you won't give a fuck about forgiveness."

I just sat there, stunned by her words. No. No! Ponies could be better than this. I could be better! I just had to try harder. "I wish things had been different, Boing. I wish I'd listened to Scoodle. Everything would have been better... I think..." I swallowed and licked my lips. "Is there anything I can do to help? To earn your forgiveness?"

She sighed and closed her eye again. "You could kill me. Quick and clean. Doc wouldn't do it. Said he swore some oath or some horseapples." I stared at her in horror as a few tears escaped her eye and disappeared under the bandage. I could see the terminal in the Fluttershy Medical Center. I heard us singing. What was one more? I heard the Angel hissing in the rain beside Thorn's broken body. '*I gave her peace!*' Damn my synthetic organs and their refusal to reflect the horror I felt. Finally, she looked away. "Otherwise, no. I ain't gonna forgive you, Blackjack. 'Cause if I did that, I'd have to think about forgiving everypony from my daddy onward, and I just can't do that." She pulled the sheets over her head. "Go'way, Blackjack. Whatever yer after, ya ain't gonna find it here."

I staggered away from her bed. Somehow, some part of me had thought that I'd be pardoned. That all I had to do was tell her I was trying to do better. I tried to be kind, strong, awesome, enduring, and remember that it was under E. But to hear that being good was just some sort of self-delusion... Worse, a form of self-aggrandizement... Look at me... I'm Blackjack. The goodiest good pony. The saint of the Wasteland.

I covered my face with my chewed-up hand as I stood there, listening to the loud holiday music and the groaning. I had to be good. I had to. I had to know that at

the end of this... somehow... there'd be sunshine and rainbows. Otherwise, the sooner I turned into Deus or the Goddess... the better. Only monsters could be happy in the Wasteland.

"Excuse me," Carol croaked from the nurse's desk. Then she looked pointedly towards Psychoshy's bed, then back at me with an expression like I should do something about it. I sighed and waved my hoof. Really, though, she'd have been better off getting the doctor. I trotted over and pushed the privacy screen out of the way. What did I know about medicine? Really, if she felt this bad all I could do was give her a shot o—

Oh. My eyes took in the sight of the yellow pegasus atop Stygius, rising and falling as she gasped and groaned, biting down on the end of her wing to try and silence herself. From the spots on her coat and the thick scent in the air, they'd been at this for a while. Stygius gave a squeak beneath her and shuddered as she trembled atop him. I looked at their union, and then Psychoshy glanced at me, her face turning scarlet as she moved atop him, seemingly unable to stop herself.

I gave a warm smile back. "Yup. He really is a champ. Trust me, you can probably get two or three more out of him," I said as she stared at me in stunned shock. Psychoshy made an admirable imitation of her mother as she blushed. She didn't stop moving, though, and really I couldn't blame her. "Make sure he uses his mouth more. He put it in you, he can clean it out. And have fun." I waved my chewed hand dismissively. "I'll probably be looking to leave in an hour or so. See you in Afterlife."

And I turned on heel and left the two alone, leaving a suggestion to the ghoul she turn the radio up more or just invest in some earplugs. Really, what was Psychoshy getting embarrassed about? It was just sex, a lot of sex from what I'd seen, and good sex at that. Still, I was smiling. I'd needed something to whack my mind back into action. The sight of two ponies passionately enjoying each other reminded me that there was still good things in the world, even if they were fleeting. . .

"You're sure about this?" Rampage asked as I handled Carrion's Contract. I'd gotten my barding back from Velvet, along with the rest of my things. Vigilance really needed some TLC, and even Duty and Sacrifice were showing wear. The Contract itself was neatly printed: a list of duties he would perform, lines he would not cross, and expectations he had for his employer. Reading it, I understood him a little better. He'd been a soldier, and a realist, but his contract didn't allow him to be used

as an assassin. He was, above all else, a guardian. And despite how wretched and undeserving Ahuizotl had been, Carrion had upheld his contract to the letter. The amount of dedication that took staggered me.

“Mhmmm. . .” I said as I sat in Afterlife, absorbing the music and the atmosphere. Despite the vibrancy of the tunes, there was something sad about it, too. These were ghouls clinging to a civilization that didn’t exist anymore. I thought about how so many ghouls got stuck in the past, locked in one moment that made sense. Then I thought of Ditzzy Doo as a part of a living community, how she’d been doing more than simply existing.

Carrion, Xanthe, Silver Spoon, and Snails all sat opposite me. The griffin had his power armor completely restored by now, though Willow had ordered it disabled after Ahuizotl’s execution. “So. I guess this is where we part ways,” I said to them. Silver Spoon looked a little sad; the glowing ghoul took off her warped frames and rubbed the crinkly glass adhered to her cheeks. “You two are determined to go looking for others?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a wide, freaky Wasteland out there, eh?” Snails said with a nod.

“And dangerous too,” I said and then levitated the Contract over to Silver Spoon. “Here. I’m giving you Carrion’s contract. He’ll keep you safe while you search.” The griffin stared at me impassively, and I couldn’t help but give him a smile. “It’s what he excels at.”

“Tiara. . . I. . . thank you!” she said as she rushed around the table and hugged me. My radmeter began tick tick ticking really really fast, and I tried to push her away as gently as I could. She raised her hooves, and I smiled and did my best to follow along. “Bump! Bump! Sugar lump rump!” She sniffed softly she backed away. “I’ll. . . I’ll try to keep it all straight, Ti. . . I mean. . . Blackjack.”

“You’ll have help,” I said, looking at the zebra. “I don’t have any say over what you do, Xanthe, but I think you should go with them.”

The zebra gulped, her eyes growing large. “Me? But. . . I. . . you. . . is this another curse?” she asked in confusion. The others looked at her as Silver Spoon returned to her seat.

“Carrion will need somepony to help with his armor, you have that stealth suit, and you know about terminals and can help them find their friends. It’ll also take you away from the Hoof. Maybe if you get away from here, you won’t be quite so cursed.” I smiled at the four of them. “And trust me, it’s better to have friends with you in the

Wasteland than to be on your own. Even I've learned that."

"I... well... but... I..." The zebra looked around in a near panic and then hung her head. "Oh, curses." Finally she smiled and looked at the other three. "Very well. I accept."

"Do we have a place to start?" Carrion asked, all business.

"Shattered Hoof Ridge Correctional. That was where Tiara was last," Silver Spoon said. "I know she probably didn't get out, but I have to hope." And if nothing else, it was a way to keep from going feral.

"That's a long way off. We'll need to stock up on ammo. Give you some weapons training," the griffin said as he looked at Snails and Silver Spoon. Then he nodded with his grumpy expression and continued, "Still, it's doable."

I rose to my hooves. "Well, it sounds like you have some plans to make. I've asked Windclop to pass you some of the bits I found in the Stonewing statue to make sure you're outfitted well enough." As I started away, though, Carrion approached me with a grim look on his face, his expression so stern that for a moment I was grateful that Willow had disabled his energy gun. It was disabled, right? I didn't think I could regenerate from a pile of green sludge. My cheeks strained with the biggest grin I could muster up as I backed away from him. "Erm... so... goodbye?"

"Yes," he said darkly, those predatory eyes locking onto mine. Then he suddenly gripped my shoulders and pulled me in, pressing his hard beak to my lips and slipping something the texture and flavor of boot leather into my mouth. I think my scorched mane stood upright as he kissed me, and I fell over retching as he said with a straight face, "Goodbye, Blackjack." He turned solemnly away and returned to the table as half of Afterlife erupted in laughter at me sitting there, scrubbing my tongue with my twisted fingers.

Sweet Celestia, I couldn't get the taste off!

Twenty minutes later, Psychoshy and Stygius joined Rampage and me outside. The mare looked happy. Not 'sadistically and gleefully pounding another pony' happy, but truly happy and relieved. Stygius met my eyes and gave a sheepish grin but then put his wing around her and pulled the yellow pegasus against him. Rampage looked on with a little sigh, then shook her head and gave them some space.

The absence of Hightower was a little disturbing; to the north, all that remained was

a ridge of tossed-up debris. It was getting late; in an hour or two it would be dark, but a flickering blue-green glow emanated from the other side of the ridge, and as we approached my PipBuck started to tick. “Lacunae?” I thought out at her, not wanting to get closer to that crater.

“Just, a few more minutes. . .” Lacunae thought back at me in a breathless voice. She was probably finding all that radiation very nice indeed.

I sighed, looking at the rubble around me. Windclop had been right: it had definitely ruined the neighborhood. Of course, the neighborhood had been ruined before, but now with huge lumps of concrete and steel beams scattered all over the bunker-like apartments, the ruin had been doubled. ...Or was it squared? Bleh, too many fancy mathematics to keep track of.

Then a dark shape slowly walked out through the deepening darkness and drizzle. Yellow eyes stared out at us from under the helmet of an archaic suit of armor as she turned to face us. I looked from her to Stygius beside me and gave a weak little smile. “Um... isn’t that your sister?” I asked, and he licked his lips nervously and nodded, his tufted ears drooping as he shrank back from her furious gaze.

“THOU ART IN SO MUCH TROUBLE, BROTHER!” she bellowed at us in a thunderous voice. “THOU SHALT ABANDON THY VAINGLORIOUS QUEST AND RETURN TO THY FAMILY! OUR FATHER COMMANDS IT!” Rampage fell over, clutching her ears, and I shrank back as the booming voice started a screech of feedback in my ear.

Stygius swooped up to her and covered her mouth with his wing, making hushing motions as he looked back in the direction of Meatlocker and made little squeaks at her. “NAY, BROTHER! I SHALL NOT BE SILENT! THOU HAST DONE FAR MORE DAMAGE TO THE SECRET OF OUR EXISTENCE THAN I!” She advanced on him, and step by step he retreated. “THREE DAYS THOU HAST BEEN ABSENT! THREE DAYS! THOU INSISTED THOU NEEDED BUT ONE HOUR TO BED THE STRUMPET BLACKJACK! NOT THREE DAYS! OUR FATHER IS MOST VEXED WITH THEE!”

Strumpet?! “Now wait a minute!” I snapped. “Stygius can go where he wants with who he wants, and he doesn’t need your permission!” Psychoshy looked stunned as her eyes went from Stygius to me to Tenebra.

“NAY, THOU TEMPTRESS, BLACKJACK, THOU HARLOT THOU! THOU HAST ENTANGLED HIM WITH SOME FORM OF LECHEROUS MAGIC! THOU HAST BEGUILDED HIM WITH THY FLANKS OF STEEL AND FOUL UNICORN SOR-

CERY! WHY ELSE WOULDST HE FOLLOW THEE LIKE A LUSTFUL MOON-CALF!?" Flanks of steel? How do you beguile with flanks of steel? Who was I going to seduce, the tank?

Rampage winced. "Um... *Please* stop shouting?"

"And anyway," I snapped, "*she's* the strumpet that's riding his little pony." I pointed at Psychoshy.

"Hey! There's nothing little about it!" the pegasus retorted, and I had to give her that. She flew into Tenebra's face. "No pony is taking Stygius anyplace!"

"INCORRECT!" she roared, and then the darkness around us came alive! Shadowy tendrils reached up around our legs and held fast. I staggered, struggling to rise as they curled about me more and more.

"Oh, this is new!" Rampage shouted as she struggled against the darkness. In my mind, the Goddess was contemplating adding a batpony or two to Unity if it meant that she could get her hooves on that kind of magic!

Psychoshy evaded the tendrils in a yellow streak as she came around and smashed her hooves against Tenebra's helmet. I kept debating about jumping into S.A.T.S. or not. The shadow magic had wrapped around my weapons, but I still had my horn. I looked over at the stricken Stygius, who simply seemed at a loss.

"OW! THY CANTANKEROUS... OUCH! CEASE THY- HEY!" Tenebra bellowed as she struggled to grab the darting yellow pegasus with her shadows. In her armor, the batmare couldn't quite bring herself around in time to face her. "STOP THOU CUNT THOU!" she bellowed in frustration.

Psychoshy tackled her straight into the ground, knocking the helmet from her head. Her bellows became high pitched, barely-audible squeaks and chirps as the yellow pegasus ground her face into the dirt. "Stygius isn't going anywhere with you! He's a free pony! He can make his own choices! If he wants to stay with us, then there's nothing you can do about it."

"Please stop," a stallion said beside me. Stygius wore his sister's helmet, and I suspected he was whispering to keep his voice at an tolerable volume. He trotted over to the pair, put his wings between the two stunned mares, and separated them. "I apologize for my tardiness, Sister. Truly, one hour was given and one hour was all I meant to spend. But... Sister, please hear me. I have in but three days lived such that three lifetimes could not compare! I have faced peril, horror and trials, but wonders too. Did thou knowest that just a short flight yon, thou canst hear melodies

unlike any in our dark home?” He pointed a wing back towards Meatlocker before grinning widely. “And that is but one place I have encountered! How many more may be discovered?”

Wow. Somepony actually *happy* to be in the Wasteland. Who knew?

Tenebra stared at him and made little squeaks and chirps. He shook his head. “Nay, Sister. Our mother’s tales of horrors and hardship were not false. But not all surfacers are savage. Many are brave, fearless, gentle, and...” His eyes turned to Psychoshy. “Beautiful.” He gave her a kind smile and then looked back at Tenebra. “I left with Blackjack for base intentions, I confess. Yet in her company and that of her friends, I have seen an example our own kind would be wise to adopt.”

Her shadows slowly relaxed and I straightened. She gave another chirp, and he looked away, again appearing sad and torn. She chirped again. “Nay, Sister. I would not defy our father the King. But I am loath to leave this place now that I have started to discover its treasures,” he said as he looked at Psychoshy. “Please... cease thy attack. I shall make my farewells.”

“You’re a prince?!” Psychoshy blurted, and he flushed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He sighed. “Prince of a people who hide beneath the ground and who dwindle away generation by generation in fear and seclusion. Never before would I have questioned our ways. Now I see how life struggles on in the Wasteland, in such hardships.” He looked at me with a sad smile. “I thank thee, Blackjack, for thy kindly education. In thee, thou hast shown me true valor and friendship.”

“So, you’re leaving?” Psychoshy asked in a little voice. “Just... leaving?”

“I must. My sister spokest true; my father will insist upon mine return. I am unforgivably tardy.” He reached over to her and lifted her chin with his wing. “Were I not a prince, my father not a king, I would remain with you all my days. Even if I must pluck the wings from my back to maintain our secret, I would. I have seen such courage, passion, and life in this time with you than in all my years below. And all of you I shall sorely miss.”

Tenebra was looking at Psychoshy oddly as the stricken pegasus began to weep. Stygius slowly wrapped his wings around her and kissed her softly. Rampage sighed as she looked away. Finally they parted lips. “Farewell, kind lady. I shall hear the whisper of thy wings on every lonely breath of air for the rest of my days.” Slowly he pulled away from her and turned away to walk to his sister.

I looked from Psychoshy to Stygius and back again as the mare stood on the verge

of losing another pony she loved. "If you are going to do anything besides live in regret, now's the time to do something," Rampage said quietly to her.

Psychoshy swallowed and then swooped after them. "Wait! Wait... please..." she said as she landed in front of him. "Take me with you."

Stygius' eyes popped wide. "Fairest, I cannot. Thou art of the surface and I am of the depths. Were you to come with me, thou couldst never return!"

"So what?" Psychoshy said firmly as she looked up at him. "All my life I've been nothing but a tool or a killer. You're the first pony who really makes me want to be better than who I was. I... I like you, Stygius. Enough to take a risk coming with you. If your father has a problem with it, then fine. I'll deal with it. But I'm sick of just going through life hoping it will get better."

Stygius opened his mouth to talk again, when Tenebra gave a chirp. The dusky-blue-maned mare smiled at the yellow pegasus and then looked sternly at her brother and gave another chirp. "You're sure? But Father..." She chirped again, firmly. "You'll speak with him... but..." And then she gave a long squeak and he balked. "Yes... I would much... much rather not marry you, dear sister. Much rather..." He looked back at Psychoshy and then smiled and wiped her tears away with a wing.

"You'd better hurry," I said as I looked back towards Meatlocker, knowing that somepony would come to investigate the shouting sooner or later. I smiled at them both. "I hope it all works out. Thanks for helping me with... um... everything," I said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

Psychoshy turned towards Rampage, but the mare just forced a smile and waved a hoofclaw. "Go on, you crazy kids. I'm happy for you both. There's nothing better than finding that very special somepony." Her jaw strained to maintain her grin.

"Well, then... goodbye," Psychoshy said.

"Goodbye, Psychoshy," I replied.

Then she shook her head with a smile. "Not Psychoshy. Whisper. If I'm going to start a new life, I may as well start with a new name as well." And with her eyes clear and confident she flew to the pair of batponies, and with one look back and a smile, they took to the air together, flying northeast around the crater.

Rampage waited a minute and then sniffed. "Finally taking her chance on her own life... lucky girl..."

Then Lacunae dropped from the sky and landed beside us, throbbing with a full charge of magical energy to take us home. “Hello, girls. Did I miss anything?”

It took a bit of explaining, during which time Lacunae seemed completely fascinated by the magical powers of Stygius’ sister. Shadow magic was apparently making the Twilight in the Goddess so uppity that she was dumping every bit into Lacunae. Rampage said little, looking slightly... something. Pensive? She grimaced when I told Lacunae how happy ‘Whisper’ was now that she had a new life and muttered under her breath as she turned away.

I supposed that Whisper wasn’t the only mare who wanted a fresh start with somepony who loved them.

While my eyes recovered from the glare of teleportation, I heard a number of startled voices and the sound of water flowing behind me. Slowly the afterimages began to fade away, and I looked at the stunned faces of dozens of ponies. I looked at the horseshoe-shaped strip mall beside the Hoofington river and the numerous ponies around vendors and shops. Steely-eyed stallions with hunting rifles looked our way but didn’t go red on my E.F.S. Strings of lights had been stretched between the two arms of the strip mall, filling the plaza between them with a shattered rainbow.

“Hey, this isn’t Chapel!” I said, perhaps a little more loudly than I’d intended. “What are we doing in Riverside?” I asked Lacunae with a little pout, standing on my back legs next to her.

“You need new forelegs,” Lacunae pointed out, “and I felt that teleporting here and walking would be less disruptive than teleporting into the midst of the Sand Dogs’ home.” I huffed and slumped. She had a point. Seeing Glory again would just have to wait. Besides, when we’d last left Riverside, it’d been a ghost town on the verge of being completely abandoned. Now, the stalls and shops that had been all but empty were overflowing with goods, and everywhere I looked were ponies. At least forty or so were going about their business in the dwindling daylight.

Or had *been* going about their business; our appearance had created quite a stir. Murmurs of ‘Security’, ‘Rampage’, and ‘Reapers’ were circulating. Most of the expressions were either awed or confused, with a few glowering at me. Lots of ponies were staring at my limbs – or the remains thereof – and shooty eyes.

“Hey Security,” called a voice from beside me, and I frowned as I looked at the peach mare with fish for a cutie mark standing behind a stand loaded with fish, parts of

giant frogs, and hunks of leech. She met my gaze and hesitated as if reconsidering. Her eyes lingered on my shredded and mangled metal legs. Then she finally smiled, though, and looked me in the eye. "It's Perch. We met a few weeks ago? Welcome back," she said as she turned to a hubcap filled with coals over which cooked fish on metal skewers. "Want a free sample?"

Well, I ate Cram. How bad could it be? I levitated one over, and she passed another to Rampage. Lacunae just looked away with a faintly ill expression. To be honest, the fish was absolutely delicious, though I didn't think Perch expected me to eat it bones, skewer, and all. The others were looking at the shops curiously.

"I will go find Rover," Lacunae said. "You can stay here and talk with your friend." He knew the alicorn from Tenpony, so there was little chance of a problem with the meeting, hopefully. Rampage finished her roast eel, belched, and trotted over to walk beside the alicorn. It looked like, for once, I wouldn't have anything to do. It left me feeling a little uneasy, but I was curious what'd brought about this turn around in the town. I couldn't be because of me... it just... couldn't..

"Where did all these people come from?" I asked the peach fishermare.

"Amazing, isn't it?!" Perch said in glee. "Lots of these folks are from outside Hoofington. When those dogs started trading, they had... well... everything! Everything we could ever hope to swap! And they love my fish." The mare was nearly dancing in her joy. "Once we had the salvage, the trade caravans started coming really regularly! We actually have some traders planning to go from here to Manehattan to Dise! Can you imagine?" she said as she hopped on her hooves. "Chems from Flank. Bullets from Megamart! We're getting food from the river and trading it with the Society for vegetables. It's amazing! And it's all thanks to you."

I felt a little dizzy; this was sort of the opposite of Yellow River. I never really expected to ever see anypony really happy to see me. *Trade will save the Wasteland*. It was astonishing how simple economics kept civilization going. "You don't have many Harbingers here, do you?"

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Those Hoofington Rises freaks? Nah. They'll only give you free stuff if you join their wacky cult. We don't need that garbage." She pointed over at the huge towers across the river. "I mean, their latest line is about how the Core destroyed Hightower. Blasted it to pieces. 'Hoofington Rises and the evils of the Wasteland are destroyed...' blah blah blah." I strained my smile, laughing and hoping few other people had seen the green beam minutes before the explosion. "*Everypony* knows that it was just that damned bomb going off. We don't

have time or the need to bother with nonsense like that anymore. We got ponies working to clear debris. Ponies working to bring in more fish. Ponies trying to fix up more shops. It's a real town again!"

"It surely is," an old earth pony stallion chuckled, pushing through the crowd. The lemon-yellow Keeper grinned at me with that look that inexplicably drew a blush to my cheeks as he tugged down the brim of his floppy, beaten hat. His eyes lingered on my busted up forelegs and he shook his head. "Why is it that you always seem to look two steps from the hereafter? One day we need ta meet up when yer whole and healthy. Make a day of it." He grinned at me. "Still, yer better off than when I last saw ya." His eyes settled on my legs and the smile faded, an old wistful look crossing his features; after a moment, I realized that maybe he was recognizing my limbs from their previous owner. Then he shook his head, though, and said calmly, "I hear tell you've been running like a mad hellhound all over the east, Security."

"Yeah, pretty much," I replied with a sheepish little smile. Then I blinked and levitated out Vigilance and my revolvers. "Do you have any parts for these?"

He whistled through his teeth as he took Duty and admired it. "Mmmm... maybe. Looks like the action's worn." He waved over one of his Brahmin and dug around in one of its packs, taking out another battered, less fancy-looking heavy revolver. "There. You should be able to cannibalize the parts off it." A little more impromptu trading and I had enough to repair the three weapons. After raiding the Hightower gun vault, I had enough guns to trade for the parts. Finally, we both sat back as I put them in my bags.

"Thanks," I said as I tucked them away. "Been busy."

Keeper laughed and then gave me a sly little look. "So I heard. Folks are talking about how Security blew the dickens out of old Hightower. Pretty impressive," he chuckled. "Can't wait for DJ Pon-3 to get back on the air and talk about it."

I groaned, covering my face, then blinked. "Wait! It happened just yesterday. How in Equestria could they possibly know it was me?"

The old yellow buck threw his head back and laughed. "So it was you! Thought so. Blackjack, didn't take long for folks to figger out who in the Hoof *coulda* done it! Big Daddy's crowing 'bout how the Reapers got the damnest toughest fighter in the Hoof. I think that old bastard is thinking of adopting you or something. The Flashers are practically ready to become your own personal gang. The Collegiate's probably gonna name you an honorary doctor or something."

“Great,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “Doctor Blackjack.” I’d probably kill whoever I tried to heal. Gunshot wound? Amputation! Broken leg? Gunshot! I sighed, shaking my head. “I just want to get home. I should have never been crazy enough to leave Glory.”

“Oh, your lovely one-winged marefriend?” He chuckled, stroking his little garlic bulb of a beard with a look that belonged on a stallion half his age. Really, I didn’t think he had a chance... He quickly added, as if I were offended, “I don’t mean anything by it, of course.” Then he leaned towards me a little. “So. How *did* you get the Core to shoot Hightower and blow it to smithereens? ‘Cause that’s a story I’d love to hear.”

I sighed, looking out across the river for a minute. “You know those Harbingers? Well, they’re right about one thing: there is something stirring in the Core. And it wants this.” I tapped the cover over my PipBuck. “There was a ghoul – freakiest thing I ever saw, big as a skywagon – that was about to eat me. Whatever the damn thing is that’s running the Core, it blasted the ghoul to keep it from destroying my PipBuck.” Then I gave a half smile and rolled my eyes. “Ten minutes later the balefire bomb blew. Totally unrelated. Really.”

“Well rut me twice and call me Sandy...” He looked a little bemused and slightly sympathetic. “Still pretty impressive, though... And what were you after in Hightower in the first place?”

“Just following a wild goose,” I said. “And I nearly got cooked in the process.”

“Sorry to hear that.” I could tell he wanted more specifics; information and rumors were probably just another commodity to him. After a moment, though, he seemed to realize that he wouldn’t be getting anything else on that subject. “So what’s your next move?”

I groaned and buried my face in the remains of my forehooves. “Right now, I just want to get back to Star House and Glory. That’s all I want.” He smiled and patted my head.

“And that’s why yer gonna end up a *bona fide* legend, Security,” he chuckled, but I simply forced a smile and looked away. “You’re more concerned with returnin’ to yer lady love than with fame, fortune, or power.”

“Unless I’m remembered for being a monster,” I muttered, thinking back to my friends in the prison. To a slaughter on a stormy night. To a little filly with broken legs. I looked at my mangled limb with a sigh. “My friends are scared of me.” I met his worried eyes. “And I think they’re right to be.”

Keeper looked at me for a long moment. “Hey, Perch! Bring me a bottle of Wild Pegasus,” the yellow earth pony shouted. The fishermare pulled a familiar-looking bottle from behind her stand, and the old stallion took it and trotted over to a rusty table and pair of chairs beside the crumbly brick wall that ran along the riverfront. I followed and watched as he deftly poured two glasses, then picked his up with his mouth and shot it down in a gulp. He smacked his lips. “Best thing for them there existential crises,” he said as he leaned back in the old chair. “So... what’s the bee in your bonnet?”

I sighed and lifted my glass, looking at the amber contents while he poured himself another. “I don’t know. A month ago I was Blackjack. A few days after that I got mutated eyes. Then I found out my PipBuck’s the key to all kinds of pre-war technology. Then I had jelly legs. Then I was blind and crippled. Raped... Then dead.” That made him arch an eyebrow. “I came back as a cyberpony... and I just felt all wrong. Still do. I was suicidal for a spell. Terrified of stallions. Went nuts. Tore apart some pegasi and crippled a filly. Got some help. Got laid. Got cooked and irradiated. Died again... worse this time. And now...” I sighed as I turned the glass back and forth before me with my magic. “Now I don’t know what to feel. I don’t know who I am. I just... want to be good. I don’t want to be one of the fuckers of the Wasteland, you know?” I set the glass down and looked out at the water as he drank a third. “You said I’m gonna be a legend, but a legend of what? Who the hell am I anymore, Keeper?”

He smacked his lips. “Funny thing about legends. They tend to be whatever a person wants them to be, instead of what they really are. Take Princess Celestia, for example. The nicest, goodiest Princess there ever was, right? Heck, you hear people say ‘sweet Celestia’ all the time; I just did it myself. Hardly ever hear them say ‘Dear Luna’ or something. Almost always Celestia. Why do you think that is?”

“Cause...” I paused and frowned. “You just... do. She’s Celestia.”

“She’s also the reason the war started,” he replied with a smile. “Oh, I know there’s all kinds of arguments about coal and industrialization and national pride and such, but I like to blame whatever pony said ‘go’. Because ultimately that’s where the bit is supposed to stop.” I drank my glass, and he poured us both another. The old stallion went on, “Thing is, folks got it so fixed in their minds that she was this goody good paragon of goodness that even two hundred years later they say her name like they think she’s gonna swoop in and save them. But me... I want to know who Celestia was at one in the morning when everything was dark and she was all alone. Was she really so good? Was she really so perfect?” He shrugged. “Guess that’s one of

them glasses half filled deals.”

Now I was more confused than ever. “So are you saying I’m not as good as they think I am?” Gee... surprise surprise.

“I’m saying that there’s no cut and dry good and bad. You might be remembered as a saint by these folk, but as a nightmare by some other folk.” He poured himself another drink, downed it, and sighed. “Fact is that while I trusted my friends, and liked them, I always knew that if things went bad then they could beat the shit out of me. Especially Big Daddy, Awesome, and Crunchy Carrots.” He swirled the remains of the bottle. “Sure enough... not long after Dawn left... they did. And bad. Something stupid.” He sighed and shrugged once more. “So if your friends are scared of you, well... you can’t help that. You can just keep control of yourself. Trying to do more than that is just setting yourself up to fail.”

I smiled a little as I looked down into the whiskey in my glass. “Thanks, Grandpa.”

He laughed at me, husky and throaty as he swirled the bottle. “You’re one of the few mares where I can honestly say that ain’t a possibility.” He lifted it and drained the remainder of the whiskey, then grimaced. “Ooooh, gonna be feeling that in an hour.” Finally he looked back at me. “So I hear you’re having other problems?”

“Had some Harbinger troubles,” I said as I looked back towards the river and the foamy brown water. “They’ve been after my head.”

“After your PipBuck is more like it. I’ve heard through clients that they’re offering a princess’ ransom for it.” He snorted and shook his head. “Offering too damn much, honestly. Anypony you should be worried about isn’t taking them seriously. Yet. Besides, the Zodiacs flat told them no. With Sanguine and his freaks gone too... well... not sure who else is gonna snap that up.”

“Oh, I’m sure somepony will. It’s not the first time,” I muttered. He winced, and I smiled a little. Was I actually getting blasé about a bounty on my head? Ugh... “I’ve been doing this too long. This has been the month from hell.”

“Awww, you’ve only been in the Hoof for a month and you’re already bitching? Wait a few years and see what it can really throw at you,” Keeper teased, and then reached out and snagged my shot glass. Before I could do anything he finished that off too. “Well now. I think I’d better be going. There’s a nice young aspiring caravaneer here, and I was thinking of giving her some personal tips of the trade before she heads off to Baltimore.” He stood, tugged down the brim of his hat, and then walked, a touch unsteady, off into the crowd.

I watched him go, then turned and looked out at the water flowing past the settlement. It wasn't raining for the moment, and I felt a little bit of peace. I didn't look at the seat across from me as I said in a low voice, "You've been quiet, Dealer. Both back with Boing and now."

The pale buck shuffled his cards as he sat in the seat that Keeper had vacated. "Why go through all the effort of contact when others do a job for you?" he asked in return. "Does it make you happy? Seeing this place you helped?"

"A little," I admitted. "Back at Flank, I figured helping was just... giving folks what they needed. But the gift didn't matter if it wasn't what they wanted or from who they wanted it from." I looked at the shops and the lights and the hope... the energy was infectious. And I'd helped with that... putting Rover in a position to trade with Riverside. I glanced back at the Dealer. "So Boing tears me down and Keeper builds me back up again? Is that the deal?"

"I guess." He bowed his head a little. "Not like I'm good at this sort of thing, Blackjack. Being stuck in a stable maneframe for two centuries doesn't do much for one's people skills."

"Then why do it?" I asked, and he closed his eyes. I leaned towards him, trying to prop up my chin on my mangled left leg.

The old, pale buck looked at his cards. "Back before the bombs fell... Goldenblood came to me. It was literally hours before he was arrested for treason. He was... more scared than I'd ever seen him before. More unstable, too. You know better than almost anyone how calm and collected he was. Well, that night, he wasn't. He was scared to death. He insisted that we'd all been played, and that he was the biggest fool of them all. That something had to be done to save Equestria."

"And that was binding you to EC-1101?" I asked in return.

"Part of me. That was what he wanted, yes. He had all the files from Rarity and making her own soul jars. He wanted to make the program itself my soul jar, make sure that it would stay intact no matter what. But he wanted more than that. To make sure that no matter what, EC-1101 reached Celestia at all costs."

I shifted on my seat. "Celestia?" I remember how coldly he'd dismissed her, cutting her off from the kingdom entirely. "Why?"

"He didn't say. He said that EC-1101 would have to get to her." He shook his head slowly, closing his eyes, and then continued with great regret, "And I told him no. I think I might have killed him, then. He left to find Trottenheimer. Said Trottenheimer'd

made something for him to deal with something bad. But then a half hour later I was stunned and woke up in an interrogation room. Luna was there. I was Goldenblood's assistant. They questioned me for... I don't know how long. Luna asked me if I wanted to prove my loyalty, and I said yes."

"Wait. Luna put you into EC-1101? But... why... how did she know how to do it?" I gasped.

"I don't know. Maybe Rarity told her? It was my chance to prove my innocence. They'd split my soul so that it wouldn't kill me. Luna told me that if anything happened to Equestria because of Goldenblood's betrayal, I was supposed to find a worthy heir. Somepony with the strength to save the kingdom and the intelligence to do what's right." He looked at me with a tired smile. "So far, you're the best candidate I've found." I didn't know if I should be flattered or horrified. I was settling on baffled.

"So... EC-1101's routing is doing what?" I asked, now completely confused.

"I don't know. It's got its own thing going, and I'm just along for the ride. I can help you access it and get past all the verification gibberish... but it's running its own program. Maybe it thinks Rainbow Dash is in Shadowbolt Tower. Maybe something else is affecting it. The only one left on the list is Horse. Maybe it's trying to get to Robronco. I just don't know."

"Ahem..." Perch said, watching me with a concerned smile. "Is everything okay?"

I realized how I must have looked; chattering to myself. "Oh yeah. Sure. Just... um... heroic brooding. 'Cause, you know, heroes..." I gave a nervous grin that made her look even more worried. "We... um... brood." I quickly cleared my throat. "What can I help you with. Need raiders ventilated? Evil thwarted? Just let me at 'em."

"Actually," she pointed a hoof at the empty whiskey bottle, "I need to you to pay for that. Twenty caps please."

I gaped at her, then at the bottle, then in the direction Keeper had gone. "But... but I only drank one glass..."

"Why is pony always breaking legs? Pony has good legs. Pony needs to take care of legs," Rover said as he fussed over my damaged limb with his tools. The Sand Dogs were doing better than I imagined. They weren't extending their modifications

to other ponies yet, but the trade in salvage had brought in a wealth of gems and food for the beleaguered people. Their subway station was still a complete mess, but I gathered that that was more because the Sand Dogs preferred it that way.

“Well, I lost that one to keep from eating a balefire egg,” I explained yet again, “and that one was chewed up by an ultra ghoul. It could have been a lot worse.” I levitated up a gem and popped it into my mouth. Mmmm. . . a nice fruity amethyst.

Lacunae and Rampage waited outside in the rain. My striped friend seemed more down than usual; I hoped that Lacunae would be able to help her. She’d helped Psycho and me after our troubles, but I wondered if maybe this was how she coped with her own problems. That and stomping things six feet underground. That left me alone with the old Sand Dog as he attached a new foreleg to my stump. I alternated between munching on scrap metal and gem fragments and the occasional smoked fish stuff, which was probably tainted but meh, honestly, how much worse could I get?

“Pony should be more careful,” he muttered as he trotted over to a terminal, brought over plugs connected to several wires, and began attaching them to sockets hidden inside my remaining limbs. “Dogs work hard to get you best parts. Should not damage them needlessly.” The components he’d used to repair and rebuild to my legs were ugly, ungainly things; I wondered if he was giving me deliberately bad-looking replacements as a further try at getting the point across.

“Believe me, after what I’ve been through, I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for your work.” I tried to get my fingers to work on my mangled left limb, then scowled and just lifted the limb and extended my thumb with my magic. “You were right about thumbs. These things are amazing!”

“Told pony,” he snorted before walking over for even more cables. How much wiring up was he going to do? “Rover told striped pony, but she say hoof for pony. Rover say thumbs better. Dogs win.” He grinned and began typing on the terminal with far more speed than even P-21 or Xanthe. “Rover enjoy making Pony’s body. Good parts. Good looks. Like old old times again.” Then he pointed a finger at me. “Is why Pony should take care!”

“I know. And I’ll try harder.” I pressed my mangled hoof to my chest. “I solemnly swear I won’t intentionally break my limbs on any enemy smaller than a house. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye.” A little pink pony in my head nodded primly.

He snorted with what I suspected was disbelief. “This take while. Must make old

repair talismans fix new parts like old. Make all same system, or limbs not work right.”

And he was getting even more cables. “How did you get trained to do this?”

“Trained?” He seemed to find the word both offensive and amusing. “Dog not get taught this trick. Dogs get first metal parts. I make sure I watch procedure. I steal papers and books. Finally, pony need assistant. I make sure I be assistant. I pay attention and make sure when other Sand Dog fixed, I do the fixing. Pony happy to let dog work on dog. Give lots of parts.” He chuckled throatily. “But dog cleverer than pony. Dogs dig tunnels, yes? Work with much machinery. Learn to make tools and machines to fix problems underground. Learn to make parts for dogs.” He sighed softly, his remaining ear drooping. “Other dogs not learn. Rather scavenge. Mate. Let Rover fix dogs. Rover hopes some dog learn soon. Rover is old dog. Too tired to learn new tricks.”

“Have you thought of teaching a pony?” I asked delicately. He snorted at once, and I quickly added, “I mean, there’s Triage at the Collegiate. They have all the Steelpony files, too, from the Professor.”

“Rover not want dogs to forget,” he grumbled. “Maybe if I teach dogs too. Fifi maybe.” He snorted again and shook his head. “Not important now. Fix you up.”

As he came over with yet another cable, I huffed, “Jeeze, how many more wires do you need?” The old dog’s muzzle split in a grin.

“Silly pony. Is not wire,” he said as he lifted the tube. “Is catheter.”

I had to admit, once he got underway, I was glad for that little tube, despite the Goddess’s amusement at my embarrassment. Rover reached over and did something, and like that, I stopped. I couldn’t even move my jaw; the muscles just strained against it, something in there (maybe part of the thing that let me eat metal?) apparently being locked up tight. Some experimentation revealed that I could still move my tongue, tail, ears, and eyelids and that my magic still worked, but other than that I couldn’t do anything but stand there like a statue while feeling the strangest electric tingling in my forelimbs. And this was going to take all night. He’d set the terminal-tech-stuff to fix and calibrate everything while he had me wired up, so I simply stood there and tingled while Rover went to bed.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I couldn’t move. . . but really that didn’t bother

me as much as I thought it would. In its own way, it felt sort of nice. If he'd tried immobilizing me like this before Happyhorn, I'd probably have been clawing the walls of my mind, but now... I focused on control, like I had with Stygius. I am not freaking now. I am not reacting. I am calm... calm... I watched the lines of data that scrolled in the margins of my vision and slowly drifted away.

The royal palace of Canterlot sure seemed different at night without celebration. The looming ministry hubs along Ministry Walk were still relatively lively, but few of the great pale marble structure's stained glass windows showed signs of light and life. While Canterlot bustled about its social affairs, its heart was dark and still. I slowly approached the main gates, looking at the shadowed recesses above with a careful eye trained to find targets. Most ponies would have missed the lurking batponies of Luna's guard watching from on high. During the day the palace was all unicorns and pegasi and brightness. During the night. . .

I wondered if those daytime unicorns and pegasi really were what they appeared. Or were they enchanted night guards made to look like those races? Just one of countless rumors about the palace and its ruler.

"HALT! WHO GOES—" boomed a voice from besides the gate, and I fell back at once, gaping at the hovering stallion above me. The handsome night guard made a face and tapped a gem on the front of his armor before landing in front of me. "Ahem. Sorry. Only supposed to use the 'royal voice' with the tourists." He reached the tip of his wing around and winced as he twisted it in his ear canal. "Woo. Does a doozy on my ears."

"Lionheart," muttered a mare who stepped out of the shadows next to him. "Thou art supposed to use the—"

"Oh stuff it, Nightracer," Lionheart said with a snort. "That's fine for formal occasions, but honestly. No pony talks like that anymore. You'd have to be half crazy to talk all the time in the royal voice. Even the Princess doesn't talk that way. Save it for the tourists." He looked at me kindly and extended a wingtip while the dusky purple mare glowered at him. I hooked it with my foreleg, and he pulled me to my hooves. "So, you have an invitation, right?"

I blinked, then pulled the white envelope from my saddlebags and slid out the folded piece of paper. He flipped it open with his hoof, the dusky stallion frowning as he scrutinized the invitation "Mmm... Psalm... meeting with Eclipse. Well, it looks

about right. Still gonna need to confirm, though. Procedure. May I see your hoof, please?" He pulled a long silver needle from his armor.

I balked, looking at his pleasant smile and then at the glowering mare. A peek revealed two more batpony stallions standing silently behind me. I had a feeling that saying no was going to earn me even more trouble. I held out my hoof and winced as I was jabbed with the needle. He drew one drop of blood and let it drip on the paper. Instantly the entire invitation began to glitter with bright red sparkles. "That's unicorn blood, all right. This way."

He led me into the palace. Despite the dark windows, there were ponies trotting around on quiet hooves. Guards, certainly, but also others, ponies who averted their eyes and halted their conversations as we trotted past. A hush seemed to envelop everything. "Do you... do you have to do that often?"

"More and more these days. There's more than one way for a zebra... or other things... to hide their appearance," he said in that soft yet comforting burr. "Regular visitors have blood talismans to speed things up. They also don't use the front gate, either."

I looked at the dark windows, the normally bright glass images now menacing abstract shapes. "I don't know why I'm here at all. I've never met this Eclipse. Do they work for the Princess?"

"Something like that," he replied with a smile, and then his ears twitched and he frowned. "Hmmm... Celestia's here." I looked around, but aside from a distant chirping I couldn't hear anything.

"Princess Celestia? Where?" I gasped in a rush of glee, earning a cool look from the stallion. "Not that Princess Luna's not... um... nice..."

"It's always trouble whenever she visits," he muttered as he led me further into the back of the palace. "Doesn't she understand that Princess Luna's busy? Ugh..." He stopped at a pair of double doors and poked his head in. "Psalm to see Miss Eclipse. Also, *she's* here."

There was a pause as a mare muttered under her breath and then said, "One second. Almost... there..." And then abruptly the voice changed and became deeper. "Send Miss Psalm in."

The office was a square room whose ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky. One wall had high windows whose tops were lost in the shadows. A second wall was almost consumed by a massive map of the world with numerous little white

and red dots covering it. Floating against the surface of the map were eight icons of light: bright orange, cyan, pink, purple, violet, yellow, green, and gold. Half were clustered over Canterlot, but I watched in amazement as the purple dot flashed and disappeared from Manehattan to reappear in Maripony.

The pegasus mare behind the desk was a dusky lavender with a buzzed-short royal blue mane and an eyepatch. Her remaining eye followed me closely as she gestured to the fancy padded chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Thank you, Lionheart. Please make *her* comfortable." The guard bowed and trotted out of the room. Eclipse smiled at me, folding her hooves on the table. "I'm glad you could come, Psalm. My name is Eclipse. I work closely with various agencies and report directly to Princess Luna. I wanted to ask you some questions about your squad's latest incursion to Dawn Bay and your attempted assassination of Legate Fortis."

A sick feeling rose up inside me, and I swallowed as I lowered my eyes. "Yes Ma'am," I murmured.

What proceeded was a complete debriefing. She asked me who I saw meeting with the Legate. Did they appear to be fancily dressed, armored, or in scientific garb? When I was planning my shot, what other activities were going on in Dawn Bay? Was there increased construction? Was the Legate fortifying his troops, building more war infrastructure, or wasting resources on increasing the luxury of his own living quarters? Every question, the pegasus seemed to think and consider, often smiling to herself and tapping her chin thoughtfully.

What she wasn't asking was the most important question: why had I missed? They'd provided me with a zebra rifle and made very specific instructions that I was not to modify it in any way nor fire it against any target except the Legate and that I was to leave it behind. I'd assumed there was an enchantment or some other thing at work; maybe a bullet enchanted to kill only the Legate? If only...

Despite myself, I grew more and more upset. It was one thing to kill somepony in the heat of battle, but what had happened... I hunched over and started to sob, and Eclipse paused, staring at me in shock. "I'm sorry," I blubbered. "I don't know how I failed. The shot was perfect. I had the zebra rifle just like I was told and he was right there and... and... I didn't mean to kill his son! The shot just went wide and... and..."

Suddenly Eclipse was there, patting my mane. "Shhh... shhh.... You didn't know. You couldn't have known. You were never supposed to kill the Legate. Fortis is paranoid; he's convinced that one of his rivals is plotting to kill him. He'll waste

months improving his guard and purging his own ranks of suspected traitors. It was just bad luck his son had been standing right beside him when you fired.” But she didn’t say it like it was all that bad. In fact, she looked downright pleased with the results of my miss. “The sights on the zebra rifle had been tampered with, and I knew that your squad wouldn’t have tried as hard as you did just to miss a shot at the Legate.”

So, it had been for nothing? The raid into Dawn Bay had been a harrowing affair, struggling behind enemy lines to find a shooting position before waiting for days to learn the Legate’s daily routine well enough to find a window of opportunity. Then, finally, getting the opportunity to take the shot. The zebra colt falling instead, the bullet through his eye. The escape had nearly cost us all our lives, and only Big Macintosh had kept us focused enough to be extracted by Rainbow Dash. All just to put a little more fear into one of the enemy generals?

“I’m damned. . . damned. . .” I whimpered.

“No.” Eclipse frowned in thought. “You acted on the orders of the Princess. I’m sure that your... soul... can be absolved in service to the Princess. I know she’ll forgive you.”

“She. . . she will?” I sniffed, rubbing my eyes.

“I’m sure of it,” Eclipse said with a firm nod and smile. “Just do whatever you can to help, and she’ll forgive you when this whole nightmare is over. I promise.”

Just then the door opened, and I heard the wet rasping breath that announced his presence. Goldenblood stepped in, struggling for breath. He looked at me, his eyes widening in momentary surprise, and then at Eclipse. “Princess Luna needs you. She needs to speak with her sister and wants us present.”

Eclipse actually frowned and rolled her eyes. “Not again. Honestly, why can’t she simply go stay with Cadence?” Eclipse snorted scornfully, and my shock must have shown because she immediately coughed and forced a smile. “Ahem. Sorry to cut this short, but sometimes there’s just no reasoning with my. . . with Princess Celestia. I’ll get somepony to show you out, my dear.” She trotted quickly and moved out into the hall. One side effect of the hushed halls: the mare’s voice carried. “What is she going on about now?” Maybe it was the sight of my teacher, or maybe it was just because it had to do with Princess Celestia, but I followed along quietly.

I was able to shadow the pair without too much trouble. A dark castle with most of the guards on the outside and plenty of other ponies going about their business

inside was nothing next to infiltrating a zebra military encampment. They walked down to another room and slipped inside. My magic reached out and gently grabbed the door's handle to keep it from shutting all the way. Looking up and down the seemingly abandoned hall, I heard the voice of Princess Luna ask in a tired and irritable voice, "Alright Tia. What's it this time? More protests about Twilight helping me? Maybe another protest on the Diamond Dog relocation?"

"It is good to see you as well, Dearest Sister," Princess Celestia said softly and without a hint of sarcasm. "Have you seen this?"

"An invitation to a diplomatic meeting at Shattered Hoof Ridge," Luna said with a sigh, and then there was the sound of paper being wadded up.

"It's a trap, pure and simple," Goldenblood rasped. "The Caesar hasn't made any serious moves towards opening a dialogue with Her Majesty. Quite the reverse; he's using their mythology as a rallying cry to unite more tribes against her and us."

"What if it's not, though? This offer comes from the heads of four major tribes," Celestia said firmly. "For ten years before Littlehorn we quibbled around the negotiating table. What if this is a step towards ending the war, even after that? I've spoken to the zebras in Zebratown and many prisoners of war. They all want this conflict over."

"Even if that is the case, the Caesar doesn't." Goldenblood sighed like a rusty boiler. "It's not legitimate, Your Majesty. And even if it were, there's no way that we could manage to keep her safe at Shattered Hoof Ridge."

"Perhaps Luna cannot attend, but why can't I negotiate peace for Equestria?" Celestia asked.

"What?" Luna asked in a low, shocked voice. "Tia, I said no. I don't care if there're forty tribal leaders wanting to talk a ceasefire; until they concede to our main demands, there's no point! They won't even agree to withdraw from Dawn Bay, and that's one of our *lesser* requirements."

"You cannot pass this up, Luna!" Celestia insisted.

"I most certainly can and will," Luna replied coldly. "And I refuse to let you go. If you were captured, the blow to morale would be incalculable, not to mention that they might simply kill you."

"I am willing to take that chance," Celestia countered. "Thousands risk their lives every day in this war. It's time I did as well."

"I am in charge of Equestria now!" Luna snapped. "Or did you forget that you

stepped down?" There was a long silence before Celestia spoke once more.

"There's not a day I can forget that, Luna," Celestia said calmly. "Nor a day I don't regret it. When I passed the throne over to you, I thought it was to lead Equestria to a brighter future, not a darker one. I am going to this meeting in your place, Luna. You can arrange security if you like, or I will go alone, but either way, I am going. Equestria needs some hope that this war will end, and if I can give it that hope, I will. I'm sorry, Sister."

"Tia!" Luna cried out, but there was a flash of golden light, and the Princess of the night let out a sob. "Damn it, Tia. I'm trying my best! I am. There's just so much to do. Can't she understand that?!"

"Doubtful," Goldenblood rasped. "They probably worked quite hard to get that peace offering to cross Celestia's hooves. Worst case, Celestia gets captured and the Caesar uses her as leverage against the Ministries. He'd offer peace and her release, but the conditions... well... your exile would probably be top on the list. Refuse, and some of the population will turn on you. Celestia's still quite popular."

"Damn it, Tia," Luna muttered. "Why can't she just... let me do this? Why is she always trying to force things? I didn't want to be in charge of Equestria. She asked me! And ever since then, she's been constantly meddling and criticizing. Why can't she just go to her school and leave Equestria to me?" Luna sighed. "I don't suppose I can just lock her up, can I?"

"Only if you want a full on revolution on your hooves, led by Twilight and her friends. I've tried my best to keep their interactions to a minimum, but she was Twilight's mentor. Those bonds sometimes go deeper than you ever expect." Goldenblood let out a rusty sigh.

"What's the best case scenario?" Luna asked.

"They kill her," Goldenblood replied. I felt an electric tingle paralyzing me.

"Ha ha. Very funny." Luna muttered sarcastically. Then she paused and said in shock, "You're serious? Golden, she's my sister!"

"Captured, she'd be a lever against you and, by extension, Equestria. Killed, she'd be a martyr for the war effort. Recruitment would probably double, if not more. There'd be no more interference to your rule, and the aristocrats would fall in line behind you. Better, several tribes of zebras revere Celestia as an embodiment of the sun. Killing her would turn them against the Caesar. We might even sway portions of the Propoli to break ranks. That could completely cripple their war effort." He

paused and then added, "Of course, the cost would be unthinkable."

"I should think so! She's my sister, for pony's sakes!" Luna snapped. Then there was an ominous silence, and Luna groaned. "What are we going to do about her? What if she's right?"

"Then you'd best be ready to return the throne to her," Goldenblood answered. "If this peace effort is sincere, any arrangement will require your abdication. The terms beyond that would probably be equally unpleasant, but moot." He paused and sighed. "We could see if she's right, Luna."

"You just said—"

"I know, and I still believe it. But if we have peace, real peace... well... you won't be responsible for Equestria anymore."

There was another long silence. "No. No! I'm not going to just... just give up! I don't care if she is older and wiser and nicer and... and... I'm going to do it right. I'm going to do whatever it takes and show her and everypony that I am every bit the ruler that she was! I have to show them I can do it. That I'm more than Nightmare Moon and the young mare that fools around on Nightmare Night."

Goldenblood let out a long sigh. "Then we'll just have to disrupt the meeting. I'll pull together a guard detachment that will pull her out at the first sign of trouble. See what I can arrange in the interim."

"And if they do capture her, somehow? Or try?"

"Better a dead princess than a captured one..."

My eyes fluttered open. It was all I could do at the moment as my mind rolled that last memory over and over again. 'Better a dead Princess than a captured one.' Could Luna have possibly okayed such a thing? No... No, Celestia lived through the war, right? Princess Luna didn't kill her.

No. That was just... unthinkable...

I was still dangling wires and tubes. My magic levitated a bottle of water off the counter and lifted it to my lips. I couldn't see what condition my limbs were in, so there was no telling how long I'd been like this. I couldn't hear Rover snoring; maybe it was already morning.

"Lacunae?" I thought out at her. "What time is it?"

"Dawn," she replied. "We are outside." There was something off about her words.

"Is everything okay?" I asked at once.

"Rampage is... disconcerted. That is all," she replied. Before I could ask further, she queried, "How do you fare, Blackjack?"

"I can't move an inch," I said with a chuckle.

"You seem to be handling it well." I ignored the surprise in her voice.

"You've never been in security. A third of your time is spent walking, another third standing a post, and the rest is the time something interesting happens." Okay, *theoretically* that was the job. There were also a lot of card games, dice, and sexual liaisons involved that I'd left out. "Granted, being able to scratch myself would be nice too. Cozy as it is, this catheter itches like crazy. The plug in my back end is a lot more comfortable, though." I paused. "Lacunae? Are you there?"

I strained and could barely pick it out. "La la la la la la... not listening to Blackjack talking about things in her hiney." I couldn't open my mouth, but I still chuckled in my throat. Even the Goddess seemed to be tuning me out.

Well, it was one way to get a little privacy.

Then I blinked. Was that a... growl?

"Lacunae? Lacunae! Um... I think I might need some help here..." But all I got back was that stream of her not talking to me. The growl sounded again, deep and low and right on the far side of the door. The handle slowly rotated, the metal squealing faintly as it was shoved open. And then I was incredibly grateful Rover had stopped me up before working on me. I'd have probably had an accident then and there.

The creature was almost two feet taller than Rover, but it stooped over. Yellowish hide sprouting knots of scar tissue and bristly black fur covered its incredibly muscled frame. Actually, scratch the "it"; there was no question whatsoever that 'it' was a 'he'. He wore only a leather harness sporting dangling magic fusion cells, and a large energy weapon was slung across his immense shoulders. It reminded me of the weapon Xanthe had cobbled together; it looked like some kind of mining tool with every safety feature removed. More immediately terrifying than that, however, were the immense hands that each ended in a set of wicked claws. The pointed maw peeled back, and I saw a ridiculous amount of yellowed, razor-sharp teeth, more than any species outside dragonkind had any right to possess. His yellow

eyes ran down my body in a way that made me wonder if he was going to eat me or rut me... Oh Celestia! Was it coming out?!

I didn't even think past that point. I simply went straight into S.A.T.S. and toggled up four magic bullets right for his face as I began mentally screaming in a blind panic. My horn flashed, the bolts smashing into his head and tearing off a goodly chunk of his features. Blood and torn hide dangled in flaps along the side of his face, and I might have gotten his eye... but the damage was far from the blasted skull and splattered brain I'd inflict on a pony target. He swayed and fell back against the wall, then fixed me with a glare and a bowel-loosening snarl. He pushed himself upright and started to advance.

I had a few more spells in my horn. This time I didn't aim for his face as he began to charge. I aimed for his kneecap. The two bolts ripped into the leg, and the canine monster was thrown off his gait. Now I'd really pissed him off. Not able to scream, I did the only thing I could think of: pull the trigger on his crude energy weapon. At least, I hoped it was the trigger... and I was right. Instantly three bolts of magical green disintegration energy blasted around his feet and the monster howled in pain as it struggled to get the energy weapon in its grip. Again and again I jerked the trigger, blasting the wall and floor and anything the weapon happened to be pointed at.

Finally those claws just shredded the harness and let it fall in a heap. There was no way my horn could lift something that huge, but I could turn it! And as the creature got ready to cut my head off with those razor sharp claws, I spun the energy weapon towards its back and fired again. The monster let off a hound-like roar as it collapsed. The weapon's energy cell was depleted, so I fumbled with controls, trying to eject the spent canister. How had Glory done this?

I finally managed to pop the cell free when Rover rushed in. "No! Stop, Pony! Stop!" Huh? I hesitated as I looked from Rover to the beast and back again. Had he missed the claws and fangs? Had he missed that penis?!

"What is that thing!?" roared the monster in pain, bringing those claws down and tearing its own weapon in two before I could bring it to back to bear. I mentally asked the exact same thing. It would have been really nice to be able to talk. He huffed, blood dripping from the holes I'd blown in his face as he stood over the wrecked disintegration gun.

"Pony. Stupid pony," Rover said as he helped pull the monster to sit upright. "Gnarr. Blackjack the Security Pony. Blackjack, Gnarr," he said with a gesture of his robotic

claw towards the yellow canine monster. “Gnarr is hellhound and guest of Sand Dogs.”

The hellhound growled that ominous snarl as he rubbed the raw red burns the energy weapon had made in his hide. “This is Security? Huh. Thought her horn was bigger.” The monster rose to his feet as Rover began to remove the cables from me. My eyes narrowed as I looked up at him, feeling implants and motors start to reactivate as the cables were removed.

“Security Pony help Sand Dogs. Dogs hope Security could help hounds too,” Rover said as he reached up and pulled a plug out of my shoulder. My mouth filled with the taste of battery, and I could suddenly move my jaw. “Not shoot hound just because hound is scary!”

“Little mare is tough, that is for sure,” Gnarr growled as he picked at his fangs with a claw. “I take it you’ve never seen us before... or maybe you’ve seen too many of us and know better?” The hellhound chuckled as he tapped his claws against the blasted wall.

“The first one,” I croaked, and floated the bottle of water over again and took another drink. Every time a cable was removed I was struck by a building pins and needles sensation followed by restored movement. As soon as I could look down, I stared at the smooth metal of my limbs. They looked exactly as they had before I’d left Meatlocker for Hightower. They were even re-enamelled! “What’s a hellhound?”

Rover typed on the terminal as Gnarr snorted, “Rover told you of how we were forced off our land by ponies long ago? Even before the bombs ended your world, our homes were poisoned. Some came here, worked for ponies, and lived beneath their cities. Others returned home, and those that survived the poison became strong.” He flexed his powerful frame and chuckled deep in his throat. “Dogs are cousins of hounds... weaker for staying away from home.”

“Yet hounds came to dogs for help, Gnarr,” Rover snapped, wiping the grin from the hellhound’s face.

“What could... well... you... need help with?” An irritable dragon perhaps?

Gnarr grumbled and crossed his arms. “Do you know about the flying ponies, Security?”

“Do you mean pegasi or the Enclave?” I asked in return.

“The second one,” Gnarr growled. “Our den has been under attack by them for nearly a month. Many scouts and warriors have been taken, and the Enclave have

used their strange devices to control them. I was one of the last, driven from my home when they overran us with our own people.” He reached down and pulled something off his harness that looked like some sort of skull cap. “Do you know what this is, Pony?”

I levitated it and turned it over. “No idea. I- yipe!” I jumped two feet into the air as the last tube and plug were yanked out of my hind end. I blinked and swallowed. “Toilet!” I wailed as I tensed immediately. Rover snorted and pointed to the door, and I rushed out to the station and into the little filly’s room, nearly hopping across the tracks.

Really, not the way I wanted to start the day. The pair met me outside, the hellhound looming over the other Sand Dogs. “I guess we’re even for me shooting half your face off?” I asked Gnarr, my face flaming. The pair looked at each other, and the Hellhound just gave an indifferent shrug. “What are the Enclave doing with your home?”

“Enslaving us. I know of at least half a dozen dens that have gone silent all across Equestria.” He pointed off to the southeast. “Our den lived in the old pony army base. More and more were taken, and then one day they returned all at once and with pegasi and controlled hounds and took over the base.”

A month ago. I thought about what I’d seen Lighthooves doing and my mane prickled. “Was there anything biological at that base? Something that could be used for a weapon?”

“It was a pony army base and struck heavily by the bombs. The only thing that remained were the bunkers filled with old stuff from the space center. Safe for us; we’re immune to the radiation. But not the Enclave.” He growled long and low at me. “I came hoping Rover could find a way to jam their control over us. Rover suggested I tell you.”

Me? Why would he tell... oh. “Hmmm... I am curious, I admit. Anything that Lighthooves was involved in interests me. I don’t know when I’ll be able to do something about it, though. I... crap!” I whirled towards the east (thank you, PipBuck compass). “Paradise! I completely forgot to clear Paradise of Red Eye’s forces! Damn it! I was just over on the east side, too!” I sat down hard, glowering at my oversight.

Gnarr rubbed his chin and chuckled. “Heh. Busy pony. Well, Rover can keep working. And if you get down that way, maybe you can stop them. Or I will, if Rover can figure something out.” I had to admit, someone solving their problems without

my help was refreshing! Why, if this kept up, then I'd be out of a job and could retire! Yeah, right. It took turning off my limbs just to get me to sit still.

"Well, I'll remember it. If Lighthooves wants something in that base, I'd like to know what," I said with a sigh and a smile. "Right now, I'd really... really like to just get home." My ears wilted a little as I gave a sheepish smile. "I've got my friends waiting for me."

"Very well. Do... not... break... legs... Pony..." Rover said as he tapped his metal claw against my nose with every word. "Pony breaks leg again and Rover start charging money to fix," he said with a scowl.

"Oh? So begging wouldn't work?" I threw myself at his feet. "Please fix me, Rover! Please please please please! Pleeeeeeeeeeeease!" I squealed as I beat my rear hooves and hugged his leg, sticking out my bottom lip.

Gnarr whimpered and covered his ears but Rover just grinned. "Whine all you want, Pony." And he tapped the side of his ear. "Dog ears cut out feedback."

"Rats." I pouted and then rose to my hooves. "Well, I'll have to think of something." I waved my hoof and smiled as I trotted for the exit.

Rover muttered behind me, "Dog bet Hound half a brahmin Pony is back in two days."

"Sure," Gnarr replied, and I glanced back to spot him shaking hands with Rover as I trotted for the entrance. "Just one question, though, Rover: Why do you keep talking like that?!"

After leaving the subway station, I met up with the morose striped pony. We were waiting for Lacunae to fly to the Miramare crater and return, but I really wanted to walk right now. After losing the use of two limbs, I reveled in full mobility.

I trotted in circles on my hooves, danced, pirouetted, and hopped. The response time was better than when I'd gone into Hightower! I popped out my fingers and worked each and every one. Even my breathing felt smoother. A heartbeat would be nice right about now, though. Could Rover make some kind of thudding implant that corresponded with pump rate? I'd have to ask him next time.

Rampage sat off to the side with her head low, pink eyes troubled as she muttered to herself. I looked in the direction Lacunae had gone and thought at her. "Is she

going to be okay?”

“I am not sure,” Lacunae thought back. “She is very distraught. She questions herself now. Her motivation and desires. . . her fears. . . her mistakes. . . everything.”

I walked up to Rampage and gave her flank a nudge. She glanced over, and I tried to give a consoling smile. “I know I have absolutely zero right to say this, but my advice is to try not to think about it.” Yes, listen to the queen of denial, because it’s worked so well for me. “After a few days with P-21 and Scotch, you’ll be able to stop worrying about who you are and just be yourself. Thinking about it will just drive you crazy.”

“Yeah. The question is, how do I stop?” Rampage asked.

“Do what Blackjack does,” Lacunae said in my mind. “Find the most dangerous place in the Wasteland and charge right in. Get shot up and so caught up in fighting for your life that you can avoid thinking about things.”

“I don’t. . . I. . . okay, I’m trying to do that less,” I muttered, my cheeks reddening as we waited in the broken and blasted street. I hoped the alicorn wasn’t loitering and enjoying the radiation. Her indignation answered my unvoiced suspicions. I sighed. “Ugh. . . sorry. Does talking about it help? Not talking about it?” I looked around for some red bars. “I can try and find something to attack us.” That at least made her smile a little.

“Honestly, helping you deal with all of your problems really helps me avoid dealing with mine,” she answered with a small smile. “I think it’s the doctor in me. Or maybe Softheart. Or. . . ugh. . . I don’t know. It’s like. . . for as long as I could remember, I had no idea who I was. Fuck toy. Loving partner. Reaper. Psychoshy was the same way once she realized Sanguine was just using her.”

“Whisper,” I corrected, and she rolled her eyes.

“Fine. Whisper. Big Daddy’s gonna love that.” She huffed and then looked off to the east. “Point is, she found out who she was supposed to be. . . or wanted to be. So yeah, I’m a little jealous. If it weren’t for you, she’d be just as miserable as me, and I could ignore my misery by helping her with hers.”

I patted her on the shoulder. “Hey. It could be worse. I nearly killed a helpless monster hellhound and felt guilty about it.” She looked at me, and I said, “In my defense, I couldn’t move and it had a penis the size of my leg. A girl’s got to be careful, right?” Okay, only a small shiver. Progress!

“Is that why you blasted it?”

"No," I said defensively as I stood and folded my forelegs behind my head. "It was more all the fangs and claws and... yeah. Big dick." I held my hooves out and her smile widened in amusement.

"So, if you can joke about it, are you over it? Did you work all that out?" she asked with a little smile.

"Sort of. I think I'm back in control of that. Mostly. Hope so." I was lying to myself. I'd always be a little on edge when it came to guys and sex, though maybe if I knew him really well, I'd be fine. "But I'm still trying. That matters, right?"

There was a purple flash announcing Lacunae's arrival. "Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked as she looked at Rampage and me.

"Penises," Rampage said simply, but smiling.

"Monster dog penises," I agreed.

The purple alicorn shook her head and sighed. Rampage grinned at me. "If only the Wasteland knew what Security talks about when she's not being a hero."

"You should try what she *thinks* about." Lacunae shivered.

"What? The plug was actually pretty cozy."

"La la la la la la... not listening to thoughts..." she began to say in my mind, so I thought exactly how things had *felt*. Lacunae went even redder and finally blurted aloud, "Sweet Celestia, stop thinking, Blackjack!" Rampage and I shared a laugh as the alicorn gave a dignified toss of her head. "You keep thinking that and you will be *walking* to Chapel!"

"Okay! Okay! Sorry!" I said, raising my hooves in apology. She nodded, trying to recoup her dignity as her horn began to flare with magic. Then I couldn't help myself. I added, "I wonder where Glory can get another one of those..."

The pair disappeared, and I blinked, looking around the now empty ruins. "Lacunae? Lacunae?!" I looked around for a blue bar. "Very funny, Lacunae!" I thought at her.

"La la la la la I suggest you start walking la la la la..." she thought back. Somewhere in my mind, the Goddess howled with laughter. Cheeks blazing, I turned south and started running.

It was midmorning by the time I reached Chapel, slurping down another gem. The

town now looked... well... like a town. The spire of the church was on its way to being repaired, and there were more structures being thrown up. I skirted the mine-field that they'd been kind enough to mark and trotted around the settlement proper and up the hill towards home. There had to be at least fifty or so ponies working down there. Most were fillies and colts, but I saw a pair of gray adult earth ponies heaving up boards while a filly unicorn hammered them in. Things still looked like a mess, though, and there was a rank stench like a cesspit that I didn't remember from the last time I was here.

I was so concerned by the reek that I halted and looked up towards the tantalizingly close roof of Star House. If there was something wrong, through... ugh. "Five more minutes won't kill me," I said as I turned and trotted towards the entrance to Chapel proper.

The machine gunner's nest was unoccupied, something that sent a frisson of fear along my spine. Had those adults enslaved the Crusaders or something? But as I trotted further in, I saw the hustle and bustle wasn't anything malicious. Still no explanation for why there were no guards, but this was just ponies cooperating to build a town.

Sorta.

Now that I was closer... There was a stockade going up, but it looked as if it'd been abandoned half way through, then restarted on the other side till it tumbled over. Four mobile home wagons were just parked in the middle of the street. The few small homes that had been here before seemed to be sprouting tumorous growths of planks and siding. The post office was almost buried beneath crates, boxes, and building materials scavenged from the manor. Most disgusting of all was the ditch running along the road, which had been turned into an open sewer.

Ghoul children and young ponies were making a game of construction, which was good for a fort, I supposed, but bad for anything you actually had to live in. I spotted the young zebra Majina running around with other fillies and colts. The adults, who seemed to have a better understanding of construction, were all throwing up their own shanties. Sekashi and Harpica stood by as I entered and surveyed the scene in shock.

"What the hay is going on?" I muttered as I stared at the chaos.

"Ah. The guardian has returned," Sekashi said as she approached with the nervous ghoulish pegasus. The minty-colored mare was hovering in the air and kept looking over at her undead charges, who were probably acting like real children for the first

time in two hundred years. “You have had some adventures, faced great perils, met mighty champions?”

“You can’t imagine,” I replied, and the zebra chuckled merrily.

“Oh, there’s been lots of imagining, indeed.” The mare grinned and gave my flank a nudge. “But what matters is that you are well and happy, for how can you be happy if you are not well? And how can you care about your health if you are not happy?” Okay. Zebra weirdness. Gotta love it.

“Well things sure look busy here... and smelly...” I coughed, backing away from the ditch.

“Ah, yes. No no, don’t put that in your mouth!” Harpica blurted to a filly sucking on an empty cola bottle. “The Crusaders have been a little... *overenthusiastic* about fixing up Chapel after the attack,” the minty blue ghoul said nervously. “I’m not really sure if they’re doing any good... ah... please don’t run!”

And then there was a solid thud against my rear end and I jerked, spinning around and looking at the stunned white blank. She sat there, swaying limply a moment before she shook her head and then frowned up at me. “Oh. Hello Boo!” Her pale eyes narrowed, and her frown grew more severe. “Um... I missed you? Sorry I left, but... um... yeah...” Her face could have been carved from plaster. I reached over, popped out my fingers, and started to scratch her ears nervously. She pursed her lips, clearly not satisfied as she leaned towards my face even more. Her eyes then grew large and watery as her lips quivered.

“Here,” a stallion said softly behind me, tapping my shoulder with something in a wax paper wrapper. My magic lifted it up and passed the cherry Fancy Buck Cake to the blank, and instantly she perked up and seized it in her mouth with a happy little squeal. She turned away but paused and looked back at me over her shoulder. Then she darted back and nuzzled my cheek before trotting off with her prize. “You spoiled her, you know,” the stallion said with a quiet little chuckle.

“Yeah, I guess I...” I said with a smile, but that slowly vanished as I turned and looked back at the speaker. The shaggy blue mane was the same, as was the lighter blue coat. His frame was gaunt, though, and he sat as if a strong wind might blow him over. More than that, though, the eyes that looked back at me were those of a stranger: calm, serene, and no longer looking at the world like it was his enemy. “P-21?” Even seeing his cutie mark, I wasn’t entirely sure it was him.

“Nice to see you again, Blackjack. I heard you’ve been busy. Did you find what you

needed?" he asked with a kind smile. The smile of a pony who had done just that.

"I... yeah. Some. I think," I said as I rubbed my mane. "I shouldn't have run off like that. I should have stayed and-" But he put his hoof to my lips.

"Don't start with that already. You did what you did. All that matters is if you're better for it or not," he said, patting my shoulder with his hoof. "And your plan worked. The Harbingers didn't follow us far, and we haven't seen them at all here. You didn't miss much besides two or three days of detoxification." He gave a little shiver. "Finally done with the treatments..."

"And you feel better?" I asked in concern.

"Of course not. I feel like I've been scraped raw inside and outside. Glory says the lifetime of drug abuse in 99 probably did a number on my lifespan; if we hadn't been retired, we probably would have been dropping in a few years anyway. But I don't have... the tension. The craving. The need's gone. It's like a huge weight off my back and off my mind. I can finally think clearly again." He then looked over at an approaching filly with heaps of scrolls poking from her saddlebags. "So I've been focusing on better things."

"Can you believe it, Daddy? That guy's building his house right by that septic trench they call a toi-" Scotch Tape silenced as she saw me sitting there, then let out a squeal, "Blackjack!" She charged up the road at me, shedding rolls of paper right and left before hugging me fiercely. Immediately afterwards, she started coughing.

"Careful," P-21 warned. I picked up one of the scrolls with my magic and carefully unrolled it. It showed four toilets and a shower, along with some extensive plumbing.

"I'm fine..." she rasped, then smiled at me, and her eyes shot open in alarm. "Blackjack! Don't look at that!" She threw her forelegs around it, yanked it out of the air, and hugged it to her chest. I floated out another one and opened it up to look at some kind of house. She eeped and grabbed that one too. "Don't look at my drawings! They're horrible." Another bout of coughing made me stop.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Glory says it's some bug I picked up when she put in the new lungs. Got a wicked scar though, see?" She lifted her chin and pointed her hoof at a straight, raw red line that started under her chin and went all the way down to the collar of her utility barding. I tried not to think of Sanguine leading a little blank copy of Scotch away.

"It's post-operative pneumonia and you should be in bed," P-21 said firmly. Scotch

blew a raspberry. "I promised Glory I'd keep you from overexerting yourself. You still need a few days and several more healing potions to get the infection out. Enervation right now would kill you." Good thing I hadn't taken her with me...

"But what are these?" I asked as I floated one of the papers she'd dropped over to us.

Scotch Tape fidgeted as she looked down at her forehooves. "Just some... you know... ideas."

"Ideas?" I asked, opening the scroll to look at... some sort of diagram of... something.

"For the town. Since I was sick and couldn't do anything," Scotch said, then gestured around. "I mean have you seen this place, Blackjack? Everypony's working and throwing up whatever they want. Half of it's gonna be falling down in weeks, if not days. They've got a ditch filled with poo running through the middle of town! And the money from the manor won't last forever." She reached over and looked down at the plan in her hooves. "I always liked thinking up ideas in 99... but I was in Maintenance. We never built anything new. We just focused on keeping everything how it was."

I thought about how I'd felt when I'd played the contrabass for the first time and was wondering if maybe I might have had a different life if I'd been allowed to play. "Well, maybe this will be how you get your cutie mark. Maybe your destiny *is* to bring plumbing back to the Wasteland."

"I'm gonna have a toilet on my hind end the rest of my life..." Scotch Tape pouted as she slumped.

"So why don't you try and build one of these designs?" I asked. "One that's not a toilet?"

She huffed softly. "'Cause nopony'll listen to me. Everypony's fixed on doing their own thing and nopony's thinking about what we're gonna need. We're gonna need a doctor. Someplace for fixing things. Need to move the minefield further out. Need to get that stockade finished and matched up and plated with scrap and reinforced with dirt or something. Need a place to store food and maybe a mess hall. Need to make bunkhouses for the Crusaders. We're gonna need a school. Ya can't just throw a story or two on top of a house!" She sighed as she looked down at the paper. "Besides, I don't know nothing about real engineering. I just fix up toilets."

I patted her mane. "Scotch, you know more about building and fixing things than

anypony here. You've been training to do maintenance work since you could play. Heck, I bet you had a steam assembly for your first toy. If this place is going to be a real town, it's going to need ponies like you."

"Yeah," she replied, but I could tell her heart wasn't quite in it. "Maybe I can talk to Charity. I know she'd be glad to have some of this stuff organized." For some reason, the name of the filly shopkeeper set my mane on end. Did I owe her money? I *thought* I was all paid up, but... wait? Had I paid for that Wild Pegasus she sent me on my birthday yet? Shoot! I didn't know for sure...

"Anyway, I need to get going. I really, really need to see Glory," I said as I rose to my hooves and backed away. The pair looked at each other with worried expressions.

P-21 said evenly, "Maybe we should go up with you, Blackjack. Glory's... well... kind of upset."

I sighed and smiled. "No, it's okay. She has a right to be." I turned and looked up in the direction of Star House. "Actually there's a whole lot I need to talk with her about. I've got a whole lot of apologizing to do." For running off, for making her worry, and other things. "We've got a ton of making up ahead. And I'm going to enjoy every minute with her." He frowned in worry, looking more like the P-21 I remembered. I rose to my hooves. "Where are Rampage and Lacunae?"

"Well, Lacunae said something about a dress when we saw her this morning. And Rampage..." Scotch trailed off as looked up at the graveyard on the hillside above the town. A red-maned pony stood out amid the gray-green grass and the white headstones. She was at her daughter's grave, if I guessed right. "Is she okay?"

"No. She's not," I said softly, shaking my head. "She found out something about herself, and it's bothering her terribly." I patted Scotch's head. "Just be careful with her. She needs our friendship a lot right now. It might be the only thing that'll help her."

P-21 looked at his daughter and stroked her mane. "Maybe we should go see her. Make sure she's okay. Why don't you go get Precious?" The dragon filly'd help if something set the Angel off.

"If I can get her off that stack of bottlecaps," Scotch said with a roll of her eyes as she turned and trotted into the post office.

The blue stallion looked at me in concern. "Be careful. With Glory. I mean... I tried to explain it but... she's really upset with you right now."

I sighed and then nodded. "Yeah. We've got issues to clear up. I mean, leaving like

I did was horrible for her.”

“No, I mean what you did with—” he started to say with a concerned frown, but I froze.

I could feel the horror creeping up on me. My mane crawled on my scalp as I looked left and right. A little pink pony in my head pulled out a spyglass and searched for the dreaded menace. Perhaps I could plead poverty... but no, it didn't matter. She could sense my purse and was coming for it! All my wealth would be hers! And yes, there she was, stepping out of the post office! She looked at me. I looked back, and her eyes narrowed like a hellhound about to go in for the kill. I leapt straight into the air, turned, and with all the power in my cybernetic limbs I raced away, laughing madly. She wouldn't get me! Not this time!

The yellow filly's words reached my ears, but I paid them no mind as I fled. “What's her problem?”

I entered Star House with just a little bit of apprehension. The place was clean and orderly and, moreover, it looked lived in. I heard the sound of a faucet running in the kitchen and spotted the blue pegasus filling up a pot. Her rainbow mane was tied back behind her head with a white cloth. It didn't matter if she looked like a young Ministry Mare in her prime or my gray beauty; she was Glory. My imaginary heartbeat picked up as I slowly walked towards her. Suddenly the troubles of the last several days were nothing, and I couldn't keep from smiling. She turned and looked at me, her rose eyes popping wide, and then she smiled with an oddly dismissive expression. “Oh, hey Blackjack. What's up?”

Huh? I furrowed my brows as she set the pot on the stove and then took off the rag and shook out her spectral mane. “Um. Hi Glory. P-21 said you wanted to talk to be about something that upset you?” This wasn't quite what I expected; she smiled again and approached. Oddly enough, my mane picked now of all times to get itchy. “Whatever it was, I'm sorry. I'm just so glad to see-“

She silenced me with a hoof to my lips, smiling up at me before her expression turned concerned. “Now. Before anything happens, I want to know how you are. Any injuries that need treating? Radiation? Taint? Anything like that?”

“No, actually.” I smiled and looked down at my foreleg. “I was just at Rover's. He fixed up my legs just fine, and the talismans...”

But again she silenced me as she put her hooves around my neck and gazed into my eyes. “What about emotionally? Are you better now than when you left?”

“Oh, absolutely. I was... I was in a really bad way there for a while but... well... I found some help too.” And I got shot up a lot and died again, but I could tell her about that later.

“So in other words you’re in good shape? Tip top?” she asked in a voice that almost approached sultry and made my hindquarters quiver in anticipation. This was damage control I could handle!

“Yup. One hundred and ten percent,” I said as I smiled goofily.

Her legs tightened around my neck as she said softly, “Good...” And then she hugged me close, feeling soft and firm and wonderful. But as I lifted my legs to hold her, I became aware of a little pink pony in my head waving a red flag, a white unicorn waving her hooves in alarm, and a horrified-looking yellow pegasus pressing her hooves to her mouth as Glory whispered in my ear. “A champion in bed, huh?”

And then her wings snapped and she hauled me into the air. “Blackjack!” she snapped, and with more power than I knew any pegasus could muster, threw me clear across the room and smashed me into the far wall. I dropped to the floor with a crash, the five little ponies in my head equally rattled. Somewhere, for some reason, I imagined the Goddess looking on, munching on popcorn. Glory flew over with tears streaking her cheeks and yelled down at me, “You... You... fucking *cunt*!”

Welcome home, Blackjack.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

50. Selfishness

"I am going for a hooficure and that is that!"

"You are not going-"

"I am! I am!"

I have to admit, after dying (again), taking all day to get back, and having more wires and tubes in my body than anypony had a right to, smacking into the far wall upside down before crashing to the floor headfirst and lying there in a heap wasn't exactly how I envisioned my reunion with Glory. It wasn't just that she *looked* like Rainbow Dash; she had every bit the strength and vigor of Rainbow Dash in her youth. Glory herself seemed equally shocked as she hovered there, forehooves pressed to her mouth and rose eyes wide.

"Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Are you okay?" she asked as she stared across the room at me.

"Glory, you called me a cunt and launched me across the room. Now you're asking if I'm okay?" I groaned as I rolled over and sat up. "Really, what pony would say yes?" I said as I shook the fuzz out of my head. "What's going on, Glory?"

Apparently something really bad, from how quickly her face darkened. She ripped the rag off her head and threw it at me. "I hated seeing you run away like that, even though I understood that you were doing it for us. I was terrified for you. Do you realize that? I didn't know if you were alive or dead. I kept waiting for a broadcast or something telling me you were okay... and when I finally got one, what did I hear? Champion in bed... Champion in *fucking* bed!" she shouted down at me. "I didn't go through all that just so you could go off and... and... fuck whomever you wanted!"

I blinked several times as I looked up at her. "That's what all this is about? That I had sex with a stallion while I was gone?"

She screwed up her face and snarled in disgust. "Yes!" she shouted, starting to pace back and forth in the air. "I shouldn't be surprised, I guess. Everypony I care about always leaves me. Mom did it. Dusk almost killed me. You took off twice, once to kill yourself and once to screw that guy!" She grit her teeth and clenched her eyes shut. "I get it. There's something wrong with me that you don't want to deal with, but couldn't you have told me first? Not broadcast to the entire Wasteland 'I

just banged a guy and he was sooooo much better than Glory!’ How could you?”

I just stared up at her. “The entire Wasteland?”

“Well, I can’t be sure that they heard it in Las Pegasus, but for the last two days I’ve been enduring the smirk of everypony in Chapel with a radio!” she said as she rolled her eyes. “For all I know, my father heard that broadcast!” She groaned as she covered her face in her hooves. “My life is even more over than it was. I should just turn myself over to the Enclave. ‘Here I am, please try me for treason, again, and then shoot me so I don’t have to listen to all the innuendo and snickers!’” she said in a hysterical, sing song voice.

I sighed and pulled myself to my hooves. “Glory. . . I didn’t do what I did with Stygius for the sex.” Then I gave a small smile as I rolled my eyes a little. “Okay, maybe a little. It was pretty good. But—“

I think her throw must have given me brain damage... more than just the tumors and like. Five little ponies in my head covered their faces all at once and I heard the Goddess chuckle darkly. Glory’s eyes popped wide as if I’d been the one to throw her.

“Pretty good? Pretty good! Blackjack, I am going to spay you!” she shrieked, and then she was on me, kicking and stomping me with her hooves. If she’d been the old Glory, this would have been cute. The new Glory had some serious power behind those kicks! She pummeled me good and hard, and I raised my metal legs and tried to protect my head and midriff.

I remembered how Goldenblood had broken Fluttershy’s heart calling out the wrong name when they’d been together. At the time, I’d thought it’d just been Fluttershy being oversensitive. It never really occurred to me that sex might be a serious matter like that. I knew love was serious. Abuse was serious. Rape and coercion for sex were serious. But sex itself was just a means to an orgasm.

Glory, it was now becoming very clear, definitely did not have the same opinion. Then again, though, I was her first mare and serious partner. This was the first time anypony had really fucked up a relationship with her and she was pissed. And while old Glory would have probably beaten me up with big words, new Glory was expressing herself far more directly. I tried to get a word out as she sobbed and raged and stomped me with all four hooves at once.

Then I heard Scotch Tape yell, “Hey, Blackjack. How many times did you have sex with my mom?” I blinked and looked over at the door where P-21 stood with

Scotch Tape beside him. Glory just blinked and stared at the filly, as if processing the question was breaking something in her head.

“Now is really not the time to be reminiscing about Stable 99, Scotch!” I called out.

“Actually, I think it is,” P-21 said as he closed the door behind him. Glory stared at him, her pupils contracting as her rainbow mane seemed to frizz in growing stress. “How many times?” he asked, cool and calm, as Glory hovered above me.

I looked from one to the other, then spoke slowly and carefully. “A dozen times, give or take, I think. Maybe more. I mean, we were on the same shift and stuff,” I said, feeling as though one wrong word would shatter my relationship with Glory forever.

“I know. I remember peeking in on you two once or twice. Did you love my mom, Blackjack?” Scotch asked; her tone said that she knew my answer.

“No. I mean, she was nice but. . .” I trailed off, not wanted to offend.

“And did you have sex with Daisy and Marmalade?” P-21 asked, making me feel oddly embarrassed.

“Yeah. Like I said, we were on the same shift.” I looked at the confused Glory and gave a sheepish little shrug. “Usually with Marm, though. Daisy was always way too rough.” Marm had always been a good lick. If it hadn’t been for Daisy, who knows what could have been?

“In fact, Blackjack, can you count how many ponies you’ve been with in 99?” Scotch Tape asked firmly. Glory backed off and sat down, looking at me as if she’d never seen me before.

I hesitated, counting them up. “Twenty or so. I mean, I wasn’t like Palette,” I said defensively and glanced at Glory. “I mean, she was rutting any second she could!” I’d hoped for a smile, but instead I got a wary look.

“Not counting males?” P-21 threw in, pushing back his wide-brimmed black hat to look at me skeptically.

“Oh, right. Probably about twenty or so of them, too,” I said with a growing blush at how the cyan pegasus stared. P-21 himself showed no animosity despite the fact he’d been one of that number at least once, and maybe other times too. I just didn’t keep males straight in 99. One a month for six or seven years. . .

“Yeah. I had three or so myself,” Scotch Tape said firmly. Glory gaped at the filly, her final brain fuse completely blown. I couldn’t see why. When you were a filly, a little

nuzzle and lick was inescapable. It was one of the few fun games to play, seeing if you could do it without people catching you. “Did you love any of them?”

“No. Some of them I didn’t even like all that much,” I said softly as I lowered my eyes. “Not like Mom and Steam. Not like. . . how I feel for Glory.”

P-21 took off his hat and, with a freaky bit of earth pony skill, lobbed it so it landed on Scotch Tape’s head. The hat stayed up for just a second, then swallowed the top half of her noggin. He approached Glory and gently touched her shoulder, making the pegasus jump. “This is what we’ve been trying to explain to you, Glory. When we said sex doesn’t matter, we didn’t mean *love*. Mares in 99 had sex with lots of different mares. Kids did. Adults did. As long as it wasn’t forced, abusive, incestuous, or disruptive, sure. For a lot of mares it was all they had to look forward to. But it wasn’t love. BJ didn’t do what she did with that guy because she loved him and stopped loving you. She did it because she needed to.”

Glory looked at him, then at me lying there, my new legs already dinged up from her blows. “I. . . I don’t. . . I can’t. . . oh!” She snapped her wings, flying up to the stairs and into her bedroom.

“*That*. . . she was upset about *that*?” I muttered, trying to wrap my head around it. It was crazy to be upset about sex. That was like. . . like being upset because somepony stole your carrot chips in the cafeteria.

“It was hard for us to get, too,” P-21 said sympathetically. “We tried to explain it, but she was so wound up she just wouldn’t listen. And there *were* plenty of other things. The stress of knowing you were in danger but she was stuck here caring for us. The frustration of not being with you. I think these last four days were hardest on her.”

“You were screaming, puking, and pooping yourself for two whole days, Daddy,” Scotch Tape said as she pulled the hat off her head and held it in her hooves.

“Yeah, but that was just physical,” he said dismissively. “Glory’s trials have been of the heart, and that’s always harder. The body can endure anything if the heart is at peace.” He caught Scotch Tape’s uneasy furrowing of her brows. “What?”

“I know you’re trying hard to do the father thing, Dad, but could you be a little less... erm... pithy?” Scotch asked with a crooked little smile. “You don’t have to sound all wise all the time.” She set the wide brimmed black hat back on his head, and he returned her smile.

“Right. Sorry. New to this,” he said awkwardly before looking at me and continuing, “She’s also afraid of turning into Rainbow Dash.”

I'd forgotten about that. "Is she? Turning into Rainbow Dash, I mean," I asked in worry.

He shook his head. "Lacunae doesn't think so. It's more likely it's all in her head... but that makes it worse. Lacunae checked her memory and didn't find any magical thoughts stuffed in there. Just her own fear."

I dragged myself to my hooves and started up the stairs. "I need to talk to her. I have to make it right with her. Nothing else matters till things are right with her again."

P-21 looked on in worry. "It may not be possible to make things right, Blackjack. She may never be with you again, like that."

I snorted, more in disgust with myself than him. "I don't care about that! I care that she's hurt and upset," I said back down the stairs at the pair. "I am not going to let her and I end like Fluttershy and Goldenblood." If I couldn't be trusted with her heart, then at least I'd try to be worthy of her friendship.

Somehow.

I reached her bedroom; she'd left the door open a crack, and I could hear her sobbing within. I pushed the door open and saw her sitting on the bed, facing away from the door with her head bowed. Slowly I walked around the bed, trying to think of what to say at a time like this. I sat beside her, but she turned away from me.

This was stupid. We just sat there together, staring at our hooves. One of us had to say something, but words just weren't coming out right. As in, not at all. I kept running ideas through my head: apologize, say I was sorry, kiss her, or leave her alone? None seemed particularly adequate, appropriate, or helpful. Glory couldn't even bring herself to look at me, let alone talk.

I felt a hole opening up deeper and deeper inside me. I was going to lose her, and all because I didn't even know how to talk anymore. But what could I possibly say to her? What could anypony say? Glory clenched her eyes shut, slow tears leaking as she remained turned away from me. Slowly, with a numb sensation through out my entire body, I made my way back out of the room. I couldn't stay with her, couldn't bear to go back downstairs, either. Instead, I returned to my room, not bothering to close either door. Sitting on the bed, I damned myself again.

Then my eyes fell on the contrabass in the corner. I stared for the longest time at the dark, polished wood. Then I rose to my hooves and staggered over. The finish

was smooth and warm beneath my touch as I ran my finger along its – along *her* neck. “Hey, Octavia,” I murmured as I shifted the instrument and stood behind it. “Can you help me out here? I kinda messed up big time. Please? I hurt the pony I love.” I plucked one string with a finger, drawing out a sour note from the instrument and a little laugh from me. “Yeah, I know, right? That’s stupid, even for me, and I’m the high princess of stupid.”

Slowly, I started to play. Would she hear? Would she listen? Would she care? I tried not to think of anything. I simply let the music play however it came out. No, not music; just notes.

I wasn’t exactly sure how long I played, but when I dared to open my eyes, I saw Glory no more than three feet from me. She stared at the blue starry comforter on the bed, then glanced back at me, then quickly looked away once more. Her rainbow mane fell across her eyes, her expression reminding me of that mare I’d found hiding in that tiny space back in the weather station. No matter how her body changed, she’d always be Glory.

I ran the bow against the strings. I knew it would sound beautiful, because it came from the pony who’d had part of her soul locked within. “Please help me apologize, Octavia. Help me show her how much I love her.” I slowly drew the bow, and a low, soft note rose from them. I closed my eyes and gave up control of my hoof to the instrument. It was astonishing how good it felt to simply give in and yield to another that I trusted, to simply stop struggling and be at peace.

The notes rose and fell, searching for a melody and not finding it. They rolled out high and fast and then dropped low to slow, full notes as the bow sawed back and forth. They skipped and jangled in frustration. One thing was for sure: no matter what happened between Glory and I, Octavia wouldn’t be left in the corner of my bedroom. She deserved to be around other ponies and inspire them to learn how to play. I’d give her to the Crusaders so she’d never be lonely again.

Finally, I looked up and saw Glory looking back at me as the sad music played. The eyes might have been different, but the feelings were the same. Her love might have been bound tightly, but it hadn’t suffocated yet. I set the bow aside and patted the wood paneling, then sat before Glory. The cyan pegasus rubbed my mane and asked in a tiny voice, “Do you hate me for bringing you back? Is that... why...”

“No. I don’t,” I said. I shook my head. “I did, for a while. A little stupid selfish part of me did, but that wasn’t why I was with Stygius,” I said. “Actually it’s not so little. I didn’t want to face it. What I am. When I died, I really thought that that was it, and

it wasn't such a bad way to go. Then... then I was back. And... different." I looked out the window with a sigh. "I didn't take the time I needed. I should have waited a week, a month, even... learning about being a cyberpony and making sure I was really over it. I was trying to run myself right into the ground. First with LittlePip... then with Sanguine... and then all on my own." I closed my eyes and placed my hooves in hers. "I promised you I'd never, ever, try to kill myself again. I meant to keep that promise. I did. But I'm afraid some part of me was trying to do just that. I was doing everything I could to tear myself apart."

That was the easy part. My eyes met hers. "I did... bad things, too, while I was gone. I came across a squad of Enclave that tried to fight me, and I just tore them to pieces." I opened my mouth and closed it again, clenching my eyes closed a moment. I had to tell her, but somehow the words got all tangled in my throat. Finally, I managed to get them out. "I... think I hurt your sister pretty bad too."

"What? What do you mean..." Glory said in a tiny, horrified little voice.

I sniffed and shook my head. "They attacked me... and I fought back... but I was completely out of control. You were right... not wanting me left alone." I grimaced, feeling a stabbing pain where my heart used to be. "I hurt her. I would have killed her if... if I hadn't run out of power." I shivered as I felt tears run down my cheek. "And if Lightning Dancer was there... I probably killed her, too."

The haunted look on Glory's face had her staring past me a moment. She focused once more, but her voice still trembled. "But Dusk is okay? You didn't kill her, right?"

"She was alive when I left her. I told the other Enclave survivors I was with to take her to the Skyport and I seriously doubt they'd disobey my order then. But honestly... I don't know if she's okay." Glory started to tremble as she curled up and hugged herself. I couldn't blame her; like this, she couldn't even go to the Skyport and find out. I tried to touch her, but she smacked my hoof away and curled up even tighter. I just sat there, staring at my stupid metal fingers. I could still see them clutching Dusk's head and slowly crushing and twisting.

She'd leave now. Hurting her was bad enough, inexcusable enough. But her family, too? I bowed my head, waiting for her to leave. "You were right. I should have stayed with you. Without you... without my friends..." The lame words fell from my lips before I ended with a whisper like a prayer, "I'm so sorry." I heard her start to move and clenched my eyes shut, not bearing to see her go.

But she didn't. And when I chanced a glance, she wore a pained expression as she looked at the floor. "Something else happened, didn't it?"

“How... how’d you know?”

A tiny, mirthless smile appeared on her lips. “I didn’t. But I’ve learned by now that, no matter how bad I think things might be, I ought to double it when you’re involved.” She took a slow breath, as if bracing herself. “What else happened?” she asked as she put her hoof on mine.

She didn’t forgive me. Didn’t excuse me. But she didn’t leave, either. I took several ragged breaths, fighting off the urge to sob as I stared at her hooves, feeling her tremble. “I... I wish it ended there. I was attacked again... Harbingers... And then I came across some scavengers. I thought they were with the Harbingers. I killed two... crippled a filly... Thought I killed her, actually. Almost did.”

Glory didn’t say anything. Her eyes were closed as she wept. But she kept her hooves on mine. As long as she was still here, there was hope. Please, let there be hope...

I moved along while I still could. “I lost it completely, then. I mean... I was *totally* gone. I would have been dead except that I found a place that helped put me back together again. That got me to finally stop running from my problems and face them. To try and deal with my guilt and my shame.”

“Did it work?” she finally asked in a tiny, squeaky voice. “Are you... better?”

“Kinda, actually. A little. It was a step towards better,” I said with a mirthless smile. “It felt like months the machines kept me locked in my own head. Got me to finally admit... admit that I’m not okay, Glory. I mean, I know I say I’m not all the time, but I’m really *not*. Being what I am was harder than just carrying EC-1101 around. Harder than dying of taint. I was okay with dying. It was a cowardly way out. But coming back as this machine...” I shook my head, sniffing as I stared at my metal hooves.

“And here I thought the sex part was the worst. Why... how...?” she murmured with a blush.

I sighed and wiped my tears away. “Stygius... he was just trying to mount me. He was a good pony, though. And I needed Stygius to try and deal with what happened on the *Seahorse*. To be able to... to be a mare... a pony... a person. It was just sex. Good sex, but sex. I didn’t love him, and he didn’t love me. It was a way to prove to myself that I could control myself enough to be able to get better.” I swallowed and said with every bit of sincerity I could muster, “It never really occurred to me that you’d be upset. Rampage tried to warn me, but I just didn’t listen.”

“Did he... come here with you?” Glory asked in dread before giving a snotty little sniff.

“No. He had to go home. With Whisper... er... Psychoshy,” I said, and Glory blinked at me in confusion. I filled her on what I had learned about Psychoshy, Glory’s eyes widening in surprise as I elaborated on the other pegasus’s lineage. It turned out that I didn’t have quite as much elaboration to do as I thought, as Glory had already picked up most of it from somewhere (Rampage?), but talking about it served as a nice digression from our own problems.

“But... Whisper?” she asked skeptically when I finished.

“Really. Whisper is what Fluttershy and Goldenblood wanted to name Psycho. I saw it in a recording.” I gave a little nod, glad that my digression had moved us to safer ground.

Glory finally grinned a little. “Oh Celestia... that’s a horrible name for her,” she said with a sniff. “Is she happy, though?” Was that a little wistful envy I heard in her voice?

“She’s taking a risk. A big one. But I think so. It’s a chance for her.” I looked up at her and brushed her rainbow mane back.

“Well... good for her...” she muttered.

I sighed, slumping. Enough about the epic failures of Blackjack. “How have your last three days been?” I asked, hoping this would be a safe change in direction. Instead, her lips curled into a frown and she looked away.

“I’m... I don’t know...” she said as she looked at her hooves. “Helping P-21 and Scotch was... good for me. I didn’t have to think about things at first. But by yesterday...” She grit her teeth and shook her head. “I don’t want to whine about it.”

“Hey, I can’t be the only pony in the Wasteland who gets to complain,” I said, giving her a little nudge. “P-21 said you think you’re turning into Rainbow Dash?”

Her face twisted in a scowl and she said in a tone of disgust, “It’s this... this *body*. If that damned blue weed had turned me into anypony else, I’d be fine. Annoyed, but fine. But there are pictures of Rainbow Dash in every single history textbook teaching us about how she abandoned us and her many crimes against the pegasus race. I didn’t come to the surface as a dashite. I came as a member of the Volunteer Corps. I wanted to help, but as Enclave. Not run out on my people like she did.”

She slipped off the bed and began to turn, looking at herself. "But this body is... ugh! I was never an athlete! That was Dusk's thing. She was the one who wanted to pull off a rainboom. I wanted to be a doctor. I studied. The only thing that kept me from getting all fat was that I'd skip meals when hitting the books. But this body!" She grimaced in disgust. "I wake up and I need to... to do a hundred wing pushups! I could only do one before. I want to go for a thirty mile flight! I sit here and feel... twitchy. I planned on shoving you, not throwing you clear across the room." She rubbed her face and shook her head. "Everything about this body says it's not me."

"I can relate," I said as popped out my fingers and wiggled them at her.

She gave a ghost of a smile. "Yeah. I guess I know better how you feel." She rubbed her face with a wing. "I also... I dunno... I sometimes feel like I'm losing myself. Like I really am turning into Rainbow Dash. Lacunae says it's all in my head, but the Joke changed my body. What if it changed my brain, too?" She shook her head hard and sighed. "It'd be different if I could blame someone for making me this way, but it was a stupid magic plant!" She went silent and her gaze dropped back to the floor. "Do... do you..."

"I wish I'd known you were doing it, but if I had I would have told you not to and you would have done it anyway. 'Cause you'd never let me die if you could prevent it, just like I wouldn't let you die if there was a way for me to save you." I shook my head. "It took a pre-war brain therapy thingy to finally get me to admit how missed up I was. And how much more help and headshrinking I need."

"So sex with him was some sort of therapy?" she asked with an arch of her brow. "That's not how sex therapy is supposed to work, Blackjack."

I sighed and rolled my eyes a little. "For the Wasteland, it worked okay. I stopped wanting to kill males for looking at my hind end. I think I can handle that now." I just wish I'd understood what that would mean for Glory.

"I guess so. A pony could do some great business being a psychologist in the Wasteland." She rubbed her puffy eyes. "So... what happened next? After him?"

"Then we got to Hightower, and..." I shook my head. "It was rough. Three ponies died." Myself included, I didn't add, and I'd thump Rampage and Lacunae if they said otherwise. "We leveled the building." Then I smiled, "But we also helped a pony who needed it. We stopped a scumbag ghoul from betraying the rest of his town. We managed to do what needed to be done. I still feel guilty, though. I feel like everything I've done since I got back was wrong."

“And I still feel mad at you for leaving. I know I said I was okay with it. . . but really, ten minutes after you left, I wanted to chase after you. But I couldn’t leave P-21 and Scotch Tape. . . so I settled with being angry you left and worried that you weren’t coming back. Then that broadcast. . . oh that stupid broadcast.” She groaned and rubbed her face. “Then I couldn’t shake the feeling that you had left us. . . that you left me. And it was Mom going all over again. . . only worse.”

Now I sighed and stretched out towards her, giving her cheek the tiniest nuzzle. “I still love you. Even if I am a lousy pony.”

“No, you’re not.” She sighed and gave a grumpy little huff. “Well, okay. Maybe a little. And I’m still mad at you.” Shaking her head, she glared at me. “I mean... Blackjack... part of me wants to hug you, part wants to kill you, and part wants to run for the hills and never look back. You hurt my sister!”

“To be fair, she and the rest of her team were trying to kill me,” I said quickly, “and I didn’t know it was her at the time.” She still frowned, troubled. “I won’t blame you if you do any of those. Even if I prefer the first option.”

“Oh no. No sweet talking, Blackjack. You are still in big trouble. I’m still really angry at you,” she huffed. Still, I smiled at her; Glory – who’d had her cutie mark burned off both her flanks and barely said three cross words – was angry.

“Well, you could always just spank me till you feel better and I wise up,” I said in a casual, joking tone. Oddly, it made her ears stand straight up and her eyes widen. Then she started to blush. . . hard. “What?”

“Nothing!” she said quickly, but she sure wasn’t acting like it was nothing. She met my eyes and went even redder. She pressed her hooves to her mouth, as if physically silencing herself. I just looked at her with a cocked brow. She pulled away, walking to one of the windows. “Look. . . can we just drop it for now? I need to think and. . . try to decide what I’m going to do.” She sighed and looked back at me. “So. . . what else happened?”

I told her everything, with the exceptions of me dying again and trying to pull myself together yesterday and the Goddess in my brain. From what I learned about Goldenblood to Psalm being in my dreams to Hightower and EC-1101 to Project Eternity to getting fixed up. She listened, a little distracted, but I couldn’t blame her for that. She gasped at my description of the Warden, laughed a little when I told her about Xanthe, and commiserated when I told her about Graves’s and Snips’s deaths.

When I finished, she looked at me, her expression equally worried and curious.

“What are you going to do next? I mean, Shadowbolt Tower. . . I can’t think of any way to get there. It’s all controlled by the Enclave Military. Or are you going to go after the bomb? Go to that Hellhound base? Deal with the Harbingers?”

I thought a moment, then rose and flopped back on the bed. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She blinked in confusion. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

“I mean that some ponies died and I nearly got a whole lot *more* ponies killed by chasing after EC-1101. I don’t care where it wants me to go next; it’s not worth more deaths. So for the immediate future, I am going to do. . . nothing.” I folded my forelegs behind my head. . . hmm, metal limbs really didn’t make the most comfortable pillows. “I am going to stay here till we work things out. Till P-21 and Scotch Tape are better. Till Rampage can get the help she needs.” And then I frowned at the ceiling. “And if the Harbingers show up, I am going to show them exactly what I did at Yellow River.” Okay. If dozens of them showed up, I’d have to do something else, but for right now. . . no. I was going to stay right here and make sure my friends were taken care of.

For a change, it wasn’t going to be about me.

I trotted downstairs, taking in the chaos. Things were quite a mess; I’d guessed Glory had tried to clean up some while caring for P-21 and Scotch, but it still looked like a hurricane had blown through. There were dirty plates and cans of food all over the kitchen, and some things were stacked in boxes. P-21 and Scotch sat at the kitchen table, with the filly glaring at a sheet of paper while her lips moved the pencil around to draw on it. P-21 looked up at me with a tired smile, glanced up in the direction of my bedroom, then back at me in concern.

“Well?” he asked as he bopped a wad of paper back and forth between his hooves.

“She’s upset,” I said. “She’s not sure about. . . us. . .” Scotch harrumphed and spat the pencil aside.

“I told her she should just paddle your butt till you stopped being dumb,” the olive filly said as she looked at her sketch critically. “But Daddy said you’d just enjoy it.”

I rolled my eyes. “It happened one time!” I snorted, with a blush. Then I frowned and thought a moment. “Twice. . . maybe three times. . . And anyway, I doubt Glory’s into that, or that it would make her feel better.”

"You'd be surprised," P-21 murmured. "Why, just the thought of smacking you with a belt has gotten me through some rough patches. Belts. Hoofball bats. Crowbars. Anything to get the message through," he teased with an easy smile.

"I don't get why its such a big deal," Scotch muttered as she looked down at her page. "It's sex. You do it for fun. She made it sound like the most important thing ever." I started to clean up, telekinetically gathering the trash up in a single heap before munching on the empty tin cans. Waste not, want not.

"For her it is," P-21 said. "And she has a point. Where sex can lead to kids, you don't want to have family you're not ready to be responsible for. So you keep it special and reserved to ponies you absolutely want to have kids with." He flushed as he looked away. "Being a parent is a serious commitment," he said with a faintly ashamed look on his face.

Scotch Tape looked up at him and then back at her papers. "Ugh. . . this is stupid! It won't work!" The filly threw the scrolls away with a flip of her hooves. "I don't know nothing about designing stuff. I was just supposed to fix things." Then she started coughing and hacking, reminding me of another pony with difficulty breathing. Hopefully hers wouldn't last as long as his did.

P-21 patted her on the back. He still wasn't very good at the whole comforting thing. "We decide what we're supposed to do for ourselves now. We're not in Stable 99 anymore," he said with a small frown. He looked at me, as if struggling for what he should say next. He was pretty new to this whole daddy thing, and really I couldn't give him much in the way of advice. My own dad had been 'U-8'. Then he reached over and pulled the scrolls back. "Explain it to me again. I know even less about this stuff than you. Show me why it won't work."

Scotch Tape sighed and glared at the paper. "Well, we need water pressure, and for that we need volume and elevation—or the right kinds of pumps, but I don't know where we'd get those—and for that we need pipe but I have no idea where the pipes are buried or where the shutoffs are or anything." She huffed softly. "I can use the storm drain for an outlet. . . not quite healthy but better than what we have. Besides, any water that flows through the ground is at risk of radiation and taint."

Flim and Flam really hadn't done anypony any favors making all that flux and selling it far and wide, I thought as I crumpled up the waste paper and stuffed it into a bag before tossing it into the living room fireplace for eventual disposal. Flux, the blood of Discord himself, didn't seem like it broke down. Dilute it, bury it; it just stayed around poisoning and poisoning and poisoning. I thought of Gardens for the first

time in a long time and shook my head. Someday... maybe...

Boo bumped my hip, making me jump in surprise, and I saw the stealthy mare had more papers in her mouth. "You trying to help me, Boo?" I asked, hoping for a nod. Instead she smiled and blinked, setting her things down in my forehooves. Three Fancy Buck wrappers, a few pieces of scrap paper, and a rumpled-up pamphlet titled 'Surrogacy and You'. "Where'd you get that?" Boo just blinked back at me. I supposed it must have come from one of Marigold's old crates.

"You'll find a way to get the water pressure you need, Scotch," P-21 said as I turned over the Ministry of Peace's pamphlet. "Maybe... could you put the water in a barrel or something on a tall pole?"

"Maybe," Scotch murmured as she glowered at the page. "But it would be tricky to build. And there wouldn't be much rainwater collection area for it to use; you'd have to spread things out over the town. And that would reduce the rainwater available for drinking..."

"Sometimes you have to make compromises," P-21 replied. She grunted softly.

I pulled open the pamphlet and saw a slightly crumpled Fluttershy smiling back at me. There were pictures of two mares holding hooves, one with a slightly swollen belly bump, and a diagram of mare anatomy. Some of the words had smeared beyond legibility, but I read what I could.

If you are a mare reading this, it is because you are an eligible candidate to receive the unborn foal of a mare unwilling or unable to carry the baby to term. Allow me to thank you personally for your courage in considering this procedure and to offer you a hug of thanks if you have already agreed. There is nothing more precious to the world than healthy and happy life. Allow me to explain the procedure the M.o.P. has developed so that nopony will have to know the pain of a lost child.

Surrogacy is a complex spell process which takes an eligible candidate, prepares her body to carry a foal, and then teleports the baby from one mother to another. As with any tissue transplant, it is vital that the two ponies involved be as closely matched as possible to prevent the recipient's body from rejecting the child. Perhaps you are a mother, sister, or daughter of the recipient? Even more distant relatives are still stronger candidates to carry the child successfully than unrelated ponies, for whom there is almost no possibility of success.

If your body is not already in its fertile cycle, biological magic will be used to give a little nudge and put your body into that state. I know it's uncomfortable, but it's

necessary to prevent shock to the baby and you. Once done, the surrogacy spell will magically teleport the unborn baby from the mother to your own womb. The process will involve some discomfort, particularly if the baby is well developed, but your body should adapt.

Please realize that surrogacy is very stressful on the baby, and as such we cannot remove the unborn child a second time. Understand that while you are a surrogate and may get attached to your infant, the legal rights remain-

The rest of the brochure was too obscured for me to read. I frowned as I looked from it to P-21 and Scotch Tape working at the table. Fluttershy had said that Marigold had been an ideal candidate for the spell. And hadn't she been Twilight's cousin? But... no. That wasn't possible. I hadn't been able to open the door in Tenpony. I'd failed the test.

So... why did I suddenly feel uncomfortable?

I sighed and added the pamphlet to the rest of the trash in the fireplace. It wasn't like I had Marigold's entire genetic history with me. Maybe she'd been Rarity's cousin twice removed? Or had some Apple in her? Who knew for sure? It could all be one big coincidence.

"Hey, P-21. There were a whole bunch of boxes in Marigold's room. Where did they get put?" I asked with a little frown.

"In the basement, closest to the stairs," my blue friend said as he sat beside his daughter, waving a hoof towards the kitchen and a nondescript wooden door in the corner. Woah... we had a basement? I trotted over to the basement door and looked down the stairs dropping into the earth. Somepony had carved them from solid rock, and the broad steps curved around to my left. I pressed the light switch, and the bulbs overhead flickered to life. I trotted carefully downwards, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu.

Clearly, we weren't the first to put things down here. The amount of stuff crammed in the deep, narrow space astonished me. Old furniture half covered up by sheets. Boxes with bags of ancient clothing. Pieces of worn, manually-driven kitchen equipment. It was one thing to think of Star House being around since the war, but as I looked deeper into the space, I had to wonder just how long ago it'd been built. Even the walls of the basement were decorated with stars and moons.

I checked the boxes closest to the door and discovered lots of the contents were books of all sorts. Most were books on astronomy, astrology, mythology, and pony

history. There had to be a few hundred books just boxed up here. I saw a note on the top of one pile, written in Twilight's familiar script.

Dear Marigold,

Please hold onto these copies from the Hoofington Library. I know that Image is supposed to screen all books for inappropriate material, but I just can't stand to think of any of them being 'sanitized.' I don't know what Rarity is thinking some days. She's grown so cold and distant. I don't know if I should talk to her, my friends, or Celestia, or Luna, or... ugh... Goldenblood about it. I just don't know. I want to talk to... somepony. I don't know who, but I want to so terribly. What's happening to all my friends? What's happening to me? What's happening to us all?

I'm sorry that things didn't work out with you and the space program. We're still going to launch rockets to learn more about the moon, stars and Equestria... until they turn those into weapons too. I think you did a really brave thing keeping your baby. I want you to know that no matter what happens, I'm going to see to it that you and your baby receive the care you deserve. I'm glad you're in grand auntie's cottage. She was always a little nutty, but she loved that house.

Please take care of yourself and your baby. I'll try and make her next birthday. Celestia knows, I feel like I need something to celebrate.

Love,

Twilight Sparkle.

PS: Did you know Cadance had another foal? Everypony's having babies except me and my friends! I'm getting a little jealous!

I looked at the signature; precise and elegant with swooping cursive letters. The script showed all the care of someone who loved the written word. Twilight had wanted a child. She'd been a Ministry Mare, but while all her devotion was focused on Ministry, there was no denying she been a mare too. She'd been together with Big Mac, but... had Goldenblood removed him from her memory? Had this been written before or after Gardens had been completed?

I could have screamed in frustration! Instead, I folded the letter and put it back. I wasn't going to let it get me mad. Nope. Not going to pay any attention to nagging questions.

Especially when it came to my own lineage.

After dying, again, and what I'd experienced in Happyhorn, I put the shame I felt

welling up in me on trial. What would it matter if Twilight were my ancestor? Okay, I wasn't nearly as smart as she was, but Twilight hadn't been perfect either. Not after what I'd seen in Hippocratic Research. She might have been the most accomplished magic user of all time, but she was still a mare. She made mistakes. Back in Tenpony, I'd craved normalcy and resented the transformation Glory had put me through. Now I was a twice-resurrected cyberpony with a goddess in my head. All I needed were wings, and I'd be a cyber zombie alicorn! Ministry Mare decendancy would be a step towards normal!

No. Glory forgiving me would be a step towards normal. . .

Sweet Celestia, Blackjack, when you screw up you really screw up.

"Dealer," I said softly as Boo flopped into a half-empty box. I looked around the dim space. "I dunno if you can hear me, but. . . I'd like to talk, if we could." The pale blank sat up with a crinkly astronomy magazine atop her head like a hat. Nothing. I wanted to feel. . . something. A tension or tightening in my chest. A closing of my throat. Instead, all within me was calm and regulated. "I don't know what to do about Glory. How do I make it up to her? How can I make it right?"

I knelt beside the box and gently lifted the magazine from atop Boo's mane. She blinked up at me with her pale, colorless eyes from within the nest of old papers.

My butt hit the floor as my eyes looked up at the stars carved in the ceiling, shedding the only expression of remorse I had left. "I don't know what I'm doing any more. I don't even know about following EC-1101. I nearly killed her sister and betrayed her trust. How can things ever be right between us?" Boo looked at me in bafflement, then stretched towards me, and suddenly the box overturned, spilling the magazines and papers all over the place. I caught her before she hurt herself, smiling despite the worry churning inside me.

Boo gave a smile back, and then I spotted something in the corner of the box. A faint glow. . .

I extracted the memory orb from the heaps of fliers from the Luna Space Center. The faded papers showed finned rockets blasting off from beside a large slab-sided black building sporting a crescent moon decoration. Marigold's memory? I could use a little vacation.

Old habits die hard. At least right now I wasn't anywhere I'd get somepony killed. I tapped the orb to my horn, closing my eyes and hoping I wasn't going to have a memory of my great grandmother ten times removed getting laid. I really didn't need

that right–

oooOOOooo

Okay, not Marigold having sex. The unicorn stood at a window looking out at the rockets that sat on their launch pads. Only one was being worked on by a crew as they attached hoses and booster rockets. Twelve more just stood there like abandoned toys. Far off, I could make out the long, ugly block-shaped buildings of what I assumed was a military base of some kind. Since I couldn't see the Core, I really had no way to orient myself.

The unicorn stood in some sort of waiting room. Through the doors were a number of raised voices. I heard Twilight Sparkle for sure, and once or twice I thought I could hear Princess Luna. Their exact words were muddled, but the tone was hardly good. Then Glory's reflection focused in the glass before Marigold. . . no, not Glory. Rainbow Dash.

The cyan pegasus appeared a bit older than Glory, and the tips of her mane had started turning a lighter shade of each rainbow color. There were crows' feet in the corners of her eyes. She was tough, but tired. "Hey. Don't worry about it. I'm sure they'll restart the program." As she waved her hoof dismissively, I saw a sleek black Delta PipBuck attached to her left forehoof.

"I wish I had your confidence," Marigold murmured softly as she looked back at the rocket. "Only one launch a month, if at all. This place was supposed to have ten times that. It was supposed to be a way towards a new future. Now it's just a target for the zebras."

Rainbow Dash sighed and said ruefully, "Yeah, the stripes really do like taking shots at this place. Don't worry, though. They'd have to hit this place a lot harder than they have to get through my air defense team." The pegasus gave a little grin. "It's the Hoofington defense all over again, only instead of them wasting their time and weapons on the city, they waste them shooting at this place."

"Wonderful," Marigold said lightly. "I'd be fine with that if we actually had a space program somewhere else. Anywhere!" Marigold said with an aggravated snort. "If it wasn't for the O.I.A. sending up occasional missiles, they'd probably just let the zebra level this place." She sighed and bowed her head. "I don't even know why Twilight asked me to come. They haven't called me in for questions or anything."

"Because you're the only pony who's ever walked on the moon... well, except for Luna. Even I haven't done that," Rainbow Dash said, giving my flank a nudge.

“Relax. All the ministries want the space program resumed. Only the pencil pushers keep whining about costs.” Then Rainbow Dash frowned a little. “Okay. So maybe Rarity and Pinkie Pie just want those Eye-Spy satellite things in orbit. It’s still a reason to go up there, right?”

“Ooooh, is somepony talking about me?” squealed an enthusiastic voice as Pinkie Pie appeared from... actually, I wasn’t sure where she came from. The pink mare was, like her friend, definitely showing signs of wear and tear. She threw her forelegs around Rainbow Dash and hugged. “Isn’t this just great! And soon we’re going to be meeting Rarity and Applejack and Spikey Wikey! It’s just like old times!” But from the strain in Pinkie’s grin and the sickly look on Rainbow Dash’s face, this was anything but like old times.

Rainbow Dash mustered an honest smile as she extracted herself from Pinkie Pie’s embrace. “Yeah. I can’t wait to show you what Rarity’s been cooking up for me. It’s going to be so awesome!”

“Cooking?! Aw, Dashie. If you needed cooking done you should have talked to me.” The pink mare adopted a hurt little pout. “It’s been so long since we’ve been together. I really need to show you some of my latest little surprises. Angel’s been helping me with them!”

Looking a little wary, the cyan pegasus leaned away from the pink mare. “Yeah, I keep wanting to see you, but between the fighting, my own projects, and Goldenblood’s scheduling, I never get a-“ Rainbow Dash was cut off as Pinkie Pie scowled and looked away. The change was so abrupt that it was frightening.

Then, almost as quickly, it disappeared, and the pink mare smiled at Marigold. “Hey, excuse us for a teenie weenie second, will you?” And coiling her poofy tail around Rainbow’s throat, Pinkie Pie all but dragged her from the room.

Marigold sighed and looked towards the closed doors and the continued shouting behind them. She stood there for several more minutes as a familiar pressure built in her bladder. Finally, she turned and left the room, trotting down the hall. The massive building was surprisingly tight inside and reminded me of Hoofington Memorial with its dim halls and almost empty rooms. Marigold found a bathroom and did her business.

Then, as she started back, she heard Rainbow Dash blurt, “Pinkie Pie, that’s crazy! There’s no way in heck that Goldenblood is a traitor!”

I froze in place, then backed towards a door that was open a crack. The office

had been stripped of all its former accouterments save the large desk and terminal. Pinkie Pie was typing at it, the green glow of the monitor giving her eyes an almost possessed look. “It’s the only explanation, Dashie. Look, somepony is passing tippy-top secret information to the enemy. The megaspells could have only been leaked by somepony with Ministry Mare-level clearance. So either Luna gave the zebras megaspells to make things more challenging, or Goldenblood did.”

“Look, Pinkie, I know you don’t like Goldenblood, but you can’t just accuse—” Rainbow Dash began before getting an angry glare from her friend.

“I remember MMMM, thank you!” Pinkie Pie said as she typed some more. “Look Dashie, Goldenblood is up to no good. I’ve tracked dozens of little schemes linked to him. He’s been getting money from fancy pants ponies all across Equestria. I’ve got evidence that Hippocratic Research is just a front for the O.I.A. They had basic weaponized megaspells before Luna gave the orders to Twilight to start working on them! There’s evidence the O.I.A. is meddling with Stable-Tec and dozens of other businesses. And there’s all these other secret projects that might be in the zebras’ hooves. This is more than just my Pinkie Sense. He’s guilty!”

Rainbow Dash frowned as she looked at the terminal screen. “Okay.”

“And I don’t care what Twilight says—” Pinkie Pie blinked and then blurted, “You believe me?”

“Let’s just say it’s worth looking into,” Rainbow Dash countered with a wan smile. Pinkie gave a little squeal and threw her hooves around Rainbow Dash’s neck in a fierce embrace. The relief Pinkie Pie showed was more than mere gratitude. Rainbow Dash sighed and gently pushed her away before continuing. “Let’s say you’re right and Goldenblood really is a traitor. None of this is actual proof! We need somepony to gather evidence that the O.I.A. is passing secrets to the enemy or working behind Luna’s back. Something that Princess Luna can’t ignore. Maybe I can talk to Sapphire, my liaison.”

Pinkie Pie snorted, “If she’s anything like Quartz, she’s his. I haven’t met a single pony who works for the O.I.A. who wasn’t more loyal to him than to the Princess.” She rubbed her chin. “What we need is somepony who the O.I.A. could use.”

Rainbow blinked and then slowly grinned, “Not some pony. Some zebra!”

The pair looked at each other and said in unison, “Zecora!”

Wait. . . who?

“Dashie, you’re a genius! If we can get Goldenblood to think he can use her, then

we can nail him!” Pinkie Pie hopped on the ends of her hooves as she bounced around her embarrassed cyan friend. She sat and rubbed her chin. “We’ll have to meet with her and work out the specifics. Train her... Maybe we can find some way to ‘disgrace’ her. He loves using people who’ve been hurt in some way.”

“And once she’s in the O.I.A., she can look for anything out of the ordinary. Beyond Goldenblood, I mean,” Rainbow Dash amended, cutting Pinkie Pie off before she could retort. The Pegasus put her hooves on Pinkie’s shoulders to placate her. “I agree there is something really rotten in the O.I.A. If it’s Goldenblood... well, Luna won’t be happy. If it’s something else, he needs to be slammed for letting it pass under his nose.”

“Thanks, Dashie,” Pinkie Pie said in relief, rubbing her eyes. “When I wanted to stop bad ponies, I didn’t know just how bad some of them could be.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the pegasus said, and then her PipBuck beeped sharply. She frowned and looked away. “Yes? Yes. You know I am.” Her frown deepened and then she slumped. “Okay. I want three intercept teams in the air, now. I’m en route.” She looked over at Pinkie and gave an apologetic little smile. “Sorry Pinkie. Looks like the zebras want to play. I’ll see you in Manehattan.” She paused and put a hoof on Pinkie Pie’s shoulder. “Please... try to get along with Twilight.”

Pinkie gasped and swelled, gritted her teeth, and slowly swallowed her rage. “I’ll... try... She just can’t accept she’s not the only smarty smart pants. She just can’t accept that she might actually be wrong.”

“Yeah, well, that’s Twilight for you.” Rainbow glanced at her PipBuck. “Anyway. We can work out the details at your hub after the meeting with Rarity. Gotta fly. ”

“Yes you do, Dashie,” Pinkie said with a small, sad little smile.

The pegasus unlatched a window and pushed the thick glass open with a hoof, then looked back with her own small smile. “Yeah. I do. ‘Cause it will be so awesome.” And with that she flew out into the air. Pinkie pushed the window shut with a tired, frayed little smile. Then she paused, her ears flopping back and forth. A second later she sniffled and wrinkled her nose. Finally she hopped twice.

Then she snapped around and looked right at me. Her bright blue eyes flattened as she stared into Marigold’s. “Uh oh! Somepony’s been baaaaaad!” she said as her lips curled in a grin that spread wider and wider as she advanced. “Didn’t anypony teach you it’s naughty to spy on other ponies?” Marigold turned and ran for her life, heart hammering!

"I just have to find somepony!" she gasped to herself as she ran down the empty halls and past the offices. She stopped at a T and looked left and right, glancing behind her before darting down to the right. Pinkie Pie wasn't running after her, though. She simply bounced along behind on her four hooves. She didn't seem to cover all that much ground. But every time Marigold looked back, the grinning pink mare grew closer and closer.

Marigold burst through an access door into a work area. All the terminals were dark, the desks scattered with abandoned litter and dust. She raced across the room, not daring to glance behind her any more. Then there was a flash of pink mane in the doorway ahead of her! Marigold dove to the side, racing along towards another exit. A silhouette of a signature poofy mane appeared in the frosted glass window pane. Marigold ducked beneath a workstation and spotted a few empty glass orbs.

"Wheeeere's Pinkie Pie?" the mare called out as the unicorn lifted an orb to her horn. "Wheeeere's Pinkie Pie?" the mare called again, her voice echoing in the cavernous space as Marigold's horn flashed. Then... nothing. The orb began to glow with swirling light as she filled it with her memory. "Wheeeere's Pinkie Pie?" The voice sounded out again, now growing more distant. The mare relaxed a moment, breathing a sigh of relief.

Then two hooves wrapped around Marigold and yanked tight as the mare shrieked, "Here I am!" And then everything fell into darkness once more.

oooOOOooo

I shook my head hard as the memory orb ended. I wondered if Pinkie had extracted the memory from Marigold, or if Marigold had gotten the memory out and somehow it'd gotten into the box down here. I sat down and rubbed my temples with my cool metal hooves. Pinkie Pie had suspected Goldenblood; it gave my sense of right and wrong a little corrective lurch. He'd seemed so slick and manipulative... well, really, how could anypony pull off what he had without somepony catching him?

Who was the zebra they'd mentioned, though? Zecora? It sounded like a zebraish name, sure enough. I wished I had somepony I could ask who... then I blinked and laughed softly. Not somepony...

I opened the little panel on my leg and began to type. Then I leaned back against a worn box and said, "Tin Pony to Watcher. Come in, Watcher. Over."

There was no response for several seconds. Almost a minute. Then Watcher's synthetic voice crackled from my PipBuck. "Tin Pony, go into your broadcast menu,

look for a little tab marked 'encryption', and switch it on." Funny how much annoyance one could get into that artificial voice. I did as he said, and a second later, "Thanks, Blackjack. Unlike someone I know, I'd rather not transmit to every receiver in Equestria."

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Champion in bed," Watcher said at once, making me flush.

"Okay, so maybe it was that bad," I muttered.

"Just a little," Watcher said, then asked, "Let me guess, Glory's not taking it so well?"

"Pretty much," I said with a sigh. "I really screwed things up."

"Oh, I doubt you're doing worse than LittlePip. Why don't you catch me up to speed with what's been happening with you? It's been a while since we last talked. Glory was getting stuff to help you?"

I settled back and sighed. "Okay. You'll probably want to get some paper for notes though." I took a deep breath. "So... it all started with the first time I died..."

"And then she threw me across the room and into the wall. Now she's not sure and I don't know what to do and everything's nuts," I finished, sighing. My cheeks were all wet from the few times I'd broken down. He'd been a very attentive listener, not interrupting and letting me get everything out. The only time he'd stopped me was when I'd thanked him for his help in Goldenblood's, asking me to elaborate on any other times I'd gotten messages from him. He hadn't said anything besides 'checking something out', so I simply continued to the very end.

The dragon seemed to think that I'd finished. "Wow..." Watcher murmured softly. "And I thought LittlePip had it bad."

I sighed, trying to think of adding the one part I had omitted in my tale: my new connection to the Goddess. Somehow, I couldn't just spit it out. It shouldn't have been too hard, but I just couldn't speak the words. At his comment about LittlePip though, I dropped it. He didn't need to hear any more of my whining. Really, I was starting to respect her even more than the Stable Dweller. "Eh, she probably has it worse," I said with a chuckle. "How's she doing, anyway?" I remembered what Homage had shown me. "Is she... um... okay?"

He seemed to guess my line of thought. "I still think she's fighting the good fight.

Arbu was ugly, though. Turned out to be a whole town of cannibals. Willing, intentional cannibals, not your virus variety.” That gave me the shudders. Raiders eating ponies because they were diseased was one thing. But choosing to eat other? “As for right now, I don’t know. She’s probably outside Canterlot. I’m trying to get some eyes to shadow her, but the last bot I found near their location got eaten by a radiator. If my guess is right, though, she’s probably somewhere around the zebra settlement of Glyphmark.”

Zebras! I’d almost forgotten. “Spike, who was Zecora?”

“Zecora? How’d you... never mind. I swear, lately it seems like every third band of ragtag misfits is stumbling over all kinds of things forgotten over the last two centuries.” The synthetic voice sighed. “Zecora was a friend of Twilight and the old pony gang. She lived in the Everfree Forest and was a bit of a loner till Twilight and the others got her accepted in Ponyville. During the war, though... well... she was arrested for being a spy and traitor. Twilight went all the way to Princess Luna to get her released, but before she could she was rescued by zebra sympathizers.”

“Did she ever work for the O.I.A.?” I asked as I looked around, wondering where Boo had gotten to.

“I don’t think so. I know Goldenblood talked to her once about being a liaison with the zebras early on. One of his ‘back channels.’ I have no idea if she accepted or not. After she escaped from custody, she disappeared from sight. Then one night, a few months later, she got caught breaking into a high-security area of the M.W.T. Nearly killed a guard before she was intercepted and killed by Applejack’s colt friend. Applejack never really forgave him,” Watcher said with a sigh. “That was just a short while before everything went... well... really bad.”

So, maybe Zecora had been freed by the O.I.A. and found something incriminating, or maybe something else had gotten him in trouble with Luna. “How are you doing? Anything else interesting happening in Equestria?”

“You have no idea, Blackjack. Everything out west is so tense that it feels like it’s going to snap any second. Raider camps are being hit hard, like Steel Ranger hard but minus the Rangers. There’s somepony with some pretty scary skill cutting us off from the broadcast towers. Red Eye’s recruiting everypony with a gun and a willingness to die for his cause. The Steel Rangers are in a full civil war. Even the alicorns have been pulling back closer to Maripony.”

Suddenly I felt the Goddess begin to press on the inside of my mind. I might not have been a real alicorn, but I had the connection to Unity, and she was trying to take

over as hard as she could. I gritted my teeth and gulped, fighting the connection. To no avail. Against my will, I choked out the question, “Do you know if LittlePip is planning anything against the Goddess?” Each word spilled from my lips and I twitched and jerked as I fought against my own body to cut the connection. Push the button Blackjack! Just push... the... button...

“Well, you know LittlePip. I’m sure she’s got something planned. Maybe she’s going to try to blackmail the Goddess into attacking Red Eye. Or maybe she’s got something else in mind. I know she was trying to set something up with Gawd.”

Who? It didn’t matter. The name set off more and more murmurs of speculation in my mind as the pressure in my skull grew. I felt the Goddess twisting my will and wits as the souls of Unity began to whisper to each other in excitement. The Goddess was speculating what it could be. The Goddess was crawling through my mind, looking for any hint of what I knew about what LittlePip might be up to. My memories of my time with her were little more than an inebriated blur. “Well... if you find anything out... let me know...”

“Sure. Good luck, Blackjack. I’ll let you know as soon as I can.” I struggled to warn him, but I was helpless. No matter how hard I fought to keep it open now, I couldn’t stop myself from severing the connection.

As soon as it was broken I grabbed a shelf and smacked my head hard against the metal beam. “Get! Out!” I yelled, trying to think of how to reconnect with him. But I stared at the screen and was struck with the horrifying realization that the knowledge of how to connect to Spike’s cave was lost. Was there a button to push, or... what had I done? I remembered the conversation, but how to get in touch again? I wanted to shake as tears ran down my cheeks. “How... Lacunae said you couldn’t control me because of the Enervation.”

The Goddess laughed softly, cruelly. It was infinitely more intimate and terrifying than the bold shouts and third person references. “Oh, this isn’t control. Not yet. This is just finding ways to push through the interference. I’ll chip off a little bit here and a little bit there till eventually, there won’t be much difference between you and a normal vessel.”

Had Lacunae lied, or had the Goddess forced her to deceive me? I wouldn’t give the Goddess the satisfaction of even contemplating the other. I wrestled with her as I tried to get her out, but it was like pushing against a wave of mud. No matter how I mentally shoved, she was getting in. There wasn’t a lot of Enervation around Chapel, and the Goddess seemed to be taking the opportunity to creep in as deep

as she could, searching for memories and thoughts.

And secrets. Secrets that I couldn't dare let her know about. If she knew about... no, don't think of it. But I was! I couldn't not. I thought about the necklaces and the crown thingy and the maneframe and... no! I could feel her searching. Hunting. Trying to find what I tried so hard to bury in my mind. Don't think about it! Don't!

But I did. I bashed my head against the floor again and again, trying to knock myself out. My augmented body resisted. Worse, it was healing the trauma to my head! If I was going to prevent her from knowing everything, I'd have to remove it the only sure way I knew how. I struggled to levitate out the pistol, feeling tears run down my cheek. My aim struggled. I had to keep her from knowing. I had to... I'm sorry Glory, but if she found out about...

"Gardens of Equestria?" the Goddess purred in my ear, the gun falling from my magical grasp. "Yes. I know about it. That interesting thought on Flux and Spike and there it is. A little treasure just laying there to be seen. *She's* beside herself, at the moment, but once my business with the other annoyance is done and Red Eye put in his place, I think I'll have to reunite Twilight with her assistant."

I stared out into empty space, feeling defiled. The Goddess just laughed in glee as the horror crept through me. "I don't know how. I don't know when. But somepony is going to kill you very soon," I whispered aloud, sounding like a prayer.

The laughter stopped, but the Goddess still chortled in her amusement. "Oh, really? I assume you're referring to LittlePip? Yes, I'm sure she'll try something heroic at the most inopportune moment. You don't know what, but you have guesses: sneaking something into the base. Unknown allies. Using Rarity's zebra magic... might have to kill her just to be safe before she gets here. Maybe... by you." There was a yank and for an instant I was filled with an overwhelming urge to kill LittlePip, but I barely fought it off, focusing on killing the Goddess instead. It seemed to work a little. "If you could contact her, you'd suggest using those silver rings against me. We'll just take that." And with another yank, I felt something go. Something about rings and unity.

Sweet Celestia, shoot me... please...

"Oh no, Blackjack. No killing yourself. No telling anypony either. Neither you nor that garbage bin you call a friend," the Goddess hissed softly in her malice. "No pony has ever insulted me the way you have. No pony would dare. Well, now you're mine. I'm going to tear off itty bitty little pieces of you till there's nothing left but a shell. Then I'll have that garbage bin bring you back for a real transformation to a proper

shape. And I'll make sure that all the Wasteland sees what I'm going to turn you into, so none ever dare to challenge me again."

I didn't think of anything except that prayer over and over again. Boo came over and butted my shoulder repeatedly before curling up beside me. All I could do was think and wait for the goddess to turn her attention elsewhere.

Somepony... anypony... help me...

I spent the better part of an hour sitting there in the basement, fighting against a Goddess who for all I knew had moved on to bigger and better things. Boo snoozed beside me, bored, before the blank had finally had enough and started butting me towards the stairs. I'd fought giant monster ghouls and other creatures, but I was helpless against a little white pony who stubbornly bumped me to my hooves and then up the stairs. Once I started moving, I could keep going.

I just couldn't stop... but I could run in place till my friends were ready to go. I kept trying to think of ways to tell my friends what had happened to me, to let Spike know I couldn't be trusted. But I couldn't. Something inside my brain had been tweaked. No, I wasn't a puppet yet, but the Goddess was tying strings to me all the same. P-21 and Scotch Tape were both gone. Off doing her project, I supposed.

In the living room I returned to going about the simple motions of cleaning and did everything I could to not think about it. Not the Goddess, not Glory, not EC-1101, not zebra balefire bombs... nothing. I cleaned up like I'd never cleaned before; Mom would have been shocked and amazed. Boo went right to the cupboard; I couldn't find any snack cakes, but I did come across some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal. I filled a bowl for her, then sucked on a ruby as I worked.

Mom. I never really appreciated her as head of security. Had she felt the same way, burdened down by so many things she couldn't control in 99? The Overmare, Rivets, her duties, and me... How had she managed? Had she felt the same see-sawing sensation inside her that lurched from depression to panic and back to depression? I soaked a washrag in the sink and began to scrub the counters, looking at the white stars on the counter tops and smiling a little. Crying a little too.

"Blackjack?" Glory said softly behind me. I didn't face her. I couldn't. I just hung my head a little. The stuff I could speak about I couldn't bring myself to say, and the stuff I needed to warn her about, I couldn't speak. So I cried and moved the rag in slow little circles like I was determined to get that one tile spotless because it was

better than anything else I could do.

“What are you doing, Blackjack?” she asked from beside me. I glanced at her bloodshot eyes; their lids were swollen from crying.

“Cleaning,” I said lamely as I looked away.

She reached down and stopped my hoof with her own. I saw then that I’d washed a perfectly round circle in the tile while missing the rest of the mess. “Let me help you,” she said simply, then tied her rag over her rainbow mane and starting to clean as well. We didn’t talk. I could barely breathe. Together, we straightened up every little thing there was to fix. . . except each other.

I wanted to talk, but I didn’t. I wanted to tell her what I’d just done, but I couldn’t. I wanted her to end me, but she wouldn’t. And so finally I struck a match from an old matchbox and lit the papers in the fireplace.

Then her hooves reached around me. For a moment I tensed, ready for another throw. But it didn’t come. . . part of me wished it would. I hung my head and said in a wet little filly’s voice, “I’m not going to run. I’m not. I’m not. . .”

That was as much as I could get out, but it was enough as she held me and I fell apart again in her embrace. “Shhh. . . I know. . . I know. . .” I might have gone through hell itself, but that didn’t mean I was beyond needing a simple, sincere hug.

Side by side we walked together back towards Chapel. I didn’t ask why she’d come back to me. I wasn’t even sure if she forgave me for what I’d done. All that mattered was that we were together; even if I was the last person in Equestria anypony should possibly be with. The afternoon weather was the Hoof’s trademark drizzle. We trotted through the rain towards the budding town below, and I filled Glory in on what had happened to Rampage. Glory’d covered up in a blanket to obscure her famous appearance, and pretty soon she resembled a drowned ghost. Boo folded her ears as she trotted behind us, the pale blank annoyed by the rain dripping inside them.

“So, does this mean that P-21 is it now?” Glory asked as the wet grass clung to her in passing.

“It?”

“Is he the one with the fewest unresolved psychological issues? The one that we go

to for help?" she asked with a wan smile. "Please say yes. I'd really like somepony else to be mommy for a while." And though she said it as if joking, I could pick up the sincere tension in her voice.

I rubbed my chin. "I don't know. I always thought of Lacunae as the shoulder to sob on," I said wearily as we walked through the rain. "P-21 still needs to get his strength back. Then we can lean on him some more." I glanced at her and gritted my teeth a moment before daring to ask, "What about. . . us?"

Glory pulled her wet sheet over her face so all I could see was her cyan muzzle. "I don't know, Blackjack. I know you need all the friends you can get. I know what you're doing is important. I just don't know if. . . if I can be okay with it." She glanced at me. "Was Stable 99 *really*. . ."

I shrugged. "I lived there my whole life, so I have no idea. Ponies not having sex except with one. . . and only one. . . partner just seems. . . well. . . stupid." I winced as I saw her frown. "Not that it is. Just, that's how it seems. I mean, don't you ever look at a mare and want to do stuff with her?"

Glory bit her lower lip a moment, then said softly, "Maybe. There was Caprice. . ."

"There was?" I blinked in surprise, and she looked at me, the raindrops running along the edge of the fabric as she smiled a little. "I thought you hated her."

"I envied her, Blackjack. There's a difference." She sighed and went on, "I have to admit. . . she is pretty cute. And the way you and her just. . . did it. Had fun even when you were total strangers. . . well, I was a little bit jealous. The Enclave is very strict on heterosexual relationships and reproduction. You just. . . don't. . . do that. What you two did." She groaned a little. "Ugh, I can't even say it!"

"You don't have to," I replied, smiling a little.

She stomped her hoof in the wet grass. "You don't understand. I want to. That's what drives me nuts. My sister could just 'do it'. You and Caprice could. So why do I get all hung up on what I want? Why can't I just. . . ugh. . ." She slumped. "Just forget about it."

I reached over and patted her shoulder. "What do you want, Glory?"

She frowned as she pulled the sheet off her face and looked away, chewing on her bottom lip. Finally she sighed and said, "Just a thousand different things, and half of them contradict. Mostly, I want to feel like I'm in charge of things. Like what I want matters. Like. . . I want to be more like Dusk. Confident I can actually do things. That I matter."

"You matter. You matter the world to me," I told her frankly.

"I know. And I know you mean that," Glory said with a sad smile. "I just don't know if I can stand mattering to you and being your very special somepony at the same time." And with that she pulled the sheet back over her head. Then she sighed and said, in a more annoyed tone, "You know, it's times like this I can understand surface annoyance with keeping the skies covered."

As if sensing her ire, the heavens replied. Soon it was pouring such buckets that we nearly stumbled into Chapel's minefield. We made the detour to the right trying to find our way to the road. We passed the ruined church, and I paused as I looked down the road toward the bridge. I saw a lone pale pony standing in the rain, staring at the swollen, churning river.

"Rampage?" Glory called out.

Slowly we approached Rampage, the striped earth pony standing as still as a blank. She'd stashed her armor somewhere. Her pale pink eyes looked longingly into the foaming brown water. "It really hurts, you know," Rampage said as she looked down. "Dying, I mean. Blackjack knows. Drowning's not that bad. I once tied half a skywagon to me and jumped off the Hoofington Bridge over by the arena. Spent two whole years down there. Really boring. Then a river serpent gobbled me up and shat me out. I think you can relate, can't you, Blackjack?"

"Yeah." I said as I joined her at the rail. "Did it make you feel better?"

"No," she answered in a low hollow voice I could barely hear over the churning water and hissing rain. "Down there, you just feel... trapped. Then bored. You want to live, but you can't. Time gets funny. I know it was two years from ponies asking where I'd disappeared to, but it felt somewhere between a few days and a thousand years. Sometimes both." She looked over at me. "I really wish that you'd used that super gun on me, Blackjack. Before I found out about Eternity."

"You're a real pony, Rampage," Glory said as she moved beside her on her other side.

"No," she said as she stepped away and pointed her hoofclaw at the pegasus. "You're a real pony, Glory. And so're Blackjack, P-21, and Scotch Tape. You had lives. Family that loved you. Childhoods. You were actually *people*!"

She started to pace. "I don't know if my childhood was growing up as a filly in Ponyville with a crush on Applebloom, living as a zebra tribal near Shattered Hoof Ridge, being beaten by my mother in a filthy apartment in Manehattan, or growing

up on a military base with a mare who always had better things to do than be my mother! I'm pretty sure now the answer is really 'none of the above!'. I have more in common with Boo than any of you!" Her shouts made Boo flinch back and hide behind me.

"Yeah. It sucks," I said as I moved in front of her. "Welcome to Hoofington! Glory's lost her family and her own body. P-21 went through shit. Scotch Tape lost her home. I get it. But we're still your friends, so what does it matter?"

"Because I'm not real!" she yelled back at me. "You at least went through things that made you what you are, Blackjack. You caused some of it... chose some of it... and got dealt some of it." She gritted her teeth and pressed her hooves to her head. "I'm losing my fucking mind here, Blackjack. I want... I've got a dozen different things I want to do, and I have no idea which one is me! Or if any of them are me."

"And I just want it to stop!" she yelled as she tore away and ran as fast as she could down the bridge towards the Core. I cursed, turning to try and catch her. I reached out with my mouth, bit hard on her tail, and was dragged further along behind her. My four metal hooves scraped grooves in the cracked asphalt as the razorwire softened between my teeth.

"Blackjack!" Glory cried as she darted around and tackled me from the side mere seconds before Rampage crossed the 'Mercy' painted across the bridge. The beam flashed once and instantly transformed her into a glowing red statue of herself before she collapsed in a heap. Glory lay atop me in the rain, panting as downpour washed away the muddy gray ashes. Then the talisman flashed, and Rampage's body rebuilt itself into that of a filly. Her skin hadn't even fully reformed before she started crawling towards the Core. The beam atop the city gate flashed again, and again she collapsed into a smaller heap.

"Stop!" I shouted as she reformed a third time, crawling on her regenerating limbs, her unset flesh sticking and stretching with each step. My magic seized her and pulled her into my grasp like a half-born filly. She thrashed against my embrace as the rain hissed all around me. Finally her striped hide formed and she shook in my grasp, crying and screaming as she struggled to find annihilation. "Please. Rampage."

I did the only thing I could think of; I held her in my hooves and began to rock. Glory sat beside me, humming softly in the rain as Rampage slowly stilled. She broke down in terrible, heartbroken little sobs as she curled against me and let out some of the pain.

Slowly, eventually, she stopped thrashing. She curled up in my arms and pressed her face to my chest. I smiled softly and stroked her mane as the three of us sat together in the rain. I couldn't do anything for myself or Glory, but I would do something for her. Something.

"So, let me get this straight, Blackjack. You want me to go into the memories of a pony bound in a soul talisman, extract them, and put them into the recollector so that Rampage can discover she is more than the product of the talisman?" Lacunae asked as we all sat on the porch of Sekashi's house. The rain had put a damper on the frantic construction, but now the sewage ditch was overflowing and vomiting its contents all over the road while the hasty additions swayed and groaned ominously in the rain. Some of the fillies and colts were still trying to get them nailed down... tied down... or whatever they were trying to do.

"That's about it," I told the alicorn, who had found another black dress to hide her wings. I didn't ask where, but I assumed Charity had been involved. Thus dressed, she avoided most of the angry looks from the workponies. I supposed when your race is viewed as monsters all across Equestria, it was inevitable that you would get some hard glances by people from elsewhere in the Wasteland. "I want you to find a memory or something that's from a pony that's not shoved in that talisman."

Lacunae knelt, closing her eyes as if in meditation. "There is a problem with your plan, Blackjack. I can't extract memories."

I blinked, frowning a little. "Excuse me?"

"I cannot perform the telepathic magic your plan requires. I am sorry. The Goddess refuses to grant me such abilities." Out of spite, I guessed. Rampage and Majina were in the house, where the little zebra talked a mile a minute. It seemed to be working; Rampage had gone from sulking and depressed to looking baffled as she tried to follow a tale involving a mouse, three fancy buck cakes, and a carton of milk. While I knew the Angel was inside the small red striped filly, I hoped she couldn't do anything severe to the zebra filly before we could separate them. "I'm sorry, Blackjack."

I frowned and Glory patted my shoulder. "At least you thought of something." Two workers walked by next to the ditch, and she pulled the sheet further over her features, but they were more focused on getting out of the rain.

"No," I said firmly as I stood up. "It's time I gave back to her. She's been following

me for weeks; she's suffered for me, and the only help she wants I can't give her." There was just the question of how. "Remember in the Collegiate when I went into your mind to find you?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at Lacunae. "Why can't I try the same with her?"

"Doing what you propose is extremely risky. You could contaminate your own psyche with the memories and personalities inside Rampage. You might put Blackjack inside her. You could forget some critical thought processes, like respiration," Lacunae said with clear concern.

I actually laughed at that. "Lacunae, I've got a talisman regulating my breathing now. Heck, you could blow my head off and my body would probably keep living for a few days afterward. And I already have Psalm in my head. And you-know-who is in there too." I paced a little. "I've got the Dealer passing by on a semi-regular basis. Really, how much worse could it be?" Considering what I'd done to Boing, taking the Angel from Rampage wouldn't be much of a change for me.

Sekashi watched my lips with concern before she smiled and said, "You know. I know a story about a funny zebra back in the homelands. A good male; wealthy and powerful and generous. One day he went for a walk and saw many poor zebras in the market. What to do? So he gave them all the money in his purse and they were quite happy. He continued on his walk, and he found many hungry zebras living on the edge of his village, so he gave them his lunch and continued on his way. Soon it began to rain, and he came across some wet and weary travelers along his way. And so he gave them his cloak as well.

"But soon this funny zebra was alone, and hungry, and wet. He found a cave in the woods. There in the cave he found a beautiful zebra from a faraway village asleep in the bottom of a cold pool. And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was no pony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too." She finished with a blissful smile, hooves folded in her lap.

We all stared at her for a long minute. "Sekashi... that's a horrible story!" Glory blurted.

The zebra mare rubbed her chin. "Perhaps I should add more description of his cloak? Would that make it better?"

Glory just stared at me. "Hey, Xanthe was worse. She went on and on about being cursed."

"Ahh. Propoli. Them and their silly curses!" Sekashi laughed. She had no right to talk. . .

I understood the meaning of her little story, though. If something permanent happened to me, what would my friends do? Was this just me trying to find some new and inventive way to hurt myself?

"No," I said firmly, but with a small smile as I looked at Lacunae. "I know it's risky. And I'll try and be careful. But Rampage can't keep going like this. At this rate, she's going to bury herself in a mineshaft or throw herself into the ocean in a concrete filled barrel or. . . something." Something drastic and so long term I wouldn't be there to save her.

Glory smiled in worried approval. But Lacunae said telepathically to me, "And what if you go into her mind and discover that she is correct? That there never was a mare named Rampage?"

"Then I'll lie to her and be her friend till the lie is real," I replied telepathically. "If I can give her peace and can help her, then I will." And while I had her in my mind, I thought, "You knew the Goddess was trying to take me over, didn't you?"

"Yes. I feared it was a great risk and that she would make the attempt. She knows a pony like you or LittlePip is her greatest threat," Lacunae replied shamefully. "I failed you."

"No. It's not your fault. It's the Goddess'." I smiled at the alicorn. "Don't worry. We'll think of some way out of this. And there's the Stable Dweller out there too. If LittlePip can't do something, the Stable Dweller will. Probably drop a balefire bomb or a house on her or something."

There was a note of disgust in my mind. "You two do realize I can hear you, right?" the Goddess said dryly. "And the moment you do think of something, I'll know it," she added in a mental snarl. Then there was a pause and the Goddess snapped irritably, "And your Stable Dweller *is* LittlePip!"

Oh, sure. Like I was going to believe anything she said! I got the impression of a pony throwing their hooves into the air in resigned annoyance and tried to put killing the Goddess out of my mind for now. Right now, Rampage needed help first.

"I've been in and out of too many memory orbs to count. If it'll help her get answers, I'll try it," I said, then met Glory's worried gaze. I tried to give a comforting smile. "I'm going to be careful. I will." I then looked in the next room where a tiny Majina jabbered to a morose Rampage. "If I can give her peace, it's a chance I have to

take.”

I caught Glory staring at me with a small smile. “What?” I asked in worry.

“Nothing. I was just reminded about. . . things,” she said, that little smile not leaving her lips.

My spirits rose a little. “Good things?”

“Yes. And frustrating things too,” she added, popping that balloon of hope inside me.

“If you are going to do this, you will need a recollector and an empty memory orb. The recollector we have,” Lacunae said, reminding me of the strange black circlet I’d found in Vanity’s locker. “As to an empty memory orb, I suggest you see the local shop filly.”

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I suddenly feared for my bottlecaps.

The post office had gotten a bit cluttered since the last time I’d been in here. The space behind the counter was nearly a solid wall of packing crates and boxes overflowing with plunder from Blueblood Manor. The feral ghoul population had kept it safe from looters, leaving it to be picked clean by Chapel’s intrepid Crusaders. Anything of even passing value that hadn’t decayed had been brought here.

There was a little sign that read ‘ring bell if it makes you feel better.’ I looked at the brass bell on the counter and tapped it. Nothing. I hit the little button on top repeatedly, but aside from a muted and oddly unsatisfying tapping within, nothing. I sighed and stretched up to try and peer over the crates of silver candlesticks and stacks of porcelain. There was nothing for it. “Charity?” I called out.

There was a rustling, and a mare called out that she’d be right there. . . or something. Then there was a crash and a yipe, and several seconds later a peach-colored mare poked her head out as asked timidly, “Yes? Can I. . .” she trailed off as her blue eyes met mine and widened in shock. “Blackjack!”

“Caprice?” I gaped at her. “What are you doing here?” The once-leader of the Flank looked as if she were recovering from quite a beating. Her face had the unhealthy blackish-green marks of bruises that were in the final stages of healing. The eyes, however, now openly showed a fear of the world she’d barely kept concealed before.

“I. . .” She swallowed and lowered her gaze. “I. . . um. . . I was thrown out of the Flank. My security team. . . they took over all the chem production and they’re using

it to make Rage and Dash. Anypony that didn't accept Citrine's rule was run out... most of the working mares and stallions. The Trough is basically gone. The only trade they allow now is buying chem supplies, guns, and food and selling Stampede and Rainboom. They're nothing but a bunch of drug fiends now."

I felt a little bad for her; just a little. She had planned to betray me, but clearly she'd gotten the rough end of the stick. "How'd you end up in Chapel, then?"

"It's just down the road," she replied with a shrug. "Most of the Flank went to go work for the Society. The rest scattered. A few came here. They needed help minding the store, so I volunteered."

"Hey!" snapped a filly behind Caprice. There was a smack, and the peach mare jumped with a yipe. "No sexing the customers! Do that on your own time!" Charity called out, then jumped on Caprice's back and hopped over her head and onto the counter top. She took one look at me and narrowed her eyes. "Blackjack! Where's my money?"

I met the yellow earth filly's blue glare and backed away. "I don't know! How much do I owe you? Didn't I pay it already?" I clutched my saddlebags to my chest. "Please don't take my poor bottlecaps. I'll pay it back next time. I swear!" Then I frowned and said sharply, "Wait a minute. Didn't I save your life last time?"

"Oh, crap apples," Charity said as she deflated. "I was hoping you'd have forgotten about that." She sat her butt on the counter as she looked at me sourly. "Fine. What do you want, Blackjack? A nice shiny new gun? Ammo? Something pretty for Glory?"

"Actually, all I need is a couple empty memory orbs," I said with a small look of relief. "Though if you do have something nice for Glory..."

She looked over her shoulder. "Hey, Saucy Flanks! Get me a half dozen memory orbs from the fifth filing cabinet in the third row, bottom drawer in the back. Don't even think of touching the sixth filing cabinet!" she snapped sharply.

"Yes boss!" Caprice said, scurrying back into the cramped and overstocked work space.

Charity watched her go and then her eyes softened a little. "She's a little worthless, but that's better than completely worthless like most adults. Came here half dead..."

"Don't you think you should treat her better, then?" I asked, and received a cool look from the filly.

"If I let her start using pity as an asset, she's never going to get any better," Charity replied. "I gave her a mountain of debt and a job and an excuse to stay. Till she pays it off, I get an assistant. She gets a place to recover." Then the filly adopted a sly grin. "So. Champion in bed, huh?"

I groaned and rubbed my cheek. "I didn't expect everypony to hear it."

"Duh! That's what makes it funny," she replied with a roll of her eyes.

I quickly decided to shift the conversation away from my sexual experiences. "Listen, can I talk to you about Scotch Tape? She has a bunch of ideas for Chapel."

I expected a snide comment or a smile, but not the dark cloud that passed across her face. "Oh. The stable filly. What about her?"

Stable filly? "Um, Charity... She has a *lot* of *good* ideas for *helping* Chapel." I repeated with emphasis.

"...Great," Charity said sarcastically. "She can *keep* them."

What? "But... you don't want them?" I said with a little frown of concern. "She's a real smart kid, and she wants to help you out."

"Are all stable ponies so thick? We don't want her help," Charity said with a scowl. "If she wasn't friends with you, we'd tell her to take her plans, shove 'em up her butt, go jump in the river, and make like a sailboat." My shock must have been incredibly evident, because she looked away, muttering darkly, "She comes here the first time telling us about her poor momma and how she died. How she's just like us. So we tell her she can be a Crusader. So what does she come trotting up here with this time?" Charity clasped her hooves together and grinned with a leer. "Why, her daddy, of course!" Her eyes fluttered a few times, her eyes wet behind her lids.

The yellow filly slumped immediately like melting butter, her blue eyes hardening as she looked towards the riches stacked up behind her. "I can buy or trade for almost anything I need. There's always somepony that needs something. But there's not a single thing I have to trade that will get me what she has."

"Charity, punishing Scotch Tape won't make you feel any better. You shouldn't spite her just because you're jealous," I murmured to her as I reached up and touched her mane.

She shoved my hoof away with an indignant snarl. "I am not jealous! The Crusaders are for orphans. We're not a bunch of dumb foals spending all day thinking of crazy ways to get our cutie marks. We stick together because we're all we have. We have

standards!”

Suddenly there was a roar from somewhere underneath our feet, and Charity spun. “I told you to stay away from the vault, Saucy Flanks! Eat her, Precious, if she tries to touch our caps!” Charity yelled.

“Vault?” I asked in confusion.

“Yeah. It’s a big reinforced room down below for valuable mail and packages. Usually don’t keep a lot of stuff in there on account that it’s a pain to get it up and down the stairs. I keep our caps and other valuable stuff down there.” She screwed up her face in a scowl. “Precious volunteered to guard it. Kinda insisted, actually.” The filly sighed and gave a little shrug.

Suddenly a scream sounded from outside and I was moving instantly for the door as a resounding crunch filled the air. Out came Duty and Sacrifice as I thought of who might be attacking us. Harbingers? Enclave? Raiders? I darted out into the rain and paused as my enemy came to light: gravity.

One of the tottering structures had collapsed across the sewer ditch and road, and the colts, fillies, and few adults struggled to free the ponies trapped under the wreckage. Glory flew out of Sekashi’s home, followed a moment later by Lacunae. The rain lashed the tiny settlement, and gusts of wind had all the buildings swaying and tugging against the ropes holding them upright. “Look out,” I shouted, but in the bedlam nopony took notice.

Sure enough, one of the ropes snapped in two and the wooden framing and scaffolding collapsed down on the milling ponies. I saw one of Harpica’s ghoulish fillies staring up in terror at the avalanche of beams about to crush her as I raced down the road. Lacunae beat me to her, flashing beside her and catching the debris with her magic before it could crush the ghoulish filly. Harpica hurried forward to gather the undead filly up and get her to safety before Lacunae dropped the heavy load.

A shrill scream filled the air, and I watched as another fell with a ponderous crash into the ditch; bearing the chartreuse Medley with it. The unicorn surfaced for a second before the debris dammed the brown flow and she disappeared from view. The building settled a little more atop her.

“Get her out! She’s pinned!” I screamed as I dove into the flow above the blockage. My metal legs helped keep me from being swept off my hooves immediately, and I felt the trapped filly thrash against the beams crushing her legs and keeping her down. I heaved against them, but rather than lift I simply pushed myself into the

muck of the ditch. I raised my head, looking at the beams and boards; maybe I could lift them off piecemeal? But no, that'd take too long. I ducked down again, feeling Medley move slower against me as I gripped the lowest beam I could and lifted. I had to do this... I thought of a pink-maned filly I'd failed so horribly not long ago...

It doesn't matter what you do; you'll never be a good pony. There are no good ponies...

No. I wouldn't accept that. I couldn't! I might have been a murderous fuckup who didn't deserve any of my friends, but I could do better. I'd give all I had to give her a chance. All I had to give...

And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was nopony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too.

I couldn't tell if Medley was struggling still or if it was just the current beating us. If I died, what would Glory say? What about others I could have helped? *Do better...* did that mean letting one filly die for others? My systems were sending all kind of 'low O2' warnings. Just a little harder. A little longer! Do better, damn it! Better!

Then there were hooves pulling me away. I fought with them. Some mare cried out in pain as I kicked out. I had to give her a chance. I had to! Had to! But then my head broke the surface and I was pulled from the filthy water by Glory, P-21, and Lacunae. The ditch flooded out around the blocking debris as I lay there, staring up at the sky as the rain pounded down upon me and my metal limbs.

"Why?" I murmured as I lay there with filthy water sloshing around me as Glory knelt on my right and P-21 on my left. The cyan pegasus clutched her forehoof in pain, and I felt the guilt push me over the edge. "I can... I can take on an army of Harbingers. Kill a ghoul monster. So why can't I give a filly a chance to live?"

"Because you're a fucking idiot, Blackjack," Charity said as she sat in the doorway of the post office. Slowly I sat up, looking at her as if she were speaking zebra or something. "You don't value yourself," the filly said scornfully. "You put everypony else above you. Your friends. Strangers. Even your fucking enemies. Because for some reason you think that your life is worth less than theirs."

"Medley... she's..." I rasped softly.

"She's dead," Charity said firmly. "She's not the first. She won't be the last. But you killing yourself won't change that. You can't give her life, Blackjack. Not even you

can do that.” I stared at the spot where the heap of beams and sheet metal lay in a scattered lump and felt something tense inside me. Do better, it insisted.

I tried.

Do better.

I want to.

Do better!

I don’t know how!

Do better!

“I can’t! I can’t do any better!” I shouted as I clenched my head in my hooves. “I try and I try and I do all that I can and I don’t know how to do any better!”

They all stared at me. There was no point in trying to get the remains out till after the rain stopped. All the Crusaders. Harpica, the ghoul pegasus holding the undead filly Lacunae had saved. The workers who were complete strangers looked on impassively as the hero of Hoofington failed before their eyes. P-21 holding a pitying Scotch Tape, the filly’s designs and plans getting ruined in the rain. Even Caprice and Charity side by side, the former wary and the latter scornful, watched me carefully. Lacunae stood beside Sekashi and the mournful Majina, Rampage, and the stoic Dealer before the zebra’s little house.

Then I felt Glory take my hoof between hers. “That’s because you’re trying to do it all on your own, Blackjack. You try to take all the blame. All the guilt. All the pain and suffering. You’re trying to give us all a better Wasteland on your own. . . and you can’t.”

“You can’t fix all your mistakes by dying, Blackjack,” P-21 said, his voice barely above the hiss of the rain. “You can’t fix 99. You can’t unkill the people who died. You can’t unbreak a pony’s heart.” Everypony just stood there in the rain.

“Just bad luck,” a colt muttered as they looked at the wrecked buildings. “What with the rain and all. . .”

“No! Not bad luck!” Scotch Tape cried as she stepped away from P-21. “Look, I don’t want to insult you after this but. . . but this is stupid! This isn’t how you’re supposed to build things! If that building had been built right, then Medley would be alive right now!” Scotch Tape said as she pointed at the tumbled structure.

“Are you saying we killed Medley?” a filly challenged.

"No! But there's a right way and a wrong way to build things. You can't just put beams on a roof, hammer them into the walls, and think it's going to stay up!" Scotch's voice started to rasp, and the filly began to cough and fight for breath in the rain.

"Come on, let's get home," P-21 began, but then Scotch shook her head and pushed away.

"I know this is your home. I want to do better too. I want this to be a better place to live. I want this to be a better world! But if you won't listen to me, then there's nothing I can do. I'm just like Blackjack." She looked at me sadly and then back at the others. "Please. Let me help."

There were angry mutters and shakes of their heads. Talk that she wasn't one of them. Not really. She had her father right there. I looked at Charity, standing in the rain, chewing on her bottom lip as she scowled at Scotch Tape. She looked as if she wasn't quite sure what to do.

Finally, the yellow filly asked in a voice barely heard over the rain, "All right then. What do you suggest we do?"

Scotch Tape looked at her, and a smile bloomed on her face. "Well... first... let's get her out from under there..." The salesfilly blinked, and then her scowl faded and she smiled, giving Scotch a tiny little nod.

And with that everypony except Glory started to move the wreckage. Together they pulled it apart and tossed it into the flooded road. Eventually a muddy little body was pulled from the churning water. I couldn't bear to look at it as it was borne away. Scotch gave a few more instructions like staying clear of the rest of the standing buildings before P-21 put his hoof down, loaded her on his back, and headed for home. Rampage went back inside while Lacunae helped take down some of the riskier structures. With the ditch more or less clear, the water returned to flow unimpeded towards the river.

"I can't love you like this," Glory murmured beside me as she hung her head. "I want to, Blackjack. I do. You're a good pony, even if you're an insufferable screwup. But I can't give my heart to a mare who doesn't think she's worth it. You've got to live, Blackjack. You're so willing to give anypony else help... but you won't let you help yourself."

I lay there, rain falling on my synthetic eyes as I stared up into that endless gray. "I don't know how, Glory. I know I need help. I know that what I'm doing is wrong..."

but I don't know how to fix it. I can't trust myself anymore." I closed my eyes. "How is anypony supposed to help me?"

Then I felt her move atop me. Her feathers spread out and shielded me from the rain as she blanketed me with her body. It's not something I could imagine Rainbow Dash ever doing. Maybe that was why. I extended my fingers and reached up behind her wings and held her to me. I knew I should be helping clear the tumbled debris. I should have been helping the crusaders bury Medley. I should've been checking on Scotch or helping my friends or... or...

He dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And so he drowned...

I needed help. My friends needed help. Everypony did. And no matter how I kicked myself for Medley; for not being able to save her... it wouldn't change that. I buried my nose where Glory's shoulder met her neck and held her. She hummed a soft little tune, like a lullaby, and I slowly relaxed bit by bit.

"Come on. Let's go get out of the rain," Glory murmured softly in my ear.

"Okay. I'll admit it's a little bit kinky, but is this really supposed to help?" I asked, flushing a little as Glory clicked the lock closed on the collar around my neck with a definite note of finality.

"Hopefully, it'll remind you who's going to keep you from flying apart the next time you feel the need to try and save somepony at cost of your own life," Glory said. She tugged on the little heart-shaped lock with her mouth a moment, then smiled. "If I'm going to help you, I'm going to keep you till you accept how important you are to all of us."

I blushed a little more, but really, I had no right to argue. If this was a condition of her staying with me, then I'd have to accept it. And, in all honesty, I was willing to let her do this. I had no idea how I'd make it without her. I needed her like I needed air. "But where the heck did you even find a collar like this?" I asked with a little squirm as we sat together on my bed. I could barely get a finger between the black leather collar and my neck; definitely snug, though not quite cutting.

"Charity. She practically gave it away when I said what I wanted it for. Oh, and she gave me the blank memory orbs you needed, too," Glory said as she rolled me onto my stomach. "I know you want to help Rampage, and I think you should, but right now *you* need a little more help," she said as she stroked my spine. The contact and

attention made me groan, but I also felt a little stab of guilt. I'd failed to save Medley. I didn't deserve to—

"Yeouch!" I yelped as Glory whacked my backside hard. Being unaugmented, it was one of the places on me that could really sting! My cheeks flamed as I looked over my shoulder at her. "Glory! You hit me!"

"You were thinking about Medley, weren't you?" Glory asked as she looked into my eyes. Instantly I flushed, feeling very... confused. The cyan pegasus leaned towards me. "From now on, you're not allowed to do that anymore, understand? Not for Dusk. Not for running away. Not for having sex. Not for failing anything. I'm the only one that gets to punish you."

"I... buh... wha... huh?" I blinked in shock and bafflement.

"You heard me," Glory said as she stroked along my spine once more. "Any time you do something that deserves punishing, then I'll be the one to punish you. I'm not going to let you let it build up until you break down and do something stupid. And yeah, it'll probably hurt. But it's the only way I'll be able to be around you and not worry about the next time you're going to fly completely apart." She closed her eyes and paused, then added, "And I think I need this too. I love you, but you've really hurt me more than once. I don't think I'll be able to get over it if I can't."

"But... I mean... what if I have to..." I asked nervously.

"I expect you to be a good pony," Glory said softly. "And if you have to help... help... but if I think you're trying to use 'help' as an excuse for getting yourself shot, then you're getting punished. And if you do something that hurts me... you are getting punished... and if you start hating yourself and moping... you are getting punished." She hooked her wing in the collar's ring and pulled my face to her. "I love you, but I'm still really pissed, and scared for you. If I can't have some say in keeping you safe and helping you, then I'm not going to bother."

I pursed my lips, then sighed and slumped a little. "I guess I don't have a choice." She nipped my rump, making me jump and look at her in confusion over my shoulder.

"Of course you have a choice. If you really need me to stop, just call me Rainbow Dash," she said as she stroked my mane, making me murr at the contact. "But if we're going to be more than friends, I'm going to have to be in charge for now on." She bit my mane and gave it a tug, making me wince and groan a little. And shiver...

And smile. . .

That afternoon, she unlocked me from the bed, and I slipped off the sheets feeling. . . odd. Not just odd. . . oddly good. I'd confessed anything and everything that had bubbled to the top of my memory, and Glory had brought out a few more tools to use on me. I'd been spanked two times for Boing and four times for Medley and once for the Fluttershy Medical Center. A blindfold, hoofcuffs, and belt were used when it came to punishing me for Dusk. She'd gotten creative when the time came to answer for Stygius. . .

Funny. I felt more like a mare now than I had with him, which was odd, as I was with Glory. I never necessarily thought of myself as submissive, but after the long afternoon and night, I had to admit I had some positively juicy feelings inside me. Sure, she couldn't get my heart racing or make me gasp for breath, but she actually made me happy to be alive and with her. Our relationship had taken a sharp right turn into the chaos capital of the Wasteland. . .

And I couldn't say I minded.

Glory clipped a leash to the ring in my collar and flew ahead of me, and I followed her obediently. I was still bothered by Medley; there was no way I could stop myself from that. But now I had an outlet that was more than just me running myself into the ground trying to atone.

Scotch Tape stared at her plans as she lay wrapped in an old quilt by the fire. She glanced up at the pair of us and rolled her eyes. "Dad, make two more. The sex fiends have emerged."

Glory flushed a little, but also smiled too as she twisted the leash around her hoof and drew out the slack. "We aren't sex fiends," she said primly, then pulled me close for a kiss that had me on the ends of my hooves. "We just. . . got creative in our relationship."

"Told you, Daddy," she said, but then she started to cough.

Glory unhooked the leash and then flew to Scotch's side. She pressed a hoof to her brow. "Mmm. . . you feel a little feverish. Let me get the thermometer."

The olive filly pushed her hoof away. "I'm fine, Glory. Besides, after all you two were probably doing together, I'm scared where you'd stick it," she said, the little filly actually blushing as well before she looked down at her drawing.

"We weren't that bad, were we?" I asked P-21; my smile wouldn't quite go away. The blue buck was actually trying to cook something in the kitchen! To my amazement, it smelled pretty good!

"Well, I don't think quite as many people heard it as the 'champion' comment," he said causally as he watched the pots simmering. "Still, you're loud, Blackjack."

I moved closer, sniffing the dishes that seemed to actually be some sort of pie, tea, and a salad of some sort. "You're okay with what we're doing?"

"You're a grown mare. She's a grown mare. You're both safe and consenting. Beyond that, it's none of my business. Don't involve Scotch Tape, and I'll be happy." He glanced at my rump. "Just a suggestion, though? Go easy under the tail when you're starting out." Wow, look at me blush!

"Oh, Celestia, I hadn't even thought of that," Glory murmured, then silenced Scotch's retort with a thermometer popped under her tongue. I feared for my backside.

"Sexcapades aside, I still want to try and help Rampage. Where is she?" I asked with a little frown.

"Lacunae has Rampage and Boo in her room," P-21 replied. "She keeps cycling through personalities. Lacunae just levitates her when she gets violent. At least she's easier to handle when she's a filly."

"She hasn't tried to hurt Boo, has she?" I asked with a worried frown.

"No. Apparently three of her souls think she's their daughter or something. Of course, as soon as she snaps out of it, she's all confused. Like she remembers parts of it but not others," P-21 said softly. I remembered how I felt after I'd died, the certainty that something had happened while I'd been gone. Something vitally important and wrong, but that I couldn't actually remember it.

"The souls within her have no memory of their own past their death," Lacunae said softly in my mind. "When they manifest, they rewrite a small portion of Rampage's mind. Some of them can re-access it, letting Rampage serve as a proxy memory for them. Some, like the Angel, have somehow learned to go back to that memory and use it to their advantage."

"Lacunae, that made no sense at all," I said aloud, earning a confused look from everypony. Of course, then the Goddess's control in my own head silenced me from explaining further. I forced a laugh and said in embarrassment, "Sorry. Lac's talking in my head." And... that was all I could get out. Glory frowned at me, and I said quickly, "Really. That's all. Just strange alicorny goodness!"

“What it means is, I suspect your idea might work. By examining the memories the souls have of their deaths, we might be able to piece together an understanding of how Rampage came to be,” Lacunae said in my mind.

“I’ve got to wonder. If souls can’t remember things after they die, how does Rampage every time she dies?” I asked, trying to think it through.

“I suspect the talisman regenerates her brain at the moment of death, preserving nearly all of her most recent memories.” There was a pause that set my nerves on edge before she went on, “It is also a sign that your theory of Rampage being a flesh and blood mare is...”

“The only theory I’ll accept,” I thought bluntly at her. “If we don’t find any proof, then we keep digging till we do. Like with science. And if we still don’t, then we lie till we do.”

“That’s not how science works, Blackjack,” Lacunae told me with an air of infinite patience.

“It’s how the science of friendship works,” I said aloud in my frustration. “Sometimes, to help a friend, you have to lie to them. At least until they can deal with it.” I flushed, rubbing the back of my head. “Sorry. More brain talking.”

I’d expected weird looks from my friends. Scotch Tape just frowned. “Yeah, but it still sucks huge butt, Blackjack. I mean, I still got a big old wad of nothing between my ears, thanks to you. I still feel... you know... nervous of machines and stuff. Really annoying.” Tell me about it, because the Goddess had made me unable to tell her. Glory and P-21 looked a little more worried, though, glancing at each other. I knew they probably weren’t all that keen on being around Rampage when she found out.

Deal with it. Rampage was a pony, and nothing was going to convince me otherwise. I just had to find a way to convince her it was true, too. And if I was wrong... well... I’m pretty experienced with messing up relationships. Maybe she and Glory could tag team or something.

I rose and looked at Glory and my friends, and she gave a resigned sigh and a little smile. “Go on. See if you can help her.”

I gave a crooked little smile to her. “And if I mess up...”

She smiled back, her eyes firm but warm. “I think either way...”

Scotch Tape groaned from where she was trying to draw new designs after the others had gotten soaked in the rain. “Could you either go help Rampage or go rut

each other again or something? Some ponies are trying to work here.”

I laughed and nodded, giving her another kiss and then looking into her eyes. “I really love you.”

“I know. I love you too,” she said before adding a moment later, “but I’m still plenty annoyed at you. So when you’re done...” She stroked my cheek, and Scotch Tape groaned in annoyance.

P-21 just laughed softly. “Just let them enjoy it while it’s novel, Scotch.”

The olive filly snorted, “Well, whatever. Probably won’t take long. Trust Glory to make kinky sexy spanking and whipping boring.”

“You’re just jealous,” Glory said as she hugged me and stuck her tongue out at the earth pony. Scotch’s eyes popped wide, and she immediately went scarlet.

“That... that’s not true!” Scotch Tape sputtered. “I could have a fillyfriend if I really wanted one and stuff. There’s boys here that’d like to be with me, too.”

Glory sputtered and looked at P-21. “Are you seriously going to sit there and... and...”

“Why?” P-21 just blinked in confusion. “She has her implant.”

Glory then lit off into a tirade about sexual propriety and how Scotch should wait till she was married, and Scotch immediately asked what marriage even was. I admit, even I was a little fuzzy on the concept. I gave P-21 an apologetic smile and abandoned him, slipping over to Rampage’s room. I gave a soft knock on the door, then slipped inside. Out in the living room, words were rapidly escalating and reaching a pitch that was starting to make my ears hurt.

Closing the door, I looked at the filly moping on her bed. With her worries exposed for all to see, I just wanted to hug her and tell her it would be alright. Lacunae stood by with the black circlet recollector and a small plastic baggie with a half dozen glass spheres within. “Don’t ask how I’m doing. You won’t like the answer. What do you want, Blackjack?”

I glanced at Lacunae. “Has she told you?”

“Yeah. You want to try to dig around in my skull and find some memories from the souls in me. Then you want to put them into that recollector thingy. What I don’t get is why you want to help me,” she said sourly.

“Goodiest good pony in the Wasteland,” I answered with a little smile. It didn’t last.

"Don't you want to know who you really are?"

"No. Not really," she said as she curled up and put her chin on the comforter. "Things are better this way."

"What?" I asked. Lacunae gave a weary sigh.

"Really. Now that I've thought about it, this is the best thing possible." And she actually smiled! "Rampage doesn't really exist. If she doesn't exist, then all the horrible things that happened to her don't matter. It doesn't matter if she killed somepony... or... or anypony..." She sniffed as tears ran down her cheeks. "So you can take your toy there and leave me alone, okay. Because... because this way is better. Understand? Better. And I'll still fight for you and stuff. But you don't have to worry about me anymore. Nopony does."

I looked at her for the longest time. I'd never thought I'd see Rampage on the mattress like this. You could cut the self pity with a knife. "Are you serious?" I asked with a little frown, thinking of how I'd wanted somepony to buck me off it. Charity's words rang in my ears. *'You don't value yourself.'*

"Blackjack?" she asked with a baffled frown.

"Are you telling me that Priest never loved a Pony named Arlostee? That she never had a baby named Hope? That she was never a Reaper or was one of my best friends?" I pressed as I stared into her pale pink eyes. "Well let me tell you something, miss pony who says she doesn't exist. Rampage wasn't afraid of anything. She helped me even when I didn't deserve it. Even when I hurt her for giving it. She always helped." I trotted next to the bed, looking her in the eyes as I smiled softly. "So let me help you now."

"You... you don't even know if it'll work," she said in worry. "Do you even know the spell?"

"What do you care?" I replied. "If you really believe this whole 'Rampage doesn't exist' garbage, then it shouldn't matter if I do it or not." I grinned at the uncertainty in her eyes, then put my hoof on hers. "But I believe the pony named Rampage does exist. That she's a special pony... unique... and I want to help her."

She shook her head and sighed. "Just... don't do something that's going to embarrass me. Like take away my bladder control or make me only able to talk in rhymes. Okay. Kill me if you can, but don't leave me lame."

"I'll try," I replied with a gentle smile. "I've got no idea what I'm doing, but... I'll try."

Magic bullet. Light spell. Now I was trying a memory spell? I bit my lip as I touched the tip of my horn to her brow, then closed my eyes and concentrated. This was the first time... no. Not my first. I'd done this to Lacunae, too. I could feel... something. It was like a memory orb, but instead of the world swirling away, it was like looking into a deep pool of flashing, churning lights. So many of them. I tried to push myself into that pool and get closer to the lights. Each one I tried to grab faded away.

No. I couldn't just grab them. I had to be patient. Calm. Fighting the strain in my horn, I kept the connection going and waited. Soon the memories drifted closer. I saw flashes of images in that bottomless, dark void. One that drifted right beside me had flickering images of Twist, and I reached out with my will and touched it...

oooOOOooo

I'd been in so many memories by this point that I almost automatically assessed the body around me: mare... very fit and healthy... earth p- no... this, body was like an earth pony, but there were several subtle differences with the way her body moved; the breeze around her tail was another giveaway. There was an unusual lightness to her hooves as she trotted along towards several low buildings right adjacent to the Miramare base. As she approached one door, I saw her reflection in the window. Red stripes. Shujaa.

The door opened at her approach, and out stepped Twist. The mare had a tired, resigned look on her face. She closed the door softly behind her and then swiftly embraced and kissed the zebra quite ardently. Even though she was still a young mare, Twist had clear wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Her chopped mane was a little more frazzled and had pink highlights in it. "How is everything?" Shujaa asked, glancing at the door.

"Fine. Everything's fine." She glanced back over her shoulder and then at the zebra. "She doesn't know. I hate telling her goodbye. I feel like, if I do, I won't be coming back."

"You should tell her next time," Shujaa said as they parted in their embrace, and the Proditor zebra looked up in time to catch a curtain in Twist's room swaying back and forth. She pursed her lips, then looked at Twist. "You should tell her now."

"No time," Twist replied as she turned and trotted towards the airfield where a half dozen skywagons waited in rows, soldiers milling about. "We were supposed to lift off five minutes ago. Did you get the briefing?" Twist asked as she walked briskly in her tan combat armor.

“Yes. A whole legion wishing to defect. It is hard to imagine. I hope that Rainbow Dash’s information is accurate this time,” Shujaa said as she walked along beside her. Unlike Twist, the zebra wore a sort of harness that was very snug. When I had a chance, I had to ask Charity if she could find one for me. She was virtually unarmed save for a dagger in a sheathe on her left forehoof.

As Twist approached, the soldiers around the skywagons fell into two rows, mostly earth ponies in battle saddles with a few unicorns and pegasi. “Sergeant,” a few said, while the others stayed silent and serious. She looked over their weapons and equipment as Shujaa followed in her wake. The zebra’s eyes lingered on Twist’s backside a little more than was probably necessary. Three other ponies whom I assumed were also sergeants inspected other groups while a fourth pegasus sergeant checked the harnesses of the pegasi getting strapped into the skywagons.

Finally, four ponies trotted forward, three in combat armor while the fourth was in a tan dress uniform. “Colonel Cupcake,” Twist said with a salute. The hefty white pegasus looked at her and let a smile curve his lips fondly before he became all business again.

“Still your hooves and open your ears,” he said loudly. “Two hours ago, the Ministry of Awesome intercepted a zebra communique about a legion of their warriors wanting to defect. Given that they had a kill order attached to it, we think the communique is pretty genuine. So we’re going to find this legion, and if this is on the up and up, we’re going to give them a little vacation from the war. Now I’m briefing you personally because the legion named is one of the oldest that had ever fought us in this war. They’ve been doing this for twenty years. If they’re willing to throw in the towel in now, we want to know why. That means no itchy trigger bits. No mistakes. Nothing. Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir, yes sir!” the soldiers said in unison.

“Fall in to your transports. Dearest Luna, soft and strong!” He called out.

“Let us honor you in song!” the soldiers called out in unison in return. He saluted them, and they returned it. The other officers snapped out for them to get to their transports.

The ponies and lone zebra rushed to the waiting skywagons, and minutes later they were lifting off and flying southward through the night. The usual Hoofington drizzle hissed against the covered roof as they flew through the darkness. The soldiers waited in rows, occasionally talking in low voices. This was how I learned that zebras also had exceptional hearing.

"What the hell is that stripe doing here?" one soldiermare asked in a murmur.

"Shut your mouth, idiot. That's a Proditor. She's the sergeant's very special somepon...er...zebra," a stallion said darkly.

"Oh, gross. You're telling me that the sarge is rutting with a damned stripe?" the mare said in disgust. "I can't believe I asked to transfer to this unit."

"Transfer out, then. She's the last of the Marauders. Sarge Twist is a fucking legend. I'd rather serve with her than a whiny transfer that hasn't had a dozen of those damned zebra robots hunting her down," the stallion grumbled.

"Oh yeah? Well I've been hearing folks talk saying they're gonna give her a retirement pretty quick. I mean, you got to ask yourself, when the horseapples fall, is she going to save us or save the damned stripe?" the mare snorted.

Then every stallion and mare turned almost as one and glared at her. The stallion then muttered softly, "You better shut your mother bucking mouth right now, or you won't get the chance to transfer. Understand?"

"That's enough talking. Zip it," Twist said as she walked along the center aisle to stand besides Shujaa. "They're chatty..." the mare muttered.

"Is it true?" Shujaa asked in a near whisper.

"It's not true till they take my stripes," the soldier said, looking at the zebra with the tiniest smile. "If something should happen out there..."

"Nothing's going to happen. This is just a wild goose chase with hazard pay. There's no way the first legion would defect," Shujaa replied evenly.

"Then this is probably a trap," the pale mare countered. "So if anything should happen..."

"I know. I know. I'll take care of your pet," the zebra said with a smirk.

"She is not a pet!" Twist retorted.

"I stand corrected. Your feral beast."

"You're impossible," Twist sighed and then shook her head.

"And you're adorable. Now hurry up, glare, and say something intimidating before I kiss you and make you blush," the zebra breathed.

Twist did so, barking out instructions, making rude speculation about some ponies' lineage, warning everypony to check their fire, and making sure their gear was ready.

Most of the soldiers were paying attention, but the soldier mare who been talking before did so with a poorly concealed sneer.

The skywagons set down into the night in the middle of a barren landscape. The rain poured into gullies and arroyos, and ponies blundered about a bit as they adjusted. Shujaa had no problem moving about, her unarmored hooves barely slipping in the mud.

“Proditor,” a mare called out in a serious voice. Shujaa spotted one of the officer ponies. “I’m counting on you. If the first legion is out here, you’re our best chance to find them. If this is a trap, you’re the best equipped to warn us.”

“Yes Ma’am, Captain Grizzly. I’ll send up a red flare if this is hostile. Green if I find a group for extraction,” the zebra said crisply. The sergeants were all making sure everypony could say ‘surrender’, ‘drop your weapon’, and ‘follow’ in zebra as I moved out with the grace and silence of a ghost. She leapt across the gullies and skirted around rocks effortlessly. Soon the soldiers were left behind as she moved through the almost absolute darkness.

Then she came across blasted robots in the muck. They weren’t like protectaponies. These were sleek and black. They reminded me more of the cyberdogs I’d seen in the tunnels. First she came across one. Then three. Then a half dozen. Some were larger than others, resembling mechanical manticores. “What are hunter killers doing here?” she murmured in worry, and proceeded with more caution.

She must have been moving for at least hour; every now and then she could see the soldiers in the distance trying to pick their way through the rain and mud and making terrible time at it. The rain was letting up, but the water still sheeted down into the muddy crevasses. Even Shujaa had to watch her hooves to avoid sliding in.

Then there were four zebras in the dark twenty feet away. They wore black armor that blended in with the night, and only the stripes on their faces gave any hint to their species. And the instant that Shujaa saw them, they saw her. Almost in unison, they lifted their rifles and they stood like Lancer. The rifles let out a stream of soft trills without even a flicker of muzzle flash.

As quick as a ghost and silent as death, the knife was in her teeth. She moved around and then was on them. A slice disemboweled one. A second was sent staggering back as a double hoof kick collapsed his sternum. A third was knocked onto the wet ground, and then all four of Shujaa’s hooves came down on his throat. She closed to the last, shoved his rifle barrel up, then plunged the dagger into his chest. Then there was a trill, and Shujaa’s torso exploded in pain. The first zebra,

his guts in the mud, was still fighting. In fact, he didn't seem impaired at all.

Then two pale hooves came up from behind him and twisted his neck with a resounding crack. The zebra dropped, joining his entrails in the muck. Twist rushed up to Shujaa. "Are you okay?"

"They make zebras more disciplined than I remember. Most give up the fight when you spill their innards." She pulled herself to her hooves. "I will be fine." Indeed, I could feel the familiar sensation of magical regeneration slowly closing her wounds.

"I guess you were right. Trap," Twist said with a frown.

But Shujaa didn't agree right away. Her eyes focused on the slain zebras. "I'm not so sure. These aren't first legion." She turned them over so they were all on their backs. Something about them must have struck the mare, because Shujaa kept looking from one to the next. They all looked the same. Zebra stallions. Same black armor. Same weapons. Same stripes... and the gutted stallion hadn't just spilled his organs. There were wires and cables dangling from that gory cavity.

"Now you see," a voice said from the darkness in heavily accented Pony. "Now you see the depths our Caesar has sunk too. First machines without honor, and now these new abominations." The speaker stepped closer, and I was struck by his powerful physique... and just how ragged he looked. More soldiers came staggering out of the gloom and drizzle. All were filthy, bedraggled, and wounded to some degree. The few who had barding and harnesses were in dire need of replacements.

"Legate Honorius," Shujaa said breathlessly. He gave a weary nod.

"What are they?" Twist asked as she stared down.

"We do not know. A year ago, the first came. From a distant tribe, we were told. 'The Children of C6yotl.' They did not speak. Did not laugh. They sang no songs and told no stories. But they could kill. First singularly, then in threes and fours, then by the dozens they took the places of good and honorable soldiers." He spat on their bodies. "We refused to accept them. Then we learned there was no refusal. If we would not, we would be replaced by them." He gestured at the dozen zebra around him. "This is all that remains of the first legion."

Shujaa gasped something in zebra. Twist echoed her shocked tone, "This is all that's left of a thousand soldiers?" He nodded grimly.

"We need to get you to safety. I know the Ministry of Awesome is going to want to hear about-"

“Contact!” a mare screamed in the night, and then the air filled with the buzz of two machine guns sweeping across the assembled zebras. Had they not been tired and worn, I was sure they would have been able to get to safety. Exhausted and out in the open, they were torn down by the spray of fire as the mare screamed hysterically. “Contact! Enemy contact! Enemy ambush!”

The injuries that Shujaa had sustained slowed her a bit. Some more of the wild spray caught her, knocking her back. Twist, however, was able to run to the side and keep out on her field of fire. She slid in the mud and slammed into the snide mare from the skywagon. “You fucking idiot! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The young earth pony slammed back. Had she been ten years younger, I was sure that Twist would have been able to take her. But with the mud, her hooves twisted out beneath her and she was sent sprawling.

“What am I doing?! Killing the fucking enemy! That’s what we fucking do! That’s the point of this whole fucking war. To kill them all!” the mare yelled at Twist. “Not fuck them like some sympathizing whore!”

“No...” Shujaa croaked as she struggled to her hooves. “Come on... heal faster...” she panted.

Twist charged; she had six feet to cover. After that six feet, she could take the mare apart in hoof to hoof combat.

But the soldier only had to bite a bit.

The machine guns roared, ripping into Twist before she was halfway.

“No!” Shujaa screamed as she finally rose and charged as well. Blood dripped from the holes as the earth pony swung her barrels towards her and let out another burst of fire. Shujaa was fast, but not faster than a bullet. Bones shattered, flesh tore, but she didn’t drop.

“What? Are you upset because I killed your sympathizer fuck buddy?” she sneered and blasted Shujaa again, sending her to her knees. “Fucking Marauders. Only Big Macintosh was a Marauder. When he died, it was fucking over.” Shujaa got to her hooves again, and then screamed as more bullets ripped into her body. “Just fucking die already, you stupid stripe!” she screamed as she fired yet another burst. Every piece of Shujaa’s body burned as she rose yet again.

“What are you going to do? Huh, Stripe? What are you going to fucking do?!” she screamed and then bit the trigger once more.

The guns were silent. Then the zebra's bloody hooves lunged forward and grabbed the mare's neck. "Wait till you're out of ammo," she said simply, and then twisted her whole body around. The mare's neck snapped like a gunshot twice and she dropped, belly in the mud, face towards the rain.

Shujaa staggered her bleeding body to where Twist lay in the mud. The pale pony took short choking breaths, one eye looking up at the zebra. "Guess... I should... have told... her...good... bye..." she gasped, blood foaming at her mouth.

"No," Shujaa said as she slumped against her. The machineguns had ripped a hole through her combat armor and punched clear into her chest. I could see bloody black things in the hole, moving and glistening; it was never a good sign to see one's insides outside.

"Remember... re... remember... you promised... please..." she begged, then slowly went limp. The squirming organs began to move slower and slower.

"No!" Shujaa cried, saying something in zebra before grabbing the knife from her sheathe. It was long and curved, with one razor sharp edge and one flat edge. Then she reversed it, closed her eyes... and then... then she plunged it into her chest. The pain was absolute; there was no way I could imagine anypony not passing out. Yet she persisted, and then the tip hit something solid in her ribcage. She gasped, blood pouring from her mouth and nostrils as she jerked the blade back and forth, twisting it, cracking her ribs.

Then the pink pheonix talisman came into view along with a torrent of blood. The knife tumbled from her hooves as she screamed and tore it from her own flesh. The pain vanished, replaced by a terrible numbness. Shujaa trembled as she cradled the little pink stone, moving it closer to the limp earth pony. With her last ounce of strength, she shoved it into the hole. Then she collapsed on her side in the mud.

"Please..." she whispered... "please..."

Then there was a pink glow in Twist's body. Those wet organs began to move more and more, the wounds closing. But then everything was getting very dark, very cold, and very quiet. "Aeternum vestrum..." she whispered, and then all was silent.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself slowly from that deep well, leaving the rest of the images behind. When I emerged completely, there was a hazy light sticking to the end of my horn. I fumbled a few seconds, then grabbed an orb with my fingers and lifted it to the light. Some of the glow was sucked into the orb till it was filled. Finally, I relaxed, and the

luminescent fog was sucked back into the filly's brow.

"Well... that was... um... interesting..." I said as I tried to look at my own horn. My whole head felt like it'd been ripped open too. I wondered if I had burnt out my horn again, but I was too disoriented to check. I could still feel that knife probing inside my chest. "Okay. Good thing you're used to pain," I murmured.

Rampage swayed and rubbed her noggin. "Did you... was there... I mean..." She bit her lip, her eyes both craving and dreading answers.

"I can tell you how the talisman got from Shujaa to Twist," I groaned. "She put it there herself."

Slowly, I rose to my hooves. "I need to go lie down. Watch the memory when you're ready. Just... it hurts. A lot. Okay?" And with that I turned and staggered out the door and back into the living room.

Where we had company.

A pegasus mare sat calmly in a wooden chair while Scotch Tape and P-21 sat together on the couch. Glory sat perched on a stool, looking utterly petrified, her body completely covered by the sheet. P-21's grass pie was laid out on plates, and they all held teacups, but only the newcomer was drinking. Her coat was a light dove gray and her mane a collection of purples, lavenders, and highlights of pink. Even though she had the ragged look of somepony used to the Wasteland, there was some graceful quality to her I couldn't quite shake. Her flank had a brand on it that was nearly identical to the one that had been forced upon Glory.

"Oh, hello," she said pleasantly as she set her cup down. "You must be Security. Or is it Blackjack? I've heard so much about you."

"Nice to meet you," I muttered in a daze and sat down hard. "Um... who are you?"

The mare smiled gently. "My name is Dawn. I was hoping to speak to you... and I was wondering if you could tell me where my daughter Morning Glory could be found."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

51. A Good Day

“Hey, you know what this calls for?”

Maybe it was the lingering raw sensation of tearing a healing talisman out of my own body, or perhaps it was simply the aftermath of using a memory spell for the first time – and one thrown together on the spot, at that – but the scene before me really wasn’t adding up. My eyes travelled from the comely dove-gray mare to my sheet-wrapped love. The former sat on the couch with her eyes oddly closed in an expression of amusement while the latter perched atop her stool with her legs and wings clutching her body so tightly that I wondered if she would simply implode. I slowly turned my eyes to Scotch Tape, who was focusing intently on her cup of steaming weed water, and finished my pan by staring at P-21 as he poured another cup and offered it to me, meeting my gaze. The concern in his eyes was unmistakable. My eyes returned to the mature pegasus, and I blinked twice, ignoring the cup. My brain hurt way too much for tea. “Um. . . sorry. I have brain damage. Say again?”

“My name is Dawn,” she said amiably as she put her cup down on the table. The mare didn’t wear any barding or carry any equipment. She appeared about the same age as Mom and Rivets had been. Mature, but not quite showing the same wrinkles as the Ministry Mares had. She must have barely been past foalhood when she’d been adventuring with Big Daddy and the others. Her eyes seemed to be closed in merriment. Even when she was looking at us, she didn’t open them past the barest squints, but I didn’t get the impression that she was blind. Call me an idiot, but I doubted she would try anything just now. While her pale gray hide bore the scars of a few slashes and bullet wounds, they were old injuries. “I heard that my daughter Morning Glory is a close friend of yours. I was hoping to see her again. I also wanted to meet her dear friends,” she said as she smiled over her cup pleasantly. “Do you go by ‘Security’ or should I call you Blackjack?”

“Uh. . . Blackjack. That’s fine,” I said as I took a seat and shook my head. For some reason, my thoughts were all muddled. “And. . . ah. . . Glory,” I murmured, looking at my friends. I glanced at her and saw the tiniest little shake of her head. “Anyone seen Glory? Is she in town?” I couldn’t figure out for the life of me why Glory wouldn’t answer, given her mother was branded with Rainbow Dash’s cutie mark on her flank. Maybe this was another weird Enclave pony thing? Still, if she wanted

anonymity, I'd try and play along; if Glory was going to undermine her relationships, who was I to stop her?

"Yeah. In town. That's exactly where she is. Uh huh. . ." I muttered thickly.

"Really? How odd I didn't see her there when I stopped through," the gray mare said with a note of amusement before taking a sip. "This is quite excellent," she told P-21. The blue stallion looked about, flushing awkwardly.

"Uh... Riverside... Town. Yeah... that town," I muttered.

"Right," P-21 said with a confused look.

"That's it," Scotch agreed. "She's. . ." The filly scowled in thought.

"Getting spare parts!" said P-21 as the filly blurted simultaneously, "Buying healing potions." The pair looked at each other in shock, and P-21 stammered, "I mean buying healing potions!" just as Scotch Tape spouted, "No, she's getting spare parts!" Both gulped, and Scotch Tape opened her mouth in time for P-21 to silence her with his hoof pressing to the filly's muzzle.

"I mean, she's getting spare parts *and* healing potions," he said finally. Scotch Tape looked up at him, then nodded quickly with a grin. I glanced at Glory, but only her eyes were visible, locked on the floor beneath her. For some reason, I could taste blood, and my head was really hurting. Wasn't the healing talisman supposed to take care of that?

"My. I'm so glad she's such a hard worker," Dawn said in that odd, cheerful way. "I'd hoped to learn more about her in town before I came here, but they were all so busy with the mess, and I understand there was an accident too?" Her smile disappeared, replaced with a sorrowful expression. "The Wasteland shouldn't claim lives before their time." Coming from anypony else, that line would have been pompous, even sanctimonious, but the pegasus practically glowed with sincerity.

Maybe it was the experimental spell that had given me a throbbing headache or the fact I could feel the knife blade between my ribs, or that for some reason I was tasting blood, but I looked dully at the gray pegasus. "Right. It's nice meeting you. If you'll excuse me, I feel like I need to throw up glass. Sorry. Dashie?" I staggered for the stairs, and Glory looked at me in shock, then walked over as if sure that Dawn was going to peer through her rags and spring upon her. I tried to put a hoof on the bottommost step, but somehow it moved out from under me, sending me staggering so I nearly landed on my face.

"Blackjack, are you alright?" Glory asked in worry, then ducked herself underneath

my body and hoisted me onto her back. I didn't argue. My throbbing headache was getting worse by the second. I saw little drops of blood falling on her disguise as she carried my heavy body up, muttering, "Dumb question, of *course* you're not."

I just groaned, and the last thing I heard downstairs was Glory's mom saying politely, "What a curious young mare! I think she may look just like Rainbow Dash!" Glory laid me down on my bed, closing the door as we passed, and I felt more blood coming out my nose. I tried to send Lacunae a warning about Dawn and our story about Glory being in Riverside, but for all I know I told her to kumquat the picklebarrel.

My EFS display was weird, with a dotted line around the head of the diagram mare and her eyes were two x's. Apparently experimenting with memory magic had some nasty side effects I hadn't anticipated. There were all kinds of other displays and warnings, but I just translated all that as 'you broke yourself again, idiot'. I wanted to throw up, but my brain didn't seem to realize my stomach couldn't, so all I was left with was a crippling nausea.

Glory rolled me onto my side and dug around in her saddlebags for a strange little light on a stick. She shone it in my nose and mouth and ears as she examined me. "Tell me there's a secret cheat mode that kills my sense of pain?" I asked pathetically.

"I wish. Professor Zodiac didn't give me an operator's manual," she said sympathetically, but continued with a concerned little frown, "I thought you weren't going to hurt yourself anymore."

"I promise, when my head is better, you can spank my fanny till it sinks in. My head... not my fanny... I..." I groaned, closing my eyes tight. "Memory magic is harder than I thought. I sort of hoped that all I had to do was touch her forehead with my horn and woosh, magic happens!" My exclamation sent a shiver through me. Quiet now, thank you.

"Don't you have a book on magic from Tenpony?" Glory asked in confusion.

"Yes. A book on beginner's magic. For beginners," I groaned.

Glory didn't give up, though. "Did you even *look*?" Oh no, she was using the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' voice.

"Um... no?" I muttered as I covered my head.

She sighed and lay down next to me. "When you're better, your fanny is so getting it," she muttered as she held me gently and stroked my neck. The nosebleed had

stopped, and the pain was receding a little. At least, I could pretend it was with her snuggled against me. “Did it work, at least?”

“I got into a memory... one of Shujaa’s,” and I retold it. Really, the whole pain thing aside, it seemed pretty senseless. A bunch of defecting enemies gunned down by an overzealous transfer. If I learned somewhere that Trooper Kill-all-zebras was sent by Goldenblood as a part of his master super sneaky scheme, I was going to flip a table or kick a hole in the wall or something!

“So they were robots that looked like zebras?” she asked with a small frown.

“I... don’t think so. I mean, there were robot parts, but even if they were fancy and sleek, they were still metal. These were...” I paused, wanting to be sure. “These were cyber zebras. They had artificial organs and everything. Like me.”

Project Steelpony. Had the zebras stolen it? Had Goldenblood actually given it to them? Or had the zebras developed their own line of augmentation research? For all I knew, Steelpony had been stolen from the enemy in the first place. But there’d been too much meat involved for them to simply be robots. Augmented zebras, though... a very unpleasant thought. I’d seen what Lancer could do with a rifle. I didn’t even want to contemplate what he could accomplish with thumbs.

It was too much for a not-smart pony like me. So I turned, slowly... carefully... and faced her. “So. Care to tell me why you’re not telling her who you are? I’d have thought you’d have been hugging and catching up on old times.”

She closed her eyes with a sigh. “I know. And I should. I want to. But when I opened to door, I didn’t think of how much I missed her or that I could finally get answers to questions I’ve had for years. I... I wanted to know why she was here. It felt... contrived. My mother coming out of the Wasteland after all this time looking for me?”

“Contrived? Please. I’ve seen Goldenblood. He’s got contrived covering every inch of him. I don’t think he could fart unless it was part of a greater plot. Your mom is just...” and I paused, frowning. What was it about her? There was something... I stroked her cheek gently. “Ever think that maybe this is just a coincidence? A good coincidence?” Despite the long odds, it had to happen occasionally.

“I did think that,” Glory said shamefully. “And when I did, I wasn’t happy. I felt... angry.” She closed her eyes and scooted a little more against me. “She was just down there smiling. Like... like these years never happened. Like she was on her way home and decided to stop in and check in on me at school. ‘No big deal. See

you when you get home. Love you. . . '."

I thought about that. "Well, maybe if she knew you were you and what you've done since you've come down here. . ."

"Maybe," Glory murmured as she glanced at the door and then back at me. "But really. . . the more I think about it, the harder it is for me to believe she's here looking for me at all."

I didn't know what to say to that. I tried to imagine what it'd have been like for me if Mom left the stable one day, only to return several years later acting as if nothing had changed. I supposed I'd be pretty freaked out too, particularly if I were a magical copy of Twilight Sparkle. I sighed, nuzzling her ears till she eventually smiled. "Well, deal with it tomorrow. We'll find out why she's here and find out some way to explain all this to her," I said, brushing her rainbow mane with my hoof.

There was a soft knock on the door, and I looked over and tried to use my magic to open it. The jolt to my brain renewed my throbbing headache. "Yes?" I asked.

P-21's poked his head in, his voice low. "If you're done for the night, should I put our guest in Glory's room till she gets back?" I looked at Glory, who sighed, then nodded.

"Yeah, go ahead," I groaned, flopping my head onto the pillow.

"Right," he said, his blue eyes turning to Glory. "For what it's worth, I don't trust her." Was it because she was a mare? Glory just looked at her forehooves, as if hoping the answers would appear upon them.

He nodded to us and closed the door again. She slipped out of bed and locked us in before returning to my side. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you blasted your brain with that magic. Can't do anything naughty with Mom listening next door, right?"

I just blinked at her in confusion. She groaned and buried her face in her hooves. "Nevermind. Just try and get some sleep."

That was good advice. I just hoped that whatever was playing on the Psalm Memory Network would help with that. . .

The hallway stretched out in one long tunnel punctuated by tiny little bedrooms on one side and cloudy windows on the other. Foals, colts, and fillies all moved around with a hushed tone. Not that laughter was forbidden here, but it was an alien sound

in the sullen, gray building. Somepony had tried to cheer up the place with pictures of smiling children, but they were flat, stale images. No pony who lived here ever smiled like that.

I knelt down, two small hooves moving a ragged brush, trying to scrub the mud tracked in from the field outside off the faded beige linoleum tiles. It was raining again; that was nothing new. It was always raining, even when it wasn't. The filmy windows gave the impression of a constant downpour outside in the sunniest of weather.

"Hey Balm," said a colt as he trotted in, leaving fresh hoofprints across the just-cleaned floor. He wasn't being unkind. Most fillies and colts weren't around long enough to learn each other's names. You didn't want to stay here long enough to have ponies learn your name. I didn't reply; he was already heading down to his room, which he shared with two other colts. I silently started cleaning the messy hoofprints again.

"Let me help with that," an orange unicorn colt with a shaggy yellow mane said, watching me work. "You're never going to get this cleaned up, otherwise." And he took another brush from the bucket and started to scrub beside me. "You need to really assert yourself. Show this mud who's boss," he said as he scrubbed back and forth hard. When another earth pony colt stepped in, he pointed his brush at the entrant. "Muddy hooves. Clean them! Now!" The abashed young pony gave his hooves a thorough scraping on the mat before continuing on.

"Thank you," I said, barely above a whisper, as we finished the hall together.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a casual grin. "I'm Cheddar. I just got here." There was a little pain in his eyes, but there was nothing new. We all had sad eyes. "Your name is... Calm? Palm? Buzz Bomb?"

"You... don't want to know my name," I murmured as I carried the bucket to the back door and threw the contents out into a puddle.

"Yes I do," he contradicted, looking confused. "Why wouldn't I?"

"If you know my name, it means you've been here too long." I set the bucket and brushes in their little cubby behind the back door. "I've been here all my life. Ever since my mom left me here as a foal."

He gave a little frown. "I thought no pony stays here more than a few months."

I twisted my lips into the same mirthless smile I always wore, used to explaining this. "Most ponies don't. You won't. I can tell. So there's no point in knowing my

name. In a few weeks, you'll find a family. So really, there's no point in knowing it." I didn't raise my voice. There was always one every few months who wanted to be friends before they left. "But thank you for asking." I turned away to go wash up before dinner.

He darted in front of me, meeting my eye with his. "I promise you, I'm going to go find out your name. And I'm not leaving till I do."

It was a nice gesture. He hadn't been the first to say something like it. But really, all friends did was hurt when they left.

But he didn't leave; not that there weren't parents who wanted to adopt him. While pleasant and witty most of the time, Cheddar became the moodiest orphan in the place when prospective parents interviewed him. And when they moved on to another child, the friend emerged again. He got his magic first, then his cutie mark and his talent. He could speak any language after hearing or reading it for a little while. His scroll-and-fountain-pen cutie mark was quite the envy of most of the colts. Still, even with such an amazing talent, he still refused to let himself get adopted.

We'd climb up on the roof on those rare days the skies were clear enough to see the stars. He'd make up wonderful stories about life on those distant points of light. Silly stories that made me laugh, and sad stories that made me feel better about my own situation. And even though I'd told him my name several times, he pretended like he still didn't know it. Because he wouldn't leave until he did. That was the promise.

And so, I had a friend. And that dingy building was a little less gray and hopeless. As colts and fillies came and went every few weeks, we became their temporary mom and dad. I kissed boo boos to make them better and he taught the fine art of spitballs. Sure, we had to go to the tired adults who actually cooked the food and took care of the adoptions from time to time, but even they were happy for our help. And a dream began to settle in; a dream where we'd eventually become adults ourselves. And we'd leave together when we were sure the orphanage was in good hooves. And he'd travel all around the world deciphering important things, and I'd see a world I could never imagine. A world where gray did not exist.

It was a pleasant dream.

Then, one day, Cheddar was called from the cafeteria. I didn't think anything of it, at first. We weren't having adoption interviews that day. I heard the sounds of muted shouting and rose to my hooves and trotted to the door. I gasped at the sight of two magnificent white pegasus stallions in gleaming golden armor. And I heard my friend inside shouting, "No! No, I won't go! I won't!"

“Cheddar!” admonished the headmaster. “One does not speak to your Princess like that!”

Princess? I stepped closer, then faltered. Even though the guards didn’t move an eye, I could feel them watching me. I simply stayed in the hall.

“It’s quite all right,” came the sweetest, most wonderful voice in all the world. It was a voice from the world of my dreams. “Cheddar, at my school you’ll be able to use your talents not just for yourself, but for all of Equestria. You’ll be able to learn greater kinds of magic and make a fresh start for yourself. You have so much possibility and potential, and the Headmaster knows that you could have easily been adopted by now.”

“It’s. . . it’s my friend, Princess. Psalm. She’s here too,” he said slowly. “Could she come to your school with me?”

“Ah, yes. Psalm,” said the headmaster delicately. “I’m afraid that she wouldn’t be a promising candidate, your Majesty. You might as well have an earth pony student as her.”

“Don’t talk about her that way!” Cheddar snapped. “She’s. . . she’s just fine with magic!”

“I understand the bonds of friendship, Cheddar,” Celestia said in a firm, yet compassionate voice. “If she doesn’t have very much magical talent, I don’t think she would be happy there. She’d be surrounded by students of greater skill, and, despite my best efforts, many of them would look down upon her. I-“

“Well then that’s it,” Cheddar interrupted firmly. “Long as my friend is here, then I’m here too.”

“I’m terribly sorry about this, Your Majesty. Psalm is pleasant enough, but sad. No pony wants to adopt a filly who never smiles. They think there’s something wrong with her,” the Headmaster mumbled. I retreated down the hall as I heard hooves approach the door. “Now, I know the children will be overjoyed to meet you. They should all be in the cafeteria, Your Majesty.”

I didn’t go into the cafeteria. I heard the inhalation of awe and the cries of glee and even a few who cried for joy at the sight of our wonderful ruler. Instead, I hid. There weren’t many hiding spots in the orphanage, but I’d found them all. Unfortunately, I’d shown them all to Cheddar. Still, there were a few that even he’d hesitate to check. After all, no sane pony would hide on a roof when it’s raining. I even caught sight of the Princess as she left in her glorious golden chariot to a life and places I couldn’t

understand. And she'd wanted to take Cheddar with her. . .

"Hey. Shawalm?" called a voice from the roof access hatch, and I clenched my eyes as the rain hissed off the wooden slates. "What are you doing out here? You missed the Princess," he said in worry as he trotted out. His mane immediately flattened in the steady drizzle as he took a seat beside me. It was starting to get dark. . .

"No, I didn't," I said as I stared at the cool Hoofington rain beading on my hooves. I wanted to hold onto the droplets, so clear and pure, but like everything else they trickled away from me. My voice was every bit as soft as the rain as I continued, "I heard you talking. She wants you to go to her school."

He sighed. "Yeah. Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. She wants to see if I can translate stuff like griffin runes, zebra glyphs, and dragon clawscript. I told her I wasn't interested." He nudged my shoulder. "I got to stay till I figure out your name."

For one brief second, I felt warm and smiled a little. Just a little. Still, it made what came next all the worse. I closed my eyes and spat out the words that were choking me. "You should go."

He started to laugh, but that quickly died. He knew I didn't make jokes. "Come on. I won't deny that it was tempting, but I couldn't just leave you."

"You should have left months ago!" I said sharply, turning my face from him. "You. . . you could have had a home! After a week. The only reason you're staying in this horrible place is because of me!"

"Well, yeah!" he said in angry confusion. "I mean, you're my friend."

"I can't let you throw your life away for me," I replied and stood. "I'm not worth you giving up a future where you could be somepony! Everypony here dreams of finding a family again. Everypony. You lost yours. I never had mine. And there's twenty other colts and fillies who could only dream of having the chance that you're throwing away! It's stupid, and you're stupid for doing it!"

He stared at me in shock. "But, Psalm, I— You. . ." A hurt look rose in his eyes and he asked in a voice I could barely hear over the rain, "Would you go and leave me if she offered it to you?"

I couldn't look at him as I spat out the lie, "In a heartbeat." And with that, it felt as if my own heart had stopped.

There was no answer but his rapid breathing. Then he said sharply, "Well. . . I guess I better go pack then!" When I didn't say what he wanted to hear, he spat out angrily,

"Wouldn't want to miss my golden opportunity, would I?"

"I guess you better!" I shouted back, clenching my eyes shut. If I looked at him... If I looked...

"Fine!" he snapped.

"Fine!" I yelled back.

"If I'd known girls were so... so... urrrgh!" He trotted to the hatch and slammed it shut behind him.

"Goodbye," I whispered as I turned my face into the rain. Cold rain, and warm.

I don't know how long I sat there. I was still up there when the golden chariot returned, sans Princess, to take Cheddar away with his small bag of belongings. He looked up at me, but he didn't wave before he flew away. I felt a chill, but I didn't much care. I didn't care about anything at that moment. I'd broken the one thing holding him to this dreadful place. The children would be upset. Mommy would be sad and Daddy would be gone; nothing new to some of them. And I'd stay here and grow up and grow old and try to help every last one of them find a better place to live. And then, I'd die here.

"Not that it isn't terribly dramatic, but don't you know young unicorns should get out of the rain?" a mare asked above me, her voice soft and bright. The rain stopped in a semi-circle around me and I looked up at a dark form drifting down to stand before me. Beads of starlight seemed to shimmer in her magically billowing mane and she wore a tiara the color of sky just after the last reds of sunset faded from view. Her majestic wings folded beside her and her horn glowed once. Instantly the water on my coat disappeared. Then she summoned a black wool blanket and draped it around me. I hugged the fabric close. "I was hoping to catch my sister here after I raised the moon, but it looks like she's still on the move." Princess Luna gave a small smile. "Now... what's the matter?"

I knew I shouldn't. That it was terribly impolite for me to do so, but I took one last look into her concerned blue eyes and pressed my face to her side and bawled like I never had before. Somewhere in all that blubbering, I got out the story of what had happened to Cheddar and how I'd thrown away my first and only friendship so he could have a chance at Princess Celestia's school and that now I was going to be stuck at the orphanage alone forever.

It had to be dreadfully rude to snot up a Princess' coat, but after I got everything out I was quite a mess, both from grief and the budding cold. "I see. It's a rare pony

who can give up what she wants for another's happiness. Your friend must be quite special for you to give him that." She lifted my chin and gave me a comforting smile. "I know that it's not easy being the sad pony. To feel like you don't deserve anything good in your life. But you do. Everypony does."

"I don't. . ." I muttered softly, looking at her pristine hoof. Not a future. Not a friend. Not even a mother or father. . .

"You do," she repeated, firmly. "So here is what I want you to do, Psalm. I want you to hang on. I'm going to see what I can do for you, but it may take some time. Everything's so busy right now, but I promise that somehow I will give you a way to be with your friend."

"You. . . you don't have to. . ." I whispered, horrified that I'd be such a bother to her. "I'm not worth the trouble."

"It's ponies who think they aren't who *are*. I know what it's like to feel worthless and unloved," she said as she lifted me with her magic and flew me down to the front gate of the orphanage. "Please, be patient. Have faith. I'll try and help you soon."

I spent the next week sick in bed. The children started to avoid me; Cheddar had been popular and more than a few of the young ones blamed me, correctly, for his leaving. I washed the hall of muddy hoofprints by myself, and it took me far longer than the old times when it had been just myself working the scrub brushes. I had no right to complain, though. I'd brought this on myself. For a short while, I'd hoped something might happen. That a chariot would come and sweep me off to Canterlot. Maybe I'd work in the kitchens; I'd be okay with that. So long as I could tell him I was sorry. The chariot never came, though. Princess Luna was a very important pony; I had to be patient. I had to.

Over the next month the orphanage got lonelier and lonelier. The youngest went first, then older and older. Soon we were a dozen. Ten. Eight. Four. The mare who cooked for us left. Three. We all ate together with the old stallion headmaster. We didn't talk. And little by little, things started disappearing into boxes and crates. Then those too disappeared. I washed the halls even though there weren't any more muddy tracks to clean. Two. One. . .

Finally, the orphanage was empty. "There's a new one," the Headmaster says, "A larger one for children whose families were lost in the war." He was going to see that I was transferred there. Then he was retiring. He says he's sure I'll find a family there. Those are the same words I've heard all my life. It'll be cleaner. Newer. Brighter. I can't imagine it. This dingy gray building is the world. It's all I know. I

can't leave it. Perhaps I can stay after the Headmaster goes. Clean the floors. Keep it intact for unwanted things. . .

He tells me to pack; says he'll return in a few hours to take me to the new orphanage. I am left all alone in the empty building. I walk the scrubbed, faded beige linoleum walkway. I peeked into the empty little bedrooms, bunk beds stripped of their mattresses and sheets. There're a few old toys, broken things, sitting forlorn in the corners. I gathered them up in a blanket. I don't know what I'll do with them; nopony wants broken toys.

Luna. She'd said she'd help. She'd said to be patient. I imagined I could hear her voice calling me. . . But I couldn't be patient any more. I was out of time! I crouched there, eyes clenched shut. "Please. . ." I whispered. "Please, Princess Luna. . . Please. . ." I trembled as I curled up, as if trying to disappear so that when the Headmaster returned, I'd be gone. Those three words kept me anchored there; the moment I couldn't say them anymore was the moment I was finished. They were the single light in the blackness that threatened to consume me. If it took me, I didn't know what I'd do.

"Psalm," came the soft voice above me.

Slowly I looked up at the beautiful dusky dark shape of the princess of the night. My eyes met hers, and I saw the understanding of the pain within me. Her lips slowly turned in a soft smile. "We were calling you, dear."

"I. . . I thought I was imagining. . ." My feeble words dribbled out before I lowered my gaze.

"I told you I'd come back." Luna said softly as she knelt beside me and stretched her soft wing around to pull me close to her warm body. The dam broke and all at once I was sobbing once more; but I knew this time the Princess wouldn't be troubled by a weeping filly. "Shh. . ." she hushed as she nuzzled me. "It's alright. I'd never leave you in a place like this." I blinked and looked up into her eyes. "I found someone to take care of you." At once my ears folded a little but she hugged me closer. "None of that. You're the last one, Psalm. It's your turn. You deserve a chance at happiness too."

She looked at the doorway. "Come on in. You're such a horrible lurker." There was a shift at the door, and then a handsome young stallion slowly walked into the room. His yellow eyes met mine with a wary look, the eyes of a pony who'd been hurt.

"Who. . . who are you?" I asked warily.

"My name is Goldenblood," he replied as he sat next to my bed. He looked up at the Princess. "Luna's... well..."

"I finally convinced him that leading a life of being a lonely intellectual was overrated," Luna replied, making the young stallion flush. "And he's agreed to look after you."

"Look after me?" I dropped my gaze. "But... I don't... I can't..."

"I know, but you do and you can," Luna said gently, smiling, but her deep eyes were filled to the brim with sympathy. "Listen, Psalm. I want to tell you something that I've never told anypony. A long time ago, I did something really bad, and my sister sent me to the moon. Time is funny there, but I was alone, and I was happy because I thought I deserved to be alone. I hated everything so much that the thought of being around anypony was too much to bear. And when I came back, the first thing I did was lash out at everypony around me, because I was still angry at them... but also, I was scared. It took me a year before I was brave enough to make a public appearance, and it took a brave mare to help teach me to be happy around others. I know there are times when being around others positively hurts, but that's better than being alone."

"Yes... Princess Luna," I murmured as I bowed my head. "I'll... I'll try..."

"Good." She slowly released me and gave us both a kind smile. "Now, I need to flash over to Fillydelphia and make sure everything's alright for Celestia's big ribbon cutting ceremony tomorrow. I can't believe they're actually opening a huge factory for making guns and ammunition. Can't imagine they'll really need that much." She looked over at Goldenblood. "You two can take the chariot when you're ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Goldenblood said with a nod of his head. The Princess beamed in return, and then her horn flared. In a flash of shadow, she disappeared completely.

"... don't want to go..." I murmured softly. I prepared for the onslaught of questions about what was wrong with me, how I could want to stay in this horrible place. "I know it's stupid and this place is dirty and closing but it's the only place I belong. The only place I deserve to be!"

He stood silently for a long moment before reaching out with a hoof and patting my shoulder. "I understand. This is your home," he said, not calling me silly. "But it's your turn to get adopted, Psalm. You're the last one here. It's your turn to go." For a minute we stood there with me just staring at the beige tiles, and then he sighed. "Nevermind. Take your time. The pegasi can wait."

It took some time. Time to gather my belongings in the black wool blanket, though there weren't very many. Time to collect the old toys nopony would ever play with again. Time to look at that grimy gray hallway and its rainy gray windows. "Should I call you... father?" I asked as we walked towards the exit. The word sounded strained and awkward to my ears.

"That sounds... odd. I'm barely old enough to have children of my own, let alone one your age. I think a better word is 'guardian', but even that sounds off," he said with a small smile. "Why don't you just call me 'Teacher?' It's fitting. I just got a job working at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns teaching history." He looked a little confused as he added, "Princess Luna herself recommended me, but I couldn't tell you why for the life of me."

"Oh," I said, contemplating a moment before asking. "Do you think I could come to the school with you from time to time? I have... there's a pony I know who goes there."

Together we stepped out the front door. It was one of those rare moments when the rain had stopped and everything was clean and crisp. A rainbow gleamed in the direction of Canterlot and made the golden chariot sparkle with light. It was almost as bright as the candle which appeared on my flank, its lone light the faith against the melancholy that had almost consumed me. For the first time since Cheddar had left, I felt a warmth return to me and Goldenblood smiled in quiet approval. I looked at my Teacher, giving him a smile I'd only shared with one other as he looked back and said, "Certainly. You can be my assistant..."

I woke and stretched, then gave a little pout as my hooves failed to come in contact with a certain beautiful mare with an uncanny resemblance to Rainbow Dash. A quick glance confirmed my suspicion: no Glory. I was also surprised to find that it was midmorning already. I usually never slept in so late, though usually it was because I was always trying to keep moving. I sighed and rolled onto my back.

"How's Rampage, Lacunae? Did seeing that memory help?" I asked Lacunae telepathically. It wasn't so much hard as weird. I supposed I thought about Lacunae and hoped she picked it up. Of course, for all I knew, all of Unity could hear me, but, if so, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"I do not know for certain. I think so. There is a difference between knowing you occasionally turn into a zebra and knowing that even if she is a part of you, she's

a good part,” my friend replied. “She says she’s going to do a little patrol. Keep an eye out for Harbingers today and think about things.”

I sighed and smiled, rubbing my aching horn. “So it wasn’t a waste. That’s good to know.” I frowned a little in thought. “Aren’t I breaking the rules, though? I thought that unicorns were only supposed to have a little magic that corresponds to their talent. But I can do magic bullets and light, and now I’m poking into memory magic.” Though, to be fair, that was like saying I was poking into brain surgery.

“That is a common myth, and one not entirely inaccurate. Before the war, a unicorn usually only possessed whatever magic they developed in their youth, and such magic was usually focused on their interests and thus usually related to their talent. But a unicorn’s magical potential is not limited by their special talents. Rarity exhibited designer skills but also knew a spell to find gems, as well as teleportation later in life. And if a unicorn’s magic was limited, what point was there in writing down spells or having schools of magic? Think of your own stable. Most of the unicorns were trained in magic appropriate to their field, regardless of their cutie marks,” Lacunae explained patiently. “Most unicorns, once they have the spells they want, simply quit studying.”

Rarity learning teleportation magic? I had to admit... the idea of being to teleport on my own nearly had me salivating. Popping out of trouble, appearing behind my enemies... I wondered if the brain damage had somehow made me smarter: I’d actually followed all that. “So a unicorn can increase her magic?”

“Yes, through substantial effort, and such growth is not infinite. There are some unicorns who focus all their efforts on one spell to great effect. Others possess a panoply of abilities but never take the time and effort to strengthen them. Only a hoofful... Twilight Sparkle... Clover the Clever... Starswirl the Bearded... devoted their lives to both. Sadly, I don’t see you being capable of matching their talent.”

“Yeouch,” I muttered. “Rub it in a little harder?” I pouted, rubbing my poor... compact... horn. I did the best I could with it!

Lacunae chuckled. “I don’t mean because you lack intelligence. Snips and Snails were hardly geniuses but were able to learn a magic utterly alien to unicornkind. No, I mean that such progress would take time and effort. You’d need to study. You’d have to be methodical about it. You have far too much shooting in your life to be a scholar. And I fear you don’t have a studious temperament.” She paused, as if aware I was giving the ceiling a shooty look. “On the other hoof, you have a

reckless willingness to experiment, despite the possible harm to yourself. It may be that magic is a talent in your family.”

Sighing, I let go of the dumb resentment. “Yeah. Mom aced every single security spell in the manual, and then some. But she never had Textbook teaching her,” I muttered, feeling my aggravation swap to my old stable teacher.

I knew where this was going, naturally. It was looking all the way back at Tenpony and the prediction that I was Twilight Sparkle’s descendant. If that were true, then it would make sense... but it couldn’t be. I’d failed to open the door. So clearly, some other mare had to be my ancestor. Maybe Pinkie Pie; who *knew* who the pink one had gotten freaky with? Or Rarity. There was a tiny, immature... okay, maybe not so tiny... part of me that liked the idea of being the descendant of the love child of Rarity and Vanity.

“You might find that, once ponies stop shooting at you, you might have a horn for magic. Perhaps. But it’s up to you. Magic takes time and effort, and certainly having resources on how other unicorns do their magic would be helpful too. But to be a serious student takes more than just intelligence. It takes stability. Something you’re lacking in spades.”

I crossed my hooves across my chest and pouted, because it was true. Mentally. Circumstantially. I couldn’t settle down and dedicate a month or two for study to try and see what other spells I could learn. I’d save that for another day when Horizons was solved, EC-1101 was at the bottom of the ocean, and the Harbingers were long gone. “How about Glory and Dawn? Have you seen them?”

“Dawn went out early in the morning, leaving a note that she’d return. Glory is downstairs. She purchased some... ingredients... from Charity. Now I fear that she’s experimenting in the kitchen. She really should leave the cooking to P-21. He has quite a hoof for it.” As if reading my mind, and for all I knew she’d done exactly that, she added, “P-21 and Scotch Tape went back to town. Hopefully the Crusaders will listen to her now.”

“Yeah. Hopefully.” I lay back and paused, then thought, “How are you doing, Lacunae?”

“I am the same as I ever was and ever will be. You know that, Blackjack,” Lacunae replied in soft resignation. “I cannot change.”

“I don’t believe that, Lacunae. I think you do change,” I said as I smiled. “The more the Goddess crams into you, the more everything inside you gets shuffled about.

That's change, isn't it?" The startled silence I received more than made up for my earlier indignation. Yes, Blackjack could, on occasion, come up with smart ideas.

"Well... in that case... I suppose I am... good?" Lacunae said warily, as if afraid that the answer would bring a backlash. "You are alive and safe. You are all reasonably healthy. You are more stable, as are Rampage and Glory. Relative to how you were, you are happier. That's all good, right?"

"But what about you, Lacunae?" I asked with a small frown. "Are you happy?"

"Please, don't ask me that, Blackjack. If you are happy, I am happy. It is the closest to happiness I can come," she said in that resigned voice, but there was something more.

"What is it, Lacunae? What's wrong?" I thought, fighting the urge to press hard for answers. It was difficult, because I caught a whiff of emotion. Over our connection I could feel something I'd never imagined would come from my friend.

Guilt.

"Lacunae?" I asked as I felt her trying to hide it, burying it out of sight.

"Please, Blackjack. It's nothing. It may not even matter anymore. You're doing so much better now. Please, don't ask," she begged, and I backed off. I heard a mental sigh of relief. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said, and then one last thing leaked through, "and I'm sorry."

Guilt? What was she guilty about? Lacunae had always been supportive and helpful. She'd been a good friend, and I was thankful that the Goddess had never made her do anything that required me to treat her as anything other than a friend. Ah, the Goddess. That must be it. She felt guilty because of the control the Goddess had over me!

I relaxed immediately. That was simply silly; she didn't have any control over what the Goddess could and couldn't do! She wasn't responsible for me being brainwired to Unity in the first place, either.

Then I heard the mental snicker in my mind and froze, trying to do everything I could to keep her out. It was futile, of course. She had my deepest secrets already, sure, but it was the principle of the thing. I needn't have bothered, though, as she didn't seem to be trying to do anything at the moment.

"Oh you poor deluded little fool," the Goddess purred in my mind, and I imagined a blue mare holding me from behind and whispering in my ear. "You still haven't

figured it out yet. . . no surprise. You see, your dearest Lacunae has betrayed you.”

“Shut up,” I growled, wishing I could mentally punch the silver-maned mare lying in my ear. “Lacunae would never do that. And if she did, it’d be because *you* made her do it.”

“Oh no,” the Goddess laughed in delight. “Not this time. This was all her. At the time I was rather put out that she’d done it, but now. . . heh. . . now I couldn’t be happier with the results!”

“Shut up! You’re lying! That’s all there is to it,” I said as stubbornly as I could. But that old refrain was growing a bit threadbare.

The Goddess persisted, her words oozing into my awareness. I couldn’t plug up my ears to stop her, and mentally chanting ‘LALALA’ was far less effective against her than it had been against me. “She did something to you. Something that’s hurt you more than you could ever realize. Something that’s almost killed you more than once. All for her own selfish gain,” the Goddess purred softly in my ear. “If you really want to know, go into her mind. Find what she’s hiding. Or don’t. Either way, it should be fun.”

There was no way to silence her, so I settled on ignoring her. My life in 99 had made me an expert at not thinking about things, though that skill had atrophied a bit. And now my own mind was supplying the venom. Had Lacunae done something to my mind now that we were connected, or perhaps something earlier in our relationship? Was there some poisonous strain of truth in the Goddess’s taunts; was Lacunae’s friendship false? If it hurt me, I’d endure, but what if it was done to my friends as well?

I could ask. I could. But if she denied or refused, what then? Would I force the answer from her? Could I? Could I force the answer from her by violence or guilt or crude memory magic if she refused? I sighed, closed my eyes, and peeked deep down in the bottommost pits of my soul, beneath all decency, all loyalty, all compassion and love. . . I could. So I would not ask. I’d have to do something else, and then I would close my eyes and hope that, if one of my loyalest and most true friends had done me a wrong, she would somehow tell me. As if she did not, then I prayed to slain goddesses that only I suffered for it.

So, unless the Goddess was going to force something (and I laid there a minute expectantly, crossing my forelegs over my chest as I stared at the roof and waited for her to do just that), I might as well get up and find out what smelled so interesting downstairs. I trotted out and down to the smell of something burning and the sight of

Glory hovering over the stove. Boo sat nearby, her head tilted as if trying to process just what was being created in the cast iron pan.

The pegasus glanced towards me and suddenly flushed, her disguise on the counter where the sheets were stained with 'ingredients'. "Oh! Hi, Blackjack. I had an idea and I was thinking of a way to make the perfect food for you," she said, then slammed her hoof down on the handle of the skillet, flipping something black into the air. Then she grabbed a plate between her hooves and with a swoop deftly caught what looked like an immense black cake. The plate shattered, and the dark discus fell to the floor and rolled like a wheel across to the pale blank. "Oh, shoot, it's heavier than most pancakes."

"Pancakes?" I asked in a daze. Boo took one sniff of the steaming, or smoking, disk, then snorted and recoiled, covering her nose.

"Well, that was how I started," Glory said as I levitated the black disk up. "But then I figured that instead of just flour, which wouldn't assist your digestion, why not add some grass for fiber? But then I thought that, really, a pancake like that would only be good for your biological aspect, so I added a layer of nails, and then some more grass and batter." I turned the disk back and forth before me. "Once I'd added them, I figured some crushed gems would also be ideal. And then I was worried that the flavor might not be right, so I crushed up some Sugar Apple Bombs for flavor. Then, just to make sure you got everything you needed, I added a layer of grease to keep your augmentations working smoothly."

"I'm not really sure that's how I'm supposed to be lubed," I said, watching the inexplicable blush on Glory's cheeks as I sniffed the black disk. Then I took a crispy, crunchy bite and chewed slowly and thoughtfully. Finally I gulped it all down and looked at the worried pegasus. I paused to consider how best to put this to her. "Well Glory, I don't know how to say this. You tried for perfection. . . ." I said gravely, then grinned. "And you nailed it!"

I held the disk in my hooves as Glory beamed and Boo sat back in confusion. "This is most perfect food ever! Cyberpony cakes! It's got everything I need for my body. And if I ever need to patch my armor, I can just nibble one till it fits!" Glory blinked as I popped out my fingers and swung the nibbled disk. "And feel that heft! I bet I could throw one twenty yards and take off a raider's head! Heck! I can just bite it into whatever shape I need! With this, I can be armed, armored, and fed all at once!"

Glory stared at me, looking a touch unsure as I took another bite. It wasn't some-

thing I'd be able to devour all at once. Something like this would take time. But as long as I had a half dozen or so of these, I'd be good for weeks. "Well, I'm glad you like them," Glory said in a slightly concerned tone.

"I wonder if I can light these on fire?" I mused as I turned it over. "Incendiary cakes of death!" I chortled. Boo simply snorted in dismissal of Glory's wonderful invention and started nosing around the cupboards.

"Okay! I'm happy you're so thrilled with my armor plate weapon baking," Glory said with a little flush as she gestured to a small heap of them next to the stove as I munched a little more. Mmm... axle grease and apple... yum! "I'm also glad you're doing better than last night." She gave a little frown. "You were talking in your sleep all night."

I blinked with a worried frown. Maybe she might figure out what the Goddess was doing from my nocturnal mutterings? "What'd I say?"

"I don't know. It was in zebra," Glory said with a worried frown. "I think you should stop experimenting till you know a little more about memory spells. Go to the Collegiate, talk to Triage, and find out how she does it. Or check that book you got in Tenpony."

I chewed thoughtfully and finally sighed. "Fine."

"I know you want to help her, and I do too, but..." she went on before she blinked. "Wait. What was that?"

"I said fine. You're right. I should know a little more before poking around inside her for more memories," I said with a simple little shrug of my shoulders. Boo pulled out a Fancy Buck snack cake and started ripping open the wax paper wrapper.

Glory frowned at me. "Who are you, and what did you do with Blackjack?"

I tried to maintain my dignity as I looked at her and she back at me. Our relationship was tense, but we both wanted it to work. I didn't want to live in a world without Glory. And in her eyes I saw endless worry barely kept in check. [a]"You're not worried I'll get in trouble?"

She frowned a moment, as if thinking about that. Then she bowed her head. "I know that I put a collar on you, Blackjack, but I can't keep you within wing's length all the time. So I am worried... but I also have to trust you, Blackjack, to stay out of real trouble. Okay?" she asked, but as I met her gaze, I saw the warning. If I couldn't control myself and prevent things like Yellow River from happening... I'd lose her.

Then I was distracted watching the blank tear open the package. “She knows how to open them now?”

The cyan pegasus frowned, then relaxed and smiled at the blank-flanked mare. “Yeah. Figured it out a day or two ago. Don’t know if it was Scotch teaching her or if she just picked it up on her own.”

I sat beside Boo and rubbed her ears as she munched down on the cake. Without a soul, you’re nothing but an animal. Could an animal learn to open snack cakes? I supposed so. Still, it was hard to think of a pony like her as having no mind or personality. “Like that, Boo?” I asked, and then levitated the black disk with the chewed edge in front of her. “Want a taste of a cyberpony cake?”

She looked at it skeptically, stretched out, licked the edge, and suddenly jerked back and snorted. She picked the remains of her cake in her mouth and trotted away, giving the black disk a sharp kick with her rear hoof. Unfortunately, it was perfectly aligned with my face. As I laid there a minute later, I reflected that I’d been correct: the cakes were *very* effective weapons.

I laid on the bed, flipping through the book on beginner’s magic. I’d promised Glory I’d at least look and see if there was any memory magic listed. I came across a lot of little magic tricks that I’d never thought of before. Some of the magic seemed a lot more than ‘beginner’. I tried to summon a door and ended up giving myself a throbbing horn ache as a tiny flimsy door in a doorframe appeared, slammed shut dramatically, collapsed into a pile of broken toothpicks, and then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Well, it didn’t say ‘practical magic’. Some of the magic, like walking on clouds, I simply couldn’t confirm if I’d done right or not. And one that created wings... well... I got through the first paragraph about cocoons and metamorphosis when my eyes crossed and I thought it best to move on. To my surprise, there was a section on ‘mind magic’ talking about making a bridge between two ponies by touching my horn to their brow. Apparently ‘diving in’ was discouraged; the book recommended pulling a memory into myself or pushing a memory into another. Just clumping minds together was apparently asking for trouble.

“What would life be without trouble, though?” I murmured as I levitated the book in front of me.

Then a folded piece of paper fell out of the back of the book, and I blinked in surprise.

I set the book aside and lifted it instead. “What’s this? Twilight’s bookmark?” I said with a little half smile as I unfolded it. Instantly, Twilight’s elegant hornwriting met my eyes.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with ~~great regret~~ a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation

What? I sat up immediately and read that line once more to make sure that my brain damage wasn’t acting up, then read further.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with ~~great regret~~ a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation and step down as Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Your ~~command~~ decision to execute Goldenblood without trial is a crime insult sad injustice unprecedented in pony history. I am ~~pleased~~ proud of the work that has been ~~committed~~ accomplished by my ministry and everypony working under me and am confident they will be able to serve Equestria admirably, but I cannot ~~remain a~~ part, in good conscience, be a part of this government any longer. I will inform my friends of this decision and hope that your reign is a good ethical better prosperous.

There were other paragraphs saying similar things beneath it, with lines edited or crossed out entirely. Other rough drafts were to Fluttershy and Applejack, telling both that she could not be a part of the Ministries any longer and suggesting neither of them should be either. There was a scratched-out section practically begging Fluttershy to talk to Pinkie Pie about stepping down from Ministry of Morale and asking Applejack to try and get Rarity away from Image.

I wondered if, if the zebras hadn’t attacked us, Equestria would have simply collapsed in its entirety? Without the Ministry Mares, would the Ministries stand? I understood that some of them had been figureheads to varying degrees, but even so, they’d been important symbols of the government. I thought about the legal briefs in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Prosecuting the Ministry Mares for crimes against Equestria? Prosecuting the Princesses for the same? EC-1101, a megaspell that effectively handed over control of the country to a new ruler. Project Partypooper, a conspiracy to eliminate everyone who would possess EC-1101. What would happen if there was no one that EC-1101 could connect with?

If Sanguine had been right... something bad.

Goldenblood had known. Hell, he was the grand architect of this whole scheme. This plot that had wrapped itself tightly around Equestria and the world. And he’d done something, created something called Horizons to deal with it. But something had gone wrong. Something that even Goldenblood had missed till it was too late

to stop it. He'd had Trottenheimer make a weapon of unimaginable power, but had been arrested before he could use it. Executed. Failed. What had he known?

I flipped open my PipBuck and brought up the megaspell program once again, just staring at the screen. The key to Equestria, Applebot had told me in another life. Something ponies would kill for. Something that made miracles work. And even after all that I'd been through, I still didn't feel like I knew any more than when I'd started!

A small part of me wished that I had pushed the button on that terminal and activated Project Horizons, just so that I'd know what it did.

I frowned at the folded piece of paper. This was pretty incriminating, not the sort of thing you just left around. It'd been stashed in the back cover of the book. I frowned as I thought back to that study and the scrolls within it. Personal. Private. Twilight's own study.

I clenched my eyes closed. Damn it, I hadn't been able to open the stupid Tenpony door! And now, more than ever, I had the overwhelming sense that I should have been able to open it!

Something was off, and for the first time, I couldn't stop myself from seriously wondering if there was some terrible truth behind the Goddess's snide accusations. Maybe there was something my friends were keeping from me after all...

"I have to admit, Blackjack, when you asked me for any tips we had on memory magic, I felt a sudden urge to run out to the badlands and play doctor with Hellhounds," Triage muttered, the blue unicorn lighting another cigarette and leaning against the walkway railing as rain drizzled into the muddy university quad. "Now, I got to admit I have a sick curiosity making me wonder just what's going through your head to make you want to know how to extract memories without giving yourself an aneurysm."

After soaking up radiation for an hour in Blueblood Manor, Lacunae had teleported me over to the Collegiate to find out everything I could about memory magic; after all, they'd been the ones who'd modified Scotch Tape's memories. I had to bully Triage a little bit with suggestions about 'learning as I went' and experimentation... each one seeming to have the effect of giving the mare a migraine. I guessed I would have had the same reaction if somepony told me they were going to try to clear a jammed gun by bashing it with a rock. Some ignorance was simply too

intolerable to go uncorrected.

I finished tucking the last of the notes into my saddlebags. “Well, as fun as aneurysms are, I have to admit that it’s easier getting through the day without them,” I said as casually as I could. Triage had once again swatted me about the noggin when I’d explained what I’d done to Rampage. Apparently I should be dead of a burst blood vessel in my brain at this moment; fortunately, Silver Stripe’s augmentations had prevented that. Lacunae stood nearby, quietly watching me. The alicorn had said nothing about teleporting me over to the Collegiate to pick up more notes on memory magic. Glory had warned me that if I trotted one step in the direction of trouble without her, she was going to put me in a harness she was saving for something ‘special’.

“Well, that’s all I know. If you were doing this to anypony besides Rampage, I wouldn’t have told you. I don’t think that mare can get much worse off,” the blue mare said as she took a long pull on her cigarette and let the smoke blast out her nostrils. “I actually found her once... four or five years back when I was trying to make my way to Flotsam by boat. Saw her tumble right over the Core wall and onto the rocks along shore. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Of course she regenerated, but wasn’t right in the head. Screaming. Babbling about a city of gore and flying steel. Sobbing. Captain blasted her with his gun twice in the noggin. She thanked him afterwards.”

The unicorn jabbed the cigarette at me. “So if you want to go crawling through her head, fine. It’s probably no more hazardous than a taint enema followed by a radioactive suppository, but it’s your ass.” She glanced down at my legs and took another thoughtful drag. “How’re the Prof’s parts?”

“Saved my life more times than I deserve,” I replied, making Triage snort. “Any luck with Steelpony?”

She twisted her lips sourly, then sighed. “With making full on augmentations? Nope. We just don’t have the fabrication facilities or engineering expertise for that. But we think we might have better luck producing less invasive talisman implants. Things that might make you a little stronger, faster, more charismatic, or smarter. We’re working on one design that simulates regeneration. Nothing as fast or impressive as your regeneration implants, but still something that’ll encourage cell growth to speed recovery and fight off disease.”

“Really? Healing talismans fight off disease?” I asked with a frown.

“You haven’t gotten sick since you got yours, have you?” she asked with a smirk,

and I had to admit that I hadn't. "Anyway, hopefully we can do some good business with Red Eye's forces."

"Wait? Red Eye? As in the slaving Red Eye? As in the evil organization threatening all of the Wasteland Red Eye? *That* Red Eye?" I blinked in shock. "You're not actually doing business with those slaving bastards, are you?"

Triage looked back at me coolly. "Why yes, I am. Not a lot of options down here in the southeast. We've got bad blood with the Society, and the Enclave are competitors. Ghouls over in Meatlocker and Rocket Town don't need much in the way of healing. So Red Eye is our best source for caps and ammo. We patch them up and manufacture healing potions for them and they keep us supplied with food and salvage we need." She caught my glower and shrugged. "Don't look at me like that, Blackjack. If I had alternatives, I'd take them."

I sighed; much as I hated it, I didn't have a right to tell the Collegiate what to do. "What about the Harbingers? Have you had business with *them*?" If so, this would probably be my last trip here.

She glowered. "Aside from them poaching members of my staff, no. They've got their own sources for everything; guns, food, potions. And they've been getting more and more belligerent. For all that pegasus prophet goes on about a grand new future and a glorious new world, the rest of them have a simpler message: join them or else." Triage gave a mirthless grin. "Even *you* can figure that one out."

"The prophet is a pegasus?" I asked with a frown.

"That's what I've heard. Never met them, though," Triage said with a smoky snort. "Just their flunkies. Their *well-armed* flunkies."

Triage took one last pull, spat the butt out on the floor, and stomped on it far harder than extinguishing warranted, twisting her hoof to make a point. "They're not quite at the point of outright hostilities just yet. The Zodiacs are patrolling every day keeping an eye out. It's just a matter of time before the Harbingers try something bigger than we can handle, and when that happens I'm hoping Red Eye decides to use some of his firepower to help us out."

I finally deflated. "Okay. Okay. I give." I'd told Bottlecap that I'd do something about Red Eye's occupation of the Paradise mall, but unless something drastic happened in the next few days, I didn't see me pulling it off. "Any other news?"

"You mean aside from Hightower disappearing in a flash of boom?" the unicorn said with a dry smirk as she shook out another cigarette. "Something's going on at the

Skyport. Lots more activity there. I don't know what they're doing, but they're up to something."

"Right," I said slowly, looking in the direction of the Skyport. "Well, I need to check on Glory's sister anyway... so I can tell Glory if... if everything turned out alright or not."

"Right," Triage said as she tugged her white labcoat closer about herself and turned to re-enter the medical school. I turned to where the alicorn stood alone, in the rain. "Think we can just hoof it? It'll only take an hour or two."

"You promised not to get in trouble," Lacunae reminded me.

"It's a walk from here to the Skyport. How much trouble could I possibly get in?" I asked with a small smile.

We trotted along Celestia Boulevard towards the east as the rain hissed around us. "Now those giant frogs. Those didn't count as trouble, okay?" I said sternly as we walked down the waterlogged road. I took another bite of the cyberpony cake I was levitating beside me. They were even waterproof!

"And that mutated river serpent with two heads?" Lacunae asked softly.

"We got away, didn't we?" I objected. "Sure, you had to teleport out of its mouth, but..."

"And that squad of Seekers?" the alicorn asked just as quietly.

"What? Only took us five minutes tops to shake them. I don't see the trouble. There was no trouble, understand?" I said pointedly, flushing as I imagined the sound of the smack of a belt.

The alicorn sighed. "I don't understand why you'd say it wasn't. You like Glory spanking you," she said flatly.

My cheeks burned, and I said primly, "I won't dignify that with a response. Suffice to say, while I like the attention and time I spend with Glory in any form, I don't want her to worry about me. I want her to be able to trust me to keep myself safe when she's not around."

Lacunae groaned and swayed a little as the scream of Enervation grew particularly acute, but I couldn't see how or why. A thought niggled at me. There was something... something about a disk? Rings? Something? I could feel it in my brain,

but every time I tried to pin down the thought, something else went wrong. “Are you okay?” I asked with a little frown. There was a boutique on one side and an ice cream parlor on the other. Red bars skittered about, but we’d been passing ruins rife with radroaches and hoppers for the last hour.

“I will be fine. I shall... endure...” she groaned, her wings drooping.

Wait a minute. Those bars were blue...

I stared at the boutique; there were definitely blue bars in there. A half dozen at least. Maybe some of those red bars were something worse than just vermin. “Go ahead. Find some place where the screaming is lessened. I’m going to go check this out,” I said softly as I glared at the boutique.

“You promised that you wouldn’t get in trouble,” Lacunae reminded me. “And you always get in trouble when you’re alone.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. I just want to check this out,” I said, looking over and seeing her skeptical look. “Really. If it’s trouble, I’ll back out. Promise.”

“I should have brought Glory’s leash,” Lacunae muttered as she took flight and glided silently down the road. Pulling out Vigilance, I moved slowly inside.

The boutique was a mess of ruined clothing and ponnequins standing like silent, rusting sentinels. The red bars weren’t zipping around, which meant they probably weren’t radroaches like most of the others. Rain poured through rotten holes in the ceiling and floor, and more than once I felt the floorboards yield alarmingly under hoof. Still, I avoided knocking over any of the tottery ponnequins in their waterlogged garments. I supposed only the Enervation kept them from mildewing away entirely.

I glanced at the register sitting on the counter next to an old radio. The room echoed with the constant tinkle of trickling water falling around me and splashing below. I couldn’t hear anything yet; for all I knew, the blue bars were in the building behind the boutique... or the building behind that. Why couldn’t EFS give distance as well as direction? One scavenging impulse acted on later, though, I discovered that the till still had twenty bits in it and that there was an old safe underneath. I busted out the old bobby pins and screwdriver, and three pins later I cracked it open. An old beam pistol, some gem cartridges for it, and a spark battery. Well, better than noth—

“Sign the bloody paper, you mules, and we’ll get you out of here,” a mare snarled from the storeroom at the back of the boutique. Well, it looked like whatever was going on was in the building after all! “Every second you waste, the Enervation’s killing you a little more. Can’t you feel it?” Hello? What is this?

“Just sign. You’ll have a safe new life with the Society,” a stallion said in a more pleasant voice.

“We don’t want to be slaves!” a mare cried.

“Serfs. Not slaves,” the stallion said reasonably. “You just have to sign the paper saying that you agree. Then we can all leave this horrible place. I’ll heal you all up, and you’ll be ready to get to work.”

“You sure I can’t fuck ‘em?” a deep male voice asked, making my hackles rise.

“Not unless you want to pay for the damaged goods, Pain Train,” the mare growled. ‘Pain Train’? *Really?* Did he give himself that name? “Though,” the mare said in a considering tone of voice, “if they don’t sign soon, why the fuck not?”

“There? You hear that?” The stallion said in conciliatory tones. “Better sign, or we may not be able to control my friend here.” The voices were coming from the back room. Carefully, I peeked through the cracked door into the back and saw two ponies, an earth pony mare in battle saddle and a cleaner, handsome unicorn leaning casually against a heap of gray rags. There were five or six ponies all wearing explosive collars. Oh what I’d give for P-21 to be here... I carefully looked over the mare and unicorn... there. The unicorn had a detonator strapped to some sort of jury-rigged PipBuck.

The prisoners all looked pretty drawn out, with blood starting to drip from their noses like crimson snot. They had the hungry look of scavengers, maybe new arrivals drawn by the stories. I couldn’t see the third slaver; maybe he was hidden behind the massive heap of rotten gray cloth that blocked part of my view?

I felt my fanny start to tingle as I began to feel like I was about to get in Trouble. I looked at the gray earth pony mare. Two hunting rifles in her saddle. I frowned and tapped my nose. If I killed her, the unicorn might blow the collars. I looked at Vigilance, pressed my lips together, and thought it through. There was no way I was going to simply let them go.

Then I looked at the ponnequins and a small smile spread across my face.

“Come on, ponies. Don’t make this—” The unicorn went silent as a slow laugh rose over the trickling and splashing water. His ears twitched, and the mare turned slowly as well. Again, the creepy laugh echoed through the hollow boutique. “What the fuck?” He scowled as he walked to the cracked-open doors, the mare at his side.

“Watch ‘em, Pain Train.”

“Burners?” The mare asked as they pushed the door open and walked out onto the spongy floor.

“This far south? Forget it,” the unicorn said darkly. “Who’s out there?”

“...wicked...” an unearthly voice hissed in the drippy confines of the boutique. “I smell wicked, wicked ponies...”

“What the hell?” the mare asked in bafflement as the laugh grew higher and higher. “What is that?”

Suddenly light burst into view as the rag-shrouded pony floated up above them. Baleful white light blazed from within it as its voice crackled and shrieked. “I smell the blood of wicked ponies! I HUNGER!” the eldritch form howled as it slowly advanced through the air.

“Fuck!” the stallion screamed as he pulled a revolver from his holster and began to unload rounds into it. The hunting rifles barked again and again, ripping through flapping wet hide. Red beams burst from the spectre’s mouth and struck around the pair as the wraith cackled madly and the two ponies scattered.

The stallion’s hammer fell on empty chambers as the apparition loomed over him. “What... what do you want?” he screamed as the blazing eyes glared down at him both in the dim, dank room.

“I hunger for the blood of wicked slavers who prey on the innocent! I hunger for *you*!” the spectre shrieked.

“Him! He’s the one you want!” the mare cried as she raced past for the exit, tripping over rusty mannequins and racing out half draped in filthy cloth.

“No! I’m not a slaver!” he gasped as he dropped his gun and his horn magically pressed buttons on the PipBuck. There was a pop and a clatter and the sound of the prisoners within giving shouts of both fear and hope. “There! See?! Free!”

“Never take another, or I shall slake my hunger upon you! My hunger for blood! Blood! BLOOD!” the spectre demanded, its voice rising to an earsplitting shriek.

With a scream of terror, the brown unicorn raced after his companion.

The spectre’s ear-stabbing shriek went on a few seconds more, then abruptly ended, as did the glow of my magic supporting it as I rose from behind the counter. The bullet-riddled mannequin dropped to the floor before me. I peeked in at the old radio,

spark battery, and beam pistol, then extracted the last and switched off the first. The feedback at the end had given me a headache. Now that the collars were off, I didn't have to worry about some slaver 'liquidating' his stock as a final 'fuck you' to me. A tiny Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash smacked hooves in the back of my mind.

I could still see Clover's neck exploding in a cloud of red vapors...

I stepped into the back room walking upright, munching nonchalantly on a cake in my hand. See? No trouble...

The six were pressed together against the far wall. I looked around the room, but 'Pain Train' was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't see a back door though... where'd he gone? Was he hiding in that heap of filthy rags? Too many errant radroaches in the area to use my EFS to find him... I turned my attention to the prisoners. Two stallions and four mares, all looking like they'd had more than enough Enervation for one day. Funny... the collars were off and their captors had gone, but they were still staring in terror at me. I gave a worried smile. "Hey, don't worry. They're gone. The ghost was just me." I levitated out my sword to cut their bonds.

"Good to know," the deep voice rumbled right behind me.

I turned and discovered that what I'd assumed was a giant heap of rotting clothes was in fact a giant *thing* of muscle and shaggy gray fur. It had a head like a brahmin, only not quite so deformed, and it stood on two heavy split hooves rather than four mutated ones. Its upper body was so muscled that it looked as though a good push would send it tumbling over. It was standing upright like I was, and its forelegs –arms? – ended in hands. I had a good opportunity to observe these in action as its backhanded swipe sent me flying, augmented legs and all, clear across the room. My magical focus was gone, and the sword and Vigilance disappeared into the debris of the storeroom as I crashed into the wall and landed in a heap of broken ponequins.

Pain Train, I assumed. Apt name. The shaggy gray beast dropped into a sprinter's pose, scraping his hooves across the floor for traction; his breath blasting out his wide nostrils. Duty and Sacrifice were tangled up in the wreckage around me, and my ringing horn probably couldn't summon a magic BB, let alone a magic bullet. He pointed his brass-tipped horns right at me, and with a bovine bellow, charged across the floor.

I used the only weapon I had left. I threw the cyberpony cake as hard as I could straight into his face! The disk struck him right between the eyes, and he let out a roar as he staggered back, clutching his forehead. He blinked twice, some blood

dripping down between his eyes, and then picked up the disk with two fingers. “Did you just try and kill me with a... what is this?”

A much needed distraction! I reached down and pulled out Duty, grasping it in my jaw and taking aim. Pain Train tossed the cake aside and with a swing of his massive fists sent an avalanche of rotten packing crates, rancid cloth, and old dummies cascading upon me. I fired a shot before the world disappeared under sopping blanket.

Okay. Maybe I was in just a tiny bit of trouble. Then I felt the impacts shuddering through the floor, getting weaker. Was he leaving? Did he think I was done? Maybe he was going after the prisoners! Or maybe...

Maybe he was just backing up...

“Here comes the pain train!” he bellowed, confirming my suspicions. A rumble in the floorboards began to rapidly build. What could I do? Summon a door for him to crash through? Give him half a mustache?! I struggled to get the anchoring layer of crap off me before I was hit by the pain train. I had to go! Now! Somewhere! Anywhere!

And my horn gave a fizzle, then a flash, and everything went white. I flopped limply on my back on top of some junk, my horn coated in a layer of soot. A split second later the gray giant rammed into the wall three feet to my left with an impact that made the whole boutique shudder. He glared down at me with his horns embedded in the wall. “Cheater...” he muttered sullenly.

“Don’t look at me! I didn’t even know it was going to happen!” I said as I pushed myself to my hooves. “What the hell *are* you?” I asked as I looked around for my weapons in all the mess.

“Pissed,” he said, then smashed his fists against the wall in rapid punches that pulverized the material around his stuck horns. As he wrenched out and stood up, I grabbed the first thing I closed my hand on, anything I could use as a shield. I hefted a rusty mannequin, but it flew apart after one blow of his fist. I grabbed the lid off a crate, but his other fist blew it into rotten splinters. I really needed my sword, but I had no clue where it was! The next thing he hit was going to me at this rate. My fingers closed around something small, round, and heavy, and in desperation I brought it up to block his falling blow.

The fist connected with the cake, and a horrible crunch filled the air.

“Yarrrrgh!” roared Pain Train as he reared back, clutching his wrist in agony. From

the way one of his fingers was all crooked, I guessed he'd finally found something as tough as he was.

I didn't waste any time as I charged, swinging the heavy disk as hard as I could.

He snorted, absorbed the blow with the forearm of his injured limb, and then grabbed my wrist with his free hand. A smile crossed his bovine features. My pupils shrank and my ears drooped. "Uh oh."

My only saving grace was that the throw through the wall and into the front of the boutique missed anything structural. I rolled several times, aching as my EFS displayed all kinds of fascinating red marks telling me the injuries I was sustaining. I huffed as I pushed myself to my hooves on the spongy floor. I glanced at the door behind me. I could run. Save myself. Live to fight another day. Leave the six prisoners with this... this thing... to whatever horrible fate awaited them.

Was I just putting my life at risk to save ponies who were already lost? Pain Train dropped into his crouch again, readying another load of hurt.

I wiped blood from my nose and pushed myself to my hooves. He slowly grinned, gave another explosive blast from his nostrils, and then raced at me once again. This time I didn't just wait for the impact. I charged back. He released another roar as he lowered his horns to rip me to pieces.

I leapt up, pointing all four of my hooves at a single point as I came down. Not at his head. No, I doubted that even with my mass I could get through that skull. My target was something else: the floor right in front of him. With a wooden crunch, the floor collapsed under me, and I was falling into the basement of the boutique. A second later, Pain Train plunged through as well. My landing was broken by a pile of rotten clothes in boxes that burst in a filthy mass beneath me. He created a giant splash that washed me into the water.

Okay. Now what?

Pain Train rose out of the flooded basement, trailing streamers of the foul gray water. I backed away, aching as he advanced. I had to stay on my hind legs, and even then the water sloshed around my chest. It was only waist deep on him. I moved to put a beam between us. He reached out with his hands, ignoring the broken finger, and grabbed the beam. With a pulpy crunch, he ripped it down and broke it in half with a massive flex of his arms.

Oh shit. I dove under the water as he hurled the two halves where I'd been standing a second before. I had to get away from... whatever he was. Get some ground

under me. Lead him away from the prisoners and to where Lacunae could offer some assistance. The Enervation scream was even stronger down here; I couldn't hear the Goddess or my friend. I tried to kick my way free when something seized my back leg.

Look mom, I'm a pegasus.

I flew across the flooded basement, crashing right through another beam and slamming into the far wall. I landed in a heap against the bricks and rusty metal equipment. Overhead, the floor was making all kinds of tortured noises; no surprise, as there was only one more wooden beam intact. Pain Train wasn't looking too good either, though. The gash between his eyes was bleeding worse than when I'd hit him, and blood dripped from his injured hand. He wasn't resistant to Enervation like I was, and he seemed to realize that he needed to end this quickly and get the hell out of here.

He dropped into the sprinter pose once more, sent two great splashes behind him as he dragged his submerged hooves through the water, and raced the length of the basement towards me. I had nowhere to run, no weapons to use, and no more magic tricks in my horn.

But, despite everything, I still had my cake clenched in my fist.

I rose as high as I could on my rear legs as he surged forward like a rage-fueled tsunami and gripped the cake tightly. I had only one chance at this. My eyes narrowed as I focused on my target, licked my lips... wait for it... Then, twisting my body I let the disk fly straight and true...

Right into the remaining beam.

With a groan and crack the beam bowed where the disk had struck it, held for a heartbeat, and then collapsed just as Pain Train reached it. With a colossal roar, the floor above collapsed upon him. He halted his charge and, with his good fist, blasted a hole right through it. For a second we both stood there, him panting hard, me pressed against the wall behind and him surrounded by a ring of rubble. I wished I could breathe the same; slow and continuous reparation just didn't suit a fight like this. Still, we gave each other matching manic grins.

Then the second floor collapsed on him as well. Then the roof. For several seconds my ears rang as the debris tumbled into the basement. The rubble gave a heave... started to shift... and my jaw dropped as those enormous fists started to push it off. "Oh come on!" I shouted as his head reappeared. What was his deal?

Apparently, though, whatever it was, it wasn't quite enough. He groaned and collapsed with a thud. Slowly, I approached him. After having three floors fall on him, he still was still breathing, but even this cow monster was knocked cold. And with the Enervation down here, he was helpless.

I reached into the water at the base of the collapsed beam and retrieved my cake. Still as nutritious and delicious as ever, and not even crumbled!

I started to climb up an angled section of the collapsed floor to reach the storeroom when I looked back. Stupid ideas started to creep into my head. Leaving him here, half buried? Leaving him to rot as Enervation slowly drained the life out of him? It just didn't seem... right.

There was a tiny yellow pegasus inside me giving me great big teal pleading eyes. I groaned, rubbing my temples. *No, Fluttershy. There is 'be kind,' and then there's 'be stupid.'* The tiny yellow pegasus gave a little sniff and just stared at me. *He'd tried to kill me!* Her tiny lip quivered. I clenched my eyes, determined to do what smart ponies did with when they fought big, terrible, half-bull monsters, which was to just go. I could learn... I... She gave the tiniest little whimper.

"Ugh... fine..." I muttered, and was rewarded with a tiny mental hug.

There was no way I could move him myself. But maybe... I had an idea, but I didn't know exactly what or why. It was just a gut feeling... I trotted around the perimeter of the basement, listening to the scream in my head. Finally I reached the rusted metal box. I could barely make out 'Roseluck Pest Solutions' on the case. I busted it open, and there... the green glowing silvery ring. I frowned; how'd I know to look for it? There was something about the rings and... something. It was like a blanket covered a part of my brain... I had no idea what I was doing or why I thought it would help, but I scrambled up to the front door and threw the shiny metal ring as far as I could down the street.

Instantly, the scream dropped to a whisper. I crept along the jagged edge which was all that remained of the first floor, looking down at the creature surrounded by twisted ponequins and draped in rotten wood and cloth. That would have to do. If he cared to dig himself out, he could do so. I was battered from head to hoof, my horn a lead weight on my brow. I trotted into the back where the scavengers watched me as warily as they had their captors. I found my sword in the remains of the back room, then Vigilance and the matching revolvers. Finally, I cut their bonds. "Follow me east, and we'll get you-"

That was as far as I got before they scarpered. Not a word of thanks, but I couldn't

blame them. I looked at some papers beside the captives. 'Contract of Servitude,' they were titled. I scanned the documents; apparently signing this piece of paper meant that you were agreeing to spend the rest of your life working for the Society for the 'betterment of ponykind'. I pursed my lips before tearing the papers in two and tossing them into the basement. I picked my way back back to the entrance.

"So... all I need to do is heal enough and tell Lacunae that it wasn't any trouble," I said as I trotted out the front door.

And bumped right into the chest of my purple friend. She slowly narrowed her eyes before taking in the hole in the roof, the missing floors, the flooded basement, and Pain Train half buried in rubble. I gave a sheepish little grin and spread my dinged forehooves wide as her gaze returned to me. "Trouble? What trouble? No trouble here!" My grin strained all levels of credulity before I gasped, "Please don't tell Glory!"

Lacunae looked down at me, then slowly smiled.

I had many an unpleasant mutter as I followed Lacunae with a rope tied to my collar. It just wasn't the same as Glory... our differences in size made me feel like mom was making sure I wasn't going to run down to maintenance to play games. Worse, she was lecturing me all about fighting the mutant brahmin minothingy and how much trouble I was in for trying to take one on alone. Fortunately, though, she both untied me and quieted down as we drew close to the skyport.

The Rainbow Dash Skyport was a flurry of activity as we approached the front gates. A small mob of angry scavengers was gathered around them, shouting and hefting up crates of scrap metal as they yelled to be allowed in to trade for food. Three power-armored pegasi kept them at bay with their bristling weapons while a pink pegasus mare in a rain-soaked Volunteer Corps uniform tried to placate the mob.

As we approached the back of the throng, the rearmost ponies spotted us. Their eyes widened as they looked at my SWAT barding and the purple alicorn, and their shouts dwindled as they backed out of our way. Row after row slowly parted. Some glared, some looked on fearfully, but more than a few wore expressions of something like hope. The three power-armored pegasi kept their weapons trained on me as the frazzled pink mare began to say in a perfunctory tone, "I told you! We're no longer accepting salvage for food and medical servi—" She broke off as her eyes widened in shock. "You!"

“Run out of food and medicine in there?” I asked wryly. An angry mutter rippled through the crowd.

“No! Of course not. It’s just that the scrap metal trade has been currently suspended and we can’t accept any more salvage at this time,” she gave a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Please, come back later!”

“We’re hungry now!” a stallion roared.

“Please. I’ve been gathering scrap metal all week for some good healing potions. My children need them!” an earth pony mare wailed. The urge to do something rash nibbled at my mane already.

“We can’t accept any more scrap metal at this time. Please understand!” the pink pegasus begged.

“Perhaps, instead of trading, you might simply give them some supplies?” Lacunae suggested.

The pink pegasus gulped. “We don’t want the local population to get dependant on donated food and medicine,” she said lamely.

“You changed the deal on us!” challenged a stallion so loaded with junk metal that he resembled some strange hybrid of tortoise and pony.

“Look at it this way,” I said to the pink mare, “you can give them a small amount of food and medicine and explain that the deal is temporarily suspended till later, or you can have a mob that gets bigger and bigger with every passing minute.” I looked at the rain pouring off the barrels of the power armor, then back at the mare. “I don’t doubt you’d be able to handle things if they got violent, but not without a doozy of a death toll and a lot of lost goodwill.” I looked the pink mare in the eyes, “You came down here to help ponies. Not to kill them.”

“No...” she muttered, then sneezed. Finally she sighed. “Okay. I’ll tell them to release some food and supplies. They’ve got more than enough stockpiled to spare some.” She looked at the crowd and then added, “But please spread the word that trading is currently suspended temporarily and that the Volunteer Corps apologises for this!”

That mollified the crowd a bit. I looked at her, waiting till she finished talking to one of the armored pegasi who I assumed had some sort of radio. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t want to come down here,” the pink mare said in a low voice, sniffing. “It’s cold. And wet. Always wet, even with us trying to keep the rain off us. I think half the

VC have caught all kinds of respiratory ailments. I just didn't want to be one of those ponies who stood by while others came down here. But thanks for helping me with that crowd. I never thought anypony would get worked up over a box of preserved food."

"For a lot of scavengers, a box of preserved food is the difference between life and death," I pointed out, then smiled. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to go in there and have a talk with Lieutenant Wind Whisper."

"You... she... I... You can't come in! She's busy. We're all busy!" she said in a rush.

I stared the pink mare right in the eye, watching her start to shake. "I need to talk to her. If she can come out here, great. I'll wait. But if not, I need to go in there and find her."

All three power-armored soldiers pointed their weapons at me again. I passed Lacunae a warning to be ready to shield me as I grinned at them. "Nice armor. Nice guns, too," I said calmly as I looked at their wingcovers. A telekinetic yank upwards as I passed forward, three shots from Vigilance right into the wingpit, sword out and slicing through the same weak point in the armor of the pegasus on the other side. Pivot around. Jump and grab the third with my fingers and ground him, then maybe finish them off.

Of course... if I'd actually done that, that would have been Trouble...

Something sure had the winged ponies nervous though. It seemed the utter lack of fear I showed for their armament seemed to be throwing these Enclave a bit. Maybe the fact that I was working on ways to eliminate them showed on my face. Or maybe there was something else entirely going on. Or maybe it wasn't me at all and something else had their tail in knots. Or all of the above. Either way, the three seemed to be getting more and more alarmed by the second.

Then the gate opened a crack, and a yellow pegasus with a brilliant orange mane stepped out. Lightning Dancer wore her power armor but had her helmet hooked to her shoulder. Her grave blue eyes met mine. "Let her in."

"But... ma'am, we're on high security for the visit!" the pink mare protested.

"I know that. Orders from the lieutenant. Let her in." Everypony immediately stiffened and looked at each other, including me. Lightning Dancer huffed. "Trust me, the sooner we talk to Blackjack, the sooner she leaves." Lightning Dancer said firmly and then added, "Or maybe you'd like to tell her why you're questioning orders?"

"You're going to have to surrender your weapons," the pink mare said after a second.

That wasn't a problem. Between my fingers and our magic, we should be okay if something went bad. I passed the gear over to Lightning Dancer, and she put them into her armor's pockets. Once we were through the gate and out of hearing range, the yellow mare hissed in a tense voice, "You've got fucking perfect timing, Blackjack. Absolutely perfect."

"What's going on?" I asked. The skyport had been fortified, but I didn't see armies of Enclave ready to take over the Wasteland. There were only a few VC running around; the majority of the ponies I saw were in power armor and were working strange machines that were putting out even more cloud.

"No time. I need to get you out of sight. Then we can talk. Intelligence would melt if they knew I brought you in here," she muttered as she led us towards a side door of the terminal building.

I held her shoulders with my fingers and asked a little more forcefully, "Lightning Dancer, what's going on?" The level of activity was concerning, but more so was the tension and atmosphere of fear. Everypony whose face I could see showed a level of anxiety even I couldn't create.

She started to answer when her armor beeped. "Oh crap. They're here. The bastards are early."

"Who's-" I started to say, when I heard a deep humming noise approaching. Something big was moving through the foggy air, something I couldn't even imagine. A powerful downdraft made the fog swirl wildly as something huge and black swept in over our heads and landed. I'd thought the Vertibucks had been impressive, but the sight of this looming black weapon of destruction made them look like flimsy toys. It was as if the tank the Harbingers used had been shrunk down a little and then given the power to fly. Two more buzzed the fields, the rising fog barely hiding them.

But that was nothing compared to what came next. From the skies came a cloud... or at least that was the first impression one received. Then one caught the black plates. The armored bridge. The turrets. It was so impossibly large that the further details were lost to the gloom. I'd thought that the tanks had been impressive, but this? With a weapon like this, what stopped the Enclave from simply outright conquering the wastelands?

"What is that?" I said as it descended to hover just above the ground next to the terminal, making the large open space look cramped. "What's going on?"

“A Raptor. The Castellanus,” Lightning Dancer said tensely. “You need to get inside. If they find out that I breached security. . .”

She reached a door, swept a card through a reader, and pulled the door open. The hallway beyond was dark and cramped, with cables snaking along the walls. Lightning Dancer pushed us along into a room with a bank of eight terminals showing different parts of the skyport. From the sight of things, some sort of major meeting was underway. Lightning Dancer blocked the monitors with her body as she turned and faced us. “Now, Blackjack, do you know where Dusk is?”

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine. “She wasn’t brought here?”

“Brought here? You mean you know what happened to her?” Lightning Dancer blurted. “What happened? One night almost a week ago she was called out for a patrol and nopony came back! I can’t find any official orders, which means it was an Intelligence operation, but nopony is saying anything!”

I sighed. “I encountered zebras and pegasi fighting in the north five days ago. They looked like they were investigating a zebra disease. There were three Neighvarro pegasi there, too. The Thunderhead pegasi were wiped out, but Dusk survived.” I omitted who had done the wiping. Call me a coward, but right now, I needed answers too. To get them, I’d need to answer some of her questions first. “I told the Neighvarro pegasi to bring her here.”

“What?” Lightning Dancer gasped.

“I wasn’t in any condition to bring her myself. They were. It was that or leave her to the Remnant,” I said in a rush.

“Well, they *didn’t* bring her here,” Lightning Dancer hissed softly through her teeth. “Neighvarro. . . that explains it,” she muttered darkly, then looked at me. “The Grand Pegasus Enclave said that they had substantive evidence of crimes against the Enclave committed by Thunderhead. Intelligence has been in complete chaos. Half their units abroad have either been arrested or have turned completely. Neighvarro’s got their own intelligence officers who’ve been wreaking havoc against us.”

I felt two responses to this news. One was a tiny bit of satisfaction that Lighthooves had finally been caught, and the other a growing, gnawing sensation of dread at what that might mean. While I had no problem with him getting punished for his part in creating a bioweapon, I didn’t have any desire to see Glory’s whole home suffer for it. Until I’d seen that Raptor, the worst I’d imagined was Vertibucks. Now I was imagining enormous cloud machines of steel and vapor swirling through the skies.

“Such power,” the Goddess purred in my mind. “With that, Red Eye wouldn’t last a minute against me.”

“Shut up,” I thought furiously at her. “You’re a dirty surfer too, remember? There’s no way they’d work with you.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power,” the Goddess chuckled.

I tried to steel my thoughts against her, in part because I feared she might be right, but also because Lightning Dancer was looking at me in bafflement. “Sorry. Brain damage. You were saying?”

“I was saying ‘where is Glory?’ Why isn’t she with you? Did something happen to her too?” the mare said in worry. “Sky Striker is here. He’s been talking about finding her.” She looked sharply at me, “And you, for that matter. Something about bed champions?”

Oh, Celestia. That did it. I turned on my broadcaster, opened a channel to wherever, and shouted, “Okay! Attention everypony! Security here! I am a dirty, lecherous, adulterous mule! I cheated on the best mare in the Wasteland and am a bad, bad pony. Happy?!” I blurted, then threw my hooves overhead. Lightning Dancer stared at me in horror as Lacunae covered her face with a wingtip.

Then I froze as I looked at the screens; every pegasus in power armor was tapping the sides of their heads and looking at one another in confusion. I stared at my broadcaster again. Okay... that wasn’t exactly what I had anticipated.

Tingly backside feelings again...

Lightning Dancer pressed a wingtip to a little earbud in her left ear. “Okay. I’m getting orders to report in now. If they trace that transmission to this building, they’ll tear this place apart looking for you,” she said. After I’d told her that Dusk might be in enemy hooves, I was grateful that she wasn’t just handing me over. “Stay here. This is my post. I should be right back, okay? And please don’t do anything else like what you just did.”

She trotted quickly from the dark room, leaving us together. “Wait! My... guns...” And sword, and all the other weapons she’d confiscated at the gates. I harrumphed, took out the cake, and started munching. I looked at the rows of terminals and reached out a hoof, scowling at it passed right through. I looked at the buttons and tried to push with my magic. Surely that would work, right? Not so much. I groaned and batted at the machine with a hoof.

Then Lacunae reached out and tapped a button with a wingtip. “—do not let one Neighvarro soldier off that ship. This is still the Thunderhead no-flight zone,” one mare told four soldiers in the center terminal monitor. “Find that security breach. Check the hangars!”

I looked at the alicorn in surprise, and she smiled back at me. “I am part pegasus, after all.” She tapped more keys with her wingtips, finally bringing up a conference room. There was a long table with six ponies around it, three on either side. Each side had a stallion, a mare, and another stallion.

I recognized Sky Striker by the dashing old buck’s eyepatch. He sat next to two other pegasi in dusky uniforms, a light-coated mare and a darker-coated stallion. From the fancy clothes and severe expressions on their faces, I expected them to be some kind of very important ponies. Opposite them were a matching trio: a darker stallion, almost black, who wore a smile that reached everything but his eyes, a pale older mare with a straight mane who looked far less amiable, and an ancient pegasus stallion in power armor who seemed quite bored with the whole proceeding. I’d hoped for more, but all these monitors were in monochrome.

“—you for meeting with us on such short notice. I didn’t expect you to come, Honored Councilor,” the lighter mare said with a thin and slightly baffled smile to the armored elder.

“Oh, few folks did,” the ancient stallion said with a wheezy cackle. “A chance to go back to the ground. Get mud beneath my hooves again? Couldn’t pass it up.” He gave a toothless grin at Sky Striker. “And once they throw ‘Honored’ in front of your name, you can do just about anything as long as it isn’t important, eh, Striker?”

The grim, one-eyed stallion grinned despite himself. “Yeah. Then half want to use you as a figurehead and the other half want you to pop off. Some things never change.”

The light mare beside the Honored Councilor tried to hide her annoyance as the dark stallion on her other side just chuckled. “With all due respect, this meeting is quite important, Honored Councilor Stargazer,” she said as she glared across the table at her counterpart. “We’ve received reports that Enclave Intelligence is acting outside its jurisdiction.”

“That is why you’ve arrested over half of my officers, General Storm Chaser?” the dark stallion next to Councilor Stargazer rumbled. “Over a report? A report? Who filed this report? What was their training background? How was it confirmed?”

"Neighvarro has been working to establish our own intelligence corps... to supplement the efforts of Thunderhead, of course, Director Stratus. Some visionary members of your organization were properly thrilled to assist us," the dusky stallion next to the general said in calm, congenial tones. He oozed comfort and sincerity. "When we learned that Thunderhead Intelligence was involved in the development of a biological weapon that could be used against the rest of the Enclave, we simply *had* to act."

The Director bared his teeth, not bothering to hide his contempt. "I'm sure you did, High General Harbinger. But instead of discussing this outside official channels as usual, you went and detained almost a hundred agents!" The name made my ears stand straight up. There was no way this could be a coincidence! And hadn't someone mentioned they were *led* by a pegasus? I racked my brains, trying to remember, but set it aside as I spied on this little meeting. "What was the origin of this report?"

"We were initially alerted by the surfacer terrorist who goes by the name 'Security' or 'The Security Mare'. She encountered one of our patrols and tipped us off to the development of a biological weapon at Miramare Air Station. Naturally, we were concerned by this possibility and investigated. Imagine our surprise when we discovered, buried in the base's terminals, records of some of the actions of an 'Operative Lighthooves'. The accounts on the terminals were corroborated by pony remains infested with a prion contagion. The data pointed us to 'Yellow River', and once more we sent a team in. We were quite shocked to discover, again with this 'Security's' assistance, that there were indeed signs of proof that a biological weapon was being adapted by this Operative to infect pegasi," Harbinger purred with a growing smile. "Tell me, what is Operative 'Lighthooves's' real name?"

"I cannot say at this time," Stratus muttered, earning a chuckle from Harbinger.

"You've been asked for the identity of this operative by the leader of the Enclave Military on behalf of the Grand Pegasus Enclave High Council. That is not a request!" General Chaser snapped.

The ancient stallion sighed and rolled his eyes. "Stop being a Tiara, Stormy. Let him answer." Chaser blinked and flushed, trying to glare an answer out of the Director of Enclave Intelligence.

"I cannot say at this time because we do not have an Operative Lighthooves assigned," Stratus replied. "I've got two hundred and thirty-two operatives, all memorized. There is no Operative Lighthooves in Enclave Intelligence."

"How convenient," Harbinger purred. Storm Chaser simply snorted. I was skeptical, too. If Lighthooves was behind this on his own. . . operating rogue. . .

Stargazer leaned forward. "As for investigating diseases on the surface, we needed to develop inoculations to better protect members volunteering to come down. Despite the Science Channel's exaggerations, there are real threats of an epidemic." She gave a little smile. "Besides, even if we were to develop such a weapon, how would we use it? All food and material shipments are rigorously inspected to make sure that we are fulfilling the terms of the treaty. We'd be at greater risk for infecting ourselves."

Harbinger twisted his lips bitterly, and Storm Chaser seemed to concede the point. "There is also a question about how these." General Chaser leaned forward and put a glass bottle on the table. I couldn't see well, but the contents appeared to be some sort of mane clippings. "Ended up in the Fluttershy Medical Center." Everyone except Harbinger and Storm Chaser stared at the bottle. "Notice the distinct colors."

Stratus gave a dismissive snort first and the one eyed buck shook his head. "So somepony decided to dye their mane. We get rebellious youths who do that all over the Enclave," Sky Striker said with a wave of his wing. "Eventually they either grow up or take the brand."

"This isn't dyed. In fact, chemical analysis shows that somepony probably used dye to conceal these colors. They're a 99.9% match to Dash," General Chaser said grimly.

"You were able to breach the field?" Councilor Stargazer finally said in alarm, with hints of fear on her face. Her tone seemed to make High General Harbinger smile even more.

"Not completely. Some sort of interference. But with the pony these came from..." Harbinger trailed off, looking at the scowling director. "So how *did* you do it? Find her in stasis? The report mentioned stasis pods in the hospital, and evidence of an Intelligence team. Or did you find some means to make a successful clone?"

"I have no idea," the dark stallion replied, glaring at his counterpart. "But if you give me that sample, I'll put my best minds on it."

"Sorry," Harbinger said apologetically, his wing reaching out for the bottle and pulling it back, tucking it in a pocket in his uniform. "We've got our own people looking into it."

The ancient pony sighed and shook his head. "All that is secondary to the activities

of Thunderhead allowing prolonged contact with the surface.” He looked across at Stargazer with clear worry. “We’ve been hearing it all across the Enclave, fears that Thunderhead is using trade and its resources to give itself an unacceptable advantage over the rest of the Enclave.”

“To put it bluntly, we don’t like or trust what you’re doing,” Chaser snapped. “With the materials you’ve gathered, you could be preparing to build your own independent force.”

“That would be against the treaty,” Stargazer replied calmly, folding her hooves on the table in front of her. “A treaty that Thunderhead has always abided by. And always will.” From the cool disdain on her face, it was obvious that she was leaving it up to the General to show dishonor first.

Sky Striker jumped in. “Of course, if you really are so concerned, you could implement your own trade with the surface. There’s absolutely no lack of settlements and organizations you could do business with.”

“Most of our communities don’t have surpluses to trade,” the ancient stallion said with a sigh and a shrug. “And besides, it is far too risky. You’ve heard reports about this Red Eye and the alicorn monsters that serve him? He’s just the first. If we get entangled in surface affairs again, it will be the same as during the war.”

“Scootaloo thought differently,” Stratus said bitterly. The ancient pegasus’s eyes widened in shock a moment, then drooped. In that moment, he looked every bit as old as he was.

“Director,” Sky Striker rumbled in reproach. The dark stallion snorted and looked away.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with bioweapons, Rainbow Dash clones, or the Volunteer Corps,” Stargazer said softly, looking at her hooves on the table. “This is about the future. The Enclave has two dire enemies. One is complacency. The other is entropy. We’ve stripped every available resource we can from every mountaintop in Equestria. Thunderhead didn’t open trade with the surface because we wanted to but because we had to. While the military has all our newest resources, even it can’t keep up maintenance. We can only cannibalize so far before we’re eating our own wings. Some communities are using talismans two centuries old. We have to change if we are to survive.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps,” wheezed the ancient buck. “But not now, and not like this.”

“I’d also like to correct you,” Harbinger purred. “You left out our greatest enemy:

traitors.”

“If you’re so concerned about it, conscript your own unicorns,” Stratus countered, then rubbed his chin. “Oh. Wait. I forgot. You can’t. Life on quarried-off mountain-tops is hardly conducive to quality talisman production. Guess you shouldn’t have gutted those high elevation stables after all.”

I didn’t like the way he used the word ‘conscript’. And apparently neither did the old stallion. “Excuse me,” he sighed, rising to his hooves, his power armor clanking as it carried him out. I doubted he could walk or fly without it. His wings were so tiny that they appeared almost absent.

“That was out of line, Stratus,” Sky Striker retorted, glaring past the mare at him.

“With all due respect, Honored Sky Striker, this is a waste of time,” Stratus said as he looked at the scowling pair. “Thunderhead controls the air defense system for Shadowbolt Tower. Anything bigger than a pony we can target and blow out of the sky before they come within fifty miles. If they destroy the tower, somehow, they’ll be losing everything they want to capture.”

“Not quite,” Harbinger retorted as he rose to his hooves, smiling confidently, staring daggers into Stratus’s eyes. “There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had.”

“Enough,” General Chaser said as she rubbed her temples. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“Agreed,” Stargazer said with a nod. “I vote for calm.”

Sky Striker looked at Stratus. The sour dark stallion shrugged. “Very well. I will order a stringent examination of all Intelligence activities within Thunderhead and the Hoofington region. You can send your own observers to verify.” He glared and pointed a wing across at Harbinger. Stratus said ‘observers’ the same way Harbinger had said ‘traitors’. “But I expect the operatives you’ve detained to be released and returned immediately if you expect to see another magic talisman.”

“Of course,” Harbinger said silkily. Everypony rose to their hooves. “But I do hope you take care, Director. Equestria is a wide land full of possibilities. I promise you, the Enclave will not be dependent on Thunderhead forever. Someday, you may just need our magnanimity and find it missing.”

“Thank you. If you will please wait here, we’ll locate the Honored Councilor so you can depart together. Excuse us,” Stratus said, and with that the Thunderhead trio turned and left the meaning room.

I saw them appear in a room on another monitor and start talking. "Can you switch the sound to them?" I asked in annoyance.

Lacunae didn't answer. Her eyes were locked on the monitor, wide and staring. "That was a lovely breeze of brown wind," Harbinger muttered. "Why did we waste our time with this, Stormy?"

"Because the public would look very poorly on the military if we did not make some formal diplomatic gestures of working this out. You know we have to keep Thunderhead's bad behavior from spreading," Chaser replied sourly. "And because I, personally, would rather not break the largest and most successful settlement in the sky in the process of reasserting control of the situation."

"You can't make a rainstorm without kicking a few clouds," Harbinger replied calmly, then scowled. "You read the report, didn't you? The Canterlot hub went active. Two hundred years with barely a peep, and now we get a class one alert reporting a breach by surfer terrorists. For all we know, Thunderhead's orchestrated this, and who knows what's next? They could try to get their Rainbow Dash into the SPP. Then it's checkmate for us, Stormy."

General Storm Chaser seemed to consider that for a moment, then replied with a dour scowl, "Our forces are already committed against Red Eye. This alert was just what was needed to convince the more hesitant elements of the council that it's time to clean house. Red Eye's special agent 'LittlePip' accessed something in there, and we have no evidence that she's working for Thunderhead too."

Little Pip? An agent for who? Was he serious? I thought hard about Arbu and what she'd done. Was it... possible? No. It couldn't be. Harbinger was wrong... or pulling it out of his ass or... or something! It was like saying the Stable Dweller was working for the Goddess. It just... wasn't possible. It... it couldn't be!

The Goddess hummed a merry little tune in the back of my mind. I couldn't shut it out, so I ignored her... and ignored the memory of Triage telling me that the Collegiate was trading with Red Eye too.

No! Do not think about it, Blackjack, I told myself. Focus on these two. This was the kind of trouble that got whole stables killed. Don't think about Homage's pony working for... just don't. The general continued, "We've been drumming up the surface threat for months, anyway. I admit that this new biological weapon is extremely concerning, but we can't turn all our forces around to tackle Thunderhead now. After we've settled accounts on the surface..."

"We may be eating our own foals while Thunderhead rips Neighvarro to vapor," Harbinger finished grimly. He seemed to acquiesce to her argument, but it clearly galled him. In his eyes I saw a lust for war that approached the insatiable. *'There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had.'*

The general sighed. "The council and the public have been told that Red Eye is a more immediate threat, High General. We can stomp him in a week and tie up loose ends, *then* deal with other any other problems." General Chaser frowned at the High General's glowering silence, and continued, perhaps trying to keep his mind off of attacking Thunderhead, "Autumn Leaf's already dispatched Windsheer's team to gather as much trustworthy information as possible. They're the best of our new intelligence squads. We still don't know the full capabilities of these alicorns. They can fly and use unicorn magic, which makes them a greater threat than a potential plague."

Something about her words snapped the High General out of his brooding. His slow, easy smile seemed to make Chaser more worried than when he'd been growling about Thunderhead. "A greater threat... or perhaps a greater asset," Harbinger mused. And then I looked over at Lacunae and saw her growing smile... and then I realized that it wasn't my friend I was looking at but the Goddess. Her eyes showed a wild glee, like a filly getting everything she wanted on Stable Day.

Oh, you'd be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power...

Worse, though, I could hear shouts from down the hall. Doors being slammed open. Somehow, I doubted it was a band of foals on a scavenger hunt. "We've got to go," I said, shaking her. Her leer only widened. I heard Harbinger making some sort of comments about 'possibilities', but I wasn't paying attention. I tried to think at Lacunae, but I felt distinctly cut out of the loop; it looked as if the Goddess was canny enough to disconnect me from whatever Unity was deciding.

Which meant that I was about to have company very soon.

No guns. All I had were thumbs, a burned out horn, and Glory's cakes. "Lacunae! Wake up!" I yelled as hooves thundered right outside the door. "Damn it..."

I was about to get in Trouble...

The door was kicked open, and two power-armored pegasi looked right at me for one stunned second. That was all I needed as I threw Glory's cake in a flat spin right into the mare's visor. The visor popped and splintered under the baked projectile's

onslaught, and her two beam rifles fired high. The pony behind her cursed and tried to hover to bring his own beam weapons to bear.

Couldn't have that...

I popped out my fingers as I lunged and smashed them against the broken visor. Pegasi were like unicorns: close combat was not their fort . With one hand gripping her helmet and another on her chest, I heaved her up above me and kept her in the line of fire. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I heard the mare scream in terror and many more hooves approach. "We have to get out of here!"

I felt eyelashes and tears against my fingers; a half inch further and she'd be needing an eyepatch. Crimson beams flashed as she fired in a blind panic, scouring the ceiling above me as she struck out with her hooves. The stallion had come up with an alternative measure of trying to push past the mare to get a clear shot at me. If it'd been Steel Ranger armor, I'd have been toast, but the Enclave armor was light enough that I was able to shove her between the doorjamb and block him.

I looked down at where Glory's cake had fallen and then back at Lacunae. Well... it worked for me. I kicked as hard as I could with a rear hoof, and the gnawed black disk flew through the air and struck my friend right in the back of the head. I winced; I'd really been aiming for her rump. Still, it snapped her out of that stare and made her frown at me, rubbing her head with her wing. Harbinger and the General were leaving the monitor anyway; I supposed that the Goddess had seen everything she wanted to see.

Then she noticed that I was wrestling with an Enclave soldier and trying to fend off another, and her eyes popped wide. She wasted no time in racing to my side, her horn flared brighter and brighter. I shoved the mare away just before the room flashed and dissolved around me.

"I can't believe it!" I stormed as we trotted towards Chapel. Vigilance! Sacrifice and Duty! The magic sword of scary sharpness... all gone! I was disarmed; I was pissed!

"We had no choice. Either your transmission or something else alerted the entire base. You would have killed them trying to escape or, more likely, they you," Lacunae said reasonably. I was in no mood for reasonable. I wanted to sulk my weapons back into their holsters! I munched on the cake that had fortunately been tangled in the alicorn's mane. It may have had a few stray hairs stuck to it now, but they didn't

detract from the delicious appley, oily, greasy goodness.

Nice as Glory's treat was, though, it didn't dull the sting of having my weapons stuck back at the base. Still, sulking about it wouldn't really help. I couldn't go back right this second and demand my stuff back, so, instead, I tried to put it behind me and focused on the next, and more troubling, item of annoyance. "So... why'd the Goddess take you over?" She looked at me with a small frown, and I sighed. "I saw it. She was gawking at that pair like it was a dream come true. What was she thinking?" I asked as we walked along. Lacunae had teleported us a short way outside of Chapel; a 'near miss' in alicorn teleportation terms. I took out some of my impotent rage on some unsuspecting puddles.

"I have no idea. I have no memory of it," Lacunae murmured. Since we'd teleported away, the Goddess had been annoyingly silent. I could almost feel her smugness in the back of my mind.

"I can't believe she did it, though," I said with an emphatic stomp in a puddle.

"She saw an opportunity and she took it," Lacunae replied casually. "It's not the first time."

"Why aren't you mad?" I asked in a huff, then looked up at her. "She took you over. Completely. Again!" How could it *not* bother her? It was... it was like the *Seahorse*. She was helpless to stop it...

"You make the mistake of thinking that I'm a person to be violated. I'm not. She has the power and took the opportunity. I imagine the Enervation was excruciating for her," Lacunae replied laconically as she trotted along. "It must have taken a significant part of her focus to achieve it. Despite what you may think, she is not sloppy or careless when she... asserts herself." She closed her eyes a moment.

I wanted to simultaneously hug and throttle her. Why couldn't she understand that she was a person to me... a person used by a monster. "But are you... okay?" I asked in worry.

"Of course." she replied, so matter-of-factly that gave me a heavy... well, not heart... blood circulation pump? Damn it, cyberponies needed some idioms of our own. The alicorn frowned a little as she went on, "The sensation of so many minds and wills within me is... overwhelming. So much in me wanting to return to its original owners... With just a little push, I think everything within me may have been returned to Unity."

I stared at her. "You mean you almost died?"

"I was never born in the first place. But I admit that it was close." She sighed and shook her head. "It was so close..." I couldn't tell if she'd said it like she was glad or regretful of her survival. I didn't press. I'd told her I wouldn't.

"Would that change her? So many memories coming at once?" The thought of a goddess with humility and compassion thrilled me as much as the thought that it would take my friend away filled me with horror.

"Who can say? She winnowed them out once. Perhaps she would do so again," Lacunae replied with a sigh.

"It makes me so angry, what she does to you," I growled.

"Why?" she asked with a small, sad smile. "I'm not a person. I'm just a collection of memories. Any critical memories intrinsic to my own identity are gone."

"Isn't there anything left of who you used to be?" I asked as I looked at her powerful purple body.

"There's a smell of who we used to be. All of us have a brain, of course, but it's as if it's asleep. Still, there's a smell of who we once were that simply doesn't go away on its own. Like daydreams you can't quite remember," she said quietly, before looking at me. "That's for other alicorns, of course. Real alicorns. I'm no more an alicorn than I am a pony."

I looked at her oddly. There was a wistfulness to her voice that hadn't been there before the Goddess had set up shop. A regret that lingered in her eyes. I'm not one for introspection, but as we walked together, it struck me how alike all my friends were. We struggled so hard to understand our own identities. Glory, P-21, Rampage, Lacunae, even Scotch, all fighting so hard to determine who we were and where we were supposed to be. And I was filled with an overwhelming urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. What luxury! What indulgence! Most ponies in the Wasteland were happy just trying to survive to next week, and here were the six of us staggering through existential crises!

Lacunae met my eye, and I guessed she read my thoughts. That did it, and I couldn't help but actually start laughing; it wasn't funny really, but it was laugh or cry and really... I was sick of crying. To my surprise and delight, she laughed with me. There was something both reassuring and unsettling about hearing it from her.

You're a real pony, Lacunae. Just like Rampage. Just like all of us. You'll see...

We must have looked quite a sight to the half dozen fillies and colts manning the machine guns at the entrance to town, the pair of us laughing side by side at the

ridiculousness of it all and me lacking all my armament. If so, we weren't any less a sight than Chapel itself. Scotch Tape stood with her rolls of paper on a stack of beams and planks outside the post office. She waved a hoof, giving directions to not just most of the Crusaders but to the adults as well. The tumbled-down scaffolds and rickety structures were gone, and Scotch Tape was directing three different teams at work. One was out carefully moving mines away from the edge of the cobbled-together wall while another was disassembling it. A third was building some kind of small, long building downhill from the post office.

Charity watched from the post office door with a wistful and envious look on her face; I suppose it had to sting to see everypony working together under an outsider. Then she glanced at me, flushed, and pointedly rolled her eyes before stepping back inside.

I started towards the post office but heard two voices speaking in low voices. "But are you feeling any better, Rampage?" P-21 said from behind a stack of beams. I froze, then developed a little smirk and carefully peeked around the corner. Hidden between the wood and the stockade wall were my two friends facing one another. The striped filly leaned against the wooden wall with a sigh while P-21 looked on with an expression of mild concern.

"I don't know. Yes. No? Maybe..." the filly sighed softly. "Seeing what Shujaa did makes me feel... different. I don't know if different counts as better or not. It's like I actually know something about her... really know... rather than just having vague feelings about her."

"Blackjack says she's going to prove you're a real pony," P-21 said.

"Blackjack's an idiot. You know that," Rampage said with a smile and a roll of her pink eyes. "Sometimes I think she'd try to help a corpse take a walk." I flushed a little, frowning as I listened on their conversation. "I wonder why I continue to follow her around. Is there some soul inside me that makes me want to stick near her?" She rubbed her face. "I don't even know which part of me is thinking right now. The Doctor? Shujaa?"

P-21 shook his head, "Try not to think of that right now." I could have kissed him, friendly like, as he kept her from dwelling on her problem and pressed, "I thought you stayed because you admired her."

Rampage gave a little sigh, then nodded. "I still do. A little. But... it's not the same, P. I used to think she was good. Now I don't know if she's good or just delusional. And she's trying to help me and you and everypony and... doesn't she get it? You

can't help some things. Some ponies are just broken. Some ponies aren't meant to be helped."

P-21 nodded sympathetically. "So do you still want to leave, then?"

What? I scuffed my hoof as I tried to lean closer to the stack of wood and barely drew back before either of them heard me.

Rampage didn't answer right away. "I don't know. Maybe. I just want everything to end. No more crazy. No more questions. No more wondering who I am. Doesn't Blackjack get that? Can't she... can't she just honor my request? She had Folly. She could have ended me, but she didn't. I doubt she ever could," Rampage muttered, and then laughed. "But if I did leave, where would I go? Back to the Reapers? Beating up gangers for sport, taking over once Big Daddy dies? There's no future there."

"You could stay here," he suggested.

"Not with the Angel in me. And she is in me. Even as a filly... when Sonata was crying over Medley, I wanted her to stop. Wanted to stop her. If we'd been alone..." Rampage sighed and sniffed. "No. I can't stay here. Reapers are a dead end. I don't know anywhere to go. Maybe I should just go to that well in the manor and throw myself in. Pop some grenades and bury myself. Be done with it. It's an awfully deep well."

"Blackjack would dig you out. You know she would," P-21 said evenly.

Rampage gave a hiccupping little laugh. "Yeah, she would. Idiot... wonderful idiot..." She sighed softly. "And you? Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I have to admit, a part of me really wants to stay here. Try to make this father thing work. Try for a little... I don't know..."

"Happiness?"

P-21 laughed softly. "Yeah, but what would happen to Blackjack without us?"

"She'd probably trip, blow up half of the Hoof," Rampage laughed.

"Start a war between the Harbingers and the Enclave," P-21 added, "all while feeling horrible about it."

"And wind up pregnant with a mule," Rampage chuckled. I felt my ears burn along with my cheeks. Okay, that wasn't likely to happen any time soon! Really, did all my friends talk about me like this when I wasn't around?

The pair laughed, and I fought the urge to trot out there. Finally Rampage sighed, “You’re going with her.”

“And so are you,” P-21 said in a more solemn voice. “She’s Security, and we’re her friends. That’s why. She’s the mare who tries, and we’re the ponies who catch her when she fails.” He sighed again and then chuckled, “I wonder if Twilight Sparkle’s friends were ever as aggravated with her as we are with her great great great oh so greaty great great granddaughter.”

What? A jolt lanced through me as if I’d be struck by lightning again. I felt numb and prickly all at once.

“I’m pretty sure they must have been. I think Twist would know. . .” Rampage sighed. “Are you going to tell her soon? About Tenpony?” Tell me *what* about Tenpony? I’d failed the stupid test, so what were they talking about? I fought the urge to trot out there and shake my so called friends till their hooves rattled.

“Maybe. I promised Homage I would as soon as we thought she could handle it; I have her memory orb and everything. I just don’t know if she’s ready for it. We promised to wait till she was stable.” P-21 let out his breath slowly between his teeth before looking back at her. “Do you think she’ll be better in a few more days? She’s out with Lacunae now. If she comes back without an emotional meltdown. . . maybe,” the stallion mused, then sighed again. “I don’t even know how to tell her. ‘Hey, Blackjack, we’ve been lying to you since you came back. Hope you don’t mind’?”

“She’s got no right to be upset. Not after modifying Scotch’s memories and telling you she’d lie to me just to make me feel better,” Rampage told him. That balked me a little. I had thought it’d been okay to lie to my friends for their own good, and now my friends had done the same to me. It hurt, but it also stole some of my anger away.

“I know,” P-21 said solemnly. There was a long pause. “I think she is better now. Better enough that she’s not running off with LittlePip in the tunnels under the tower, anyway. Better than moping on a mattress or racing after whatever damned thing distracts her. She still keeps pushing herself to the breaking point over everything, though. Medley. Hightower. When will she say ‘enough is enough’ and stop?”

“Never,” Rampage said. “And you love her for it.”

“Please. She’s a penis short for me,” he grumbled.

“You do,” Rampage teased. I peeked and saw the filly’s sly little smile.

"I love her name," he muttered. "Not Blackjack. Her real name. I love how she seems like she can do anything. . . at least till she can't. I like how she keeps trying to to good, no matter how bad it hurts." He sighed long and low. "But loving her? You'd have to get me pretty drunk to pull that one off."

I heard the pair laugh. It was surprising to hear how easy it sounded when I wasn't around. Had my friends been sneaking around me since I'd come back as a cyber-pony? They must have been. Running off and getting drunk on a gallon and a half of whiskey. Flying back on a herd of alicorns with a strange pony I'd only just met? On one hoof, yeah, it was funny. Glorious even. But on the other. . . yeah. I could see how badly I'd scared them like that.

My friends had kept secrets from me to protect me. Rampage had been right; Scotch Tape too. Not knowing sucked. Even if it had been with the best of intentions. I backed away from the stack as they kept talking. My friends were sticking with me, even if they doubted me some, they weren't going to leave me. Still, it was damned hard to take, even if I could understand the reasons behind it.

"You look like you've received some bad news," Dawn said from behind me, looking at me with her odd little squint, as if she never really opened her eyes. The look of merriment was more one of sympathy than mockery, though. "Did your trip go okay?"

I held my breath as I debated, then sighed. "It had its ups and downs. Fought a freaky brahmin monster with thumbs. Won. Lost my guns, though." There weren't words enough to express how frustrating that was.

"Ah. I'd wondered. Most folks don't trot very far without weapons," the pale mare said with a sigh. She didn't have any weapons... "Those that do, though, are more interesting than most." She looked over in the direction of Star House. "So how did my little girl get transformed into Rainbow Dash?"

I froze, my mouth working soundlessly. "I . . . don't know what you're talking about. . ."

"You don't have to protect her," she said with a sigh. "I had a feeling when I first saw her, and she was always a terrible liar." She turned towards Star House. "She still nibbles her mane when she's nervous. And that cooking... only my daughter cooks like that."

"Glory ran afoul of some Killing Joke," I said simply. "It transformed her into a literal Dash."

"I see," Dawn murmured. "Yes, I suppose that would do it. Something to alienate

her further from her family and people.” She looked at me with her eyes closed. “I’ve run into it myself once or twice. Insidious weed. The Everfree Forest is just rife with it.”

I supposed that that might explain the whole weird closed-eyes-seeing thing. “I just hope it doesn’t stop her from... from doing whatever she wants to do.” And now that I thought about it, I wasn’t entirely sure what that was anymore. “She’s terrified that the Enclave will spot her.”

“She’s right to be. If she’s become a complete copy of Rainbow Dash, she may be able to access the SPP,” Dawn said, then glanced at me. “A prewar superweapon. One built so that only a select few ponies could use it. Think... mmm... imagine being able to throw tornadoes and hurricanes at your enemies, and you’ll get the right idea. Weather control on an enormous scale.”

I thought of the Raptor and shuddered. Until today, I didn’t really understand what ‘enormous’ really meant.

Dawn continued with a brighter smile, “I doubt it will keep her from doing what she believes in. She once almost flew down to the surface when she was just a filly, with plans to give her boxed lunch to the first pony she came across. Striker barely caught her before she was zapped by a lightning rod.” She sighed and shook her head. “I can only assume she’s still mad at me for leaving.”

I thought about keeping up the pretense, but hearing P-21 and Rampage talk prompted me to be a little more honest, and I finally let out a sigh. “I’d say she is, a little. Mostly, she’s confused. She’s wondering where you’ve been.” I paused, then asked softly, “Where *have* you been?”

Dawn just smiled and turned her face towards the west. “A little bit of everywhere. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Stalliongrad. Las Pegasus. I even tried to find what had become of the griffins, dragons, and zebras. I looked everywhere I could for some sign of hope for the world.”

“Did you find it?” I asked curiously.

“I did,” she said with a nod of her head and a look towards the ponies working. “In the end, we’re all the same. Pony. Griffin. Zebra. Dragon. We let ourselves become divided and separated. That’s what caused the war. It’s what caused the bombs to fall. It’s what perpetuates the misery to this day. Differences as insignificant as where one was born, the stripes on one’s skin, or one’s species. It’s those differences... those separations we create... that cause all the suffering and

hardship in the world. Finding peace is no more difficult than overcoming those differences.”

I gave a little smile. “Not sure how that gives you hope, then. Most raiders and gangers are more interested in putting a bullet in you than finding common ground,” I said, not sure if I was indulging her or not. “I’d have more hope in a having a bullet of my own, sorry to say.”

Her smile turned sad. “At least you’re sorry. Most folks aren’t. Yet, doesn’t that ganger desire the same things as their victims? Happiness? Health? Security? Joy? Yes, their expression is terrible, but their desires are all too common.” She looked towards the Core. “If you scrape away all that pain and angst, what they want is what anyone wants: happiness and cooperation.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “Yeah. I guess I can understand that.” I didn’t necessarily believe it, but it was a nice sentiment. “Nice to see Chapel moving ahead,” I commented with a change of subject as we trotted in the direction of Charity’s.

“Oh yes. If people work together, they can accomplish amazing things. Your young filly friend there is quite in her element. They’re putting up that building in almost record time. I must say I’m impressed.” Yet, something about the way she said it was almost sad.

“Chapel’s had a hard time lately. They were attacked. The church was destroyed, and one of the ponies who ran the settlement died. They’re picking themselves back up again,” I said as I watched Scotch Tape giving directions on the odd, long house they were building. I wanted to ask what it was for, but there was no way to approach her at the moment; the filly was in full manager mode.

“Just like you, Blackjack,” she said with an amused smile... but again, something was a little off. Despite her carefree, closed-eyes expression, something about her seemed off. Was she feeling guilty about her daughter?

“Hopefully better than me,” I replied. I sighed, rolled my eyes a little, and changed the subject. “So does Glory know that you know?”

“I suspect not, and I’m not sure if I should tell her or try to spare her feelings. Talking about it only makes things more awkward.” Her closed eyes turned back up towards Star House high on the hill. “Hopefully tonight. That P-21 fellow said he was going to cook something special.” She gave a little shudder. “Thank the sun for that. Glory always had her father’s skills in the kitchen.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked in bewilderment. “She’s a great cook. I mean,

she made this,” I said as I nibbled on the half-chewed cake.

Dawn just looked at me blankly with her odd squint, then smiled and said gaily, “Ah, love.”

I huffed, bit off a corner, and chewed thoughtfully. My recent encounter with being ‘protected’ from the truth had left a sour taste in my mouth. “I think you can tell her. Just... be ready for tears. and make sure she can’t throw you into any walls. She’s been through a lot of stress recently... mostly due to me.”

“Oh dear. And she doesn’t handle stress well at all,” Dawn mused. “I suppose that explains this?” She reached out with a wing and flicked the ring on my collar, making me blush immediately. “Ahhh. I see. Almost the exact same thing I did with her father.”

This was starting to creep in a somewhat disturbing direction. “You collared your husband?”

“Of course not. That would be silly,” Dawn just laughed as she took to the air. “I married him.”

I watched her fly towards the house and sighed, shaking my head with a smile. Pegasi weren’t quite as strange as zebras and griffins, but they were definitely on the list.

An empty tin can bounced off the back of my head. I looked over at the grinning Scotch Tape, who pointed her hoof towards me, then grinned and pointed at the structure they were building. “Hey, Blackjack! Glad you’re back. We need your cyber-fingered funky zebra walking help here.”

Well, that was the magic word, right? Help.

With me playing the role of a jack, lifting and holding the heavy overhead beams in place, the work went even faster than before. The young ponies worked in teams of three and four to carry the materials over. I held things in place. The adults banged them together, Lacunae and my magic helping to hammer the higher places. Once the building was up and enclosed, four large open-topped barrels were placed up high along the back of the building. Pipes had been punched through the bases and sealed with Wonderglue and duct tape; I wondered if that’d actually work in the long term.

It wasn't until I saw what came next that I realized what we were making. Toilets. Five fine porcelain thrones from the manor itself. They were set in place by Scotch Tape herself. Lacunae used her magic to ferry over a barrel filled with river water and poured to fill each of the opened barrels. Then Scotch Tape shooed us all out.

"Go! Git! Out! I gotta test it!" she said as she pushed everypony out.

For a moment, everypony just looked at each other in confusion. Then came a sound of passing gas and a tinkle, and looks passed from one pony to the next. Finally a pregnant pause, and then a sound of a flushing toilet filled the air. The assembled ponies let out a cheer as Scotch Tape emerged, blushing faintly.

The olive filly nodded once with clear relief. "No more ditches."

Of course, the luxury of having a working toilet was more than most of the assembled ponies could handle, and they quickly availed themselves of the facilities. Scotch Tape just sighed, watching them enter and leave with clear relief. Now the greater challenge: getting the fillies and colts to keep it clean.

It was then that I noticed something else was new besides the bathroom. When Scotch had emerged, she hadn't buttoned up the rear flap of her coveralls, and her butt was hanging out a bit. I blinked, then squinted. "Scotch... your flank... I think you got it!"

Her eyes popped wide, but rather than gawk at it like any sane filly would, she clenched her eyes closed and began to whimper. "I don't wanna see it!" she blurted as she tugged the flap back in place and sat down hard. I gave her a minute; she only lasted fifteen seconds. She stood once again, eyes firmly shut as she groaned, "You look, Blackjack. Please tell me it's not a toilet."

I magically tugged her coveralls back and sighed before I patted her head. "It's not a toilet," I said as reassuringly as I could.

"You're just saying that, aren't you! I got a big old white bowl on my butt, don't I? Or something even worse!" She whimpered and shook her head. "I don't want to see it! I'll go find a big old patch of that blue weed and get myself turned into Applejack or something!"

"Scotch Tape, it's not a toilet. To be honest, I'm not really sure what it is!" I laughed and that prompted her to take a peek.

The filly's cutie mark was a strange diamond over an unwrapped scroll. The four-sided diamond was made up of two strange apparati. The bottom one was a ruler which seemed to be bent in the middle at a ninety degree angle. The top was some

strange piece of equipment that resembled two sharpened metal sticks joined at the apex by a hinge. On the parchment was some strange abstract design that appeared vaguely structural.

"It's... I... but..." she stammered as she stared at her flank. P-21 appeared from the crowd, slowly walking up with a wistful smile. Scotch Tape looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Daddy?" she whimpered.

"It's a very nice cutie mark," he said as he pulled her into an embrace. Immediately, she burst into happy tears as she held him. Some of the other ponies looked on at the spectacle in confusion and with a little envy.

I sighed and took a deep breath. "You realize what this calls for, don't you?"

Scotch Tape wiped her eyes. "Huh? What?" Suddenly, a lot of ponies started looking nervous as I grinned from ear to ear.

It wasn't anything like a Stable 99 cutie mark party. There weren't any recycled dresses, the food was whatever we could raid from Charity's stores and a Society merchant Lacunae cornered in Megamart, and the festivities were rape free (thank goodness). The decorations were whatever fancy ribbons we could throw up around Star House. There were so many ponies that those who couldn't fit in the living room spilled outside. The vast majority of the colts and fillies were both utterly baffled and completely delighted by the festivities. When they got their cutie marks, it was mostly just another day. Who could spare food and energy for a celebration over a cutie mark? So rather than saying this was just for Scotch and her mark, I hastily made up a story of 'cutie mark day.'

P-21 was in his element, cooking in the kitchen with the help of Rampage and Lacunae. The striped filly seemed to be lisping a little, her pink eyes slightly sad; Twist was making an appearance and helping out from time to time. Lacunae floated bowls of some sort of improvised punch drink stuff that was mostly Sparkle-Cola onto tables outside the front door and put a brake on any of the festivities that got too wild. The games she and I put up were also odd to most of the ponies; 'pin the tail on the pony' wasn't nearly as interesting as 'shoot the head off the raider'. Oh well, as long as they were having fun and being careful. Others improvised a band of whatever instruments they could and played despite the Hoofington drizzle.

I brought down Octavia from my room and showed her to Adagio, Allegro, and Sonata. I tried to explain how she was special, and how they should play with

her, take care of her, and not leave her alone. The three young ponies looked at the instrument thoughtfully. Then the blue and magenta Adagio stood firm as the magenta and blue Allegro hopped on his back. Tiny Sonata clambered on to Allegro's shoulders and her hooves began to work the neck of the base. Allegro didn't use the bow at all! Instead, he happily plucked the strings, and deep twangs joined the rest of the band. I tried not to wince, but oddly the notes that came out were clear and deep.

There was a little bit of regret, too. I'd liked making music. It'd been nice; it'd saved me more than once when I'd been at my absolute worst. And a part of me liked to imagine just what I'd have been like in another time and place where I could have learned music rather than how to patrol and enforce the rules of the Overmare. It was a silly, selfish thought, but I felt it all the same. Still, Octavia should be in the hooves of other ponies to enjoy her music, not kept as a prize in my room for when I was down.

And ultimately, I liked giving her to the three who'd lost their friend more than I liked playing her for myself.

Rampage moved like a jackal on the fringes once the cooking was done, her face a constant mask of indecision. Should she go, or would she be safe to participate? Did she even want to play with a bunch of silly foals, or was she a mature mare? Finally, appearances decided the matter. Two green colts shouted something to the equivalent of 'boogie down' or maybe 'booger town' and started to dance like maniacs beside her. Indecision finally broke, at least for a little bit, as she smiled and joined them in their exuberant dancing. She even smiled like a filly.

Sweet cupcakes, music, and fun. For a little while, we pushed the Wasteland away and had a little hope and civilization. I looked up on the roof where I could barely make out the still forms of Glory and Dawn, their heads close together as they had their own reunion. I sat on the periphery of it all as I chewed on the edge of my cake, watching them. My friends. My community. My stable.

Dealer chuckled softly beside me. "You don't have to sit out here. You can go and join them." The white pony looked better than he had before, more rested. Younger, too.

"I don't deserve to," I said quietly, taking a pull on a bottle of Wild Pegasus I'd obtained for the celebrations. He gave a deep sigh, and I smiled. "It's alright. I'm fine like this." I watched them celebrating, and my smile grew. I couldn't partake, but I could appreciate. "Are you okay?"

He frowned. "Me?"

"You've been quiet a while. I expected you to put in an appearance at the skyport. All that talk of responsibility and accountability," I said, then saw his uncomfortable look. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... scared of her." He pulled his hat over his face to hide his shame.

I blinked in shock. "Scared?"

"I'm a soul in a box, and EC-1101 is bonded to me. The Goddess manipulates minds and souls connected to her. If she found out about me, she might try to yank out the Megaspell through your connection."

I gaped at him. "Can she do that?"

"Do you want to find out?" he retorted. I really didn't want to find out.

Topic change. "So, apparently my friends have been keeping secrets from me," I said softly before taking another drink. "To protect me..."

"Friends do that sometimes. You did that," he added, and I gave a little grimace. "You can't have it both ways, Blackjack. Either you're honest to your friends, or you try to keep things pleasant. Not all that easy to pull off both."

I frowned, closed my eyes, and let go the little bitter sense of resentment that I had no right to hold. I'd tried to give my friends peace of mind. How could I hold their actions against them when they were just trying to give me the same? When I looked at him again, his lips curled in a tiny smile of approval.

"I know. I know..." I murmured. I sighed softly, smiling just as slightly as he was. I looked at the celebration and frowned a little, tallying up all the good things... and bad things... that had happened today. My friends were working out their problems. Scotch got her cutie mark. P-21 might actually be happy again, at least a little. Rampage too. I'd saved six ponies without killing anyone. I'd gotten answers without reenacting Yellow River. Saw a Psalm dream that didn't have me in tears. Glory was finally talking with her mother again after years of separation. I might have actually teleported before my horn went poof. Chapel now had flushing toilets. And yet... there was something off about it all that I couldn't quite put my hoof on. "Ugh, today's just been... just been weird."

He smiled a tired, sad smile. "The word you're looking for is 'good', Blackjack."

"Good?" I blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about? Blackjack doesn't have good days. She has days that are bad and less bad and occasionally are

punctuated with good events.” I saw his smile and brushed my mane behind my ear. “Okay... theoretically it might be possible... one in a gazillion chance...”

“Trust me, Blackjack. It’s been a good day.”

I watched the celebration, and my smile grew a little more honest. Not the expression I usually wore when I was in the calm between disasters and breakdowns. Sure, I’d lost my guns and sword, and I’d had a reminder of the consequence of good intentions, but I’d also helped my friends and appreciated just what ‘protecting my friends’ really meant. I’d get Vigilance back one way or another. Duty and Sacrifice, too. And the creepy sword of crazy sharpness. And find some way to stop whatever was building between Glory’s home and the rest of the Enclave.

“Yeah,” I said softly as I watched the proceedings. “Yeah, I guess it was.”

And if I could have one good day, I could do anything.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

52. Reunions

"I put two and two and two together and it added up to Matilda!"

I can't claim to be any kind of expert on parties, but it seemed to me that the cutie mark celebration was slowly winding down. Food was now in the process of digestion, the lengthening night robbed the party of its energy, and the rumble of thunder was the final nail in the celebration's coffin; nopony wanted to have fun in the rain. Soon we were escorting the colts and fillies back down the hill to Chapel. The adults who'd attended carried two or three young ponies on their backs with slightly awkward looks. I could understand, though: these weren't their children. Still, all of them seemed willing to do the right thing. To do better.

Several of the younger foals climbed into the cart the Crusaders used to move salvage, and I hauled it down the hill and around the minefield. The fillies and colts all staggered into the post office to sleep, and the adults crawled under tarps or into the few other buildings as the Hoofington skies began to pour.

While my friends returned to Star House, I lingered a moment. The heavy drops started to hiss as they struck the piles of lumber, stacks of recycled building material, and cracked asphalt. I looked at the ditch full of dirty water. Just yesterday, I'd jumped in and tried to save a filly. Today we were having a party. What would happen tomorrow? I grit my teeth as I felt my emotions give a sudden lurch. It wasn't fair. Wasn't right!

I looked at my leg, where the damned program that had caused all the trouble in my life lay. I wanted to throw it in the river then and there. I'd never relinquish it to the Harbingers—whatever they served was not worth that—but it would be satisfying to know that *no pony* would get their hooves on the thing. I deserved to have it, though. I deserved all the pain it. . .

No! I wasn't going to do this *again*. I sucked in great breaths of wet rain and struggled for control. With each breath, a little bit of the anxiety inside me escaped. I let the rain wash across my face as I fought the urge to kick myself right into the ground. This was the Wasteland, and people died. I'd tried to save her. I'd tried. Bit by bit, stability asserted itself.

Was EC-1101 worth all this grief? I'd had a good day. Not exactly a normal one, but good. What would it be like to have several more? I needed to think, so I walked

slowly along the road down to the lonely shell of the church building. The forlorn structure hadn't been repaired at all; all the energy had been spent on the village itself.

I looked up at the dark window from which Princess Celestia had once gazed down at her loving subjects. Now I could only see the black towers outlined in the stark electric green glow of the Core through the empty, shard-rimmed frame. Water dripped and pattered through the holes torn in the roof. The cushions were saturated, squishing unpleasantly beneath me as I knelt upon them. My eyes passed over the shadowed paintings of the Ministry Mares, their faces lost in the gloom. Even my augmented vision didn't do much. The only one I could make out well at all was Twilight Sparkle; judgemental purple eyes stared down at me. They were Mom's eyes.

I closed my eyes and then accessed my recordings. Slowly, the hymn that had saved me from the nightmare beneath Horizon Labs began to play. I imagined that I could almost pick out Medley and Priest from the countless others. Of course, I couldn't. The music sounded hollow and weak in the wet gloom, a ghost of the melody and the moment. Funny; just a few hours ago, I'd been using a ghost to save six lives.

There was nothing funny about the real thing.

"Blackjack," came P-21's solemn voice from the door of the church. "I didn't see you at the party."

"I don't think I'm really all that much of a party pony anymore," I replied as I looked at the water sloshing around the saturated violet cushion. "Does that mean I'm getting old?"

"Mature, maybe. I can't imagine old. Or I can't imagine anything but being old," he said as he walked up slowly to stand beside me, pushing back his wide brimmed hat to look me in the eye. "Are you okay?"

I was sitting alone in a ruined church on a rainy night all alone, and he asked if I was okay? I'd be scared of anypony who hung out in a place like this and found the term 'okay' applicable. "Yeah. Sure. As okay as I'll ever be, I guess." I looked at the blown-out window and went on, "I'm not feeling like I need to run or I'll die. I only did one moderately stupid thing today. I'm depressed about Medley... and Boing... and everypony else I've failed, but I'm trying to deal with it. I'm happy for Glory and Scotch, at least. So... yeah." I gave him a little smile. "Okay."

I looked down at my PipBuck and fiddled with it as he watched me with a concerned frown. I flipped through a few songs, selecting one at random so I wouldn't have to listen to dead ponies sing. It landed on something classical. No words. Just soft piano and strings that fit the drizzle around me. "I've been doing some thinking since Hightower... and Medley... and Priest... everything. I've been chasing after EC-1101 for weeks now, trying to find a secret. Now... now I'm wondering if I should. It was always a goal to chase after; an excuse to run myself right into the ground."

I looked towards the clouds above, barely visible in the green glow of the Core. "Maybe I should give up on following EC-1101. Help folks here. Deal with the Harbingers and Red Eye. Try and fix up what I can rather than just getting folks killed trying to get to a navigation tag." I forced a smile as wide as I could. "That would be better, wouldn't it? Glory would be happier knowing I'm keeping out of trouble. You could spend more time with Scotch. We could work out Rampage's problems."

But he didn't look like he agreed with that at all. "Yeah. You could do that," he said evenly. For almost a minute neither of us spoke, and my cheeks ached at the forced smile.

"So. That would be good. Right? Good for everypony," I said as I rubbed my PipBuck nervously. "No more stupid adventures of Blackjack. Yay..." I forced every bit of insincerity I could into that cheer.

"Except for you," he said softly.

"Me?" I couldn't believe it. My smile trembled even more. "I told you. I don't care about EC-1101 anymore. It's not... not worth everything we've been through." Not worth the worry I'd caused Glory. Not worth the danger I put my friends in. "I think I'll give it to Spike or... or something." It was a lame suggestion; I had no idea if Spike would accept it when he was already guarding the Gardens. But P-21 just looked at me with that steady blue gaze and disappointed little smile. I finally snapped. "Sweet Celestia, P-21, fuck whatever I want! What I've wanted has been a fucking disaster. What about what you want? You want to stay with Scotch Tape. Say I'm wrong. Glory deserves a little attention and stability. Rampage needs help more than me. Fuck my Goddesses-damned quest!"

But he didn't answer. He pulled the brim lower over his eyes. "Yeah. I do want that. These last couple of days have been... well... they've been the best in my life. Damned wonderful. And I know Glory'd be happy with that. Rampage too. But

you've been following that for a month, and now you just want to give it up?"

"Yes! Why not? Who cares what Goldenblood did? Who gives a damn about what Project Horizons is? Why can't I just..." Just what? Quit? The question caught in my throat and our eyes met again. This time, I was the one who looked down at my rain-streaked hooves.

He put his hoof on my shoulder, and I looked into his eyes. I didn't see the hard blue gaze of my friend. They were calmer, softer. If 99 had been different... if so many things had been different... "If I thought you really wanted to give it up, sure. But I don't think you do. I think that this is just another case of you tearing yourself down. Something to make you miserable. Like me refusing to tell Scotch the truth. Me convincing myself that I deserved to be miserable." He patted my shoulder, and his smile widened a little. "Tell me I'm wrong."

I opened my mouth soundlessly once, unable to speak the lie. Finally I whispered, "You're not wrong." I should give it up. It was going to get me... my friends... everypony killed. "It's just... this was a good day for everypony. I'd really like to see more of them... you know?"

"Me too," he replied with an unusual smile as he nudged my shoulder. "And when you find out the answer to this mystery and EC-1101 is really done, that'll be a great day. For you. For everypony. But no giving up on it, Blackjack. Not unless you'll really be happy with it."

I sighed and closed my eyes. And I knew I wouldn't. The questions and mystery would be there like a thorn in my mind. Eventually I'd resent my friends for my own stupid decision. Finally, I smiled in resignation. "Okay. You're right. I guess I'm just being... not smart again..."

"You're smarter than you think," P-21 replied evenly.

"Yeah. Brain damage did me some good." I snorted and rolled my eyes sarcastically before frowning in seriousness. "If I just had a clue what Horizons was! Sanguine said it was something bad and something big. Real big. And apparently, from what I saw on Goldenblood's terminal, wherever and whatever it is... it's ready to go off. But I can't think of anypony who'd have a clue as to what it is or what it's meant to do. The only ones who might know are the Harbingers, and we're not exactly on speaking terms at the moment."

P-21 frowned, seeming lost in thought before he slowly nodded. "Yeah..."

"Well, nothing I can do about that now. While I can't quit, I think I can spare a

short vacation from EC-1101. A week or two, maybe,” I said with a smile. Or till the Harbingers showed up. “See? Blackjack can learn.” Somehow, my joke didn’t reach him.

“Yeah,” he said as he stared away out the door. “Blackjack. Do you trust me?” I caught the glint of guilt in his eyes as he peeked back at me from the corner of his eye.

“Sure,” I answered at once. “I trust all of you.”

“Even if we... I... did something behind your back?”

I looked at him for a long moment, and then smiled, “All of you are a whole lot smarter than I am, P-21. If you did something and didn’t tell me... well, I trust you’d only do it for good reason. And I trust that you’d tell me sooner or later.” My response seemed to tear at him a little. I knew it couldn’t be easy for him.

He turned away and seemed to debate with himself a minute. I could have asked for whatever he was hiding from me, but I didn’t want to push him. Then he glanced back at me, and our eyes met. For the longest time, we seemed to just stare at one another. For the oddest reason, I thought back to 99 and meeting outside that supply room. It felt like it’d all been a dream. He turned, his stoic mask spoiled by the tension of worry about his eyes. He was waiting for me to ask. I was waiting for him to tell me. Finally, he lowered his gaze, “I have something to tell you, Blackjack. You’re not going to like it, though.”

I arched a brow. “About Tenpony?” Heee, it wasn’t often I got to be the smug pony.

He was silent for a moment before he sighed and frowned with an annoyed little scowl. “So Glory told you. Figures.” He shook his head grimly, as he went on, “Well, we promised Homage we would when you were ready. She promised to talk with me first though.”

“Actually, she didn’t,” I answered as I looked at him. “I sort of worked out that something was wrong about what happened there.” He scowled at me, skepticism clear on his face. I sighed and rolled my eyes. “*And* I heard you and Rampage talking about it.” Surprise showed for a moment before he recomposed himself. He swallowed and looked out at the gloom around us.

“I’m... I’m sorry. We...” He didn’t seem to know how to finish.

“Thought it was the best thing for me,” I finished for him and gave an honest smile. Any anger I’d have normally felt was muted by the rain and the talk I’d had with

Dealer. I'd lied to my friends to protect them. . . they'd lied to me to protect me. That was the definition of 'fair'. It didn't matter if fair still sucked butt.

"Yeah," he muttered, looking ashamed. "When you ran off with LittlePip, Glory was in a panic. Homage was beside herself. We were all. . . concerned." He sighed and shook his head. "Then you returned on a flight of alicorns and. . . yeah. All of us were really worried."

"You were right to be," I replied, putting my hoof on his shoulder. He reached up to his wide-brimmed black hat and pulled it off, then reached in and scooped up a round memory orb in his hoof. I frowned, focused, and barely managed to snag it with my feeble magic. That teleport had knocked my horn for a loop, but it didn't diminish the fact that I'd done it. Mom had told me her mother had been able to do it, and her grandmother's mother too. I'd never seen Mom pull it off, though.

"So, how'd you get it from me?" I asked. "I know I'm not as smart as LittlePip. No way I'd do it to myself."

"We didn't. It's my memory," he said. "No sex. No surprises. Just the truth." He trotted to the side and took a seat in a sheltered spot. "It's not long. I'll watch you while you view it." I blinked at him in shock, and his eyes popped open. "I mean I'll watch out for you while you view it. Not watch you 'cause I want to watch you. . ." He closed his eyes and pressed his hooves to the sides of his head. "Priest. Stronghoof. U-21. Calamity," he muttered over again.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm pretty sure you can like both stallions and mares."

That brought him back to his scowling, grumpy self. "I don't like mares. Most are whining, chatty, hypocritical, and just plain crazy. With the exception of Scotch Tape and. . . I just don't like them!" he blurted, waving his hoof at me. I couldn't hide my smile, and he pointedly glared at anything that wasn't me. Some things never changed. Thank Celestia for that.

Chuckling, I glanced from him to the little orb, then moved beside him. Not the opportune place, but it was better than nothing. I tapped the orb to my horn with magic and tried to make the link to the orb. According to Triage's notes, I wasn't supposed to force it. Then the connection took hold, and the world slipped away.

oooOOOooo

It'd be nice to say that it was the first time I had been in a pony like this, but I'd be lying. The full body ache ran from head to hoof; it wasn't nearly as intense as the agony I'd experienced as Deus, but I couldn't imagine anypony living like this day

after day. Each step sent a wave of discomfort rolling through his muscles. Every breath was an ache-filled labor. Even blinking created a swell of pressure in his eyes. I instantly had a greater understanding for my friend's personality. If I felt like this daily, I'd be pretty grumpy too.

He trotted away from where all the others talked in low voices and sat. Carefully, he reached behind his head and raked his hooves through his brushy mane, pulling out three syringes of Med-X. He hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. He bit the cap covers off two of them and jammed the needles into his hind leg right above the knee that'd been crippled not so long ago. Instantly he shuddered and let out a long sigh of relief.

He looked up and met the equally stoic gaze of the zebra, Xenith. I hadn't known her very well; she'd been nothing like Xanthe, despite how similar their names were. Xanthe had been weird. Xenith had been scary. The zebra didn't say a word; her light green eyes may have simply been cameras recording his private moment for all the judgment they held. P-21 said nothing either. Then there was some silent acknowledgement in Xenith's tiny nod before the zebra turned away and he tossed the syringes in the trash. With a deftness that shocked me, he wound his mane around the remaining needle and hid it in his wiry blue hair.

Slowly he walked back towards the conversation. "... is having the memories extracted. To be safe, we're going to scrub every reference to Blackjack and the rest of you from her mind before she leaves here. She wants us to save the chat she had with Red Eye, but with Lacunae following the rest of you around... We don't want to risk the Goddess thinking Blackjack knows something," Velvet Remedy said calmly, not noticing P-21 returning to the group.

"Blackjack knowing things is an oxymoron," P-21 replied sourly.

"She's lucky," Homage nearly growled. "LittlePip is so getting punished when she's... better. Running off like that in the middle of the night. Not telling anypony!"

Glory looked like she'd been crying with her lovely purple eyes all bloodshot and puffy. It didn't matter what body she possessed, she'd always be beautiful. "Punished?" she asked a little cluelessly.

"Means she's going to strap her down and take a crop to LittlePip's hind-end till she learns not to scare us all so bad," Calamity replied with a chuckle, making the gray pegasus blush furiously.

"Does... does that really work?" Glory asked, blinking in surprise. When ponies

looked at her, her ears folded back, and she said softly, “My... ah... my sister is like that.”

The gray unicorn smiled kindly and then rolled her eyes. “Maybe. Maybe not. But it’s definitely going to make me feel better,” she said with a small smile at Glory and a nod at Velvet and Calamity. “Anyway. LittlePip is our problem. What about Blackjack? Is she okay?”

Glory opened her mouth, sighed, then started again. Her voice was more clipped and reserved. “She drank nearly a gallon of whiskey in one go. She would have been dead of alcohol poisoning if she’d done this a week ago.” She sighed again and covered her face with a hoof and her voice shook. “I... I don’t know if it was another suicide attempt or not. I knew there’d be trauma... We nearly lost her so many times. I just... I just don’t know.”

Sweet Celestia, I deserved whippings for a year for doing this to her. Velvet put her forelegs around Glory in a light embrace. P-21 stepped forward. “I doubt we’ll be able to apply the term ‘okay’ to Blackjack any time soon. We’ll see how she stabilizes... if she does. She was mutated, violated, mutilated, and then... she...” His voice broke for a moment as he looked away before finishing, “And then she came back as something else.”

A speaker beside the metal drum holding the Professor’s head crackled, “At the very least, she shouldn’t feel discomfort from her augmentation. We were very careful to block as much pain input from her synthetics as we could. She shouldn’t need Deus’ Mega-X painkiller formula. That’s one benefit.”

Wait. So I was *supposed* to hurt? Was that why I felt so... so still inside? Were my implants rubbing against flesh, scraping at nonfunctional nerves, with every step? I’d never forget the pain Deus had been forced to live with.

“Did her augments make her do this, Professor?” P-21 asked.

The speaker was silent a moment, then said, “It’s possible. Steelpony only had a few test subjects as heavily augmented as her. There seems to be an equilibrium point where, once so much of the body is lost, the mind becomes increasingly unstable. A few became terribly reckless in battle; after all, they had repair talismans. Why worry about damage? Others felt a loss of self and suffered depression. Still others became more aggressive as they tried to assert self on their augmentations.”

“So her twigged behavior could be from the mess she’s lived through, a loose wire, or both?” Calamity asked before looking at Homage with a little half smile. “Kinda

makes ya miss PTM's, don't it?"

"No. It doesn't," Homage replied before looking at Glory. "Don't worry. We'll get her straightened out."

"We'll go check on LittlePip. Let her know you're coming in a bit," Velvet said, and then she and Calamity headed for the exit. P-21's eyes lingered on the brown pegasus's backside; I had to admit, my friend had excellent taste. I'd said it before: I didn't know what it was, but there was just something about fliers that was nummy! A second later, noticed only by P-21, Xenith departed as well.

When they'd gone, Glory sighed and looked at P-21. "Is Scotch Tape still with Lacunae?"

"I think so," he answered as he took a seat across from the candy-cane maned stallion, Life Bloom. "If LittlePip was right. . ."

"She was," Homage replied firmly. "Twilight Sparkle was pulled into Unity days after the bombs went off." Glory shivered and shook her head.

"Then we need to keep this from both of them. We don't know what the Goddess would do if she knew." Glory looked at Life Bloom. "Can't you convince the Twilight Society to put off this stupid test?"

"Unfortunately, no," Life Bloom replied with a sigh and a shake of his head. "They spent a considerable amount of resources helping put Blackjack back together. They want a payback. Sooner, rather than later."

"She just woke up, and first things she did were run off into a tunnel full of feral ghouls and sneak into an enemy camp with a complete stranger," Glory begged as she wiped her puffy eyes with her wing. "Give her a little time!"

"It's not my decision. The Society wants her tested," Life Bloom said grimly. "Every few years we come across a Ministry Mare relative, usually an Apple, who can bypass spells keyed to the Ministry Mares."

"But how do you even know there is a descendant for Twilight?" P-21 asked.

"A hundred and fifty years ago there was an organized attack on Tenpony. Raiders were part of an ill-planned attack on the tower itself, back when the Twilight Society made efforts to help the inhabitants around the tower. Several raiders were captured. One carried a memory orb. Before her execution, she said she'd gotten it from a strange ghoulish living in Canterlot who claimed she'd gotten it from the Ministry of Peace hub. Inside were memories of Twilight having a clandestine relationship

with Big Macintosh and of an unborn foal being transferred to a surrogate mother. Unfortunately, we've never been able to ascertain which of Twilight's cousins could have been the surrogate. So for a hundred and fifty years, that memory orb has achieved near mythical status."

"Why?" Glory asked with a frown. "What do they expect her to do? Be the second coming of Twilight Sparkle?"

"Twilight ushered in an era of magical discovery unparalleled since the mythic ages of Clover the Clever and Starswirl the Bearded. Her brother was captain of the Royal Guard for several years. Her family had been integral to Equestria, and there was even speculation before the war that the Sparkle lineage was descended from those legendary ponies," Life Bloom said calmly. "There are many in the Society who believe that any pony descended from Twilight would be destined to do great things."

"Nevermind that she could be one good push away from a complete psychological collapse?" Glory protested.

Life Bloom closed his eyes and sighed. "In their eyes, if Blackjack is unstable, she can always have an heir or two to fit the Society's agenda."

"Over my dead body," P-21 said flatly.

"I'd never be a party to such a thing either," Homage said, glaring at Life Bloom.

"There are elements in the Society who would trade DJ PON-3 for the Twilight Sparkle bloodline, Homage. In a heartbeat," Life Bloom replied grimly. "I had to say, all the warm and fuzzy sentiments I may have had for the Twilight Society were going bye-bye. He looked at P-21 and Glory. "Not all, or even most, but enough. The moderates simply want to know, then make up their minds in their own time."

"But if she is, then the hardliners would probably never let her leave," Glory said with a scowl. "But if she doesn't do their test, then they won't let her leave either."

"Are you certain Blackjack can't handle the knowledge?" the Professor asked. "She seemed remarkably resilient."

Oddly, everypony looked at P-21 instead of Glory. He looked around, then sighed. "I think that with time, Blackjack can handle anything. Wait a few weeks, and she'd be able to deal with being related to the most famous unicorn in history. But throwing it at her now... no. I don't think it'd be good. She'd react badly. Like... gassing Stable 99 badly," he added, looking around at the others.

“What is the test that is being considered?” the Professor asked.

Life Bloom sighed and rubbed between his eyes. “The hardliners want something definitive. Perhaps some kind of blood test. Umbra wants nothing less than an egg harvest for magic testing. The old bastard probably plans on eventual in vitro fertilization.” P-21 reached into his brushy tail, and I felt the bump of a grenade underhoof. Life Bloom glanced at P-21 and I guessed saw my blue friend’s equivalent of a shooty look. “That is not what most of the Society is after,” he added quickly, and P-21 relaxed just a little. Glory didn’t. If looks were magic bullet spells. . . Life Bloom continued, “Most want to see if she can open the doors.”

“Doors?” Glory asked in worry.

“There’s a number of doors that were magically keyed to Twilight so that only she or close relatives could open them. Some are. . . very hush hush. But there are others that were more symbolic. Like the main doors to the M.A.S. meeting room where all the boring official business happened.” He looked around the building, “Before this place was made the M.A.S. hub, it was an exclusive hotel. Much of the building was modified for the M.A.S. to use.”

“I thought that Tenpony was built for the M.A.S.,” Glory said in surprise.

“A lot of things were built from the ground up for the Ministries, but it’s not like they all appeared overnight,” Life Bloom replied casually. “While Maripony and the Canterlot and Hoofington hubs were being constructed, Tenpony was converted as a base of operations. It had already been modified into a broadcasting tower for the war effort before Luna rose to power, so it was a natural conversion. The uppermost floors were converted to M.A.S. use while the lower ones remained as they were for the populace.”

“So. . . before these doors were enchanted so that only Twilight could open them, the room was just an ordinary room?” P-21 asked, his brows furrowing.

“I believe so, yes,” Life Bloom said with a frown.

“With ordinary locks?” P-21 asked.

Homage frowned at him. “You’re thinking of locking the doors so they won’t open for *anypony*.”

“Right. Blackjack and the hardliners will see her fail to open them,” P-21 replied.

Life Bloom smiled. “And then we can have her open something else later to be absolutely sure. Perhaps Twilight’s study. It’s off the athenaeum; most ponies won’t

be there.” He looked at the others. “That way I can inform more moderate members discreetly that she is Twilight’s.”

“Blackjack will never have to know,” P-21 said with a little nod, then looked at the worried Glory. “She can continue on thinking that she’s just Blackjack.”

“And the Goddess won’t know any different either,” Glory said as she closed her eyes. “Oh, Blackjack. . . I’m so sorry. . .” She sniffed. She had nothing to be sorry about.

Homage frowned at the three of us, then shook her head. “The only way I’ll agree with this is if we tell Blackjack the truth.”

“Homage. We know why we can’t,” Life Bloom said with a resigned sigh.

“And I accept that. There is a time and a place for honesty. This isn’t it. But she deserves to know the truth.” Homage looked at all of us sternly before adding, “Otherwise, I will tell her. And if that’ll be easier on all of you, then that’s how we can do it.”

Glory trembled a little. “I couldn’t. . . I wouldn’t know how. . .”

“I’ll tell her,” P-21 said in a low voice. “She knows I won’t lie to her.”

Homage’s eyes softened a little. “That would be welcome, but things might get. . . mixed up.” That was an understatement; if we went back out into the wastes, there was a chance he could die and I’d never know. “How about copying your memories of this meeting? She can access them later. . . if her magic recovers. It might be easier to show what we decided rather than tell her. Make it easier on her. And you,” she added.

P-21 glared at the mare, then lowered his eyes. “Fine.”

The rest of the memory was simple. P-21 snuck up in the early morning, avoiding cameras and personnel alike as if he were a giant blue StealthBuck. He walked right up to the fancy doors, tried to open them. . . nothing. He squatted, and with a pin, his screwdriver (which I thankfully learned he kept concealed in his brushy tail and not. . . other places), and some scrap metal jammed the heavy old lock closed.

So that was it, then. My friends had conspired to keep me safe from not just myself but from others as well. And they’d been right to do so. If the Goddess had known I was related to Twilight, she might have tried to hurt me simply to torment the Twilight Sparkle within her. If the hardliners had known, I might never have left. And if I’d known. . . yes. I would have done something stupid and selfish. Hurt myself. . . or

hurt my friends even more.

P-21 made his way towards the clinic when he passed by a mirror. He looked around, confirming he was alone, then stared at his own reflection. “Blackjack...” he began, then clenched his jaw and averted his eyes from himself. “I don’t know how to say this. I don’t know if you’ll ever be well enough for this memory. Heck, we might all be dead tomorrow. I just... I wanted... I...” He covered his face with a hoof and groaned. “I think it was easier when I wasn’t allowed to talk most of the time.”

He sat for a moment, then looked at himself again. Slowly he took another breath and then said softly, “Thank you. Even if you’re the most... boneheaded, idiotic, infuriating mare in existence... you never quit. You never give up. No matter how hard it is on you. I hope you realize that we don’t want to give up either. You suffer so much for us... sometimes pointlessly... that it makes me want to scream and hug you at the same time. Don’t suffer for us. The guilt is worse than the pain. We can take it. Maybe not as much as you do, but we can handle what the wasteland throws at us.”

His lips curled in a rare, soft smile as he stared into his own blue eyes. “You can trust us with the burden sometimes. That’s all I’m saying.” He flushed and then glanced away, back again, and then added, “And... um... please don’t tell Calamity. Or talk about this... ever... or...” He groaned and shook his head. “Ugh... nevermind...”

Then he turned and continued on his way. The world swirled away as the memory ended.

oooOOOooo

The drizzly night reasserted itself along with the strange notes of Octavia’s mournful music coming from my PipBuck. I was the descendant of Twilight Sparkle. The child she and Big Macintosh had conceived together had been passed to Marigold after his assassination. Marigold had raised Tarot as her own. By a fluke, she’d been visiting a friend when the bombs fell, and instead of ending up in the doomed stable 90, she’d gone to Stable 99 where she’d passed the filly to Card Trick. She’d grown up in a stable where the rules almost guaranteed she’d have a child. Generations later, here I was. How could all that be a coincidence?

A riot was taking place in Unity as the Twilight part of the Goddess struggled to assert herself at this news. I couldn’t pick out specific words from all of the babble, but I was guessing that the Goddess wasn’t going to be too happy with me when she finally imposed order on the consensus. That hardly mattered, though. She

was already plenty pissed with me.

I'd go crazy if I tried to calculate the odds. I remembered being on Star Point when I realized the implications, but now... I wondered if there was some force out there playing with me, setting things up. Maybe Discord had done it all as a joke ages ago. If I found a memory orb of Goldenblood plotting this, I'd scream. Or maybe it was as simple as Celestia and Luna still managing things from the Everafter. Or simply it was all chance, a trillion to one odds. Who could say?

All I knew was my tail was soaked and my butt was cold. I turned to P-21 with a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dawn said happily from beside me with her merry squint.

"Gyaaaah!" I shouted, lurching back and falling over. I waved a hoof at the dove-gray pegasus looking down with an expression of concern. "Where- where'd you come from?"

"Flankfurt. . . though I think today you call it just 'Flank'," she replied casually.

P-21 stepped up beside Dawn, looking a bit wet and more worried than usual. "Hey," he murmured, looking away awkwardly as he rubbed his shoulder with his forehoof, water dripping off his battered hat. "I.. um... I hope you don't mind." He pointed at my PipBuck. "I wanted to play some of that Octavia broadcast."

What Octavia broadcast? I opened my mouth to ask, but then I saw the familiar seriousness in his eyes and a tiny nod towards Dawn. I swallowed, and then gave a little smile. "Yeah. No problem. I love Octavia too."

"Good. You should leave it on." I just frowned at him in bafflement, then gave a little nod. He relaxed just a hair, glanced at Dawn, and then asked in a lower voice, "Are you... okay?" I could hear the unanswered questions. 'Okay with what we did? Okay with what you know?'

Was I? Twilight Sparkle was a legendary figure in my mind. To be related to her, even distantly, felt... overwhelming. But unlike at Tenpony, now I'd had time to come to terms with some of the changes forced upon me. And I'd seen that Twilight hadn't been perfect; good, yes, but not perfect. No perfect pony could have left Discord to be processed into flux. But she'd been willing to resign rather than continue being a part of ministries that did bad things. I wasn't quite the fuck-up that I'd always thought of myself as. Not perfect—certainly not— but trying to do better.

"Yeah. I am," I replied. He smiled, body sagging in relief before he gave a sharp sneeze. I patted his shoulder. "We should go back inside Star House. Getting sick

sucks.”

“Actually. I’d love to talk with you a moment alone, if you don’t mind,” Dawn said. I saw P-21’s features immediately grow grim.

“I don’t think—” I began.

“Go ahead, Blackjack,” P-21 said as he pulled his battered, floppy hat down over his face a little more.

Wait? He wanted me to go with her? “Are you sure?”

“Sure. I’ll go back to the house,” he said with a smile. “You should talk with her. She’s an interesting mare. Some questions and answers might help you out. Expand your horizons.” Wait... what?

My eyes went from her to him. Did he think Dawn knew something about Horizons? “If you’re sure,” I murmured, glancing past him at the amused pegasus.

“Sure. Just keep her close. Friends always stick close,” he said quietly, then turned and slowly, silently, walked out into the night. Overhead, the clouds let out a long, deep rumble of thunder.

“Such a fascinating stallion. You know, I suspect he’s secretly in love with you,” Dawn said as she looked at me with her eyes closed.

“Unlikely,” I replied flatly. “He’s more interested in stallions than mares.” Dawn just seemed to find that even more amusing, and I felt a flash of annoyance. “So. What do you want to talk about?” I asked, the contrabass beginning a long, low musical sawing that made my mane crawl. I wanted to turn it off, but I remembered what P-21 had said.

“If you don’t mind, I was hoping we could go for a walk and talk a bit,” Dawn said absently. “I’ve been eager to learn more about the mare who’s done so much in such a short time. It seems like Equestria is seeing an outbreak of heroes these days.”

“Now?” I asked, gaping at her, looking around at the dripping rainwater. “In *this*?”

“Oh, it’s hardly poor weather. The rain is coming down evenly, and we shouldn’t see the worst of it for at least an hour,” she said as if it was no matter. “As to the time, I’ve long grown used to keeping unusual hours.” I disagreed with her on the “hardly poor weather” part. The black skies were lit from within by the distant, dull flashes of lightning around the Core. She pointed up towards the manor. “Perhaps up to that lovely estate and back again?”

Right. A walk in the middle of the night to chat as a storm builds. Even I wasn't that stupid, but it wasn't as if I could just shake her. Not till she told me what was going on. P-21 said I should stay with her... so I faked as much enthusiasm as I could. "Sure. Sounds like fun." I'm just taking a walk, in the rain, at night, with a storm coming, *unarmed*... I sighed. There were so many things wrong with this.

Trust me. Expand your horizons.

I do, P-21. And I stood and followed her out into this hissing rain as the skies crackled. Octavia's classical music seemed to rise and fall in fitful melodies. I glanced at the title. 'Storm.' Wonderful...

For Glory's sake, I dearly wanted to cling to the hope that Dawn was here for good reasons. That P-21 was just being paranoid. That this really was good and right... I glanced at her as we walked in silence through Chapel and saw her frown a little. "I admit I have some concerns about you and Glory. I've heard some disturbing stories... about how dangerous you've been to others. And to yourself."

"Well, the Wasteland is a dangerous place. Especially around Hoofington," I added as I looked at the rain rolling off her wings. She was walking with her eyes closed. How in Equestria could she see where she was going? It was getting beyond 'weird' and into 'creepy'.

"Mmmm. But for all its danger, Hoofington has always had potential for greatness. Did you know that, long ago, it nearly became the capital of Equestria? I'm not talking about during the war. No, this was hundreds of years before that," she said happily as she walked slowly beside me.

"No. I honestly didn't," I replied.

"Mhmmmm! This entire valley was to be a glorious city. From one side to the other. A place of beauty and majesty fit to make Manehattan look like a backwater," Dawn said as she walked along. She faced me and added, as if sensing my skepticism, "Not all wastelanders are ignorant savages. I've spent years collecting any lore that might help others understand what Equestria was... and could be again."

"Still... Hoofington?" I muttered weakly, just not seeing it.

"No. Lunaria. The capital of Princess Luna." My shock and confusion had to be showing. "History gave her the far less flattering title of Nightmare Moon."

Funny. I seemed to recall a memory of Luna happily assuming that title herself. "But she was banished. And a thousand years later stripped of her powers." You'd be surprised what you can learn on the night shift with nothing but old textbooks in

storage to read... though mostly they'd just been about the importance of following rules.

"Indeed. Celestia and her forces met Princess Luna here before her dark citadel and used the Elements of Harmony to banish her to the moon for a thousand years. The valley was all but abandoned afterwards, till centuries later the village of Hoofington was founded. And then reborn a third time as the Core." I tried not to snort. A city only Nightmare Moon could love. . .

"Yeah. Great place to live, if it didn't kill everypony that got close," I said sarcastically.

"Yes, the automated defenses are a problem, but there is a key to shutting them down," she replied, and I felt a chill creeping along my spine. It was now I really wished I had my barding and a gun of some kind. Even one of Glory's cakes. There was no way to tell with her eyes closed to slits, but somehow I could feel her looking at EC-1101.

"And you'd want to live there?" I asked slowly, as if I were trying to disarm a landmine.

"I'd like to live anywhere we can have peace. Don't you want peace?" she asked in an almost pleading voice.

"I'd like any place where people aren't killing each other over some bottlecaps, salvage, or their next meal," I replied. "I'd like to not have to kill anypony again. Wouldn't you?" We passed the post office, and I saw Caprice peeking out at us. The peach mare's blue eyes met mine for one instant, then dropped shamefully. Slowly she drew back into the building and closed the door.

My question seemed to amuse the gray pegasus, who sighed and shook her head. "Of course. I don't believe in killing any more than you do. Every life lost is one more person who can't help us rebuild the world. And I want to rebuild the world," she said calmly. "I'm hoping that we can work together for a common good."

"Your good, or mine?" I asked as we walked past the town entrance. The colts manning the light machine gun in its tower looked down at me with a seriousness that didn't match their youthful appearance. They reminded me of Boing.

"Why not both? You want to help the people of this city. I want the same. It seems we have some common needs that should be grounds for cooperation," she said very matter-of-factly. "You've heard of virtues, yes? Mine is salvation. I've devoted my entire life to bettering the world. To do better, as Fluttershy said." She tilted her head towards me. "I imagine your virtue must be quite similar to do all that you do."

I hadn't thought of my virtues in a long time. Salvation? No. I didn't think so. And even as much as I threw myself into the meat grinder, I doubted that it was sacrifice. Tenacity... endurance... maybe. But I didn't hold any illusions that I could save the Wasteland on my own. I doubted anypony could. All I could do was give ponies a chance.

"I just don't want people to hurt. If I can spare them that, then I'm happy," I replied, not quite telling the truth but not lying either.

"It's a generous gift you want to give them," Dawn said as we trotted along through the rain. "It was a gift my husband, Sky Striker, tried to give me. A wonderful gift. A life above the clouds."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering where to take this strange conversation as we crawled up the hillside. "How'd you meet?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, it was quite unexpected." She flushed a little, running a hoof through her mane. "You know of my friends? Big Daddy? King Awesome? Carrots and Zodiac? Keeper? They were much like you and your friends." She shook her head. "When I was just a filly, my tribe was wiped out in a brutal fight. I saw my parents, both earth ponies, killed before my eyes. Such things were common then. But I vowed on their deaths that I would stop the killing. It earned me my cutie mark," she said as she looked at her flank and the dashite brand. "A new day..."

My eyes lingered on the mark a moment. "What was it?"

"The sun... or what I imagined a sun to be. A great bright disk of light... illuminating the Wasteland..." She sighed and shook her head. "At least, that was what I believed."

I frowned and listened as she continued. "I was just a naïve young pony going into the savage Wasteland. I met Big Daddy first. A huge braggart of a stallion seeking to become the Wasteland's greatest fighter. He joined me to prove to the skeptical filly how mighty he was. Then Keeper, the horny scoundrel, making his way from one end of the Wasteland to the other in search of caps. Big Daddy had to thump him regularly to protect my virtue." She snorted, the thunder rumbling overhead as we drew closer to the manor.

"We met Crunchy Carrots and Zodiac trying to kill each other raiding the same pre-war bunker, trying to find the same ancient technology. Turned out to be a dead end. King Awesome joined last, bringing his own magical skills, and an ego to match Big

Daddy's, to the team." Her smile turned wistful as she sighed. "And together we decided to save the Wasteland, starting with Hoofington. Those were the best days of my life."

"Saving the Wasteland's easier said than done," I commented lightly.

"Yes. Much. And over time, the lack of success grew... frustrating. The flaws in us pushed us apart more and more. Eventually, we were fighting each other more than the gangs and warlords of Hoofington..." She sighed and shook her head. "One day there was an incredible storm, and from the clouds above fell a wounded dragon and a pegasus. The dragon crawled off... to where, I never discovered... but I met my Sky Striker and nursed him back to health... and then... he offered to take me back with him."

"Your friends allowed it?" I asked.

"No." She shook her head. "But by then... well... we weren't much of friends anymore. They stayed together because of me and... well... I flew off. I abandoned them to find their own way." She looked out into the night. "I failed them. They joined me because they believed in me..."

I thought of Dawn and my own friends. Would we still be friends in five years? Or even one? I'd been outside in the Wasteland for a month and a half, and look at how much I'd changed. "And once in the Enclave, you tried to get them to help the surface."

"Yes," she said with a nod. "Though I tried to be a mother first. It was... nice," she said with a faint blush. "But my virtue had always been to try and save people below the clouds from the life I'd lived. The Enclave, even now, has power and food and the sun... so very much... that we lack below. But I failed. And soon... soon there were ponies willing to kill me to keep them from having to acknowledge the suffering below." She shook her head again. In the flickers of approaching lightning I could make out the outlines of the manor through the pouring rain. "I say I left to protect my family... and part of that is true... but..."

I finished for her as the thunder growled like a stalking beast growing closer with every minute. "But you also left because you hadn't done what you needed to. The wastes still needed saving."

"Yes. My friends hadn't been able to do so. Nor had the Enclave. So I left them behind." She stopped and, for a moment, looked skyward again. "Sometimes, though... sometimes I think I'd give almost anything to go back. To be with them... my family..."

my friends... Sky Striker. All I'd need is one word, and I'd fly back to that life. The feeling terrifies me at times." She shook her head once more, as if trying to rattle the desire from her mind.

"Sometimes, I'd give anything to have 99 back. Do anything. Just to have a chance of making it better. There were good ponies there, even if it was messed up. I'd give anything to give ponies a chance at a better tomorrow," I said as we started down the driveway towards the cavernous manor. With luck, it'd offer some shelter from the storm.

Glory's mom stopped in the rainy road and looked at me quizzically. "Then why is it you deny EC-1101 to ponies who would use it to spare countless others pain and suffering?"

No. Looking at Dawn, the sensation of hope that Glory would have a happy life with her mother again guttered, and I felt a chill pass through me. The building storm now completely forgotten, I looked on in sad resignation. P-21 had been right. She did know something! "How do you know about EC-1101? Did Glory or P-21 tell you?" Her smile, smug and knowing, informed me that Glory hadn't. And P-21 wouldn't...

"Oh no," she said softly as she trotted up the road. "I've been searching for EC-1101 for quite a while now."

Then I knew the answer, like a sick punch to my gut. "You're with the Harbingers."

"More accurately, I *am* the Harbingers," Dawn replied matter-of-factly. "I am their prophet for a better tomorrow."

For a few seconds, I wondered if my horn had recovered enough for a magic bullet. If not, fingers would work. Still, I looked at the unassuming gray mare... their leader. It was a rare moment I really wished I could kill a pony in cold blood. But Dawn wasn't just unarmed, she was unarmored and Glory's mother besides. The second she turned red on my EFS, though... "So all that catching up with your daughter? Just a lie?" I asked, glaring at her in the rain.

"No. It was a gift. A miraculous indulgence," Dawn replied, her smile fading a little. She looked towards Star House with that infuriating squint. "It was wonderful to meet her again. To talk to her like we did years ago. And I thank you for giving me the opportunity, Blackjack. I do. But time is running out. I'm here to ask for your help. No guns. No tricks."

"Really? So this isn't just an attempt to get me alone and kill me?" I asked sharply.

She looked at me evenly. "Believe it or not, while I do want EC-1101, I also want my

daughter to be happy. You make her happy. Happier than I ever could,” she said, her voice a soft note of shame.

I snorted in disbelief. “You’re the leader of the Harbingers. You’ve been hunting me for the last week. Why in hell would I ever work with you?”

“Because you want to save the Wasteland. And together, we can save it from Project Horizons.”

I felt as if lightning had struck me again, and I stared at her in shock. “Project Horizons? You know what it is?”

“A bit,” she replied with a small smile. “And I know that you’ve been trying to figure out what Goldenblood and the O.I.A. did two hundred years ago,” she said, trotting off through the rain towards the front of the manor. “If you want to know more, come with me. We’ll talk, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

I stopped in my tracks. Going with her would need a level of idiocy astounding even to me. This clear ploy had to lead me into a trap. It was obvious from a mile away. I tried to send a message to Lacunae to try and find P-21. To give some kind of warning to Glory. The riotous argument being held in Unity made me unsure if it got through to my friend, though.

I’d already walked into one... two... too many death traps trying to unravel the mystery of Horizons, and I’d promised Glory I wouldn’t get into trouble. “Thanks, but—” I began, and then I froze.

My eyes returned to Dawn. I had friends. I had to trust in them. P-21 had been right. I could no more give up on learning about Horizons than I could cut off my own head. And now I had a chance to find out something about Horizons itself.

Falling in step with the pegasus, I asked, “So. What is it?”

“Horizons itself was a superweapon developed two hundred years ago by Goldenblood to prevent a coup by the Ministry Mares. I don’t know where it is or how it works, but being that it was designed by Trottenheimer, who adapted megaspells to weaponized purposes, we can assume the destruction would be substantial. You saw what his silver bullets could do,” Dawn said as she walked beside me.

“How do you know this?” I asked with a frown.

“Because thirty years ago my friends learned about the activities of the O.I.A. and the existence of their secret projects. Not hard, given that Zodiac worked on one of them. We scraped the surface and learned just the barest hints of the projects, but

that was enough. Unfortunately, the struggle between my friends was too much to bear, and we separated before we could learn more. But I knew of it.” She sighed and hung her head a little and continued, “And unlike the others, I remembered.”

“Zodiac said she didn’t know anything about it,” I countered.

“She lied.” Dawn shrugged. “Or she simply forgot. I suppose living for two hundred years could make a pony somewhat forgetful,” she said simply. “I’d suspect the former, though. She was always casual with the truth.” The gray mare sighed and shook her head. “In any event, when I returned to the Wasteland, I sought out something... anything... that could save it. The Enclave was too isolated. They would have killed me before they lifted a feather to help the surface. So I travelled far and wide in search of anypony who could bring order to the world.

“I came across a few prospects. A griffin warlord trying to recoup his people’s fallen glory. A dragon with the intelligence and skill to manipulate ponies, living in an old prison and trying to establish control around his lair. The most promising by far was a cyberpony willing to do or give whatever he could to re-establish civilization. Each of them, however, fell short. The first was too consumed by hatred, the second obsessed with greed, and the last callous to the suffering he caused. When I returned to Hoofington, I was prepared to die. I went into the tunnels, ready to rot away and be done with life,” she said solemnly. “And it was there that she found me.”

“She?” I asked with a frown as we walked towards the camp where the Crusaders had gathered their salvage. So far, there were only two red bars, but I had no idea if they were Harbingers at the edge of my sensor range or Radroaches trying to get out of the rain. From the movement, possibly the latter. Still, there could easily be snipers focused on me this very second.

“I was sick, dying, and delirious when she found me and saved me from the Elevation beneath the city. I was nursed to health and given the ability to understand her.” She turned to me and smiled in bliss. “She is the Goddess of the Core.”

I halted in my tracks at the mouth of the empty camp, and so did she. “Goddess? As in... Princess Celestia goddess?” Or alicorn-creating crazy evil goddess?

“Yes. A goddess of technology and knowledge. Cognitum. She is trapped and integrated with the Core, but she showed me such wonders. The Core is there... a city that can contain and care for the entire population of the Wasteland ten times over. It is a place where all sapient life... not just ponies but zebras, griffins, hellhounds, and even dragons can live in peace. Even with the extensive damage that time and the war inflicted, there is more than enough for all.” She smiled gently.

"You've already felt her blessing. She was the one who overrode the interference to fire the defense beam at the ghoul in Hightower."

"Interference?" I frowned in confusion.

Dawn sighed. "When Equestria fell, countless automated spell matrixes were locked out. Though Cognitum is wise and powerful, nearly every system in the Core disobeys her. It is a struggle for her to exert her will on even the smallest system." She then smiled once more. "But, with effort, she can."

"I see. So she fried the ghoul," I said slowly.

"And she took over the holo-emitters in Flash Industries and killed your enemies." Dawn said with a wide smile. "See? Even though you have never known, she's assisted you several times before."

Funny, I recalled her assistance practically ripped my leg off and nearly killed Glory! I scowled and put that aside for the moment; I needed answers, not to pick a fight just yet. "So this Cognitum told you more about Horizons?"

Dawn's smile faded a little. "Yes. It is a device capable of destroying not just the Wasteland but potentially far more. EC-1101 serves as its trigger. When Equestria fell and EC-1101 went active, the fuse was lit, but then through sheer chance the spell became trapped within your stable, and the fuse was then delayed. Now it is out, and once more Horizons is primed to fire."

"And how does giving you EC-1101 figure in?" She hadn't told me much about Horizons, but I definitely wanted to know more. P-21 had been right, again.

"Right now, Cognitum struggles to assert herself over the most basic of systems. Without the authority granted by EC-1101, she is only able to utilize one ten thousandth of her normal capabilities. She struggles through interference and dealing with the damaged systems. Once EC-1101 is in her hooves and properly activated, she will be able to cancel Horizons and establish a new Equestria from here. All will be welcome. All will be equal in her *true* unity. And then... then we will have peace."

That meant that this Cognitum had to be a descendant of a ministry mare too. "So Cognitum sent Sanguine to my stable?"

"Yes," she replied simply. "The price was the restoration of his family. But Sanguine was a coward. When he learned of the true Goddess, he sought to retrieve EC-1101 and flee. He would have run beyond her reach and, in doing so, doomed us all."

Eventually, EC-1101 will conclude that Luna has been deposed and fire Horizons. When that happens, the Wasteland, perhaps the world, will be destroyed.”

I frowned; something about this was off. Goldenblood had been paranoid, no doubt about that. He’d done everything he could to ensure that Luna had remained in power. He’d manipulated the ministries and the entire kingdom for her. But if Luna was deposed or killed... why blow everything up? Some sort of vengeance? It couldn’t have worked as a deterrent because nopony knew about it. I looked at the gray pegasus with a long frown. If this Cognitum had lied to Dawn, there was only one way to figure out the truth.

“I need to meet her,” I said sullenly. And that meant a trip to the deadliest place in Equestria. We stopped in front of the Crusaders’ salvage camp built before the main entrance of Blueblood Manor. The dark building loomed above me, thunder booming through the dark skies above. A lone lightning bolt illuminated the scoured front of the structure.

The manor had certainly seen better days; the Crusaders had stripped it of anything that was even remotely of value like a gleeful swarm of radroaches on a corpse. Lying about were crates of pipes and coils of wire that had been ripped from the building but not hauled away yet. The structure itself, with its reinforced walls and beams, might stand for a century more before it collapsed completely, but nothing of value would remain within... except for Vanity’s bedroom, if Charity had honored her promise.

Dawn’s lips curled in a grin even wider than she’d shown when she’d been with Glory. “And you will. When you give EC-1101—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I’m not giving EC-1101 to you. Nor her,” I said levelly, leaving the mare as stunned as if I’d kicked her upside the head. “You don’t get it. She exposed my home to a disease that turned almost everypony I knew into cannibals. And you and your Harbingers made the exact same mistake Sanguine did. You shot first. You should have tried this conversation before sending squads of killers after me.”

Dawn’s mouth opened and closed. “I... we thought there was no choice. After Sanguine took it from you, I ordered Steel Rain to retrieve it at all costs. We had no idea who had it; perhaps you, or a minion of Red Eye or some raider acquired it.”

I glared at her. “But you found out it was me soon enough. You chased me all the way across the Hoof.”

“I wasn’t in charge of that. I simply...” Dawn struggled to justify herself and then said,

“Steel Rain informed me that you would never willingly surrender EC-1101. I simply followed his recommendations.”

“And he was probably right. What matters is that you didn’t even try. You should have had this talk with me after we left Hippocratic Research. Instead, you tried to blow my head off and take it, just like Deus and his bounty hunters,” I replied sharply. “If you’d spoken to me in the Fluttershy Medical Center, I would have been happy to give it to you. Or at least to talk it over. But your Cognitum killed Sanguine and I’m pretty sure sent a super-sentinel after me. Your seekers hounded me. Steel Rain—”

Dawn suddenly straightened. “Would it help if you could get revenge on him for what he did to you and your friends?”

“What?” I blinked, lightning flashing and booming above me as I stared at her.

“You said so yourself. Steel Rain advised me to take it by force, and in the process wronged you. If you like, you can take his place.” She reached out and tapped my chest. “You can make certain that the Harbingers remain an order of good virtue.”
Remain?

“He’d never just let me kill him!” I gasped, staring at her in shock. Was she actually serious about this?

“You may be surprised,” Dawn said as she looked at the front door to the manor. “We can deal with that right now, if you like.” Then she stated firmly, “Rain. Come here. No armor or guns.” For several minutes I just stared in shock before the door creaked slowly open, and then I tensed as a blue bar appeared. He wouldn’t actually come out here unarmed. Dawn was crazy if she thought he—

“I knew that you’d never give it up,” the stallion said as he emerged from the manor. On instinct, my horn’s magic reached for weapons that were probably in some locker at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. I was surprised to see two things: one, he wore only a PipBuck. Two, he looked positively cute! The stallion with guns as massive as Deus’s seemed disturbingly vulnerable without his fancy armor. His pink mane was plastered to his purple coat, and his kindly face wore an oddly embarrassed expression.

Again, for the second time of the night, I really wished I were a pony who could kill an unarmed enemy. “You’re showing a lot of guts trotting out here like that,” I said. I ground my teeth, trying to think of some way I could beat the ever loving snot out of him and not have Fluttershy give me dirty looks inside my head.

“I don’t have much choice in the matter...” He paused and then rolled his eyes. “I

figured there was a fifty-fifty chance you'd kill me at first sight anyway after what happened on the Celestia and at Goldenblood's house. Or maim me, at least."

"I'm thinking about it. I'd treat a fart as a deadly weapon from you," I growled.

"Please. I don't want you two to argue. This is about the future of Equestria and getting Blackjack's cooperation," Dawn told the unarmored stallion firmly.

"Of course, Prophet," the former Steel Ranger said smoothly. "But unfortunately, you still don't realize just what lengths Blackjack will go to win. Just what she's capable of. You should accept that she will never willingly part with EC-1101 or join the Harbingers. We're the 'bad ponies.'" He grimaced and sat, making little quote wiggles with his forehooves.

"Teaming up with him was a big mistake," I said to Dawn without taking my eyes off him. "I'm surprised he hasn't shot you in the back long before now, Dawn. He betrayed his last leader for technology. He'll do the same to you." A half dozen more ponies were emerging from the manor. All were unarmed and unarmored and keeping their distance as they moved around the camp. My eyes kept looking for snipers or whatever was Steel Rain's plan B.

My comment added a bit of amusement to the embarrassment on his face. "Ah yes. That *had* been my plan, I admit," he replied with a small grimace as he pressed a hoof to his chest. "Unfortunately, a certain measure has been taken to ensure that I cannot betray Cognitum or her prophet." He met my gaze and gave an almost sheepish smile. "It seems my ambitious nature was better known than I anticipated. There's a kill implant nestled right in my chest. One signal from either, and it will immediately puree my insides."

I remembered the prospector in Tenpony vomiting bloody viscera and blinked in shock, then looked at Dawn as she continued, "When we discussed how to retrieve EC-1101, Steel Rain was quite adamant that it could only be done by force. That you were using the megaspell for your own agenda," Dawn said calmly as she trotted up beside me. "I believed him. My mistake for thinking you were a monster after I heard what you did to your stable."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Oh, she is. The worst kind," he said with a casual smile that didn't hide the fear in his eyes. "A monster who thinks she can stop being one."

I looked from her to him and back again. I didn't know what to say to this. "If you like, I can kill him now. Or maim him. Or simply exile him with a command that the kill implant goes off if he uses any technology more advanced than a can opener," Dawn

said evenly, her smile returning and the purple stallion's gentle features growing resigned as he sighed. "Consider it a repayment for following bad advice."

"What?" I gasped as I backed away from both of them. "Whatever happened to believing in not killing?"

"If his life is the price for saving all of the Wasteland, then it's one that I will accept. What's one life compared to the multitudes that will be saved?" Dawn asked with that blissful smile.

"Everything," Steel Rain said with another sigh before he smiled at me apologetically. "Well, I won't pretend like I don't have it coming. Go on then. At least it'll be relatively quick."

I stared blankly, my gaze shifting from one to the other. Was she serious? Just... kill him and take his place, just like that? I looked into his pink eyes and saw an acknowledgement of defeat in them. I had no doubt whatsoever what he'd do if our positions were reversed. Right now, I could do the smart thing and kill one of my greatest enemies. I might not even have to follow through on handing over EC-1101 afterwards. There was just one little problem. . .

"No," I replied. Steel Rain flinched, then blinked and then paused as his pink eyes looked from Dawn to myself.

Dawn frowned for a second, then brightened. "Oh. I understand. You want to do it yourself. Well, I can give you the kill command just as soon as—"

"Fuck no!" I snapped as I backed away from both of them. "Don't you get it? I'm not a fucking executioner. Give him his armor and guns, and I'll do what I can to kill him properly if he's going to try something, but I'm not going to kill him just to give you what you want!"

"But... the Harbingers... Cognitum..." Dawn stammered, weakly, still clearly astonished I wasn't taking her offer.

"Sorry, Dawn. I know you believe the Core holds all the answers, but I can't believe in your goddess. The Core is simply death. Always has been. Always will be." The fact she'd been willing to kill him, at all, for her mistake in believing him convinced me that the Harbingers weren't the Wasteland's final solution. I didn't place my faith in goddesses and lost technology.

It took hard work to do better...

We stood there in the darkness and hissing rain, facing each other. Suddenly Steel

Rain began to laugh. "Oh, this is too rich. I knew that Blackjack would never part with EC-1101, but I never imagined she'd pass up a chance like that! It's too much!" He chuckled, shaking his head with a mirthful grin.

"So. Is this where the ambush occurs?" I asked bluntly, glancing around me, wondering where the stealthed and armed Harbingers might be.

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. Of course not. Even naked and unarmed, you're fantastically deadly. We'd be idiots to attack you now," Steel Rain said with his friendly smile as he waved his hoof at a large sheet of canvas covering something massive. Four ponies ran up and started pulling off the tarp covering what I'd assumed to be salvage. "We're going to use something... else."

I glared at the pair, then watched as a black-and-white-striped mountain of metal came into view. The tank. Immediately, its engine snarled and spotlights glared to life, and it swivelled the lamps towards me. I tensed, ready to run, but then Dawn said in a quiet but horribly sure voice, "No. The other target." For almost a minute the tank sat there, revving its engine. Then it slowly swung its main turret away. My blood froze as what I realized what the 'other target' was.

The guns pointed right down at the sleeping village below.

"You fucking monsters..." I whispered as I looked at the war machine, its engine snarling as if it were pissed to see me again. I struggled to break through the chaos within Unity to get a warning to Lacunae. Maybe if I could activate my broadcaster... ugh, but as I tried to turn off the music and turn on the radio, Steel Rain frowned and leaned in towards me. Damn, he remembered that trick! I quickly brought up the file and showed them EC-1101 with a twist of my hoof. "Is this worth killing innocent foals for?"

"What other choice have you given me?" Dawn replied quietly, her mane obstructing her face. "Trying to take it by force has failed. Trying to negotiate has failed as well."

"Give up?" I suggested, half in contempt and half in desperation.

"Could you?" she asked coldly as she turned away from me, asking in a near whisper. And then, for an instant, she looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes open and blazing with a bright, violent green luminescence, then looked down at the village and spoke again, her voice rising with every word. "What else am I supposed to do, Blackjack? I have devoted my entire life to finding some way to save the Wasteland, just as you have! I left my husband and my children in Thunderhead for this world. I must find some way to make it safe! And I've found it! I've found it!" she

proclaimed as she whirled and advanced; her green eyes glared brighter as she thrust an accusing wing at me. “And you... YOU! You refuse to let me. How dare you, Blackjack?! How dare you withhold the key to Equestria’s glorious rebirth?”

I gaped in horror and backed away, wishing for some armament as I beheld the furious, screaming mare and glimpsed the real Dawn within the baleful green glow of her eyes. “What in Equestria are you?” I gasped in shock. A mutant? A monster-pony? Something else?

“I am what I needed to become, just as you are,” she said coldly as she closed her eyes once more and turned her back to me, looking up at the tank. “I do not want to kill helpless foals, no more than you want them to die. But I will kill them if you force me to it. The future of Equestria is infinitely more precious than any one village.”

I knew I couldn’t take the risk of calling her bluff. I’d lost EC-1101 before and recovered it. My eyes met the calculating gaze of Steel Rain, and his apologetic smile grew a little. He knew that the second the village was out of harm’s way, I’d be after them again. They’d either try and kill me or shell the village to keep me busy.

My eyes dropped to EC-1101 in my hoof as the maudlin music rose. Was this another damned price I’d have to pay? Steel Rain’d been right. I’d pay with my own pain and suffering as long as I had to, but now was I going to have to pay with the lives of others to keep the program from my enemies? I clenched my eyes shut, as I searched within me. Could I really pay that price *again*?

“Fine,” I said bitterly and then glared at her. “All right, Dawn. If you’re willing to slay sleeping children with a fucking *tank*, then I guess you win.”

A lull in the storm calmed the air for a moment, as if the world itself had been stunned by my surrender. Dawn faced me, her eyes closed again and hiding that baleful luminescence I’d seen before. “What?”

“I’m not going to kill more innocents just to hang onto a damned program. So congratulations. Your willingness to murder helpless children won.” My words made the mare jerk as if I’d kicked her. “I hope you’d be proud. I hope your children would be proud.”

“I... I have no choice,” Dawn muttered.

“Wrong. You always have a choice,” I replied.

“You have no right to lecture me after what you’ve done!” Dawn hissed at me. “You’ve killed foals! You gassed your own stable!”

Oddly, the attacks only made me smile. After all the beating up I'd done to myself for my mistakes, those accusations seemed petty and hollow coming from another. "Yes. I did, Dawn. So consider me an expert on mistakes. The fact you have to kill helpless ponies is a hint that what you're doing is wrong. You know it." I dared step towards the pegasus. "Be the better pony. You can save the Wasteland another way."

For an instant, I thought the growling thunder and flickering lightning would end. Dawn walked away from me towards Chapel and the Core lying beyond. I liked to imagine her eyes opened for real and she saw the hideous towers for what they were... a lie of a better life. A trap. That she'd think of her own family and children and do what was right. It was a hard choice...

But then the skies boomed and the rain fell hard and heavy upon us as she hung her head. "I'm sorry..." she murmured, barely audible before the lightning flared and the thunder drowned out anything else she may have said.

More Harbingers spilled out of the manor, these ones armed and armored, and quickly moved in around me. "Get a maintenance kit," Steel Rain said. "Last thing we want is for one of us to damage the PipBuck." Then he looked at me with an irritatingly contrite smile. "Oh, and please turn off your broadcaster, Blackjack."

"What?" I frowned, glancing at it. "I never turned it on."

"Really? Because I've been listening to your conversation since you left Chapel." He lifted his head and then turned it to show some kind of earphone thing. "I've been a big fan of Radio Blackjack." Then he suddenly smirked. "Champion in bed? Really? That freak?"

"I've changed my mind. Kill him," I replied flatly at the worn joke, but inside I was elated. I glanced down at my PipBuck as it played the classical music. Had Glory been listening in? I could kiss a certain smart blue pony! I cancelled the transmissions and killed the music, though; they'd served their purpose, and there was no point in antagonizing the Harbingers further now when I was stalling for time... Overhead the clouds boomed deeply once more.

"We should hurry. I have absolutely no doubt that Blackjack's friends will be on their way," Steel Rain said sharply.

"We have sentries," Dawn replied absently.

"I've learned that with Blackjack it is better to be safe than sorry," Steel Rain said in worry as he scanned the night, no doubt using his EFS. He looked back at me with a

warm smile. "I don't want to underestimate her again. Her friends have a disturbing tendency to rescue her at inopportune moments."

I glanced at Steel Rain for some sign that my act of mercy might gain some assistance, but the one time our eyes met he simply gave a sorry smile and a shrug. I supposed that if the purple stallion had an implant that could kill him instantly, he really couldn't help me that much. Dawn began to address the Harbingers around us about the wonders of the Core now that they had EC-1101. A city that, despite its ruin, all could be safe in. A place where there was enough plenty that raiders wouldn't need to raid.

She wasn't crazy. That would have made this easier. She simply believed, more than anything, that this was the last chance for the Wasteland. A simple, wonderful solution. But I'd been in Hoofington long enough to know that there was no simple solution. There was a catch, and Dawn had either missed it or didn't want to accept it. Peace, at any cost, where ponies could do better and be better and have better than they ever had before.

"So you'll be the kindly teacher lording over us all?" I asked, perhaps a bit too sharply. An earth pony mare set a metal toolbox down next to me and began to pull out all kinds of arcane equipment.

"Of course not, Blackjack. When the Core is open to all, I'll return to the Wasteland for others. I'll direct them. . . unicorns, pegasi, griffins, zebras, dragons, anyone who needs safety. . . until I die out in the wastes." She smiled merrily as she looked at me once more with her eyes closed. "I have no illusions, Blackjack. I don't deserve the Core, and I won't accept a place in it. I've been forced to do horrible things, and I know that there's no forgiveness for some crimes." She cocked her head. "Would you ever be able to truly forgive yourself for what you did to your home?"

"No," I replied. I could choose not to punish myself, but forgiveness? Never.

"Then you understand," she replied. "Cognitum will teach the Wasteland civility. She will return Equestria to what it should be. None will war when the consequence is immediate execution." I glanced at Steel Rain and shivered with the thought of everypony forced to have a kill implant inside them. That was Dawn's idea of improvement? That was doing better?

As the brown earth pony mare worked, I could see the Harbingers watching me carefully. The tank's cameras whirled and machine guns twitched to follow my every movement. The engine growled again and again as if the massive machine wanted to blast me into bloody scrap. I knew this was going to end with my death. There

was no way it couldn't. Yet even now, every armed pony was keeping their distance.

Steel Rain veered away to step inside the manor. I took a look at Dawn and the bristling guns pointed at me. All it would need was one aggressive twitch from me and they'd vaporize me where I stood. But the tank wasn't shelling Chapel at the moment. With luck, somepony had heard my broadcast and they were getting to safety, or P-21 was somewhere out there, or... something.

Because if it was just me, then I was done.

Finally there was a jerk, and the Delta PipBuck was pulled out of my hoof. Half my systems went with it, my vision filling with errors and static as readouts went dead. She passed the device to Dawn, and the gray mare cradled it to her chest as if it were a baby. "So..." I said as I was slowly herded into a spot adjacent to a solid wall. The Harbingers had formed a half circle around me with my back to the Manor. I gave a slow, sickly smile. "Guess this is it."

"I guess it is," Dawn said as she hugged the device. Steel Rain, now armored, stepped up beside her. Several seconds ticked by. A moment passed as the rain hissed around us. The lamps of the tank bathed me in their harsh white glare. I could barely make out the individual faces of the Harbingers. Only Dawn, front and center, and Steel Rain could be seen clearly. She kept her face downturned. "You understand why we're going to kill you. We have no choice..."

"You always have a choice. You just keep making the wrong one," I said back.

"I told you. Suicidal," Steel Rain said. At least he hadn't put on those cannons yet. I supposed that with the tank sitting there they were somewhat redundant.

"No," I countered flatly. "This isn't suicide. I don't want to die here, like this." My eyes swept over the shadowy silhouettes of the Harbingers around me. "I know the Wasteland sucks. Every single person knows that. But I also know that, so long as folks think the right way is more killing, nothing is going to get better. I'd like to live. I'd like to go back to Glory and tell her what an idiot I've been. But I also know... just like every one of you knows... that there is no easy way out. Never." I looked at Dawn, narrowing my own eyes. "I don't know what this Cognitum has told you, Dawn. I don't know what the Core has to offer. But I do know that there is no simple fix to the Wasteland. No saving it. There's only doing better, and making the hard choice." I looked at the Harbingers around me. "Even if it hurts. Even if it gets you killed."

"What a lovely inspirational speech," Dawn said softly, "but you are quite mistaken.

There's been nothing easy about this at all." One second. Two. Ten. "Fire," Dawn said quietly as I closed my eyes.

Thunder roared around me, and everything went white.

Then I frowned as I became aware that I hadn't been torn into bloody cyberpony pieces. I opened my eyes and glanced above me at the luminous shell that encompassed me and the sight of Lacunae hovering above, her brows furrowed in focus as her shield flashed and flared from the bullets striking it. Her purple eyes looked down and met mine, and she smiled.

A second later, from the rear of the tank there blossomed an immense plume of flame that filled the air with a scream of steel. A half dozen more pops filled the air from the rear of the Harbingers as great billowing clouds of smoke swept out. The Harbingers wheeled about in confusion. Steel Rain swore loudly as he waved his hoof, trying to establish order in the thickening murk of the smoke grenades. Thank Celestia that most of the Harbingers didn't seem to have EFS.

I saw Dawn launch herself skyward only to be knocked from the air by a cyan bolt streaking by. The PipBuck tumbled from her hooves as Glory arched around and slammed her azure forehooves into Dawn's face as the mare began to recover.

"Killing foals, Mother? Using a tank against foals and Blackjack?" Glory shrieked. "Are you mad?!"

Dawn didn't answer her as she twisted and dove, but Glory, in the body of one of the finest fliers in history, streaked down and smashed her hooves against Dawn's spine. I would have expected the kick to have taken Dawn out of the sky entirely, but to my astonishment she kept flying with merely a grunt. Still, Glory was hardly through after a single kick and swooped around for another pass. Dawn snapped and rolled, disappearing into the smoke with Glory racing after her like a ghost from the past.

The rain and wind fought the heavy clouds of smoke as the skies poured down, and lightning flashing over the manor with a resounding blast of thunder. I raced to catch my PipBuck as it tumbled to the ground. Steel Rain dived from out of the shadows towards the tiny vital piece of technology!

Then my feeble magic seized the device and just barely brought it to a halt, dangling in the air above him as he sprawled in the mud. Quick as my horn could manage, I pulled it back through the air. My friend's magic arrows flashed out, impacting against his armor. Steel Rain charged Lacunae, ready to power through her shield

and thrash us into pony jam. I popped my fingers out, jumped up on her back, and pulled myself between her wings as she launched into the air. I pulled the device safely back into my hooves. The Ranger dove beneath her hooves, sliding in the mud with a roar. "Get Blackjack," he shouted, "or shell the village!"

"Thanks, but cutting it a little close, weren't you?" I yelled.

"Well, it was a very nice speech," Lacunae replied calmly as she soared up over the milling Harbingers. "Besides, it took time to quietly neutralize the snipers they set up, and P-21 needed time to get that bomb together." Up in the air, we were a huge glowing target. "One moment, and I'll teleport us away."

"No!" I shouted, pointing down at the machine. "We have to destroy it!" Already the tank was in the process of repairing the smoking hole ripped in its back. In a few minutes it would come after us itself, but we couldn't leave just yet. Even if we left and Dawn pursued, Steel Rain would certainly level anyplace ever allied with me. Megamart. Riverside. Meatlocker. They'd all be targets!

Lacunae glanced back at me in worry, then returned to the ground. First thing I needed to do was shove my PipBuck back into my leg and close it up. It could be reconnected later, but I didn't want it to fall out or something. Then I looked around for P-21. I needed a smart pony here!

I saw one Steel Ranger with two grenade machine guns preparing to blast us out of the sky when a white filly with red stripes jumped on his back. For a moment it was a bit of a comical sight, the armored pony giving her a piggyback ride. Then the ripper clenched in her jaws whirled as she rammed it against the side of the ranger's neck between two armored plates, spraying out sparks. The Ranger thrashed wildly as we flew over them, and then the armored pony started screaming as the ripper sunk through and into her neck, the screeching saw blade painting Rampage's face red as the Ranger collapsed.

Rampage pulled her weapon free, spraying a fan of crimson, and then spat the ripper out to call to us. "Like my can opener?" she shouted before disappearing into the smoky confusion with a manic filly laugh. I think I preferred her hoofclaws.

Glory flew up beside us, laying down a constant stream of green death. Either Dawn had gotten away, or Glory had broken off to come help the rest of us, or... I saw the tears in her eyes that promised she'd need a whole lot of TLC if we made it through this. She met my eyes once, and then she was gone again, drawing fire with her own suppressive strafing.

The tank began to screech and groan as it started to turn its weapons towards me. Maybe it had some version of an E.F.S. We landed a little ways away from the Harbingers behind the cover of some crates full of copper pipes. “Fuck, where is she?” Glory swore, her furious rose eyes glaring as she turned around in a circle. She glanced at me, worry momentarily replacing rage before her eyes returned to the skies.

P-21 appeared from the shadows seconds later carrying my barding. “So, is there a plan?” I asked him.

“That’s my line,” he said wryly before he swung up Persuasion, bit the grip and fired the weapon at a Harbinger bringing an assault carbine to bear. The grenade struck the fighter in the face, knocking him over as it spun further out into the chaos and exploded. “We need to get out of here and—”

“We have to take out that tank,” I shouted, pointing at the pink flashes of repair magic visible through the haze. I saw him on the verge of arguing and rushed on, “They’ll blast Chapel to pieces if we run. It’ll be Sanguine with heavy artillery!” That focused him and squashed any argument he might have had. “Tell me you can pull together another bomb or something to take it out?”

“I’ll need time and materials,” he said with a frown. “Some of these fuckers have got to have something that goes boom. I just need to get enough of it.” But it was four against fifty, and that didn’t allow much time at all. Not good odds, even for me.

Lacunae lifted a Harbinger’s dropped assault carbine to me, then seized an anti machine rifle from a staggered mare and swung it hard into her face like a giant club. “Then we’ll buy you the time you need.”

We had to get moving. Anypony with an EFS was going to see us. “Scatter and delay them till we can take out that tank!” And with that we broke apart. This was one time where being outnumbered was in my favor: everywhere I looked were red bars. Still, there were three that mattered more than the rest: the tank, Steel Rain and Dawn. I had to find them. “How much did you hear?” I asked Lacunae telepathically.

“Everything. P-21 contacted us as soon as he left Dawn. He suspected her, but none of us anticipated she was behind the Harbingers,” came the reply. Then a pause before the comment, “Blackjack, about that memory orb. . .”

“Not right now,” I replied as the Harbingers started to be organizing with shouts to fan out and find us. “We can talk about it after we win!”

"Of course. Of course," she said, sighting down the rifle. Her shot blew the head off a mare in combat armor.

"Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I murmured as I finished off the magazine in the carbine and three Harbingers closed in around me. Bullets peppered off my barding and hide as I went into zebra stance, popped my fingers out, and grabbed the nearest one's head. My body twisted in a spin that his head followed and his body didn't. As his neck snapped, I heaved him over me as a shield to catch the anti machine rifle rounds of the other two, and scooped up his carbine to replace my empty one. Rocking and twisting the body to keep it between me and their weapons, my horn levitated the carbine towards one of the mares and unloaded the entire magazine in her general direction in a spray of wild fire. I thought my horn might explode at this rate; my eyes were running as I struggled to keep focused.

As my target fell, the last mare took advantage of my distraction to dart to the side and pointed her pair of anti-machine rifles on her battle saddle right at me, firing at almost point blank range. I flailed in an attempt to dodge; the shots buzzed as they nearly struck me, but the weight of my corpse shield overbalanced me and sent me falling to the ground. The mare's eyes alighted in triumph as her jaw started to tighten on the trigger bit...

Then she screamed in agony as a whirr filled the air and she fell back. Rampage squatted behind her, holding a severed rear leg in her hooves, grinning around the bloody handle of the ripper. Yes, I definitely preferred her hoofclaws to that.

Heaving myself upright, I looked around for my next target, then staggered as another AM round glanced off my barding. I tried to find something I could use for a better shield than the stallion's corpse, but something else slammed into me from the other side... an explosion? My EFS showed all kinds of damage that I really wasn't feeling like I should... thanks to Professor Zodiac. This trauma hurt in an almost abstract way; distant, more an alarm than deep visceral pain. Not the agony that Deus had been forced to live with.

Small wonder I loved any physical sensation I could get with Glory.

Glory wasn't strafing now. She was doing daring aerial maneuvers in and out of the lingering smoke to evade being torn apart by the gunfire, returning shots whenever she could to disrupt our enemies. The Harbingers were orienting themselves, organizing to focus fire. Worse, even more reinforcements seemed to be coming from around the sides of the manor. The odds were rapidly going from ten to one to

twenty to one... or worse.

Don't think about that now. Fight. Kill. Run. Move. Fight . Reload. Take ammo. Kill. Move. Grab. Break. Throw. Aim. Fire. Run. Jump. Turn. Burst. Roll. Ignore the damage. Burst. Give P-21 time. Grab. Fire in face. Move. Ignore the red flashes on my damage display. More time. Grab. Gouge eyes. Take carbine. Shoot face. Roll with the explosion. Stand up. Move. Move! MOVE!

I lay on my side and then became dully aware of why I wasn't standing anymore as I looked at my rear leg and saw the brand new forty-five degree kink put in my metal limb during my explosive tumble. "Shit," I muttered thickly, lying there in the mud as six Harbingers advanced. I tried to get my horn to teleport me like yesterday! I was Twilight Sparkle's descendant. I could do it! My horn glowed as bullets chewed through my barding and into my body. Do it, I told my horn!

It flashed... then popped like a lightbulb burning out. My carbine dropped to the ground as I reeled like a hammer had smashed upside my horn once again.

Okay. Maybe I should have waited a few more days before trying that...

Suddenly there was a deep intake of air, followed by the roar of a flamer mixed with screams meeting my ears. Great. Looked like I was going to burn after all. I opened my eyes, expecting to see the steel ranger that was about to roast the meat from my bones.

"Blackjack? Are you okay?" Scotch Tape asked as she raced through the muck with the purple dragonfilly at her side. Precious jumped over me, bullets pinging off her scaled hide as she took another breath and let loose a plume of green flame that washed over three of the Harbingers. "Sorry, stupid question," she said as she knelt besides my scrapped leg.

"Scotch? What are you doing here?" I asked weakly as the filly struggled to help me drag myself behind the cover of the Steel Ranger that Rampage had dropped.

"Don't be stupid, Blackjack. We're all here," Charity said as emerged out of the bedlam with a bloodsoaked Rampage. The filly wore a miniature battle saddle that had been converted to hold two heavy revolvers, which she fired past the dragonfilly at some enemy I couldn't see. "That's eight caps!" she roared at them. "Sixteen!"

Scotch opened my foreleg and, with far more focus and skill than the mare who'd removed it, re-attached the Delta.

Suddenly, I saw blue bars...

A whole lot of blue bars!

My EFS now showed a lot more blue mixed in with all that bloody red on my display. I watched in shock as the red and blue colts Adagio and Allegro raced up and dropped Octavia sideways before them and the three colts from the watchtower tossed their light machine gun across the instrument's body. Anti-machine rounds whined and sparked off the instrument's indestructible body as the machine gun opened up a chattering line of fire into the Harbingers. The ghoul Harpica flew high above dropping apple grenades into knots of enemies.

"Rampage! Bend that limb straight," Scotch Tape said, digging through her tools. The filly grabbed my thigh with her hindlegs and my damaged fetlock with her fore-hooves, and with a grunt of effort she bent my leg till it was straight again. Scotch pulled out one of Glory's cyberpony cakes and shoved it into my hooves before starting her work; I immediately started eating it as quickly as I could. "I hope I can do this," Scotch Tape said as she made repairs.

"You can. It's in your blood," I muttered around the cake. She flushed, but smiled as I ate as quickly as I could while Scotch made her field repairs. Caprice slid next to me in a blue pre-war dress utterly unsuited for battle, her eyes wide and terrified as the SMG she held jittered in her mouth. This bedlam was so beyond her, but she'd come. I could at least respect that, but I reached up with my fingers and relieved her of the 12.7mm SMG before she accidentally shot somepony on our side... like me. "Thanks," I said, and she flushed and immediately handed me her magazines.

"I shouldn't have come," she muttered, the once fabulous mare dropping her eyes to her hooves as she stood in the churned-up mud.

"I'm glad you did," I said before I bit down on the mouth handle and sighted two Harbingers that were getting ready to take out Scotch Tape. The recoil nearly shook my teeth out of my head as I emptied the magazine in two seconds. I spat it out and stared at the weapon. "Damn! This thing just loves ammo."

P-21 emerged out of the chaos holding a small block of plastic explosive that had been taped together. "This is all I could find," he said with a frown. It was less than half the size of the bomb he had used the first time we'd faced the tank. He looked over at the grinding machine as it began to rejoin the battle. Harbinger and Crusader alike gave way as it ploughed back and forth, searching for me. "We've got to get it inside. If we can get it inside and kill the crew running that thing, it'll be as good as destroyed." He slipped a detonator into my barding.

I slowly groaned and sat up. Suddenly, something connected, and a jolt ran trough

my hind leg. It began moving once again. “You did it,” I said to Scotch, then finished off the cyberpony cake.

A wing of fliers whooshed overhead, and for a moment I thought the Harbingers had pegasi of their own, but these were Enclave! It was pointless to shout a warning to Glory; the noise and chaos ensured she wouldn’t hear me. “I’ve got to lead it away. I can’t fight it and worry about all of you and keep my head from getting pulped by a lucky AM round at the same time.”

Charity snorted. “Don’t worry about us. These fucks owe Chapel for even dreaming that we’re helpless. Not after Priest. Never again!” she shouted as she ran forward with Precious, then stopped and looked back. “Arlostee! What the fuck are you waiting for?”

Rampage blinked and smiled as tears danced in her eyes, then snatched up her ripper and, with a gleeful scream of the weapon’s motor, raced forward with them.

“Blackjack, how are you going to lead it away? I mean, it’s a tank!” Scotch Tape shouted over the din. P-21 fired off a grenade nearby and I winced; as outnumbered as we were, there was still a chance he’d hit a friendly. I trusted he knew what he was doing, but it still made me damned uneasy.

“Keep them safe,” I said as I started moving again towards the front door of the manor. On the way, I was astonished to see a striped mare move like a ghost out of the smoke with nothing more than a simple wooden pole and a snarling red wooden mask. Sekashi sprang right into the midst of three Harbingers, her hooves spinning the pole with astounding finesse. She launched forward and rammed the end into one pony’s throat, whirling it around and tripping a second, batting away a levitated pistol and then crushing the horn of the unicorn wielding it with a sickening crack I knew all too well. The dehorned unicorn screamed as she fell back, scraping her hooves over the stump. The whirling stick rammed into the tripped pony’s head with such rapid succession that when Sekashi stopped the entire head slumped like a battered sack of meat and bone. The screaming unicorn was knocked from her hooves and then silenced with a double hoofstomp to the head.

The choking stallion brought his battle saddle’s carbines up towards Sekashi’s back, but before I could fire at him, a tiny striped filly with a blowgun appeared from nowhere and shot a dart into his throat. His eyes bulged, and then he collapsed with a goofy smile. Majina waved her little hoof at me with a happy grin.

“This reminds me of a very funny story!” Sekashi said with a laugh as she whirled her staff; how in the world did zebras *do* that? “I will have to tell it to you another

time, though.” And with that, the striped pair disappeared into the fight.

My body was almost to fifty percent as I reached the front doors to the manor. I flipped open my PipBuck and started looking for nearby transmitters. A tank had to have some kind of radio, right? Maybe I could order them to follow me into the manor. I located... well... it was close. “Security was just spotted going into the manor! Tank! Go after her! Quick!” I barked.

The tank, which had been simply rolling across the battlefield firing its machine guns at anyone who got in its way, suddenly stopped. I smiled as it turned its spotlights and main turret on me, but then paused. Why was it just sitting there?

Suddenly its main guns blasted just as something peach slammed into me from the side, knocking me behind the sandbag barricades that’d been erected centuries ago. The shells detonated high, the blast crushing me to the ground like a massive hoof a second before an avalanche of rubble fell down upon me. I was dazed for a second, and then I opened my eyes and looked at the mare who had shoved me down.

Caprice stared at me, her mouth moving silently as she stared straight ahead. I looked at her bloody, battered body. I was a cyberpony, and that shot had hurt. Caprice... “Lacunae! Somepony! I need a healing potion!” I screamed, hoping somepony was close enough.

The tank was moving. I heaved the peach earth pony over my shoulders and ran through the blown-in doors into the main hall. Everything remotely valuable had been stripped away and the walls, once bedecked with finery, were now bare. Piles of rubble lay everywhere where rubbish had been heaped up. “Why? Why’d they use the cannons?” I asked. Something like that could have destroyed EC-1101! Crush me. Use machine guns. But the cannons? I popped my fingers, ripping off strips of Caprice’s ragged dress and trying to tie her bloody wounds.

“It’s my fault,” Caprice said. “I... I told Dawn you were here. I told her... told her about Glory...” The mare whimpered as she coughed and threw up a bloody mess down her front. “Blackjack... I’m so sorry...” she croaked as tears ran down her cheeks.

“Don’t worry about that. Just hold on,” I said, trying to ignore the growling motor growing louder and louder.

But she shook her head. “Listen... please... he’s with them...” she said weakly, struggling for breath. “I gave him to Dawn. He’s the tank...”

“Who?” I shouted, as her eyes grew unfocused. “Who’s in the tank?”

“Sorry...” she whimpered. “Should have... done... better...”

Her blue bar disappeared.

Then the building began to shake.

I turned in time to see the smoking wall explode inward as the massive tank rammed right through, barely slowing. I retracted my fingers, dropped to all fours, and raced down the vaulted central hall as the massive war machine ripped along after me. The lamps painted the hall in their harsh white glare as the tank’s machine guns gouged lines of steel death through the air. The piles of rubble were my only cover, and the vibration of its steel treads sent them bouncing and sliding around my hooves. One misstep... one delay... I’d be either machine-gunned in half or ground to pieces beneath its massive treads.

Get it inside. Get it jammed. Get the bomb inside it. That had been the plan in my head. Only the tank wasn’t playing along! Even as it tore down the second floor balconies above me, it wasn’t stopping. Its engines powered it right through the broad hallway it was supposed to be getting stuck in.

I slipped for just a second, and its twin cannons roared. The shells passed through the air with a buzz like a colossal bumblebee as the blast wave picked me off my hooves and sent me tumbling forward like a cyber rag doll. The force of the shot and the detonation in the central conservatory shattered the skylights overhead, and rain began to pour in through the smoke. I picked myself to my hooves as the shaking grew stronger and stronger beneath them.

Through the smoke emerged two crushing treads and a broad, jagged row of steel. I lifted my forehooves completely on reflex and put them right above that row of steel teeth as my hind legs slid backwards beneath me. My fingers struggled to find something to grab on to. Maybe if I could get on the damn thing... but then I stared at the two machine gun turrets pointing right at me. They could kill me right now...

Then I glanced behind me at the wall and understood. Shooting was too good for me. They were going to smash me to cyberpony mush. Then I saw the smoking hole blasted into the wall five feet up. I kicked my way up onto the rubble churning in front of the machine as the wall grew closer and closer. I had no idea how to do this; I had no idea if I *could* do this. But my body had been made by a zebra, and I could only hope it had half their agility! I launched myself up as a yard remained between the tank and wall, curving my back as my momentum carried me through

the jagged hole. I landed on my head a second before the whole building shook with the force of the impact. The engine let out a roar as I sprawled onto my back.

I was in some sort of large courtyard. Rain poured over my face as I lay there, bringing me back to my senses. If my ears had been flesh and blood, I'd probably be deaf now. There was a cyan flash, and Glory was there. She threw her hooves around me and hugged me close as I numbly patted her mane. We shared a wonderful and terribly poorly-timed kiss before I pulled myself to my hooves.

"You're safe!" Glory muttered as she held me.

"Safe as I ever am," I replied with a wry smile. "That was some pretty incredible flying, Glory Dash."

She immediately colored. "Don't call me that. I was just shooting wild. I think I may have wet myself somewhere while they were blasting at me. I just had to keep firing at them."

"Glad as I am to see you, there's a tank right on the other side of that wall, and I have a feeling they're really pissed with me," I muttered.

"You have that effect," a mare in Enclave power armor said as she landed next to us, followed by two others. She immediately opened her helmet, and I saw the orange features of Lightning Dancer. A second pegasus landed beside her, facing Glory. Then two more! Thank goodness they were blue bars... for now, at least.

"Fuck me. She really does exist," one of the armored pegasi, a mare, breathed, then reached up and tapped her helmet. The lavender features of the Neighvarro mare Twister appeared, her eyes widening.

"I never thought I'd see... her..." another mare said as she retracted her helmet faceplate, her orange and yellow striped mane poking out of the opening. "Rainbow Dash..." Sunset breathed.

"No. I'm... I'm not Rainbow Dash," Glory stammered.

"Fooled me," the missile-armed stallion who must have been Boomer muttered thickly.

"What are all of you doing here?" I gasped, looking from one to the next. "Lightning, why... what's going on?" If they were here to take Glory...

But the yellow pegasus shook her head. "Well, after the meeting at the skyport, Sky Striker decided he was going to find out what was going on himself. The Honored Councilor sent these three with him."

"We've got the most experience operating in the Hoof," Twister replied. Meeting my eye, she added, "That mare, Dusk, is okay. She was in critical condition, and the Castellanus was closer than the Skyport, so..." She trailed off as she stared at Glory. "Who...how..."

"Hey, Twisty?" Boomer said as he pointed at the wall. "Didn't she say there was—"

An explosion blew a cascade of dust and rubble over the seven of us, and two smoking cannons pushed through the blasted hole as the machine tried to make its own door.

"Shit! Right! Tank! Roof!" Twister grabbed one of my forehooves and Glory the other, and they both lifted me up towards the roof. We barely cleared the lip when the tank rolled into the courtyard below. I didn't really see this as much of an improvement; If the thing had an E.F.S. then we were seven pretty obvious red bars.

Lightning Dancer reached into her barding and threw down a legful of blue-banded grenades. They detonated with crackles and pops of arcing magical electricity. The tank froze, turrets sweeping back and forth. The yellow pegasus backed off along the flat, rain-washed roof. "Those spark bombs should jam it's E.F.S for a little bit."

"Right," Twister said as she whirled on Glory. "What the hell is going on? We were searching Miramare with Sky Striker when he heard a broadcast about his wife fighting out here or something. And now we find Rain—"

"I'm Morning Glory," she interrupted as she frowned sternly at the mare. "I got magicked into this body! I'm not really Rainbow Dash."

"Striker's kid? Oh my..." Sunset's red eyes widened. "No wonder he set a speed record getting here."

Twister glanced from me to Glory. "What the hell is going on here, Blackjack? The surface isn't supposed to have ordinance like that anymore!"

"Tell you what? Stick close, and if we live through this, I will explain everything. Okay?" I snapped, looking down. The tank was swinging its guns around like a giant radroach's antennae; it seemed to be searching for us.

"Fair enough," Twister said as she looked at Glory again, the lavender mare clearly spooked.

"You're here with Father?" Glory gasped as she looked around. "Where is he? And you have Dusk?"

"I dunno where he went. This whole mission turned into a squall soon as Striker got

that message. As for Dusk, she was unconscious in the Castellanus's med bay last I saw her," Twister said.

"Here," Lightning Dancer said as she dug into her saddlebags and dumped my weapons out onto the rooftop beside me. I saw the sword, and my life suddenly became a lot better. It might not have been a ripper, but it would do for a can opener.

"We have to find Father," Glory said tersely, looking around in concern while I tucked my equipment away.

"Isn't he right over there?" Boomer asked as he pointed further along the rainswept roof towards a pair of blue bars. I glanced down at the tank as my body continued to regenerate; it was blasting the courtyard walls with machine gun fire as if in a fit of frustration. Then I looked where the stallion was pointing and saw the eyepatched Sky Striker standing two feet from Dawn. I froze. "Oh no..."

"Father... Mother..." Glory moaned, looking anguished.

"Glory... your mother..." I said weakly as she walked a few steps past me closer to the pair. I didn't know what to really say now. That she might not even be a pony anymore? That she was a murderer?

Up here, the sound of the grinding of the tank crashing back into the manor struggled with the fury of the fighting below and the storm raging above. Yet, despite all that, there seemed to be a calm surrounding the two like the eye of a hurricane, and I was helpless to do anything but watch. Neither of them spared us the slightest glance; all their attention was for each other. If there was any chance for Dawn giving up this suicidal mission, it was Sky Striker. If I said a word, I knew that we'd lose her to Cognitum forever.

But he didn't know... and Celestia damn me, I couldn't think of any way to warn him without losing her. I looked at the stricken Glory and swallowed. I had to give him a chance. *Please... please save her, Sky Striker.*

I saw him look down at Dawn, concern and frustration warring with each other as Dawn hung her head. Then, with a sob, Sky Striker hugged her close to him. "You're alive. My heart... my love... You're alive... How... why... I thought you were gone forever..."

"I had to go. We would have been killed. You know that." Dawn answered as she nuzzled his neck with a small smile.

The one-eyed stallion sniffed. "We could have left together."

"And taken our children to the Wasteland? No mother could do that," she replied quietly. "Or would you have come with me and left our children alone? Forced Dusk to become their mother when she'd just gotten her cutie mark? No... I couldn't stay, and none of you could come with me. I had a mission to complete down here."

"Your mission...?" he asked softly, then smiled. "I've tried to carry out your mission, Dawn. Thunderhead finally sent down the Volunteer Corps. It took ten years, but we finally came down and helped." He stroked her mane gently. "You could come back with me. We could make the Volunteer Corps bigger and better than before. Do real good! Save the Wasteland."

She clenched her eyes tightly and buried her face in his chest. "Save the Wasteland. That's all I've ever wanted. All I've ever dreamed of." She gave a sob, and then said quietly, "I'd love to go back with you, my love. Back up to my life... my family. To ponies who love me. To a better world."

I swallowed, feeling the floor rumble under my hooves. I wondered if it was from the thunder or the tank moving through the manor beneath me. Tanks should get a special E.F.S. bar! I looked back to Dawn as she trembled in his grasp.

He started to say something, but perhaps he sensed it at the same time I did. A wrongness that didn't belong to the mare he loved. Dawn could never go back. She was like me. Just like me, she knew she didn't deserve happiness. Her followers were fighting and killing children, for Celestia's sake, but I wanted to believe she could. I wanted it as much as Glory and Striker did. Because if there was hope for her... there could be hope for me too...

She swayed before melting "Sky... I would... I would love to go back up to your castle in the sky. Forever... just like a pony tale..." And for an instant she smiled, and I knew it was over. She'd come back with us, tell me what I'd need to know, disband the Harbingers, and go home to her family. Glory would have her mother back. Striker would have his wife. Dawn would be loved once more. For an instant...

Then her eyes opened and she looked right at me.

The baleful green glow of her eyes flared once as her they moved to stare at my hoof. The dire luminescence rippled out from her glowing pupils, and green lines of light traced themselves across her silver irises as it passed. The light shimmered along those fine faint scars crossing her body. Then the gray hide split along those lines and sloughed wetly apart, revealing a blacker hexagon-patterned hide hidden beneath and broken by green tracers of light. From under her gray feathers, dark chisel-like blades emerged, each sporting green circuits of light. Her hooves split

as mechanical fingers erupted from the disintegrating flesh of her fetlocks, each digit tipped in a long black talon surrounded by a sickly jade aura. She plunged the curved blades into his back, slicing through his black power armor as if it was butter.

With a furious scream, she plunged her her bladed wings deep into his body and with horrifying force flung him away, his crimson blood raining down. I watched as a her tail seemed to weave itself into a whiplike appendage that crackled with green lightning. Almost by reflex, Duty and Sacrifice were drawn and, slipping into S.A.T.S., I blasted eight rounds right into her face, enough to decapitate most ponies. The impacts knocked her back from us, and she launched herself into the air. Glowing green chips in her ebony dermis peeked through her ravaged face, but the hexagonal hide was barely damaged and regenerating before my eyes. She hovered there a moment, looking down at Sky Striker's broken body with a cold stare. "Enough! No more weakness!"

"No!" Glory screamed and raced to her fallen father. From inside Dawn's body, the green glow spread, a disintegration field rendering her tattered hide and feathers to ash that washed away in the rain. What remained was a mare who was more cyber than pony. For an instant those glowing green eyes looked at those mechanical fingers and claws, at her husband's blood being washed away, and then looked down at her husband and daughter with a fleeting expression of horror. Then with a scream I'd heard in a buried city beneath the ground, she launched herself into the lightning-filled sky.

Lightning Dancer and I rushed to the fallen Sky Striker. "Stop her! I've got him!" she shouted, and the Neighvarro ponies immediately popped their helmets closed and took to the air. Glory, her face a mask of anguish, did her best to stem the flow of blood. Lightning Dancer pulled out familiar purple potions and poured them into Sky Striker's mouth.

Glory whimpered as she struggled to save her remaining parent. "Come on, Daddy! You've been hurt worse! I heard all your stories. You've taken worse from a dragon. . . ." But though the wounds closed a little, some force seemed to be fighting the restorative magic. The wounds were tinged with a faint, malignant green glow. "The potion's not working, Blackjack!" the cyan pegasus sobbed in distress.

"Dawn. . . my Dawn. . . what happened to her?" croaked Sky Striker. "Such a fool. Heard her voice, her name. . . and I. . . such a fool. . ."

"Hush. You're going to live for Glory. You understand? Glory isn't going to lose two parents today," I said, then looked at the two mares. "Can you get him to Star

House? The potions might be more effective there.”

Glory pulled off the scraps of Sky Striker’s armor. “I think so,” she said in a terrified whimper, and we carefully draped Sky Striker over her back. I sent a frantic message for Lacunae to get to Star House as soon as possible and use her healing magic on Glory’s father. Then there was one last thing to cover. . .

“You aren’t going to try and capture Glory, are you?” I asked Lightning Dancer in a tense mutter. “Please. She’s not Rainbow Dash.” I hoped I didn’t sound as much like I was begging as I feared I did.

Lightning Dancer looked at the bleeding Sky Striker and then back to me. “One hurricane at a time, Blackjack. We’ll talk about it later. For now, see to your own battle.” With that, she carefully began to fly off towards the northeast.

I sighed, looking at the blood and ash mixing with the rainwater. Why did it always have to end in tears?

Then the tank stopped waiting.

The roof erupted beneath me, and then world fell out in a roaring avalanche of stone and beams. I landed in a crash in the very ballroom where Blueblood had slain Roses. The elegant room hadn’t been picked over as much as the rest of the manor. The white marble floor hadn’t been torn out, and the elegant pillars still had their golden carvings of unicorns. Darkened balconies ran across both sides of the long hall. Despite the tank’s immense size, it had more than enough room to move freely and was more than capable of blasting me to pieces.

I slowly rose to my hooves as the engine snarled like an angry dragon. The lamps and machine guns whirled as they oriented on me. Glory had her battle. I had mine. No more running. It was time to finish this. “Okay, you metal bastard. You want to play?”

As crazy as it was, I grinned from ear to ear.

“Ante up.”

I dove to the side as the machine guns opened up, their rounds tearing into the pristine marble floor and the blackened patch where Blueblood had died. I found momentary cover behind a pillar but didn’t dare stand still when the machine guns paused in their barrage. The cannons boomed, and the thick column disintegrated in a spray of marble, filling the air with dust and smoke. The lamps flashed back and forth as the tank turned and strafed wildly along my path. I reached the corner pillar and leapt as the cannons fired again, blasting out stone chunks and shrapnel as I

slid across the floor on my side, coming to a stop in front of the stairs that forked in a Y.

My body reacted almost on its own as the tank turned to face me and began firing its machine guns once again. Backflipping end over end, I ascended the stairs as the machine gun ripped a line of fire right after me. I saw that the marble wall behind me where the stairs split was embossed with the Blueblood family tree, and as I raced to the side the machine gun fire continued up along it. As I ducked behind another pillar at the top of the balcony, I watched it rip through the stone all the way up to the final name. 'Goldenblood.'

I popped a sapphire in my mouth and took a peek as the turret slowly turned from one balcony to the other as the rain poured down upon it and smoke and dust drifted through the air. I waited till the cannons pointed towards the far balcony before I moved, running as quickly and as low as I could. Still the machine guns fired wildly as the tank turret swung around towards me. I ducked behind a pillar as the machine guns blazed, their bullets ripping through the stone in a stream of lethal metal. The twin cannons came around and pointed up towards me.

This was gonna hurt... I had no idea how, but I stood like a zebra and launched myself in one arching backflip off the marble balcony, feeling the fiery fingers of the machine gun rounds punching right through my limbs and body. But I couldn't stop. My body couldn't stop. The machine guns chattered as they struggled to track me through the air, and a thunderous boom washed through me as the tank blasted the balcony where I'd stood two second before.

I landed with a bloody clang atop the tank's turret. The machine guns couldn't target me when I was laid flat on the metal, and the turret swung back and forth wildly. I drew my sword with my fingers, clenched down on the grip, and then rolled off onto the front of the tank. With all my strength I jammed the sword into the socket of one of the machine gun turrets, and the silvery blade slipped through the metal with its magical sharpness. Wrenching it about a few times, there was a spark, and the turret froze. I quickly wiggled the blade again for good measure, then pulled it out and repeated the process on the other machine gun turret while it tried to target me. It too sparked and went dead.

Roaring in fury, the tank revved its engines and swung its main turret as it bucked back and forth. I clambered back on top of the turret, and then spotted it: a hatch. Holding on for dear life atop the flat turret, I levered the blade tip into the hatch and started cutting.

You fuckers are gonna die, I thought with cold certainty. I'm going to blow your faces off.

The tank suddenly charged the far wall and struck with such force that only my teeth and two fingers kept me from being flung off. For a moment we both sat there, the tank and I, and then it backed up and fired both cannons nearly point blank into the wall. The shockwave nearly knocked me off, and my magically sharp sword slid out of the hatch along with the cloud of rubble that cascaded over me. I held onto the hatch, looking behind the tank for the glint of silver. Then, as if sensing my intention, the damned machine backed up!

I gritted my teeth as I looked down at the hatch. Rain from the hole blasted in the roof pattered down around me. Even now, the machine gun turrets were glowing pink. Soon they'd be operational once more, and then the hoof-wide gash I'd managed to cut in the hatch would follow. There was only one thing to do... I hooked my fingers into the hole, squatted, and started to pull.

I felt the tension build more and more. Felt the line between flesh and blood grow more acute. The motors in my legs began to whine as I put more force into them than they'd been designed to bear. Then they started to smoke as my own repair talismans struggled to keep them pulling. Pull, damn it! My flesh began to distort where pony ended and metal began. Warnings filled my vision as the metal hatch began to bow outwards. Just a little more. Bullet holes torn through my metal limbs twisted as smoke reached my nostrils. Just a little more...

Everything gave all at once, the motors and power talismans popping one after another in one final spasmodic tear. The stress on my metal limbs caused my already battered back leg to explode apart completely, and my right foreleg ripped off entirely, connection cup and all, leaving a bloody mass of wire, metal, and meat. My left foreleg shattered at the joint midway, flopping uselessly by my side as I finally pushed myself further than even my cyberpony body could go.

But it had been worth it: my final pull had also forced the hatch open. Now I just had to kick the explosive block off my barding and into the tank and... um... fall on the detonator?

I stared down into a turret filled with technology I could barely understand stuffed into a space that nopony could fit inside. It was filled with wires, talismans, and a clear glass jar that was occupied by a round globe and a few metal vertebrae. A mechanical arm tipped with a camera looked up at me, and then the equipment inside spoke in a mechanical voice.

“Kzzzt....K....Kuntzzz.”

Not ‘he’s *in* the tank.’

‘He *is* the tank.’

“Deus,” I whispered back.

With my legs destroyed and my horn burned out, there was nothing I could do as he jerked back and sent me tumbling off the turret and onto the ground. There was nowhere to run. I had nothing left to fight with as he pulled back and pointed every turret right at me, lamps glaring. He sat there, and I could almost imagine him savoring the moment. Would he blast me to pieces? machine gun me apart? Crush me beneath his treads? His engine revved over and over again.

So I rocked up into a sitting position, looked up at the tiny socket cameras beneath the lamps, and shouted as loudly as I could, “I’m sorry!”

The engine abruptly fell to a quiet idle as I sat there, the rain pouring down upon me. “I’m sorry that I killed you. I saw your memory orb, Deus! I felt. . . how you felt. I know how Sanguine kept you on a short leash and used your pain against you. . . pain that nopony deserved!” I closed my eyes. “And I saw the orb in Miramare. I saw what Brass did to you. . . what that. . . that. . .” I clenched my jaw and then shouted, “that Cunt did to you!”

Slowly, I looked up into the cameras, rain and tears streaking down my face. “I know you loved Twist. . . and I know that she couldn’t love you in return. That you never meant to hurt her. That you just wanted to love her. But you couldn’t. And you made a mistake. . . And I saw how Vanity kept you from her when all you wanted to do was to see her once! Just fucking once!” I yelled as I rocked there in the rain. “But he didn’t. He left you there in Hightower to rot. Like you were scum.”

I sat there silently, expecting the annihilating blast to come at any second. But it didn’t. All I could do was sit there as my EFS flashed critical failure at me on multiple limbs. I lifted my shattered right stump, showing the cables coming out of my torn flesh. It didn’t hurt... not like it should. “I know what it’s like to be a cyberpony now, Deus. I know what it’s like to feel dead inside. To have your body move in ways you can’t understand. Like you’re not really in control anymore. I know the feeling of violation. . . how it feels like you’ve been turned into a thing. And I know you felt the same way, Deus. I know how it feels to have the one good flesh and blood part of you that makes you feel like a pony. . . and I’m sorry that I took that away from you as well.”

The engine let one long low growl, but it dwindled away. “You were a good pony once. You fought for Equestria. You were a Marauder, gunning down enemies with a minigun to hold a hill that command told you to abandon. And you were a monster, Deus. You made a horrible mistake. . . there’s no lie to that. But you were never given a chance to show you could be more than that mistake. To prove you were a better pony. To do better. . .”

“I used to think that what you did to my home was horrible. That you were a monster for it, and deserved whatever you got. Well, I learned what it means to make a horrible mistake. I know what it means to become a monster, Deus. I became a monster too!” I shouted at the pony within the machine. “But I got a chance to do better. To become more than a monster. And now you do as well. You can choose the better choice. You can turn your back on the Harbingers who would have had you kill children; make up for your mistake.”

I heard a commotion at the hole in the wall Deus had made to drive in and saw P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage, their eyes wide in shock. My eyes met P-21’s, I gave a little shake of my head, and he stopped the pair from charging in.

I bowed my head before the tank, closing my eyes. “Please. One monster to another. . . please. . .” I whispered, “choose to be a pony....Doof.”

There was a moment of silence save for the soft noise of the rain and the low rumble of the tank, and then Deus’s engine let out a mechanical scream as the cannons fired. The wall behind me blew out. Again he fired. And again. Again. The shockwaves of the cannons battered me and the concussion would have deafened me had my ears been flesh and blood. Again he fired. Again. He blew out the walls and ceiling. His machine guns ripped apart the balconies, and his cannons pulverized the marble surrounding us. Again. Again. Again.

Finally the barrage ended; only a bowl of rubble remained of the ballroom. Rain hissed to steam off his barrels as the water washed the dust from his striped armor. I hadn’t moved. Slowly, my friends peeked over the edge of the debris at where I still sat, head bowed and body broken. All four cameras oriented on me. Slowly I smiled. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Deus ground his gears and turned, ramming the far wall of crumbled stone and ploughing right through it. Slowly, I looked over at my friends as they rushed to me. “Oh Sweet Celestia,” Scotch Tape said as she lifted my shattered cybernetic leg. “Blackjack. . . why do you keep breaking yourself?”

Maybe it was the blood loss, but I laughed, which only made them look more worried

as I said softly, "Because I know there are people who can put me back together ...make me a pony again." I looked at Rampage. "Did we win?"

"Yeah," Rampage said. "The Harbingers have run off. Steel Rain got away, though."

P-21 looked the way that Deus had gone and then back to me. "How'd you beat him?"

"The same way you beat me," I murmured softly as I leaned my broken body against his. "I gave him a chance to be a better pony."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: So, before any blame falls on my editing staff, I want everypony to know that the tank battle, backflips and limb damage all, is my own fault. Someponies have noticed I like certain animes and you might be able to pick which one inspired this battle. If you found it ridiculously cheesy and poor writing, it's my fault. But this is something I had planned since chapter 16.... and I really thought that I'd get to it a lot sooner than this.... sigh...

Anyway, I want to give my editors huge thanks for this chapter. Folks probably noticed a lot of things got in the way of getting this chapter done. But Hinds, Bro, and Snipehamster stuck it out and got through the whole thing. I'd also like to thank Fuzzy for giving his time and opinion to this chapter. There were some major questions about what was going to happen in this chapter. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And lastly, thanks everypony who leaves comments and feedback. It's really important to me, even if I don't always get to responding as promptly as I should.

I hope that everyone is happy with the pacing of the story. I know Horizons is ridiculously, freakishly long. I hope that it's not going too long. I have a plan and an ending, I promise. Hopefully we'll get to it before next Christmas... or the Christmas after next...

Anyhow, thanks for sticking with Horizons and I hope the story is doing well. Hopefully we'll get one more chapter before Christmas. Take care. Thanks for reading!)

53. Upgrades

“The war brought misery and death all over the world. I sure hope that something like that never happens again. But from what I’ve seen, there’s not much hope for ponykind.”

The doors to the Fluttershy Medical Center ER smashed violently inwards, battered aside by a ferocious cyan-rainbow tornado wearing a shooty look all its own. Glory, her hide spattered and streaked with blood, stood in the doorway and bellowed with passion and assertiveness that would have done the original Rainbow Dash proud, “I am assuming control of these medical facilities!”

The few ponies standing around the battered ER just stared in speechless confusion at the sight of her backed by Lacunae and four power-armored pegasi. I lay like a heap of ballast across Lacunae’s back, twisting as I tried to alternate my gaze between the emergency room in front of me and the wagons that had hauled the injured all the way from Chapel to the hospital.

“Now wait a minute,” a brown earth pony began to say as he looked at his own balking security and the two beam turrets flanking his half-dozen ponies. “We’re in charge he-“

Two blinding flares of emerald magic streaked through the ER, and the two turrets exploded in a second. Glory hovered over him. “This is not a debate!” she roared down into his face. “Get whatever medically-trained ponies you can out here at once. Doctor. Nurse. Midwife. I don’t care, but move!” Her imperious hoof pointed at the security ponies. “You two. Go grab whatever buckets you can and start boiling water.” Next she pointed at four more ponies who looked on in wary bafflement. “You four! Grab buckets and detergent and scrub these tables as quick as you can. You have two minutes!”

All the ponies in the emergency center just gaped at her before she shouted, “Move it!”

And as if Celestia herself had returned, they moved.

“Scotch Tape. Get on Blackjack’s PipBuck and contact Megamart. We’ll pay whatever they want from what we stripped off the Harbingers if they can get Bonesaw and every healing potion and chem they’ve got together within ten minutes. Then do the same for the Collegiate, and get them to send Triage.” Scotch Tape lifted my

remaining foreleg, removed it so that she could use my PipBuck more easily and wouldn't damage me further by pulling on the leg, opened the panel, and fiddled with the controls a bit. Glory turned to Lacunae as the filly began to talk. "We'll send Lightning Dancer and Boomer to Megamart with a cart. Will you have the magic to reach the Collegiate and bring the things back?"

"I will, even if I must imbibe the wastewater in the little filly's room," Lacunae promised solemnly, setting me on a bench where I had a clear view of the ER.

"Good. Take my father up to the stasis pods before you go." Glory then turned to P-21. "Go up to there and make sure that the one we put Scotch in is still working. If not. . ." she hesitated for an instant, glancing back at the bandage-wrapped form of her father. Her eyes met mine; I gave her as reassuring a smile as I could. It was all I could do at this point. "Try and get it prepped and ready if you can."

"Should be easier this time," the blue pony muttered, glancing at Scotch Tape as she talked into the PipBuck. Then he ran off towards the stairs.

Glory's hoof turned to bear on the few uninjured Crusaders who had accompanied us from Chapel. "You four. Scour this place from top to bottom. Every chem, healing potion, bandage, and bottle of alcohol you can find, bring here or to the operating room on the tenth floor. Understood?"

"Bet I can find more than you!" one shouted, turning the vital scavenger hunt into a game and hiding his fear as he did so.

The Collegiate and Society ponies that staffed this little outpost staggered out from the side rooms where they'd been sleeping and were instantly drafted and assigned duties. When Archibald, the brown pony in charge, muttered something about caps and paying for this, Glory silenced him with a single stare and then pointed at the heaps of assault carbines and anti-machine rifles we'd taken from the Harbingers. "Are these tools of death payment enough for you to save lives?"

"Um... ah... yes... I suppose," he muttered.

"Then move!" Glory bellowed.

"I'll just wait over here... and... um... watch..." I muttered from my seat.

In five minutes, two tables were scrubbed far cleaner than they'd been in centuries, and the first victims were brought in off the wagons. They'd been triaged back in Star House, the most wounded loaded last and taken off the wagons first. A few were probably Harbingers, but that didn't matter right now. All that did matter was

that they were mortally wounded. Glory had a nurse pour a pan full of Wild Pegasus and dumped the medical tools in. I envied the tools a tiny bit.

Lacunae levitated the still form of Sky Striker through the ER and then flew up to the stasis repository. Glory hesitated for one moment, her face clearly showing a yearning to be at his side.

Then she started to work.

I hadn't appreciated her medical skill in a while. Nowadays I just regenerated, used healing potions, or was hurt so badly I was unconscious, and I hadn't watched her save Scotch. I saw her move from one tool to the next with her mouth with a deft finesse that matched Rainbow Dash's flying skills. She made healing potions and unicorn magic seem like crude tricks, easy and almost lazy solutions, cheats. Given the lack of magic up above, I could now understand how much medicine would rely on cutting and sewing. The only magical assistance she used with each patient was to put the recollector on their heads to anesthetize them.

When Bonesaw arrived twenty minutes later, he and an earth pony Collegiate doctor working the ER had gone through and stabilized a half dozen patients. With magic, the old stallion pushed them further towards recovery and away from death's bony hooves. Yet even magic had its limitations. It could heal wounds, certainly, but what of infection, shock, contaminants left in wounds, and other complications? With needle, thread, scalpel, and tubes, Glory saved lives without magic.

But not without cost. One mare who'd come to fight with the Crusaders shuddered, gave one long exhalation, and then went silent. Glory simply closed her eyes a moment with the slightest bowing of her head and then washed her hooves in a bucket, rinsed them with whatever alcohol was present, and moved to the next. She refused to give death more than that.

And me, I sat back watching it all with a profound sense of frustration. I wanted to will my limbs back in place so I could boil linen for bandages or sterilize the equipment, wipe down the tables or just give comfort to injured children. But all I could do was sit back and watch as ponies better than I worked to save others.

It's not always about me, though...

When Lacunae returned with Triage and a few others an hour later, the alicorn looking positively drained of magic and her wings dragging on the floor as she walked, the critically ill were stabilized enough for the blue unicorn to take Glory's place.

"Glory," I said as she washed her hooves, staring at the bloody water.

She didn't answer.

"Glory," I said louder from my seat in the corner.

She bit a bottle and carefully trickled the alcohol over her forehooves.

"Glory!" I shouted, and she jumped, the bottle falling from her mouth and puddling at her feet. She stared at the fluid spilling away in shock as I tried to meet her eyes and said in softer tones, "Glory. Go to him."

"I... I can't. If he's... I..." she stammered, clenching her eyes shut. "I'm needed here."

"Glory. Go." I imagined my mother, all the things we'd left unsaid. "Go to him. Triage is here. She can see to the injured. You've done your part. Go on."

She glanced at me and the mask of her stoicism crumbled as tears welled in the corners of her eyes and she grimaced. "Blackjack... I'm scared. What if... how could she... why...?" She bowed her head, and I started to move to hold her before I remembered my missing limbs. "Why did she do that?!" she cried out at me.

"I don't know," I said in a low, gentle voice. "Maybe Cognitum took her over and attacked him before she changed her mind. Or maybe... maybe she had to do something so she couldn't return to her old life. One that she wanted but that wouldn't save the Wasteland. I don't know. What I do know is your dad is up there. If he's alive, you're going to need to talk to him. And if he's not..." I closed my eyes, remembering the head and the stake. "If not... you need to say goodbye." I finished in a near whisper.

She looked at me for one more trembling second and then pulled my torso into an embrace, holding me tight. Even if I didn't have legs, I imagined holding her just as tightly as I sighed and stroked my cheek against her neck. "Thank you," she whispered back.

I sighed and kissed her neck and smiled when she finally pulled back. "Go on. I'm going to wait here. I know sooner or later Rampage will bring Rover." I sighed, looking at my three stumps and damaged hindleg. "I'm really going to owe him a leg or three."

"All right," she said, then flew up into the air. "I'll be back soon." And with a swoosh of her rainbow mane, she shot down the hall.

Scotch Tape looked over at me from where she hugged my foreleg with my PipBuck

within. I wondered what Cognitum would think if she knew that EC-1101 was in the possession of a filly; part of me found it funny, and another decidedly not. “Hear anything interesting?”

She sighed and looked at the leg. “Lots. There’s a bunch of chatter about one group withdrawing to some place called the Cathedral, another talking about ‘Operation Cauterize’ and something involving Canterlot, and a bunch of jabber that I think is zebra. But I didn’t pick up anything from the Harbingers. If they’re communicating, they must be using landlines rather than transmitting.” She glanced off to the side and then back at me. “Blackjack. . . there’s this really freaky pony watching me right now.”

“Pale? Wide-brimmed hat? Cards?” I asked with a little smile. She nodded, glancing away again nervously. “Don’t mind him. He’s Dealer. Lives in my PipBuck. He’s a . . . friend.”

The filly set my leg down and backed away from it before looking back at me. She looked at the device, then looked off to the side, and finally leaned towards me. “Blackjack. . . I’ve seen him before,” she whispered.

I would have sat up a little straighter if. . . well. . . limbs. “What do you mean, Scotch?”

“In a book. There was a paper with a drawing of a pony that looked just like him,” Scotch Tape said before she shrugged off her saddlebags and dug around for a bit, pulling out a copy of the “Wastelands” game book she’d picked up in Silverstar Sporting Supplies. She flipped it open to the back pages where several papers had been shoved in. “Character Sheet” was printed in the upper left corner of each, and below were a bunch of boxes and letters that made no sense. Somepony with some art skills had drawn rather detailed pictures on the backs. One was a pony wearing steam-driven power armor. Another was a unicorn mare holding a talisman like Priest’s cutie mark, her head bowed reverently, while a third depicted a wildly grinning pegasus stallion with a long rifle strapped to his barding.

And there was the Dealer. Same hat. Same gaunt, sallow look with a dead-eyed stare as he flipped glowing cards between his hooves. “Turn it over. . .” I murmured.

Name: Smiling Jack. Race: Earth Pony. Profession: Occult Gambler. Hometown: Gallows Hill.

Player: Echo.

“I see,” I said quietly. It might have been coincidence. There may have been more

than one pony with that name. But I wasn't sure coincidence existed any more.

Dealer had worked for Goldenblood. A personal assistant. Dealer had also been a Marauder. Everypony in that team had in some way been affected by tragedy and failure. Suddenly the Dealer's rants about responsibility took on a new light; he'd seen his team drift apart after the death of Big Macintosh. Seen one turn into a criminal, another driven insane, the rest spread apart and broken.

Doof. Psalm. Twist. Jetstream. Stonewing. Vanity. Applesnack. Big Macintosh. Echo.

The team was complete now.

"Dog think Pony has problem," Rover said calmly as the old canine cupped his chin and narrowed his filmy eye. "Now what could it be... hmmm..." He sat on a large wooden crate he'd hauled in while Triage readied her surgical equipment.

"I broke my legs," I muttered, flushing as I lay there on a table. Now that the injured were more or less taken care of, there was time to deal with stupid mares who tore their legs off trying to rip open tanks with their bare hooves.

Triage glanced at Rover and then at me. "I dunno," the blue unicorn said, her lips twitching around her cigarette. "Sprained ankle?"

"I broke my legs," I repeated, huffing and rolling my eyes.

Rover 'hmmmm'ed as he rubbed his chin. "Dog think Dog may have clue, but Dog is not sure." He looked at the smirking unicorn. "Is something missing?"

"No. I mean... how could that be?" Triage asked in mock amazement, levitating my severed forelimb and cupping her own chin in imitation of the Sand Dog. "Isn't she one of the strongest, toughest cyberponies around?"

"Dog certainly thought so!" Rover replied sarcastically. "Pony certainly act like it!"

"I admit it! I broke my legs!" I yelled at the pair, who ignored me.

"Maybe it's not physiological," Triage offered.

Rover feigned shock. "Pony think problem is in Pony's brain?"

Triage nodded soberly. "I think it very well may be."

"Okay! I'm an idiot who broke my legs!" I yelled at the pair. "Happy?"

Triage jumped and stared at me, her eyes wide. "Eureka! We have a breakthrough!"

Rover crossed his arms, bowed his head a little, and nodded once. "Yes. Pony may be onto something," he said seriously.

"But how to fix it? I mean, we can't make her less of an idiot," Triage said soberly.

Rover shook his head. "No no. Dog is good, but Dog not work miracles."

I glowered at the pair. "I hate you both." The pair arched their eyebrows coolly, simultaneously, as they looked at me and then at each other, and almost in unison gave each other matching smiles that I didn't like at all.

"Dog has answer. If Pony insists on doing things that ruins Dog's hard work, Dog will make simply make her tougher." He looked at Triage and grinned. "What pony think? Securipony?"

Triage's horn glowed, and I felt something release beneath my thigh. With a pop, my last leg came off. "I think we should just jump straight to an Ultra-Sentinel. Nip this problem in the bud once and for all," Triage replied with her own grin.

I had a vision of myself sporting six legs each as big as my body and wiggled my three working stumps desperately as I struggled to get away. Triage levitated me, and my stumps waved helplessly in the air as I tried to flee. "No! I'll never get laid again!"

Triage set me back in the middle of the table. Finally, she sighed. "All joking aside, we're serious, Blackjack. You are throwing yourself into fights these legs just weren't meant to handle. You need some more body reinforcement, too. Your cyber parts are designed for recon and being all sneaky. Face it. You need a combat model that can take the abuse you're throwing at it."

"I don't want to be turned into Deus," I muttered. "I like having flesh and blood." And so did he.

Triage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Then you better get used to being a cripple. Fact is, you're thrashing yourself harder than even your repair talismans can keep up with. And you won't be any use to people if you can't move."

"Fuck you," I hissed at her and closed my eyes. I saw the thing that Dawn became. That Deus had been. And I could see myself becoming just another version of Dawn. Was there any pony left in her? "I don't want to be a machine, Triage. I don't want. . ." I began, then slammed the back of my head against the bed as hard as I could. "Fuck!" I could almost imagine my mother looking at me from the Everafter.

It isn't always about you, Blackjack. I could hear P-21's soft words in my ears.

I'd given my flesh and blood for others before. Now I just had to give a little bit more...

Still, where was the line when I'd stop being Blackjack and start being Dawn? Or was it already too late? I fought the tears of frustration. "Sorry," I muttered.

"Don't be. Near as I can tell, this is par for the course," Triage replied.

I closed my eyes. I wasn't Dawn. I was a better pony than her. I was. . .

"What have you got?" I asked quietly.

Rover looked back to me. "Pony is fortunate Pony has friends."

"Professor Zodiac realized a while ago that you might need stronger stuff than what you had," Triage said, "even if you didn't want to admit it. She had us looking for whatever Steelpony parts we could." She sighed and shook her head. "There were plans for cybernetic Steel Rangers and Shadowbolts, but finding the actual augmentations was a bust. It'd take a full engineering lab to make them from scratch."

Now I frowned at her. "So. . . you don't have tougher legs?"

"Not exactly," Triage said as her horn lifted a black piece of metal from the crate. I blinked in surprise, and then stared at the rear leg of a piece of Enclave power armor. "You see, we won't be making them precisely from scratch. We'll use the remains of Sky Striker's power armor, the Shadowbolt repair drivers, and your basic legs to make new ones."

"You can do that?" I asked in surprise.

The blue unicorn sighed. "I *think* we can do that. The Shadowbolt design is based on power armor, only much more reinforced. Instead of armoring around a pony, it strengthens throughout the body. We'll have to fortify your joints and spine, though. One bad fall on your back and you could easily snap it." She levitated another long piece of black metal. "Fortunately, we've got enough pieces of Sky Striker's armor to do it." She looked into the box and pursed her lips. "Too bad the wing guards were shredded."

Not too bad for me. Anything that got me more than twenty feet off the ground was something I didn't want. Once I worked out teleportation. . . I sighed and then gave a half smile. "Just try and keep me as much flesh and blood as possible. I don't want Glory to have to break out a wrench set when we make love."

“And that was a mental image I could do without.” Triage shuddered and lifted one of my torn legs with her magic. “We’ll get you put back together. That shoulder is a problem, though. We’re going to have to pop you into a memory orb for a bit while we work on you.”

“However,” Rover added, lifting a finger, “there is price for Pony.”

I sighed, knowing there had to be one. “I’ll go to Grimhoof.” I really wanted to chase down Steel Rain and Dawn, but. . .

“That’s his requirement. The Collegiate has a separate request,” Triage said with a smile. “Fact is, the Collegiate is dying for a steady food source. The Society has been gouging us for years for basic staples. We got their plantations running, and then they kicked us out. But there’s one plantation close to us that never got running due to extreme Enervation, stronger than almost anywhere else. Somehow, you’re immune to Enervation now. Maybe it’s a cyberpony thing. In any case, we want you to go in and see if you can clean it out for us.” My immunity seemed to annoy the blue mare; I supposed she didn’t like mysteries any more than I did.

“Why isn’t there any Enervation in the other plantations?” I asked.

“No idea. They were a Stable-Tec testbed for stable orchards and gardens. This plantation was leased to some other company. Roseluck Agrifarms. We sent in some robots, but there were turrets and they couldn’t get any deeper.”

Roseluck Agrifarms. I’d heard that name before.

“All right,” I sighed in agreement. “Soon as we’re out of here, we’ll travel there next.” It felt galling, considering the other important things I needed to do, but I supposed finding Steel Rain and Dawn could wait till I’d paid off my debt.

“Good.” Rover nodded. “Is nice having Pony that honors word.”

Triage opened up her saddlebags and pulled out a number of strange talismans and other arcane science equipment. She levitated a memory orb and something particularly pointy. “Hope you’re ready for a long night.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back. “It’s already been a long night.” She floated the orb over and touched it to my horn. . . .

oooOOOooo

The world refocused into the eyes of a white unicorn mare looking into a mirror. I started a bit at her unusual appearance; her irises were rainbow bands and her mane was a chaotic blending of prismatic colors. An elaborate curl of golden wire

looped around her horn to a tiny ruby set in the tip and matched her shimmery dress which was decorated with thousands of tiny gems. A gap showed her cutie mark: a diamond radiating spectra of light. She popped out a tube of lipstick, delicately applied a thin line of red, carefully tamped her lips, and then smiled. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "All right, Diamond Flash. You can do this."

She turned with a swish of her shimmery prismatic tail, trotted from the bathroom, and walked into the bedlam of a great gathering of ponies. The cavernous space was awash in lights, music, and noise. Dozens of displays and booths filled the vaulted chamber, and ponies of all kinds, as well as a few beings from other lands, wandered through looking at the varied wonders. Above it all hung a banner magically illuminated to read 'Equestrian Technology Trade Fair'.

Clearly, this was a major convention of some kind. In the distance, on the open floor below the ringing balcony my host was standing on, I spotted Applejack standing beside a green stallion and talking to Rainbow Dash. Pinkie Pie walked with an entourage two floors up. Opposite her, Twilight Sparkle seemed to be critically reviewing the Ministry of Arcane Science's stall and clearly not finding it to her satisfaction. Two green unicorn mares fussed around with the displays, even with others looking on, clearly trying to execute the purple mare's exacting directions. Stable-Tec had a massive three-story-tall display of a stable. From the traffic coming and going through the building's wings, this event clearly went beyond even this massive space.

Diamond Flash walked casually through the throngs of ponies; every one of them looked as glamorous as herself, or more so. She levitated a glass of champagne and took a nervous sip as she looked over at one display. Flash Industries had something going on that had dozens of ponies oohing and ahhh-ing as energy zapped and flashed. She made her way closer, and well dressed ponies looked at her, sized her up, and made room for her.

"Flash Industries, makers of magical energy weapons renowned across Equestria, now revealing the latest and greatest in shield matrix technology!" boomed a speaker as a large diamond rose from one end of a platform. "You all know Flash Industries' fine products like the AEP-7, with a redesigned focusing crystal pattern, an improved photonic focusing chamber, and selectable beam focus, wavelength, pulse energy and refire rate! Well now, witness the next generation in energy products from Flash!" A familiar, boxy energy pistol rose on a frame on the other side of the platform.

The diamond began to glow, and a hexagon of glowing panels materialized around

it. "Using only the finest Crystal Empire gems, the Flash Arcane Defense Emitter, or F.A.D.E., creates a shield spell impervious to normal weaponry. See for yourself the awesome power of Flash!" The pistol began to fire crimson beams, the blasts striking the rotating panels and making them glow brighter and brighter.

"What's that? Not enough Flash for you?" A beam rifle rose up beside it. "Let's see if the F.A.D.E. can handle the cutting edge energy of the AER-12, now with improved platinum gem fittings!" Even brighter crimson beams blasted away along with the pistol, and the shield remained in place. "Oh my! Perhaps we need something even 'Flashier'? What about the Flash AET-3 Triforce?!" boomed the speaker, and a third, snub-nosed rifle raised up and began to blast three beams at a time along with the other two weapons. A few ponies in the front backed away from the barrage of red beams striking the magical plates.

"I know what you're thinking! How can this be? But you haven't seen anything yet, folks! Because I know some of you must wonder: what if, somehow, your F.A.D.E. becomes inoperable? Are you doomed?" the speaker blared. "Not at all!" And then the diamond lowered back into the platform while the magical field remained. Red energy flashed and glared off the magical plates, even with the gem gone. "So long as your enemies keep firing, the F.A.D.E. keeps going. Truly a wondrous innovation from Flash Industries!"

The weapons stopped firing, and three beautiful mares and one handsome stallion stepped forward from around the platform, handing out pamphlets about exciting products from Flash. Diamond Flash hung back, giving a sigh of relief.

"Marvelous display," a voice said from behind her, and she whirled, staring at a handsome yellow earth pony with a gorgeous unicorn at his side.

"H... Horse! And Sweetie Belle?! I... What an... I mean..." She fought to compose herself and smiled as casually as possible. "I'm delighted you found it impressive."

He smiled genially as he went on. "Personally, though, I have to question demonstrating one product that renders your others obsolete. It does seem a curious move."

She swallowed. "What, I should wait for a competitor to snap up something out of the M.A.S.?" She gave her best dismissive toss of her mane. "When you see the price tag for one F.A.D.E., you'll know I'll make a fortune either way." Then she glanced across the room at Applejack. "Besides, the MWT is urging more emphasis to be put on defensive applications, like power armor."

"I'm sure the zebras truly appreciate their defensive capabilities," Horse said sardonically, with a small roll of his eyes. He looked at the crowds with clear distaste and sighed. "Such a bother, but this is where the well-connected rub flanks and decide what the future will be." He suddenly looked at her once more and smiled, arching his brow. "And you certainly seem determined to be one of them. Look at you. Lowly M.A.S. researcher to magical weapons dealer. Who would have guessed?"

"I... I'm just trying to do what's best for my company. And for Equestria," she added, sounding as if she wasn't sure if Horse was mocking her or not. She glanced at Sweetie Belle, then frowned and looked down at the Stable-Tec display where Sweetie Belle was addressing a collection of ponies. Her eyes went from one to the other, mouth hanging open.

"I do love that look," Horse said with a chuckle.

"Is that... is that a robot?" she asked.

"The latest and finest," he chuckled. "Sweetie Bot, 2.0," he said with a wave of his hoof, and the robot actually blushed and lowered her eyes. "She's not for the show, though. She's all for me. I just love seeing Stable-Tec squirm at the potential questions." He gazed down at the distant, real Sweetie Belle with a strange, hard look. "I once asked her to marry me, but she declined. So I made one that wouldn't. Worked out for the best, I suppose."

"I'll say," Diamond Flash said as she looked around. "I... I wonder if the Princesses will show up."

Horse rolled his eyes. "Oh, I suppose Luna will make an appearance, eventually. Give some boring speech about innovation, how pleased she is at our inventions, remind us to give our all to win the war, and then teleport back to Canterlot. Rah rah rah." He gave a dismissive yawn. "I'd be far more interested if Celestia poked her horn outside her school... but she has even less inclination to be around weapons like these." He scanned the crowd and then gave a savage little grin. "Oh look. Her cadaver's here."

She followed his gaze and looked down at the scarred form of Goldenblood walking around the edges of the room, skirting the crowd. "Who?"

He glanced at her, his expression turning pitying. "Oh, that's right. You're not in the know. I really shouldn't be surprised anymore." He smirked down at the pony as he made his way towards Stable-Tec's stable display. "That's the director of the Office of Interministry Affairs. One Goldenblood."

Diamond glanced down at the disfigured pony who was now standing in a corner away from the crowd gathered around Sweetie Belle. The mare then looked back at him. "So what?"

Horse threw back his head and laughed. "Oh my. 'So what?' That's so... cute." He returned to glaring down at the stallion. "When I was interim director of the M.W.T., I discovered all kinds of interesting things about Goldenblood and his little office. Things you wouldn't begin to believe. It was all right there, if you were smart enough to know where to look." He caught Diamond's eye, and his lips curled in amusement. "Applejack isn't, by the way. She hasn't a clue about a tenth of what's done behind her back." He glanced at the orange mare and her escort with a look that was almost pitying.

"You... you don't know anything about what happened to her... her accident, do you?" Diamond asked, her voice dropping. Horse glanced at her and his lips widened even more. I knew ponies that smirked like that... I wanted to buck that smirk right off his face.

"Why... of *course* not. How could you possibly *think* such a thing?" he said in a voice of faux wounded pride, pressing a hoof to his tuxedo vest. He then looked down at Applejack's green escort and chuckled. "How terrible that the assassin was killed rather than apprehended. Can you imagine what Morale might have discovered had he been arrested? Why, I imagine whoever did arrange things must have been tickled pink when he was dispatched. Probably sent Applesnack a gift basket." He chuckled and shook his head. "Such irony..." Was he talking about himself or Goldenblood... ugh... either way, I didn't like it!

The mare licked her lips nervously, averting her eyes from the handsome yellow stallion. Diamond started to move away from Horse. "I should... um... go mingle."

But Horse reached out and pulled her close to the rail once more. "Ah ah ah. You want to be one of the big ponies, you need to learn how the game is played." He nodded his head once towards the crowd, and the robot nodded in return and trotted towards them, drawing attention from the pair.

"It's Sweetie Belle!" they began to gush, and the robot began to sing in her slightly-off buzzing voice as Horse led Diamond away from the scene.

"What do you want, Horse?" she asked warily.

"Oh, what do any of us want? Mares. Money. Mansions..." he said with a dull wave of his hoof, then he smirked at her. "Let me turn the question around. What do you

want, Diamond?”

She balked a moment. “Well... to do what’s best for my company. And for my daughter. And... for Equestria, of course.”

He gave an exaggerated yawn. “Yes. How very dutiful to your stockholders, biology, and nation.” He frowned and darted in front of her. “What is it you want? You *really* want? What horrible, selfish, ignoble desire purrs inside your heart that drove you to release a magical talisman that makes all your other weapons, perhaps war itself, obsolete?”

Diamond stared into his powerful, charismatic brown eyes. “Magic,” she said in a near whisper. “I... I never was very good at it. All I could do was manipulate light... and when that didn’t lead to anything productive, I was... reassigned to lighting the lab. I want to... to make magic. Powerful magic. As powerful as the Princesses or Twilight Sparkle herself!” she said in voice of heated confession.

A small, triumphant smile crossed his face. “Mmmm... would you like the chance to do so? To make magic on an unimaginable scale?”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded once. “More than anything.”

Horse chuckled and then tilted his head towards a small door. “Let me show you something.”

He lead her through the small access door and down a service hallway where cameras swept slowly back and forth. He pulled out an odd card with a gemstone reflector on it and held it up as they approached the cameras; there was a beep, and the red lights atop them went dark. He glanced at the incredulous mare and gave a wink. Eventually, they reached a small, nondescript office, and he tucked the strange card away. He walked to a large bookcase. “Ah, an oldie, but a goodie. ‘Principles of Power’...” he reached out with one hoof and pulled out a small book. “And ‘Applications of Technology,’” he said as he tugged out another. There was a faint click, and the bookcase swung out. “The classics never grow old.”

He pulled another gemmed card from his tuxedo jacket and hung it in front of his mouth as the heavy door behind the books appeared. The symbol of the Ministry of Wartime Technology was emblazoned upon it, but I saw the tiny icon of the O.I.A. in the corner of the door. A red lens popped out of the middle of the door and swept across Horse, Diamond, and the strange card he held up. The door opened with a hiss, and two huge sentries, perhaps the earliest ultra-sentinels, rolled forward from their access.

“One A Two C Four D Three I,” Horse said casually as he put the card away. Instantly, both robots turned their guns towards Diamond. She cried out, and he hastily added, “And one consultant.” The robots beeped and returned to their alcoves. “Touchy things at times, aren’t they?”

“What is this place?” she asked nervously. Beyond the two robots was an elevator shaft and a platform lift.

“This is the Ministry of Wartime Technology,” he said as he stepped onto the lift. “Down there... well... that’s the surprise.” He smirked at her. “You can still walk away, Flashie. Go back to making products and attending board meetings and chasing after quarterly benchmarks.”

As someone whose given name could easily be made to end in an ‘-ie’, I knew there was only one response. She turned and stepped onto the platform beside him. The lift gave a lurch and began to drop. Only green lights spaced intermittently gave any illumination as they descended into the earth below.

Diamond paced nervously back and forth. “Where are we going?” The smooth concrete walls gave way to rough-hewn rock framed with girders.

“Down,” he replied simply. “There’s a lot of ‘down’ in Hoofington. Even before the original city was razed, it had a rather stunning amount of drains, sewers, and access tunnels. It’s as if the city’s always been trying to draw its inhabitants to explore deeper and deeper into the earth.” He glanced at her and gave a grin. “Nervous?”

“No,” she said sharply.

“Liar,” he replied. “Unicorns always are when it comes to being underground. You love the shiny things... but the rocks? The dirt? The bones? No, you really don’t belong here,” he said as he casually looked over at the wall.

Diamond stared at him a moment. “Do you... not like unicorns?”

He looked at her and arched a brow, then smiled. “Truth be told, I hate every last one of you.” He turned to look at the passing stone walls again. “It’s jealousy, really. You get to do magic. We can’t. It’s your dream to do incredible magic. Well, it’s my dream to someday have technology so advanced that there won’t be a difference between unicorns and anypony else. We’ll all be equal.”

“You’re... frightfully candid,” she murmured.

He gave a short laugh. “It’s this place. It brings out the honesty in me.” He turned and pointed to the wall, which now glittered with huge black bands. “As we dug

the tunnels to bring building materials into the Core, we came across this strata of obsidian. One of the thickest ever encountered. Odd, because obsidian rarely forms so deep beneath the earth. It's also a poor foundation for skyscrapers, to be certain, but, enchanted and processed, proved quite useful as a building material. But beneath it, we encountered something even more amazing. . . a layer of broken and compressed granite."

"My. . . geology is somewhat lacking. . ." Diamond confessed.

Horse chuckled mirthlessly. "That was one thing I liked about Goldie. He could talk rocks all day. I think it's the only thing I like about him." He pointed at the gray walls. "The granite formed eons ago, some of the hardest stone in the world. But something had shattered it to pieces. This wasn't some slow process of erosion but a rapid and traumatic event. Even more shocking, in several places we found pockets with intact zebra ruins, buried beneath an avalanche of debris."

"Zebras? In Equestria?" she asked, baffled.

"Please. This was centuries before Equestria. We were being exploited for food by Unicornia and Pegasopolis," he said with a roll of his eyes. "We came to one of two conclusions. Either there had been some sort of cataclysmic volcanic eruption, or a colossal impact had blasted a mountain of granite apart and the debris had rained down all across the valley. Magma then rose and rapidly cooled, forming the obsidian layer, which was buried beneath sediments." He reached into his tuxedo and casually drew out a fragment of shiny silver metal. "And then we found this."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Starmetal. Sky Iron. Meteorite. Or rather, that's what it appeared to almost everyone. What I discovered was that this metal isn't simply an element or alloy. It has an peculiar atomic structure capable of manifesting particular macroscopic effects." He smiled smugly. "And I realized that such a metal had more than simple natural origins. It was technology. Incomprehensible technology to everyone but a very select few. Technology that would allow us to not just end the war with pitiful ease but to also to utterly transform the world. Perhaps the universe."

Diamond took a half step back from Horse as he chuckled. "Of course, that was just my pet theory." He looked down, where the green glow was becoming brighter and more steady. "Then we found. . ." He paused, and suddenly the lift dropped into a colossal, perfectly round void. "... this."

A few green lights along the lift's hanging rails were the only source of steady il-

lumination, struggling to light the massive space around us. The green glow was augmented by countless motes of ghostly white light circling in the middle of that great space. Along the periphery of the expanse were long, jagged blades of silver jutting hundreds of feet into the mile-wide cavern. Green crackling energy arcs flickered and danced along the edges like a distant lightning storm. A swarm of tiny humming dots swirled and flickered around the silver spires like a metallic mist.

“What... how...” she breathed, staring into the space as the lift dropped towards a large bulbous shape suspended in the very center of the chamber, hundreds of feet above the floor.

“We didn’t make this,” Horse said as he started out at the gargantuan machine surrounding them in all directions. “Something else, somewhere else, using a technology greater than anything we could imagine, did. Applejack’s engineers and Twilight’s researchers call it the ‘Tokomare’. The zebra called it the ‘Eater of Souls’. I call it the future of the equine race.”

She blinked and stared at him in shock. “How is this... thing... our future?” The lift came to a stop at a dangling station. A ring of terminals flickered around pieces of equipment, and a half-dozen ponies walked around the devices. A hum filled the air which would have made my mane stand on end if I’d been there myself. Diamond swayed as a familiar lethargy washed through her. “And what... what’s that screaming?”

An odd, small yellow mare with strange pointed eyes and a black mane pulled into a bun trotted up and passed her a small plastic canister on a plastic thong. “Here. Take this,” she said in an odd accent. “It’s the only thing that we’ve found that counters the ambient energy.” Diamond put it around her neck, then breathed a sigh of relief. “Doctor Toko, leader of the Tokomare project.”

“You’re from Neighpon?” Diamond Flash asked in shock.

“Indeed,” she said with a smile, then gestured to the other ponies. “This is Bastille, from Fancee.” A stern-looking gray earth pony mare nodded once from her terminal. “Trotski from Staliongrad.” A blue stallion with an impressive, brushy beard trotted up and kissed her hoof. “Halalah from Saddle Arabia,” she said as she gestured to a large, yet surprisingly delicate... pony? “Harmonia from Crystal Empire,” she indicated a white mare who was... sparkling? Okay. Shiny ponies was where I drew the line!

But that couldn’t prepare me for the last member of the research team. “And this is Amadi,” Toko said as she pointed to the final member, a large and shrouded form.

When indicated, he stepped forward and pulled back his hood, uncovering his long striped mane and lined features. He wasn't just striped, however. His face was covered with intricate tattoos that seemed to emphasize his stripes. Strange glyphs were tattooed upon his hide in sweeping, elaborate tribal marks. His yellow eyes focused upon Diamond, and he gave a small smile, as if finding amusement in something.

"A zebra? What... how..." She swallowed, her mouth working silently a moment. "I thought zebras had been... ah..."

"There are certain elements within the government which can overlook the current political climate. Besides, my tribe is loathed far more than any pony could be by zebrakind," he said fluidly with an easy smile. "The chance to be a part of this is more than I could dream," he said with a wave of his hoof, then looked back at her and gave a little nod of concession to her. "But it is much to take in, I understand."

She swallowed and turned to Horse. "What... why am I here?"

Toko gestured at the immense metal spines jutting out at them as she said, "The Tokomare is an alien device of unprecedented power and potential. But while some members of this team may have more... outlandish theories about its potential..." Toko glanced at Amadi who chuckled with a rueful bow of his head. "Our goal is simple: unlimited electricity for the entire world."

"An end to all wars," Amadi said with a nod. "With this device, the resource struggle will end, and both pony and zebrakind will have peace. All people will. Stars willing, of course." Maybe it was just me, but there was something about the way he said that which made me wish my spine could crawl.

"Yes, using an unimaginably advanced source of technology to illuminate our light-bulbs. How... thrilling..." Horse said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

Diamond looked from one to the next. "I don't understand. What can I do?"

"I think it'll just be easier to show her," Toko said as she trotted to a control panel and began to push buttons. Everyone started donning green-lensed goggles that hung around their necks, and Amadi passed a set to Diamond. Instantly everything was awash in emerald hues. "Harmonia?" Toko asked as the other smart ponies went to work. The shimmery mare began to manipulate intricately carved crystal rods in another panel. "The Uvula is positioned right in the middle of the void. Any closer, and the radiation and discharge would be... hazardous."

Four long crystals slid out of the dangling platform towards the sparking wall. Above

us, four long metal arms that had rested along the lift rails slowly swung down and stuck far out into the void. Bright golden wands glimmered at the tips. "Extra duty magic lightning rods?" Diamond asked with a small smile.

"Flash Industries' finest," Horse chuckled as he worked on his controls. Instantly, the distant dark motes swept like a dust storm towards the platform. Tiny metal orbs fluttered in a swarm around the platform, then swooped into large drums along the elevator above, humming like massive bee hives. "Mechasprites. Something that never was converted for market use... but very useful in hazardous environments like this." When the last flying machine returned to the canister, he waved at Toko. "Ready here."

"We are at full extension," Trotsky said from his terminal. "Shall we go for a hundredth?"

"Sure. Give the system a workout," Harmonia said.

Amadi bowed his head. "Ashtar. Shurrak. Dagon. Spare us your wrath and grant the daring a fraction of your power."

"Shall we pray to the Boogiebuck and the Headless Horse while we're at it?" Horse drawled with a roll of his eyes.

The zebra scowled. "Perhaps when your people suffer terribly from a power beyond your imaginings, you will have a greater respect for them."

The yellow stallion rolled his eyes once again. "And I'm sure when it comes, it will be a miracle for the ages. Shall we?"

"Only a hundredth," Toko warned. "Ear protection now." Everypony present quickly donned strange crystal-studded earmuffs.

The hum began to fill the air as the four crystal wands began to resonate. The spires filled the air with an ominous counterpoint to the strange sound. "Tuning in to the frequency," Harmonia shouted, the shiny mare barely audible as she turned a knob with her hooves. The swirling motes of light began to whirl around the dangling platform energetically. "Any second now. Be ready," she said as the humming crystals hit a sweet note.

The flickering green lightning along the silver protrusions disappeared. Then the crystal's note was drowned out by a single, brutal tone blasted from every direction that made Diamond scream and fall to the platform. Thunder boomed all around her, and she looked up to see dozens of streamers of lightning ripping through the space and striking the spires. The lightning ran like water along thick cables

stretched along the sides of the metal supporting the platform. The storm lasted a few seconds, then disappeared. Diamond coughed at the acrid reek left in the air.

She looked up at the four lightning rods; then gaped at their absence. Four drooping, half-slugged spurs sat in their place. Horse whooped, “Look at that. All the outputs are maxed. Again!”

Diamond’s trembling hooves pulled off the earmuffs. “I’ve never seen that happen to any of our heavy duty lightning rods. That was a hundredth of full power?”

Toko smiled at her. “No. If our math is correct, it is one hundredth of one percent of the power the Tokomare is capable of.”

Sweet Celestia. “Sweet Celestia,” Diamond murmured. “How?”

“We’re not certain. The Tokomare seems to... react... to a singular frequency. But as you can see, we need something capable of shielding and channeling the power. And Flash Industries is the forerunner with your F.A.D.E. and other research projects with energy manipulation,” Toko said as she pulled her goggles up. “With your shields, we can not only tame the Tokomare, we can channel its power all across Equestria. Perhaps, all across the world.”

I thought back to the megaspell chambers beneath the city; if there was any way the energy I’d seen could have been channeled to them, then suddenly the zebra’s zeal for destroying the Core made a lot more sense. Terrifying sense. If the ponies living above knew the glowing bullseye they lived on, then they were bona-fide crazy people. One and all.

“Power like that... it would take dozens, perhaps hundreds... thousands... of F.A.D.E. units. And the mechanisms to control them and...” She closed her mouth, staring at the distant silvery prongs and their flickering lightning.

Horse walked towards her. “So. What do you say? Want to do magic on a scale that will make Twilight Sparkle green with envy?”

Diamond Flash looked from one to the next, and then her eyes returned to Horse. Then she smiled. “I’ll get started tonight.”

oooOOOooo

When the memory ended, I reeled there on the table. It didn’t help that my whole spine felt... stiff, and my shoulders and hips ached. So, that was the Eater of Souls: either a monster from beyond the stars or a ridiculously powerful machine. Either way, it was beneath the Core, waiting. What could it do? What, if anything, did it

have to do with Horizons? Oh, who was I kidding? Something like that had to be involved with something!

Or did it. . . I reflected on something else: no Goldenblood. It was hard to imagine any conspiracy in Equestria without that scarred bastard involved, but I supposed that, statistically, there had to be some plots he wasn't involved in. Maybe he was and had simply been absent. Or perhaps Goldenblood had conducted this one from behind the scenes too and. . . I groaned and rubbed my face with a cold black hoof. "Why so many damned secrets?"

"Because it's the Hoof," Triage said as she took the orb and returned it to her bag. "So. . . the Tokomare. What do you think?" she asked as she trotted back to the table with a freshly-smoking cigarette between her lips. "You saw the Tokomare. Horse's marvelous mechanical monstrosity."

I sighed and looked at her, feeling the urge to be honest, and spat, "I think it's more proof that virtually nothing that was made during the war was worth a damn. It's like Dawn's belief that all they need is one thing, just one, and everything will be perfect. And Diamond Flash was just sucked right in, too! No doubts. No 'wait a minute, what if this thing eats us?' or 'maybe dangerous life-sucking radiation means we shouldn't play with it!' or anything. Did Equestria have a terminal outbreak of stupid?"

Rover laughed as he attached my leg in the new socket in my repaired shoulder. "In a way, Pony. Ask ghou. Everypony just raced forward as fast as they could. Pony is herd animals by nature. But moreover, think of Equestria before pony's war."

Triage manipulated a probe in my opposite shoulder. "There were threats, certainly, but all they needed was for somepony—notably Twilight Sparkle and her friends, but others, too—to do the one thing needed to fix everything." She gave me a little smirk. "You're not the only unicorn who's studied memory orbs. Before the war, they'd just use the Elements of Harmony and make everything better.. Return a crystal heart to a pedestal and King Sombra is banished. Just do X, and Y is gone or fixed. Simple."

Rover sighed as he lifted my last foreleg and began to attach it to the shoulder socket. There were a number of clicking sounds and a warm, tingly feeling radiating from the connection. "Pony never realize that occasionally X's leads to more Y's. . . Z's. . . and letters of alphabet Pony never imagined." He could say 'alphabet' but not 'ponies'?

He reached over to a tray, lifted my black collar up with this two fingers, and strapped it around my neck with a wordless smirk of delighted amusement. I felt myself blush profusely as he snugged it down against my hide. "Thanks," I muttered in

embarrassment. He didn't say a single word, and Triage looked at me, the metal ring at my throat, and then back at me with a sardonic arch of her brow. "What?" I snapped defensively.

"I didn't say anything," Triage replied as Rover cackled.

I sighed as I looked at all the blood and scraps of metal scattered around the table. My EFS showed a slightly different layout: still blue, but there was definitely a wing motif on the top, bottom, and upper corners of the EFS display. "Can I get up?" I groaned, wondering just how bad the damage was.

"Yes, but be careful," Triage warned. I slipped off the table feeling decidedly... heavier. These legs weren't as light and quick as my others. "I think it all worked out okay. If the rest of his power armor were intact, we could probably have armored your whole body."

"Thanks. This is good enough," I said as I stretched and held out a hoof. Instead of white, it had the shiny blue-black metal of enclave power armor. I tried to pop out my fingers, but there was nothing there but metal hooves. "No thumbs?"

"Pony have thumbs," he said as he rapped the end of my forehoof. "Dog not know why Pony not able to use. Talisman should make work," Rover said, scowling at the end of my forelimbs as if the digits were insulting him with their absence. I looked along my limb to the shoulder and stared at the larger, heavier plate there. I looked back at my hips, but aside from two fresh red scars, the black metal ended at mid thigh and continued at my haunch. "Pony thought you'd want to keep pony butt pictures." Triage snorted and took an extra long drag on her cigarette as she avoided my eyes.

"Yeah, well, there wasn't enough armor to fully reinforce your hips externally, so I put some internally and called it good." Suddenly the mare yawned and shook her head. "And with that, I'm going to bed. Somepony else can clean up. Make sure you eat some metal and gems soon and frequently. Your repair systems are going to be working overtime for a while."

I nodded, pulled out one of Glory's cyberpony cakes, and began to eat. It definitely hit the spot with its appley-oily-metally goodness, but I still wanted to find a mirror. I wanted to see what Glory would see when she looked at me; did I still look like Blackjack, or was I something else?

"What is that Pony is eating?" Rover asked as he sniffed curiously.

"Oh. Glory made these for me." I levitated up a few. "Everything a cyberpony needs."

He picked one up and sniffed it, then took a bite. His eye popped wide as he chewed, then slowly swallowed. "Is full of gems!" He gobbled up the rest before I could blink. Finally! Someone with good taste!

There was a large mirror in a recovery room down the hall, and I summoned up my courage and a light spell. "Not Dawn. Not Deus," I murmured before I took a good look in the mirror.

Okay. It wasn't... as bad as I'd expected. I looked like I'd put on half a suit of Enclave power armor and had neglected to put on the rest. Aside from my legs, there was a large shield-shaped piece of metal across my chest that connected to my shoulders. An articulated ridge of black metal followed my spine down to my tail. My sides were still bare; on one hoof, a tactical vulnerability, and on the other a wonderful reminder that I was at least partially flesh and blood. The ridge narrowed when it got to my mane and became two thinner strips, with my mane in the middle, running to just behind my ears.

"Blackjack?" Glory said from behind me, and I froze. Slowly, I turned to face her. Her rose eyes followed the metal along my back to my flanks and then down to my legs before looking me in the eyes. She looked absolutely exhausted. Then she gave a little half smile. "Wow."

"Triage and Rover were tired of me breaking myself. So... upgrades. Fun!" I bit my lip as I rubbed my forehoof against my leg. "It's not too bad... is it?"

She smiled and flew to me. "Not as bad as I was afraid it might be," she said as she nuzzled my wonderfully flesh and blood neck. Our kiss was a delightful reminder of what it meant to be a mare.

"I was afraid..." I started, but she pressed a wing to my lips.

"You're not Deus and you're not Mother," she said quietly.

"How's your father?" I asked in worry.

"Stable," she replied. "Lightning Dancer has contacted the Enclave. I... don't know if there's any help for him up in Thunderhead, though. Whatever Mother did to him... well... I don't think there's any way to undo it. It's like his body has forgotten how to heal itself." She sighed and rubbed her face. "I think about those kids and leaving him there... at least Lightning Dancer will stay with him. If I know Intelligence, they

won't abandon him either. Still... it's hard."

"Maybe someday the Collegiate can make him a cyberpony, too. . . maybe..." I trailed off lamely. I could tell she didn't care for that thought at all as her eyes dropped. "Are you going to be okay?" I asked as I lifted her face with my hoof and looked into her eyes.

"I'm with you, Blackjack. There's no safer place to be," she murmured softly as she held me tight and then gave an arch little smile. "Now, let me check how Triage's improvements work. Give you a full physical?" The line was so bad that it took every bit of my self-control not to snort.

"Well, okay," I said with a little smirk. "But it's been a long time since I played doctor." Then I yipped as her tail snapped upside my rump. "Sorry," I said as her tail hooked in my collar and tugged me towards the bed.

On that long-unused mattress, we both reminded each other that, as bad as things could get, there was still bliss to be found in each other. It might not have seemed like the best time for intimacy, my body still repairing itself and she half exhausted, but when we finished and laid on the bed with our limbs tangled together, I couldn't help but feel sublime satisfaction.

Chapel, forlorn and lost, seemed somehow smaller and lonelier in the rain with so many Crusaders inside the buildings or at the hospital. Yet, even after the fight, some colts and fillies remained in the watchtower and kept an eye on the hills around the village. They observed with interest as the wagon, levitated by Lacunae, set down in the middle of the square and I, P-21, Scotch Tape, Charity, and two or three less injured children climbed out. Glory and the Neighvarro Enclave flew after us; I wasn't going to leave them with her back at the hospital. Call me paranoid, but the three had been giving Glory furtive looks every time she passed.

"We gotta get them Harbringers," Scotch Tape muttered sleepily as P-21 tugged her across his back. Rampage stalked out of the shadows beside the post office, and a second later the purple-scaled Precious emerged as well. Her slitted green eyes stared at my new black metal additions with equanimity, one freak to another.

"You can get the Harbringers after a few more hours of sleep," P-21 said, then put

his floppy hat on Scotch's head. Glory gave a yawn and stretched, her blue wingtips trembling. She gave me a tired smile and nuzzled my chin one more time before staggering off with him. Twister watched her go, looked at me, and muttered something about catching some sleep as she and her comrades skulked off in the opposite direction.

"Any trouble?" I asked Rampage and the dragonfilly. My vision was showing warnings about low power; apparently my new augmentations needed more energy than the old ones, or my healing and repair talismans were working overtime.

"A few scavengers tried to snatch some gear the Harbingers left behind. We ran them off," Rampage said as she gestured up at the manor. "No sign of the Harbingers, though. Or the tank."

"You'd think a tank would be easier to find," Charity muttered. "Still, I'll be glad if it never shows up again."

"I need some more gems," I muttered, trying to refrain from rubbing my sore neck. It wasn't muscles that ached. My eyes turned towards Star House; did I have any gems left? I needed one of Glory's cyberpony cakes. . . if only Rover hadn't scarfed them all.

"I've got some gems," Charity said as she limped towards the post office. Apparently shrapnel wounds made the filly a little more generous.

"You mean my gems?" Precious hissed as she narrowed her eyes, but she balked when Charity, despite her bandages, whirled on the scaled pony with a furious glare. The dragonfilly shrank back and quickly amended, "I mean. . . the gems I sleep on?"

"You can spare a few," the filly grumbled. "Besides, it never hurts to keep Blackjack in a little bit of debt to us just in case we need her to fight another tank." The hybrid glowered at me defensively, then walked back into the post office.

"Another tank?" I asked with a snort. "Do you think I'll ever have to do something like that again?"

Charity stopped at the door and looked back at me. "Given how your life goes, Blackjack, it'll probably be three tanks. Flying ones." I groaned, knowing that she was right. I followed her into the post office and was taken aback by the lack of weapons inside the shop. Where'd Charity stash the rest of the stuff they'd looted off the Harbingers? They couldn't have brought it all to the hospital, not while taking the wounded. She limped to the back of the building and moved between the crates. "Come on down to the Stable."

Wait. *Stable*? I frowned and squeezed my way between the boxes and bureaus that held the majority of the village's property and towards the back where there were, I now saw, stairs leading down. "No way. . ." I breathed as I looked at steel walls and telltale conduits that made my mane tingle. "It can't be."

I trotted down after the pair, my black metal hooves clanking far more loudly than my white ones had, and stopped short at the sight of the huge round door set in a concrete wall. '94' was printed in faded white letters. "You have a stable down here!"

"Right. Which is why we live on the surface where we can get shelled," Charity said flatly as she trotted over to the control panel beside the door. A moment later the lights above the door began to flash as a klaxon sounded. With a screech and grind, the door slowly rolled open.

"Welcome to Stable 94. The smallest stable in the Wasteland," Charity said as she stepped through the door. Peeking inside, I immediately saw she was right. This wasn't a stable entry like in 99. The walls seemed even thicker than usual and opened up into a large space that was maybe twenty feet high, forty feet wide, and sixty feet deep. There weren't any offshoots or other hallways in here. The entire stable was just this one, singular room. Everywhere I turned there were boxes of valuable salvage ranging from trinkets to weapons to ammo to bottlecaps. I recognized quite a few fancy dresses from the manor and several plastic barrels full of bottlecaps, bits, and other wealth.

I used to joke that Charity would own every cap in the Wasteland, but to actually see it. . .

Charity limped over to a bed in the corner of the chamber, a desk with a terminal next to it. Nearby sat a heap of gemstones. Precious climbed atop the pile and began to sullenly flick rubies towards me. "You can have these. I don't like the flavor," she said sulkily as she curled up on the heap.

I levitated a dozen into my saddlebags, then lifted one to my mouth and started to suck on it, frowning at the yellow filly. When my systems had a bit more charge, I looked around at all the stuff and then back at Charity, arching a brow. She bristled a little, "What?"

"Nothing. I just didn't have any clue you were this. . . loaded," I said as I looked at the treasures. "It makes me wonder why you fought at all, instead of just holing up in here."

"Maybe because we're not stupid?" she retorted scornfully. "Maybe we know that all

somepony would have to do is sit up there and starve us out if they really wanted us dead. Or maybe it's because I really don't want the adults up there to have a clue just how much stuff there is down here for them to snag. Or maybe, after seeing Priest die and being shot in the gut, I wanted to show the Wasteland that we're a bunch of kids that shouldn't be fucked with. Or all of the above," she said grimly.

I sat and raised a hoof. "Okay. Fair enough. But what is this place? Is this a stable or not?"

Charity gestured to the terminal beside her bed. "I think it was supposed to be, but there was something going on with Stable-Tec. You can read it yourself."

I trotted over, hit a few keys, and was glad to see that there weren't any annoying passwords. Most of the terminal was meaningless gobbledygook, but there was a series of logs that piqued my interest.

>S, we've run interference with Image and Morale again. Please try to be a little more circumspect, if you can. The story is that the "material" for Stable 24 is for a satirical, ironic, postmodern performance piece. P&P are keeping PP occupied with infiltrators in Manehattan; hopefully, she won't get a twitchy tail on you again. Give my love to AB. -E.

>P.S. Try and remember identification protocols, S. It's that whole plausible deniability thing that keeps PP off our butts. Thanks.

Stable 24? I wasn't familiar with it. It looked like it was 'Fun with Codewords' time again. Given that it was Stable-Tec, I guessed S for Scootaloo and AB for Apple Bloom. PP simply had to be Pinkie Pie. I couldn't guess who the others were.

>GB, what the hay is going on there? I agreed to let your office scrap one stable. One. Now you're taking materials from other projects. AB might not have a clue about how to read a spreadsheet, but I had to talk her out of doing a hooves-on inspection of 90. Our deal was you cover our flank, I look the other way from time to time. If you start snagging entire stables, though, ponies are going to notice. -S.

Those two letters made me bare my teeth, the hiss of my breath drawing both the fillies' glances. Of course he'd be involved. He was fucking involved with everything! Now I thought back to the gutted stable in the south; no wonder it had been incomplete! The materials had been used for something else. Horizons? Redoubt? Maybe... Gardens too? Where else had Goldenblood gotten a Crusader mane-frame for Twilight without anypony else knowing about it?

>S, I don't know precisely what you're doing with your stables, and frankly, I don't care. L was not keen on allowing Stables in the first place, as they suggest Equestria will lose the war. I do know that if what you're doing became public knowledge, Stable-Tec would be finished. I also know that no corporation in Equestria has the resources that Stable-Tec does. Nepotism can be quite useful. What are two or three stables lost when you get to keep the rest? Be practical. -GB.

"Of course," I muttered as I read the next and then shook my head. Blackmail and

sneaky tricks followed him around like a fart. How could Luna, whom I assumed was 'L', have ever trusted him? There were a few more that seemed largely inconsequential.

>AB, hey Bloom. I was digging through some of the MWT's Stable-Tec files and lookie what I found. Mind transfer to a computer? Sexy, Bloom. Really sexy. You've been holding out. I saw what you have cooking at 29, 33, and 94. Hope you don't mind if I snag the designs, ROFL. This has got some real possibilities if we can reverse it. Play around a bit. -H.

>P.S. You should check out my Sweetie Bot.

Horse and mind transfer? I frowned as I thought back to the Tokomare; an immense machine of terrifying potential, and Horse had his hooves on some sort of technology that could connect a mind into it? Why did that feel SO wrong on so many damned levels?

>H, I heard all about the "Crusader" you tried to make. Look forward to reading about your lobotomy when you fail to upload yourself into it. -AB

>P.S. SB hopes you get tetanus.

There were a few dozen other correspondences in the terminal, none of which made much sense to me. Then I found the last one.

> Your Majesty, what is Project Horizons?

"That's what I'd like to know!" I shouted at the terminal, and then covered my face in my hooves. Dawn had given me a snippet, but she'd told me more about Cognitum than she had about the project that was always tantalizingly out of reach.

The terminal beeped. I blinked and stared at the blank screen and a single, flashing cursor. Then an audio file began to play. *"So what is the energy output of the moonstone/starmetal reaction, Doctor Trottenheimer?"* rasped a familiar voice that made my mane creep.

"I could do the math for you, but it's a ridiculously large number, Goldie. At an optimal ratio of 1000 to 1, you're looking at an extreme arcanokinetic reaction. Even using it at a less efficient and more manageable 1 to 1 ratio, it's pretty energetic. So much so that no reactor or generator could contain it. You'd need to bottle the blast inside some sort of magic field... and even then, it would be tricky. Sorry, but I don't see this becoming an energy alternative for coal in our lifetime. Or any lifetime," a calm and intelligent voice replied. Then there was a pause, and he asked, *"Are you okay? When was the last time you slept?"*

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Goldenblood muttered.

"Oh, so tomorrow, then? Given how you look..." There was a pause where I could

only imagine a glower, then Trottenheimer suggested, *"Maybe you should stop working with that starmetal. We still don't know if it has toxic side effects or not. It definitely has some bad vibes coming off it."* When Trottenheimer said that, Goldenblood gave a wrenching laugh. *"Are you sure you're okay?"* Trottenheimer asked again, sounding even more concerned.

"It's nothing. Just... bad vibes. It's funny." He coughed and hacked a bit longer before asking, *"Weapon applications?"* Trottenheimer let out a long sigh. *"You knew it was coming. Applications?"*

"Practically nil. Oh, don't get me wrong. It'd blow up just fantastically! But the collateral damage would be... excessive. If you used a hundred kilograms of starmetal with one kilogram of moonstone, you'd wipe the Core off the face of Equestria. A thousand kilos of that starmetal and you'd take out Canterlot as well. Megaspells are plenty destructive enough and easier to control." Trottenheimer chuckled. *"Good thing we only brought back two or three kilograms of moon rocks, huh?"* Then there was another pause. *"Goldenblood?"*

Goldenblood rasped, *"And if we used, say, ten thousand tonnes... what then?"*

"Oh, are we going for morbid speculation? Well with that much starmetal we'd probably lose everything from here to Manehattan. There'd be pieces of the capital raining down in Roam."

Goldenblood didn't answer for a moment, then he said in a hiss, *"I meant ten thousand tonnes of moonstone. At optimal ratio."*

"Ten... ten thousand t... ? Goldie... I don't think there'd be anything left of Equestria with a reaction that big. Or the zebra lands for that matter," Trottenheimer muttered in shock. *"I... the planet would still be here. We'd probably keep the atmosphere and oceans too, but I doubt there'd be much for survivors beyond that! It'd be equivalent to a geologic event. Dust clouds for years afterwards. Worldwide forest fires. I can't even imagine the arcane aftereffects of that much energy being released. It would be a weapon with no sane application. Besides, where would you get that much moonstone? Unless you're planning on making a couple hundred trips to the moon, you'd never get that much together."*

"Of course. Of course. It was just... a thought," Goldenblood muttered.

"Don't have those thoughts. It scares me when you have thoughts like that," Trottenheimer said, then sighed. *"You know what? You need to get out of the lab more. You might know your metals, but trust me, the less you work with starmetal, the bet-*

ter. Stuff gives me the heebie jeebies! Give me megaspells any day.” Trottenhimer laughed, though it was a little strained.

There was silence for another moment, and then Goldenblood rasped, “*You’re a good pony, Trots.*”

“No I’m not. I make spells that can kill thousands... hundreds of thousands... indiscriminately. But do you know what’s sad? We don’t know how many have died in this war. When we add up pony losses, zebra losses, third party and neutral casualties... it’s already in the millions. You’ve seen No Pony’s Land around the edges of Hoofington. This war will bleed us dry. If the threat of the megaspells we’re designing for Starfall can staunch that flow, it’ll be worth it.”

“And if they’re used and kill everyone?” Goldenblood asked in a harsh whisper.

Trottenheimer was silent for a moment and then said in a voice of resignation, “*Well, it’s one way to end a war.*”

The recording ended, and the two young ponies stared at me. “What the heck was that, Blackjack? I never heard that recording before,” Charity said as she gaped at the terminal.

I just sat there, numb. Moonstone and starmetal make catastrophic explosions; I’d seen that myself, but I’d never imagined just how big they could be. More than any megaspell or balefire bomb. If he had enough of both, he could destroy all of Equestria. All of the world. I felt numb as I contemplated it; did Horizons have something to do with... with that? If I’d been capable of hyperventilating, I’d have passed out right about now. Because I had no difficulty imagining that Goldenblood could. That he might. But did he?

Where would you get that much moonstone?

I stood and carefully looked around the corners of the room. There. My eyes landed on a camera in a corner. I stared into its lens, a tiny red light beside the optics, as it focused on me. Who was on the other side of that camera? Cognitum? Horse? Dawn? Who was playing these games with me?

“Was there any kind of arcane science equipment in here?” I asked as I stared at the camera.

“No. It’s always been empty,” Charity replied as she stared at me in confusion, like she’d never seen me before. “There used to be cables and things sticking out of the floor though. Maybe something got taken out a long time ago?”

Something involving a way to copy a mind into a machine. “Thanks, Charity. I’m glad you showed me this.”

Charity flushed. “Thanks. Just don’t talk about it, please. We’re a target enough because folks think we’re weak. I don’t want them to know just how much salvage we’ve collected over the years, especially from the manor.” I’d had a huge bounty placed on my head; I knew exactly what she was talking about.

Then Rampage shouted down the stairs, “Enemy spotted! It’s back! The tank is back.”

“Deus,” I muttered, and he raced for the door. Had he reverted and decided to wipe Chapel off the face of Equestria, or was he here for some other purpose? I ran into Rampage at the top, the striped filly stepping aside as I made a beeline towards the exit. “What’s he doing, Rampage?” I wasn’t hearing explosions; that had to be a good sign. Right?

“It’s not rampaging yet, Lieutenant. Hostile was spotted to the northwest, half a klick away,” she said as she followed me. “No sign of other hostiles, yet, but they’ve got to be out there. Enemy wouldn’t leave armor unsupported. Do you want me to recon and see if I can find them, Vanity?”

Wait. What?

I paused and looked back at her and the furious look in her eyes. On her flank, the two candy canes forming a heart were foremost in the slew that was her cutie mark. I swallowed. Twist could disappear at any moment; just noticing she was in the body of an older filly might do it. She seemed to think I was Vanity. Maybe. . . “One moment, Sergeant. Are you mentally clear and focused on combat?” I’d have to be quick and careful; I had two highly unstable Marauders to deal with.

She hissed in her anger. “Damn it Vanity! I’m fine. I don’t need your freaky unicorn magic messing with my head. I’m not Jetstream. I can deal with it.” Her entire face twitched with aggravation, I might not have been a morale officer but even I could tell she was close to snapping.

I considered her coolly. “I’m not sure I can take that risk, Twist. Let me put them in a memory orb for you. You can hold onto it till after the battle. I won’t take it.” Please don’t notice that I was half metal or a mare or that my mane was the wrong color. “Please don’t make me bench you this battle for psych. . .”

“I told you I’m over what that bastard did to me! Peppermint and I. . .” she snapped, then grit her teeth as she stared into my eyes. *‘See me as Vanity. I am your friend.*

I want to help, I thought as I returned her gaze. Twist's jaw trembled as it clenched and a tear ran down her cheek. Then she spat, "Fine. Just be quick about it. And I want it back after we deal with that tank. I am not turning into Jetstream!"

No arguments there. I pulled an empty memory orb from my saddlebags and touched my horn to her brow. According to Triage's notes, the trick to gathering a memory was not to dive right into the middle of it, like I had with Shujaa. Rather, it was like collecting a cloud of flickering images. The more bright and clear a memory was, the more important or traumatic it was to the viewer. I imagined hooves of magic wafting the cloud into a tighter bunch. I saw vague images of Shujaa, Twist, and Rampage all swirling together.

What to get? I couldn't copy it all. There'd been a name that Shujaa'd mentioned, though. "Peppermint. . ." I muttered, and watched as a portion of her mind bloomed with images.

"What about. . . Vanity?" she muttered weakly. "Wait. . . you're not. . ."

I saw her mind become erratic and, with as much skill as I could muster, I gathered up that glowing section and pulled them from the others. I didn't have time to look through. From how bright and sharp the flickering images were, I could only guess they were important to Twist. Hopefully they'd be important to Rampage, too.

The glowing cloud emerged from Rampage's forehead like a little radiant storm-cloud. I lifted a blank memory orb with my magic and touched the cloud to it. With a small flash, the nimbus disappeared into the orb.

Rampage swayed, then shook her head. "Blackjack? What's going on?"

"The tank's back," I replied as I held up the orb. "And I think I've got something for you to see later. Something that'll help."

"Something. . ." She blinked at the orb, and her pink eyes shifted back to me. "Are you sure? I mean. . . knowing about Shujaa was cool, but. . ."

"It's from Twist," I said with a small smile. The name gave the filly a haunted look. She'd been the last to receive the phoenix talisman; I could understand her feelings.

"You. . . why don't you. . . you look at it?" she stammered and swallowed, shaking her head. "I mean. . . then you can be sure."

I stared at her and then glanced at the orb. "Okay. After the tank, then."

Outside, the sallow glow of day was lightening the usual Hoofington gloom. I must have been reading messages longer than I thought. I popped another spicy ruby in

my mouth and trotted quickly to the stockade, peering through a gap. The ponies who hours ago had been fighting the Harbingers now looked to me. Some stared at my new augmentations. Others saw the truth. The Harbingers attacked because of me. Sanguine attacked because of me. The tank was here because of me. There wasn't anyplace I could call home where somepony wouldn't try and take me out.

So this is how Arlosté felt: a home that doesn't want you because of the risk you pose but that would feel too guilty if it asked you to leave.

P-21 emerged from out of nowhere, making me jump. My blue friend had my sword in his teeth and several saddlebags strapped around his neck. Spitting it out, he peered at the tank and gave a triumphant little smile. "Good. This time we're ready."

"We are?" I blinked as I looked at the tank. I took the weapon, though, and felt a little comfort. I just wished I had something that could pierce its armor that was less... melee-dependant.

"When we didn't destroy that thing, I took the liberty of making these satchel charges from the Harbingers' explosives," he said, holding up one bag and opening it to reveal a cone of beaten metal. Then he turned so I could see a tube of Wonderglue duct-taped to the side. "Press hard. Glue adheres the blast side to the armor. Radio detonated. Shaped charge should breach better and hopefully take out the tank's repair talisman. Or its brain." I stared at him for a moment, and he frowned in worry. "What?"

"I am so glad that you're on my side," I replied with a smile, making him scowl... and blush... as he muttered about me being an idiot. So, now we could do something in case things went bad. I closed my eyes and concentrated. The chaos in Unity had subsided; it was now almost ominously quiet. I didn't want to try and think something at Lacunae. Right now, the last thing I wanted was for the Goddess to distract me from dealing with Deus. "Where're Lacunae and Scotch?"

"Scotch is minding Boo. She tore the place apart while we were gone," he said with an arch of his brow. "Lacunae's with Glory."

I sighed, trying to think of what to do. "I should have left some more cakes out for her."

"We did. She wasn't looking for cake. She was looking for you," he said.

Okay. Guilt was what I didn't need right now. Especially when the tank began to move across the slope, around the village and towards towards the road between it and the bridge. "Okay. When you think you can, get those charges on it. Don't blow

them unless it fires.”

“I can use the drainage ditch for cover if it gets on the road. What are you going to do?” he asked.

I rose to my hooves. “I’m going to go talk to him.” He groaned and covered his face with his black, floppy hat. “I gave him a chance to be a better pony. Now I need to find out if he took it or not.”

“That’s not it,” Rampage said, then smirked at P-21. “Fifty caps. Pay up.”

“You can collect from Blackjack,” he replied sourly.

I looked at the pair for a moment with pursed lips. “I’m so glad that my friends are betting on my idiocy,” I muttered sourly as I started towards the northeast, trotting down towards the bridge.

“Oh, that’s nothing. You should see the betting pool for how long it’s going to take for you to ruin your shiny black legs. I think half the ponies you know are in on it,” Rampage said. “I gave you sixteen hours. . . .”

“I am not going to ruin these legs. I don’t think Rover has many more ‘fixing stupid pony who always breaks her legs’ in him,” I grumbled as we stepped out the gate together. P-21 was already gone.

“Triage bet it would only take you eight,” Rampage snickered.

“Well, Triage smokes too much,” I countered with a scowl. “Don’t we have a tank to deal with right now?”

“Somepony is touchy,” Rampage observed.

“Somepony is dealing with a tank run by the brain of your old pal, Deus,” I snapped. “Somepony has a right to be touchy.”

“Deus?!” she gasped as she looked up at me, and then pointed at the tank with her little hoof. “You’re telling me. . . that. . . Deus’s brain is in there?” I sighed and nodded, and the filly burst into a peal of laughter. “Oh, Sweet Celestia, that is just perfect!”

Deus had crossed the ditch with ease, and now the massive tank began rolling up the road towards me. “Rampage, stop helping Triage win that bet,” I said as the road shook under my black hooves. Looking at those two cannons, I could only gulp and manage a weak smile. Then I spotted a black hat moving quickly and quietly along the ditch beside me, creeping as low as possible. That gave me a little confidence

as the huge machine came to a stop twenty feet away. At least none of his weapons were pointed right at me. Okay. Time for diplomacy. “Hello, Doof.”

“Doof?” Rampage looked at me with a frown and pointed a hoof at the tank. “I thought you said this was Deus?” She frowned, as if focusing on something. I watched as the two candy canes appeared, but didn’t manifest fully. Her eyes flickered, and I imagined Twist peeking at me from the depths of Rampage.

“Doof was Deus. And now he’s Doof again,” I said, looking up at the tank with a hopeful smile. “Right? The good marauder Doof? The pony who wants to be a better pony?”

The turret whirled low as the cannons swung back and forth twice. Oh... I really hoped that P-21 was fast with those satchel bombs. “Oh, let me guess?” Rampage said as she hopped onto my back and tapped the black plates that ran along my spine. “You’re here for a rematch? You should watch yourself. Blackjack has all these fancy upgrades. You really shouldn’t fight her for... um... another eight hours. Right. That should put you in the perfect window for a rematch.”

“Rampage! Stop trying to win that bet!” I said, bucking her off and onto the road beside me. The tank let out a rumble, and a camera focused on the older filly. “Yeah, Deus. That’s Rampage.” I frowned, “Haven’t you ever seen her like this?”

Deus swung his turret back and forth again. Rampage snorted. “We don’t exactly allow magical disintegration weapons in cage fights. Ruins the suspense, and the damn Flash Fillies would be impossible to live with.” Rampage stood and faced Deus again. “Big Daddy is going to squirt when he hears about this. He’s always going on about having the biggest, baddest fighters in the hoof. Not even Brutus can compete with you now!” The engine gave a little rumble. I hoped that was a good sign.

“So... you’re not here to fight me again?” I asked. The turrets rose and fell once. “Yes, you are or yes you aren’t?” The tank let out another deep rumble as I raised my hooves defensively. “Okay. I’ll take that as a no!” The cameras focused on me, and I looked at my black armored limbs. I gave him a wan smile. “Yeah. Blackjack, new and improved. And a little less me.”

The engine let out a low growl. Rampage stepped forwards again, and I cringed inwardly as she said, “You’re being awfully quiet. Don’t you have a single ‘CUNT’ for me? Come on, that tank has to be wired with loudspeakers or something.” Deus let out a deeper growl of his engine and shook his turret. “No you aren’t, or no, you’ve suddenly embraced a whole new appreciation of femininity?”

I took several steps away from her to the side, and spotted P-21 peeking at me from behind the tank. He smiled, gave a little nod, and disappeared behind it completely. "Rampage, I'm not going to blame Deus for shooting you. Stop being like Brass." The engine growled once more, but softer. Slowly, I moved in front of him again. "Is it because you can't talk? Did they do something to you?"

The cannons rose and fell once. Rampage whistled long and low, "I guess that's Dawn's equivalent to washing a pony's mouth out with soap." The engine growled again, lower and more ominous.

"So you're not here to fight me. . . what are you here for?" I asked as I looked up at the vehicle. He didn't growl his engine or shake his turret or anything. "Are you here to help me?" No answer. "Help Chapel?" Again, no answer. "Revenge on Dawn?" No answer. "Go back to the Reapers?"

Suddenly Rampage fell back laughing. She laughed so hard her hooves kicked into the air. "Rampage? What's gotten into you?"

She laughed so hard she was crying. "Oh! Oh! It's just too much!" She wiped her eyes with a hoof as she looked up at the tank. "Is it that you suddenly don't have a clue what to do with your life and the only thing you can think of is to follow Blackjack in the hope that she'll help you make some sense of the incredibly fucked up circumstances you now find yourself in?"

Deus rumbled his engines in an idle tone, and then gave a tiny rise and fall of his cannons.

"What?!" I blurted out. Rampage laughed even harder at that. "Wait! Why?!"

"Because that's what you do when you've been beaten by Blackjack, duh!" Rampage said as she sat up. "If she doesn't kill you then she makes you re-examine your entire life and you follow her along until you find something that makes sense! And because it's a whole lot easier than trying to kill you a second time. I mean, look at the list. You've got me. Sanguine at the end there. Psychoshy. Now Deus. I bet Gorgon would have, too, if it weren't for that whole rock crushing to pulp thing."

I sat back on my haunches, eyes wide as I tried to process this particular line of crazy. "But. . . that's. . . that's insane!"

"Blackjack, have you looked around lately? What's sane?" Rampage asked as she stopped laughing, smiling up at me. "I'm an immortal amalgamation of souls. You're a cyberpony. Deus is a tank! One of your best friends is an alicorn and your lover looks like Rainbow Dash. The only friend you have even close to anything approach-

ing normal is P-21.”

P-21 stepped out from behind Deus, tossing a detonator to me. “I’m just waiting with baited breath to turn into a ghoul,” he said flatly as he stepped beside me and looked up at the tank. Its engine roared. P-21 pushed his hat back and glared up at Deus. “Stop. You’ve got four bombs glued to your chassis. I’m not nearly as mechanically smart as my little girl, but I am pretty sure that they’ll rip your engine right off.” The engine noise dropped substantially, and P-21 went on, “They’re also on timers, so even if you kill us, they’ll go off.” The engine rumbled again, and he pointed a blue hoof up at the tank. “Stop.” The engine slacked off. “I’m *not* like Blackjack. I don’t trust somepony who chased us all across the Wasteland to not swap back to being a complete monster. The only way I’ll tolerate you being anywhere around us is if we have a way to turn you into scrap if you decide to swap back to Dawn’s side or just kill us for the laughs. Got it?”

For a very tense moment, I was sure we were all going to explode in a fiery ball. Rampage stared at him in amazement, and even I was a little taken aback. P-21 didn’t flinch away from the machine. Then Deus raised and lowered his turrets once. “Good. Then open your hatch, because if I were Steel Rain, I’d have some kind of bomb strapped to your brain set to go off the instant I knew you’d gone rogue.” I blinked in surprise. Why hadn’t I thought of that, given that was exactly what Dawn had done to Steel Rain?

The hatch on the turret opened, and P-21 started climbing up. Rampage stepped next to me and murmured in amazement, “When the hell did his testicles drop?”

“Hush,” I replied, unable to stop smiling. I tried to jump up beside him, but my legs were slower and heavier than I was used to. Instead, I scraped and flailed my way up the side of the tank, nearly falling off twice. I really missed my fingers! It seemed Shadowbolt augmentations didn’t understand the concept of ‘climb’. There were errors flashing: ‘Device not found’. I reached the top, and one camera turned to look right up my hind end. Yup. Deus all right. The engine made a strange coughing noise... was it just me or was he laughing?

I got to the hatch, looking down into that cramped space. “Do you even know what you’re looking for?” I asked as I saw a blue butt poking out from underneath some equipment.

“Nope. But I’m not looking for it. I’m sniffing for it. Definitely smelling some plastic explosive in here,” he said. I looked at the armored brain resting in faintly green fluid inside the glass jar. “In fact, if I were you, I’d get out of sight. If a Harbinger

spots you sitting up there, it won't be a hard call to set off whatever I'm sniffing down here." Then his hooves flipped over. "Ahah! There you are. Wired to... well... something. Hmmm." His hooves went limp. "Is that the radio? Ahah! There!"

"You found it?" I asked with a grin.

"I found one. I doubt it's the only one," he replied. "You really need to get out of sight, though, Blackjack. At least till I'm sure he won't blow when somepony else pushes a button."

"Right." I looked over at Rampage. "I guess you and me should—" I was interrupted by the turret swinging back and forth. "Huh... okay... well, I guess I'll go." Hopping down was much easier than scrambling up. Apparently the legs didn't have problems with falling like they did with climbing. I trotted away, looking back over my shoulder at Rampage and the cameras all oriented on the filly. Deus was interested in Rampage?

"Okay. It's official. The Wasteland is stark raving mad," I said flatly as I trotted up the grassy slope towards Star House. I whirled around and looked, waiting for the Dealer or the Goddess to make an appearance, but neither did. "Well... that's vaguely disappointing..." I muttered as I continued up to the house. It was still battered from the party. Had that really been just hours ago? It felt like months.

Inside, I spotted Scotch Tape laying on her side with Boo, snoring up a storm. The inside was even more thrashed than we'd left it. Then Boo popped her head up from behind Scotch Tape. She looked right at me, but rather than charge, she crept over the sleeping filly and looked at me with her pale eyes. She looked... wary. Even scared as she shied left and right. "Hey hey hey... Boo. It's all right. It's me."

But she didn't look reassured. If anything, she seemed more worried, ears hanging and eyes downcast. What was the matter? Was she sick? Injured? Was there something wrong with her cloned body? No... nothing I could see. Then I looked into the worry in her eyes. It wasn't her... it was me. But what had I done... no. I sighed and closed my eyes. Damn it...

"I haven't been treating you very good since Hippocratic, have I, Boo?" I'd left her to go gallivanting across the Hoof, then come back only to leave her behind again. I really was a self centered nag, wasn't I? Gently, I reached out and stroked her white mane. It was growing a bit long, partially concealing her white eyes behind milky bangs. I pulled her closer and held her, rubbing her spine. I could still nuzzle her as well as I ever could.

Boo relaxed a little bit and nuzzled me in return. “I’ll try not to leave you behind again, if I can help it. Okay?” It was a risk; I couldn’t see her surviving a place like Hightower... but leaving her behind just meant a different kind of hurt. “Just try not to let yourself get hurt. Okay?”

I didn’t know if she understood what I was asking of her. I could only hold her and hope that I wasn’t going to get her killed with my kindness. Of course, something bad would happen; the steel that was consuming my body one upgrade at a time was testament to that. But I could hope. I could hope. . .

She rested her head on my side and huffed softly. As carefully as I could, I stroked her mane with my hoof. It’d been a while since I slept. Maybe just a short nap. . .

I trudged through the green snow along the chunks of obsidian talus at the base of Black Pony Mountain. The Hoofington basin was quiet. No rain nor falling snow marred the clear air. As far as the eye could see, green drifts of snow blanketed the land. You could almost imagine that it was a calm Hearth’s Warming Eve day.

Then I passed frozen earth pony corpses in the snow and was reminded that this was anything but. Nothing useful on any of them. I had worked my way through half of my radiation supplies. The goods I’d pilfered from the hospital were running low, and I needed to find more. Hoofington Memorial was south of me; I could take what I needed from there.

But right now, I needed to check in. The only problem was that the EBS had fallen almost as silent as the snow. There were a few desperate sobs from the west, somepony in the Manehattan MAS hub trying futilely to get some kind of organization effort going. The military channels had fared even worse. There was machine chatter, but it wasn’t anything I could access. Every channel was either destroyed, locked down, or useless. Since I couldn’t do so remotely, I only had one choice: report in person.

I continued to pick my way up the talus. The radiation clicked slowly away, my black riot armor providing slight protection as I ascended towards the eastern side of the mountain. It’d been only a few weeks since the bombs fell. But I still had my duty to perform. I still had to earn my forgiveness.

Finally, I pulled my way up onto a flat shelf of land between the obsidian crag and the eastern mountains. The shelf was littered with a dozen sky carriages, some of them large passenger affairs and others small, expensive personal craft. Some had

landed perpendicularly atop other carriages because the space was so limited.

And there were a lot of bodies. Pegasi still dangled from their harnesses, some killed by radiation and others killed by bullets. Earth pony laborers lay in heaps. A smattering of unicorns in fancy outfits clustered together in whatever shelter they could find. Bodies... bodies... bodies. So damn many. I walked along as silent as death towards the sheer eastern wall. Once there'd been a cave here, a cave that had been home to a colossal beast in older, peaceful times. Today there was no cave, just a solid wall of black obsidian.

I approached, hoofstep by hoofstep. A sense of dread filled me, and I hesitated. A few more, and again I froze. I looked to the left and right, looked at the perfect semicircle of bodies that had stood here and slowly died of radiation. I couldn't take another step forward; something refused to let me. If he were here... he'd open it. He'd need me. He'd use me.

And he was on the list.

Then someone had the ill judgment to shoot at me. Worse, they missed.

I came around, both SMG's rising up as my eyes picked out where the shooter might have come from. It wasn't really all that hard. The emaciated red earth pony mare swayed in the doorway of one of the wagons. As her eyes rested on me, she immediately smiled in relief. "Oh, Operative Psalm. About time somepony useful came along." She turned and trotted back inside the sky wagon, and I followed. The once expensive skywagon was now a squatter's shack.

"Do you have any Rad-Away or Rad X, Operative?" the red earth pony wheezed as she trotted over to a tiny cache of supplies in the corner. She turned, more of her mane falling out as she moved. But I didn't respond, simply looking at her. She pointed a glittery red hoof at me. "I asked you a question, soldier!"

I nodded once, and she grinned. There were missing teeth in her smile, and her gums were bleeding. Another day or two and she'd be gone. I looked around and spotted a black earth pony mare lying in a heap with a bloody knife embedded in her neck. Another one of my old bosses, Onyx. "Good. Good." Garnet tossed the revolver on the bed, blood smearing the mouthgrip. "Damn Redoubt is sealed. Can you fucking believe it? Somepony got here before us... all of us... and locked it up tight!" She rubbed her face, beads of sweat on her brow. "I just knew that eventually somepony who could get inside would come along."

"Is Luna in there?" I asked in a low, tense voice.

“Luna?” Garnet cackled. “Luna’s a corpse in Canterlot. Celestia too! All of Equestria is dead. Fuck Luna,” the red mare said as she slumped. “I was supposed to be a part of the new order. Richer than fucking Filthy himself.” She looked over at a brown stallion in the snow. “Fucker wouldn’t shut up about his kid. Can you believe that? We’re all fucking dying, and he wanted to run off to the far side of the country to get her.”

“We have confirmed deaths for all the Partypooper targets?” I asked in strained reasonableness, and Garnet gave a bloody grimace.

“Cloudsdale is vaporized, and that was the last place Dash was spotted. I think we got her. Maripony was balefired too, but it’s still standing. Anypony’s guess if Twilight survived.” If it was standing, she had. “Rarity and Fluttershy are corpses in Canterlot. You killed Pinkie.” She rubbed her chin a moment. “Applejack might have made it to Stable 2 in Ponyville. . .” She stared at the bloody spittle on the chipped, glittery hoof. “I need that fucking Rad-Away, Operative,” she said, a touch weakly.

I ignored her request. “Where is the Director?” I asked slowly. Keep calm, just like when shooting. I had to stay calm and centered. I had to. . .

“Who the fuck do you think is in there?” She glowered at me, pointing at the wall with a chipped ruby hoof. “He buttoned it up tight. He’s got everything in there. The whole facility to himself. Probably his fucking robot, too.” Then she grinned her ghastly, bloody grin. “But now that you’re here, you can get in there! You can get me inside! Right? You have a code. . . or password. . . or something. . . That’s all I want.” She panted in desperation as I just looked at her, and she asked in exasperation, “What? Do you want money?” She kicked open a suitcase, scooped up two great big hooffuls of bits and held them up to me. “I’ve got money. . . there was so much damn money we scammed off those aristocrat jackasses. Kingpin paid a mint to get in too. CEOs and other business leaders. . . fuckers all came here actually thinking they’d get in.” Her bloodshot eyes twitched as she grinned hopefully, then her grin sagged. . . along with her forelegs. Gold coins bounced and tinkled around her hooves. She rubbed her face with her hoof, muttering to herself. “I thought we’d get in. . .”

“You’re sure that Horse is inside?”

She narrowed her feverish eyes. “No! I’m not fucking sure, but unless Sapphire told Rainbow Dash or Emerald told Twilight, he’s the only pony with the authority to access the Redoubt!” She coughed and retched, bringing up bile over her glittery red hooves. “Now pass me some Rad-X, Operative.”

"No," I replied, turning to go.

"What?" Garnet gasped.

"I still need to finish the mission. Luna gave the order. I must carry it out," I said simply. "I'll need all my radiological supplies to do so."

"Give it to me or I'll take it off your corpse!" I stopped and just looked at her as she trembled, then swept up the gun in her mouth and fired again. And again. And again. The thirty-two caliber rounds thumped against my barding but didn't penetrate. Then the revolver started to click. She shook, pink tears running down her cheek as the gun slipped from her mouth, taking two more teeth with it. "Please... help me."

"Helping you doesn't earn me forgiveness. I will serve Luna and earn forgiveness, and her last order was to carry out Partypooper. I can confirm two kills. I suppose I'll have to confirm the rest," I said, readying myself for the long walk to Maripony. Then I'd have to use every Stable-Tec access code I had to clear out that Ponyville stable... difficult, but doable.

"You stupid cunt! Luna didn't give that order! I did! And you killed for me! You stupid damn bitch!" she cackled as she pointed her hoof at me.

I stared at her. "Liar. Only Luna could give that order," I said weakly. "Only Luna would..."

"You unbelievable dumb shit!" Garnet roared with laughter. "Did it ever occur to you that there were fucks who benefitted from everyone dying?" She pointed a hoof at me. "Goldenblood had it set from the start. When the war ended, you... me... Trueblood... we'd all be brought up on fucking war crimes! War crimes! Fuck! That!" She swung her emaciated hooves wide as she grinned ghoulishly. "Soon as Horse found out, I knew I wasn't going to let that fucking happen. So I gave the order. Right when we were certain clusterfuck apocalypse was going to hit. We sent out hit squads to kill every last person even vaguely connected to the O.I.A. or its projects. No pony would know about the Redoubt! We'd live like fucking gods!"

"I see," I murmured. I bowed my head and clapsed my hooves. "Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another." But the words gave no comfort. No absolution of my sins. I was damned, and not even Luna could save me.

"You'll never be forgiven! I know who you killed." I lifted one of the SMG's at her cackling, bloody maw. She grinned her bloody smile, ready to eat a bullet. "Come on, finish me! Finish me you killing fuck!" she screamed as she threw her hooves

wide. "You've killed fucking thousands one by one for your fucking Goddess! Kill me!"

But I didn't. Instead my magic reached out and took the knife that'd been stuck in Onyx. Her grin disappeared as I flicked the blood off it and tucked it in my belt. Then I turned and stepped out into the snow. "You should have saved one of those bullets for yourself."

Garnet hobbled to the entrance after me. "No. Come back here! Kill me, you cunt! You whore! Murderer! We killed everypony! Kill me!" She screamed after me. I never looked back as I heard her bloody choking sob, "Please... kill me too..."

I woke, my PipBuck's chronometer telling my two hours had passed. Boo snuggled against me, snoozing as well. I smiled and nuzzled her mane; she smelled like cherry filling. Then I glanced up at Glory, watching me with an odd look on her face as she sat before me. My cheeks reddened, and I swallowed, looking aside. "I didn't do anything..." I muttered. How long had she been watching me sleep? Was she ticked I'd slept here rather than going up to her?

"I know you didn't," she said as she moved up to my other side and curled up against me with a sigh. "The question is... would you like to?" She wasn't asking as if she planned on throwing me into more walls, but there were still little alarms going off in my head. As if sensing my trepidation, Glory smiled a little. "I'm not going to be mad. I just wanted to know if you'd like to or not."

I glanced at the snoozing blank, then back at her. "Um, no? At least, not unless she suddenly told me she wanted to do something like that with me. And you were okay with it. I mean, if you're asking me on a purely physical level then... but I... um..." I trailed off as she sighed. "Sorry."

"It's something you can't really help, Blackjack. You are who you are," she replied as she leaned against me. "I'm understanding that a little more now. I guess the question is... am I okay with it? And I really don't know."

"You seemed really okay earlier," I muttered with a rueful smile. "Biter," I added, and watched her blush and smile.

"That was relief sex, Blackjack. I claim temporary insanity," she muttered, then sighed. "I don't want to be left out of your life, because then I'll have nothing. But staying with you is hard. It's not your fault. You just... have stuff happen to you. But

it's still hard. And it hurts." She closed her eyes and lay against me. "Just don't... don't leave me out. Whatever happens, don't leave me out or leave me behind. Please..."

"I won't," I murmured and kissed her closed eyes, drawing a smile and sigh from her lips. She nuzzled me and drifted off to sleep. With a blanket of mares... maybe the dreams would be better...

Then I noticed that she wasn't the only pony who'd been watching me. There, opposite me, sat the Dealer. His eyes trailed over my sleeping companions, and then he looked at me with an expression of quiet envy. "Echo..." I murmured, and his lips curled into a sour sort of smile.

"So. Figured it out, did you?" he rasped softly. "Supposed you would sooner or later."

"Scotch Tape did. Or, rather, she figured out Smiling Jack." I looked at his gaunt figure as his eyes widened in surprise.

"Did she? Huh." He chuckled and gave a sheepish little smile as he rubbed the back of his head. "Always loved that character. Once mesmerized a dozen zombie buffalo to perform ballet in tutus. Good game, that one."

"Why didn't you tell me about Echo sooner?" I asked as I looked up at him. His smile disappeared instantly.

"What was there to tell? I was the unwanted product of an egotistical jerk and a mother who didn't want to be reminded of her past mistakes," he said grimly as he looked away. "I entered the military because there was no other place for me. There never was. I was the pony who wasn't there."

"But you saw-" I began, but then he snapped and threw his hat to the ground.

"Of course I saw!" he snapped, and then laughed bitterly. "I was the pony who saw it all. The good times... the bad times... I called them in. Recorded them down. I saw Big Macintosh die. I called in the medics who took Stonewing away. Watched Jetstream lose it on the battlefield. Saw Doof become a criminal. Vanity eaten up by regret. Twist turn into an emotionally scarred husk. Applesnack consumed by bitterness. Psalm by sin. I watched it all... and I did nothing to stop it!" He spat as he started to pace back and forth.

"I was the witness. The one who knew where the bodies were being buried but who never blew the whistle. The one who overheard all the dirty secrets but was too gutless to bring them to light. The one who knew my friends' pain but was too

cowardly to raise a hoof to help!" As I watched, the sallow white stallion transformed into a buttery yellow one with brown hair in short and shaggy profusion around his shoulders. "Why in Equestria would I want to tell you about Echo? The pony who did nothing while he watched the world explode around him?"

He scooped up his hat and put it back on, reverting back to the Dealer, his lips in a harsh frown. "Smiling Jack was the bitterest, angriest, nastiest pony in the Wasteland, and he was a thousand times better than Echo ever was."

I stared at him quietly for an instant. "What happened to all of you?" I murmured.

He turned away, and for a moment I was certain he was going to leave again. But then he whispered, "Stars..."

"Excuse me?"

"It's stupid. It's just... something I've thought about." He looked back at me over his shoulder. "It was right after training. We'd finished basic and it was Nightmare Night and everypony was in a mood to celebrate. Twist wanted to go to a carnival being held right where Chapel is today. Before the graveyard was there. Bit by bit, we all agreed. Psalm took me along because she took pity on me."

He sighed and shook his head with a sad little smile. "That was a good night. I actually felt like I had friends for the first time ever. There were games and rides and kids running around and... it just felt like the war wasn't happening. Everyone was having a wonderful time..." He shook his head again as he lowered it. "Then Twist saw that damned fortune teller..."

"Fortune teller?" I asked with a frown.

"An old zebra had a tent. Strange old guy. Had tattoos all over his face. His tent had bizarre, leering masks and creepy herbs and specimens in bottles. The kind of zebra that would have been snapped up by the MoM had he been around a few years later. Maybe he was. Asked us if we wanted to know our fate." He snorted and shook his head. "Of course... we did."

He sighed and looked mournfully at me. "He said we'd all die ignoble deaths on the muddy battlefield within a year."

I winced. "Ouch."

"Needless to say, none of us liked that. But then the old codger asked us if we wanted to change our fate. He said there was a way for all of us to be heroes. The greatest heroes in the whole war, so long as we were true to each other. So long as

we never... ever... broke fellowship with each other.” He hissed slowly through his teeth. “What can I say? Friendship... fame... heroism...”

“The catch?” I asked with a sympathetic smile.

He shook his head and looked at me. “The first to break the fellowship would die... and they would receive the most merciful death at that. The rest of us would wish we’d been the first to break, if we were not true to each other.”

“And you accepted.” How could they not?

“We did. Partly out of pride and partly out of a wish to laugh at the zebra’s predictions. But then he got out this book. This... this horrible, black book. And suddenly it wasn’t so funny. He called on the stars to change our fates, and curse us if one was false to the others. There was a hum and... green spiraling things... things an earth pony can’t really explain.” He shook his head. “When the light show ended, the zebra was gone. The tent was completely bare save for a few empty crates.”

He sighed once more and then gave a little smile. “What was funny was... it worked. The next day, we were all assigned to a special combined task force. Experimental... three pony kinds working as a special squad. And it was... amazing,” he finished with a wistful look. “We were amazing. We... we did things that nopony thought was possible. Things we didn’t think possible. And there was fame and glory. Most of us never talked about that night, but I thought about it. We were going to be friends. Loyal and true forever and ever...”

“Then Stonewing fell in battle and we wondered... oh never out loud... but there were looks. Questions. Had he been untrue? Had he broken the fellowship?” He sighed as he dropped his head. “We didn’t know that he was being held in a hospital in critical condition. Some paperwork error. And then...” He raised his eyes to mine. “Then Big Macintosh said he’d had enough. He said he’d met a mare and it was time to settle down. He’d figured he’d done his share for Equestria, and didn’t believe in zebra curses. He wanted to raise a family. Said family was the most important thing of all. He’d stay for one last critical mission... protecting Princess Celestia at a peace summit. He figured that once the meeting was done, there wouldn’t be need for Marauders.”

“Then he died,” I said quietly.

“Oh not just a death!” Dealer snapped, “A hero’s death. Princess Luna turned it into a rallying cry... another escalation in the war. A sign we had to fight harder – do better – to defeat our foes. The next day, Psalm disappears. A few weeks later Doof

rapes Twist. A month later Applesnack gets reassigned to babysit zebras. A few months after that, Jetstream snaps. Then Vanity walks away. Twist takes the enemy as her lover. And me... I was left all alone. Picked up by Goldenblood out of... I don't know... pity, I suppose."

I thought of that moment out on Star Point. Before I'd found out about Gardens and taint and... everything. Had my fate been changed there? Had I been supposed to die with a bullet through my head beside Marigold's bones? Cursed to become the thing I was now? It was a chilling thought.

"I'm sorry. I just... don't know what to say. Stars and zebra curses... Sekashi said the stars were powerful, fickle, and dangerous. But I don't know if they can actually do things like that," I muttered, looking at the stars on the beams overhead.

"I can't imagine they do. Every colt and filly wished on stars back when you could see them. I did," he said softly, hanging his head a little. He looked so glum that I wished I could give him a hug.

Instead, I did the next best thing. "So... tell me more about the adventures of Smiling Jack." A small smile curled in the corner of his mouth.

After an hour of Dealer regaling me with stories about hunting down bank robbers across the desert, dealing with spirit-summoning shamans, being forced to dress in drag to infiltrate a monastery, fighting hordes of zombies, and something called an 'epic botch' that apparently turned Jack into a 'kumquat', Dealer returned to wherever he went when he wasn't feeling chatty.

I'd have to go soon and check up on P-21 and Deus. There was just something that was bothering me as I lay here nice and quiet. It was *too* quiet. Particularly in my head. I hadn't heard a peep since the riot inside the Goddess ended. The stillness was unsettling... and unnerving. Was the Goddess just silently watching in the back of my mind, or was she away plotting something?

So far, I'd only listened to Unity and talked at Lacunae. I'd never actually tried to go into the hive consciousness. Part of it was that I didn't know how, but another wondered what would happen if I did try and push that connection. Would I be sucked in forever? Could the Goddess control my body while I was in there? Was it even possible?

Aw hell... it wasn't the first time I'd ever done something completely clueless and

heedless of the risks...

I thought about the memory magic I'd done with Rampage and what I'd read in Triage's books. I wasn't a smart pony, but I wasn't as stupid as I used to be. Memory spells shared memories, and the Goddess was like a massive memory orb filled with countless recollections and souls. She was just able to control where those memories went. If I thought about the Goddess as a collection of memories, maybe I could go into it the same way as I entered Rampage's thoughts.

I visualized that part in the back of my mind where I talked to Lacunae and the Goddess spoke to me as a pool of water filled with countless glowing clouds of memory. Instead of trying to pull them to me, I pushed myself into that pool, just as I had with Shujaa. Slowly the world around me faded to black as I struggled deeper and deeper into that pool. Swimming was a pretty alien concept to me, so I settled with sinking. Sinking I could handle.

Then I heard it... the faintest whispers in the dark. First one or two. Then a small crowd. Then a steady stream of barely audible comments. 'She has it. She is out. She is coming. Coming soon. She is bringing it. Bringing it to us. The book. She has the book.' I didn't know who 'she' was. More chilling were the comments after that. 'We must kill her. No, we must reward her. One of us. One of us!'

I tried not to pay attention to whispers. I needed to find the big ego in charge of them all. Mentally, I sank deeper. My body was left behind; an unnerving sensation. It was exactly how I'd felt after escaping Hightower. A feeling of... letting go.

Then I heard the voice and saw the distant blue glow. I moved towards it; for some reason I imagined myself as a white unicorn with a striped mane... and no metal. At least here I could be normal. That blue glow coalesced into the Goddess, an immense blue unicorn from the waist up surrounded by a ring of faint glowing pony shapes. Her hips devolved into a glowing ameboid mass stretching out around her like tendrils into the cloud, and her lumpy blue hide seemed to undulate and move in strange ways. I stared at the sight of two green unicorn heads poking from her shoulders, looking on. By the side of the Goddess's head floated a translucent, membranous balloon connected by a meaty filament to the Goddess' temple.

And trapped within was a very familiar purple mare's head.

In front of the Goddess were hundreds of windows, like terminal screens. In them, I could see images all across Equestria. Most of them were scenes of the Wasteland. One was looking down upon a village of zebras, and I thought that one of them looked a bit like Xenith... of course, they all looked kinda similar. Then I spotted

Calamity! There was no missing that hat. It was like P-21's, and there just couldn't be another pegasus with one like it in the Wasteland.

The windows in the center swelled in size; perhaps window size was the equivalent to how much attention she was giving something? If so, what she was looking at was... as best as I could see... a floating city-fortress hovering over the clouds. From a dozen eyes, I saw a wing of alicorns fly through the dark clouds around the massive structure of war. "Such power..." the Goddess purred.

"Thunderhead class mobile siege platform," said the mare's head in her right shoulder.

"The Glorious Dawn," intoned the other.

The view swooped in and suddenly jerked as the alicorns teleported into a docking bay. One by one, the crew pegasi were magically neutralized and dragged into the corner. The green mare heads closed their eyes and said in unison, "We have the location of his quarters."

The Goddess nodded. "Watch the others and make sure they are not discovered." She turned her gaze to glance at the purple head inside its balloon and then returned her eyes to the windows. "Take us there."

"Are we certain he is amenable?" one of the green mares asked.

"Of course he will be!" the Goddess snapped. "He desires magic. We desire power. What better match could there possibly be? With his machines of war we shall bring Red-Eye to heel and save all of Ponykind from the Wasteland."

"So long as he does not turn that power upon us," the other green mare warned.

"Yes, we shall take precautions. Soon the Black Book will be ours, and we will make the required changes to perpetuate ourselves," the Goddess said testily.

"Trixie..." murmured the purple head weakly. "Please..."

"Silence," the Goddess boomed as she glared at the balloon. "You tried it your way. You failed. I acknowledged when you were right about me. Why can you not accept that this is the way it must be? Why must you perpetually insist on 'another way'? After 200 years of trying, only force has been proved to work. What kind of scientist continues to use a flawed method?" The Goddess stared at the windows as the purple head hung in shame. "No more missionaries, Twilight. No more trying to work with ponies like Red Eye. We must control the situation, not let it control us." She glared at the windows a moment. "Go."

Half the windows flickered as they jumped into a sumptuously decorated office. The walls were festooned with weapons, pegasus uniforms, flags, and maps. The dusky pegasus I'd seen before at the Rainbow Dash Skyport now sat behind a desk, scowling at a chart. Two guards stood by with bored looks on their faces.

Those bored looks turned to astonishment as magic bolts slammed into them and dropped them in heaps on the floor. Harbinger drew a strange, ominous-looking beam pistol as he crouched behind the desk. There was something familiar about it, but I wasn't precisely sure where I'd seen it before. "PEACE!" The Goddess thundered. "THE GODDESS HAS NOT COME TO DO BATTLE! YOUR SOLDIERS ARE MERELY STUNNED, NOT SLAIN!" Slowly, Harbinger rose up from behind the desk as one window slowly advanced upon him. "THE GODDESS HAS COME TO PARLAY WITH THE GRAND PEGASUS ENCLAVE!"

After a moment, he dropped the pistol on the desktop. "Brown wind... it's true," he said as he slowly rose to his hooves. "You really do exist." He narrowed his eyes a bit. "I expected an assassination attempt from Red Eye's alicorns before now. He has to suspect we're moving against him."

"INDEED, BUT THE GODDESS DOES NOT SERVE RED EYE. HE HAS ABUSED THE GODDESS'S TRUST, AND SO WE SEEK A NEW PARTNER. A BETTER PARTNER. AND WHO BETTER TO RULE THIS NEW WORLD WITH THE GODDESS OF EQUESTRIA THAN THE LORDS OF THE SKY?" Her words were perfectly chosen, drawing a smile from the gray stallion.

"You're proposing some kind of alliance?" he asked slowly, as if disbelieving even the idea of it.

"THE GODDESS IS. YOUR PEOPLE REQUIRE MAGIC? THE GODDESS HAS MORE MAGICAL POWER THAN ANY EQUINE WHO HAS EVER LIVED! WITH YOUR FORCES, YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR RIGHTEOUS BATTLE AGAINST THE WICKED RED EYE. BUT THAT IS NOT ALL! THE GODDESS KNOWS OF YOUR STRUGGLE WITH THUNDERHEAD! HOW THEY WITHHOLD THEIR OWN SOURCES OF MAGIC WHILE YOU GROW EVER WEAKER! HOW THEY PURSUE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS TO USE AGAINST THEIR OWN PEOPLE! THEIR EVIL IS INTOLERABLE EVEN TO THE GODDESS! ONCE RED EYE IS CHASTISED, THE GODDESS WILL AID IN YOU DELIVERING A PUNISHMENT BEFITTING SUCH TREACHERY!"

Okay. This was rapidly approaching a level of nightmare even I was having trouble handling.

“Well. That’s an interesting proposition. Very interesting. But you know that saying about things that are too good to be true,” he said with a glare. “What is the catch?”

“NO CATCH. NO TRICKS. TOGETHER WE SHALL BRING PEACE AND ORDER TO EQUESTRIA. YOU WISH THE SKIES? KEEP THEM WITH THE GODDESS’S BLESSING. THE GODDESS’S CHILDREN SHALL RULE BELOW AND BRING SALVATION TO ALL PONIES TRAPPED IN THE WASTELAND. THE GODDESS SHALL PROVIDE YOUR ENCLAVE THE MEANS TO CONTROL NOT JUST THE SKIES OF EQUESTRIA, BUT OF THE ENTIRE WORLD! AND IN RETURN, ALL THE WORLD SHALL BE UNITED AND SAVED.” But that was a lie, and I knew it. Zebras, griffins, and ghouls couldn’t be turned into alicorns. But looking into the office, I could see the naked appeal in Harbinger’s eyes.

Still, he wasn’t entirely sold. “How do I know this isn’t a trick? Perhaps an attempt to get me out in the open?”

“LOOK UPON YOUR NEUTRALIZED GUARDS! HAD THE GODDESS WISHED YOU DEAD, YOU WOULD BE SO! OUR OFFER IS MADE IN GOOD FAITH, HARBINGER. THE GODDESS SEEKS YOUR ASSISTANCE, NOT YOUR DEMISE.” He clearly seemed to be considering it.

Finally, his lips twisted sourly. “It’s not exclusively up to me. The council will want to *debate*.” He said the word like it was a curse.

The Goddess chuckled. “YOU KNOW THE VALUE OF SPECTACLE BETTER THAN MOST, HIGH GENERAL! THERE WILL BE NO NEED OF DEBATE WHEN YOU ARRIVE WITH A WING OF THE GODDESS’ CHILDREN WITH YOU. YOUR PEOPLE SHALL FALL IN LINE AND EXCUSE YOUR AUDACITY WHEN ALL THE GODDESS’S GIFTS ARE PRESENTED. NEW TALISMANS. FRESH MATERIALS TO MAKE NEW WEAPONS OF WAR! THE STRENGTH OF YOUR PEOPLE RESTORED! COME TO THE HOME OF THE GODDESS. BRING YOUR CAMERAS SO THAT ALL CAN SEE THE GLORY OF THE GODDESS! THUS SHALL OUR ALLIANCE BE MADE FACT FOR ALL TO SEE!”

Harbinger glared at her, but his eyes danced with the potential hope. “He desires,” whispered the two heads.

“Of course he does,” chuckled the Goddess. “We’re speaking the same language. Power.”

Harbinger finally said with a little smile, “I’ll reflect on your generous offer, Goddess.”

“He shall accept!” the green left head said.

“He only needs to get his plots together,” the right green head murmured. “Then he shall come!”

“OF COURSE, HIGH GENERAL. THE GODDESS LOOKS FORWARD TO OUR ALLIANCE! TOGETHER WE SHALL BRING PEACE AND ORDER. BUT WE URGE HASTE IN YOUR DECISION, LEST THE GODDESS BE FORCED TO ACT WITHOUT YOU.”

“Of course,” he said with a little smile.

“Return,” the Goddess said with a cackle, and the windows aboard the siege platform disappeared and were replaced by images of clouds.

Okay, I had to do... something! I had to tell somepony! I needed to...

Twilight Sparkle was looking at me.

The old mare’s head seemed so terribly tired and sad as she looked on. Yet even as I looked, the corner of her mouth turned in the saddest smile. Then she mouthed a word within that diaphanous balloon. ‘Run.’

“What...” The Goddess began, and then the immense blue form turned around to face me. Then I understood what all those lumps were and why they moved so oddly. It was a body made of eyeless pony faces, a thing that could have been birthed in Horizon Labs. Her periwinkle eyes widened as they looked down at me, then narrowed in an enraged glare. “YOU!”

Shitshitshitohshitohshi-

Out. Awaken. Leave. Vacate! I struggled to pull myself out of this void and back to myself. Maybe if I got into myself, I could warn someone! Spike! I could tell him! He’d warn Homage! He could tell everypony! The Enclave and Goddess... together?! It had to be stopped. I felt myself pulling out, but too slowly. Far too slowly!

Her immense hooves reached out and caught me. “Sneaky sneaky, Blackjack. I look forward to having you fully within Unity. And that day shall come soon. Very soon.” Her lips curled wider as her eyes narrowed. “In the meantime... let me repay some of the annoyance your lineage has caused me!”

She pulled me towards her gargantuan maw, filled with countless babbling pony heads and an infinite number of teeth...

I jerked, disturbing both Glory and Boo as I clutched my pounding skull. “What is it, Blackjack?” Glory asked in concern. “What’s wrong?”

Something was wrong. There was something... Something I needed to tell some-pony...

“I don’t know... just a headache...” I muttered as I lay back. We were going to have to leave soon. I had debts to pay, and sticking around here was just an invitation for the Harbingers to attack again.

I just wished I knew what the Goddess found so damned funny...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

Quest perk achieved: Shadowbolt armor Mk I. You’ve received the reinforcing base for Shadowbolt cybernetics. +3 DT.

54. Fate

“Oh, my fortune telling has nothing to do with my Pinkie sense! It’s only good for vague and immediate events. Like that, see? . . . where did that even come from?”

“So,” Glory asked from the kitchen as she carefully stowed every bit of food we had left into bags, “is he safe?”

There was no question who ‘he’ was. Rampage looked up from where she sat as a surly teenager adjusting the straps on her power hooves. “Safe? Deus doesn’t do safe. He does ‘more harm’ and ‘less harm’. ‘Safe’ isn’t applicable to him.” She then started to put on the metal armor, which was still a size or so too large. I supposed having a size-changing body would be extremely annoying. She seemed to have a system of belts and straps to keep it all in place.

We were rested and getting ready to move out with the sunset. All that was needed was to make sure everything was stored up. Rampage had drawn a crude map showing how to get to Grimhorn, a route essentially heading back south to Flank, then continuing east till the road crossed the Hoofington River above the reservoir. If all went according to plan, the Harbingers would see us go and not bother Chapel any longer.

P-21 looked at the magazines of bullets he was carefully inventorying and preparing in advance. “Well, he’s less harm to us. . . unless he wants to commit suicide. I found five explosive devices wired up inside him; one of them was set to go off in less than an hour. Whoever put him in that thing had been pretty methodical about it. First charge would have disabled the case holding his brain and severed his connection to the tank. The second would have scrapped the life support, then the repair talisman, and finally the engine itself.”

Scotch Tape carefully stacked up her own supplies. Tools, duct tape, wonderglue, scrap metal, plungers, wire, some arcane electronics scrap, and capacitors were all arranged around her in a fan. “How’d the zebras even shrink down a reactor small enough to fit on a tank? I can’t figure that one out,” the filly said, then passed a roll of tape to Boo, who caught it in her mouth and then set it into the bag. How’d Scotch teach her that trick?

“Better question is ‘Where did the Harbingers get a tank in the first place?’” Twister asked as the Neighvarro pegasus checked her power armor. Next to her, Sunset

was loading her beam rifles with new cartridges. "All our recon said the surface shouldn't have anything even close to that kind of firepower." She gave Glory another of those long, indecisive looks like she was trying to come to a decision.

"Maybe it was captured. Maybe they have a working facility making repairs somewhere underground," Glory hypothesized with a shrug. She held up a cyberpony cake to me. "Want one before I pack them all away?"

"Awww, if you insist," I chuckled; she tossed it to me, and I caught it with my magic. Lacunae was outside, keeping an eye out for the Harbingers. No sign of them yet, but they were reforming and rearming; we had to get out of here before they made a second attack on me while I was still here. And if they tried to use Chapel as a hostage against me again... well... I think at that point I was entitled to go Yellow River on the Harbingers. Besides, given the defenses Chapel was building up, there'd be the chance of an embarrassing defeat by a bunch of foals.

"Those are going to make you fat, Blackjack," Scotch Tape opined with a snicker.

"I'm still getting things repaired. I'm a growing mare," I said, taking a bite. I chewed happily for a moment, then sighed. "The real question I have is why he's coming with us in the first place? I don't think a radio-controlled bomb would stop Deus from killing somepony if he really wanted to." Rampage snickered, and I looked at her. "Rampage's 'Follow Blackjack because she beat you' theory aside, there has to be a reason. You knew him longest, Rampage. Can you think of any other reason?"

"Deus wasn't exactly the most social war machine," Rampage pointed out. "Nopony besides Big Daddy and Brutus ever fought him hoof to hoof. Even Psychoshy never tried to take him on. Gorgon was the closest thing to a friend he had, and he was a mute monsterpony." The young mare then stopped and frowned.

"What?" I asked as I checked the wear on Vigilance. Some parts from some twelve millimeter pistols had done it good, and I'd tried, mostly in vain, to polish it to its original sheen. An assault carbine would have to do for longer ranges. I'd all but given up on keeping a riot shotgun intact.

"Well... it's stupid," Rampage said with a flush. "It's just that... well... I think he was scared of me. Don't get me wrong, I know I'm one scary pony, but you remember Deus. There wasn't a mare he wouldn't try and fuck if she looked at him wrong." After what Brass and Hightower had done to him, I could understand it. Forgive... no... but I could understand. "He barely said two words to me in two years."

But given how Rampage resembled Twist with her coat and her mane, it wasn't hard to imagine why. "I wish I could just ask him," I grunted in annoyance.

"There are wires that connect him to a speaker, but he doesn't talk," P-21 said with a shrug as he packed his things away in his bag. It never ceased to amaze me how he could hide entire grenades in his brushy mane and tail. Maybe it was kicking the Med-X, but he looked pretty good. Then again, he'd always looked good. . . not flier-good, but still. . .

"He might be suffering from severe aphasia," Glory said as she tucked the last of the food away and trotted to her battle saddle, deftly slipping on the gatling beam gun's harness. When she saw my sardonic expression of cluelessness, she elaborated, "It's a speech impairment due to brain damage. Yes and no may be all he's capable of expressing."

"Or he's keeping silent," P-21 suggested as he shrugged into a bandoleer of 40mm grenades for Persuasion. He glanced around, looking a little agitated, and checked the grenade launcher for the third time.

Rampage snickered. "Oh, come on. Deus couldn't go five minutes without a 'cunt'." P-21 looked at her coolly, and the striped mare blinked. "What?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't use language like that around my daughter," he said primly. I shared a look with Glory and suppressed a laugh.

"Oh, really? What should I use?" Rampage asked with a grin. "Sugar pot?"

"Vagina would be the most accurate," Glory offered.

"Hoo-hah," Twister suggested.

"Vertical smile?" Sunset said with a grin.

"I usually just call it my turbine," Scotch said as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully, then looked at me, "cause it makes me hum." It seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but P-21's mane seemed to twang a little like snapped wires. "What?" she asked, and the poor blue stallion looked so flustered that I decided not to chime in with my own personal nickname.

"Okay. That's enough talk of... that..." he said with a nervous grin, waving his hooves as if trying to banish the topic.

"Oh, come on. Surely you have some little nicknames for your own equipment?" Rampage teased, then shook her head as she looked back at Scotch, then at Glory. "Aren't the socio-sexual mores of Stable ponies fascinating?"

She flushed a little, but then replied primly, "Don't ask me. I spent my grade school being encouraged to prefer fillies. Boys for boys. Mare's love. All kinds of slogans and stuff to keep us apart when we went into our fertile cycles."

Ramage laughed and grinned at Scotch Tape. "Oh, yeah. Wait till you start your cycle. Best and worst time of the year for mares. Then you'll call it your... I dunno, reactor or something." Rampage snickered, then sniffed the air. "Smells like one of us is due right now. Knowing our luck, we'll all kick into cycle at the same time. That's always fun." I glanced at Glory blushing furiously and giving a little squirm. Rampage turned and grinned at P-21, "What do *you* think?"

P-21 sat there, eyelid twitching before he jammed his hat on his head as his cheeks flared. He turned and marched out, shoving Boomer aside as he muttered darkly. The brown stallion blinked as he looked back over his shoulder. "What's his problem?"

"Propriety met reproduction on the battlefield and was promptly bent over and rutted," Rampage replied. She caught my glare and recoiled, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll apologize to His Grumpiness." Powerhooves clicking, she trotted out after him.

Boomer took several deep breaths. "Oh, yeah. Thought something smelled good." He gave a crooked grin. "If any of y'all need that itch scratched, well, I'd be happy to help out. There's a reason the ladies call me Boomer, after all." I chuckled, remembering how close I'd come to gelding him. What a waste that would have been. . .

"Just because a mare's fertile doesn't mean she becomes a sex fiend, Boomer. Y'all know that," Twister said.

"I reckon not. T'get to 'sex fiend' takes a few drinks." The brown buck grinned, and the mare flushed a little.

"Y'all better get back out there and keep an eye out for any hostiles, 'fore I remove the head yer thinkin' with!" Twister snapped.

"Sure. Might need to. . . nnngh. . . adjust my armor though," he said with a laugh before he went back out. Mmm. . . fliers. . .

"Stallions," Twister muttered, then saw Sunset looked at her curiously and the russet mare flushed. "It's not me! I'm at least two weeks from cycling."

"Is it that bad?" Scotch Tape asked with a little frown.

"Eh." I gave a little shrug. "You'll start looking at stallions more and the idea will be

on your mind a lot for a week or so. Just make sure you stay around other mares, and we'll stop you from doing something with some moron just because he's got a nice body. Make sure you never point your hind end at a stallion if you can help it. Really gives them the idea if they get a good whiff. Give yourself a good rubbing once or twice a day till the itch passes. You've got your implant, right?" The filly nodded. "Then you've got nothing to worry about if you do mess it up. It's more an annoyance than anything."

Scotch Tape looked relieved as she finished passing things to Boo. The last of the supplies were packed away. I kept looking at Glory, and as she completed her own packing I trotted up to her. "So, is it you?" I asked, giving her a little nudge.

"No!" she said as she blushed furiously, then pressed her lips together. "Maybe. . ." Finally she slumped. "Probably." She sighed and rolled her eyes, "Ugh. . . stupid biology. It's not like I'm attracted to him in any way, shape, or form. It's just a dumb little thought that I just can't quite put out of my mind. It's not fair I've got a piece of anatomy nagging me to be a mommy. This is the worst time possible for me to have a kid!"

I gave her a little nuzzle. "It's not a bad thing to think of down here. Just roll with it." She huffed at me, but finally gave in with a roll of her eyes. "That a girl."

"Well, he is pretty nice," Glory said with a little smile. That's the spirit. Bisexuality: double your options, double your fun! And Boomer was certainly nice to look at.

"Now you're thinking like Blackjack," I said with a grin. Maybe if she broadened her horizons a bit, I could go along for the ride with her. "I think you'd make a great mom, Glory." I winced inwardly, hoping that she didn't take it the wrong way.

But she didn't. "Maybe someday. . . if things were normal and not so crazy. . . maybe. But it's probably just the hormones talking," she said, then looked towards the door with a wistful sort of smile.

"It wouldn't hurt you to experiment," I said with a nudge. I supposed I could terrify the brown stallion into behaving himself.

"Maybe," she said again with another little sigh. "It might be okay with him. I doubt he'd hurt me." Her wings pomfed out a little bit as she smiled, then trotted for the door along with everypony else. "There's just something about earth ponies. . ." she murmured softly before closing the door behind her.

I stopped in my tracks and blinked in shock at the closed door. "Wait. What?"

There weren't any cheers as we climbed onto Deus, but everyone in Chapel watched us go with an unfamiliar look in their eyes. Maybe it was the sight of the black-and-white-striped tank with 'MEGA DEUS' hoofpainted by Scotch and Rampage in red across the front, or perhaps it was the three pegasi in ominous black Enclave power armor flying overhead along with a purple alicorn, but every pony, ghoul, and zebra watched us go with an odd expression I'd hadn't ever really seen before. Not fear. Not joy.

As Deus's treads rumbled along the road through the village, I looked out at all the faces gazing on and gave the smallest smile and little wave back. I must have looked ridiculous; my reinforcements made wearing normal barding impractical, so some of Sky Striker's plates had been duct taped and wonderglued to my augmented limbs to cover the gaps. Still, I saw something akin to open awe in Sekashi and Majina as we rolled by their cottage. Harpica, the ghoul maid, gave a bow and spread her dusty wings in a curtsy. Charity looked on, her normally calculating eyes watching me now with something more honest and sincere.

"Why are they looking at us like that?" I asked as I flushed.

Rampage looked at me. "Are you serious, Blackjack? You don't know?"

I frowned at her. "Me not knowing is nothing new. They keep staring at us..."

"Not at us, Blackjack. Not even at Deus," Rampage replied. "You. They're staring at you."

Now I was blushing everywhere that wasn't metal. "Me? Why me? What did I do?"

Glory sighed, smiled, and shook her head. P-21 leveled a sardonic look at me. Even Scotch Tape seemed to get it. Rampage's grin lost some of its edge as we rolled out of the village, and she just looked at me with admiration and pity. "You gave them hope, Blackjack."

The last time I'd travelled between Flank and Chapel, I'd been running like a maniac to try and save Chapel from Sanguine. This time, I was a passenger on a war machine with three power-armored pegasi providing escort. As the evening gloom deepened, I started wishing that the Harbingers would attack. I scanned all around for some red bar which could alleviate this tedium, but there wasn't anything that

could provide a distraction. Not even a radroach or bloatsprite dared to challenge our passage.

“You’re pouting, Blackjack,” P-21 said as he stared out at the gloom.

“I am not,” I replied, pouting as I glared at the darkness. “Think they’re out there? The Harbingers?”

He shrugged, checking his grenade launcher. “I’m certain of it. They’re watching us. Thinking of ways to separate us from Deus, you from the rest of us. Maybe a lucky shot from those big guns of Steel Rain’s. . . though they can’t risk destroying EC-1101. Maybe when you go to that plantation. Dawn threw away her family and her life. She hasn’t quit. Quitting leaves her with nothing.”

I sighed, looked out into the growing gloom, then glanced over at Glory speaking in low tones with Rampage. She met my look with a momentary one of apprehension, then a forced little smile. When I didn’t return it, her expression turned concerned for a moment. Finally, I managed a small half smile. Only then did she finally give me a sincere smile. She might have looked like Rainbow Dash, even had her athleticism, but she was still not far removed from the timid mare I’d discovered beneath that terminal. She didn’t love me, and maybe I didn’t love her. Life was a tempest, and she clung to me as the one and only constant in her life. The collar she’d put on me was a hollow symbol. A lie.

But sometimes a lie was something to live for.

Someday she’d find someone she did love. Someone who didn’t hurt her all the time. Someone better. We might be together for days, months, or even years, but eventually I’d do something to drive her away—

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. “Ow? What did you do that for?” I whined.

“You’re getting that look again,” P-21 said with a smirk as he tugged his hat lower on his face.

“What look?” I asked as I rubbed the spot where he’d hit me.

He shook his head. “That look like you’re trying to think and arriving at all the wrong conclusions. Relax, Blackjack. I’m sure that we’ll be attacked sooner or later. Don’t stress yourself till then.”

I huffed and then groaned. “I can’t help it! I get all wiggly when there’s nothing going on!” My metal legs kicked the air before I huffed and laid limply. “I hate being bored.”

He glanced at me and chuckled. "Don't you have a memory orb or something you can go into?" He asked with a small roll of his eyes.

"I don't want to be all memory orb'ed if the Harbingers attack," I said with a sigh as we rolled along.

"Then sleep," he said with a shrug. "Or whine more quietly," he added, then spat a grenade into the breech of his weapon and clacked it closed. I looked at him skeptically but then sighed and closed my eyes. Really... how could anyone take a nap... on a... tank...

"This doesn't look good," Jetstream muttered, looking about at the rocky valley as the Marauders stepped out of the skywagon. The open area was a mile across, two miles long, and filled with gray boulders and scrubby yellow grass. In the middle were a number of black-and-white-striped figures underneath a white open tent. "They could hide a whole legion in those rocks, and we wouldn't know it till the firing started." Two dozen soldier ponies, a dozen pegasi, and a half dozen red-striped zebras moved out from two other skywagons.

"Ayep," Big Macintosh said stoically as he chewed on his grass stem. The rest of the Marauders slowly fanned out. Dark thunderclouds overhead boomed and threatened rain. "Orders?" he asked as he looked back at Vanity with a small smile.

The emerald-maned unicorn gave a sheepish curl of his lips in return. It was clear that while Vanity might have the officer's crest, Big Macintosh was in charge. "Secure the meeting area. The command post will be here at the skywagons. The Third Battalion should be deployed somewhere southeast of us, preventing any large numbers of enemies from moving in. Our real concern is assassination."

"You really think they'd kill Celestia?" Twist asked with a scowl.

"Yes," I said softly. "There's real concern that this is a trap." That drew some surprised looks, but I flushed and looked away.

Big Macintosh nodded. "I'll be in the center with the Princess." He gestured towards the skies with his hoof. "Jetstream above with the fliers. Twist, move into those rocks with the Proditors. Doof, take that high point in case we need suppressive fire pulling back to the wagons. Applesnack, take a dozen and set up a line to the north. Captain'll take the other squad to the south." He paused, then looked at me. "Pick your spot for a field of fire." He looked at Vanity for confirmation.

“That sounds good, Sergeant. Carry on,” the unicorn said, then turned to Echo. “Get in touch with the Third as soon as you can. Four squads aren’t going to be nearly enough if this goes bad. I know Celestia ordered no troops, but there’re just too many ways this can go wrong.” The white unicorn glanced at me for a long moment. “Make sure you’ve got a dedicated channel between Psalm and Big Macintosh. If there’s trouble, she’ll be the first to spot it. Everypony move out.”

I turned and walked to the skywagon for my gear. I was carefully assembling my precision weapon when a stallion said behind me, “Hey there, Becalm. Long time no. . .” I turned, levitating the sniper rifle as I regarded the orange unicorn carrying saddlebags bulging with scrolls and papers. His yellow eyes focused on the rifle floating beside me, and he finished lamely, “. . . see?”

“Cheddar?” I murmured. “What. . . what are you doing here?”

The orange stallion snorted. “We haven’t seen each other for years and that’s all you can say?” he asked, his eyes moving once more over to the gun. “You’ve. . . changed.”

“We’ve all changed. I’m fighting for Luna now,” I said quietly as I tried to hide the rifle behind my back, a futile gesture given that it was longer than my body. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here with Celestia’s peace envoys. The Princess believes that my talent with languages will be useful. There’re over twenty different dialects spoken in the Zebra Empire. . . and. . . um. . .” He swallowed, his smile growing more tense. “That’s a really big gun. . .” he murmured.

I sighed and stopped my pointless efforts at concealment. “This is Penance,” I said as I levitated it before us. “Magically augmented and designed by the M.W.T. and M.A.S. for unicorn snipers. It’s a prototype and, given all the fuss it requires, probably won’t be put in production soon. It fires a variety of fifty caliber loads ranging from explosive antipersonnel rounds to armor-penetrating bullets.” I removed the magazine, showing the jet black bullets within. “These are dragonkiller rounds, in the event of a dragon attack. A. . . friend. . . provided them for me.” Said scarred friend was exchanging terse words with Big Macintosh and Vanity at the moment. Though he met my gaze, Goldenblood only frowned. He looked mad. . . no, not mad. Fearful.

Cheddar stammered at me in horror. “What. . . how. . . why in Equestria would you bring something like that to a peace meeting?”

"It seemed prudent." I swallowed as I looked away from my teacher and turned back to my childhood friend. "Don't you understand what will happen if Celestia is captured? The zebras could use that to force a surrender. Or they could kill her. After all, they wanted Luna to be here rather than Celestia."

Cheddar pressed back, "And we asked for the Caesar to come. Instead he's sent a tribal elder to negotiate for him."

"A tribal elder?" one of the Proditors asked as she looked over with a frown. It took me a minute to recognize a younger Shujaa. "It is Briarthorn, yes?" Cheddar looked away a moment, then nodded. The zebra mare looked contemplative. "I see. Elder Thorn is only a few years 'elder' to I. She is of the Mendi tribe, who have always objected to the war, much like Ministry Mare Fluttershy. Mendi is as respected as the Ministry of Peace. If it were Elder Earthquaker of the Achu, or Elder Longsight of the Propoli, however, it would be far more promising."

"We have to start somewhere," he said plaintively, but the Proditor was clearly skeptical. He sighed and covered his face with a hoof as Shujaa continued after Twist. "This is exactly what Celestia was afraid of. You people don't understand. These 'security' arrangements are going to unravel everything before we can even have a chance to talk!" He looked at me, practically begging me to agree. "Don't you understand? If we don't show them at least a gesture of trust, we'll never have a chance."

A few years ago, I would have agreed with him. I would have taken the risk if it would mean an end to the fighting. But I'd heard the atrocity of Littlehorn. So many students I'd known. . . if the zebras were capable of that, then they were capable of anything. "Trust them with something less precious than the princesses. Send Rainbow Dash. She can at least fight if they try anything."

"Listen to you!" he stammered. "Try anything? What happened to the filly I helped wash the floors with?"

She killed people. Lots of people. And if I just served Luna loyally and faithfully, everything would be fine. It wouldn't be for nothing. "You can't understand."

His eyes hardened. "No. I guess I can't. Try not to let the zebras see you with that thing, Psalm. Contrary to what most ponies think, zebras revere their elders as much as we do the princesses. Even if they're not from a fighting tribe."

He turned on a hoof and trotted away. I knelt, cradling my gun. Everything would be all right in the end. I'd serve Luna, and she'd forgive me. She'd absolve all my

sins. Make all the zebras I'd killed worthwhile. "Please, Luna. Please..." I prayed silently.

"We'll need the Marauders more than simple prayers," Goldenblood rasped wetly as he trotted up. "Big Macintosh will be present at the pavilion. We can only hope that things get mired in bickering." He rubbed his face nervously. "I can't imagine what Celestia is thinking. This is precisely why ambassadors were invented!"

The scarred and emaciated stallion looked even more frazzled than usual. "Do you really think they're going to try to kill Celestia?"

"If they think she's Luna, yes," he said as he paced a little back and forth. "Everything is a mess in the backchannels. I don't know if they think it's going to be Celestia or Luna. I've told them it's not Luna, but they'll question it. For all I know, they might think it's more likely after I warned them."

"Maybe it's sincere," I offered, mostly as a token to my childhood friend. "Maybe they want peace."

He snorted skeptically and shrugged as if peace was inconsequential. "Perhaps. I'm more concerned about Celestia forcing this and negotiating personally." He ran a hoof along his golden mane as he stared at nothing. "Maybe she's trying to atone for starting the war... this is some elaborate form of suicide. No... unlikely. But perhaps she wants to be captured. Maybe she sees this as a way to force a conclusion to the war." He rubbed his cheeks. "Or maybe she plans to defect... she's never approved of the ministries or the expansion of the war effort. Always trying to nudge her way back towards power." He looked on the verge of a nervous breakdown as he stared with his bloodshot eyes into empty space.

"Have you... talked... to Celestia about it?" I asked, guardedly.

He gave a hollow little laugh before breaking into wet coughs. When he finished he gave me a wan grin. "I'm not high on Celestia's friends list at the moment, or ever again." He rubbed his face. "We can't let them take her. It will mean the end of Luna as ruler. Celestia is still frightfully popular."

"Don't worry, Teacher." I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. "I won't. No matter what."

He gave a sad little smile. "I hardly think it's fair to call me that. I've never taught you much worthwhile. Rocks and gems and metals... hardly the education you deserved."

"You taught me about devotion and conviction," I said with a sincere smile. "Don't

worry, Teacher. I won't let them take her."

He sighed and nodded. "I'll need to go to the radio wagon. Listen to the backchannels and see if there's any hint of what they're planning. I've never heard things so chaotic in the Empire since Luna took the throne. There's no telling what the Caesar is planning. Or the elders. Or the legates..." He gave a wan smile. "Equestria isn't the only place with shadowy politics. The zebra invented the damned game." His smile disappeared and he turned, trotting quickly to the radio wagon.

I kept the gun floating at my side as I moved towards an ideal firing position, a rocky outcrop five hundred yards from the tents. It'd give me a field of fire overlooking the tents and beyond. I climbed up on the rocks and took a position where I could look between the stones. Most snipers worked in pairs of shooters and spotters, but few unicorns had the talent to levitate a rifle and aim it steadily for hours without straining their eyes or their horn. I unraveled my cloak and spread it over myself and my gun. The magic couldn't match zebra invisibility, but it did manage to blend in with the surrounding rock enough to make me appear to be just another stone.

One quick radio check with the sergeant, and I was set.

It was an hour later that the winged chariot arrived. In that time, I'd used my magic scope to pick out three dozen zebras ranging from sniper pairs to hoof to hoof specialists. Each location was relayed to Echo, who'd pass the information on to the rest of the Marauders.

Then brass horns sounded, heralding the arrival of the Princess on her golden chariot. From the other side of the valley thundered ram's horns, and a young adult scarlet dragon flew over the mountains, landing and depositing a trio of zebras. The dragon then pumped his wings and took off once more as both peace groups trotted to the tents. I tracked the dragon till it disappeared back behind the horizon.

Maybe this would be okay...

From over the radio connection with Big Macintosh, I heard the envoys greet each other with Cheddar interpreting. Sweeping my scope over the valley, I watched as the elder zebra greeted the Princess with clear surprise. Shujaa had been right. The elder wasn't much older than myself. Still, from the security arrangements, they seemed to value the bead-bedecked zebra mare as more than just a throwaway.

Over the radio, I could hear Cheddar talking back and forth. To hear Briarthorn speak, the war was becoming ever more burdensome to the Empire. More and more was being asked of the tribes to fight the Maiden of the Stars. Soon it came

to the sticking point: Luna's rule was a non-starter. So long as she remained in power, the Caesar could not entertain the topic of peace. I watched Celestia through my scope, the magical lens peering through the tent at her. I saw the pain and indecision clearly etched on her regal face. I imagined it to be exactly how she'd looked after Littlehorn.

I should have been watching the others. I spotted only a tiny bit of movement in the back of the delegation and a flash of green.

From inside the tent came a pop, and suddenly a brilliant green cloud billowed up and filled the space. Everyone began shouting, screaming, and coughing as they struggled and milled about. The tent collapsed, and then, with a flare of magic, Celestia ripped the canvas and let the billowing smoke roll out. She swayed and collapsed as Big Macintosh staggered over her prone form.

"Cupcake! Code Cupcake!" I shouted over the radio to Echo. "The Princess is down! Code Cupcake!" I immediately started looking for targets in the delegation.

Then things went from Cupcake to Roadapples. The ground beside the tent collapsed, and instantly zebras began swarming out of the hole. Many of them sported strange wings and took to the air as soon as they were above ground. I heard the orders coming fast and furious as the pony delegation staggered and flopped back around Big Macintosh, finding a new appreciation for the huge stallion.

Yet one didn't. Cheddar waved his hooves as he jabbered to the zebras who advanced out of the hole in the earth. The zebra envoys were shoved and kicked aside as the newcomers moved in on the fallen Princess. The elder tried to move in beside Cheddar, snapping in rapidfire zebra. Some of the zebra attackers, with almost contemptuous ease, scooped her up and tossed her onto another zebra's back, and she was swiftly borne away from the fighting.

"Get behind me!" Big Macintosh thundered.

"No! Please! Peace! We want peace!" Cheddar shouted as the zebra attackers advanced.

"Have it," a stallion replied calmly. The powerful zebra rose and brought his hooves down in one thunderous stomp that exploded my friend's head like a grape.

My round returned the favor a moment later, the enchanted bullet magically punching a hole the diameter of my hoof through his head. I'd fired before his blow fell, but the distance had prevented my friend's salvation by a half second.

Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another.

Chaos reigned as the zebras engaged the security force on all sides. Big Macintosh, in only his armor, stood between the Princess and her attackers. The zebras were as unarmed as the red earth pony, but they moved with the deadly swiftness and strength of Stampede. Four on one, they flanked and surrounded the stallion who met blow with blow. The zebras, however, had to keep back and moving; they knew I was out here. No doubt a sniper was looking for me this second. I couldn't count on headshots, but I could punch a hole through any zebra that dared to stop for more than a moment.

"Where is the Third Battalion?" I heard a shout over my radio. Was it Vanity? "We're pinned down!" Doof's minigun maintained a spray of firepower at any zebra that dared to get close to the skywagons. The gray stallion bled from a dozen holes, but he only stopped firing to chug a healing potion and let somepony reload the gun. Overhead, Jetstream and the other fliers worked to keep the bat-winged zebras from spreading out and assuming air superiority. Twist and the Proditors moved through the rocks, taking down the sniper teams as fast as they could.

But they were still after the Princess. If they managed to get her, they could flee back to zebra territory if the Third wasn't in position to stop them as planned. It was a huge window, and there were far more zebras in the valley than our own people.

Something heavy landed on my back, hooves trying to grab my head through the cloak. I didn't dare look away from the red stallion struggling against his attackers. If they hadn't been trying to capture Celestia, they would have simply gunned him down. If I looked away... I couldn't look away. My horn pulled my sidearm, pressed it to the batwinged zebra atop me, and started firing. I heard a mare scream, struggling to snap my neck as I maintained focus. Then the hooves around my throat grew weaker as blood soaked my cloak and hide.

The peace envoys struggled to help Big Macintosh, but they weren't soldiers. They'd been poisoned, too, and several, like Celestia, were either unconscious or sickened. The best they did was to slow one of the zebras long enough for me to blast out their throat. Too many were kicked and lay where they fell, dead or close enough that it didn't matter.

I couldn't let them take Celestia. Please... somepony... anypony... help. All I could do was shoot things. That's all I could do.

Big Macintosh, bleeding and bruised, refused to fall. His coat shiny with blood, standing to protect what were likely broken ribs, one eye matted with blood, he stood on. He would not fall. Could not fall. One of the zebras darted in for a shattering

kick, but the stoic pony took the blow and grabbed the hind leg between his hooves. The zebra struggled and flailed, and my round punched through his chest.

The last attacker made a charge on the injured red stallion. As he was beaten by a dozen savage blows of horrific strength, I felt an icy certainty that he would fall, Celestia would be taken, the war would be lost, and Luna would be ruined. I couldn't let that happen. I tried to lead the shot, but the blood of the slain zebra dripped into my eyes and smeared my vision with a single blink. I fired, but my shot went wide. "No," I whispered in horror, tears dripping as I struggled to adjust my aim before it was too late.

Then, despite all his injuries and the debilitating poison, Big Macintosh turned as if to run. The zebra let out a scream of triumph. But Big Macintosh's body wasn't set for flight. As the zebra dropped to attack, Macintosh's hind legs pulled back and unleashed one final immense kick that connected with shattering force. The striped stallion careened away and hit the dirt, laying prone on the ground like a sack of broken bones and meat. Then Big Macintosh collapsed on the grass beside Celestia.

But he wasn't done. I could see another two dozen zebras racing towards him from the head of the valley. They were only minutes away. "We need evac for Celestia and Big Macintosh now! Right now!" I cried out as I shoved the zebra corpse off me and struggled to clear my vision.

"We're pinned down," Applesnack snapped. "Can't move two steps without the damned stripes climbing all over us."

"It's hoof to hoof in these rocks," shouted Twist, followed by a battlecry.

"Damned zebras have reinforcements. We should be there in five minutes," Vanity swore. I looked at the striped attackers racing towards the ruins of the tent. Big Macintosh and the Princess didn't have five minutes, and from the firearms the zebras brandished, I doubted they'd let Big Macintosh get off another kick even if he was in any state to try. I checked my ammo. Two rounds left. How'd I gone through it all so quickly?

"You've got to get Celestia out of there, Macintosh," I said as I slid the magazine into place and pulled back the bolt. "Please! Please, we can't let them take her."

"Anope," he replied simply as he rose to stand over Celestia once more, and then his rear leg gave out and he slumped beside her, grimacing in pain. "Can't get myself out of here, yet alone the Princess. Just got to delay for Vanity." I entertained the

wild notion of somehow running the five hundred yards and carrying them both to safety. . . a mad idea.

Madness. There was only one thing to do. “We can’t let them capture her, Big Macintosh.” I slowly moved my aim down till it was pointed at her unconscious royal head.

Maybe it was the sound of my voice, but with a grunt of pain he rose and turned to face my firing position. “What are you thinking, Psalm?”

“Better Celestia a martyr than a prisoner,” I said in an almost fevered whisper. “If you can’t get her out of there... we’ll have to... to... remove her.” Luna would understand. She’d have to.

“What?” Macintosh gasped, and at once he stepped between me and the Princess.

“It’s the only way. They’ll be on you before help arrives,” I said, trying to be as reasonable as I could. His green eyes stared at me, not with anger or rage but with a tired resignation, as if five years of fighting had settled on him all at once. “Move, Big Macintosh. Please!”

“Anope,” he replied, his gaze level. “Our mission is to protect Celestia. Understand?”

“They’ll be on you in a minute! They’re going to take her,” I pleaded over the radio. “Please, move!”

He smiled. “I reckon if they do, you and the Marauders will get her back. Understand? I ain’t going to move,” he said calmly, steadily, doing what was right. What was right and honorable and true.

“Please, Sergeant. Please. . .” I begged, tears running down. They’d overpower Big Macintosh in a few seconds, and there were several with batwing talismans. “Don’t make me shoot you.”

“Anope. I know you won’t, Psalm,” was all he said as he gazed back at me. Slowly he smiled, trusting me to do what was right. “I know you’re a good pony.” He was the best of us. Honorable. True. A good pony with a noble and caring heart.

And I put a bullet straight through it.

He wilted slowly as his face relaxed, fighting every second to protect Celestia. When he crumpled, I had a perfect shot at the alicorn’s head. I could barely aim through my tears. I just had to take two more lives, and then I’d be done. The Princess’s, then my own. There was no living with this. Not this. But at least Luna would still be

able to save other, better ponies than myself and maybe, somehow, someday, she might...

"Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I breathed, blinking away tears and staring at Celestia's head in my crosshairs.

Then the skies were split by a ripping boom as a dozen trails of crackling clouds coursed through the air, lead by a single rainbow vein. Like streaking missiles, the Shadowbolts broke formation and engaged the zebras with terrifying speed and force. Rainbow Dash herself looped like a rainbow-maned goddess of death and slammed right into the body of zebra racing for Big Macintosh and Princess Celestia. The blast scattered them far and wide as a polychromatic cloud rose from the impact crater.

At that point, the fight was over. The Shadowbolts finally made the zebras give up and retreat with their elder. I just watched from five hundred yards away as the Marauders raced towards the blasted pavilion, hugging Penance to my chest and rocking as I stared. I could barely make out Applesnack through my tears, but I couldn't miss his howl of pain as he threw away his gun and knelt beside the fallen pony. I heard Twist's painful sobbing, punctuated with thumps of hooves against unfeeling rocks, Jetstream's stunned denials, and Doof's obscenity-laden rant. Echo was murmuring in a stunned voice that Sergeant Big Macintosh was down.

That was when I promptly leaned over, vomited, and shut out the world and what I'd just done.

The Shadowbolts found me and carried me back to the wagons, where I sat apart and hugged my rifle. Celestia was flown away, pain and sorrow etched into her features. I had doubts she'd ever attempt anything like this again. All anypony could do was weep and rage for the fallen hero who'd courageously placed himself over Celestia's body to take the bullet. No pony had yet figured that the direction was all wrong to be a zebra sniper, or that the bullet had been one of mine. Only Goldenblood looked critically at me as I curled up, clutching Penance, praying for some salvation I didn't deserve.

The scarred, exhausted stallion trotted next to me. "What happened?" was all he asked.

"I thought they were going to take her. Luna forgive me... I... I begged him to move..." I whispered. His golden eyes met mine, and I broke, sobbing hysterically. He wrapped his hooves around me, holding me close. One damned pony committing with another...

I woke to Glory shaking my shoulder and started, looking up into her eyes. “She killed him,” I whispered.

“What? Killed who?” Glory asked in confusion as I sat up, my body aching. Tanks needed to come with mattresses.

“Big Macintosh. I saw how he died,” I said as I tried to shake it. Such a pivotal moment... had Big Macintosh lived, would Twilight have left the Ministry of Arcane Sciences? Would the world have blown up, or would something else entirely different have happened? I saw the cameras of the tank on me; Twist watched me from the depths of Rampage’s eyes. I could almost feel the Dealer listening in.

It surprised me when Twister said from above, “Yeah. Killed by a zebra sniper at Shattered Hoof Ridge. Horrible fight. It’s said he leapt in front of the sniper to shield Celestia from his bullets. His funeral was probably the most heavily attended in Equestrian history. If several elements of the Third Battalion hadn’t turned traitor, it never could have happened.” The pegasus looked down at me. “What? A mare can’t have a fancy for military history?”

“History... isn’t always what the books say,” I murmured as I looked away, then frowned. Deus revved his engines; was it just me, or did his motor sound... annoyed? I scowled and looked around. “Where the hay are we?”

“On the edge of the badlands,” Rampage said with a yawn. “You missed Flank. Place is a wreck with Caprice gone. I swear, in five years, they’re going to be nothing more than a gang of drugged out fiends infesting the ruins,” the mare said contemptuously.

Even though it was the middle of the night, my eyes could see well enough to make out the oddities in the terrain. It looked like somepony had taken an immense pencil and drawn lines back and forth across the land to the south. Walls of crumbling concrete and rusted heaps lay scattered as far as I could see, some with long-abandoned rifles rusting silently away. Many of the lines were muddy ruts and ravines left in the landscape. Rusted artillery pieces lay with their red barrels threatening the skies. And there were bones. Everywhere I looked were bones and skulls sticking out of the earth as if the remains struggled to keep fighting each other. A reek of sulfur hung in the air, and patches of dense mist skulked along the deformations in the crinkled land.

“It’s a battlefield,” I muttered in stunned disbelief.

“Not a. The. For almost four years. Everything from here to Dawn Bay is a mess of trenches, bunkers, fortifications, and bases,” Twister said in a subdued voice as she hovered above.

“Surfacers are idiots,” Boomer commented, punctuated by a yawn.

“It was genius,” Twister disagreed. “It’s estimated that almost three million zebras died assaulting Hoofington, while pony casualties were less than two hundred thousand. That’s three million that weren’t attacking Manehattan or Canterlot. Hoofington was such a critical target that they simply couldn’t ignore it.”

But this place was more than just a military target. A cursed city. Nightmare Moon’s city. The Maiden of the Stars’ city. And looking at all the sorrow this place had wrought, who could say that they were wrong? The Tokomare was here, and if the zebras were right, it was something far worse than just a machine. The idea of something so mindbogglingly powerful staggered me. And if it was just some super power source, what would happen if Cognitum or Dawn got their hooves on EC-1101 and used it to control that kind of energy? Would anything stop them at that point? I’d seen the dormant factories underneath the city and the machines moving on their mechanical trains back and forth.

Sweet Celestia, I hated this place.

To the northeast I could see a massive lake, so large I that couldn’t see across it. In the growing gloom, I looked at Twister and gave a little frown before asking, “What do you know about Nightmare Moon’s battle with Celestia?” The pegasus stared, nonplussed, and I felt a little apprehensive. “I remember hearing that she fought Celestia here.”

Twister, and everypony else, looked a little surprised by that. “Wow. That’s ancient history. But yes, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, Celestia brought her armies here for a final confrontation with Luna. Accounts differ. The one I like is that Celestia punched through into the valley but was cut off from her main forces. Apparently, everypony expected a duel to the death atop Mt. Hoof, that big granite knot at the south end of the Core. Somehow, Celestia banished her sister to the moon instead and scattered Nightmare Moon’s batpony forces back to her hidden citadel.”

“How do you hide a whole castle?” Scotch Tape asked curiously as she perched uneasily atop Deus’ turret. Given that Luna was princess of the night, I could only imagine. . .

“No pony knows. It’s said that ponies could only find it with the express permission

of the Princess or her top generals.” Twister gave a small shrug as she flew beside the tank. “Regardless, it was so long ago that nopony knows how or why things happened back then.”

My thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a bridge spanning a narrow in the reservoir. The sight of the cantilever structure made me look at Deus. “Is that going to hold him?”

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. “Blackjack, given all you’ve seen, how can you doubt Equestrian engineering? Even after two hundred years, it’s probably as strong as it’s ever been.”

“When you have four anchors for legs, *then* you can tell me not to worry,” I said with a scowl as I walked to the front of the tank. When Deus stopped, I hopped off and trotted ahead. “Just let me go a little bit ahead and check for weak spots.”

Glory landed on one side of me, and P-21 trotted up on the other. For a moment it was almost like when we’d first set off in the Wasteland, even if Glory looked like Rainbow Dash now. Why, we even had Deus following us!

Rampage turned out to be correct: the bridge was entirely sound and we reached the central span of the structure without incident. Then I spotted a red bar straight ahead of us. Then more. I stopped and drew the assault carbine with my magic. P-21 disappeared off to the side almost instantly. Looked like the Harbingers had picked an excellent place for an ambu—

“Lookie here! Two fine ladies wanting to use our bridge,” a unicorn stallion called out as a half dozen bandits trotted out from behind the cover of a rusty skywagon laying on its side in the middle of the road. A mustard yellow unicorn wearing patched-up spiked barding gave a cocky grin as he approached, his black mane pulled into something that might vaguely be a style. Then his eyes landed on Glory. “With a Rainbow Dash impersonator. Whatever is the Wasteland coming to?”

A badly scarred brown earth stallion stepped up next to the unicorn as the the first pony twirled his goatee with a hoof. He eyed us both in wary confusion. “Um, Snide? Shouldn’t they have brahmin if they’re traders? I mean, she’s got a beamy gun, and her legs are metal. Maybe we should let them by.”

“Nonsense!” The unicorn said with a toss of his head as he looked at us. “The toll is one hundred caps each. If you two make like good little ladies and don’t raise a fuss, we’ll let you go without trouble.” He smiled broadly. “You have my word.”

“That means we take all their money, right, Snide?” the scarred brute asked. “After

they take it out and stuff?”

“Oh do shut up, Numbskull,” the unicorn snapped.

“You’re . . . just robbers?” I asked slowly as I looked around at the half dozen ponies.

“You’re not with the Harbingers?”

“My, somepony is slow on the uptake,” Snide snorted, rolling his eyes and getting a chuckle out of his men. “Now, make like good ponies and hand over the caps.”

I gave a crooked smile to Glory. With S.A.T.S. we could vaporize the lot of them in a flash. “Um, maybe you should listen to your friend there. Haven’t you heard about a cyberpony trotting around here? Calls herself Security?”

“Yeah, right. Everypony knows that Security never comes this far south,” Snide said with another snort.

“I don’t know, Snide. I mean, she does got them metal legs.” The big one rubbed his chin with a brass hoof. “I really think we should just let them by.”

“See? That’s where you messed up, Numbskull. You used the word think. The thinking is my job.” He turned back to me and sighed, rolling his eyes once more. “Good help is so very hard to find. Now, where were we?”

I sighed and rubbed my face. “Look. I understand that you’re just trying to get by. I do. And if you actually protected travelers as they crossed, I probably wouldn’t mind. But your friend is right. I am Security, and if you try and shake me down, it’s going to go very badly for you.”

“Please! Do you really think you’re the first mare who’s claimed that? If we let everypony saying she’s Security through here then we might as well just throw in the towel.” He squinted at my legs. “Probably sheet metal. And Security’s legs are white, not black. Or so I heard.”

But there was one in the back, a dirty brown stallion with a pair of hoofcuffs on his flank, who seemed to have second thoughts; a terrified, haunted look crossing his face. He didn’t just think I was Security. He knew me.

“I dunno Boss. Maybe we should tell her the sob story? You know, the one you told us in case we ever ran into her?” The scarred brute turned to me. “We was all part of a nice and peaceful settlement long ways from here when we was attacked by a lot o’ bad ponies. So now we is here to be good ponies! And we don’t do nothing bad. Ever! Cross me heart and hope to cry and. . . um. . . something ‘bout eyes.” He crossed his brass hooves over his chest. I felt a rumble through my hooves.

“Oh shut up!” the unicorn snapped, smacking the scarred pony upside his head. “We only tell that story if we’re sure its Security! Now get over there and take all their caps, you idiot!”

Then the lot of us were painted by Deus’s headlights. The two cannons and machine gun turrets oriented right towards the band of raiders. Three power-armored pegasi and an alicorn flew above him like an avenging wing of death. Rampage lounged on the hood in her spiked armor, pressing one hoof to the metal just hard enough for the magic talismans to release one small arc of electricity. “We got tired of waiting.”

Snide gaped at the sight of more death than he’d probably ever seen pointed at him in his life and then stared at me, his pupils constricting to points as he adopted a rictus grin. “Loveliest settlement you ever saw! Most peaceful ponies in all the wasteland, we were.”

“Skip it,” I replied with a small smile.

“Quick! Use the failsafe!” Snide shouted as he whirled to run, and was struck in the face by a chunk of metal tossed by P-21.

“Your failsafe was garbage,” the blue pony retorted. “Ten fragmentation grenades and a half dozen bricks of C-4 wouldn’t even dent the underside of this bridge with your layout.”

“Oh. That’s... good to know...” Snide held the scrap of metal in his hooves and then dropped it as he turned back to me. “Oh fine! You got us! Another scourge of the Wasteland destroyed. Huzzah! Just make it quick.”

I just sighed and covered my face. “Contrary to popular belief, I don’t play judge and executioner. I haven’t heard anything about a band of raiders raping and murdering everyone trying to use this bridge. If I search that skywagon, am I going to find a bunch of raped and brutalized ponies?” I asked slowly.

“What? No!” Snide said quickly, looking repulsed, and uneasy. “We can go to Flank if we want that! We’re just... trying to get by,” he finished lamely as he spread his hooves.

“And I can respect that,” I said in low, reasonable tones. “In fact, if you can keep this bridge safe for travelers, I imagine most wouldn’t mind paying a small fee.” When his gaze turned sly, I added, “Small, reasonable, manageable fee!” He immediately bobbed his head, the relief evident as it spread across his face.

Glory leaned in. “Are you sure this is okay, Blackjack?”

"No," I replied, trying not to look uncertain. "But I'm not an executioner. I've worked with gangers before. I have to give them a chance." But the brown earth pony stallion was still acting quite skittish, and finally it got on my nerves. I looked right at him and snapped, "Is there a problem?"

He didn't answer, but P-21 did. "You!" the earth pony shouted as he charged the wastelander. The others watched in astonished bafflement as the blue earth pony slammed the brown stallion against the rails.

"Get off me!" he spluttered in anger, but I saw the fear in his eyes. . . eyes that were on me.

"He's from the Seahorse!" P-21 shouted. "He's one of the stallions you spared!"

A strange calm stole over me and I felt a wire drawn tight inside me. "I see," was all I could manage as my horn slowly lifted Vigilance. "Tell me. . . this pony. . . has he raped anyone the last few days?"

"Shut up!" the brown earth pony shouted.

"What? Clink?" Snide looked at the brown stallion in bafflement. "What if he did?"

"Because. . . I gave him his life once when he wronged me." I was astonished by how calm I felt. Serene, even. "So tell me, has he?"

Snide coughed and looked away. "Well, you see, one can't be that picky recruiting help and. . ."

"Course he did." The confused, scarred stallion frowned and answered, "That caravaner's daughter. Remember? Wanted to keep slaves and all."

"Shut up!" Clink screamed as he shoved P-21 away and started to run. My bullet flew with all the accuracy of S.A.T.S. right through the back of his rear right knee and he collapsed, screaming. I'd screamed like that once, recently. Slowly I advanced with sublime calm. Screaming obscenities, he flopped and writhed, and yet I had no problem blasting another knee cap.

"Please!" he begged as he tried to shield his face. "You said you weren't an executioner! Please!" He cried out as I calmly advanced.

Be Kind!

No, Fluttershy. Not this time.

Do better!

It's not for me to do better. It was him. Now I am going to do better. . .

I pointed the gun right at his head as he lay there in a spreading pool of filth. I was fairly certain he'd be crippled for life; perhaps he'd bleed out. But I looked down the barrel and stared right into his eye. I'd given him mercy and he'd squandered it. He'd hurt others. It was every bit my fault. If I'd killed him, he wouldn't have hurt another pony. . .

All I had to do was become a killer.

I stared straight into his eye, everyone watching both of us, as I tried to summon up every iota of pain, shame, and humiliation I'd suffered that horrible time. I needed only a few pounds of pressure to kill him. The bullet would tear through his brain like a sledgehammer. Glory watched with a mix of sadness and concern; was she afraid I'd do it, or that I wouldn't? P-21 just stared with quiet certainty. If I didn't, he would. All the others left it up to me.

"Why?" I whispered, whether to him or to myself, I didn't know. "Why do you have to make it so... fucking... difficult?!" I spat as a tear ran down my cheek. Would the Wasteland not be happy till I'd shed that last little inch? Till I lowered myself into the blood and slaughtered like my enemies? I wasn't a killer. Wasn't an executioner. That was it. My last tiny connection between that poor clueless mare who'd left 99 and this half metal monstrosity I was now...

"I'm sorry! Please! I'm so sorry..." the stallion groveled.

A thread of integrity. It was all I had. Kill this stallion; give him the gift of death. Punish him and prevent him from harming another. And worst of all: I wanted to. I wanted so much that my muscles ached with the need to harm him. To cast away that last little inch of integrity. To do what any mare in all the Wasteland should do; would do at the drop of a hat. . .

But I wasn't a killer.

Maybe the stallion saw it in my eyes, but the fear in him melted away. The corner of his mouth twisted in disbelief that I was weak enough to spare him twice. Even with a glowing pistol pointed right at his face, he knew I couldn't pull the trigger.

The round ripped right between his eyes and sprayed his brains across the crumbled asphalt.

No. . .

I stared at his limp body. That... that hadn't happened. Couldn't... never... Then I heard the most gentle whisper through my mind.

'Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another.'

I didn't talk to anypony for almost an hour after that, walking along behind the tank and lost in my own thoughts. Glory tried talking to me every few minutes before giving up and leaving me alone. Snide had promised everything from his firstborn to his mother not to be next; apparently summary executions were quite persuasive. No wonder they were so common. If I'd just started killing people from the outset, the Hoof would probably be fixed by now.

Unfortunately, my friends didn't seem to remember that I had augmented hearing. "I'm sure that Blackjack will be fine, Glory. You said that if you ever came across any of those four that you'd kill them too," Rampage said.

"I know what I said, but I didn't think Blackjack would do it," Glory retorted. "She's always been so adamant on not being an executioner."

"Yeah. Softest heart in the Wasteland," Rampage drawled. "Look, everypony has to bust their murder cherry eventually. Blackjack finally popped hers. She'll get over it."

I didn't want to get over it. I didn't want to do it at all.

"You know something's wrong with Blackjack though," Glory said with a glance back at me. "She's changing. I can see it."

"We've all changed. You're Rainbow Dash now, remember?" Rampage said.

"Please don't remind me. We're moving so slowly it makes me want to scream," Glory replied sharply, then sighed. "I don't know. I worry about her all the time. It's like there's something inside her and it's twisting and turning her about. If only she'd talk to me. . ."

If you only knew, Glory. If I only could. . .

"It boils down to this: do you trust Blackjack?" P-21 said to the others.

"Pick a day. Sometimes she's so good she makes me scream. And then she pulls something like this," Rampage replied. "I know I'm the group bag of crazy, but you have to admit that BJ's right up there with me."

I waited to hear Glory disagree with her. Her silence contorted inside me.

"We just have to be there for her. As simple as that," P-21 replied. "As much as she's been there for us."

"It will work out," Glory said with one last glance back at me and the smallest smile. She still had hope. . . even after everything I'd done.

"You know better," the Dealer rasped beside me. I looked at the gaunt, pale stallion with a twinge of annoyance. How easy it was for him, riding along in my Pipbuck, when I was the one who pulled the trigger.

"What do I know?" I snapped back at him. "That it's wrong to kill ponies? That I should try and do better? That—" I saw Glory and everyone looking at me oddly and said sarcastically, "I'm just talking to the invisible pony that lives in my PipBuck, folks." Everypony just pointedly looked away.

"What you should know is to skip this whole cycle of hating yourself and then pitying yourself. It's really not healthy and it makes you really whiny," he said as he walked along with a scowl. "If Clink had lived two centuries ago, he would have spent the rest of his life in Hightower, or worse. There was always 'worse' towards the end. And I know his victims wouldn't have shed a tear."

"I killed him. Or I've finally snapped and gone full Crazytown." He cocked his head. "I have Psalm in my dreams, and now I'm hearing her in my thoughts when I'm awake. So between her, the. . . nnnghhh. . . and you, my brain is getting pretty damned crowded at the moment!" Dealer just looked at me with a mix of patience and resignation, "Did you know it was Psalm who shot Big Macintosh? Not a zebra. One of our own! Trying to kill Celestia!" I gave a little scream and smacked my head with a metal hoof. "And now that. . . that thing. . . is inside me!" I'd pitied Psalm. Now I was turning into her.

"I knew. I'd heard the transmission," he said grimly. "But Big Macintosh's body wasn't even cold before the report went out. There was no investigation of his death. It wasn't even a day before Goldenblood disappeared her into the O.I.A. "

"And you didn't tell anypony?"

"Who would I tell? Pinkie Pie? Rarity?" he snorted, "Everypony wanted to believe it was a zebra that killed Big Macintosh, so it was. The triumphant hero sacrificing himself for the greater cause while protecting the princess. I would have been labelled a crackpot conspiracy theorist, or worse, disappeared myself. I sometimes think that Goldenblood took me into the O.I.A. just because I knew. Don't you understand? History isn't truth. History is what everypony decides to settle on as what happened. But behind that there are a thousand little causes and twists and permutations in the cracks that shape events. You're seeing everything I saw. And if you're

feeling disillusioned, then congratulations! You've finally stumbled onto the truth."

"You know what else is the truth? I'm a murderer. I killed him." I grit my teeth, feeling everything fall apart. "Damn me... I wanted to so badly. I wanted him dead. But I couldn't... and then..."

"Then I pulled the trigger," a solemn voice said inside me. For an instant I was sure that Psalm was now talking to me, but it was the comforting voice of Lacunae. The large purple alicorn landed next to me. "You aren't the only pony with magic, Blackjack." She'd been all the way back by the tank; how had she reached that far?

"You... but... *why*?" I mentally stammered back at her.

For the longest moment I felt a baffling deluge of emotion pouring off Lacunae. "Do you know what would have happened if you hadn't killed him? If P-21 or somepony else had been forced to do it for you? You would have become a joke, Blackjack." Her words were firm and decisive, not at all like I was used to. But behind that was a reek of shame and guilt that I couldn't ignore.

"Lacunae... what's wrong?" I asked. That sense of guilt increased, pungent like ammonia in my mind.

"Nothing's wrong. I simply did what had to be done," she said, so cold that I wondered if somehow this was the Goddess. Except the Goddess wouldn't have been trying to reassure me. "You want to change the Wasteland? Well, unfortunately, fear has a powerful effect on others. If it became known that you were so merciful that you couldn't kill your own rapist just because he said 'sorry', then every raider with half a brain left would wring their hooves and recant their ways only to return to raping and killing as soon as you had disappeared over the horizon. Your friends would have to kill on your behalf, and it doesn't matter how loving or tough they are; that would poison your relationship with them."

Speaking of relationships... "Lacunae..."

She ignored me, almost in a rush as she thought at me, "So I pulled the trigger. It's my fault. Understand, Blackjack?"

"Lacunae..."

"Do you want to be a killer?" Lacunae snapped, half desperate as she looked down at me with an expression of almost frantic need for agreement.

That finally provoked a response. "No... I don't want to be a killer," I said quietly. "I don't want to turn into Psalm. I know what I did at Yellow River... what I'm capable

of.”

The Maiden of the Stars shall bring death and destruction.

“It’s not your fault, Blackjack. It’s mine. Put it out of your mind,” Lacunae said solemnly. “I’ll do whatever I can to keep you from being an executioner.”

Lacunae’s strange behavior almost distracted me from what’d happened, but I couldn’t put it out of my mind. Ever since I’d first dreamed of Psalm, I’d felt myself changing. I wasn’t completely sure who was in charge of me anymore. Was Blackjack at the controls? Psalm? The Goddess? The Dealer? The stars? I felt like I was dancing on strings and had no idea who was pulling them. Even Goldenblood and his damned projects were tugging at me from two centuries in the past. They were woven into my very body.

The problem was that the idea that I wasn’t in control of myself was so wonderfully seductive. All I had to do was simply believe it, and the burden of responsibility would be lifted from my shoulders. It was the refuge of every madpony and monster: don’t blame me, I can’t help it. And the most terrifying thought was that it might be true. What if I wasn’t in control? What if any one of those things was manipulating me? Everything I’d ever seen looked manipulated and contrived; how could I be any different? Even now, Lacunae’s assurances felt superficial and false. Maybe she was just lying to try and make me feel better about Clink. Maybe the Goddess was making her lie. How could I trust anything at this point?

The Marauders had broken apart. Dawn’s companions had too. Maybe friendship itself was a contrived convenience so we wouldn’t feel so lonely and vulnerable. Were we even friends?

I wanted to cut those strings so badly I could scream.

But I knew I couldn’t do it alone. . . I’d tried that, and I’d gone far too close to full madness than I ever wanted to imagine.

I looked up at those ponies riding on the tank and sighed, then looked at Lacunae. “Can you give me a lift?” The alicorn nodded and carried me up onto the tank turret, where they made room for me. “Hey,” I said as I took a seat between Glory and P-21, putting a hoof around the former’s shoulders and giving her a nuzzle. “Mind if we talk a little about what happened?”

Glory nearly cried as she smiled and nodded. “Sure.”

Okay, so it was a bit of a mess, but over the next blubbery hour we talked. I told them everything I could that didn't involve the Goddess or Lacunae's claim that it was she who'd pulled the trigger. I confessed my fears and frustrations, the idea that maybe I wasn't in control of myself as much as I should have been. There wasn't much my friends could do besides listen, but they did. And afterwards, I found that, despite everything, I did feel a little better.

We were now further southeast than I had ever been before. The bare dirt was studded with rocks and the detritus of ten years of war. There were the hulls of tanks and skywagons left to rust, crumbling fortifications and blast barriers that leaned this way and that along the road. We drove by the massive remains of what I suspected was a Raptor. A little to the northeast was a building so wide and massive that, at first, I'd thought it was a more angular mountain.

A mystery for another day; we'd reached the turnoff to the base. A bullet-holed sign pointed the way off the main road and to the southeast.

The wide, low rise the base lay upon was shrouded in mist. Wisps and vapors curled around us as we moved slowly along the road up towards the clusters of reinforced buildings. A sulfurous scent tanged the air, and muddy patches of steamy water bubbled and trickled beside the road. The detritus almost like a scrapyard, there was so much ruin. A monument to squandered blood and treasure. Then a discolored plaque on a bullet-chipped concrete block came into view: Grimhoof Army Base. Beyond, I could make out the vaguest hints of huge, squatting buildings half hidden by the mist.

"Oh, this has bad written all over it," Rampage said as she hopped off Deus and down to the crumbling gates. Even Deus seemed to be trying to be quieter in the concealing fog. "Is there anything you can do about this?" she asked Glory and the Neighvarro trio.

"We could, but everything would know we're here," Twister said as she looked around, her beam rifles humming softly. "We'd be stealthier without the tank, you know."

"Maybe. But I've met a hellhound. I definitely want superior firepower if we need it," I muttered as we reached the twisted and rusted gates. "Why would the Enclave be interested in hellhounds in the first place?" I asked Twister. P-21 took one look at the rusted lock on the gate and gave a shake of his head.

"I don't know. Intelligence, that is, Thunderhead, said they'd make ideal and easily controlled shock troops," Twister said she popped the rusted-over lock easily with

her power-armored hooves. "But if we're maintaining our separation policy, what do we care what's on the surface? We can't house hellhounds in clouds. Can't control or monitor them on the ground. It didn't make any sense."

"Hell. It'd make more sense to back groups of earth pony mercenaries," Boomer muttered. "Give 'em weapons, food, and supplies and have 'em conquer the surface for us." I thought of Harbinger and his talk with the Goddess, the Goddess providing support and security and the Enclave providing firepower.

"Or you could actually engage the surface peacefully," Glory snapped at the trio. "Trade food for materials? Things like that?"

"As thrilling as politics are, aren't we trying to be quiet?" P-21 asked as he moved forward. Smart pony had a good point.

Deus had a momentary pause at the gates, and then the front of the machine opened up and two mandibles began to pull the gates into the front of the tank. Though I winced at the popping and jingling, it was over in just a few seconds. I guessed that was how the tank recovered metal for its repair talisman. Since nothing came after us immediately, I guessed we'd dodged a bullet.

Moving into the base, it was clear that these reinforced buildings had been heavily targeted by the enemy. My radmeter began to tick immediately and spiked whenever we drew close to the hulking structures. Some looked as if they'd been directly targeted by tactical balefire weaponry, the concrete blackened and the reinforcing steel melted and warped. There were larger weapons that had been reduced to distorted figures of rust, their twisted barrels thrust defiantly upwards in the mist.

And there were red bars. Everywhere I turned there was a red bar moving this way or that. Were there Enclave pegasi flying silently in the fog above us? Were hellhounds hiding in the ruined hulks of the structures around us waiting to spring an ambush? The quiet rumble of Deus was the only sound I could make out. Lacunae, Glory, and the Neighvarro trio hovered above us. Rampage and I flanked Deus. P-21 had disappeared into the mist. Scotch Tape and Boo rode on the turret. We had more firepower in one place and time than I'd ever had before.

So why was my mane going crazy?

Scotch Tape began to struggle with Boo, and the olive filly said as loudly as she dared, "Blackjack? What's wrong with her? Settle down, Boo!"

But Boo wasn't settling down. She struggled to get away... away from what though? Deus was the safest thing around. But I trusted the white pony's instincts and said,

“Let her go.” Scotch looked at me skeptically, then released the blank mare. She immediately scrambled off the tank and backed away from it. . . and then she suddenly looked down and jumped aside, then jumped yet again. Like there was something wrong with the ground. . .

Dogs dig. . .

I watched her, and then slowly knelt down, turned, and pressed the side of my head to the cool, wet asphalt. For several seconds I felt completely ridiculous. Then I heard it: a deep, hollow scraping noise, followed by another and then another. Then there was a pause... followed by the whine of a magical energy weapon being primed right beneath my head.

I fell back just a second before a crimson beam tore up through the asphalt and into the sky. “They’re below!” was all I got out before the ground exploded and a massive canine monster tore through with one claw while the other brought the largest energy pistol I’d ever seen to bear. I floated out Vigilance and jumped immediately into S.A.T.S., firing five rounds into its snarling brownish-black face. The bullets turned its face into a bloody ruin of meat and bone, but they didn’t kill it; the beast wasn’t even injured enough to retreat! Instead it clawed the air in front of me, claws ripping four furrows in the asphalt as it began to fire wildly. The energy weapon crackled with unstable malice as it unloaded again and again.

There were two more pops, and two more hellhounds emerged from the asphalt, bringing even larger magical weapons to bear. The scarlet beams flamed in the air as they tore up at our fliers. The radiation pouring from the holes spiked my PipBuck; I didn’t want to imagine the source. Every one of the hellhounds wore a bizarre chrome helmet that seemed out of place with their crude weaponry and claw-cut and hammered armor.

Overhead, Lacunae carefully sighted down her scope, ignoring the hissing hellhound energy weapons as she sent armor-piercing steel through their skulls like a smiting Goddess. There was a desperate edge to her telepathic voice that belied the cold expression on her face. “No more...” she repeated over and over again. One of the emerging hellhounds started to strafe in my direction, and Lacunae actually shouted aloud, “Leave her alone!” before blowing his head apart in a shower of brain and skull.

Deus gunned his engine, his machine guns swinging forward and spraying the hounds in their holes, but they disappeared almost instantly, as if ready for it. I pressed myself to the ground and fired the entire ten-round clip into the hellhound

in front of me before it finally dropped back into the hole. Victory?

No. Boo, staring wide-eyed at the walls, still appeared as scared as before. “They’re not gone!” I called out as I loaded a fresh magazine filled with armor-piercing rounds. Then the wall of the massive building beside the tank gave a crack and detached from the rest of the structure, tipping slowly at first, as the foundation crumbled. P-21 ran up alongside the tank and Scotch Tape jumped onto his back. The filly clung for dear life to him as he beat a hasty retreat. Just behind him, the great slab of wall fell like a descending drawbridge and with a squeal of metal and explosion of dust collapsed onto Deus.

I’d have been concerned about P-21 and Scotch Tape, but even with his burden he practically danced around the chunks while I scrambled for safety. The pair disappeared in the cloud of pulverized architecture. Emerging from the gap left by the fallen wall were four more hellhounds. Two dropped to one knee behind a chunk of rubble and sprayed the skies with a hissing, crackling gatling variety of beaminess while the other two lunged for Rampage and me. The heavily-plated hounds dragged their claws along the asphalt, the long edges of their talons filling the air with an ominous scraping as they closed the distance.

Rampage didn’t wait for the hellhounds to close; the adolescent mare roared a challenge of her own and charged. She leaped and smashed all four powerhooves against the first hellhound’s face. The energy cells discharged, blasting her away to backflip through the air and land as the hellhound staggered. Rampage wasted no time, charging again right between the hellhound’s legs and running the serrated spine of her armor against something quite tender that tore a howl from the hound. The razorwire woven into her tail caught in the matted crotch of the beast, and with a yank pulled the hellhound to sit on the broken pavement. Rampage then rose and brought down her hooves in a flashing storm of blows to the hellhound’s neck and skull till something cracked inside.

I didn’t have the luxury of her size or pointed edges as I drew my silver sword and swung it in a futile effort to keep the beast attacking me at bay. Even though the edge was sharp enough to cut through the heavy steel plating, I didn’t have the magical strength to push it through on my own. The hellhound leered as I danced back, the razor sharp claws of one hand slashing around as I tried to block the other. Vigilance punched holes in the hellhound, but I wasn’t really doing much in the way of damage. Worse, I suspected from the lack of blood that the creature might be regenerating!

Not good.

I swapped to the shotgun as I gave ground, but the buckshot mostly deflected off my foe. I swapped to the assault carbine, but the close quarters meant that I was firing wildly at best. I suddenly felt a wall behind me, and the hellhound sprang. Sword and forelimbs stopped claws that could carve through stone. Quickly, I twisted to the side so I could give more ground. "Damnit! I am not breaking these legs!" I swore as the claws carved shallow channels into the black metal with mere glancing blows; Celestia help me if those things landed a direct strike!

The hellhound suddenly lifted its powerful forelegs and flipped me with a crash onto my back. It spread its mighty arms wide and let out a shattering roar of victory.

A dull 'thhmp' went off in the mist behind me and the hellhound's yellow, bloodshot eyes widened in shock as it clutched its throat. A second later its torso erupted in two jets of gore spurting up and down as the grenade went off. P-21 trotted out of the shadows with Scotch Tape behind him, looking scared, and shoved me back to my hooves without a word, and I felt myself go red.

Right now really wasn't the time for this....

Glory and the pegasi were keeping the two shooters busy, trading fire back and forth. Deus's engine roared as his treads clawed at the asphalt, slowly pulling himself out from under the slab. Suddenly, though, a piece of the road next to him gave way with a crash. The hellhounds were trying to undermine the tank before he could pull free! If he got buried... "Deus! Fire!" I shouted. "Get clear!"

There was a muffled explosion as the section of wall split into three smoking chunks and flew away from the front of the tank. One arched high and came down on a hellhound more keen on shooting Lacunae than paying attention directly above him. It landed with a resounding crunch. Now freed of the wall, Deus retreated several yards as the road collapsed in a sinkhole just where he had been. Four hellhounds blinked up as they stared at the twin cannons in horrified realization.

Not even hellhound hide was tough enough to withstand that! Still, there were a lot more of them. They clawed their way out of the ground and poured out of the irradiated army buildings, their crude but powerful energy weapons crackling and filling the air with buzzing beams of death. "We need to move!" I yelled. Lacunae levitated Scotch up onto her back while coolly taking aim and blasting a hellhound through the skull with her anti machine rifle.

The tank rolled forward and launched up the far side of the crater, then climbed over the crumbled wall. Machine guns chattered as they chewed into the hellhounds trying to climb out of their holes; he lead the way, Boo, Rampage, and myself following

in his wake. Lacunae and the pegasi rained down fire behind us to deter pursuit. The shielded alicorn seemed to be an irresistible target to the Hellhounds. Maybe they had some issue with alicorns I wasn't aware of?

"They must be being controlled by the Enclave through those helmets!" Glory shouted from above. "That's what's making them attack us!"

"I hate to disagree, but this is fairly typical behavior for their kind," Lacunae pointed out as her shield flared under the barrage. She then flew to one of the rusted rooftop weapons, teleported above a trio of hellhounds with the lump of metal, and dropped it on the beasts. The hellhounds tried to dive aside, but it managed to crush one beneath its oxidized hulk. Red and green beams from the pegasi swiftly turned his two friends to dust before they could disappear into the earth. There were more coming, though.

"Move, move, move!" I shouted as I ran.

P-21, panting, struggled to keep up. "Always with the running thing," he muttered. I dodged behind him, ducked my head, and with a lunge I scooped him up onto my back. His forehooves hugged my neck as I raced to catch up with the others. "Okay... this works..." Then he shook his mane, pulled out an apple grenade, tugged the stem, and let it fly behind us and into the ranks of the hellhounds. The shrapnel didn't kill them, but at least it kept them from blasting us for a few moments.

"Why do all your fights turn into running battles, Blackjack?" Rampage asked. Two hellhounds poked their snouts out from a blown-out door, taking a bead on Boo. Rampage, with swiftness that shocked even me, charged the pair. The armored mare rolled and body slammed them with her spikes, knocking them back. Their crackling, sizzling weapons fired wildly, and the two beasts amazingly dusted each other!

Rampage stood and shook the glowing powder off with a baffled look. "Huh; that's new." The bloody mare beamed at the blank pony. "Good job drawing them out, Boo." Boo just trembled in fear, looking as if she wished nothing more than to be back in Star House with a Fancy Buck cake.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Rampage continued, "don't get me wrong. This running and fighting is a whole lot of fun, but I'd really appreciate a little variety in the future!"

"Sorry to be so predictable!" I jumped and rolled aside as the ground gave way beneath me, blasting the hound with the levitated shotgun as it emerged, not doing much harm but surprising the creature. I might not be as sneaky on these hooves,

but it was clear that I could still move as quickly when I needed to. Then I saw Deus driving beneath a footbridge between two of the large buildings and saw the pack of hellhounds perched along the edge. “Look out!”

But it was too late. As Deus passed under them, a half-dozen of the armored beasts dropped down and began to rip into his armor with their claws. He tried to strafe them with the machine gun turrets, but the creatures wrecked the turrets with rending rakes from their talons before he was able to do any real damage. “Hold on! We’ll help!” I shouted as I raced to try and pick them off the tank.

Deus had other ideas. He suddenly swerved and, engines roaring, blasted the reinforced wall of a building ahead and charged straight into the hole. A cacophony of screaming metal, roaring engine, and ripping steel filled the air, and a great storm of dust blew out the windows as he passed. From the crashing within, I suspected he was taking the roof down as well. Suddenly there was another concussive blast, and Deus erupted back out onto the street from another newly-made door, his scoured armor free of any clinging hellhounds.

He rolled to a stop, trailing dust and smoke. “Or... that’ll work.” I admitted. Deus’s engine gave a guttering laugh as the rips and tears slowly started to repair themselves. Scotch Tape shuddered and averted her eyes; I could understand why. The rent machine looked like a banged-up skull. Lacunae and the pegasi, having seen that we were free from pursuit at this particular moment, flew down to join us. I glanced back the way we’d come; that was a whole lot of red bars... “We can’t keep running and shooting. Grawnerer or whatever his name was said that the Enclave were controlling them. We need to find out how and stop it. Personally, though, I’m more interested in why the Enclave is here in the first place than the gadget they’re using.” The Neighvarro pegasi gave firm nods of agreement.

Scotch Tape staggered down from Lacunae’s back and onto mine. Glory looked at my forehoof critically. “If they’re broadcasting a signal, you should be able to pick it up on your PipBuck, Blackjack. Just try to find a frequency in the P band and...” She met my flat gaze and adjusted. “Look for the strongest channel. It’ll probably be a lot of buzzing and screeching terminal talk.”

“Thank you,” I said as I looked behind us. “We’re going to have to split up. These hounds really seem to love chasing Deus. He can take them for a run. Sunset, Boomer, and Twister can help keep them away. Lacunae can keep contact between us.” I wouldn’t elaborate on how. “If we stop the broadcast, then hopefully the hellhounds will let us go. If not, then we run and tell Rover to teach his cousins about gratitude.”

“Sorry. We’re going to need one flier with you,” Twister said firmly. “We were sent to find out what Thunderhead is up to. I can’t run the risk that you withhold information.”

“Fine. You can—” I started to say when Sunset stepped forward.

“I’ll go,” the mare said in a firm tone that allowed no argument. Twister looked a touch surprised at the mare’s assertiveness. Sunset went on, “You’re a better fighter than I am, Sergeant, and you’ll need Boomer’s missiles.” Twister looked at Boomer, who merely shrugged, and then back at the black armored mare.

“Alright, Sunset. Keep a sharp eye and report back whatever you find,” Twister said before taking to the air again. Deus gunned his engines and roared off back down the road with the two power-armored pegasi and alicorn in flight. We moved off to the side, and a minute later I felt a vibration underhoof. Nobody should be able to dig that fast. Perhaps they were taking existing tunnels and just digging the final stretches on the spot? When I started to move, P-21 reached out and stopped me. A second later I saw the slower red bars. Hellhound flankers moved along, sniffing at the air as they pointed their ponderous, cobbled-together weapons about warily.

For an instant, I was sure that we were doomed. I started to lift the carbine, but P-21 gave me the softest nudge; I glanced down and watched him give his head a tiny shake. I had to trust the smarter pony. A minute later the hellhounds straightened and took off after Deus as well.

“We’re downwind,” P-21 said simply as he slung Persuasion around his neck once more. Boo had relaxed as well; I supposed that that would do.

I frowned as I looked around, but had no idea what I was looking for. A giant Enclave flag? A map with ‘Hellhound Control Center’ clearly marked would be nice. I looked at Glory with a hapless smile. “Ideas?”

Glory frowned and flew up a short way, turning this way and that before she landed. “Can I see your broadcaster?” she asked. I thrust out my PipBuck, and she began to fiddle with it. “Wouldn’t use a broadcast band... P band... yeah. There!” A screeching, buzzing noise emanated from my Pipbuck, and I immediately turned the volume way down. “That must be it. Now...” She repeated the same process with her own PipBuck, then finally worked on Sunset’s armor. “Now, you stay here, Blackjack, and swing your hoof around till the noise is loudest. I’ll fly a hundred yards north, Sunset can fly a hundred yards south, and we’ll triangulate on the transmission source.”

Did I mention how much I loved ponies smarter than me?

Following her directions, we managed to find a general direction in which the signal was stronger than others. Grimhorn had a completely different layout from Miramare or Ironmare. Dozens of reinforced structures were clustered together between large expanses of open terrain. In the distance, we saw Deus tearing across the Wasteland with a crowd of Hellhounds in close pursuit. If it hadn't been for that, we never would have been able to dash across the breaks in cover. In several places we were literally tiptoeing around radioactive holes dug in the earth. While the misty fog might have given some cover from sight, I didn't know how well the hellhounds could sniff us out.

"What's down there?" Scotch Tape asked as we passed by one of the radioactive pits.

"Who knows? Dysfunctional balefire bombs? Magical waste? Leaking Stable-Tec reactors? I don't want to find out," I said. Nothing good was underground in Hoofington.

Yet I spotted what I hoped was our destination: a cluster of buildings, one of which had several large dishes pointed up at the sky. While many were streaked with rust, I suspected they still worked. The persistent cloud bank surrounding them was another strong indication of something pegasus-related.

Then there was a whoosh overhead, and two Vertibucks passed above us, stirring the air and exposing us; fortunately, the two vehicles seemed to have bigger things to worry about at the moment as they rushed towards the structure with the large dishes. "Is it just me, or does it feel like something is going on?" I asked as the clouds closed in once more. Carefully, we picked our way forward. All it would take was one perceptive hellhound or one EFS, and we'd be given away.

Then we found the dead zebras and hellhounds, the bodies only a few days old, scattered across the broken ground; dozens of striped corpses lay among about the dead canines. It'd taken headshots from skilled snipers to drop the beasts. From the ashes strewn about, I could only imagine how many had actually been killed. Still, the presence of the zebras baffled me; what were they doing here? Was this another thing like Yellow River, or something else? It was a hell of a coincidence...

"Blackjack..." Glory said as she knelt by a severed zebra head. A hellhound claw had ripped the side of the face clean off... and revealed the metal beneath. Not a zebra... a cyberzebra. I stared in shock as I spotted more in the wreckage.

Up ahead there were sounds of gunshots, the zap of energy weapons, and hellhound roars. "What the heck is happening?" Scotch Tape asked, standing on my

back and shielding her eyes as if that would allow her to peer through the mist.

“We need to get higher...” I said, looking around the rooftops. One of the buildings next to the structure with the three large dishes had a wooden scaffold lashed to the side. It creaked beneath my hooves but held my weight. We made it up to the third story. Clearly this rooftop was some kind of camp. There were glyph-marked ammo crates half-concealed underneath canvas sheets. The center of the building had long ago collapsed and lay as a heap on the first floor, leaving the roof as a balcony around a hole.

Boo hung back, looking scared.

I slowly moved to the edge of the building where somepony had left a pair of binoculars. Peering through them at the buildings next door, I spotted two that were surrounded by a barricade of rubble. Hellhounds, looking haggard and exhausted even for clawed monsters, seemed to be battling dozens, perhaps hundreds of zebras. The swamp of striped fighters was slowly wearing down the beasts. From atop the buildings, pegasi in black power armor darted out of cover to strafe the striped attackers and then returned to cover before deadly sniper fire could drop them. I saw the two Vertibucks landing on the far side of the dished building.

Then I was shot in the back.

The bullet smashed hard against the base of my neck, sparking off the reinforcement along my spine. Funny, something about the gunshot seemed awfully familiar... I whirled to look for the shooter as my friends dove for what little cover there was. What I saw were ghostly blurs in the mist on the far side of the hole. Glory and Sunset immediately started spraying with their energy weapons while Scotch Tape rolled off my back to take cover next to Boo.

I raced around the hole, gritting my teeth as the shots thudded into me, all blows that hurt but none that would down me outright. I fired ahead of me with Vigilance as I closed the gap between me and the nearest assailant. Blood dripped from the flickering air as I dove at the cloaked zebra. My hooves, however, flailed at nothing as my attacker leapt out of reach at the last second. I laid there, sprawled on the ground, and felt two hooves land on my spine and then a rifle press against the back of my skull. The stealth cloak had fallen open, and I magically jerked the rifle barrel to the side, the round biting a deep hole in the crumbled concrete.

As I struggled to keep the barrel off my skull, I glanced over at my friends. A grenade reduced two blurs into bloody heaps. Glory and Sunset fired red and green bolts of energy at the attackers. One zebra raced at Boo and Scotch Tape along the

edge of the building as if were as wide as a road. Her cloak flew free, revealing a triumphantly grinning mare as she leapt into the air and launched a devastating kick at the white mare. For a moment, I was absolutely certain both were going to die, and then the zebra's snapping cape suddenly whipped across her face, blinding her and causing her hoofstrike to miss by inches. To the astonishment of both the zebra and myself, her leg punched completely through the crumbly roof. The mare struggled to free herself until Scotch Tape rose above her and bashed her skull with a pipe wrench, knocking her out.

Okay... I'd take it and ponder sometime I wasn't fighting for my life.

Knowing my friends weren't going to die in the next few seconds, I focused on my own attacker. The shooter swore in zebra and with even more force tore the rifle's barrel from my magical grasp. I rolled, the shooter jumping once more to avoid falling as I looked up. The barrel filled one eye socket as I stared up into the shocked face of my adversary.

"You?!" Lancer swore. "How! What oath did I swear to be cursed enough to have you show up now?!"

"Back off!" Glory shouted as she pointed her gatling beam gun at him, hovering over the hole. Lancer pressed his forehoof to the trigger. A sharp sneeze might blow my head off. "Don't!"

"I swear, I should have killed you when we first met in that school," the stallion muttered as he looked down at me. "We seem to be at an impasse. A parley seems to be in order."

"Forget it," Scotch Tape shouted as she brandished her wrench.

"The alternative is I die and take the cursed one with me," he countered sharply, not taking his blue eyes off mine. We might be able to kill him if the magic disintegrated him faster than he could move... but anything else would likely have him kill me in his death throes.

"Fine," I said, looking at the others. "Put your weapons away. Remember Brimstone's Fall."

For an instant I thought he was going to shoot me anyway. Then he pulled the batwing-glyphed rifle from my face and stepped off me. "You have impeccable timing, Maiden."

"What's going on here?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, not taking my eyes off the zebra. More were emerging from the lower floors; over a dozen were moving into

position below us to make sure that, if the fighting started, we'd be in a tight pinch. Probably his plan. I looked at him. "Maybe we can help?" The question drew shock from everypony except P-21.

"No. You're a tempest in metal and pony flesh. I'll not—" Lancer began. Then one of the other zebras asked something and it made him grimace. "No. We don't need their help! We'll reclaim what is ours without—" Another sharp question from another zebra stallion, and he snapped back. For several minutes, a trio argued with Lancer. The sniper looked more and more anguished, his mane bristling progressively before he snapped. "Fine!" He rubbed the bridge of his nose, "We are here to take back something stolen from us. What is your business here?"

I glanced at P-21, then said, "We're here to free the hellhounds from the Enclave control."

Lancer closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Of course. Only *you* could want *that*." He looked at me once more. "We've been struggling to breach their defenses. Every hour they bring in those machines and fly out with more of our property."

"I saw the cyberzebras," I said with a nod of my head, and the stallion grimaced.

"Yes, the... Brood of Coyotl. They are formidable..." And from his scowl, not appreciated. "Unfortunately, they are not wearing down the Enclave defenses quickly enough."

"Any other ways in?"

"There are claw-dug tunnels, but they are suicide. We have an underground passage secured, but we have been unable to breach the armored door or hack the terminal. You cursed my finest tech specialist," he said sourly, a hoof stroking the trigger of his gun, "so we have been unable to proceed."

I looked at P-21, and he gave a sure nod. "One last question..." I tilted my head towards the Vertibucks. "What are they taking out of here?"

"Property. *Our* property. Taken long ago," he replied sharply. From the press of his lips, I suspected that that was all I'd get out of him.

"Guess we'll have to get inside to find out. Once we do..." I trailed off, arching a brow.

He took a deep breath. "If you can break the pegasi control over the beasts, we will be able to drive them off. I doubt they will fight for the Enclave of their own volition. We will then reclaim what is ours."

“Fair enough. And you let us out of here,” I added. “Deal?”

He shuddered. “I should have killed you when we first met. You’ve been nothing but misfortune for me since.” Finally, though, he gave a little nod.

“Now, show us to that door...” I said with a grin.

No wonder the hellhounds carved their own tunnels; this door was made to withstand a balefire blast. “Northeast Equestria Satellite Tracking” was stenciled over the front. Claw swipes had scoured the reinforced steel but not breached it. P-21 worked a terminal set in the wall with a thoughtful methodical demeanor that would have had me climbing the walls in frustration.

Lancer hadn’t offered to accompany us, and I wouldn’t have let him. Instead, a half-dozen zebras in black combat barding stood silently at the ready. These were the Brood of Coyotl; they didn’t laugh, talk, glare at me, or do much more than follow. Familiar red lights gleamed in their eyes, but that was the only hint that they’d been augmented. Half wore battle saddles with markspony carbines, while the other half wore powerhooves; there was something vaguely un-zebralike about their armor and weaponry. They wouldn’t go past this point; they were here to stop any hellhounds on the far side from rushing out.

Oh what joy to be caught in the crossfire.

“Any luck?” I asked P-21.

“I’m trying to access a super-secure facility. The password is thirteen characters long. It’s not exactly easy to figure out.” He typed some more on the terminal, scowling as if it’d given him a personal insult.

“Blackjack, what’s wrong with them?” Scotch Tape asked from where she sat with Boo. The filly stared at the armored zebras warily. “They don’t talk. They don’t even move.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. They were used two hundred years ago during the war; I remembered seeing them in Shujaa’s memory. “Maybe they’re just... really focused?” At the moment, I had way too much on my plate to take on new mysteries.

“That’s way more than just focus,” Glory said with a frown. “I’d love to do a physical exam. Take one to Rover and compare their augmentation to yours. It’d be fascinating to see if there’s any commonality in designs.”

"Yeah. Lancer's not going to let that happen," P-21 said from the terminal, then glanced at me with a frown of concern. "You do know he's going to betray us?"

"He's shot me multiple times in the back, and I haven't died yet," I said calmly. "Must be really frustrating for him. Worse, given that the Remnant thinks I'm the Maiden of the Stars." Scotch Tape cocked her head in confusion, and I sighed, "Basically... I'm the zebra devil destined to bring chaos and destruction to the world."

"Oh." The filly smirked, but I could see the thought process work through her head as her smile disappeared. "Oh..."

"I'm not the maiden of anything! I'm not even a maiden! There's certain criteria a mare has to meet in order to be considered a maiden, and I blew that when I was your age," I snapped, making Boo shrink back. Sighing, I added in softer tones, "I don't want to destroy anything, Scotch."

"I didn't say you did, Blackjack. It's just... look at all the things you've done," she said with a tap of her hooves. "I know it's not true..."

P-21 hit a key, and there was a solid clunk and the sounds of working machinery from the door. "There it is. *Constellation*," he said as the door slowly swung open. Its thickness was more than the length of my foreleg. Beyond was a hallway with an icon of four stars on the wall over the acronym N.E.S.T. "Let's hurry. Now that this door is open, I give Lancer five minutes before he storms through here."

As quietly as we could, we moved deeper into the facility. Given the reinforcement all around it, it was clear this place had been designed to withstand megaspells; there also weren't any signs of looting or pillaging, which made me wonder if anypony had entered here till recently. P-21 and Boo were in the lead, the white mare as cautious as P-21 as she moved forward. Sunset and I, with our metal hooves, hung back.

The red bars didn't give me much encouragement, but three times we evaded hellhound and pegasus patrollers, once by all of us hiding in large empty crates scattered along the halls. The fourth encounter, both Glory and Sunset placed exceptionally lucky shots that simultaneously vaporized two hellhound guards before either of them could get a roar off. Scotch Tape swept the dust into a nearby garbage bin. My paranoia began to nibble at me. It shouldn't be this easy. With EFS and the hellhounds' senses, we should have run into far more trouble! Was this some sort of setup?

"Blackjack," Glory said as she examined one of the many crates with a label: 'Destination: Shadowbolt Tower. Contents: scrap metal 14/25 #32. *.' "This is a Volunteer

Corps label.”

“This sure isn’t a Volunteer Corps operation,” I said as I slid the silver sword along the top, cutting through the screws holding the lid in place. We pushed it up and revealed a large, carefully disassembled piece of machinery. “And that isn’t scrap metal.”

Glory thumped her hoof against the crate, gritting her teeth. “We always wondered why Intelligence stopped blocking the VC program. They’ve been using us to smuggle things to the tower.”

“I’m sorry,” I said as I stroked her blue wings with a hoof.

“I’m not. Come on. Now I have my own payback to give these jerks,” she said as she continued down the hall.

We soon found the nerve center of operations, emerging on a terminal-lined balcony walkway overlooking a buzzing command center with rows of even more terminals. The N.E.S.T. control room had at least two dozen power-armored pegasi, another two dozen technicians tapping away at terminals or talking over schematics, and... I lost count of the hellhounds. Once again, though, we’d gotten lucky. There was only one power-armored pegasus guarding the balcony. When she trotted close, Sunset and I reached out, grabbed her by her tail, and jerked her through the doorway. One sharp blow later, the guard was unconscious, and we moved out on the balcony.

“Which one do you think is controlling the hellhounds?” I asked as I peeked down at all the terminals.

“None of them. Those are terminals. The maneframe is probably even more reinforced than this place,” Scotch Tape said as she peeked down, rubbing her chin.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” P-21 whispered to his daughter.

“That if we can’t get to the maneframe or the broadcast equipment, we can blow the cables connecting the two?” Scotch replied, surprising the stallion.

“Actually, I was thinking of trying to find this place’s reactor and blowing it up,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Overkill, Dad.” The olive filly looked down at the floor. “If I were designing this place, I’d drop the cables through the floor to maneframes below and run the broadcast cabling up an armored central trunk. Which I think is right... there.” She gestured at a long square conduit running along the wall from floor to ceiling, passing right by the edge of the balcony. “The problem is I have no idea how we’d carve our way in

without everypony seeing us.”

Then a klaxon sounded, and at the alarm both hellhounds and Enclave soldiers drained from the room, leaving the techs working more frantically than before. I looked at everypony, feeling that sense of paranoia growing. Nothing *ever* went this well for me. We moved to the end of the balcony; the conduit was almost the size of a pony. My silver sword floated out, and I pushed with all my might, slowly carving a hole in the half-inch steel. Behind it was some sort of copper mesh. I floated both the cutout and the sword back to me while P-21 prepared some plastic explosives. Then I munched on the metal.

“Blackjack, there’s probably an auxiliary channel. This place has to have redundancy,” Scotch Tape said tersely as she glanced down at the agitated pegasus technicians below. “See if you can find it and cut it.”

“Right,” I muttered, not having a clue of what it was I was looking for. Maybe a conduit with some sort of label saying ‘Back up cables, please don’t cut’ on it? I moved back along the balcony with Boo following close behind me. Some of the terminals had burned out over time, but others still flashed their obscure data and messages. I wondered just what they meant, but really, all the ‘MASTER - ES-1037C: 73%’ and ‘CBG1 CONNECTION LOST’ meant nothing to me.

>EC-1101 acknowledgement required.

I paused and went back to the unassuming terminal with the tiny command up near the top of the screen. “No...” I glanced back at Boo, then at the terminal screen. My ‘things are going too smooth’ paranoia tripled. I pressed the enter key, not sure what would happen. The screen flashed, and more text appeared.

>LNR PLC to NEST. Auth. 331-AJ762-RD997 Luna.

>EC-1101 activity detected.

> LNR PLC acknowledgement request 9,999,881 / 10,000,000.

> EC-1101 acknowledgement required.

> Project Horizons protocol pending.

I stared at the screen, but no matter what I typed, the same data scrolled. Dawn had said there was a fuse lit once EC-1101 was out of stable 99. This ‘LNR PLC’ place was sending requests out to whoever could receive them, not realizing that Equestria had been destroyed. So what happened when it got to ten million? I suspected that whatever the LNR PLC was, that was where Horizons was too.

Still, another dead end. I had no way of knowing how to acknowledge the request.

Did I have to use my broadcaster? Transfer EC-1101 into the terminal? How did I do that? Did the terminal even work? I sighed and looked at Boo. "Another hint. Sometimes I think my life is just a string of hints I don't qui—" Behind the pale mare was a row of five metal pipes with 'Aux brdcast' stenciled on them. "And really freaky coincidences, too..."

Boo blinked her pale eyes and cocked her head with a happy smile.

I made two slices with the sword, cutting five disks out of the pipes and sending wire chaff all over the floor. If I set off an alarm, it couldn't be heard over the one already sounding. I trotted back to Scotch Tape with a grin, "Cut the backups."

"You did?" Scotch Tape said in shock, then quickly smiled. "I mean, good job."

"Thanks," I replied dryly, then looked at P-21. "Bomb ready?" He held up several bricks of explosive taped to a radio detonator. I floated it over and into the hole. There was a soft thud as it fell down a little ways before getting hung up on something. "Okay..." And I accessed my broadcaster. I'd done this once by accident, but this time it should work.

"This is Security to all Enclave personel," I said calmly. "In five minutes, I'm going to free the hellhounds you've enslaved here. You can use that time trying to stop me, or you can clear out." I paused, almost knowing for certain that he had to be listening, "Lighthooves. You know what I can do. Remember Minty? Get your people out of here."

From the shouts below, I guessed that my message had been received. I could only hope that they'd follow my advice. If they didn't... well, I'd given warning. "Let's go. Quick," I said, wanting to get out of here before they found us.

Given that all those guards and hellhounds had probably headed towards the door we'd entered through, we needed to find another way out. As it was, all I could do was move through the halls as quickly as I could. Fortunately, there weren't many red bars this way.

Just a shimmering magic field. The blue wall stretched across the entire hallway we'd started down. I tapped it with a hoof, but it was solid as rock. My eyes checked the walls for a terminal to deactivate it, but there was nothing there except for a stenciling of a rainbow lightning bolt on the wall...

"Let... let me try," Glory said as she stepped up to the field and touched it with a wing. The feather passed right through like it was water. She passed right through, and once she was on the far side, the magic field dropped, leaving a ring of deactivated

gems. "Wow... it worked. Let's go." From her flustered appearance, she clearly didn't want to talk about it.

The hallway kept going up and down, and I had no idea if we were above the ground or beneath it when we emerged in an office overlooking a large warehouse space. A large section of the warehouse's roof had been torn off, revealing the open sky. On the office's wall I saw a map, pictures of pegasi wearing strange blue and yellow uniforms, photographs of the rainbow-maned flier sitting on a rock with other ponies and grinning while behind them a colossal factory burned. Another showed a burst dam, a third the building of one of the MASEBS towers.

"This... this was Rainbow Dash's office. Or one of them," Glory breathed as she walked slowly around the space.

"I always thought the Ministry of Awesome was the Ministry of Do Nothing," Sunset said as she followed Glory.

"Lots of ponies thought so. Rainbow Dash wanted to give that impression," Glory replied as she looked at the terminal. "Plenty of folks wrote her off as the dumb athlete. But she knew how to organize weather teams and be a leader."

"Till she abandoned her people. Besides, we don't really know that this was Rainbow Dash's office," Sunset said as she looked around. "It seems pretty dumpy for a Ministry Mare." And that was true. There were empty Sparkle Cola and Buckweiser bottles on the desk and empty potato chip bags in the trash. Definitely not a place a Ministry Mare kept to impress others. This was a working space. I had no difficulty imagining Rainbow Dash in here coming up with new plans and schemes with her confederates.

But there was one surefire way to know that this was Rainbow Dash's office. It lay right beside a photograph of six young Ministry Mares in ragged and torn dresses with a dapper young dragon standing beside them, a mouth-scrawled note read 'Best night ever!' in the upper corner. It was a small figurine of a purple unicorn smiling brightly back at me, clean despite the dust that covered everything else. I lifted the Twilight figurine and turned it over to read the inscription. *'Be Smart'*.

The pony gang was complete.

"Folks. You might want to look at this," P-21 said as he looked out the window, down into the warehouse. Holding the figurine, I trotted next to him and looked myself. The cavernous space held racks and racks filled with familiar, long, tapered shapes. Of course, these weren't ablaze with blue fire.

Missiles. Zebra missiles. Dozens of them. Perhaps hundreds. In the center of the building, a sort of workshop had been set up where the large missiles were being disassembled, packed into the VC crates, and loaded into two vertibucks. Suddenly, it all clicked into place. Lighthooves had his delivery system, targeting talismans to guide them, and plague to load them with. He really did have a weapon to kill thousands, potentially tens of thousands!

“We’ve got to—” I said as I turned towards Glory and Sunset... and then I froze as I turned to see only empty space beside me. I looked around in confusion, then spotted the door swinging closed on the side of the office. ‘Roof Access’.

Of course a pegasus would have access to the outside from her office. I ran as swiftly as I could for the door and spotted stairs going up through another ring of deactivated shield gems. I scrambled up the stairs and slammed the door open as I emerged onto the roof. Glory lay unconscious at Sunset’s hooves as her glistening stinger pried and ripped the blue mare’s gatling beam gun off her and tossed the wrecked weapon over the edge of the building. The mare looked at me as I emerged, and the stinger at the end of her tail popped off. Sunset plunged her tail stub into a storage compartment on her side and withdrew it with a new tip, this one crackling with arcane lightning. I raced at the pegasus as she crouched to pick up Glory.

“No!” I screamed as I drew my gun and slipped into S.A.T.S., but Glory was now blocking my best targets. Instead, I aimed for Sunset’s wing, triggering the targeting spell as I charged. The shots bit into the armored covering but didn’t ground her. The power-armored pegasus launched herself into the air, carrying my love with her. “No! Glory!” I screamed at the skies, helpless to follow.

Then there was a flash in front of Sunset, and four alicorn hooves slammed into the her. She coiled her tail around Glory as they tumbled back to the rooftop. “You shall not pass!” Lacunae thundered, her eyes blazing. Sunset flipped and landed atop the roof, facing me and holding Glory as a shield.

The crackling blade came around, pressed at Glory’s throat. “Get back! I’m taking her with me!” Sunset shouted at me. “If she can get through those shields, she’s Rainbow Dash enough for us! Back! They’ll want her alive, but I’d be happy to rip out her throat and take a tissue sample instead.” Twister and Boomer flew in, and I swapped to my carbine.

“Sunset! What the hay do you think you’re doing?” Twister shouted as she flew towards us from the north with Boomer close behind. “This wasn’t the plan!”

“Plan? There was a plan?!” I screamed as I kept my eyes locked on Sunset.

“The Thunderheaders have missiles. Cruise missiles! If we can get into the SPP, then we can smack them right out of the air!” Sunset shouted. “We have orders to retrieve the Rainbow Dash copy. She can breach barriers, Twister! That’s all the proof we need! Take out that alicorn, and we can get out of here!” But Twister and Boomer weren’t firing just yet. “What are you waiting for?!” Sunset blurted. “We have our orders!”

“Glory’s told me the Enclave aren’t a bunch of selfish assholes!” I shouted back, wondering if I could take the shot. A three-round armor-piercing burst? Maybe.

“We have our orders!” Sunset yelled.

“I’ve saved your life, Twister. Remember Yellow River?” I asked as I lined up my shot. Sunset was backing towards the edge of the roof. Behind us, I heard some low hellhound snarls. Clearly our yelling and gunshots were attracting attention.

“What’s your call, Sergeant?” Boomer asked, looking from Sunset to Lacunae.

Twister looked down at Sunset. “Now I know you want to do what’s right, Sunset. I do too. Yes, we have orders. It’s our job to carry them out, but not like this. Let Morning Glory go.” I felt a deep gush of appreciation for the mare for using Glory’s real name.

Hellhounds climbed over the far edge of the roof and began to race towards us, their dragging claws shrieking on the metal surface. In a moment it became clear that they were aiming just for me and P-21; apparently pegasi were off their menu while under the helmets’ influence.

“Traitor!” Sunset screamed as she backed towards the edge.

“P-21! Fire!” I shouted. P-21’s hoof smacked the detonator in his tail. From the tall building with the dishes came the faint sound of a crumpled explosion. The hellhounds stopped short of us, clutching their heads with screams. Then their claws curled in and crushed the helmets with a shrieking of metal. They tore the helmets off.

“No...” Sunset murmured as she released Glory and turned to leap off the building. Two hellhounds who had been about to tear me to pieces instead turned and leapt after her. Their claws sank through her armor, and Sunset screamed as she was borne to the ground, claws ripping her armor and flesh to pieces. Two more hellhounds immediately began blasting into the air, forcing Twister and Boomer and

Lacunae to evade their red blasts. Other hellhounds closed in to finish everypony not in power armor off.

“Gnarr sent me!” I yelled as two leapt upon me. One grabbed my throat and pulled back his hand to rip my head off in one swing. “Gnarr sent me to free you!”

The hand paused. Fierce, cunning eyes stared into mine with a palpable hatred. Then the hand around my neck released. “Leave,” was all the hellhound said. Then, with a howl, the hellhounds left the rooftop. With a whoosh, the vertibucks lifted out of the hole in the roof and made for the skies. One had a hellhound clinging to its side and struggling to rip its way to the pegasus fliers.

I checked to make sure Glory was okay; she was unconscious, but alive. I didn’t look at Twister and Boomer as I said, “You should get out of here too. Tell your superiors that Lighthooves plans on using missiles to deliver his bioweapon.”

“Blackjack,” Twister began. “What about Glory?”

“That’s up to you,” I said quietly. “Rainbow Dash was Twilight’s loyalest friend. Twilight always knew that Rainbow Dash would do what was right, eventually. I guess its up to you to decide who your loyalty is to.” I slipped the Twilight figurine into the saddlebag that held the others.

The two looked at each other and then took off, flying southwest. I could only assume they’d find their way.

I cradled Glory as I looked to Lacunae. “Take us out of here.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were reunited with Deus and Rampage and riding the tank away from the base. Rampage had a novel counter to the anesthetic that had incapacitated Glory. The shot of Dash that Rampage administered had Glory awake and practically bouncing on her hooves. “Right! Rematch! Next time I’m going to take them all down! Ten seconds flat!” she said as she punched the air with her hooves, snorting.

“I like this Glory. She’s goofy,” Scotch giggled.

“Wait till the Dash wears off,” I countered, hoping we wouldn’t have another addiction to worry about when she crashed. I then filled Rampage in on everything that happened while we were gone.

The striped mare listened to the story of our infiltration, muttering sourly, “Wow. You

have all the luck. In. Out. Killed a traitor. Freed a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters. I should have gone with you. We've just been leading hellhounds around in circles!" Deus rumbled his engine in reply.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to make a habit of it. Hope Rover's happy," I said as I rubbed my throat. "Hellhounds and Sand Dogs aren't even close to each other. I'll take cyberdogs over radioactive hounds any time."

"Blackjack!" P-21 called out, pointing into the still-lingering mist.

I looked up and spotted the blue bars... lots of blue bars. Dozens. Hundreds maybe. They walked out of the fog in perfect unison. Every step was simultaneous and deliberate. I felt a frisson at the black-armored, faceless horde of zebra. The Brood of Coyotl were a silent, ominous lot.

Glory popped into the air. "Let me at 'em! I'll take them all down!" I grabbed her tail with my magic and gave a firm yank to plant her butt back on the tank. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" she protested.

"Hush and let the non-drugged ponies talk," I said as I looked around for him. "Lancer?" I called out.

"Maiden," he replied as the zebras parted and the silent stallion advanced.

"Well, is this the point of your sudden yet inevitable betrayal?" I asked dryly, tapping the turret with my hoof with a reassuringly solid clang. "Because while you got an army, I got a tank."

"Maiden, didn't I tell you that your death wouldn't be at my hooves? Your demise has been decreed to be carried out by Legate Vitiosus himself. I would not kill you, even if I had the opportunity," Lancer said with a calm smile as he stood out in front of us. I didn't point out how willing he'd been to threaten to kill me when he'd had guns pointed at him.

"So..." I frowned as I watched the black-armored zebras slowly back away as one. They weren't moving as if to simply let us leave, however. One red bar appeared on my EFS. "Oh no..."

A gap appeared ahead of us, and a lone figure slowly advanced through the mist. The zebra stallion moved with a slow gait that conveyed terrible power and grace all at once. His head was concealed by a dragon skull carved with strange glyphs. His powerful body bore innumerable scars across its surface, including a horrible Y-shaped injury across his chest. More carved dragonbone armor formed spikes at his hips and flank, strapped in place, and tattered glyph-marked cloths tied around

his fetlocks snapped in the breeze; apart from that, he wore no barding. He carried no weapons that I could see, but for all I knew he could kick through steel.

Lancer trotted around the edge of the circle of zebras to join the Legate, kneeling beside him. "Legate Vitiosus, may I present for you the Maiden of the Stars, Blackjack." He then smiled at me and said, "Maiden, be honored. This is the Legate of the Fallen Caesar's will. The stallion that exercises the last Remnant of the Imperial army."

"Enough, my Lancer," the Legate said in a low, deep voice. "This is not the time or place I wished for this battle. I hoped to break the Maiden upon the smoldering, melted remains of their cursed city. You have forced this confrontation prematurely, my Lancer."

Lancer stared as if struck. "F... Legate. It may be early, but she is here! You are here! Let the champion of the stars be felled by your hoof!" He paused, then added, "I know we were unable to retrieve the Talisman of the Eternal Warrior..."

"Indeed. You have failed to do a great many things. You were unable to slay my treacherous mate, you failed to retrieve the bones of the stars, and the talisman escaped you. Now you force this premature confrontation," the Legate boomed as he stared at me atop Deus. "At times I think your certainty that she is the Maiden is simply a way to cover your own failings."

"I'm not," I replied as I looked down at him. "I don't have an argument with you, Legate. We simply want to go."

He regarded me for a long moment., "You seek to save the people of this cursed land?" he asked, gesturing towards the Core with a sweep of his hoof.

"I do," I replied.

"Why?" he asked in return.

"Legate, I beg you. Do not speak with—" Lancer began, but with one baleful look from the Legate he fell silent, chewing on his unspoken words.

I considered the question, not expecting it. "Because... because I can fight. Because others need me to fight for them. If I have the ability, then I should use it. Security protects ponies."

"But who are these ponies you protect?" He asked calmly, reasonably. "Murderers. Rapists. Thieves. Slavers. The craven, the callow, and the cruel. You yourself have seen how this place corrupts, twists, and violates all within it. This land attracts the

sinful and wicked. Are they deserving of your service? Are they worth your pain?"

Closing my eyes, I could easily imagine who he was talking about. Clink. Sanguine. The Overmare. Dawn. Even the Reapers, the Flash Fillies, the Burner Boys, the Halfhearts... The Enclave. "Maybe not. I have to admit, there're a lot of bad ponies in this place," I replied quietly. I could feel all eyes upon me, and not just those of my friends. I imagined Priest watching me. Roses and Thorn. Dusty Trails. Snips. Lemongrass. Marmalade. Mother... "But even if there are bad people here, there are good ones, too." I could see Charity and Bottlecap. Rover. Cynical Triage. Keeper. The ghouls of Meatlocker and the fillies of Chapel and the ponies of Riverside and Megamart... And I smiled as I looked down at the Legate. "Maybe it's not about being good and bad, Legate. Maybe it's about trying harder to do better, to be better people. And so long as there are people here trying to do that, I'll give them all the protection I can. Security saves ponies," I finished simply.

The Legate looked up at me and smiled. "Then we are enemies, whether you are the Maiden or not. It is my solemn duty since I assumed command of the Remnant to execute the Caesar's final orders and destroy this vile place and all who live here." He took a few steps forward. "It appears, Maiden, that we are at an impasse. It is unfortunate that I cannot break you when you are at the peak of your destiny"

"Shucks. Too bad for me, then." I sighed and sat down on the turret top, frustrated that we couldn't come to some sort of arrangement that didn't involve fighting. "So. Is this something that's just between me and you, or can my friends help?"

He just smiled, and from around the ring came an ominous clatter of dozens of weapons being readied simultaneously. "Certainly, if you wish *my* friends to participate also."

That wiped the smile from my face. "Um...I got a tank on my side," I reminded him. Deus revved his engine in agreement.

This fact didn't seem to perturb the Legate in the slightest. "You do. And perhaps that alone would be enough to win. But you have many friends as well. Loved ones. Children. Can you live with them dying on your behalf? Will you so eagerly slaughter dozens to win?" The calm certainty of his smile chilled me.

"You're pretty confident. What if I win?" I countered with a frown.

"Then the Remnant will withdraw until a new Legate is chosen. Perhaps that will not happen for years. Perhaps it will never happen," he countered with sublime confidence that it would not need to happen at all. "Is it not better this way? Had

your Princess, or your predecessor, faced the Caesar in fair combat, the war may never have happened. With one duel, you may end a threat to this wicked place forever.”

Oh, that was tempting. He knew exactly how to push my buttons. I glanced at all my friends and hopped off Deus. “Give us a chance to talk it over?” I asked. The Legate nodded his skull-helmed head while Lancer stared on in shock, his mouth moving in feeble disbelief. We pulled into a tight circle.

“Don’t even think about it,” P-21 warned me quietly.

“I can take em all on!” Glory said with a snap of her tail.

“I’d pay to see that,” Rampage laughed with a nod to Glory. “We need to dose her on Dash more often.”

“No,” I replied. Rampage arched a brow, and I amended, “No to the Dash. No to fighting all of them. I don’t want to risk all of you against him.”

P-21 rolled his eyes, “And what makes you think we want to risk *you* against him on your own?”

“I’m not going to sit by and watch you fight some... some... spooky zebra!” Glory said with a snort.

“I don’t want to fight him at all,” I said as I glanced over at the Legate. “And oddly, I don’t think he wants to fight me, either. Something about this feels... wrong. So as soon as Deus and the rest of you are clear, I want Lacunae to find the nearest radiation crater, suck up the rads, and come yank me out if things go bad.” With luck, he’d be just another zebra... but I doubted it.

“What if we want to fight anyway?” Rampage said with a scowl, and Deus rumbled in agreement. “We don’t have to just walk away cause you say so.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “Rampage, please leave this to me.” Then I smiled to her. “Trust me. If I can beat him here and now, then the Remnant won’t be a problem. He’s right about that. I’d rather not fight another war.”

She screwed up her face, grimaced as if she had a bad case of indigestion, and finally slumped. “I don’t like this, Blackjack. This guy... he feels familiar. In a bad way. A part of me just... just... *knows* him!” She said with a frustrated scowl, then added, “And I know he’s bad fucking news.”

I knew what she meant. Something about the way he talked, even the way he moved, nagged at me. I turned back to him. “I want your soldiers to pull back. My

friends will do the same. Then we can have your duel... till one of us surrenders or is killed. Agreed?"

"Your terms are acceptable," he replied casually. "You may use whatever weapons you have at your disposal."

"No, Legate! She must be slain here and now," Lancer begged as the zebra horde pulled away.

"Silence," the Legate countered, not taking his eyes off me. "You forced this confrontation prematurely. Do not say another word to me." Glory, still muttering about how she could take them all on, gave me a firm hug and a promise that if I started losing, she'd be there in ten seconds flat. With that, the tank rolled further north with my friends, and the striped horde moved off to the east. I spotted a half dozen or so hellhounds watching from the southwest through glinting binoculars. Were they going to interfere, or were they placing bets?

I wondered what the odds they were laying on me were.

I levitated the starmetal sword and Vigilance before me; the only weapons he might have had were those wind-blown pieces of cloth tied to his legs, and I wasn't sure how effective those could be. As we began slowly circling each other, the Hoofington rain decided to start right there, hissing on the rock and dripping along my metal and his bone. I just had to beat him. Not even kill him. I could do this. I could! We trotted around each other, feeling as if we were building energy and any momen—

And like that he turned and darted in with a speed that almost took me by complete surprise. He leapt over my swing in a somersault and smashed his outstretched hooves against my skull, rattling my focus. He landed in front of me and launched into a backwards flip that crashed his hindhooves against my jaw. I fired wildly as I staggered back, but he landed on his back legs and in a half dozen steps arched around to my left, jumped in a spin, and bashed the side of my head again with an outstretched rear hoof. The force of the blow almost put me on my backside as he landed in a crouch and twisted to arrest his momentum in that direction. A second later, he reversed the movement of his upper body, and like a snapping spring rammed his hoof against the opposite side of my head, knocking me flat on my back on the ground.

All that in ten seconds...

My EFS warned me that my head couldn't take a series of blows like that again, but that was exactly what the Legate was continuing to target. He sprang like Rampage

high into the air, flipping and bringing his rear hoof down in a finishing blow aimed at my skull. I brought up my forelegs, and his hoof clanged loudly against them. The sword flashed through the rain to sever the hoof pressed against my forelimbs, but he kicked off my legs before the edge connected. Rolling back upright, mud streaking along my hide, I dropped into S.A.T.S. and queued up five shots.

To my amazement, the targeting spell estimated only a forty percent chance of hitting! I triggered the spell anyway, but as soon as I did I could see why the chance was so low. Everything moved at a crawl except for him! Three rounds bit into his striped hide, but they were spread out and not near any of the vitals I'd aimed at. The shots didn't even seem as effective as they should have been, given he wore no barding in those areas. His tough hide just fought the impacts, leaving small bloody holes rather than gaping wounds.

Not good.

I rose and lifted my hooves to block further attacks to my head, but the Legate had fainted. Once again on his hind legs, he moved along the left side of my body in a single revolution and slammed both forehooves into my ribs with enough force to drive me back down to my knees. Then he snapped another forward flip that brought his rear hoof slamming right on my spine. Had I not been augmented, he probably would have snapped my back.

"Rampage says if you don't start moving, it's over," Lacunae said tersely in my head. "I can also try to shoot him from here if you can stop his motion."

"No. If the zebras see you aiming, it'll be a bloodbath," I countered. Rampage's comment was a fair point, though, and I ignored the throbbing pain and heaved myself into motion, charging him. He was faster than me and had to be as tough as me. I doubted he was as heavy as me, though. Spraying muddy water everywhere, I closed in on him. I knew he'd try and dodge, and he did, jumping to the left. I reached out with my magic to grab his hoof and...

Nothing! It was like his striped body was coated in an oil that just slipped right out of my magic. He darted in with another forward-flipping kick to my head, as before, but I lunged aside and took the blow on my shoulder. My forehooves reached up and locked around his outstretched rear leg, and then my horn flashed and fired magic bullets into him; like my telekinesis, though, the magic was reduced far below what it should have been. Using the trapped limb as leverage, he twisted around in front of me, drew back his other hoof, and kicked me square in the horn. The stab of pain almost broke my focus, and my planned swing with the sword to sever his trapped

leg missed and bit deep into my own right foreleg.

As smooth as a greased gun slide, he kicked until I lost my grip, then pulled free. I didn't stay put and let him simply spin kick me yet again, though, instead backing away and blocking the attack. Perhaps I could wear him down...

Then I saw that the holes I'd punched in his side were closing before my eyes! "Oh come on! You're ridiculously fast, strong, partially bulletproof, magic resistant, and regenerating?!" I protested, pointing my sword at him. "How?!"

"You are hardly one to complain about unnatural abilities," he countered, gesturing with a muddy hoof at my synthetic limbs. "You profaned your body with metal and machines to gain your strength, violating your very essence," He smiled, and Celestia damn me if the bastard didn't flex his powerful muscles and send half the zebra mares behind the Brood of Coyotl whooping!

Still, he was giving me an opening and a breather... which was a little baffling, since he was supposed to be finishing me off. As I rose back to my hooves, he continued, "Whereas I have augmented my body with sanctified alchemy and sorcery that only the zebra possess. The fury of the spirits, the might of dragons. The ferocity of griffons. The power of things... beyond *your* grasp.." He posed like a magnificent striped god before his followers.

If he'd been a little more reckless, I'd have thought him a braggart, but he never took his eyes off me and gave me an opening to knock him out. Either he possessed scary confidence in his abilities, or something was going on here. "Well... great! Good to know. So we're going to be locked in an eternal struggle here, then?" I countered sarcastically, at the same time thinking frantically to try and figure out what he could be up to.

"No. Simply until your power reserves are drained," he replied casually. "I shall not tire, and my body shall not fail. Yours, however..." He trailed off as his smile widened.

Crap. I queried my available power in my EFS... and the moment my attention moved off him, he was on me. One of his rear legs swung low to the ground in a powerful circle and swept me off my hooves again. My focus snapped, the blade spinning off into the muck around us. Without stopping his spin, his outstretched hoof crashed against my descending skull and spun me away into the mud. I groaned and stayed on my back for a second too long. His circling hoof continued around a third time, changing orientation from horizontal to vertical and crashing down on my chest with such force that even my synthetic lungs had the breath blasted from them.

“Pathetic,” he said as I laid there, my chest making disturbing crackles and wheezes as my lungs reinflated. “It is your destiny to be defeated by me, but I had hoped for something... grander.”

“We’re going to come ba—” Lacunae began to say in my mind.

“No!” I shouted, feeling the old, familiar need to win growing within me. I flushed as the Legate cocked a brow and hissed mentally, “Stick to the plan. I can handle this preening son of a mule!”

“No? You have nothing more?” The Legate tilted his head with the question, then straightened and broadened his smile a bit. “Oh... are you communicating with your friends? Some internal radio?”

I spat something that tasted of oil and blood into the mud and glared up at him. *You’re stalling again. Why the fuck don’t you finish me off?* “Don’t worry about them,” I hissed as I lifted myself back up. “Worry about me!” My horn flared as I drew Vigilance, Sacrifice, and Duty in a surge of desperation, firing wildly at him as I charged.

The bullets tore into his striped hide, ripping bloody holes as he crouched before me. I just needed a few more shots, a few more good hits. A few more! He sprang backwards with that disturbing zebra grace, though, and flung a glob of muck directly into my face just as I entered S.A.T.S. No! I fired away blindly, blinking and trying to restore my vision.

When it cleared... wait, where’d he go?

“Above you!” shouted Lacunae in my mind as his plunging hoof smashed down between my shoulders, driving me face first into the sludge; my spine let out a crackling of bone and a groaning of metal, and I felt a horrifying moment of my body being consumed by a paralysing numbness from my neck down. My focus broke, my guns falling out of sight in the muck. “Enough is enough! We’re coming—”

“No!” I groaned as the tingling impact-induced anesthesia abated. The Legate circled me as his unhelmeted followers cheered. Lancer smiled like it was Hearth’s Warming Eve. I’d win. I was a cyberpony killing machine who wasn’t going to be defeated by freaky zebra martial arts. “I’ll beat him!” I croaked.

“Pitiful,” he said in a voice of disappointment that only my mother was allowed to use, but he just kept circling as I struggled to rise. “Why are you not greater? Your destiny is for so much more. Power. Destruction. Yet you wallow in the muck like a sow. I am half inclined to let you crawl back to your friends until you are a fitting

opponent.”

Lancer’s grin disappeared like a popped balloon. “Father, no! Finish the Maiden before her friends come and spirit her away!” Oddly, the *Legate* wasn’t smiling either. If anything, he now seemed frustrated.

“If you fear such, my Lancer, be prepared to slay her alicorn when she appears, but you will not interfere with destiny,” the Legate snapped, then fixed me with a calculating glare. “Where are your friends? Why do they not come for you?” he murmured; if my ears hadn’t been augmented, I likely would have missed it.

“A good question,” Lacunae snapped in my mind. “I may have just enough magic to come back myself and help yo—”

“No! You heard him. Lancer and a dozen other zebras will kill you the moment you appear!” I could see Lancer prepared for her arrival. Surely there’d be others as well, hidden out of sight. “I’ll beat him... no matter how he breaks me!” I could take it. I deserved it... I deserved this...

“Damn it, Blackjack! You’re not Psalm!” Lacunae shouted within my mind.

The name struck across my thoughts, stunning me a moment. Psalm... I was acting like Psalm? The Legate just stared through the eye sockets of the dragon, as my eyes met his for a half dozen heartbeats. Annoyance flashed inside his brilliant, scornful yellow gaze. Finally, some line had been crossed. “So be it,” the Legate said.

Like a tempest, he fell upon me. His body twisted back and forth, a vortex battering against me with a speed and power I could only defend against by lifting my hooves. I had to win – it was what I did best – but I wanted to lose. That sick, insidious seed inside me liked this battering, wanted it. Hightower. Pinkie Pie. Chapel. Fluttershy Medical Center. Big Macintosh. The *Seahorse*.

His grin suddenly widened. While continuing to rain down blows, he said in a tone of false kindness, “Do not fear for your friends’ safety. Those that surrender will be taken back to our base as slaves. I will take the olive one for my harem as tribu—”

My black, dented limbs snapped up and clenched the Legate’s swinging forehoof between them in a grip so firm it halted his thrashing, whirling barrage. “No,” was all I said as his eyes widened within that skull, his foreleg trying to jerk itself free. Then I pulled him forward and rammed my horn into the left socket of that bony encasement.

For the first time In our fight, the Legate truly screamed.

If I'd possessed Lacunae's spire, I might have finished him off there and then; as it was, only the vitreous jelly of his eye coated the end of my compact horn. His own supernatural toughness and speed allowed him to jerk back moments before magic bullets erupted from my horn. Blood, dark and arterial, spurted from the impact, and the bone itself cracked and crumbled around that wounded socket. I lacked fingers, so instead I lunged once more and sank my teeth into his neck. My jaws bit down hard enough that I tasted blood; for once, it wasn't mine. Locked so, my forehooves grabbed his shoulders in a steel embrace. He struggled to pull free, and I twisted to the side, driving him straight into the muck.

I heard Lancer shouting something in Zebra. Something edged in fear. He knew. He'd seen me like this before.

I'd win. No matter what.

The Legate's hooves kicked wildly as I began to pummel everything I could that was striped and moving. He wheezed around the grip I had on his windpipe, trying desperately to free himself. *No you don't. No more fancy zebra kicks.* I hauled him back to me through the mud, using my weight, something his augmented flesh lacked, to keep him shoved beneath me. I raked his belly with the dull blunt ends of my hooves, forcing them into his flesh as he struggled and finally ripped his throat free from my mouth.

It wasn't the first flesh I'd eaten.

Rising over him, I slammed my forehooves repeatedly into his body. The dragonbone helmet saved his head, but with each kick I felt more bones break. I knew he was striking me as much as I was him, but I simply paid that no mind. I had to end it now! My augmented body was burning through its power reserves just as it had at Yellow River.

Then I spotted a starmetal hilt poking out of the muck, beckoning. My magic reached out and pulled my blade to me. I smashed him hard, flat on his back beneath me, and my magic raised the sword high. Let's see if he could regenerate his head!

Half of my face exploded in pain that cut right through my fury and focus. The right half of my world disappeared into a wild blizzard of colors and shapes as shrieking, staticky feedback shot through my skull. I screamed as a red hot dagger of agony plunged itself through my right eye, my body arching back as my hooves clenched over the wound. The Legate gave a heave beneath me, throwing me off. Any second now he'd finish me off for good. I clenched my eye shut as I writhed.

I felt the familiar floating sensation of death surround me, and I finally relaxed. Finally... I'd see mother again...

I hovered somewhere dark, still, and silent. This didn't feel... familiar. It was like the darkness of Unity, but empty, save for myself. Nowhere to go. Nothing to see. Simply myself.

"Hello?" I said, my voice thin and small. Then I spotted someone else, dark and distant. A white nimbus vaguely outlined her. "Hey! Who's there?" I shouted as I ran towards them, then slowed... then came to a stop as I saw her white mane and black coat and the candle on her flank. "Who..."

Psalm turned, bringing up Penance. The sniper rifle pointed at my right eye, and a blinding flash cut through the darkness. When it faded, the unicorn was gone and I was alone once more. I trembled, unarmed and unsure. "I'd really like to wake up now... or move on... or... something!"

A faint lilac gleam appeared in the darkness, highlighting an alicorn. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I raced towards her. She'd get me out of this...

But it wasn't Lacunae. Tall, cool, majestic and beautiful in her royal regalia, Princess Luna turned and looked down at me, tiny stars gleaming in her mane. Her teal eyes held only sadness and pity for me. "P... Princess Luna?"

Suddenly she reared up, her purple aura becoming a frigid blue corona as her delicate ceremonial yoke became starmetal barding and her tiara a cruel helmet. Her eyes blazed, fiery and dragon-pupiled. "You little foal! Thinking you can be me!" she roared as she reared up before me in the dark, and then she brought her hooves down upon my head.

Again, darkness. I curled up, trembling. A distant red glow bloomed, and I watched it tearfully. This one approached slowly, relentlessly, inevitably. The red glow grew like a flamer spreading across that vast void around the dark figure. This time, I turned and ran as fast as my white hooves could carry me. But though her slow step remained constant, the distance between us closed. I could hear the crackle and the screaming behind me as the darkness was consumed by the inferno.

"Stay away," I screamed as I whirled, raising my hooves in horror at the figure.

A white unicorn fused with black steel looked down at me with light flickering in her hard, soulless eyes. A field of strewn bodies spread out behind her as her

black and red mane snapped in an ethereal wind. So many dead. Raiders. Foals. Stable ponies. Zebras. Hellhounds. Steel Rangers. An endless field of death punctuated by a rainbow mane, a bloody fedora, a broken purple wing, and an olive filly embracing a mare no longer pristine white. She pressed a gun to my right eye; I stared down the barrel's spiralling rifling and into her merciless grin simultaneously.

"Can't escape the Maiden," Blackjack said, and my world exploded once more into a white I hoped would never end.

"Blackjack?" a mare called from somewhere both close and distant. "Blackjack!" One by one, sensations returned. Cold, wet metal on my back. The rumble, accompanied by a faint vibration, of an engine. Pain throbbing through the right side of my face. Sadly, this was all distressingly familiar.

"I got shot, didn't I?" I muttered, looking up into the wide eyes of Glory.

"Don't move," she said in concern as she looked down at me, chewing her bottom lip in worry.

I sighed and remained still. "What happened with the zebras?"

"We don't know," P-21 said as he moved on the opposite side of me from Glory. "Lacunae started screaming that we had to get back to you immediately." The blue stallion looked off in what I could only presume was the direction of the alicorn. "I've never heard her scream before. I didn't know she could." He looked back down at me soberly. "We barely saw anything of the fight. The fog cut us off. Lacunae was all but jumping in one of those radiation pits trying to get enough magic to get in and blink you out. We arrived just as the zebras were leaving." He looked off in another direction. "They are gone, though. I checked. They've moved back to the base. They left you for dead."

Me? The Maiden? The pony devil of the stars? "That... doesn't make sense..." I muttered weakly.

"Zebras..." P-21 said in return with a small shrug.

"I got a head," Rampage said. "It's only got one eye, though."

"Head?" I muttered, starting to get alarmed. "Eye?" I began to raise my head, but then P-21 pushed me back down.

"Don't move. Not unless you want to break out your eyepatch again," the blue pony

said as something wet and fleshy thumped heavily onto the metal beside me. “Lacuna, make sure Scotch and Boo don’t see this, please.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“The bullet went into your right eye, Blackjack. It deflected, and it’s sheer dumb luck that the round exited out under your right ear and not your brain stem,” Glory said in a shaky voice. “Celestia... I want some more Dash...”

“Got some right here,” Rampage said brightly. “Chemical confidence in a nice little inhaler.”

P-21 raised a hoof out in the direction of Rampage’s voice and shook his head.

Glory took a shaky breath. “No... no, he’s right... put it away. Throw it away. Take it yourself. But don’t give it to me.” She ducked her head out of sight, and I heard some wet noises.

“Does it hurt? Do you want a memory orb?” P-21 asked me.

“No... no... right now... no...” I said as I laid there. I didn’t want to go someplace else. I’d just got back.

“So... what happened, Blackjack?” Rampage asked. “I was getting all kinds of creepy familiar vibes from that bastard.”

Once my face was put back together again, Glory was cleaning things up, I was chowing down on a third cyberpony cake, and P-21 was keeping an eye out as we sat together atop Deus. Scotch Tape and Boo had collected my weapons from the battlefield while Rampage scavenged the remaining zebra corpses, leaving me with time to think of my next step.

The only problem was... I wasn’t sure what it should be. I felt strings attached to me... tugging me this way and that, pulled by unknown manipulators. I stroked the mane of the Twilight figurine as I pondered. Did I really have any choice?

Fate... how seductive it was. Not my fault... not my responsibility... bad things... good things... you could say it was all fated to be. Had Twilight been fated to end up trapped in a monstrous Goddess? Pinkie Pie fated to become a drug-addicted pariah? Psalm to kill Big Macintosh? Maybe there was some alternate history where the war never happened. Where fate was kinder and gentler than it was today?

I looked down into Twilight's happy, smiling face. Fate was an easy answer when you looked at the strand of history. All those little causes and effects leading to now. Sometimes miraculous... sometimes monstrous...

Was I really the Maiden of the Stars...?

"How are you, Blackjack?" P-21 asked. "How are you really?"

I sighed and hugged the figurine to my chest. "Different. Haven't been in a fight like that in a while. Not since..." Yellow River. Was that really only a few weeks ago? He caught my uncomfortable expression, and I looked at my forehooves. "Guess what mom said was true. There's always a bigger fishy."

"Huh?" he asked with a cock of his head and an amused, if baffled, smile.

"Nothing. Just something Mom used to tell me," I said with a sigh as I kept running my hoof over the figurine's mane.

He sat quietly beside me. "So... what's all that 'Maiden' stuff?"

"Zebra prophesy," I said with a shrug. "I'm supposed to destroy the world. Just like Luna and Nightmare Moon." I glanced over at him. "P-21, do you believe in fate?"

"I believe in you. Does that count?" he countered with a half smile. I gave him a nudge in response, and his smile widened as he looked at Scotch Tape. "I don't know. I don't think so. I heard that ponies get cutie marks that tell them their destiny. But considering mine was openly controlled, it always seemed pretty much bullshit to me. But then, I've never known what my cutie mark was supposed to be..."

"What if your destiny is something... bad? What if it's to kill and hurt people?" I asked.

"Then you ignore it," he said simply. "Because if you accept what that bastard said about your destiny being ruin and death, then it'd be no different that me accepting the medical mares telling me that my destiny was to be a walking sperm bank who should be dead right now. We decide our own destiny."

Did I have any choice? Was I just following the strings? Were we all?

I felt I had three different paths in front of me, and whichever one I took was going to decide everything. I could go after Dawn, the Harbingers, and Cognitum and try to end that threat once and for all. Or perhaps try and find out a way to stop the Legate and his army from attacking the Hoof and all my friends within it. Or go to the clouds and try and stop Lighthooves and his biological weapon.

Then I glanced down at my hoof and opened up the panel, looking at my Pipbuck. For some reason, perhaps fate, perhaps something else, I brought up EC-1101 and stared at it. Then I accessed its tantalizing routing information.

Next routing location> Shadowbolt Tower.

“Right,” I said as I looked up at the midnight clouds. “Well then, I guess if I’m going to decide it, I’d better start thinking of some way to get to Shadowbolt Tower.” At his inquisitive look, I smiled. “Lighthooves has a biological weapon that can kill countless pegasi. I need to get up there and stop it... and make sure Thunderhead isn’t destroyed as well.”

He looked at the sky and gave a little laugh. “Oh, is that all?” He shook his head. “I don’t suppose you know somepony with a flying machine, do you?” he asked playfully.

I sat there a moment, looking down at the figurine and thinking, and then my lips curled in a small smile. “Now that you mention it...”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

Quest perk achieved: My Little Ponies – You have collected one of each of the six Ministry Mares statuettes. Stronger together than they are apart, they have granted you +1 Luck in addition to their normal benefits.

55. Noblesse Oblige

"They are not slaves, they are our "servants." We have given them homes, food, clothing, and a purpose. We have given them a life."

"So, tell me about the lightning rods," I asked Glory as we rolled northeast away from Grimhoof. We were snaking our way between the skeletal shells of old commercial buildings, their decaying walls sporting layer upon layer of gang graffiti. I wondered who the 'Neverenders' had been and how they'd been replaced by the 'Hells Ponies.' Then the 'Nightmares' had spraypainted over that. One wall ahead boldly declared 'Fuck Big Daddy', but that message was punctuated by what I suspected was the desiccated body of the author impaled on rebar jutting from the wall beside the declaration. "I need to know exactly how they work."

"I don't know the specifics of their operation," Glory replied, looking at me in concern and chewing on a wingtip. "All I can give you are generalities." I gave a small nod. She took a deep breath, then let it out in a huff before going on, "Well, lightning rods were produced at the end of the war. I'm not sure how many are left abroad. Some think that the Neighvarro forces scrapped theirs when they couldn't maintain them. They have a spark generator that builds up a charge and then blasts the nearest target with a bolt of lightning. It actually has about the same power as one of a Raptor's main guns, as I understand."

Which meant that getting shot would likely be an instant kill for any of us, even Lacunae. "How do they find their targets?" I asked as we drove through the desolate district. I magically pulled the macabre remains of the graffiti artist from the rusted metal as we passed, letting the ganger corpse clatter down to the rest of the bones scattered along the sidewalks. Better to be more anonymous bones amidst the rubble than some grisly fetish on a wall.

"Blackjack, are you sure..." Glory began, not certain how to respond to me. I couldn't blame her; after meeting the Legate, I'd gone through a whole new storm of pondering who he was, *what* he was, and why he'd let me live. That whole 'not embraced your destiny' line was either terrifyingly strong faith in higher powers or a load of contrived bullshit. The whole fight felt like the Legate had done everything he could to not kill me. In fact, the Legate worried me far less than either Lighthooves or Dawn at the moment.

Oh, I was still concerned. He'd beaten me, something that I found infinitely galling.

A part of me wanted nothing more than to find him for a sound rematch... but, ultimately, whatever was going on with him wasn't as immediate as Lighthooves's biological weapon or Dawn's actions with the Harbingers. As infuriating as my defeat had been, I had to focus myself elsewhere. He'd put me off for the time being, and I'd do the same with him. So, since we'd left Grimhorn, I was thinking of everything I could to head off Lighthooves's threat first. Any second, Lighthooves could push a button and start a massacre. And I would be partially to blame for not stopping him sooner.

Just like with Clink. . .

"I'm sure," I answered, frowning as I looked out at the night. Maybe it was the Twilight figurine in my saddlebag, or perhaps it was the need to win gnawing at me, but I couldn't just sit back and rest again. I found my thoughts focused sharply upon my goal: getting to Shadowbolt tower and stopping Lighthooves, and maybe finding the next destination of EC-1101. I had a creepy suspicion that I knew exactly where it was headed next.

"Well, Dusk would know more precisely, but as she explained to me, their sensors detect magical energy sources. For the Thunderhead-area rods, that sends an alert to the tower, and somepony then targets the intruder and sends a fire command." She rubbed her mouth with a wing, her brows furrowed in thought. "I think it used to be completely automated, but there was a friendly fire incident a decade ago and they disabled that."

"What counts as a magical energy source?" P-21 asked with a frown, holding the slumbering Scotch between his hooves.

"A spark battery? A missile?" Glory suggested. "Maybe even a charged gem cartridge? Any kind of magical generation device would set off the sensor. Of course, every lightning rod also has a half dozen cameras keeping a constant observation of the ground."

"Have you ever heard of surfacers reaching the Enclave?" Rampage asked, looking at Glory with a small frown. She'd been cross ever since the fight with the Legate. He was, as she put it, a 'big bad freakily familiar fucker', or BBFFF for short. "Every now and then you hear stories about somepony slapping together a hot air balloon or something."

Glory turned her face away. "No. Patrols usually find those." She glanced back at Rampage with a shameful expression and went on, "It doesn't end well for them, I'm told. Something about giving surfacer ponies 'flying lessons'."

"Of course," Rampage muttered. "Why are we saving these assholes from eating each other, again?"

Glory flushed, "In any case, Blackjack, it wouldn't matter what you used to get up there. Your cyberpony body itself counts as a power source."

I looked away, scowling, and then I thought of something. "So just unplug me?" I asked with a hopeful grin. Glory gave the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' sigh. "Come on. There had to be some way to turn me off."

"Does *anything* do that for you?" Rampage asked with a smirk, and I rolled my eyes.

"No. I'm pretty sure she—" The pegasus began, then groaned as I flushed. I wasn't that bad! Glory covered her face with a wing. "Blackjack, we can't just deactivate you! Those systems control your heartbeat and respiration."

"Okay..." I said slowly as I thought it out. "So... what if you did what you did when I was going to Tenpony to get cyberized? Hook up my veins to Rampage. Completely power me down and make me the Wasteland's biggest paperweight? Would that work?"

"Oh, I see how it is," Rampage muttered. "Make one little crack, and she turns you into life support." She rolled her eyes, then caught my concern and snorted. "Oh, don't worry. I'm just pissed at the moment. . . least I can be of some use."

Glory opened her mouth to argue, and then hesitated. "It... might?" she finished tentatively. Then she shook her head sharply. "But you don't have to do this, Blackjack! Thunderhead's problems aren't yours, and you already have enough problems that are."

"I'm pretty sure the Enclave can handle it," P-21 agreed.

"Right. Between Dawn and that striped motherfucker, I'd say your plate is pretty full," Rampage said, then frowned and wiggled her nose, pinched one nostril shut, and blasted a load of snot out the other. Glory looked on in disgust as Rampage wiggled her muzzle. "Mmm... miss the old claws. Just can't pick my nose with power hooves." She met Glory's nauseated expression with a baffled, "What?" Meeting only silence, Rampage turned back to me and continued, "Maybe you should leave this up to the feather brains?"

"No," I replied, glaring up at the clouds. "The zebras pretty much have their own things going on. I don't know what the Remnant are up to, but I do know what Lighthooves is. Till I can talk to Sekashi, Xenith, Zodiac, or someone else who

knows what they might be doing or how I can stop it, I'll focus on things I can deal with."

"But are you sure?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

Of course not, but it was the only step that made sense to me. I saw it as a card game with the stakes being the future of the Enclave. "Maybe Twister will reach help in time. Then Neighvarro will have to go all in. They will attack the tower and Thunderhead. If their attack is successful, then Lighthooves will call, launching his weapon. Maybe one gets through. How many thousands will die from the cannibal plague? Maybe it doesn't. Then the Neighvarro will crack down hard. Worse, they might capture the disease themselves. Call me cynical, but I don't have a hard time imagining the Enclave using a rain-delivered bio weapon on the Wasteland."

"But what if Lighthooves is right and the Neighvarro back down?" Glory asked with a hopeful smile.

"Then Thunderhead wins. Huzzah. Neighvarro will have to submit and watch as their power crumbles away to the economic and technological might of Thunderhead." I put a hoof across Glory's shoulders and asked, "Do you think they'll fold like that?"

"They might. . ." she began. Then she closed her eyes and hung her head a little. Finally, she answered in a tiny voice, "No. You're right. They'll fight. Wage one final massive battle."

"Lighthooves is betting that the Grand Pegasus Enclave won't risk it. He's probably counting on some backroom deals being made so the Enclave leaders save face." Too much Goldenblood made me painfully aware of such arrangements. I stared off at a lone monolithic skyscraper with the stable-tec logo on the side, remembering the meeting. "But I saw High General Harbinger in a meeting, and he was ready, actually eager, to attack even with the possibility of the bioweapon."

Rampage frowned at me. "Did that bullet knock some extra smarts into of your brain, Blackjack?"

"Hush," P-21 said with a small smile. "So what's your plan? I assume it will involve running for our lives at some point?"

"My plan?" I frowned at him a moment. "Getting to Thunderhead, meeting with Honored Councilor Stargazer, and having her put the brakes on this crazy train."

"And if she can't or won't?" Rampage asked.

"We bust into Shadowbolt tower and destroy the plague ourselves." I answered, glossing over the fact that I had no idea how we'd accomplish such a thing. "We give them Lighthooves as a rogue element and remove the excuse for an attack. And if they attack anyway, we stop them." Again, just *how* we'd do that was lost in the nebulous cloud of conviction that somehow I would pull it off.

Glory stared at me with a small smile, then said, "Only you could say something like that with utter sincerity and still have it actually sound possible."

I smiled and rolled my eyes a little. "Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty sure that LittlePip or the Stable Dweller could take on the Enclave and give them a run for their money."

Funny how that little comment seemed to shake their confidence a bit, and, oddly enough, I imagined a tiny lavender unicorn groaning and covering her face. I had no doubt, though, that if I did fail or fall, somepony else would step up and finish things. Maybe P-21. Maybe Glory. Maybe even Doof, if he truly wanted to change his ways. If I could do it myself, though, I would. I'd already damned and broken myself so many times over that I'd happily spare another if I could. P-21 leaned over and started talking with Glory about ways that they might handle the lightning rods and what they'd need to plug me into Rampage. The striped mare entertained herself by hypothesizing on ways to kill the Legate involving meat pies and balefire eggs.

That gave me a chance to address something else.

"Are you okay?" I thought at Lacunae, glancing at the alicorn flying silently above us.

"Of course. How could I be otherwise?" Lacunae replied in her familiar, soft voice. Yet there was a tension beneath it all that bordered on snippy. I just waited patiently, and after a few moments the mare said, in more familiar, worried tones, "The Black Book is coming."

I thought back to Project Eternity. "Rarity's Black Book?"

"Yes," Lacunae replied, an unfamiliar tremulous edge to her voice. "It is... disturbing..."

"I thought that the Goddess *wanted* the Black Book. For alicorn stallions or something like that." Given what the Goddess was, though, who could really tell?

"You don't understand," Lacunae said in an anguished voice I'd never heard before. "There is... considerable disorder in Unity at the moment. More than ever before, even over the course of centuries. Your... your intrusion and lineage, Red Eye's

inevitable betrayal, LittlePip's aggravation, and now this. It concerns Unity... this fear that the Goddess cannot hold. The Goddess is forcing our doubts like a river into me. What magics are within? Will they allow us to create male alicorns and become a truly viable race? Will the book affect us? Corrupt us? The Goddess is confident she is beyond its influence, but Unity whispers despite her guidance. Even that is terrifyingly new. We whisper. For centuries, the Goddess has been a constant in all of us. Now... change is coming."

"Not all change is bad," I countered. "Look at what we're doing here." Lacunae went quiet for a moment, and her silence gnawed at me. "Lacunae, what is it? Something is bothering you."

Again, it was a long pause. "Blackjack, you are a good friend. Despite your faults, and they are many, you have always attempted to act in the best interests of others. Your sacrifices are admirable, and your hope that good can ultimately triumph is an inspiration." Another pause before she added in a mental whisper, "I do not want to wrong you again, Blackjack."

"When have you ever wronged me?" I asked back. "I mean, pulling me out of 99 was rough, but better in the long run. I forgive you for that. Besides, I think that that might have been the Goddess. But other than..."

I froze as I heard the mental sob and looked as surreptitiously as possible at my friend above and the tears on her cheek. "Lacunae, what is wrong?"

"You are a dear friend, Blackjack," Lacunae replied. "Since you joined Unity, I have tried all I could to shield you from her. But the Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans soon to come to fruition. And I can think of no way to protect you or help you! I can do nothing!" she wailed, and I imagined I could see the Goddess looking on in mirth.

"Lacunae. Stop and talk to me. What is going on?" I asked as she wept.

The sensation was like a brush from my mane to my tail, a pressure that reminded me of when I had eardrums to pop. "The Goddess suggests you not worry about this one. This vessel is full to bursting, and the Goddess suspects it will not last much longer."

"Stop it!" I mentally snarled futilely, grimacing.

"Oh... this is well past the point of 'stop'," the Goddess purred. "So many treasonous thoughts and feelings. Weakness. Compassion. Guilt. Shame. Pity."

"You're killing her!" I said mentally as I clenched my eyes closed, aware that Glory

was talking, but I was focusing entirely on that cold voice within.

“Killing her? She was never alive. Besides, where will all those horrible weak thoughts go if she dies?” the Goddess sneered. “No. Soon all those nasty, weak memories will drown this little joke of a personality she pretends to have, and she’ll be full to the brim with poisonous thoughts. The Goddess shall lock her up somewhere with a nice barrel of radiation.” I felt that pressure grow over my entire body. My horn glowed and drew Vigilance.

“Blackjack? What is it? What’s wrong?” Glory asked. P-21 looked from me to the gun and back again. “Are you okay?”

It took every bit of willpower I had to put the gun away. That was all I could manage to do. “I’m fine, Glory. Thought I saw something, that’s all.” I thought a second later at the Goddess, “You cunt.” Given my company, it seemed appropriate.

“Such language. Such impudence.” The Goddess chuckled. “You should be more respectful. After all, when this Lacunae is broken, the Goddess will need a new cesspit.” The sensation of being gripped became one of being squeezed. “Guess who the Goddess has in mind for the role?”

If only my friends could read my mind. . . could hear me screaming. . .

“Oh yes, Blackjack. The Goddess has plans for you. Such plans. And soon,” she said in a tone of supreme satisfaction. “Continue your little quest. The Goddess doesn’t want your friends to interfere before it’s time.” There was a pause. “Oh. And if you behave, I won’t have you crush your little blue lover’s head like a grape.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” P-21 asked as Glory put her hoof on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I said with a happy smile. “I’m just fine. Fine as I’ll ever be.”

Overhead, Lacunae shed tears for both of us.

“You still haven’t been very clear about this flying machine,” P-21 said as we moved northwest out of the ruins and into a stand of long-dead trees.

I might not be able to complete my plans now, but I couldn’t exactly tell my friends that. I sighed. “Okay, to be fair, I don’t actually know someone who has a flying machine.” P-21 frowned, his ears laying flat. “More like, I’ve seen a person who had one. A long time ago.” Glory knitted her brows together with a smile that made me wonder if she was reminding herself that she loved the not-smart pony, “I don’t know

if the flying machine still exists, if it can still fly, or if I can get my hooves on it if it does and can.” P-21 sighed and pulled his hat over his face, masking his mutters.

Glory coughed delicately. “I don’t suppose there’s a ‘plan B’?”

“Yes,” I replied sarcastically. “My plan B involves going to the skyport and trying to smuggle ourselves on a vertibuck. And if that fails, we could try using EC-1101 and a MASEBS tower to try to talk to Thunderhead’s leaders.” Doubtful I’d get to do either, but I could get Glory home at least.

I could do that for her.

The ruins had given way to a cracked driveway snaking back towards the reservoir. Dead trees rose like scattered spears across the landscape, many more lying in heaps and piles where Enervation had kept rot at bay. I noted a great deal of garbage mixed in with the rot, heaps of refuse scattered here and there. Blue bars were scattered here and there too, and once I spotted a scavenger hiding from us as we passed. We drove by a small caravan of three armed guards escorting a dozen wretched-looking ponies, but when the armed trio saw me atop Deus they immediately broke for the woods.

Aside from one or two who fled the opposite way, the captive ponies simply stayed put in the rain.

A stockade of skywagons, wood, and scrap metal rose up before us as we approached the large wrought iron gate rising ahead of us. Two large towers flanked the entrance, and there were others built up along the length of the wall. As we approached the front entrance, someone began beating frantically on a garbage can drum, and sentries rushed into position. Deus’s engine let out an unimpressed snort as he halted in front of the entry. There were still flecks of gold leaf clinging to the metal; I imagined the grandeur that the occupants clung to was just as fragile as those tarnished yellow curls.

Elysium Gardens.

“H... hold,” shouted a stallion through a bullhorn from the far side of the gate. Deus grumbled his engine as Scotch Tape and Boo roused themselves from their naps. “S... state your name and your b... b... business with the Society.” More ponies were moving up onto the top of the barricade, mostly possessing simple hunting rifles. Not a missile to be seen. It didn’t mean that they weren’t keeping bigger stuff in the rear, though.

“Security. I’ve come to speak with King Awesome,” I replied with a small smile.

"Reapers have no jurisdiction here," the stallion squeaked nervously. "I must ask you and your... tank... to leave immediately!" P-21 frowned and moved the tired Scotch and Boo further back on Deus's turret while Glory bit down on Vigilance's mouth grip. I'd loaned her the gun since her own had been scrapped. Rampage, though, rose to her hooves in one sinister, almost sexy movement.

"Oh, that was stupid, wasn't it, Deus? A real Deus-ee." Rampage laughed and grinned, then turned her full attention to the gate. "You got three Reapers here, two of the fucking top ten, and Security, and you're thinking to keep us out? That's funny. That's real funny." She scraped her hooves on Deus's armor with a screech as she grinned at the pony. "You know what would also be *really* funny? Us driving this tank right up your ass." Deus revved his engine in agreement.

"Rampage, that's enough," I said as I stood beside her, trying to suppress my smile.

"Enough? I hadn't even started!" Rampage replied with a pout. "At least let me get a barrel up there."

"I just want to speak to King Awesome. A quick question, and I'll be gone," I said as reasonably as possible to the stallion.

"Absolutely not! I have orders! You must leave immediately, or we'll shoot you all! Really! I mean it!" I sighed; I really did not want to do things this way. "O... one! T... two!" he began in his high strung voice. I watched the milling blue bars. Red and it's dead...

"Oh shut up! You're going to get yourself killed," a mare snapped from behind the barricade. The guard ponies started in alarm.

"Your highnesses! The Reapers are attacking! It's Security!" the stallion quailed. "We need reinforcements!"

"You moron!" the mare snapped. "If they were attacking, you'd have been dead two minutes ago! Honestly!" A moment later, a blue glow surrounded the gate. It swung wide and a trio of white unicorns stepped forward. A shield protected the three from the misting rain. Clearly, these were not Wastelanders, and one I knew.

"Blackjack," Prince Splendid said with a generous smile, wearing absolutely pristine combat armor. "Welcome to my home." The white, blue-maned stallion who I'd met months ago outside the Fluttershy medical center still stirred a base, fundamental part of me. I reminded myself he was head of an organization of slavemongers. That, and his warm, handsome gaze no longer made my mare bits quiver receptively like they once did.

To his right approached a cross, younger-looking mare that shared his coloration so closely that I wondered if they might be twins. She wore gold and sapphire jewelry and a delicate tiara. She also wore neither barding nor any weapons but an elegant dress that wouldn't have lasted ten minutes past this gate. Her firm blue eyes locked with mine without fear or hesitation. "Security," she said in a cool voice as she eyed me.

On his left was a unicorn filly Scotch Tape's age, white in coat but possessing a bubblegum-pink and magenta striped mane. She wasn't quite as formally dressed as the other two but had a grin that could give Rampage a run for its bottlecaps. She eyed the severe, blue-maned mare, who had to be Splendid's sister. "Do forgive Grace. She's been given a double dose of bitch pills every day from birth," she said with a snicker. "Splendid, you know. I'm Princess Charm. Are you here to kill somepony?" the pink-maned filly asked eagerly.

"Oh, I like her," Rampage chuckled.

Grace scowled at the younger filly and stepped forward, saying quickly, "We don't want any trouble, Security. You can come and see my father, but the tank and your weapons stay here. If you try to force the issue, then things will get uncivil."

"Celestia forbid *that* should happen," Charm quipped with a roll of her magenta eyes. Then she grinned at Rampage. "Make it happen. Please?" The armored mare snickered in reply.

"Ahem. Sisters," Prince Splendid said behind a faux cough. Glory gave a little, sympathetic smile to the stallion as he said apologetically, "I'm afraid Grace is right. Abrupt, but correct. We can't let you in so... overarmed." Funny, I didn't know a pony could be 'overarmed' these days.

Still, that was refreshingly straightforward. "We're not going in unarmed," I said with a smile. "You know you can trust me, Splendid."

"I know I can, but there's fifty other Society ponies who don't have the best opinion of you, Blackjack," Splendid said diplomatically.

The well-dressed mare seemed to consider all of us, her gaze lingering a little longer on Lacunae than the rest, before declaring firmly, "If you can't concede to this, you can take your business elsewhere."

Charm rolled her eyes once again and pointed her hoof at her sibling. "When you start the summary executions, could you begin with her?"

"Charm!" Splendid rebuked, "That was uncalled for."

“Tank. Rampage. Security. Hello?” the filly said as she gestured to all of us.

Grace considered us and then sighed. “You won’t be helpless, you know. You and your alicorn have magic, you have a broadcaster to call for help, and you have a tank to come to your rescue,” the blue-maned mare said with a toss of her head.

Well, that was unsettlingly accurate. I glanced at my friends, who looked equally nonplussed. P-21 frowned at her, “You’re well informed, Princess. . .”

“Princess Aquilina Augusta Awesomeness the Graceful,” she said with exaggerated formality. “Grace will do,” she added with a smile, helping suppress a small gnawing sense of annoyance I was feeling towards the Princess. There was just something frustratingly familiar about her, but I knew I’d never met her before. “When it comes to ponies like Security, it is wise to be informed.”

I looked back at my friends. Rampage glanced at Deus. “If you don’t mind, Blackjack, I think I’m going to stay with Deus. I’m out of Mint-als, and Society ponies make me want to hurt things. Trust me, you’ll feel the same pretty quick,” she said with a grin.

“Well, if you’re sure,” I said as I looked at the rest of my friends. Glory was already unarmed, except for the loaned Vigilance, and she shrugged. P-21 just wore a little smile that said they’d be lucky to find any weapons he’d secreted and gave a little nod.

I hopped off the front of Deus and trotted towards the princess, curious about the mare. “Grace, hmm?” She didn’t seem scared by my clearly metallic components, but there was a canny concern. We were dangerous, a grave threat, but we weren’t unreasonable. But well-informed as she was, she couldn’t know what business we had here. Meeting with us in person was still a considerable personal risk.

“Indeed. I believe you’ve met my twin, Prince Splendid?” So I had been right! She nodded to Boo and Scotch Tape. “The rest of your friends are welcome to join you, of course. The Society will extend our hospitality to you, in exchange for civility.”

I looked at my friends and then gave a shrug and turned back to Rampage and Deus. “Listen in on the radio and stay close. If things turn. . . uncivil. . .” I glanced back at Princess Grace a moment, spotting a small roll of the unicorn’s eyes. “Show them what Reapers can really do.”

“All right,” Rampage sighed. “I suppose we can go hunting Radroaches or something.”

“With a tank?!” Glory said, gaping.

The striped mare smirked back at her. “What do you think?”

“I... you... they... seriously?!” Glory blurted.

“Don’t blow up anything friendly,” I replied casually as I passed over my guns for storage inside Deus. I lifted the sword and said, “I’m keeping this.” The princess glanced at them, then gave a small, accommodating nod.

“You had impeccable timing, Grace,” P-21 said in a low, untrusting voice once we’d given Deus our weapons. I had no doubt he had some grenades hidden... somewhere...

The pristine unicorn smiled at once. “Hardly. The moment the report was radioed in, I teleported straight to the gates,” she replied with another little roll of her eyes. “Honestly, trying to deny entry to that kind of firepower... what were they thinking?” The guards all looked on sheepishly.

“Yeah. Who’d have ordered that?” Charm said with a little eye roll of her own – what, were derisive gestures a family trait or something? – as they as they started back through the gate. I turned to my friends for a moment, and not feeling much better about this at all, followed.

“If I hadn’t seen Tenpony Tower, I’d think this place was ridiculous,” I said as we walked through the marble foyer of the three storey ‘country club’ perched on a hillside overlooking the reservoir. Every effort had been made to preserve the building from the ravages of time and decay; it resembled a tiny pearlescent bubble of the old world. The Society ponies were almost exclusively unicorns, with perhaps half a dozen well-dressed earth ponies talking amongst themselves. Overhead, a massive chandelier filled the hall with warm, magical light.

It was a far cry from the grubby shacks outside. Clustered on some old clearings for something that Splendid had called a ‘Golf Course’, they’d been groups of a dozen or so buildings surrounded by fences. I hadn’t seen many ponies, though, only a few elderly and children taking care of chores like tending their own weedy gardens. The barbed-wire-topped fences, I’d been told, were to keep the serfs from fighting with each other in the middle of the night and to protect them from occasional radgators from the lake.

Right. And Stable 99 kept the males locked up so they wouldn’t exhaust themselves. The problem was, while I felt for the dingy ponies in those hovels, I couldn’t see

a way to help them. There were more ponies here than anyplace I'd seen yet. It wasn't surprising now how poorly armed those guards at the gate had been; the Society must have had a hundred or more ponies keeping watch. The ponies outside the marble building wore Steel Ranger power armor. Apparently, blowing up the *Celestia* had given some of the Steel Rangers a career change. Fighting the Society would take some heavy firepower. . . heavy firepower that could be brought to bear without shelling slavers and slaves alike. Deus wasn't exactly a precision weapon, and I did *not* want another Fallen Arch.

"Nice place," P-21 muttered. "Bought with slave labor."

"Serfs," Splendid corrected immediately. "Not slaves."

"Forgive me if I don't appreciate the distinction," P-21 replied.

"There isn't one," Charm said with a shrug and a happy smile.

"There is," Grace countered with a frown. "Stop being obnoxious." The pink-maned filly simply smirked in response.

Splendid cleared his throat and said in a voice of pure reasonability, "Serfs are not slaves. All our serfs willingly agreed to work for the society. We provide food and security, and they provide labor. It is an equitable arrangement," he said with a smile made of reasonableness. The way he kept staring at my tail was making me feel tense.

"Right. Like the equitable living conditions," P-21 said gesturing to the sumptuous quarters.

"They choose to come to us," Grace said firmly. "We are not raiders. We don't go out and capture ponies to work for us. Every serf must sign a contract that clearly outlines their duties to the Society and the Society's obligations in turn. The contracts are all enchanted so that only a signature that is willingly signed is valid. You can't just sign a pony's name for them."

"I recall three slavers forcing ponies to sign your damned contract," I retorted. "They stuck them in a nice patch of Enervation and let it slowly leech the life out of them until they agreed."

Grace jerked as if slapped, looking from me to Splendid. The stallion coughed and averted his eyes. "There is some question as to if the contract is valid if signed under duress. After all, the perils of the Wasteland puts us all under duress in some form or another. Is starvation duress? Is sickness duress?"

“What?! There is a difference between a pony starving and a pony forced to sign or die!” Grace snapped. “Do you mean you knew about this, Splendid? Does father?”

Splendid screwed up his face and made a vague expression. “Eh, I’m sure there’s somepony investigating it. The point is that the work here is far better and safer than scrounging in the Wasteland.”

“And I’m sure you work right along beside them. Share the same food. Oh, and I bet there’s never a case of abuse?” P-21 said sharply. “Because the ponies with the power are always kind and benevolent.” He looked at me and growled, “Please tell me you’re going to kill all these fucks.”

Charm giggled. “Oh, finally! Something interesting!”

“I... uh...” I blinked, at a loss for what to say. Why couldn’t somepony just shoot me or threaten me? The last two times I’d tried to fix communities, it’d blown up in my face. I was definitely seeing the Society due for some kind of reckoning, but I just wasn’t sure if I was the one to deliver it or not.

Splendid coughed and looked equally uncomfortable, while Grace frowned back at the shacks. “Well, somepony has to be in charge, right?” he said after a moment. “Better us than a pony like Red Eye.” He tried his lovin’ melting smile on me once more, baffled that it wasn’t having the effect it once did. If it hadn’t been for Stygius, I would have bucked his head clean off his shoulders.

“I suppose that if they didn’t like the conditions here they could... take their chances out in the Wasteland?” Glory suggested hesitantly. But I remembered those wretches picking through the trash. That wasn’t much of a future. I supposed serfdom was a tiny step up from slavery... maybe...

Still felt wrong, though.

“Well, we’ll have to see about this, right Blackjack?” P-21 asked as he looked at me with a sure smile. I stared back at him in shock. “Right?”

I looked around at the others and rubbed my mane with a hoof. “Um, I don’t know, P-21. I really just want to talk to King Awesome.” And avoid another war with another group of ponies when I didn’t know all the details of this place.

“Excuse me?” he said flatly.

“Well, the ship’s all we need from him. If he doesn’t have it, then I don’t see the good that picking a fight with yet another group of ponies will do,” I said, and his stormy blue eyes narrowed.

He looked at me a moment, glanced around, and then moved behind me. "Oh, look. A bathroom. Move it, Blackjack," he said, giving my armored flanks a shove. I was so shocked, I moved ahead while everypony just stared after us. As we entered the little filly's room, I just stared at him in bafflement as he ducked down, checked the stalls, then whirled on me. "What in Equestria is wrong with you, Blackjack?"

"With me? You're the one who pushed me into the filly's room!" I retorted.

"How can you blow holes in slavers and then treat this as if it's no big deal?" he said with a wave of his hoof. "Look at this place! It was made possible by those slavers."

"You heard them. They're serfs, not slaves." But I didn't feel much conviction, remembering again the captive ponies a few days ago near the Skyport and how they were being pressured to sign.

"Right, and I was 'reproductive equipment.' The word 'slave' may not have been used, but that's exactly what I was," he countered. "You saw their homes! Do you seriously believe that that is any kind of a life? And we haven't even seen their *working* conditions!"

"P-21, there're seven of us. Eight if you consider Boo."

His blue eyes blazed, mane bristling before my eyes as he spat, "We have a fucking tank! One that'd be happy to kill these fucks!"

I threw my hooves up. "What do you want me to do, kill the Society ponies and their guards and set everypony free, or at least those that weren't collateral damage? Let them scatter out and be food for every raider and monster out there? Drop everything and try to... to... what? Create a fair government where somepony isn't fucked? Have you forgotten me trying to fix Flank? Have you forgotten 99?"

He seemed to vibrate before my eyes. "I can never forget, Blackjack. Have you?"

"I remember killing everypony there because I fucked up and didn't make sure that Rivets knew about the virus!" I roared back at him. "Do not ask me to radically change societies! I am not qualified!" I paused and took a deep breath. "All we're here for is the airship."

He grit his teeth as he glared at me. "So you're the only one who gets to have a set of priorities, Blackjack? This place is wrong! *Damned* wrong and you know it. I don't care if they call them slaves, serfs, servants, workers, employees, or bosom buddies! If they're living and working in those conditions, they're being used just like I was." He stared back at me with a chilling fire in his eyes that I hadn't seen in a

long time. "But, oh, so long as they get you what you want for your next step, it's fine."

I gestured at the door with a hoof. "I already have half the Hoof against me, P-21!" And any day the Goddess might take me over for good. "I'd like to not add another group after my head. You're assuming everything is bad just from where they live. For all you know, they're *happy* to be here. They may even be grateful."

He closed his eyes tight, flinching back as though I'd struck him. "I'm sure some of them are," he muttered quietly. "There were males in 99 who were. Grateful for the shots. . . how lucky we were to get shots. And slop to eat. So very grateful to not be dead." He grimaced, fighting the liquid shame creeping down his cheeks. "I know I'm not being objective here, Blackjack, but I need to do something. And I need to know that you will do something too."

"Why?" I demanded, wanting my heart to thunder and my breath to snort. Wanting to show my agitation and frustration. This mechanical stillness inside me was infuriating. "Why me?"

"Because you can and I can't!" he shouted in my face, tears running down his cheeks in frustration. "Because you have the power to do this and I don't! You do the audacious and the impossible every single day and I know that if you wanted to change all this, you could!" He closed his eyes, shaking as if on the verge of breaking. "You do so much... do this..."

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why was I trying to rationalize this? I should just get a bottle or ten of whiskey, gulp it down, and kick the whole rotten mess down. But as much as I wanted to, I also knew that things weren't that simple in the Hoof. I could end up getting everypony killed if I did this wrong.

But I also knew that P-21 needed this, just as much as I needed to find Horizons. It didn't matter what I was here for; he needed something else from this place. A chance to make up for 99.

I looked at him and then closed my eyes. *It's not always about you, Blackjack.* "Okay," I said quietly, then saw the shock spreading across his face. "Let's try to not do anything drastic right away, though. We need information, and you need to get it. First chance you can, slip away and get a good look at this place. See if you can find where the serfs are working and their conditions and give me an honest appraisal. If it's as bad as you think it is. . . we'll think of something we can do without getting everypony killed. Alright?"

"I... yes... sure..." he murmured as if he'd woken from a bad dream and he was trying to make sure that things were real. "I... thank you for trusting me with this, Blackjack. When I saw this place and that *chandelier*," he made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "At least the Tenpony Tower bunch didn't have this serfdom bullshit going on."

I patted his shoulder. "Don't thank me just yet. I'll help how I can, but I mean it when I say that I don't want to slaughter the ponies in charge and trot on. I don't have the best track record with fixing settlements, good intentions or no. So if you think we have to do it, then we'll do it smart and right. Okay? And it might take us a while, given that I've got Lighthooves, Cognitum, the Legate, and who knows who else to deal with right now." And the Goddess, an enemy that I couldn't even tell any of them about!

"Right. Just... right..." he said and took a deep breath, scrubbing at his face with the back of his fetlock. "Okay. Thank you."

"Just don't get caught, and talk to us before you do anything," I said as I patted him carefully. He didn't flinch away; I supposed maybe we were past that for good. "Okay. Stay safe. I'll pass things on to Scotch and the others."

He nodded, and I trotted out of the bathroom. Grace, Splendid, and Charm gaped in bafflement, Scotch tape and Glory in concern. "Nice... ah... toilets. Very shiny."

Glory looked on speculatively, but Scotch Tape simply grinned at the baffled noble unicorns. "Yup, this is the mare you're all terrified of. Fear for your commodes!"

"Quite," Prince Splendid murmured, then finally closed his mouth in a smile. "I'm afraid that I have something to attend to. Do see that she gets to father, dear sisters." And he turned and quickly trotted away.

"Not it!" Charm laughed. "Gotta get the rumors started!" she said as she scampered off.

Grace stood there, her mouth weakly working for a moment, and then she covered her face with her hoof and growled, "Ugh... fine! Somepony has to!" Turning, she muttered, "This way."

"Did I miss something?" Glory asked.

"Splendid is going to talk to the Du Trots, the Steeples, and the Oranges about your arrival, probably going to say he single-hornedly stopped you from blowing the guards to bloody flecks. And Charm is going to be a little pain in my nethers," Grace said with a sigh, then straightened. She took a deep breath, holding a forehoof to

her chest, and let it all out at once and regarded me. “Well then. Let’s get you to father’s study. Then I’ll take your friends somewhere they can freshen up while you’re our guests.”

“You take your responsibilities seriously,” Glory observed as the princess lead us away from the well-dressed ponies.

“Somepony has to. Being a princess is more than simply getting what you want,” Grace replied primly. “Contrary to what my siblings believe.”

She trotted down a hall and up some stairs to the third floor, then stopped outside a door. “Father’s study. He seemed to think you’d like to wait for him in here to talk alone. He’ll be coming in a short while.” She turned towards my friends. “Now, for the rest of you. Would you like meal, a bath, a nap, or a tour?”

“Food,” Scotch Tape said with a raise of her hoof.

“A bath would be lovely,” Glory said, brightening up at once.

Boo let out a body shaking yawn.

P-21 backed down the hall. “Sure. I’d love to be shown around.” Lacunae said nothing. She stood as still as stone.

“Of course. . .” Grace muttered with a sigh, and then gave a small smile to me. “Well, I’ll take care of your friends and then come back for you when you’re finished with father. Be brief and to the point. His health is fragile, and he tires easily.”

I watched her lead my friends down the hall and then opened the door. Really. . . I just had a simple little questi—

‘Office of Interministry Affairs.’ The banner was hung across the far wall in understated black and white. I stared at photographs of Ministry Mares, Garnet, Onyx, and even Goldenblood. I walked slowly around the desk, checking out the terminal, then looking at a grainy photograph of Goldenblood shaking hooves with Princess Luna. ‘Goldenblood assumes minor role in Princess’s new government,’ read the caption. A much clearer picture showed a metal stand and a large purple and green dragon blasting a black pony silhouette with green flames. ‘Traitor executed for crimes against Equestria.’

There were maps of the Hoofington valley and the whole of Equestria on the wall with colored pins all across them. A large newspaper article in a frame asked, “Just what is the O.I.A., and who is in charge of it? Answers not forthcoming from Princess or the Ministries.” I saw a rank of golden memory orbs in a glass case that nearly

had my horn twitching. Unfortunately, I knew a lock that was out of my league... maybe P-21 could come in here and borrow them for me?

The terminal on the desk was logged in. There had to be dozens of audio files on it. It'd take me days to listen to them all, but I couldn't help myself and picked one at random.

The file started to play, filling the air with familiar rasping breaths. "—have to make sure that Clovertail remains on the 'exclusion' list at the MoM. If Pinkie Pie arrests one more vital member of the MWT. . ." the stallion grumbled.

"Goldenblood?" a stallion said in a brighter, healthier voice that was naggingly familiar. "You're late. Garnet's already started the meeting." There was a long pause. "You look terrible."

"Pinkie Pie arrested Clovertail again, Trottenheimer," Goldenblood rasped, then thumped his hoof. "Doesn't she understand that Clovertail's company makes the arcane spell matrices for Steel Ranger power armor? If Clovertail is removed, the company will shut down till they can elect a new CEO. Clover's set up a legal nightmare to protect himself. It'd take them a month, two if Applejack decides to try and play Ministry Mare. That could be more than five hundred units delayed." He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Why can't Pinkie Pie keep her 'law enforcement' to annoying the aristocracy and stop interfering in the running of the country?"

"I doubt she sees it that way. Clovertail is scum. You know what he's done," Trottenheimer said in a harsh voice.

Goldenblood let out a hissing sigh and said, "Scum we need for a few more years. A few months, at least. Then the Princess can round up Clovertail and me along with all the others when she cleans out the garbage." There was a pause, and then Goldenblood said in a mutter of shameful resignation, "He's a lesser evil."

"There're a lot of those in Equestria these days," Trottenheimer remarked. "Is that why you look like hell?"

There was no answer for a long minute, and then Goldenblood replied, "I haven't been eating much. Sleeping less. I've been trying to keep Luna out of my dreams."

"Oh, well, that's brilliant. Hunger and sleep deprivation are wonderful assets for any leader looking for complete burnout. Are you drinking as well, Goldie?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Goldenblood snapped, and then his voice softened. "I'll be fine. We're so close. Just a few more things to wrap up. . . and then. . ."

"I'm worried about you, Goldie. Everypony at the office is," Trottenheimer replied. "If they knew your plan. . ."

"Their concerns are misplaced. Better to worry about the Princess and Equestria," Goldenblood said, then let out a long, tired groan. "Just a few more months. Perhaps even just a few weeks. Twilight Sparkle will have her damned alicorns if she keeps poking around Hippocratic Research as she has. I'm half tempted to simply tell her what it will cost. Maybe that will change her mind."

"And after Twilight mass produces alicorns, what then?"

"That will probably be the point when the plan can finally be finished. Luna will have a government that will last a thousand years. Equestria can finally return to normal. And Twilight will be executed for crimes against equinity and undermining the regime. Goddesses, if only she stopped. . ." There was a tired longing in his voice. As if he would give anything, even his life, especially his life, to have that.

"Bully for her. What about you?" Trottenheimer asked. There was a ping, and for several seconds a long low tone rang out. "Put that thing away, Goldie. I hate that sound."

The note faded away. A few seconds later, Goldenblood answered grimly, "Likely summary execution. Hopefully it'll be quick. But banishment to the sun would be quite a spectacle."

"That's not funny. I wish you wouldn't joke like that," Trottenheimer muttered.

"Somepony will have to pay for all we've done here. Likely many ponies. Hopefully fewer than I originally planned." He coughed and wheezed. "Ironic. I fully expected to die ten years ago. Ten years. . . now I wish I had."

"Before Fluttershy?" Trottenheimer asked sharply.

"I was a broken bird to be mended by her. A pet she foolishly fell in love with, and who foolishly loved her back. Too bad I ended up hurting her too grievously to ever forgive myself or her," he muttered wetly. "She deserved somepony far finer than I."

"Oh please. If this gets descends any further into a self-loathing pity party, I may be sick. There is no reason for this, Goldenblood. Talk to Luna. Do something really radical and talk to Twilight or Fluttershy. You're not alone." There was a ping, and another long tone filled the air. "And throw that thing away!"

"It helps me concentrate," Goldenblood retorted.

"I don't care if I gives you wings, that stuff is no good. I work with it as little as possible." The tone trailed off. "Maybe it's time to admit that the plan isn't working."

"It's working fine. I just have to hold on for a little longer. Just... just a few more things... if we can get a second or third Celestia One built so we can target the interior, their front lines, and their launch islands. Or finally get the Tokomare online and connected to the Hoofington megaspell facility. Or perhaps see if I can work out a deal in the back channels..." There was another ping and long screaming note.

"Goldenblood, enough. Just, stop. This plan you came up a decade ago has gone too far. Go talk to Luna. Tell her everything and resign."

"And who will take my place? Horse? Oh, he'd love that. Garnet? You?" He snorted and blurted, "Celestia?" He let out a long, tired sigh. "No. I'm already quite thoroughly damned. I won't condemn another to my position. I've done enough to deserve all that's happened to me. All that will happen. All that matters is Equestria. That when I'm finally removed, everything can return to those better days. We'll have a Princess who can rule the kingdom as she needs to rule it, and there won't be a need for war or the Ministry Mares anymore. And things will be... better. I just have to hold on a few more months." Trottenheimer didn't say a word.

Goldenblood suddenly emitted his rusty chuckle. "You know, it's funny. I was born in the zebra lands. Learned their tribes and language. Tutored by zebras. I was more striped than any pony before the war, and when Mother died, I didn't want to come back. But when I stepped off the boat and saw this green and bright place, I knew that there was something special about it. That there was a goodness here that I'd never known or imagined. A promise that, if you were good and tried hard, everything would turn out okay. Goddesses, I loved Equestria. With its strange and silly and delightful inhabitants and their odd and baffling ways. And yet, no matter how I tried, I was always apart from that goodness. Terrified of it. I'd watch Equestria from afar with longing, see the ponies and their friendships and day to day concerns, and I'd stare in wonder and terror. It was like a precious bauble of spun glass, and if I dared touch it, it would shatter from my careless pretension. I wasn't worthy of Equestria."

"That's quite a monologue. I remember when you couldn't say four words without gasping."

"I've been practicing what I'll say for my last trial. Or right before my execution." Goldenblood gave a hollow, grim little laugh. It soon died, and Trottenheimer didn't share it. Finally, Goldenblood said with quiet conviction, "It will get better, when it's

all over.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Trottenheimer murmured, barely audible in the recording.

Goldenblood didn’t answer him, but I could imagine him gazing off. “Well... if everypony loses, Twilight has a contingency for that. And if Equestria is lost... I do.”

There was a long pause, and then a knock followed by a mare saying, “Director. Flim and Flam are on the line for you. Twilight is being persistent again.”

“Thank you, Emerald. Give your sisters my regards and thanks.” There was a long sigh after the door closed. “Thank you for stopping by, Trotty. I appreciate your concern, but I started this nightmare. I’ll finish it.”

“You don’t finish nightmares, Goldie. You wake up from them.”

The recording came to an end, and I sat there, thinking about what I’d heard. It hadn’t been anything... important. Nothing about Horizons at all, really. But to hear him talk about his own execution so casually... and that talk about loving Equestria. It had to be an act. It simply had to be. Goldenblood was a villain and a murderer who’d done unspeakable things. I looked over at the front page of the Canterlot Times and the silhouette of Goldenblood being consumed by green flame.

“I thought you might appreciate this,” a stallion said behind me, making me whirl towards the door. The speaker, an elderly unicorn with a mane like guttering blue fire and a coat the color of spoiled milk, sat in a wheelchair with a blanket covering his hindlegs. Unwholesome blots of blue and purple hovered beneath his papery skin, and one eye the color of fog peered at me. The other, however, was a piercing azure, and I was struck, despite his clear infirmity, by a strange vitality that hovered around him. Elderly though he might be, a charisma and life clung to this old stallion like a royal cloak that no ravages of time or ill health could strip away. And from the keen glint in his eye and the way it roved over my body, I felt a sudden annoying flush of embarrassment. He looked like he was barely able to stand, but I wasn’t so sure that that would keep me safe.

“King Awesome, I presume?” I asked, forcing as polite a smile as I could.

“Naturally. Could that apply to any other?” He gestured to the pictures, news clippings, and memory orbs. “What do you think of my collection?”

“It’s... astonishing,” I admitted as I examined a bland pamphlet that read, ‘Office of Interministry Affairs: Career Opportunities.’ The designer looked as if they’d gone

out of their way to make the available positions seem as boring as possible. “I never imagined I’d see so much. . . stuff. . . associated with it.”

“Stuff?” Awesome asked as he raised a bushy blue brow.

“Um. . . nice stuff?” I amended, but then he chuckled, and I suspected he was teasing me.

“Well, better than ‘garbage’ or ‘shit father collects’ I suppose,” Awesome said with another chuckle, looking at the collection as his horn glowed and pushed the wheels of his chair. “I’ve always been taken by the O.I.A. Such a curious, little, unobtrusive part of the Equestrian government. Most of the Wasteland doesn’t even know it once existed, and the few who do couldn’t care less that it did. It’s like the Ministries themselves, a relic. Unimportant now.”

“I don’t believe that,” I said. “In fact, since I learned about it, I keep finding the things Goldenblood did to be more and more relevant.” I raised a hoof, turning it over and looking at it. “Their secret projects are still around. . . still causing problems.”

“Oh, you know about the Projects?” He seemed impressed. “But of course, you should. Zodiac told me about two of them. The secrecy. The conspiracies. But who cares about what a bunch of dead ponies did two centuries ago? Better to hunt down raiders and horde bottlecaps and bullets.” He sighed, shaking his head. “Most ponies believe my interest is just a sign that my wits are slipping. Wastelanders concern themselves with the here and now, not the once was.”

I had to admit, if I didn’t have the mystery of what Goldenblood had done, I probably wouldn’t have lasted long in the Wasteland. First I kept going to keep EC-1101 away from Deus. Then it was the puzzle of Horizons and what he’d really done. Now I was driven by a strange urge pulling me to find the answer and stop whatever he’d set in motion. Otherwise, I probably would have ended up a Reaper, or perhaps working security at Megamart. I wouldn’t have been pushed to further and further extremes and hazards.

“I care,” I replied, looking at the collection. “But I have to admit, I don’t understand why he did all of it. The Ministries. The Projects. It just seems so stupid.”

He rubbed the snowy stubble on his chin with a hoof. “Have you ever done anything behind a friend’s back?”

“Ohh. . . just a lot,” I muttered, flushing as I looked away.

“And did you know it was wrong?” he asked, and I frowned but nodded. “So then why did you do it without telling them?”

I thought back to Scotch Tape. While she'd forgiven me for removing her memories, it still bothered her. It also made me wonder, for the first time, if there were other things she'd seen or heard that she wished she didn't remember. "I did it because I thought it needed to be done. And I didn't tell because... because I knew that the truth would upset them."

King Awesome nodded once. "I suspect it's not much different than Goldenblood and the O.I.A. Most of the things he did were things that he believed were needed not only for Equestria to win the war but to put Luna in a position of power where she could rule much like her sister had. He fostered secrets not to protect himself from the law but because he didn't want to see Equestria upset by his necessary action."

"You think he wasn't just hiding so folks wouldn't stop him?" I countered, skeptically.

"He planned to be stopped. You heard that recording. Everything he'd done was planned to eventually be exposed. I think, instead, it was that he knew how shocking it would be for ponykind to contemplate that anypony could do the things he'd done." He shook his head with a sigh. "I think he bloodied his hooves so that other ponies didn't have to."

I thought of Psalm and shivered. It made a horrible kind of sense. "Still fucked up," I muttered.

"Evil is when we rationalize the wrongs we do to others. And Equestria was full of little evils during the war. The war. Politics. Business. National pride. Racial pride. Victims. There were so many little excuses for so many horrible things ponies visited on each other. Even today," he said with a chuckle. "Somehow the wicked always seem to find ways to justify their actions."

I thought about the Legate and his grand talk about destiny and how full of shit it was. "And the Society? Does it do the same?"

He was silent a long moment, his blue eyes locked with mine. "I suppose that that depends on which member you ask, but personally, yes. I suppose we do." He sighed and shook his head, his gaze turning far more calculating. I glanced around at the O.I.A. paraphernalia and the back at King Awesome. "So, I suppose it would be fair to ask the question most pressing on the minds of my followers: have you come as a bloody conqueror seeking to liberate the unwashed masses and put the heads of their over-cultured oppressors on pikes before giving the whole operation to Big Daddy and the Twilight Society?"

I stared at him for several seconds, processing all that before summarizing my response in a nonplussed, “Huh?” Shaking my head, I frowned at him. “Look, I could have saved all of you the pain and aggravation. I’m here for an airship for my friend. That’s it.” Well... my priorities might change depending on what P-21 discovered, but I’d gas that stable when I had to.

He blinked at me for one moment, then threw back his head and cackled. “You’re here for *that*? The Fleur? Oh my, the gossipmongers will be so disappointed. They were absolutely certain you’d come to liberate the serfs.” He wiped his eyes with one leg as he said with a smile. “Take it.”

I frowned. “Wait... just like that?”

“Just like that.” He replied with a smile, narrowing his eyes. “If it will get you on your way elsewhere, I’ll happily give you a piece of antiquated machinery if it will avoid other unpleasantness.” He waved a hoof errantly. “It will take a little time to get skyworthy, and the Society will quite happily show you the utmost hospitality until you leave. You’re actually in time for the Society’s Grand Galloping Gala tomorrow night.” He suddenly frowned. “Though getting a proper ensemble together will be tricky.”

I was so ready to barter, threaten, argue, or beg for the airship that simply being given it was making my head spin. “Well, thank you.”

“You can show that thanks by not trying any drastic changes to the status quo. The Society has gotten very comfortable of late and they are extremely nervous that you are here to end that comfort,” King Awesome replied with a chilly smile. “So... Security’s really not here for more than the airship?”

“Maybe...” I frowned, and he arched the brow over his brilliant blue eye. I felt a surge of P-21’s righteousness well up inside me. “Well, maybe I am. I don’t see much difference between serfs and slaves, and some of my friends aren’t happy with what you’re doing here.” He just smiled, clasping his forehooves together as he regarded me thoughtfully.

“Believe me, it could be much worse.” He leaned back in the chair, narrowing his bright blue eye. “When I met them, the Society were a gang of thugs with slightly better than average manners and elocution. There were slaves then, toiling to grow food in the Enervation-weakened soil of the old golf course. I had to teach the gang the concept of nobility. Of being superior not only competitively but in breeding, conduct, and spirit. If they were truly nobility, then they had obligations to fulfill. The distinction between slave and serf may not seem like much to you, but it’s the

difference between raiding settlements, slapping bomb collars on prisoners, and working them to death and accepting volunteers, giving them safety and food, and working them for half the day.”

I scowled at that, then shook my head. “I really don’t know about that either way. Slavery is wrong, but I don’t know if what you’re talking about is a form of slavery or not.”

He considered me shrewdly for a long moment. “It’s a semantic question, Blackjack,” he said as he folded his hooves before him. “Do we keep our serfs here when they wish to leave? Yes. It prevents infiltrators. Do we require them to sign an agreement to become serfs rather than slap a bomb collar on every able-bodied pony we can? Yes. And are there some that use coercion to circumvent that rule? Yes,” he finished, his face solemn and stern. “Ultimately, the Society is not perfect. No more than the Reapers or the Collegiate.”

“It’s not semantics to me. Wrong is wrong, and the Society has a lot of wrong going on as far as I can see. Keeping intelligent seaponies in some kind of zoo for your amusement? Using a minotaur to force ponies to sign your agreements so that you can pretend to be better than common gangers? It reeks of a whole lot of brahmin shit,” I said with more severity than I originally intended.

But to my surprise, King Awesome looked more amused than offended. “Of course it does. But what you keep failing to understand is that the Society was, and can be, far worse. The distinction between serf and slave may not be much, but it *is* a distinction. Far better than the terms given by Red-Eye. Should we force them to labor in irradiated pits for their freedom? Work them for five years in conditions few will survive? Make them fight to death for our amusement? That used to happen before I became king,” he said severely, his blue eye intensely boring into me before he gave a sigh and a shrug, “As for the other accoutrements... well... the Society is always desperate to set itself apart as sophisticated and special. Which is why they’re so terrified of somepony like you coming along and challenging their complacency.”

I felt a little unsure now, even embarrassed. Was he agreeing with me? “So... you think this serfdom thing is wrong too?”

“I think that I’ve been King of the Society long enough to appreciate what little distinctions we can have. But perhaps a better pony might improve things. Who can say?” He said with a little chuckle, making me question just what was going on.

I rubbed the back of my head as I looked away. My uncertainty had robbed me of my

former righteous indignation. “Well... It just seems like you’re getting a better deal,” I muttered lamely, no longer certain of what to do. Accept a lesser evil? Overthrow it, and invite a greater evil? ...Or stop, listen, and learn more about what was going on?

“Aristoponies always do,” he replied with a smile and a shrug. A wistful look filled his eye as he gazed at his collection. “A fact my old friends failed to accept. But that’s ancient history. Few care about such things. History is an irrelevancy, even to the Society. No pony cares about the past.” He spoke with quiet bitterness and heartbreaking resignation.

I frowned and glanced around at the room again, and then back at King Awesome. Finally, I smiled at the old stallion. “I do.”

We talked for nearly two hours about everything. The Society. The O.I.A. Goldenblood. His companions. Dawn. His recently departed wife. There were some parts that kept me riveted, like hearing about the final breakup and a paternal King Awesome protecting Dawn from a lecherous, uncouth Big Daddy. Other parts, like him claiming to be the great grandson of Shining Armor, Twilight Sparkle’s brother and the entitled heir to the Crystal Empire, seemed too farfetched even for the Wasteland. But then, as he told me, “If you’re going to be anything in the Wasteland, why not be a king? And if you’re going to be a king, you better be a fucking awesome king.” Hence the name.

It was just crazy enough to be true.

Grace peeked in on us a half dozen times before her father told her to knock it off. In that time, I’d learned that he’d approved of Sky Striker’s marriage to Dawn, as any stallion who would ride a flaming dragon from on high had to be a decent protector, but had wanted them to stay in Elysium. I found out that Keeper’s weakness was for something called ‘strawberries’ and that Big Daddy’s hooves were ticklish. I returned the favor by sharing a few secrets I’d learned, like the details of how Goldenblood’s affair with Fluttershy had ended and how her baby had survived to become the reaper Psychoshy. That alone seemed to astonish the old stallion.

More surprising was how good it felt to be able to talk about Goldenblood, Horizons, EC-1101, and all the trouble they’d brought to my life. None of my friends had viewed the memory orbs I had, or heard the recordings or... or anything. None of them cared. They cared about me, sure, but not what moved me. We discussed

various theories about what Horizons might be; he preferred a megaspell while I was tantalized by the idea of a massive moonstone/starmetal reaction. We both agreed how very odd it was that he could have gotten away with so much at the O.I.A. Had Luna maintained plausible deniability, letting Goldenblood blackmail and leverage others into silence? Had she been fooled? Complicit? I didn't know which scared me more.

"My word. I don't think that I've talked this much in years," he finally said with a yawn, arching a brow again. "Do you really care about all of this? Or are you simply trying to butter me up?"

"I do care, Awesome. The past keeps coming back to bite me, and I'm scared of some of the futures I've imagined. I don't want this world to be a terrible place. I want to make it better," I replied simply.

He took a deep breath. "You're a fool, Blackjack. But a good fool, and that's better than all the other kinds in this world." He yawned and slumped back in his chair. "Thank you, Blackjack. It was... quite nice to speak to another like this. I've got quite a few dozen memory orbs from the O.I.A. regarding the various Projects that I think you should see." He separated one and floated it to me. "Certainly some of them should come in useful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll inform Grace that the Fleur is to be made ready for flight again. We'll have to check the bag and patch any holes. Little things like that."

"You're sure that it can still fly after all this time?" I asked with a little skepticism. I would be sure to have P-21 and Scotch Tape check it as well before we went anywhere.

"Of course," he said with a canny chuckle. "The Society weren't stupid. If they ever had to flee this place, there were few methods better than by air. It will take some time to prepare though, and I think that I should stress that this is a loan. The Society will definitely want her returned, for sentimental reasons if nothing else." He tapped his hooves together. "You'll come to the Grand Galloping Gala as my personal guests, of course. Though there is the question of what you'll wear."

"You let me worry about that. I know a filly who owes me a fancy dress or two," I replied, not having a clue as to what I'd actually do at a party. Drink and stand in the corner? Probably safest. At least I wouldn't look like a complete embarrassment, though. "In the meantime, I need to investigate a plantation somewhere east of here."

But he'd fallen asleep in his chair. I rose to my hooves, took one look at the col-

lection around me and what answers it might have, and started to leave. Then I stopped and regarded the slumbering, elderly unicorn. I'd never really had a 'father' or 'grandfather' before. Whatever pony had sired me in 99 hadn't filled any kind of mentoring role. I hadn't even understood the word before leaving Stable 99, but as I saw him lying there, I got an odd feeling that I'd never had before and wasn't sure what to do with. Finally, I trotted to his side, made sure he was actually asleep, and then gave a polite kiss to his cheek.

It seemed the civilized thing to do.

"Glory, why are you turning their kitchen into an abattoir?" I asked as I looked at the bloody meat in one heap, the pile of bloody cybernetic components in the second pile, and the spread of cleaned cyberpony parts. Boo and Scotch Tape sat in front of the pantry, building a small wall of provisions. The kitchen staff worked as well as they could, watching the blue pegasus with poorly hidden expressions of horror. "What are you even doing with the zebra body parts?"

Glory was a fright, blood smearing her hooves and spotting the cloth tied over her mouth. "I needed to remove these components from the Brood," she said, gesturing to the pile of gorey machinery. "This place had the best equipment. Knives. Scrub brushes. Alcohol. Lots of water. Perfect for removing and cleaning these parts for study. The eyes might be identical, but I want to see if there are other similarities and differences."

"Okay. Why?" I asked as I levitated over a bottle of whiskey. Really... cleaning cyberzebra parts with this. I disapproved. The kitchen staff seemed to be waiting for somepony with the courage to come and tell us to leave, but for the moment I couldn't blame them for keeping their distance. Boo and Scotch Tape, their fortifications built up, proceeded to bombard each other with grapes, berries, and fancy buck cakes. I wasn't exactly sure Boo knew what she was doing, but I had to admit that her mouth was formidable protection from Scotch's snack cake barrage.

"For one, you need to know what they're capable of if you have to fight them. Are they strong like Deus, fast like your recon legs, or agile like your shadowbolt upgrade?" She scooped up a round piece of equipment. "This motor's exactly like the ones installed by Rover a few days ago, but its placement wasn't nearly as precise. There was abrasion on the bone at the joint. Would hurt like hell. But this..." She reached over to the bloody pile and lifted a smaller piece covered with gobs of blood

and chunks of brain. "This is different from your own neural interfaces. It's a newer design. It completely replaces their pain centers. I don't think that the Brood can feel pain. And from this abrasion, I'm skeptical as to whether they have a healing talisman like yours."

Two very good things to know. "Okay. Just try not to scare these folks. No animating the dead for your army of cyberghouls," I teased, noticing the horrified looks on the faces of the servants listening in.

Glory blinked at me in confusion and gestured to the bloody heap. "But there's not enough materials here for even one cyberghoul." It took every last bit of restraint I had not to burst into laughter at the shock on the servants' faces. She set down the component. "I haven't seen P-21."

"He's... around," I murmured.

Glory caught my eye. "We're not going to do anything rash, are we?"

"I'm not sure yet," I replied, looking at the cooks on the other side of the kitchen. They watched with wary eyes. I had to think of how odd we must seem to all of them, like we were crude and not-quite-invited houseguests and they just hadn't quite decided whether it would be more trouble to put up with us or throw us out on our rumps.

"I'm not opposed to the idea, but please be careful. I'd hate for us to repeat what happened at Flank, or Fallen Arch," Glory said, then reached over and bit a wire scrub brush, took up a piece of metal in her hooves, and began scrubbing away chunks of clinging flesh.

"I'm going to find Lacunae, Rampage, and Deus and take care of that errand for the Collegiate," I said casually. "Should be back quick. Come with me?"

She seemed surprised, looked down at the messy business before her, then raised her bloody hooves. "I'm up to my withers in zebra here. But you go. And do come back quick."

"I'll be good." She looked at me skeptically, and I added, "I will. I promise I'll stay out of trouble." I errantly rubbed my collar.

She pulled off the mask, wiped her forehooves on a wet rag, and just sighed with a gentle smile as she trotted towards me. She hugged me and nuzzled my ear. "Blackjack, you are utterly incapable of staying out of trouble. If trouble doesn't find you, somepony sends trouble to you, and if that doesn't happen you'll stir up some trouble simply by trotting along. Sometimes I think that you need trouble to survive."

She pulled me close and gave me a little smooch. “Stay safe. Don’t get hurt. Come back soon. I can live with that.”

I smiled and kissed her back. Scotch Tape gave a little ‘awwww’. “That’s so sweet. A little disgusting,” she added as she looked at the bloody specks on Glory’s mane and coat, “but sweet.” Then her inattention was rewarded with an orange bouncing off the side of her head. “Ambushed!” Scotch Tape snapped, then lobbed a Fancy Buck Cake that exploded orange filling across Boo’s face. “Direct hit!” the filly crowed.

Boo’s pale eyes appeared amid the dripping orange filling. Then her tongue swept up and collected all the dripping confection in one long circular pass and swallowed it with a gulp. Scotch Tape blinked in shock and flopped over. “No effect. . .” she whimpered. As I started to walk away, Boo scrambled to her hooves and trotted after me. “Hey! Come back!” Scotch Tape sulked as Boo stayed beside me. “What am I going to do now?”

“To the defeated goes the chore cleaning up the mess,” I replied, giving a nod to the cooks as we passed out of the kitchen. Scotch Tape gaped at us and then collapsed on her back in a powdery heap.

“Thirty one!” Rampage crowed as we wound our way northeast towards the navigation tag Triage had given me. “Might have been more, but you know, after you feel the blast, you lose track of things.”

“You make it sound like sex,” I muttered as we rolled along. While most of the terrain was tangled, dead woods, there were a few odd buildings mixed in with rusted, bold plaques like ‘Carrotech’ and ‘Radish Fabrication Research’ on them. ‘Technology parks’ I supposed they were once. Really, what did you fabricate with radishes? I saw the large Stable Tec R&D building and wondered if I might make a side trip to my side trip.

“Bang bang,” Rampage said with a shrug. Boo blinked, cocking her head, and I reached up and scratched her ears. She gave a happy little murr as Rampage looked on. “I really don’t get her. She doesn’t talk, but she seems a lot smarter than just some critter.”

“She’s different, is all,” I said, sighing as I peered out at the crawling landscape. “Ugh, I hate waiting.”

“Yeah. Deus does kinda take most of the fun out of the Wasteland. All the random,

deadly shit just doesn't compare." Rampage said as gestured to her left. "Feral ghouls?" She swapped her powerhoof to the right. "Tank." Then she repeated, gesturing left then right with each group, "Pissed off Steel Ranger? Tank. Onery radgator? Tank. Zebra army? Tank. I can see why Dawn was so confident. Tank beats everything."

"Except a chance at being a better pony," I said, and Rampage smiled and snorted scornfully.

"If you can't beat em." She looked down at the turret. "Hey, Deus! We need to paint you bright pink to lure in more things to kill. This auto travel is boring!" Deus revved his engine in a very negative tone. "Hey, it was a suggestion!"

I gazed up at Lacunae flying silently overhead, and Rampage followed my gaze. "Is she alright?" Rampage asked softly.

"Huh?" How could Rampage possibly know?

"Her purplecorniness. She's acting a lot stranger than normal. She doesn't talk. She doesn't eat. She just stands there looking like she's going to cry," Rampage said with a small frown. "I mean, she's always weird, but is she okay?"

I glanced up at Lacunae, but she gave no indication that she'd heard or acknowledged Rampage's concern. I felt the giant metaphorical hoof hovering over my brain. "No. She's really not." Rampage arched a brow as I felt the Goddess start to press down. I closed my eyes, struggling to get even the simplest explanation out. "She's dealing with some alicorn stuff." And so was I. I struggled to move my jaw and spit out something... anything... that could be a hint for what the Goddess was doing to me!

"Uhuh... anything I can do to help?" Rampage asked casually. I could have hugged her! I wanted to! But the Goddess slowly crushed my will beneath her hoof. My mouth moved silently, my face screwing up as I struggled to spit out two words. But the pressure became a physical pain. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked, frowning in concern.

"N... no." I stammered own, feeling a will besides my own carefully manipulating my mouth to go on, "She's fine. I'm fine. Nothing wrong at all, Rampage. Brain damage!" My lips pulled back in a rictus grin as Rampage stared at me in concern and bafflement. "Just wanting some booze and to get laid! And to shoot some shit because that's what I do!" I was grinning like an idiot, and Rampage just gaped at me. I felt the Goddess's strings quiver in frustration. "How are you?" I added, and

finally Rampage relaxed a little.

“Just... trying not to think about it. Running around with you is a lot easier. Doing anything is easier,” she replied. “If you squish a bunch of souls together, does that make a pony? Do I have a soul of my own? Or am I just a freak?” She sighed and gave a little shrug. “Finding out more about Shujaa and the other memories you snagged helped, but I still don’t have those answers.”

I felt the strings quiver as the Goddess plumbed my mind for what I should say. I replied with the most colorful insults I could; oddly, she didn’t seem impressed. “You are what you say you are,” the Goddess answered for me. “Never think otherwise. It doesn’t matter if you have a soul of your own.”

She cocked her head at me, and I felt the awkwardness rolling off the connection. I wondered how often the Goddess had truly interacted with a pony outside of Unity. Red Eye, at least, but what others? I had vague impressions of awed missionaries spreading the promise of Unity to an uncaring Wasteland, and seeing the subtle manipulation of their hopes to be transformed into alicorns themselves. Rampage looked doubtful.

“R...r...” I stammered, trying to get a word to her. Rampage was immortal; the Goddess couldn’t kill her. And there was Deus too. I had to tell her. “G...She... Co... I...” I blathered like an idiot. My lips twisted as I struggled to spit out a few simple words. The pressure built till I was sure my brains were going to explode out my eye sockets. Then a memory orb floated out of my saddlebags. I looked up at the blank face of Lacunae above as the orb touched my horn. A flicker of magic, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Damn fucking Goddess! I wanted to shove a string of balefire eggs up her huge mutant ass and light them all up! Worse, even in the memory orb I could still *feel* her. It was like body heat radiating behind me, a telepathic breath in my ear. She’d given me a time out, and I could still feel all the little twinges and tweaks going on within me.

What was she doing while I was stuck in here?

First things first. Where was ‘here’? At first glance it appeared to be some sort of indoor junkheap. Mounds of multifarious parts were piled high up the walls of the room I found myself in, and a mountainous heap of haphazardly connected electrical components sat in the middle. A dozen massive screens mounted on the central

technological mishmash glowed with static. I knew the body I was in quite well. The slow burn with every breath. The painful scars that tugged with each step. The ache deep in his bones that made every step a punishment. Goldenblood stood in some kind of strange laboratory with a dozen other ponies. He floated a clipboard before him, idly drawing houses in the margins of some banal-looking form.

“You aren’t supposed to be doing that,” a dark pegasus muttered beside him. He glanced at her, then looked around at the assembled ponies. I noticed the unicorn zony Silver Stripe examining the hulking piece of machinery with rapt attention while Psalm stood quietly at the rear. The black unicorn wore the ominous riot armor, sans helmet, as she watched with hollow, haunted eyes.

He gave a small snort. “Oh please, Eclipse. The princess isn’t going to need this report.”

“You never know. She might,” the pegasus said with a mysterious little smirk.

Then the mustard-yellow Horse trotted out in front of us with an easy grin. “Fillies and gentlecolts of the O.I.A., I just know how much you love these little demonstrations. So, with no further ado, may I present the Crusader, one point two! A marked improvement over the original Stable Tec design in terms of processing power and capabilities,” he said, turning towards Goldenblood and giving a small bow, “Thanks to your painstaking work of looting Equestria’s patent office, I’ve been able to extend to Equestria as a whole a maneframe superior to anything produced by Stable-Tec.”

“One would think he’d be a little more humble about copying Apple Bloom’s work,” Eclipse murmured.

“Horse is allergic to humility,” Goldenblood replied in his gurgling rasp. “I’ve seen the real thing. That device is twice the size and power draw of a real Crusader. I’ll be impressed if it has half the processing power of the original.”

“If only Stable Tec was willing to sell them to us directly. . .” Eclipse muttered with a frown.

“Stable-Tec opposes the war. We should be glad they’re only wasting their resources building bunkers. They could be a much larger problem if they decided to really assert themselves,” Goldenblood muttered. “We’ll have to make do with Horse’s contraption.”

Horse grinned enthusiastically to the crowd as the robotic Sweetie Belle trotted out to join him. “Now I know what you’re thinking. Yes, that is a Sweetie Bot. But the other thing you’re thinking is ‘what is the big deal, Horse? What makes your

Crusader better than the original?” Horse chuckled and pulled out from the side of the central machine a strange mesh of gold wire studded with tiny talismans. “Well, I’ll show you. By now you’re all familiar with the mind transference system that Stable-Tec perfected. But really, what good does a permanent transfer do? With the new and improved Crusader 1.2, you can upload as many minds as you need to. Swap between them. Scan for information you need and simply use a part of it.” He jammed the golden spiderweb onto his head, and the dozens of tiny Talismans began to flicker and blink. On the massive terminal screens, symbols began to stream and dance, showing flashing lines of data scrolling by.

Suddenly, a massive digital head of Horse appeared on the screen. “Voila!” The audience gave appreciate ‘ooohs’, and the digital head split in a massive grin. “Of course, that’s not all!” he crowed, and then he looked down at the Sweetie Bot. Her eyes flashed and scrolled green lines of data. Then the robot adopted a grin exactly the same as the one upon the screen.

“Once connected to the Crusader 1.2,” the robot said, a faint synthetic warble the only thing marring an uncannily accurate emulation of the real Sweetie Belle’s voice, “you will be able to remotely access and control any properly modified robot connected to its system.” The robot then adopted a sympathetic look right along with the immense face on the screen. “We’re already adapting this for smaller, dedicated systems for poor colts and fillies crippled or suffering from illnesses too severe to be treated with our current technology.”

I really wished I could feel my blood run cold as I imagined the bloody word ‘PLAY’ painted on hospital walls.

Horse removed the delicate golden netting, and the attendees moved closer. “And with a push of a button!” He pushed a large red button on the side of the machine. For a moment, the Horse on the screen looked alarmed, but then it was replaced by a field of static as the pony Horse proclaimed, “The upload is purged and can be replaced by any other mind you may wish. Come on up and try it.”

Silver Stripe was first to place the golden mesh on her head. Sweetie Bot trotted around and spoke to the other attendees in zebra. The the button was pushed, and the next tried it. And the next. And the next. With each push, the machine let out more ominous buzzes and crackles. Technicians emerged and began to check the machine’s panels and displays with nervous looks. As the demonstration went on, with each pony giving the computer and Sweetie Bot a trial trot, Horse kept giving glances over at the scarred stallion.

“What about you, Goldie? Care to try it out?” Horse taunted as he waved the net at Goldenblood.

“No thank you,” Goldenblood rasped, his eyes cool and contemptuous. “Your machine looks a little unstable. I don’t recall Apple Bloom’s Crusader buzzing like that.”

“It’s buzzing from sheer awesomeness,” Horse said, the veins in his temple throbbing as he grimaced in annoyance.

“Thank you. We shall consider it,” Goldenblood said dismissively as he turned his back on Horse. Suddenly there was a shout and a shove, and for a moment, something metal touched his mane. Then Psalm was there, darting in, and there came a muffled shout as Goldenblood was shoved to the floor.

“Are you okay?” Eclipse asked as she knelt beside him. He glanced up in time to see the glittering mesh descend down and land firmly atop her inky head.

Suddenly the machine let out a massive mechanical shriek, and the screens went wild. One exploded in a shower of sparks as the reek of burning electronics filled the air. The gold glow of Goldenblood’s magic yanked the mesh from her brow. In an instant, Psalm was on Horse, kicking his legs out from under him and following it up by magically pressing a pistol to his temple as she pinned him. The Crusader finally let out an immense pop, and a cloud of rolling black smoke erupted from the top as the machine let out an anemic whine.

“Hey! It was a joke!” Horse said as he squirmed beneath Psalm, his brown eyes staring at the gun she pressed against his temple. Everypony suddenly seemed intent on either looking elsewhere or walking away.

Goldenblood ignored him as he helped Eclipse to her hooves. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I’m just fine,” Eclipse said as she rubbed her temple. She turned her eyes down and stared at Horse with a calculating gaze that chilled me. Psalm looked to Eclipse, and the black pegasus gave Goldenblood a long glance, then a small shake of her head. Goldenblood let out a long, low sigh, then locked eyes with Horse. I felt his brows furrow and his teeth grind.

“Do not play jokes on government officials,” Goldenblood said firmly, gesturing with his hoof for Psalm to let him up. Horse slowly rose as Psalm backed off, the humiliated stallion glaring at Goldenblood with unabashed loathing. “Now. You seem to have a computer to fix. Do so, and maybe then we’ll talk.” He said as he turned on his hooves and walked out of the lab with Eclipse and Psalm. I heard him shout about fixing his Sweetie Bot first. Wonderful priorities there, given that it had only

suffered a small scratch to its flank...

Once they were out in the hall, Goldenblood muttered, "He was probably hoping to have a peek in my mind." He said darkly as he walked down with the other O.I.A. officials avoiding his gaze. He looked at Eclipse, "Are you sure you're okay? I can have him removed in fifteen seconds and Robronco taken over in half an hour."

Eclipse fluttered her wings and tossed her head. "I'm fine. Just a little disoriented. If he wasn't already involved tangentially, I would. We'll just use it as a reason for him to behave. I'm more interested in his discovery. See what we can commandeer and sneak out from him. I doubt his security is as tight as Apple Bloom's."

"Espionage on her own subjects. What would her majesty think?" Goldenblood said in an almost teasing voice.

"Princess Luna knows nothing about it whatsoever. Princess Luna sits on her throne and makes impressive speeches while the Ministries do all their acts behind her back. Poor Princess Luna," Eclipse giggled as the world began to blur away.

oooOOOooo

Normally when I come out of a memory orb, I'm in a heap somewhere reflecting on what I'd seen. This time, I came out and found myself standing beside Deus and looking down at a large factory-style building. 'Roseluck Agrifarms' was written across the third story in fancy red cursive script. The next second, his main guns roared, and I flopped back on my side; thank Luna for reinforced hearing or I'd be deaf right now. Below, a sentry bot exploded in a shower of steel. Two more followed it, mindlessly firing missiles and gatling guns at the war machine before the cannons fired twice more and eliminated them.

Rampage trotted out from behind Deus with Boo crawling along after her, looking quite spooked by the noise. "Nice job, Blackjack. Go get some more." Lacunae watched from a distance.

"More... wha... huh?" I rubbed my ears; even though I wasn't deaf, the noise had given me ringing feedback in one ear. "What's going on?"

Lacunae spoke quietly in my mind. "You've been controlled by the Goddess. She has had you running in, shooting the Sentries, and rushing out again on auto pilot. Apparently she finds it quite... entertaining as she waits for LittlePip to arrive."

Great. I was a toy. Worse, I felt chains in my mind. While I'd been out, the Goddess had been busy. She had enough control over me to use me when I was unconscious. How long till she could control me like any other alicorn? What would she

do once she could?

I heard a snide, little chuckle in my mind as I pondered that.

“Right... so... where are we going?” I asked, shaking my head. “That last shot rattled me a bit.”

“You’re the one going in, remember? On account of all the Enervation? Find out what’s causing it and see if the Collegiate can use it?” Rampage frowned at me. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been acting strange all day. I swear, refer to yourself as ‘The Blackjack’... Is this a getting shot in the head thing? I never said ‘The Rampage’ when I was shot in the head.” I tried to will her to put it together, but then she chuckled and said, “Heh... The Rampage likes...” Damn it... I should have brought P-21...

“No. No. I got it.” I said as I stood and dusted myself off with a hoof. “I’m going.” I said as I trotted down towards the building, looking for red bars. From the dozen or so smoking sentries arranged in front of the building, I’d been busy. The Enervation scream began to cry out in my mind as I approached the blown-in loading dock door. “Are you coming?” I asked, as I glanced back at Rampage.

“Uh... remember?” Rampage said as she trotted towards me with a look of irritation. As she walked, her flesh began to sag. Bloody rivulets began to trickle between the gaps in her armor. I stared in horror as one eye popped in a slurry of pink foam, only to regenerate a second later. “I mean, I can go down there if you want, but it’s really gross.”

“No! No. Stay here and keep Deus company. I’ll bring more sentries if I find them,” I said, turning away. I couldn’t feel sick, but oh how I wanted to throw up. I walked alone into the factory, hearing the distant Enervation scream struggling against a cool, soft note that radiated from inside me. It sounded so... familiar. Ugh. Stupid Goddess brain damage was making it hard to think.

The interior of the factory was largely a warehouse stacked high with heaps of wooden crates. Corrosion streaked the metal walls and girders, and water sloshed coldly around my hooves. Some of the crates were open, holding rusty equipment which I guessed was for farming. Others were full of plastic barrels filled with pulpy mush with ‘seed stock: corn 21A’ printed on the side. I saw labels for sacks of fertilizer that had split open, the contents forming white crystalline structures creeping in cascades of nitre down the side of the sacks. There were still a dozen red bars on my EFS, and so I maintained constant vigilance.

“Lacunae? Can you hear me?” I thought at her, but it didn’t pierce the Enervation scream. How had the Goddess used me? Had she programmed me like a robot? Could I be programmed like a robot? I had a horrifying image of myself like Sweetie Bot, the Goddess copying herself into my brain. The thought made me shiver. And worse, I couldn’t think of any way to tell somepony!

As I moved deeper into the factory, leaving the warehouse area and moving into some offices, the floor creaked and the saturated carpet gushed with every step I took. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, exactly. Something that would definitively let me tell Triage that I’d checked out the building. There were labs filled with pulpy seed that had soaked but couldn’t rot. Water dripped from sprinkler pipes over planter trays that had long ago corroded away. Debris shifted underhoof with every step, grinding softly.

I ran into two still-functioning turrets. The machines strafed me with machinegun fire, but with S.A.T.S. and the assault carbine I managed to shred them without taking too much damage. Still, even with my resistance to Enervation, I noticed that I was barely healing from the shots. Even I had my limits.

Wow. When was the last time I’d actually needed bandages? As I dug through my saddlebags for something I could use, I spotted a rusty safe set into the wall of an office. Heh... speaking of ‘last times’... I had some bandages wedged way down deep next to some old, crumbly Stable 99 grass chips. Once I’d staunched my wound, I dug out my bobby pins. Then I took a long look at the rusty lock, pursed my lips, and simply hit the door as hard as I could with my hoof. It let out a brittle snap and swung open. P-21 would not have approved.

Inside were some gold bits in a box marked ‘petty cash’ and a few healing potion bottles filled with black tar. I also saw some file folders. Most of them were spoiled by water, but I saw a note that had survived. ‘Geez, Rose. Where is Hippocratic getting these sales figures for our pest solutions?’

A mouthwritten reply read, ‘You know Flim and Flam. They can sell fire to a phoenix. It wouldn’t surprise me if they’re marketing to the enemy to make these figures.’ Right, because during a war, selling anything to the enemy was a good idea.

Nothing else of use in the office. Then I spotted a door with faded paint barely legible through the rust. ‘Pest solutions’. Below it was another sign. ‘Designated emergency shelter’.

Slowly I shoved the door open, the rust screeching and setting my teeth on edge. These walls were solid concrete. Even with the metal decay, this chamber still

seemed quite sturdy. There weren't even leaking pipes. It was dark in here; everything was in shades of gray in my augmented vision. The floor was ankle deep in viscous fluid as I walked along tables stacked with long-still fabrication machinery. I could taste metal in the air. Coppery.

Across the room, a lone terminal beckoned with its flickering screen. I slowly picked my way to it, feeling the thick water concealing uncertain impediments that shifted underhoof when trod upon. At the green glow of the terminal, I saw that the screen said 'Roseluck Agrifarms: Emergency Protocols.'

Step one: Evacuate all personnel to designated emergency shelters.

Step two A: Wait for the all clear to be given by emergency personnel and management.

Step two B: If evacuation warning is sounded, proceed to the north parking lot. Remain calm. Walk. Do not run.

Step three: When the all clear is sounded, contact your division manager for damage and risk assessment. Do not simply leave the premises.

I carefully began to explore the information on the terminal. There were a lot of banal, uninteresting reports about meeting quarterly goals. Then I spotted three letters that perked my interest: O.I.A.

>Are you sure the O.I.A. is involved? We don't have anything to do with the other ministries.

>I'm sure, Lily. That freaky metal in pest solutions? They provided it.

>I thought it came from Hippocratic. Flim and Flam wanted to see what we could do with it.

>Oh, like that's suppose to make me feel better, Lily!

After that, I started to look for anything to do with pest solutions, O.I.A., or Hippocratic. It took me a while before I found something that jumped out at me.

>I got another nastygram from our legal department.

>Something serious?

>Treason count?

>What?! What's going on?

>Intel found the zebras using an 'arcane device' identical to our pest solutions. Ring and all.

>WHAT?! How! They can't produce those without unicorns, and, even if they had unicorns, we're the only ones with the designs.

>Hence the nastygram.

I peered around the cavernous, reinforced space. The Enervation was setting my teeth on edge. Starmetal was being used here to create... pest control stuff? I examined at a cardboard box beside the terminal. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions. No chemicals. No talismans. 100% safe sonic technology.' On the back were diagrams of a pony installing a box next to a garden, then wavy rings spreading out from the box and driving away rabbits, birds, and little round bug things with wings that looked a bit like colorful spritebots. 'Ministry of Peace Approved' was written, along with a picture of Fluttershy hugging the box. I opened it up and stared at the metal case. I could feel it humming in my hooves. After biting off and eating the lock, I popped the casing open and checked out the hoof-sized metal ring. A shimmer of green light flickered along its edge.

I found another short exchange in the terminal records.

>Roseluck, are you sure about keeping Pest Solutions open? That's the 8th incident this quarter!

>It's just Wartime Stress Disorder that made Brownbuck snap. We're all feeling it. The MoP will set him right.

>But there's something wrong in that whole division, Roseluck. The metal used in those rings must be toxic. A three hundred percent increase in health problems isn't normal!

>All our tests show that it's safe and neutral. The MoP confirmed it. Besides, we got the metal from Hippocratic. If there was really anything wrong with it, don't you think that they would have noticed?

>Rose! What about the ponies getting sick? We have to tell somepony.

>Fine. Notify Garnet. She can tell the MoP there might be something off about this stuff. Meanwhile, keep production going till we have to shut it down. Hire a second shift and rotate them out more frequently. Maybe that'll help with the health problems.

>But the investigations...

>It's not our fault if some damned sympathizers are buying our pest solutions in bulk and sending the rings to the stripes. That's the MoM's job. Or the military's if they just want to bomb their fields.

Profits over ponies. There were more files, but a lot of them were corrupted. I found an audio log that crackled to life, though, speaking out into the still, metallic gloom around me.

“Lily? It's Apple Tart over at Horizon Labs. I want you to know we put this metal through every test we could and found no contamination or hazard. It's completely neutral. We're seeing a lot of it lately, though. Twilight just sent us a bullet made of the damned stuff! We're going to try cutting it open next week. I can tell you this... I don't like it either. Something about it just feels bad. I did a little ‘non-scientific’ research. Took me forever to contact a researcher in ‘esoteric energy’, and she hypothesized that this metal somehow draws and manipulates souls. She said that if ponies died around the stuff, it would pull their soul right out and send it... somewhere. Worse, the more souls that pass through it, the stronger the pull would become. Lily, just how much of this stuff have you used?”

I looked at row after row of work tables. These starmetal rings had gone all over Equestria... no... all over the *world*. Each one a tiny, self-contained, indestructible siphon pulling souls through them to their ultimate destination. I knew this... some fundamental part of myself just knew it was so. How many raiders had killed with one of these quietly soaking up the soul of their victims? And if they grew more powerful with every death, it explained why Enervation was so damned strong in the Hoof! This place was one giant basket of death and destruction. It was so strong that, here, the soul-stealing field was actually palpable. But they were everywhere. Tenpony! The zebra lands! I wondered if they could be found in Enclave Raptors. The only place they hadn't been used was apparently Stable-Tec, which explained why we'd never experienced Enervation in 99.

Then the rusty door behind me let out a shriek as it banged closed! I whirled, assault carbine raised as the monitor cast out its feeble glow in a dim green cone across the murky fluid under my hooves. My augmented vision helped, but there were dark corners that even that couldn't penetrate. “Who's there?” I shouted. Nine or ten red bars filled my vision, and not all of them were still.

A low laugh filled the air, setting my mane on edge as I began to move sideways along the rows of worktables. Robots didn't laugh like that... Something moved overhead, the laugh echoing again in the cavernous space. I fired up in its direction, the bright muzzle flashes blooming in the darkness, but my bullets found nothing but

concrete.

“You’re wasting time,” a mare whispered, her voice quiet but permeating the copper-reeking room. “No... you’re wasting lives...” she hissed maliciously “Murderer...”

My blood ran cold as I looked around the gloom. “Dawn...?”

“It took me so long watching and waiting. When you came here... I knew you would be alone.” Dawn hissed softly.

Don’t stop moving. The fluid sloshed around my knees as I kept in frantic motion, looking in all directions I could as I made a slow circuit around the room towards the door. Then I found it: the rusted door bucked shut. I shoved hard against it, but it didn’t budge. The thick metal hinges and frame were bent. “I had to wait. Had to have my doubt removed. You made me doubt her, Blackjack. You really did. Your selfish words. Selfish,” the darkness whispered. I pointed the gun upwards just in time to see something streak away through the shadows. “She fixed me. Made me stronger. Removed my doubt. My weakness.”

That certainly raised her a few points on the crazyometer. “I don’t want to kill you, Dawn. I want to help,” I said as I made my way further along with slow, deliberate steps.

“You want to help?” Dawn asked in a barely audible murmur. Like a mechanical angel of death, she swept down from the rafters, swooped in low over the viscous slime, and slammed me against the concrete wall. Griffin-like talons popped wide and seized my reflexively-raised forelegs. Baleful green eyes stared into my red ones as her razor-sharp wings spread wide above me. She screamed in a mad cry that matched the machine scream I’d heard in the depths twice before, “GIVE IT TO ME!” The green glow of the core illuminated her maw.

Fortunately, I was a unicorn. S.A.T.S., four magic bullets to the head. Four point-blank blasts rammed into her and ripped her synthetic, dark gray hexagon-patterned hide to expose the wire-like muscles beneath it. I’d hoped that, if I had to kill her, it would be quick and clean. Weird fluid, hydraulic or coolant, sprayed my face as she reared back. The left side of her face was a tattered and torn nightmare. Her metal talons ripped lines in my armored forelegs as her wings slashed wildly, gouging a two inch deep slash in the concrete right beside my head.

She landed, covering her ripped face with a hoof; no matter how much of her body was machine, she’d been a mare once. I knew what it was like to have half your face torn off. Still, no time to let up. I raised the carbine and fired as fast as my horn

could pull the trigger, at the same time dropping back to all four hooves. Her bladed wings snapped up, the bullets sparking as they deflected off the metallic vanes.

When she started to move, I threw myself aside, rolling in the muck as she flashed through the air and slashed where I'd been standing an instant before. The razor edges of her wings caught the carbine trailing behind me, tearing it out of my grip and slicing through the barrel, then tore through the concrete wall and flung out chunks of debris. I slammed a magazine of shock rounds into Vigilance as I rolled up to my hooves, the dark fluid covering the floor dripping off me as I crouched and fired. Letting out an inequine cry, she launched herself back into the air, avoiding my next shots as I tried to follow her.

Damn it, I needed light. The wan glow of the terminal and her eyes simply wasn't bright enough!

I could hear the whoosh of her wings as she powered through out of sight above me, and I kept moving, following the edge of the room. I tried to pick her red bar out from the others; it certain had to be the one moving the most. Still, it was difficult to— I felt a little pink pony and tiny blue Glory thump my brain and sent me diving forward as Dawn divebombed where I'd been standing just moment before. Green energy crackled as the muck fountained around her. I twisted, flailing as I brought up Vigilance and used S.A.T.S. to plant a single electrical shot in her tattered face. The blessedly blue blast made her eyes flare.

"Stop!" Dawn shrieked as she gave a little hop, and I half scrambled, half back-stroked away from her as her wings tore into where I'd come to rest. "Shooting!" she snapped as I continued flailing in the general direction of away as she pounced again. "My!" I turned, kicked off of the wall, and slid across the floor as she leapt once more. "Face!"

I came to to a rest under one of the metal tables, rolled onto my side, and shot her once again with another glowing blue bullet, the shining blue mixing spectacularly with arcing green. A clean hit to her chest this time, but she didn't seem to care at all; she jumped up onto one of the tables. *Don't stop moving* was all I could think as I used the legs of the tables to pull myself out of the way as her wings swept out and ripped right through the steel. Floating out Duty and Sacrifice, I blasted up wildly. I wasn't sure if the heavy rounds would penetrate the tabletop —heck, I wasn't even sure where I was aiming— but it'd be better than nothing.

I suddenly ran out of table, kicking off of the last legs to slide out and using my fully recharged S.A.T.S. to ram a barrage of eight rounds into her armored torso. The

heavy dueling pistols punched deep into her mechanical chest, and more of that dark fluid leaked from her body as she fell back. “Mistress!” she cried out as I came to rest, reclining in the coppery ooze.

Suddenly there was an electric crackle and buzz as, one by one, the rows of lights came to life. Dawn flew back, landing on the far side as power was restored to the room.

And to the silver rings.

They were everywhere. They dangled from partly constructed cases. They were hanging on dozens of racks overhead, wired up for testing. And as the equipment glowed to life, the Enervation scream suddenly became much clearer and distinct. That counterpoint inside me wasn’t enough to keep it at bay. As I lay there, I felt something inside me spasm. A burst of sour blood poured out of my mouth as I felt the scream grow.

“Weakness of flesh...” Dawn replied as I rose to my hooves... and realized I stood in a field of gore. Red fluid, not water but the liquefied remains of the ponies who had sheltered here, coated me. They’d come into this solid, reinforced room expecting shelter from bombs and bullets. With the death of the bombs falling, the rings’ Enervation fields had spiked and transformed them into this oasis of gore. They’d never rot. They could only liquify.

“Fucking Hoofington!” I screamed as I scrambled to my feet and blasted at her with my pistol and revolvers. Now Dawn was the one flying for cover as I staggered, fighting against the starmetal rings that threatened to liquify me. I stomped after her, not sure what was my blood and what was the blood of all those unfairly slain as I fired again and again.

Then a purple mare smacked me hard upside the head. I needed to get out and get to my friends. If I killed Dawn and was liquified anyway... There were other doors, larger powered doors likely for moving inventory to and from the warehouse. I raced to the access, firing behind me at random as I slammed a hoof against the ‘up’ button.

Two talons grabbed my shoulders as the door slowly ground up, and Dawn slammed me against the wall. “Oh no. You’re not leaving now. You’ve kept the Goddess Cognitum waiting long enough!”

I didn’t talk. I pressed all three of my guns to her steel body with my magic and pulled the triggers. Three explosions sounded around me as she screamed and

slammed my face into the wall. Focus. Endure. If a little white pony inside me could handle her soul being ripped to pieces, I could handle a little pain. Sparks shot down my horn as it was rammed into the concrete wall again, but I fought every instant to keep it together and pull the triggers again.

She shoved, but I was stronger. A little orange mare gave a whoop in my mind. I pushed hard off the wall and rammed her spine into the table behind us. Her talons tore free of my shoulders as I twisted around to face her. “! Am! Sick! Of! Goddesses!” I roared as I reared and slammed my hooves into her over and over again. Every impact rammed her further and further into the twisted table. Her razor wings shredded the metal as I slammed her back. The bloody wings became tangled in the metal. Her body was rent and wrecked, dripping machine fluids into the gore. I pushed the guns to her head as I stared into her glowing eyes...

And saw myself...

I was a mix of machine and meat. She was a synthesis of synthetics and steel. Both of us wanted the Wasteland saved. Both of us had ponies we’d loved. We’d suffered. We’d fought. We’d killed. Two sides of the same coin. Were it not for my friends, what would have stopped me from becoming just like her? She was mad, corrupted... violated... my enemy... a pony who nopony, not even her daughter, would blame me for killing.

Be kind, a tiny yellow pony inside me begged.

Fierce red eyes stared into blazing green for a minute longer, and then I pulled away as she shrieked in rage and frustration. My magic hit the ‘down’ button on the door as I passed out into the warehouse. The door dropped behind me as I staggered away from the room. Razor wings ripped into the door as I staggered for the exit. I saw Deus, Lacunae, and Boo on the hillside above me. Rampage, her body falling apart and regenerating even as mine was, came beside me and helped me out of the Enervation field. We collapsed together before the massive machine.

“Triage... is going to be... disappointed...” I muttered as I struggled to regenerate my injuries. Despite it all, I smiled. I hadn’t killed her, and that might come to bite me in the ass later... but lying there in the Hoofington rain, the blood being washed from me... I suspected that Twilight and her friends would say I’d won.

“I certainly hope that your expedition was fruitful,” King Awesome murmured over a cup of tea when I returned. I hadn’t yet met up with P-21 to decide what had to be

done; presumably, he was somewhere out discovering the inequities of the Society. If he was in trouble, it would simplify matters considerably.

"I met Dawn," I said as I looked into my cup of boiled weeds, having no interest whatsoever in drinking it. He sipped delicately from his glowing cup. "She's a robot now. And crazy." He set the cup back on the saucer. "I didn't kill her," I added as he stared at me with his deep blue eye. "I think I could have, but I didn't."

"I see..." he replied calmly. "Might I ask why?"

"Kindness," I replied lamely, gazing back into my cup. I set it down on the table. "I looked into her and saw myself. Just as stubborn. Just as committed. Just as monstrous and..." I'd be going to say 'manipulated', but one of the Goddess's chains yanked tight and stopped me. "Should I have killed her? Would it have been kinder to just finish her off?"

"You say you saw yourself?" King Awesome asked politely. I nodded and he asked, "Would you want to be spared, or slain in her position?"

"I'd..." I closed my mouth. Pushing past my nasty self destruction habit, would I want to be saved or destroyed? The idea of simply being done, of my life ending, was terrifyingly seductive. And if I'd been answering a few weeks ago, I'd have happily suggested it. But now... now I hoped that I was a better pony. Somewhat. "I'd want my friends to save me," I admitted softly.

"Then you made the right choice," King Awesome said tiredly. "If you can be true to your own ethics, you can be a better pony."

"What about raiders and slavers?" I asked archly.

"The former have no ethics, just survival of the fittest. The latter is the application of economic acumen to the former." He gestured to the marbled walls. "When my friends and I came to the Hoof, we found dozens of different tribes of raiders. Varying kinds of scum who'd carved out their own little niches. Kill one band, and another would pop up. With the exception of Meatlocker, there weren't real settlements. But when we encountered the ponies living here, in Elysium Gardens, I knew that they could be more, because they *wanted* to be more. They pretended and imagined that they were descended from blue-blooded aristocracy. Doubless a hoofful were, but most were of no different stock than raiders you'd find anywhere else."

"So what changed?" I asked with a frown.

"Ethics." He took a sip of his tea and then looked at me. "They had pretenses of grandeur. I used those pretenses as an excuse to improve their behavior. By

getting them to adopt ethics, the idea that they had to hold themselves to a better standard, I was able to curb the backstabbing inclinations they possessed. You ask about the difference between serfs and slaves? Well, one is that I stressed that the serf was to be protected. Slaves were disposable, both in labor and in war; just go out and take more to replace any losses. Instead, the idea became that serfs were lesser ponies requiring the Society's help."

"How is that more ethical? You're saying that you're better than the serfs!" I retorted.

"As opposed to raiders who merely kill whomever they wish?" He shrugged. "I never said it was perfect. But Equestria, in ancient times, used a form of serfdom that created the aristocracy of Canterlot. Eventually we grew out of it, and the aristocracy became a superfluous holdover from older days. Eventually, the Society will follow the same path." He looked at me evenly. "That is why I agreed to meet with you, Blackjack. Too many would see what we've done and dismiss it as simple slavery. It's not. It may not be much better, but it is better and will become much better still. I hope that you can recognize what my friends could not." A shadow of tired sadness crossed his face.

"They didn't understand?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "To them, I was just another slaver. Worse, a sellout. The Society fed thousands with our plantations, and that increased the demand for slaves." He rubbed his brow with a hoof. "Big Daddy, with his gang of thugs. Crunchy with her weapons. Keeper with his bottlecaps. Zodiac with her books. All of us certain that we knew the best way to fix everything."

"And Dawn, looking for her one solution," I murmured.

"So you *do* understand her," he chuckled. "Yes. She was always so certain that if we just found or did that one magical thing, everything would be better. The Enclave. Or the Core. Or something." He sighed and shook his head again. "Well, she was the youngest of us."

"She's a lot like me..." I murmured, dropping my eyes. He studied me for a long moment, then smiled.

"She is. But you're a bit more. After all, you still have your friends." He sighed again and leaned back in the wheelchair. "Excuse me, Blackjack. But I'm feeling very tired again. Perhaps we can continue this later?"

"Sure," I said as I rose to my hooves and slipped out of his room of pre-war curiosities. As he began to softly doze, I closed the door quietly behind me.

“Blackjack!” Grace shouted down the hall as she stormed up in a furious huff. Two power-armored ponies followed, another unicorn behind levitating a fifth pony. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Huh?” I said as I sat down on the floor.

She waved her hoof at the two armored ponies. Slowly, they moved aside to reveal that the levitated pony was a battered P-21, his hooves tied and his mouth gagged. “You sent this pony to spy on us! We caught him in the plantations, interfering with an overseer.” I felt a dangerous calm overtake me as I began to think about how best to neutralize the two former Rangers.

“Of course I did,” I replied calmly. “And I want him back, and healed.” I added firmly.

“Don’t bother trying to deny—” Grace began, then blinked at me absently. “You... I... I see...” She pondered a moment, then turned to the unicorn levitating P-21. “Don’t just stand there. Let him down, untie him, and get him healed at once.” The pink unicorn mare blinked in shock, and then bowed her head and began to remove P-21’s bonds. Grace took a deep breath and turned to face me once more. “Okay... why...?”

“I wanted to see how you really are. How you treat your serfs, and if I needed to do something about it.” I replied evenly, relaxing a bit as P-21 was freed.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” Grace said as she started to pace back and forth. “Half the society believes that you came here intending to do that in the first place! Now they’ll think you sent your stallion here to make contact with the serfs to foment rebellion.”

“He was molesting her,” P-21 spat with venom as he glared at Grace. The pink-maned unicorn cast a spell, mending some of his contusions, but he pushed her away and snarled at the white aristocrat. “That was why I stomped his head in!”

Grace flushed. “I heard it was consensual, not forced...” Grace muttered.

“Consensual! When you control every part of a pony’s life, where *precisely* does consent come into it?” he spat at her, making her back up as he trotted over to me.

Grace turned even redder before she looked me boldly in the eye. “If that’s the case, he’ll be stripped of his authority. But understand that things are very tense right now, Blackjack. Every member of the society has armed themselves, and they’re bringing in more bodyguards for your inevitable coup. There are suggestions that we should take hostages. Invite the Harbingers to deal with you. Poison you. Make some

other attack before you act. I beg you to please consider this! I'm trying to keep everypony from getting killed!"

She looked on the verge of tears in her frustration. I sighed. "I don't want anypony to die either. Please believe that and pass that on. But I also can't do nothing."

Grace sighed and slumped. "I see." She then straightened and said sharply, "You understand that every minute I try to convince others not to act, I put my own well-being on the line. Try to conduct yourself more discretely." She then turned and nodded for the trio to follow her back the way they'd come.

We all found a safe little corner on the roof where no pony could overhear us. Lacunae wasn't able to summon her shield spell to protect us from the rain due to her treatment by the goddess... Worse, I couldn't explain why to the others. I couldn't even show my frustration! However, though it took me a dozen tries, I was finally able to get the umbrella-like rain shield spell from Twilight's book to go off and protect us from the drizzle... mostly. Well, wet manes were still better than being completely soaked through by the roaring downpour.

"So... what did you find?" I asked P-21, trying to copy mom's 'no exaggerating' look.

He took a deep breath and let it all out in a huff. "It's not good. Not as bad as Fallen Arch, but still pretty bad." He pushed his hat back. "There's probably two or three hundred serfs. They're fed decently enough, I suppose... better than out in the Wasteland. But there's no doubt that they're getting the short end of the stick here. They can't leave, have no say in the work they do, and if they refuse to work then the overseers can whip them, lock them up in steel crates, starve them... anything to get them to do their job."

"How long do they work?" Glory asked with a small frown.

"More than half the day. They get a small break for meals and sleep. Then it's back to work." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Once a week they get a break. That's when most of the maintenance is done down in the plantation."

"Seems pretty civilized for the surface," Glory replied. "It's not really all that different from sky farm settlements in the Enclave. Not a pleasant life, but safe."

"Oh yeah? Do your supervisors force workers to fuck them?" P-21 asked as he rounded on her.

“Some do, yes. And when they’re caught, they’re punished,” Glory answered him plainly. “Is that the case here?”

P-21 sighed and looked away. “That’s not the point. Most of them do it, no matter what the rules say.”

“Are the overseers nobles or serfs?” Glory asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” P-21 countered.

“My point is that you seem utterly determined to condemn this place because of your own personal experience. I understand why,” Glory said evenly as she gestured towards the golf courses and the shacks spread out across them. “But I look at what these ponies are doing, and, while I think it’s not perfect, it’s absolutely a step in the right direction.”

“They work until they’re dead. Colts and fillies prepare food. Old ponies do what little chores are left over. How is that a step in the right direction?” P-21 growled.

“They’re not killing and they’re not getting killed. That seems like an improvement to me,” Glory said before looking at me. “I had a very long and very interesting talk with Prince Splendid while you were out. It seems that he is of the opinion that the Society can do more, far more, for the Wasteland. Right now, a great deal of their wealth is being squandered on pointless celebrations. Like this ‘Grand Gallumping Gala’ or whatever it’s called. He thinks that, with a little effort, the Society could expand as they did in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Provide security and safety to the Hoof.”

“On the backs of slaves!” P-21 snapped.

“Serfs. I think the distinction is quite clear,” Glory countered. “And I think that a Society that is actually working to stop real killers and raiders is doing far more good.”

“Well, I’m with blue boy,” Rampage replied, then grinned. “Not because I care about the serfs or slaves or whatever. The Society are a bunch of asses. I want to kill them on general principle. So freeing the slaves or serfs... eh...” she gave a little shrug. “Whatever. Most of them are probably fucks anyway.”

“Thank you for the barbarian perspective,” Glory replied primly.

“Oh, trust me. It gets better.” Rampage grinned. “I have it on good authority that if we put the right ponies in charge, we will make a fortune. Caps. Weapons. And, not that it matters to me, but memory orbs about a certain ‘Project Horizons’? Thought

you might like that.”

I felt an electric jolt pass through me. “What?”

“Yeah. Apparently the Ministry of Morale had a field day with a guy named ‘Golden-blood’ and yanked out all kinds of cool memories. They’re yours if you’re interested,” Rampage said with a little shrug.

Scotch Tape scowled thoughtfully. “Is there any way we can do all three? Like... make things better for the worker ponies, help the Wasteland, and get the memory orbs?”

“Kid, you pull that off and I’m nominating you to be in charge,” Rampage replied. She then looked at me. “So, what’s your call?”

I had *no* idea. In fact, I was started to feel a little panicked. It was like mom throwing a pop quiz at me! “I... don’t know. I just came here for an airship! I didn’t...” I stammered as I stared at P-21, then at Glory, then at the others. “Why is everypony looking at me to decide this? Remember Flank and 99?”

“I also remember Riverside and what you created there,” Glory replied with a small smile.

“And you helped in Chapel,” Scotch Tape added immediately.

Rampage shrugged. “While it was pretty decent already, you didn’t do Meatlocker any harm either.”

I sat back hard, looking from P-21 to Glory and back again. I had no idea which would be the better choice. P-21 had a valid point, but then, so did Glory. Maybe Rampage was right and I should simply take what I could get and leave somepony else to pick up the pieces? “Can we... um... can we see which option shoots at me first? That’s usually how I determine if something is good or bad.” Glory and P-21 groaned almost in unison. “What! It’s a perfectly fair indication!”

“You could choose none of the above?” Scotch Tape offered.

P-21 shook his head. “Blackjack won’t do that.”

“Of course not. She’s going to help protect the Wasteland,” Glory replied firmly.

“No, she’s going to help the serfs!” P-21 snapped back.

“Serving the Wasteland is much more practical and the greater good!” Glory retorted, not backing down.

“Why you stuck-up little Enclave...” P-21 began. I felt the sense of panic rising inside me, seeing my friends fight like this. I really didn’t know which one I should support. They were both right!

Rampage let out a scornful, “Oh will you two just shut up and fuck already? I’m sure Blackjack would love that too!”

Glory and P-21 gaped at each other, at her, and then at me all in perfect unison. “With her?!” blurted P-21 as Glory gave a scandalized, “With him?!” They concluded with a simultaneously disgusted, “Gross!” The utter similarities between the two had me burst into laughter, and I reached out, grabbed them both in a headlock, and pulled them into a huge hug.

“I love you guys,” I said, laughing and crying at the same time. I was sure P-21 would angrily shake me off and grump and groan, but to my surprise, I felt the tension in his muscles draining as I held him close. Scotch Tape and Boo, not wanting to be left out, immediately jumped in as well.

Rampage pouted. “Oh sure... No hugs for...” she started to mutter. Then she stopped in alarm as we all looked at her. “Oh no... no no no... Don’t you... ack!” she shouted as all of us, even P-21, piled atop her in a massive heap. The sheer ridiculousness of it all had us all laughing together.

At that moment, perhaps completely by luck or perhaps by a bit of divine providence, I glanced up at Lacunae. The massive purple alicorn watched us all. Her face was not blank or anguished; her expression was of simple, heartfelt happiness. For an instant, I was reminded of that memory orb I’d seen so long ago and the image of Celestia and Luna in that tent. For an instant, I wasn’t looking at some freaky mutant lackey of a snide and vicious ‘goddess’ but at a true alicorn. One loving and accepting and nurturing of us all.

Finally, the moment passed, and we let the striped mare up. I smiled and wiped my eyes. “Well... in any case... I think that King Awesome has everything in hoof here. I’m not going to do anything until he...”

But my voice trailed off as I saw a strange earth pony approach. Behind him were dozens more ponies trotting up onto the roof. None of them were armed, but all of them looked quite unhappy at the moment. He was a ghoul, which was impressive enough; I hadn’t thought that the Society would allow a ghoul in their company. The gray undead stallion had one of the most intricate and stunning manestyles I’d seen on anypony, ghoul or not. A pair of violet glasses completely obscured his eyes as he approached with a velvet wrapped parcel on his back.

“Blackjack, I presume?” he said in a voice just oozing sophistication, despite the undead rasp. He nudged down the glasses enough to look at me with filmy purplish eye

I frowned as I slowly approached him. Grace, Splendid, and Charm all struggled to push themselves to the front of the crowd, each wearing expressions of outrage and shock. “Yes?” I asked as he pulled the velvet parcel from his back and started unwrapping it.

“King Awesome has passed away,” he said as he revealed a golden crown decorated with diamonds and rubies. I gaped, unable to think as he jammed the crown atop my head. “All hail Queen Blackjack, new leader of the Society! Long live the Queen!”

“Long live the Queen,” shouted the crowd, minus the contributions of Splendid, Grace, and Charm. “Long live the Queen!” My friends stared in amazement.

I sat there, my shield dropping in shock and the rain dumping down on me. I said the only words that I could think of at a time like this: “Oh, fuck me...”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Additional note: The chapter quote is from First Citizen Lynette in Fallout 2.)

56. Royal Pains

“Stay back! I just had myself groomed!”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” I shouted for the third time at the gray ghoul with the magnificent coiffeur. At least this time we were doing it in the privacy of King Awesome’s bedchambers. Seeing the body was the first thing I’d demanded. I’d imagined that maybe this was some kind of joke or trick or... something. Seeing him lying in repose on his bed... witnessing the relaxed expression on his face... Damnit! I’d liked the old stallion. He’d been the first pony I’d ever been able to talk to about Goldenblood and the O.I.A. He’d understood me! And now he was gone and I was Queen and... “Tell me you are fucking kidding me,” I pleaded.

“Oh please. As if I’d waste my good humor on such tacky comedy,” he said in fancy elocution. “The King named you his successor soon after you departed. And shortly before he did.”

I levitated the crown off my head and set it in my hooves. “But... why? It doesn’t make any sense! We only talked for a few hours and... and... I don’t deserve this!” I said as I looked at the ring of shiny, gaudy... tasty-looking... metal in my grasp.

“Of course you don’t. Honestly, do you think you were given that because you’re suited to rule?” the ghoul said with a disdainful sniff. “King Awesome gave you rulership of the Society to save it from itself.” He made a dismissive gesture with his hoof. “A powerful pony was needed. In fact, we sent a representative west a week ago to contact the Stable Dweller and bring her here. And if not her, somepony in Tenpony Tower. Or perhaps the celebrity DJ-PON3, if he could be tempted to mitigate his rantings. Even Red Eye, if none other could be arranged.”

Excuse me? I inspected my friends to see if any of them were following this. Universal bafflement. Good. It wasn’t just me, then. “I think you better explain in a bit more detail,” Glory said, trotting up beside me and hugging me with a blue wing. “It’ll help Blackjack get past the ‘I don’t deserve good things’ shock if you tell her how this will bite her in the tail later on.” Then she frowned at the ghoul. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe I got your name.”

“Hoity Toity. Equestria’s finest fashion aesthete,” he said proudly, clapping his hooves together. A colt scampered out from a corners of the room with a red threadworn pillow and set it down just as Hoity sat. The ghoul glanced at the boy and gave a

peremptory wave of his hoof. "This is Epicure, my assistant."

The lime green colt rubbed his darker pine green mane, "Actually, my name's—"

"Tut tut! No time for that now," Hoity said impatiently. "I need you to go downstairs and find out what the Oranges think of this recent development. And see if you can find what Charm is saying to the Trotters. Also, find out how Grace is taking this. Oh, and if you can mention to Splendid that Blackjack seems quite composed, that'd work wonderfully."

The colt worked his mouth a moment, as if trying to remember all that, then sighed and nodded. "Yes, sir." He turned and walked for the door, glancing back at the rest of us with clear reluctance before slipping out. Composed? I wasn't composed! The only things keeping me from hyperventilation were my cyberpony lungs!

"A good lad for raider stock. Has a talent for finding things out informally. Not as skilled as Paintie was... but I digress." He glanced at me and smirked. "My talents at critique don't end with the latest styles. Before the war, I made it a habit to learn the mercurial tastes of Equestria's elite and made sure my fashion reviews suited their attitude... within reason of course. Then, during the war, I devoted nearly as much time to looking over information for dear Rarity as I did setting the trends for the autumn season. Information gathering is quite complementary to fashion work."

We were talking about his past now? It seemed surreal. Maybe this was all the Goddess messing with my head some more? Or maybe I'd finally snapped? "I can't imagine that was useful after the bombs fell," Rampage said with a wicked little snicker.

"On the contrary! My discerning eye made acquiring the best goods far more simplistic," he said with a gesture of wounded pride. "Perhaps we should abscond to somewhere... else," he said with a look over at the sheet covered body. "I can give you the history of this place."

I didn't respond; it was better than nothing, so I nodded. We stepped out and proceeded through the grand structure. Mostly grand. It was clear that entropy was nibbling at the faded velvet curtains and the patches of threadbare carpet. They'd done their best to hide the wear, but even the Society wasn't immune to reality. They just lived outside it.

As Hoity walked, servants and society ponies made way, bowing deeply to me, then whispering as soon as we passed. The ghoul ignored them, speaking in grand tones, "The original Society were those stallions and mares who escaped the ple-

beian slaughter at Blueblood Manor. We'd invested significant resources in the Prince's shelter, only to discover that it apparently didn't exist. And when the riot broke out... well..." he sighed and shook his head. "Fifty of us crowded onto the Fleur when the bombs fell. So overloaded and with the world collapsing around us, we found ourselves at a loss. Fortunately, the Elysium Gardens was not a priority target for balefire bombs or other attacks, and we put down here. The country club had been exceptionally fortified during the war and had quite an extensive stock of supplies for hundreds of guests. The staff, however, were in utter disarray. Some had fled to rejoin families, while others were simply in shock. The manager had committed suicide in her office. Very disagreeable. So we did what we did best—"

"Started bossing people around?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Of course," Hoity said without a bit of shame. "Fancy Pants became our leader. We provided order when there was none. The waitstaff and servants who remained were very pleased to have us put things in some semblance of civilization. It was anticipated that we'd have to wait a few months for things to be set right. Maybe even a year." He sighed. "Quite ironic, in hindsight."

"So what happened?" Scotch Tape asked, the filly eager for the rest of the story. We travelled down a staircase, into halls where there was much hustle and bustle in preparation for the Gala tonight. Even a royal death couldn't stop that party.

"Well, we anticipated that the skies would clear and the pegasi would help us rebuild. In fact, we were counting on it." He glanced at Glory, who ducked her rainbow-maned head and looked at her hooves. Now I was the one hugging her as Hoity Toity went on. "When that didn't happen, despair set in. If it hadn't been for Fancy Pants, we'd have been undone in the first year. When the radioactive snow cleared, we used the conservatory here to grow marginal crops while sending parties to find supplies around the Hoof. Things were... easier then. The savagery that you are so familiar with took time to evolve. Even so, though we managed our assets with care, when others came demanding we share them... well, violence was inevitable. But worse, there were elements within that thought they could do better. Fancy Pants was assassinated in his sleep by one of our own."

Hoity sighed, shaking his head at the memory. "Eventually, things decayed. Oh, there were still order and rules that made the Society the strongest group in the region, but the manners and principle were lost. Some even turned to... egghhh..." He trembled, lip curling in disgust. "...cannibalism. Not from necessity but by choice. At that point, I had become the wretched creature you see before you and relocated to Hoofington Memorial Hospital. It wasn't until King Awesome assumed

control of the Society, slew the most savage elements, and imposed expectations of dignity and respectability that I returned and assisted him. It's been two generations since then, but there are still some elements that cling to. . . uncivilized ways."

Maybe it was the cannibalism comment that snapped me out of my daze, or possibly it was that we finally arrived in the immense ballroom that served as the throneroom. A huge, ugly, gilded chair sat on a dais at the far side of the room. My seat, for the moment. "You talked for five minutes and still haven't explained why giving me a crown keeps all of you alive," I said crossly. "If there's this much plotting going on here, maybe it'd better to just wipe you all out after all. Given half of what I've heard you've done, it'd be no less than you deserve."

"Oooh!" Rampage grinned broadly at me. "Is that on the table? Tell me it's still on the table. I will sex you right now if we can smash them all into jelly!" Hoity looked a little nervous as he pulled out a lacy white fan and began waving it briskly before his face.

Glory sniffed disdainfully at Rampage's glee. "Oh, don't be ridiculous. Blackjack wasn't serious. Were you, Blackjack?" she said with a smile in my direction. When I looked back blankly, she frowned and amended, "About wiping them out?"

I blinked, flushed, and quickly added, "No. Of course not," then turned from her and muttered under my breath, "Mostly."

Rampage let out a feigned sneeze that sounded a lot like, "Whipped!"

"Only if she behaves," Glory replied with a smile at me that made me wish the floor would swallow me up. . . why was this happening now? Why at all? Damnit! All I'd wanted was to borrow an airship!

Hoity stared at all the rest of us, fan frozen and jaw dropped. "Nevermind them," P-21 said brusquely with a wave of his hoof. "You were telling us why Blackjack was chosen?"

The ghoul blinked his filmy eyes and seemed to get back on track. "Mmm yes. Well, you see, there was no lack of plots and schemes for when King Awesome passed. Some of the guards were receiving almost triple their pay in assorted bribes to act or not act when it happened. I'm fairly sure it would have come down between Charm and one of the lesser aristoponies, provided the serfs didn't revolt and try for a mass overthrow."

Then he snapped the fan closed and pointed it at me. "But there were no plans in place for you being given the throne."

"But... I... he..." I stammered, then tossed the crown as hard as I could at the ground. It pinged, bounced off the floor, flipped end over end, and landed neatly on Boo's head. "He used me!" The blank mare made a better queen than I did!

Hoity sighed and shook his head. "Oh please. On a scale from one to ten for being used, this barely rates a three. Three point five, tops." I shot the ghoul a murderous glare, and he snapped his fan open once more, turning away with a cough. "I understand if it is upsetting, but if you think it through, I think you'll see things aren't so bad."

"Go on," I growled.

He took a slow, deep breath. "Nopony planned for you to take over like this. Oh, there were contingencies for if you forced your way into power. That would have made the elements unite momentarily against you. But openly being given it? Never. So at the moment, a dozen or more conspirators are rearranging their plots and schemes to put themselves into power. Bribes have gone for naught. Weapons intended against guards are suddenly inadequate to face you and your friends. Even the serfs, who've been rumbling for years, have gone silent waiting to see what will happen next."

"But that's hardly a long-term solution. It just paints an enormous target on Blackjack's head!" Glory protested crossly.

I sighed, rolling my eyes a little. "It's okay. I'm used to it." Maybe I was the best candidate after all...

"If she had any interest in actually staying put and ruling, certainly," Hoity said with a casual wave of his fan before leaning towards me. "You aren't really planning on giving up your quest, or search, or whatever for this, are you?"

"Of course not!" I retorted. Not like the Goddess would give me a choice. I could feel her will poking and tugging at my mind.

"So you leave. But before you go off on your merry way, you're going to need to pick somepony to run things here," he said with a sweep of his hoof at the throne room, once a ballroom for the resort.

"How is that any different from them just assuming the throne directly?" Glory asked with a frown.

Hoity sighed, "Because if they kill Blackjack's duly appointed regent, then Blackjack herself will return in a full fury of death and destruction. And out in the Wasteland,

Blackjack has proven to be remarkably resilient against attack. Here, one might get lucky and assassinate her, but out there roaming the Hoof? Unlikely.”

“So all Blackjack’s gotta do is appoint somepony to run things here, and she can go on her way?” Scotch Tape asked.

Hoity sniffed delicately, “A succinct appraisal.”

“Good! Now you can pick somepony who can make things better for the serfs here,” P-21 said with the first real smile I’d seen since we’d arrived.

It was shortlived as Glory countered, “Now wait a minute, P-21. The serfs already live much better lives than almost everypony in the Hoof. Think of the good the Society can do for the entire region!”

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. “Please. These bastards couldn’t do good with a gun to their head. Just take whatever you need and move on. This place isn’t worth your time.”

I felt the Goddess pressing on my skull. Unicorns. I should use the Society to send unicorns to Maripony! An alliance with the Goddess! It’d facilitate her creations of new male alicorn stock once LittlePip arrived with the book.

I staggered and swung my head back and forth as Glory said sharply, “Blackjack, tell him that it’s better to help the many rather than a few who are already better off!”

“I . . . but . . .” I tried to think.

“Blackjack, you promised!” P-21 snapped, his eyes hardening. “Or is this part of the plan?”

“No. I . . .” If everypony could be quiet a second and let me put two thoughts together.

“These people, with a little reform and effort, have the ability to help more ponies in the Wasteland than any! If you’d stop being so overemotional and apply a little reason, you’d see that!” Glory said in exasperation.

P-21 huffed, his eyes narrowing to very shooty slits. “Oh. So I’m being hysterical, huh? You sound just like the ponies in Medical! I’m just a hysterical male, is that it?” P-21 snarled at her.

“Come on, Blackjack. They have a frigging menagerie!” Rampage snorted.

“Oh we closed that gaudy thing down years and years ago,” Hoity countered.

“Okay, fine. Had. We should still stomp them into jelly. I know Big Daddy would approve. Hey! Make him regent!” Rampage crowed eagerly.

“Certainly not. Only a Society pony would do!” Hoity retorted. Rampage began to grin murderously at the ghoul.

“You’re not thinking straight because of 99!” Glory yelled in P-21’s face. P-21 looked ready to tackle her! And I couldn’t think of way to stop them; they didn’t recover from bullets to the brain, after all. I was witnessing my friends tearing themselves apart before my eyes.

“Hey! You don’t get to bring up 99! You don’t know what they did to my daddy!” Scotch Tape snapped. “I think he’s right!” P-21 blinked and looked in surprise. Still, while Scotch had dissipated a little of his anger with her support, I could see he was one dismissive remark from exploding.

I wanted to shake, but my synthetic body wouldn’t! I wanted to breathe hard, but my body couldn’t. All I could do was twist up tighter and tighter within myself. I trotted away from the others. “Quiet,” I ordered. They didn’t notice as they continued to shout and jabber louder and louder. The Goddess was a thudding headache bashing at my brain. I grit my teeth as I stared at the throne at the far side of the ballroom, a goddesses-awful eyesore of gilt metal. I didn’t know if it was the Goddess or my own frustration and anger. “Everypony! Shut! Up!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Blackjack?” Glory asked from behind me.

“I beg your pardon?” Hoity blustered.

“Look, if you want me to start killing we can work alphabetically. . .” Rampage began, reasonably.

I whirled on all of them, feeling a rage building up inside me. “Leave!” I felt the surge building more and more inside my horn. “Me!” I roared at all of them. “Alone!” I wanted to be somewhere else! Anywhere else!

And then the world disappeared in a lavender burst of light.

I crashed to the floor in Awesome’s collection, smashing a table and scattering leaflets everywhere. The shock of the spell had momentarily silenced the Goddess’s endless pushing and prodding. Laying there in the middle of the room of the stallion I’d shared tea with just hours ago, I clenched my eyes shut. Why me? Why leave it to me?

Was it all a scam? Maybe this was something Hoity was pulling. Or Cognitum. Or Dawn. Or... or some other higher scheme that put me right in the place I didn't want to be: in the middle of a moral mess. Or maybe this had been Awesome's desperate throw to try and preserve something not worth saving. It didn't have to be me. It could have been anypony powerful enough to hold the title but without reason or interest in actually ruling; I just happened to come along at the right time and be liked by him.

But that wasn't why this hurt so bad. I'd liked Awesome. I would have liked to have talked to him about the serfs. Find out how the Society could have done better. Speculated on Goldenblood. For a little moment, it had felt like I'd had a family again. Only this time, instead of being silenced by Looks and imperious parental tones, I could have shared my thoughts with him.

And he'd *used* me. He'd brought me into this room and showed me understanding and empathy and then he'd died and dumped his solution on my shoulders. He hadn't asked. He hadn't even told me. He simply made his plans with Hoity Toity and then kicked off to leave this mess in my hooves. And most galling of all: it would probably work. I wasn't going to wipe out the Society, no matter how much P-21 or Rampage wanted me to. And I wasn't going to stay here to rule, either; I was terrified of the responsibility of simply picking a regent. But I was also too responsible now to simply walk away.

Goddesses... for once I actually wanted the Goddess to take me over and end this complicated joke that was my life. Then the urge to send unicorn peace envoys to the Goddess slammed into me like a ton of bricks. I even started crawling to the door to give the order.

Suddenly a horn dipped down from above and touched mine, and the impulse abated immediately. I slowly turned my head, looking up at Lacunae. For a moment, I was simply Blackjack again. "Lacunae?" I asked as I looked up into the sad eyes of the alicorn, then looked around for memory orbs. "Keep back. I'm not ready to join the Goddess yet!"

"I know you're not," she murmured softly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. She wants you soon. She wants you in Unity, and it's all my fault."

"It's not your fault, Lacunae. It's the Goddess. If you wronged me, it was her doing. Not yours," I said as I looked away. The shelves full of memory orbs were empty. Also gone were some of the papers and articles that had been on the desk. Only minor artifacts remained, curiosities that wouldn't have told me things about Hori-

zons. I'd wanted to look at the memories with Awesome, talk about what we saw within.

"It is my fault, Blackjack. It is all my fault, and before you or I are too far gone under her control, I have to ask for something I have no right to. Your trust," Lacunae asked as she closed her eyes. "Before I'm too far gone, I want. . . I need to show you something."

"Too far gone?" I asked in worry.

"The Goddess is readying herself. Anything that could undermine her. . . doubt. . . compassion. . . kindness. . . is being purged into me. I feel as though. . . like I'm an over-pressurized container. That I might explode. That all the swirling feelings and memories inside me are condensing into something volatile. But this time may be our only chance for me to show you this before the Goddess refocuses on controlling you," Lacunae said, her body shuddering. "Please. I need to show you."

"How do I know this isn't some kind of trick?" I asked with a scowl. It was true; at the moment I couldn't feel the Goddess scratching at my brain. Her attention was elsewhere. . . or was it? This could be some kind of trick. Like Awesome and. . . and. . .

What was the matter with me? Had I finally hardened to the point that I couldn't trust my friend? I looked up into her desperate, purple eyes. "Please, trust me," she pleaded. I stared into hers and finally closed mine.

"All right. I just hope it's quick, before the Goddess makes me crown her as regent." I said as I looked back at her.

Lacunae pressed her horn to mine, and the world swirled away.

Well, this was new. I stared at the dark, riot-armored mare as she walked through a blackened strand of forest. The charred trunks still hissed steam, despite the green snow laying around them. I hovered as translucent as a ghost behind her. Across from me stood the spectral Lacunae. "So is there a reason I'm not experiencing this first-person?" I asked as I watched the black-armored mare trudge through the forest towards a ridge far above.

"This is not within you. It is a memory within me," Lacunae whispered.

"Something the Goddess crammed into you?" I replied. She didn't answer, though.

Instead, she bowed her head as we floated after Psalm. I could trot. . . well, float. . . around her but if I tried to move away I was swiftly dragged back. “Where the hell is she going?” I asked as I watched the mare trudge to the top. I could hear her PipBuck ticking like crazy. The rads had to be through the roof here. “Lacunae, what is going on?” I asked in concern. I saw tiny spectral motes floating into Lacunae.

Then Psalm crested the ridge and stopped at the lip of the valley, and I saw it: a massive hulking block of a building beside a luminescent hole full of chaotic, flickering light. Glowing fissures radiated out of it, and a malevolent polychromatic glare filled the valley beyond. Things. . . glowing, protoplasmic things. . . crept along those deep ravines. Scattered amongst them was a patchwork of sundered foundations, the outbuildings of the base itself ripped to shreds. From the buckling in the roads, it looked as if the entire area had been shaken like a bedsheet and left rumpled.

The structure itself appeared to be a hulking industrial building reinforced with thick steel beams and concrete walls to withstand almost anything the enemy could throw at it. . . almost anything. Not even the enchantments of the MAS had spared it from colossal devastation. The building was intact, but the ground around it had partially collapsed and left almost a full third of it hanging out over the sinkhole, the gargantuan structure still in one piece only due to ridiculous Equestrian overengineering. Along the side facing the ridge, in scorched purple letters, was the word ‘Maripony’. The name Twilight had given Big Macintosh in a blurt of panic. . .

“What the hell is she doing here, Lacunae?” I asked, staring at the devastation around us as she moved through the ruins, avoiding the malevolent glow by ducking through the blasted foundations and skirting along the rumpled terrain. She never stopped, and I couldn’t blame her. Either that suit had some superb radiation shielding or she was tripled dosed on Rad-X, or both. She didn’t even slow when she levitated out packets of Radaway, draining them as she moved. I could see the glowing malformed moving things. Some had the vaguest canine appearance. Others were bloated ponyish shapes that wandered mindlessly.

“This was Twilight’s last reported location. She’s come here to kill her,” Lacunae replied softly.

I gaped at the transparent alicorn. “But. . . but Partypooper was a lie! Garnet set it off. She admitted it!” I spluttered as Psalm moved to a delivery dock. The twisted, broken hulks of skywagons lay fused in a heap like some perverse sculpture.

“Serve Luna and you will be forgiven,” Lacunae whispered. Psalm checked the

dock's door into the building, but it was locked.

I expected bobby pins but was in error as I watched Psalm apply a wad of plastic explosives to the lock and move aside. "But Luna is dead!" The blast echoed across the eerily howling valley. "This is insane!"

"It doesn't matter. Serve Luna and she will save you. The order was to execute the Ministry Mares and other compromised members of Equestrian command," Lacunae replied hollowly as Psalm went inside and we were dragged through the wall after her. Once inside, the radiation dropped to slow ticks. A rate that would kill in days rather than minutes. Her horn flickered, and one by one the clasps of the respirator were detached from the helmet.

What lay beneath more resembled a ghoul than a pony. Only a few tattered wisps of white mane remained, and her black hide was pale and ashen and riddled with sores. Bloodshot eyes stared wearily out as she tried to levitate another packet of Rad-away to her mouth, clutched her stomach, and vomited a slurry of red and orange. Again and again her body hunched over as she retched but brought up nothing. She collapsed on her side before the foul pool, sucking in gulps of air and coughing wretchedly.

"She came here to die," I whispered softly.

"No. It was in service to Luna," Lacunae insisted. "To serve was to earn forgiveness for sins."

"How? How does this earn forgiveness?" I asked as I gestured at Psalm with outstretched forehooves as the black unicorn pulled herself to her hooves. One up, she steadied herself, then proceeded to move through the balefire-gutted structure.

"You know," Lacunae answered solemnly as we passed ponies whose bones had melted into the superstructure.

I watched the exhausted mare move onward, dying but devoted to action. Every now and then the memory around me blurred as she struggled to maintain consciousness. I saw myself racing on, exhausted and terrified of sleep, till I finally had arrived at Yellow River. Till I had crippled an innocent filly after nearly crushing Dusk's head. Of course Psalm wasn't looking to die. No more than I was being self-destructive while swearing to never attempt to commit suicide again. It was a delusion I knew only too well.

"Did Twilight even survive the bomb?" I asked as Psalm moved deeper into the structure. Here, there wasn't as much char. The bodies were intact, mostly soldier

ponies with nowhere to flee. “I mean... she’s in Unity.” I lowered my eyes. “Sorry. Stupid question.”

Suddenly, Psalm entered a corridor that wasn’t just intact but lit! The emergency lighting flickered, despite the gaps in the wall. From somewhere came a sharp, hysterical screaming. I’d heard screaming like that... the pain... it was the scream of a mare getting her cutie mark burned away. Psalm levitated her sniper rifle, checked the magazine loaded with explosive rounds, and peered down the hall, slowly sweeping the weapon. I remembered its enchantment allowing Psalm to see through solid objects.

She then looked down and froze. The gun clattered to the floor, her bloodshot, yellow eyes wide. “No. It’s impossible...” She slowly backed away, the expression of horror growing. “What... what unholiness...”

“What? What is it?” I asked Lacunae, but she didn’t answer. So I poked my head through the floor. I was a memory. What could it...

I stared down into an enormous room of vats of glowing blue flesh. There’d once been six, but two had ruptured and filled the floor with purple and green sludge. Only my experience in Horizon Labs came close to the thing I saw below me. It was nearly impossible to tell where the undulating flesh ended and the metal began. A chaotic storm of blue energy flickered and flashed over the living magical mass, occasionally coalescing into a twisted, agonized mare.

I watched in horror as a frantic peach-colored unicorn mare in a tattered white lab-coat clung to the railing of the catwalk. A blue tentacle of magic wrapped itself around her torso and pulled. “No! No! Celestia, no!” she screamed, clutching with such desperation that the catwalk started to groan. But the tendrils pulled relentlessly on. The mare’s screams took an even higher pitch as her limbs broke and she was wrenched from the walkway and into the blue sludge. She flailed her hooves, but instantly her broken limbs took on the consistency of soft wax. The peach hide melted away into the great blue mass. Elsewhere, pieces of flesh were being drawn together; wings, limbs, heads, and horns, forming slowly like budding plants before my eyes. The creation of alicorns, some blue and others green.

Then I was yanked back through the floor because Psalm was running. Though dying from radiation poisoning, Psalm refused to let it stop her. The hallway smeared into a blur as her recollection broke down, but she pulled herself back together and pushed on. She seemed to know the layout of Maripony well enough; I supposed she’d memorized the plans from her time in the O.I.A. She pushed her way into a lab

marked 'experimental weapon development', around which were strewn thousands of pieces of junk, talismans, and half-completed weaponry.

She lifted a targeting talisman, went to a terminal, and started typing. Her years in the O.I.A. had clearly involved more training than just shooting things. I watched over her shoulder, then looked over at the ghostly Lacunae, who kept her face averted. With focus that would do P-21 proud, she ignored the blood dripping from her nose and mouth. She connected the talisman to the terminal, linked to the MASEBS network, used an O.I.A. backdoor, password 'Littlehorn' and...

Hoofington Megaspell Command.

"Dear Luna..." I breathed as I watched in horrified fascination. The network informed her that the facility was locked down due to EC-1101, and Psalm gave a frustrated sob, wiping away the blood and sweat from her ashen face.

Then I heard it. The whisper of the Goddess, growing stronger with every passing second. "Come to me. You're dying. Let me save you, Twilight. I can save everypony now."

Psalm gave another sob as she typed furiously. "No. You're not Luna. I don't know what you are, but you're not her!" she whispered furiously as she typed. Every attempt to override the lockout ran into the same wall. "Luna, forgive me and take my soul. Forgive... please forgive me... I serve you, Princess Luna!"

She managed to get into a monitoring program, then snuck into maintenance, and finally into manual discharge. 'Warning! Megaspell primed. Manual discharge not advised. Target?' She gave another sob and smile as she turned the talisman over and began to type very carefully a string of numbers and letters written on the back.

Then she hit enter. The targeting talisman turned from a milky white to a blood red. She gave one more sob and smile. "For you, Luna." She tapped a button and relaxed with a look of bliss.

The screen flashed. 'Manual discharge of Megaspell overridden per EC-1101 command. Discharge aborted.' The talisman returned to its milky white. Psalm stared at it for several seconds.

Then the Goddess whispered, "You... You don't belong here. What are you doing?! Why are you trying to kill me? I can save you! I can save everypony! Just like Twilight and her friends did."

"You are not Luna!" Psalm screamed, flinging the stone away as she scrambled back into a locker. "You are... a thing! I have seen true Goddesses, monster!" She

swore as she looked at the bottles and ate a tablet of buck, sucked some Rad-away, and healed herself with a potion. Then she continued poking through experimental weaponry, looking at the crates' labels closely.

"You come from outside. I can see your memories. . ." the Goddess said sympathetically. "I can feel your torment. I know that feeling. . ."

Psalm clutched her eyes, pressing her hooves to her head. "Out! Get out!" She returned to motion, mumbling. "Blessed Luna, full of strength, be a shield against the darkness and the nightmares. Be my silent protector against the darkness and our enemies. Grant me your mercy and protection," she prayed aloud as she went from one to the next, trying to drown out the Goddess. Then she saw one crate, then smiled. "And empower me with the might to strike down your enemies." She flipped the lid open and stared down at a strange device nestled in padding with a half dozen green orbs flickering with a rainbow sheen. 'Balefire Egg Launcher' was written on a label next to technical information.

"You're insane," the Goddess whispered in horror. "Who are you? What are you thinking?"

Psalm lifted the device from the padding and loaded an egg. "I serve Princess Luna. In service, I am forgiven for my sins."

"You've killed. . . I can see it. . . You monster! Stay away!" the goddess screamed, and glowing blue tendrils pushed up through the floor, waving wildly as they tried to catch Psalm. But she pulled her helmet back on and started to move, the B.E.L. floating above her. It might have been the Buck, or perhaps the rad-away and potion, but I believed sheer zeal kept her moving so quickly down the halls.

"Oh, Celestia. . . I can see. . . I can see your thoughts! I can see. . . Manehattan? Canterlot? Hoofington? All gone?!" the Goddess wailed, and I heard the ghostly wails of other ponies already linked in Unity. "There's nothing left out there but death, and you're trying to kill me? I can save your life! Just like how I just saved Twilight's! Please!"

"I don't care about my life!" Psalm shouted. A half dozen glowing tendrils streaked down the hall towards Psalm. She raised the B.E.L. and shot the flickering green egg, then leapt to the side through a hatch. She'd barely closed it before another explosion shook the building. From the rumbling and rippling, I could guess that part of the building was falling into that sinkhole. "Only Luna can save my soul!"

She pulled herself to her hooves and kept moving. "Your soul? You're worried

about. . . that. . .” the Goddess trailed off in horror. “Oh. . . you. . . you’ve killed. . .”

“Yes, I’ve killed. For Luna! All for Luna! So it’s all right!” Psalm cried as she moved through another hatch. “I’ve hurt so many! Killed so many! But I serve Luna!”

“Psalm. . . that’s your name, isn’t it?” The Goddess said so softly, so compassionately that I wondered how it would be possible that she’d ever been this way. “I know what it’s like to do bad things. I know what it’s like to need forgiveness. Please, don’t do this.”

“I came here to kill Twilight Sparkle,” Psalm spat as she staggered into some industrial works and started making her way down. “That was the order! Kill the Ministry Mares. . .”

“That order was a lie. You didn’t come here to kill Twilight. . .”

“Shut up!” Psalm whimpered as she kept moving down through the works. “Luna. . . protect. . . strength. . .” Psalm muttered in terror.

“You came here hoping that Twilight was alive. . . so she would kill you.” The Goddess said around us as we floated after her.

“Quiet!” Psalm sobbed as she finally came out above the enormous blue mass with its budding alicorns. She pointed the B.E.L. down at the mass. “Luna. . . Luna. . . Luna. . .”

“I know what it’s like to do bad things too. I was once under the effects of something evil, but the bad things I did came from me. I know what it’s like to want forgiveness so much it hurts.” Psalm stood on the edge, looking down as the blue motes coalesced into a blue mare’s head. “I can give you the forgiveness you seek, Psalm. I can save you, if you let me. If you don’t pull that trigger.”

Psalm’s glow flickered. “I just. . . wanted. . . to serve her. . .” Psalm whimpered, and then dropped the B.E.L. to the catwalk. She pulled off the helmet as she sat at the edge. “I don’t want to die. I don’t want to be forsaken! Not again! Luna was supposed to forgive me. She was supposed to make it all. . . all right. . .” she suddenly frowned and lifted the B.E.L. again. “No. I. . . I won’t lose faith now. . . I can’t. . .”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the Goddess replied. Then a blue tendril wrapped itself around Psalm’s throat. Her eyes bulged as she tried to aim the B.E.L. downwards, but more tendrils of magic curled around the weapon and twisted it away. Psalm’s eyes watered as more hooked around her body, starting to pull her downward.

“No! Luna... Luna...” she gasped. The B.E.L. went off, the ceiling exploding in green flame that rained debris down upon Psalm. Her mane alight, she screamed and thrashed wildly.

Then there was a crack, and she was lifted into the air, blazing like a torch as her body hung limply as radiation and pieces of the ceiling tumbled down upon her. “I will save you, Psalm. Whether you like it or not.” And with that, she was dropped like a burning doll into the blue mass. We fell with her, and suddenly Maripony disappeared in an endless sea of blue.

For a moment or an eternity, we floated there. Then the whispers started. Horrified. Shocked. Angry. “Murderer... treasonous... killer... butcher...”

“No!” Psalm’s voice cried out at the blue grew darker. “I had to! For Luna!” A ghostly Psalm hung in the void between us.

“Luna would never forgive a monster like you,” hissed the darkness as it closed in around us.

“No! Please! You said you’d save me!” Psalm cried out as she looked round in terror and starting to scream as parts of her transparent body were torn away.

“And I would have, if you hadn’t spurned my offer,” the Goddess replied coldly. “But I think I can find something useful to do with you.”

“Please! Somepony! Luna! Celestia! Twilight!” Psalm cried out in hysteria. “Help me!”

“You tried to kill Celestia,” a pair of mares said softly. “We can see it in your thoughts.”

“Twilight! Please! Don’t let them do this to me!” Psalm begged as only her head remained. Then the disintegration stopped. For a moment, hope bloomed in her agonized eyes.

Then the darkness was silent for an age before Twilight whispered, “You killed Pinkie Pie...”

And then Psalm screamed and screamed till only Lacunae and I were left. I wasn’t sure if the memory had ended or not as I stared at my friend. “It’s... my fault,” she said quietly.

“Your fault?” I countered as we floated in that vasty blackness. I tried for a grin and failed. “How is anything your fault?” But then she looked at me, and I knew. The pain in her dragon-slitted eyes was every bit the same as the pain I’d seen in Psalm as she’d been ripped to pieces in a vengeful Unity. “No...”

“Yes. It’s all my fault. The Goddess. Your pain and misery. What happened to you on the Seahorse. Dying in Hightower. Even your link to the Goddess. It is all my fault,” she said as she trembled and closed her eyes. “When you connected with me in the Collegiate, I took the opportunity. . . in my selfishness. . . to put pieces of myself inside you. You were so selfless and they were so small that I convinced myself they could not be harmful.” She sniffed and bowed her head. “But I was wrong. I’ve seen my memories poisoning you with every passing day. Corroding your confidence. Filling you with the self-destructive need that I’ve felt for two centuries.”

I stared at her, not comprehending. “But. . . the Goddess?”

“I was the poison. The first raider. The monster most ponies couldn’t imagine. The Goddess initially wanted to save Ponykind. She still does, but I gave her the hatred. I was the original sin!” she wept, shaking as she hugged herself.

“Huh?” I struggled for some explanation or reason. I was a master of self abuse. “You can’t know that, Lacunae. It could have been something in the Goddess, or the magic, or even Twilight herself.” I didn’t want to imagine it, but I couldn’t accept one pony as responsible for every wrong the Goddess had committed. “The Goddess is making you feel this way.”

“The Goddess didn’t make me contaminate you with my own memories,” Lacunae retorted as she looked at me in anguish. “Would you have allowed yourself to be violated and tormented if I had not filled you with my own urges for my own relief?”

I actually laughed, bringing her up short. “Probably.” She paused and gaped at me as I smiled at her. “Come on, Lacunae. This is teenager-grade angst. You’re blaming yourself for the Goddess? Why don’t you take credit for the last war while you’re at it?” That made her sob even harder inside my mind. I shook my head. “You can’t take the blame for my actions either. What I did is my own fault. Not yours.”

She trembled and grit her teeth a moment before she spat out, “But I can take the blame for the Goddess’s control through Unity.”

Now my smile disappeared. “How’s that?”

“When I transferred my memories to you, it created a link between you and I. That link has grown since. No amount of taint would have connected you to myself and Unity!” she cried and shook her translucent head. “Through me, the Goddess is connected to you.”

I stared at her silently. I knew where this trail ended. “I see. Why are you telling me this?” I knew why. She was setting me up for this.

"Because, the Goddess plans to use you as I was used and this must not happen. The only way to sever the connection permanently is for you to kill me. I cannot do it myself," Lacunae said as she closed her eyes again.

My answer was without hesitation. "No way."

"You must!" Lacunae replied. "When we break this vision, you'll have only a few seconds to kill me. Do it, and all the emotions transferred into me will return to Unity. The memories I've infected you with will be broken!"

"It's not an option," I countered almost casually.

Something in her broke, and she swelled up, turning black, her eyes blazing as her forehooves seized me. "Stupid cunt! What do you think you're trying to save? I am nothing! Worthless! A collection of unwanted memories and useless emotions housed in the shell of a mare who murdered your ancestor! I am less than nothing. For once, do what is right and selfish and kill me! Save yourself! You can save countless more if you just end me."

"No," I answered calmly as I stared up at her.

She loomed over me, her eyes bright as balefire bombs. "You. . . I used you, Blackjack! I slipped the trash I couldn't bear into you as the Goddess did into me! I gave you my poison just as I passed it to her! End me! Please!"

But I couldn't, and wouldn't. And she knew it too. She trembled, her eyes blazing with a harsh purple light as she quivered, then slowly shrank smaller and smaller, growing pitch black as she shrank to the size of a filly. "Please..." she whimpered. "Why? I deserve it. Why?" she whispered as I embraced her.

"You're my friend," I replied quietly. "I can't kill you. Not even if you want me to. Not even to help myself," I said as I closed my eyes and nuzzled her mane, listening to her sniff and weep softly. "I'm sorry. I'll help another way if I can, but I won't help you destroy yourself."

"Why?" she asked as she pulled away, tears on her cheeks.

"Because I'm a monster too, and you didn't let me die when you could have. Friends don't let friends die. Not when we have a choice," I said quietly as I petted her hair.

As we hovered there in the great black, I glanced up at a gargantuan blue head with immense blazing eyes and two green unicorn mares flanking her shoulders. Behind her, a purple-maned mare looked away, yet I could perceive the slightest peek of her eye watching us. I glared up at the four, daring them to make one comment of

the scene. One insult. One unkindness. . .

They didn't. The blue head turned away, then the two greens, and the darkness returned. It was a small mercy, probably one they'd purge soon to rid themselves of weakness. But for this second, I was glad for it.

When we were out of her mind and sitting side by side in Awesome's collection, I rested my head on her shoulder. "Is there any one of us that isn't emotionally screwed up?" I asked as I looked out the window and into the rain pouring into the reservoir. "I mean, is that just me? Or the world? Or what?"

"Boo, I think," Lacunae replied quietly. "And it's not just you. Everyone has their own share of pain. You're just able to handle so much of it that it's easier to share with you."

I sighed and closed my eyes, listening to the distant hiss of the rain on the water. "Someday, I want one good day. A day with music and dancing and good food. Some time when we can all be happy. Do you think I can just command one?"

"I don't see why not," Lacunae answered. "Have you decided what you're going to do with the crown?"

"Toss it in the lake," I grumbled, then sighed and met her amused gaze. She was actually smiling. "Okay. Probably give it to Splendid. Or Grace. Or Charm. Or just throw it in the middle of a crowd and run for the nearest exit."

Lacunae was silent for a long moment. "The Goddess is going to take you over soon."

"Maybe." I stared out at the gray waters and the hazy distances beyond.

"She's purged herself of her doubts and mercies. She's determined," Lacunae said as she closed her eyes. "She's going to take the black book and then kill LittlePip."

"Maybe," I repeated calmly.

"And you can't warn LittlePip or tell anypony. And neither can I."

"Maybe. P-21 and Glory are a lot smarter than me. They'll notice," I said, as much to myself as to Lacunae. That is, if they weren't at each other's throats over who they thought I should give the crown to.

"And the Goddess plans on turning you into the next Lacunae," Lacunae murmured.

"You never know. I might get lucky and be assassinated before she has her chance," I said with a small smile. Finally I sighed and closed my eyes. "Well. . . no time to waste here."

I turned and started for the door when Lacunae said, "Blackjack?"

"Mhmm?"

"I wish you and Psalm could have been friends. Before Psalm joined the war," Lacunae said regretfully. "I think. . . I think you would have made her a better pony."

I snorted and smiled back at her. "Of course not. I would have gotten us both stinking drunk, tattooed like zebras, and thrown in jail." She sighed, but smiled and shook her head with a smile of resignation.

The funeral of King Awesome that afternoon had four mourners: myself and his three children. All the rest of the attendees clustered on the edges, watching with shifty eyes and whispering softly to each other while giving hard glares to others. My EFS had a dozen red bars in the crowd, but short of halting everything and sorting out the hostiles, there was little I could do. Glory, P-21, and Rampage kept an eye out on me so I could focus on Awesome's departure. The blue duo had struck a temporary truce not to bug me about what I should do.

We'd gathered out on the shore of the reservoir. His body had been wrapped in sheets and placed within a rowboat filled with wood. Bottlecaps were heaped around his hooves and golden bits gleamed in the rain where they'd been sprinkled on his body. White lilies, actual flowers grown from some serf-worked plot, lay wreathed about his head like a crown. A wooden sword rested on one side, an assault rifle on the other, and a shield at his feet.

On his chest, hidden beneath his crossed hooves, was my own contribution: a memory orb of Goldenblood at the Grand Galloping Gala. I'd wanted to share it with him, and in this small way I could. I didn't listen to Hoity's pomp and ceremony, and from what I could tell I wasn't the only one. Most here were just going through the motions, playing at dignity and respect. Of his children, Charm seemed completely desolate while Splendid adopted a stoic poise. Grace's eyes shone with regret.

Finally the body was pushed out onto the reservoir, and I gave a nod to P-21. He raised Persuasion and fired it as true as I knew he could, an arc of smoke lancing up towards the gloomy skies before plunging back down at the old rowboat. A moment

later, the incendiary grenade went off and the boat burst into flame. For an instant all eyes were on the craft as it drifted further and further out on the water. I'd expected it to sink quickly, but to my surprise, and strange relief, it stayed afloat as it moved off into the darkness as a lone torch. The crowd dissipated soon after that, leaving just a dozen or so together.

"Come on," Scotch Tape said to the weeping Charm. "Let's get you inside, your highness." Charm gave a snotty sniff and nodded. Rampage started to follow, but I gave a shake of my head. Lacunae and P-21 both moved in her path. Rampage adopted a surly look. As they departed, I noted the uneasy looks of Grace and Splendid. Were they seriously worried that I'd give Charm the crown out of pity?

I waited till the flames finally began to gutter before I turned away. It was all pretense. These ponies lived in a dream world. Out in the Wasteland, a pony was lucky not to end up as carrion. These ponies created a whole display of disposing of one of their dead, one they didn't even care that much for. Could they do better, and if so, then what could I give them? I mulled this over as we trotted back to the resort with an escort of servants around us.

"Death to tyrants!" screamed a stallion behind me as I felt a prick in my shoulder. I turned, looking at one of the unicorn servants whose magic glowed around a carving knife stuck an inch or two into my body. Chaos broke out as there were yells and screams, but these dwindled away as everypony realized I wasn't screaming in agony. I could feel the tip of the blade caught in the augments under my hide.

Splendid reared dramatically beside the unicorn attacker. "Don't worry, Lady Blackjack! I'll save... you..." Splendid started to say as my friends looked at him incredulously. My look was more... shooty. He slowly dropped back down to his hooves as he looked at the blue unicorn and then back at me. Things seemed to have skipped off script. "Um... guards?" Still nothing.

"Seriously?" I asked, levitating out the knife, looking at Splendid. When he didn't reply, I glanced at Grace in time to catch her eye roll. I looked at the servant. "I've been shot at, blown up, burned, had my limbs ripped off, replaced, ripped off again, and you use... a knife?" I levitated the blade to my mouth, flicked off the blood, and then began to eat it from the tip. Chewing each bite deliberately, I maintained my stare, and since I didn't have to blink, I could do it a very long time. Finally I had only the bottom of the knife and the grip remaining.

"Do I get to splatter him now?" Rampage asked eagerly.

"I... um..." the servant muttered, dropping his gaze. "They promised my family

would be paid and set free from our contracts.”

“A pity story. . .” The striped mare sighed. “Great. There goes my fun.”

I swallowed and pushed the truncated knife back into his hooves. “Take that to whomever put you up to this and tell them that they’re going to have to try a whole lot harder to kill me.”

“Um. . . sorry. . .” the servant asked weakly as everyone who didn’t know me stared in amazement.

“Aren’t you. . . going to kill him? That is what typically happens to assassins,” Splendid said in clear confusion.

“For any sane, normal pony, sure.” Rampage said with a roll of her eyes. “But for the Saint Blackjack of the Wasteland. . .” She pointed a hoof at me and said sourly, “Do you have any idea how many ponies she’s stopped me from killing just because she bought their sob stories? I swear. The most potent weapon against Blackjack is a good tearjerker.”

Grace smiled at me in approval as Splendid seemed to work it over in her head. Grace looked at her twin coolly. “Well, let’s hope the next assassination attempt is as much a show as this one.”

Splendid returned her cool glance. “Certainly, you don’t believe this was me?”

Grace adopted her brother’s voice, “Don’t worry, Lady Blackjack! I’ll save you!” Splendid immediately flushed and put on an air of bruised dignity. I lagged behind a little and gave Hoity a look.

“Am I going to have to deal with this a lot?” I asked the ghoul sourly, gesturing back at the ‘assassin’.

“Until you pass the crown, most certainly. And the longer you’re here, the more serious the plots will become. That was quite an amateurish attempt, if it truly was an attempt at all. But I’m sure the pressures on you will become more intense as time goes on.” The ghoul let out a rusty sigh, and Rampage looked back at us as he said, “For a time, King Awesome managed to temper the worst elements, but I’m afraid his solution won’t last long.”

“Now you see why I hate these fuckers,” Rampage growled. “Sure, Reapers kill each other, but we’re honest about it. These assholes take pride in stabbing each other in the back.”

The gray ghoul sighed as we stepped back inside after everyone else. “Crude and

barbaric, but accurate. I never quite understood why either. I knew the rich and famous well before the bombs, and there was never this degree of severity with their intrigues. Oh, there was the occasional assassination attempt, but it was never so . . . recreational.”

“It’s the Hoof. What do you expect?” I replied, wondering if that were true or not. Was all this killing and scheming the result of the Eater, or simply a local, brutal, phenomenon? “How much time do I have before things get out of control? In your expert opinion?”

Hoity pursed his lips, rubbed his chin, and looked at me. “By the end of the Grand Galloping Gala tonight. If you don’t move by then, I fear they might start targeting your friends. At that point, I’ll be heading back to Meatlocker.”

“I think that sets a record for shortest reign in Equestrian history,” Rampage said with a smirk. “Just pick someone at random, get all the loot from this place you can, and go. Don’t listen to Glory and P-21. They’ll get you sucked in with politics and morality debates and all kinds of other shit. Flip a coin. Toss it at random. Take the airship and go.”

I rubbed my chin. “I’ll think about it,” I finally said, doubtful I’d be able to do it, but it was so tempting.

“Being Queen sucks,” I muttered telepathically to Lacunae as I laid out on King Awesome’s bed— technically my bed now— hugging a pillow and sulking. I’d sent my friends away after they argued for half an hour about what I should do. Thankfully, neither Glory nor P-21 had played the friend card yet. I’d sent Glory to find out more about Grace and P-21 to learn about Splendid. Rampage would do whatever she damn well pleased. “Seriously, everything I have going on and I have to . . . to play at being Queen? This is foalish shit. . . and when *I’m* the one saying that, you know it’s bad.” Lacunae sent a telepathic chuckle from the museum, where she was watching the ponies readying the Fleur for our eventual departure.

I’d spent an hour inspecting the plantations below. The Stable-Tec testbeds were amazing; I can only imagine what stables had been rich and extravagant enough to have entire orchards growing underground in perfectly secure environments. The Society had cleaned everything up for my arrival. Not a whip in sight, and every serf looked like they’d been given a bath and an extra meal and commanded to smile at the ‘regent’. They’d actually sung a half-hearted song as we’d walked through.

Then somepony had taken a shot at me. A bit more serious than a knife. The sniper pony had missed the first shot by luck, but a serf near me had been wounded. My EFS gave me the direction and my S.A.T.S. helped me target the mare's head. Four magic bullets had streaked up to her position at the mouth of a vent. One had gotten lucky, punching right through her eye and out the back of her skull. I didn't correct the onlookers on their assumption that I could kill with a thought from a hundred yards away.

P-21 had found a bomb under the bed when we'd returned; he'd disarmed it. Hoity's prediction seemed more and more accurate, and with this great big party being prepared there were so many ponies running around that I couldn't keep track of who was coming and going. One thing was for sure: eventually, they'd target somepony I cared for.

There was a knock on the door. "Yes?" I called, floating out Vigilance and loading AP rounds.

"I wanted to speak with you, your Majesty," Grace said smoothly.

I sighed and rubbed my brow. Keeping the Goddess back, dealing with these annoyances. . . and now this? "Do you have to?" I whined.

There was a pause outside. "I suppose not, but I would appreciate it."

I closed my eyes. Well, if she tried to kill me, that'd winnow down my choices, wouldn't it? I opened the door with my magic. Grace, wearing her spectacular gown, entered with caution. "You don't look so good, your majesty."

"I've got a lot going on," I replied acidly.

She walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed, looking at me. "I can sympathize. It looks like I'll have to flee this place soon."

"Why do you stay at all?" I asked as I rolled onto my side. "These ponies are crazy."

She looked mildly insulted, but gave a small shrug. "They have something rare in the Wasteland: luxury. Most descend from common raider stock, pretending to be well bred and exceptional. They're not. We're pampered and spoiled, wasteful and living off the toil of others." She sighed and shook her head. "Well, once it's clear that I will not be your choice, I'll have to head to Tenpony or. . . elsewhere. There are individuals who won't want the risk of me becoming a spare."

"You're counting yourself out already?" I asked, curious.

"I always knew I was the weakest candidate. Charm is more. . . sympathetic. Her

age. Her manners. Or if not her, Splendid can give you far more than I can. He's long wanted to invest our excess in the Hoof. His successful foray into the Fluttershy Medical Center, for instance. I never would have thought of that. Father favored me, but. . ." she gave a little shrug.

"Splendid said he wanted to extend your father's life," I recalled as I pushed myself up on the pillows.

"Of course. He was least favored. So long as father lived, he'd have a chance to maneuver into a better position," she said with a small smile. "You saw that horribly rushed attempt at gallantry outside."

I sighed and shook my head. "I hate all this political bullshit."

She looked amused, "Why? By all accounts, it's more civilized than the tactics of most of your enemies. It may be mentally taxing, and horribly frustrating, but when the battle is political at least nopony's going to be holding a town of foals to ransom. And politics is still a game with the highest stakes. Win, and you stay in power. Lose, and someone else takes what used to be yours."

"Politics doesn't show up as red bars on my EFS," I retorted sourly.

"I suppose," she said as she looked away. "I don't have as much skill at it as I should. Father always favored me but never named me heir. I think he was always waiting for Splendid to step up, or maybe he knew naming me would have put a target on my head instantly." She walked over to the window looking out over the reservoir. "He was never clear. Never straightforward. He would hint at his approval, or make little suggestions. He could change his mind whenever the political winds shifted. When he died. . ." she sighed and glanced at me with a small frown. "Well, his move was unexpected."

I considered the pale, blue-maned unicorn as she gazed out the window. Mother and I had issues, but I'd always known she loved me. And I never had to compete with a sibling for her favor. What would it have been like to have had siblings to contend with? "It was a surprise to me too," I said with a sigh.

She gave the ghost of a smile. "You should have seen Charm when she got the news. My, what a vocabulary." She shook her head and looked at me. "Have you thought about the Gala tonight?"

I needed a segue just as much as she did. "I'm no good at parties!" It was yet another thing in a growing list of things I didn't have time for. So meaningless in the scheme of what I was dealing with that it seemed surreal.

"You never had them in your stable?" she replied, curiously.

I laughed a little. "I was security. It was my job making sure that nopony was having sex in the bathrooms or raiding Medical for party favors," I replied with a sigh. "I can count the number of parties I've been to on my hooves."

"Your friend Lacunae said she'd handle your accoutrements. That just leaves dancing." I blinked slowly at her, and she smiled politely at me. "You have no idea how to dance, do you?" Grace asked with a small cock of her head.

"Dance? Ponies dance at parties?" I replied, only a bit facetious.

"Oh dear," she said as she slipped off the bed. "Come on," she said as her horn glowed. A phonograph in the corner whined to life, then dropped the needle to the record.

"Come what? What are you doing?" I asked as she took my hoof and tugged me off the bed.

"I'm going to teach you a few dances so you don't look like a complete fool tonight," she replied. "And trust me, there are ponies who want to kill you with embarrassment if they can't kill you with bullets. In fact, there are some who'd find that great fun."

"Every second, Rampage's suggestion seems to make more sense to me," I muttered as the music began.

"Hush," Grace replied with a smile. "If you can fight, you can dance. It's just movement in unison. It's as easy as one, two, three. . ."

Dancing was one of those things other ponies did. Yet. . . I thought about how I'd learned music from Roses and Octavia, and magic from Twilight's primer. Maybe I could learn this? Bit by bit, she walked me through the steps of a waltz. One two three, pivot, one two three, pivot, one two three spin, bow, repeat. It was all patterns, timing, and repetition. Grace slowed down to match my awkward pace and sped up as I became relaxed with the motions. She then moved into a back and forth variation, a formal dance. I must have looked like an idiot, and I said as much, but she just smiled and kept me going.

If teaching me to dance was an incredibly convoluted way to get the crown, it was working.

We stopped after a minute, she enjoying a bottle of purified water and I munching a ruby. "Does it hurt?" she asked as she looked at my metal forehoof.

“Huh? Being a cyberpony?” I asked, and she nodded. I gave a little smile as I raised the limb. “Not really. Not in the sense you think of. I don’t know everything, but apparently they turned down my ability to feel pain. So, what I feel is like a memory of feeling things. Like when you get a leg cut off. Even when its gone, and you know its gone, you can still feel it there.” She wore the oddest expression. “What?”

“I’ve never had a limb severed,” she replied delicately, sympathetically.

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Stupid thing to say,” I muttered, then rolled my eyes. “Anyway, no. It doesn’t hurt. Not really. But I can’t feel anything else. I don’t have a heartbeat. I don’t feel blood rushing through my veins. Don’t get short of breath. Don’t feel a whole lot of things. I’ve got a few very precious nerve endings in my hind end that I’m very grateful for, and that’s about it. It takes some real extreme stimulation for me to feel much at all.”

She blinked, her eyes popped wide, and her face immediately assumed a rosy shade. “Ah. I . . . I didn’t know that.”

I gave a little smile, “You know, back in 99, I never really appreciated my—“

“Blackjack!” She blurted with an exasperated half smile. “There is such a thing as knowing too much!”

“Ah.” I blinked and grinned. “Sorry.” I looked at her for a moment with an odd sensation and said, “You’re descended from Twilight Sparkle’s brother, right?”

“If father was to be believed, yes. Why?”

“Well. . . If I’m Twilight’s descendant, and you’re the descendant of her brother, what does that make us?”

She hesitated a moment, opened her mouth, closed it again as she thought a little more. “I believe it makes us cousins several times removed. Hardly a relation at all, really. More of a coincidence,” she said matter of factly, but then saw my stare. “What is it?”

I gazed at her and then threw my hooves around her. “Cousin! I have a cousin! Three cousins!”

She struggled in my hooves. “Several times removed!” she reminded me in a gasp, but I didn’t care. I had family. . . okay, it was one step above a complete stranger but still, family! “Need air!” she wheezed desperately, before I released her.

"Sorry!" I said at once, releasing her, then grinning a little sheepishly. "I just... I never had much family."

She laughed and shook her head. "I'd been told how unpredictable you are, but I had no idea." But I'd gone from laughing to crying at the same time. Her smile melted to one of concern. "Blackjack? Are you... are you okay?"

I wanted to tell her so desperately, but the Goddess' prohibition clamped down tight. "It's just... my life." I said with a sniff, a chuckle, and a little sob. "Times like this, I really wonder if I've lost my mind. I got so much to do, so little time, and here I am dancing and giddy that I've found someone I can call family, no matter how removed. It seems almost... surreal."

She sighed and looked towards the reservoir, "Yesterday, I was terrified you were going to level everything. Today, I'm giving you dancing lessons when I should be doing everything I can to undermine Charm and Splendid... because tomorrow, I might be quietly pushed out the gate, killed, or running for my life."

It isn't always about you, Blackjack. I huffed as well, laying back on the bed, staring at stars painted on the ceiling. "Is there something about Twilight Sparkle's family tree that insists we live interesting, messed up, adventure-ridden lives?"

"It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?" she replied with a sad smile. Then there was a knock on the door.

"Don't come in! I'm having wild royal rutting in here!" I called out in a surge of recklessness. Grace's eyes grew wide.

"You better not be without me!" Glory said, pushing the door open. My laughter died into a squeak as it was my turn to go red.

P-21 and Rampage followed her in. "Oh, she was being sarcastic?" Rampage quipped. When she saw Grace, her expression became smug. "Ooooh. Doing some personal interviews?"

"Dance lessons," Grace replied primly, all hint of embarrassment gone as she turned, bowed her head once to me, "Cousin." Then she turned and walked out. Oh, she was good.

"Dance lessons?" Glory asked.

"Cousin?" P-21 asked a second after.

I opened my mouth to start to complain, then closed it and shook my head. "Never-mind. What's up?"

P-21 and Glory shared a look, and then he said calmly, "First, Glory and I wanted to apologize. We know this choice is important to you. We're sorry for making it more difficult."

"I'm not, but that's just me. I still say you should auction it to the highest bidder. Maybe give it to the Society janitor. That'd be a hoot," Rampage quipped.

"I'll keep that as plan B," I said dryly.

Glory smiled, "Second bit is that the airship should be ready tomorrow morning. I think that, with you unplugged and Rampage as life support, we should make it. I'll coat the ship with clouds, and with some luck, we should be able to sneak right up to Thunderhead. If we pick up Father on the way, we should be able to see the Councilor pretty much as soon as we arrive."

"I went over the ship once, and it looks like it's on the level. I'll check again before we go," P-21 added.

"And I have a message," Rampage said with a smirk. "I was supposed to give it all sneaky sneaky like, but, eh. Fuck that." She shrugged. "Anyway, there's somepony that wants a trade. He wants the crown to go to Charm. In return, he'll give you ten thousand caps and King Awesome's complete collection of memory orbs." She paused and added, "He also said that if you give the crown to anypony but Charm, he'll give you a bag of crushed memory orbs."

Glory sucked in her breath sharply. "No, he wouldn't!" she gasped, looking at me in worry.

"I'm pretty sure he would," Rampage replied. "He acted a lot like me, so I'm pretty sure he'd follow through. I don't know if this is his own game or something he set up with the filly. Personally, I'd go for it. Maybe hold out and see if he can give you fifteen thousand."

"Blackjack isn't going to sell the crown!" Glory scoffed, then looked at me. "Right?"

"Ehhh. . ." The thought of Goldenblood's memory orbs, any one of which might have answers on Horizons, being destroyed chilled my blood.

"Glory, remember the part where we agreed we'd let Blackjack make this choice and support her one hundred percent no matter how we feel about it?" P-21 told the cyan pegasus. She immediately screwed up her face as she struggled with her own internal conflict.

"Sell! Sell! Sell! Sell!" Rampage chanted, earning a glare from Glory.

“Stop,” Glory growled, getting a tongue stuck out at her by the striped mare. “What are you, five?”

“What are you, my mother?” Rampage retorted.

“I’m going to go looking for my daughter.” P-21 said as he started for the door. I turned to watch him g—

“Red bars,” I said as I drew Vigilance, staring at the door. “Five, right on the other side.”

“I really miss my gun,” Glory muttered. “Weren’t there supposed to be bodyguards outside?” I floated my assault carbine over to her. She looked at it skeptically, then bit down on the trigger bit guard and secured the gun in her hooves as she took cover behind the bed. P-21 looked at Persuasion, then joined her. I made three. The bedroom only had one entrance, for security.

“I never met a guard immune to bribes, bullets, or blowjobs.”

“Okay, I think I know what we need to do,” I said, a complex plan coming together.

Rampage rolled her eyes. “Oh fuck no, Blackjack. I’ve played nice and haven’t killed one of these fuckers all morning. You don’t get to take this fun!” She stepped out in front. “Come and get us, you mother humpers!” Rampage roared as she turned and charged the door.

Apparently, the challenge was enough for the door to be kicked wide, and four ponies, two high and two low on either side of the door, looked in with the fifth in the middle. They wore spiffy, brand new combat armor, two with assault carbines and two others with anti-machine rifles. The fifth, who’d kicked the door open, wore a battle saddle with two miniguns mounted backwards. As one, they began to spray bullets into the bedroom. The bed didn’t provide much other than getting us out of sight.

Of course, no pony is ready for Rampage. The minigun rounds sparked off her armor as she charged the stallion in the middle and lowered her head, keeping the bullets out of her eyes. Like a ponified saw blade, she darted under the hind legs of the stallion and, once beneath him, gave a great heave. The stallion’s blood poured down on her bladed steel, and he clenched his bit in his dying spasms. Rampage twisted like a turret, and sprayed the two on the left with a barrage of minigun fire before the impaled stallion went limp.

“Catch!” She snapped, heaving again and tossing the bisected remains on the pair on the right side of the door. The body crashed into the two, knocking them back out

of sight behind the door jamb. Like a flash she was on them, kicking and stomping with her bladed hooves. I couldn't see the damage inflicted, but I could see the spatter.

The first pair struggled to their hooves. "Tag!" she shouted in glee and launched herself after them. There was a scream, a wet pulpy noise, and the chatter of a carbine.

I glanced at P-21 and then at Glory as there was a soft chunky noise and a bloody pony was kicked back in front of my door. "Hoofington... rises..." he... or maybe she... it was hard to tell through all the blood... said weakly before falling over limply.

Rampage strolled over, standing in front of him, her armor coated in blood and viscera. "Really? That's the best you can do?" She then looked at me, a length of purple intestine dangling to the side of her face. "What? "

"You know, you might be really obnoxious, but there are moments I'm glad you're on our side," P-21 said in complete honesty before he approached the slain ponies.

"Aw, come and give me a hug!" she said, spreading her blood drenched forelegs wide as she grinned.

"And the moment's over," P-21 said.

I stepped past them and looked at the dead attackers. Definitely Harbinger gear. I looked down the hall to where my 'guards' stood staring with gormless looks on their face. I cocked a brow as I stared at the four until one declared lamely, "I had to shit. I dunno what the other guys were doing."

I rubbed my face. Luna save me, I had to get out of here! "All I wanted was an airship," I muttered.

The attack had gone nearly unnoticed by the Society with all the party affairs being conducted. Oh, I had no illusions that everypony didn't know, but something as simple as an attempted regicide was apparently nothing compared to a social affair. The Society wanted to get to their fun and games, and I was the four hundred pound cyberpony futzing everything up. The only silver lining was that over a dozen lesser plots and schemes had completely fallen apart, leaving Hoity quite amused and myself a worsening Societal irritant.

Lacunae was out picking something up. Glory was checking the dead Harbingers, looking for something that might identify how they had gotten in. P-21 was triple-checking everything that might explode, since that was the next logical course of taking me out. Boo lingered by Scotch Tape as she was chatting with Charm. And Rampage, after multiple demands for her to wash and not wear pony entrails as a fashion statement, sat at my side boredly as my 'champion'. I'd publically declared that if I were killed, Rampage had full carte blanche to take my revenge on the perpetrators and left it vague as to if that meant the actual assassins, the Society, or everypony in the Hoof who'd looked at me wrong. Apparently, according to Hoity, it'd gotten three to abandon their plots for the time being.

That left me languishing in a stuffy conference room with Splendid talking at me about the Society's finances. Apparently they were loaded; being one of the most reliable food suppliers for a post-apocalyptic wasteland brought in the caps. I'd also discovered that the Society didn't have a firm monarch when it came to the money. Profits were split into a mind-numbing array of shares, half shares, quarter shares, and eighths, and sixteenths. That was after expenses, which were surprisingly high. Still, the Society took their money and bought everything from guns to old world relics, facilitating trade.

Which meant, as nice as the thought was becoming, that I couldn't just trot off. I had a chance to affect the biggest player in the Hoof. I just had to decide which was the right answer...

"Splendid?" I asked as he started in on last year's figures. The white stallion paused beside a chalkboard with rows of numbers on it. "Why the fuck are you telling me all this?"

"As leader of the Society..." he began, and I raised my hoof, cutting him off.

"Not leader. Let's drop that pretense. I'm not leading anything. I'm picking the leader. That's the deal. And you're smart enough to know that. So why tell me all this?" I asked sharply.

He coughed, looking away. "You're a lot smarter than when we first met."

"I'm also a lot more metallic." I folded my hooves on the table. "If you want to give me a sales pitch, give it."

He took a deep breath, touching his chest, and let it out before saying bluntly, "You should make me your regent if you want to help the Hoof in a substantial way."

I met his gaze with my own stare. "Go on."

“Charm is too spoiled, and Grace too gutless, to understand what the Society could truly be. You saw what we achieved at the Fluttershy medical center. That’s just a start.” His horn glowed and he flipped the chalkboard to show a map of the Hoofington Valley. “With a few changes to the way the Society does things, we’ll have the resources to secure not just our own territory but the rest of the Hoof as well. We can hire mercenaries to take the Paradise Mall back from the slavers inhabiting it and lease it to the Finders. That opens up trade with the pegasi at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. We can also take and secure the Ironmare Naval Base on the bay and distribute goods to the north end of the city. But more importantly, with pegasi and the bay, we’ll be able to send our goods farther than ever! We can reach Manehattan by boat or air infinitely faster than on foot or via caravans.”

He looked back at me. “With Society supremacy, the Collegiate and Finders will have to abandon their petty little issues with us or be completely marginalized. With their help, we’ll turn the Hoof into what it once was: a cornerstone of Equestria. Hoofington will rise bigger and stronger than before and help restore true civility to the surface.”

Well. Somepony had aspirations. I had no idea if he could pull it off, but he seemed confident in his abilities. “So why is it Charm or Grace couldn’t do the same?”

“Charm has no interest. If she had her way, the society would exist to serve her every whim. And Grace doesn’t have the stomach to admit what it would take,” he answered. “We’ve argued over this since we were foals. She’d rather waste time and energy trying to reform the Society. Kick out the bad apples, give the serfs more rights and shorter hours, even pay them a few shares! What would serfs do with money?”

I could think of a few things. “And your way?” I prompted.

“We’ve got more than half our security force keeping the serfs in line. If we employed more stringent methods to get them to work, that would free up ponies to secure the rest of the Hoof. More liberal use of explosive collars. Using chems to keep them working longer and more productively. More energetic recruitment.” With a huff, he continued, “They come to us, begging for food and safety. The second we provide it, they work as absolutely little as possible. Worse, they grow resentful, and some even become threats. If we crack down harder, we won’t need so many here.”

“Civilization built on the backs of the oppressed. Wonderful,” Rampage said with a snort. “Not even the Reapers are this messed up.”

“We’re not oppressing them. We’re making them live up to the agreement they

signed when they came to live here. We feed them and their extended family. That's far more generous than the Wasteland," he retorted.

"Right. Thank you. Well, I'll go ahead and ponder that for a while when I make my choice tonight at the Gala." I gestured towards the door with my hoof, waiting for him to leave. When he did, I buried my face in my crossed hooves. "Remember when my only concern was finding out what EC-1101 is? Or what Goldenblood had done? Or just running away from people trying to kill me? Can you believe I actually miss those days? Really!"

"That's because you're trying to be the saint of the Wasteland and do better and all that. Personally, it's absolutely amazing to me. I would have killed half these fuckers in the first five minutes if I were in your horseshoes." She chuckled and then patted my back. "If it's any consolation, I admire what you're trying to do. I think you're stupid for trying it, but when is that any different?"

I turned my head enough to look at her with one eye, then re-buried my face in my hooves. It wasn't particularly comfortable. "How are you doing, Rampage?"

She blinked in surprise. "Me? I just got to slaughter five heavily armed ponies. I'm just grand." She grinned, and it lasted all of ten seconds before it slid off her face. She immediately took out a tin of Mint-als and popped two into her mouth before asking, "Do we have to talk about this?"

"No, not if you don't want to," I answered, but it didn't seem to put her at ease.

"I've watched some of the memories you've picked out of my head. Some of the stuff... like that doctor? And I thought Glory was boring..." she tried for a laugh, but it didn't last. "I don't know. I watch it and it's like... somepony else. It doesn't feel like me. Even if it's a part of me, it's like... like..."

"Like my cyberlegs?" I suggested.

"Yeah! Something that was stuck on to me," she said with a smile and a nod.

"What memories do feel like you?" I asked as I sat up.

She thought a moment. "Everything from when I was yanked out of that crater by those ghouls on. Sure, there are gaps, but I don't think of those memories as somepony else's." She cocked her head. "Why are you asking me this? Not that I'm not thankful, but don't you have something more important to do?"

I laughed, leaning back. "Oh let's see! Get to Thunderhead and stop a biological weapon from being deployed. Stop the Harbingers, Dawn, and Cognitum from

killing me. Deal with the Legate. Find out where EC-1101 is trying to go. Find out what Horizons is supposed to do. Oh, I think I have 'clean out Paradise' on my list somewhere, too." I rose to my hooves, not mentioning the most pressing... any second the Goddess was going to make all that moot by turning me into the next version of Lacunae. I started trotting back and forth. "There's a certain point where you have so much going on, that helping my friends is the only thing that feels like it really matters. Save the Society. Save the Enclave. Save the Wasteland. I can't even pick who's the right person to give a crown to!"

"Blackjack?"

I kept moving faster and faster, "I wonder if this is how Twilight and her friends felt? Having a thousand things that hundreds of thousands of lives counted on and not being able to ever really get any headway because once you finish one then another pops up and there's nothing you can do. So you push harder and think harder and hope harder while you're terrified that at any second it's all going to fall apart and you'll find out how many you killed—"

Rampage started to look worried, "Blackjack!"

I continued on. This was a time where I wanted my heart thundering and to gasp for air. I needed to, but my artificial body refused. So instead, I felt myself grow even more anxious. "But no pressure! It's not like thousands of ponies are going to die if I screw up! No, wait, they are! I mean I'm seriously trying to weigh if saving the lives of who knows how many in the Wasteland will be worth the suffering of hundreds of serfs! I mean, if it really does work and helps the Wasteland, then isn't it justified? Which is the lesser evil? Can't things just be easy? Like tell everypony trying to kill everypony else to just kill Blackjack instead. They can kill me and then they won't have to kill each other and—"

She hit me. The blow knocked me right off my hooves and sent me sprawling. I didn't get up, laying there, head pounding and staring at the wall. Then she trotted over, picked me up, and gave me a hug. "Idiot," she muttered.

"Can't I just die for them and call it good?" I whispered as I pushed my face into her neck.

"No. Dying's easy. Killing's easy. You never do the easy thing," she said as she held me. My shoulders trembled, some of the dwindling number of muscles still wired to my brain betraying my anxiety. "I know what I'd do. It'd be selfish and quick and probably hurt a lot of folks, but I wouldn't care."

It took me a few minutes to relax. Finally I removed my legs from hers. "Sometimes, I wish I could be like you."

"No you don't," she replied, soberly. "Because I would have quit a long time ago, Blackjack. I would have sold that program, or picked a fight I couldn't win, or simply wandered off. I am not a strong pony, Blackjack. I can rip people to pieces, but ask me to do the right thing on my own and I just won't."

There was a rapid knock on the door and I clenched my eyes shut. "Unless one of my friends' lives are in danger, piss off! That's a royal command!"

Then the door was pushed open, admitting a frantic looking Charm. "Blackjack! They've taken them!" I closed my eyes, feeling the urge to sic Deus on this place rising by the second. "They took Scotch Tape and Boo! They said if you don't make me in charge, they'll kill them!"

I opened my eyes and fixed her with a gaze that could cut through stone. "Really?" I asked, hoping that this was some kind of sad, elaborate joke. She nodded, looking terrified. I closed my eyes a moment, fighting for composure before I let out my breath in one slow hiss.

Time to do this... "Right," I muttered, activating my PipBuck.

"Guess they thought you weren't going to accept the bribe," Rampage said with a sigh. "Pretty good guess."

"Maybe, but I'm certain they'll do it. I think they believe they can use me," Charm said in a desperate rush. I rose to my hooves and started walking. "I mean, I know I'm young, but I promise I'll do a good job doing whatever you want," she continued as she trotted along beside me. "I was going to get the guard, but they said they'd kill them if I did, so I came to you." We continued walking down the hall. Some of the guard ponies saw us walking and fell in line. Her panic gave way to confused indignation. "Did you hear me, Blackjack? They're going to kill them if you don't make me your regent!"

"Mhmmm," I replied as I stepped out the side door and started walking across the lawns. "Did you hurt either of them?"

"I... wha... you think I'm involved in this?" she gasped, pressing a hoof to her chest.

"Did you hurt them?" I asked again, and Charm shrank back. Clearly, this wasn't following her script any more than the "assassination" with the knife had. Maybe it was genetic...

“I’m certain *they* might have!” Charm blurted. “Those two didn’t go quietly. And where are you going?”

I headed towards a large shed that looked like it’d once held lots of little white carts that now laid nearby like heaps of snow . “I’m following her PipBuck tag,” I replied evenly and saw her eyes grow a little wider. “Do any of you know what I’ve put up with today? Do any of you know what my week has been like?! I’ve had assassination attempts on me. I’ve been manipulated and betrayed more than once. I was shot through my fucking head! I am not in a fucking good mood, I am regretting ever coming here, and I am sincerely motivated to cull the lot of you and let the Collegiate take over running everything here! Do you understand?!” I roared, seeing five red bars and two blue within.

I turned and kicked the large front doors with all the power I could muster. They might have been barred within, but one blow and they broke free of their hinges and fell down to either side of me. Within, I saw the mare and stallion I’d encountered trying to pressure ponies to sign serf contracts. They sat at either side of a table, playing cards, and stared at me in shock. Next to them were two astonished-looking stallions who had been wrestling with Boo. In the back was the minotaur, Pain Train, holding onto a bound Scotch Tape with one huge hand. “You have one chance. Release them. Now!”

“You! How did you find—“ the mare began, but I entered S.A.T.S. and shot her through her foreleg with a single magic bullet. She writhed on the ground, holding her leg, screaming.

The pair dropped Boo and struggled for their weapons as they backpedaled away from the mare. One tripped, falling on his back and shooting wildly into the air. The bullets struck the chassis of a cart hanging from hooks on the ceiling. With a crunch, the chassis fell free, striking both scrambling ponies with a resounding crunch. Boo immediately scrambled for safety behind me.

“Watch out! They’re going to kill the hostage!” Charm shouted, glaring at the minotaur and ex-card-player. The unicorn stallion started to raise a gun, his eyes wide and terrified. He had reason to be. Like an immense hunting cat, Rampage launched herself at him, clearing the table and latching her claws in his shoulders. With a scream, he went down on the far side. Charm looked at Pain Train as he picked Scotch Tape up and stood, looking way down at me. “He’s going to break her neck! Any second now! He’s going to do it!” She looked at me, then at the stoic minotaur holding Scotch Tape by the neck. “Do it!”

I locked eyes with him, just as I had that last time we'd met. Then he looked at Charm, reached down, and carefully undid the ropes on Scotch Tape's legs. Aside from looking pretty scraped up, the olive filly was uninjured. Charm looked as though a spring in her brain had just gone 'spoing' and she was trying to comprehend what was happening. Charm stared at Pain Train, her left eye twitching before looking at me and grinning from ear to ear. "She's free! Huzzah! How wonderful!" she said with ebullient glee.

I looked up at Pain Train. "Thanks," I replied as I knelt beside Scotch Tape and checked her over.

"We're even. Was a stupid plan anyway," he muttered.

Scotch Tape rose to her hooves and her blue eyes landed on Charm. "You!" Charm's grin twitched as she took a step back. "Funny how they came for us exactly when you went to the bathroom!"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about!" Charm said as she backed away.

"Get over here!" Scotch Tape roared, and tackled Charm before the filly got three steps. "You're sick! You make the Overmare look nice! I felt sorry for you!" Scotch screamed as she rolled, bit, hit and kicked Charm. Finally she got Charm in a hooflock around the princess's neck. "Honestly, foalnapping us! Where do you get off?!"

"Ow! Stop it! You can't do this to me! I'm a princess! You can't prove anything!" Charm squealed as Scotch Tape bit her ear and growled like she was going to tear it off!

"Enough, Scotch," I said with a chuckle, carefully disengaging the battered white filly. Scotch swung her hooves wildly. "Did she say this was the plan?"

Scotch Tape glared at her, then spat out, "No. But she trots out and a minute later they trot in easy as you please. They threw me in a sack! Talked about the great life they were going to have when Charm was regent. They were going to get a share, whatever that means." Scotch Tape swung at her again. "You are so lucky. I swear, next time I'm going to give you the mother of all swirlies! I'll rig a toilet that'll suck your horn out your back end. You just wait!"

"Good hooflock, though. The ear was a nice touch," Rampage chuckled. That finally made her stop fighting, though she still growled at the other filly.

I looked at Pain Train. "Did she plan this?"

He gave a laconic shrug. "I just do what I'm told. Ponies don't involve me in planning their schemes. I'm just the dumb muscle." Then he looked at me. "Though I knew it was stupid. You beat me once. You'd probably beat me again."

I looked at the battered filly, "Well?"

Charm sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Why is everypony yelling at me? I just do what I'm told to do!" she said, giving a choking sob. I didn't twitch. Finally, she slumped and scowled at me, her eyes dry. "Fine. Believe what you want. But that deal that was made? It's still standing. And you want daddy's memory orbs, Blackjack." She rose to her hooves. "I saw what Goldenblood did with Horse's machine. I know what this Horizons thingy is. And if you want to know, you can give me my crown. Otherwise, I'll send you them pulverized in a box. Got it?"

I twitched as I looked down at her. Scotch Tape still looked murderous. Rampage appeared amused. I really didn't have time for this shit. "How about this? You hand them over and I make sure that Grace or Splendid don't boot you out for good?" I counter-offered.

She narrowed her eyes in a spiteful glare. "I'd rather you drive yourself crazy thinking about what might be in them. And I can't wait till you come crawling back to me, asking me what I saw. And I'm not going to tell you. So there!" And she pulled her mouth wide and stuck her tongue out at me.

I rubbed my head. "Scotch. She's all yours. Don't kill her. She might come to her senses. And don't let yourself be taken hostage by her again. Otherwise, I'm letting P-21 handle it. Understood?"

Scotch blinked at me, and then her lips curled in an expression of sheer deviousness. I swear her ears seemed to pull into horns as she looked at the white filly. "Mmmm... come here..."

"You're insane! Stay away from me! Nooooo!" she shrieked, running for her life. It was probably the first time she'd ever had to do it; there was no way she was going to get away if that was the quickest she could flee.

I glanced at Rampage, "Make sure she doesn't mess Charm up too badly, okay?" Boo curled up next to me, making it clear she wasn't parting company with me any time soon.

"What about you?" Rampage asked.

I rolled my eyes. "We've got three hours till this party starts. I'm going to find someplace quiet, lock myself in there, and think about what to do. I doubt there's

much else anypony here can throw at me.”

“Famous last words,” Rampage replied. “Well, if another hit squad comes after you, let me know. You do attract interesting fun.” Then she turned and raced after Scotch Tape. “Don’t let her get away! I’ll show you how to torture a pony with a loogie!” I laughed, despite myself. Sometimes she seemed not much different from a filly herself.

I returned to Awesome’s stripped collection. So many questions, like what happened when Dawn left. Had it been as Keeper said, or had Awesome been telling the truth? Somehow, I had trouble believing anypony so fascinated by Goldenblood could be honest. But then what did that say about me? I poked my head out the door at the ponies who were supposed to be my guards; hopefully they were more diligent than the last pair. “Okay. I don’t care what happens. Short of fire, explosions, or my friends being hurt, I want nopony to come in here, no matter what. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” They replied, saluting briskly.

Boo scrambled to the far side of the room, looking around as if checking for possible attackers. I looked around myself, then closed the door and locked it. Then, for good measure, I levitated over a chair and wedged it under the handles. Then I shoved a table against the door. *Then* I threw a few O.I.A. ashtrays against the wall in frustration.

This wasn’t the worst day of my life, but it was by far the most frustrating. I’d never had so many obstacles and interferences thrown in my face. These ponies. . . these Society ponies. . . I wanted to help them! And they were creeping and plotting and trying to kill me and threatening my friends and I just wanted to scream! Of everything going on in my life, why was I stuck dealing with this shit? Why didn’t I just hop in the airship and fly away? Punt the crown into the crowd like Rampage suggested?

“I am so not qualified for this,” I growled.

I glanced and saw Boo looking nervous and smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m done throwing things for a while.” She tentatively approached, and I gave her ears a good rub. Instantly her apprehension disappeared. “How about you? Who do you think should run the Society?”

She blinked her wide, pale eyes at me and then nosed about the wreckage I'd tossed in my tantrum. She lifted a picture of an M.o.P. meeting with Fluttershy and Garnet and blinked at me. I chuckled and stroked her ears. "Sorry. I don't think either of those ponies will do." Her ears drooped, and she let the picture fall to her hooves. I held her, giving her back a pat. "It's okay. I'm no better at this than you are."

"That's because you're doing it wrong," rasped a voice that I hadn't heard in a while. I looked over at Dealer, calmly shuffling his cards.

"Hey," I said with a smile. "You've been quiet, lately."

"Getting old," he answered. "Two centuries is a long time by anypony's reckoning." He did look tired; there were dark shadows under his eyes, and he didn't shuffle with the same briskness as before. "I probably would have died in 99 if EC-1101 hadn't been broken out."

"How can you die? You're a soul." I couldn't keep the concern from my voice. "I thought you'd just... go on." Boo looked around, as if searching for whoever I was talking to. I laughed and gave her another pat. "I'm just talking to a pony in my head, Boo. Don't worry about it." Boo cocked her head, and, so help me, even looked a little skeptical. She did relax, though.

"Nothing lasts forever. Not even souls," he replied with a small sigh. Then he looked at me again. "Anyway, you're making the same mistake the Ministry Mares did."

"Oh?" I asked as I took a seat.

"You want both order and virtue," he replied as he drew two cards, one showing me at the head of an army and another of me hugging Rampage. "But you can't have them. Not at the same time."

"Why not?" I asked with a frown. "I thought good and evil cancelled each other out."

"Because one has to have priority over the other. Doing what's right for an individual is different from doing what's right for a group of people. Order screws people. It has to. When you're trying to prevent discord and chaos, you can't tailor the law to try and make every situation right. Likewise, if you try to do what's best, inevitably some ponies are going to buck the system. The Ministry Mares didn't understand that. Applejack tried to make order with her power armor, then was upset when her cousin mass produced weapons that could kill ponies using it. Fluttershy tried making everything better without once thinking what kind of a crime it is to modify a pony's memories against their will. If she'd truly cared about virtue, she would have let the cases of Wartime Stress Disorder mount as opposition to the war. She

didn't," he explained calmly in his soft, weak voice.

Boo let out a snort and seemed to even roll her eyes a little. I looked down at her, and she blinked cluelessly up at me. I stroked her gently for a moment, and then looked back at Dealer. "And I'm trying to do the same thing?" I frowned as I thought about it.

"You want order in the Wasteland. You want the fighting to stop. The battles to end. The misery halted. You want things safe. None of these are bad things in and of themselves. But when taken to its extreme, there is precious little virtue found in order. Splendid's plan might work. Let's say it does and he manages to bring an end to the fighting. Is life better? All the people he's going to force to work, he may as well not even call them serfs any longer. Is that pacified Wasteland worth living in without freedom?" He nailed me to the floor with his gaze, "Is your goal to turn the Wasteland into one enormous Stable 99?"

"Ouch," I winced.

He gave a small smile. "Virtue, on the other hoof... that's harder. You know that. You've done so much trying to do the right thing and do better. I've never met a pony, except maybe Big Macintosh, who honestly and sincerely tried to do the right thing as much as you, Blackjack. But part of virtue is letting others choose to be virtuous, and living with them when they choose not to be. That's freedom. It's a messy business at times. And it's hard. Damned hard. But at the end of the day, you can look yourself in the eye and know you're the better pony."

"And I can't have the best of both worlds? I can't have order and virtue at once?" I asked with a frown.

"You can, but one's got to take priority over the other. And once order is more important than virtue... oh, you can go all kinds of nasty places. Usually under the premise of 'protecting' virtue. It was everywhere before the bombs fell. Pinkie Pie ordering parasprites to record conversations and conducting random arrests. Rainbow Dash carrying out sabotage missions in zebra lands that killed tens of thousands of noncombatants. Twilight pursuing magic that she knew was going to be used in megaspells. Even Fluttershy, at the end, allowing modifying the memories of ponies who dissented. So much virtue sacrificed in the name of 'protection'. Till in the end, any virtue that was left was hollow. An empty claim long ago abandoned in reality."

Boo gave a disgusted little noise, sticking her tongue out. I looked at her again. She couldn't... but that was ridiculous. There was no way she could be hearing Dealer.

It was impossible. I rubbed my chin and smirked. "You know, you get really talky when you show up, Dealer."

He blinked, then chuckled dryly. "I interact with all of one pony. Forgive me for thinking up speeches in my spare time." Tugging his hat over his face, I think he was actually blushing! After a moment or two he flicked the brim back up, looking at me once more.

"I'm trying to be smart about it. Thinking which way I should go. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" I asked plaintively. "Isn't that what princesses and queens are meant to do?"

"Sure. But you're not a queen. You're Blackjack. And you are not a thinking pony. If you were Twilight, sure. You could compare and debate philosophies and histories and crunch numbers and try to deduce the right course of action. Did you do that when you heard that Scotch Tape was being held hostage?"

"No," I frowned. "I just activated her tag and went and got her."

"Exactly. You're instinctive. You're a gambler. You could have gotten Scotch Tape killed if the situation had been different. Easily." I flushed and opened my mouth to argue. "But you didn't, Blackjack. And that's the point. You do what is right because you're a good pony. You concern yourself with being good, and you're not even sure what your personal virtue is. I don't even know, and I've been watching you since Miramare." Boo gave my cheek a nuzzle, making me smile.

"But... what if I fuck up?" I muttered. "What if I choose Grace and the Society gets torn down from the outside? What if I chose Splendid and the Society takes over the world? What if I choose Charm and she becomes the Society's Overmare?"

"You live with it and accept it. You can't gamble and expect not to fail, and nothing in this life comes with zero risk. Trust yourself and decide, and then move on to all those big things that you need to do. Let somepony else deal with this nest of vipers." He then looked at me shrewdly. "Or is it you don't want to? Is something else wrong?"

I stared at him, fighting against the compulsion not to talk about it. "You know... my life is weird... right? And how... strange stuff happens? To me..." I felt the pressure growing. It spread like ink through my mind, staining everything with its touch. "Things... weird things... are happening to me... right... now..." I spat, struggling. My skull started to pound as the outside will squeezed down on me. "Please!" I managed to spit out. Boo backed away in shock, her pale eyes wide.

“Blackjack. What’s wrong? What’s happening to you?” He asked as he walked to me quickly and stared into my eyes with his intense gaze. “Blackjack... is something affecting you?”

I felt myself shoved back into my own mind, like an immense hoof reached around, grabbed me by the neck, and yanked me away from the terminal of my mind. Four magic bullets flashed through his head as I gave a wild swing. Of course, my hoof passed right through him. Despite being pulled out of my own seat, I fought to get back to the controls of my own mind. “Leave me alone! You stupid, annoying figment! You are nothing!” my body shouted. I overturned a table on the Dealer, sending O.I.A. paraphernalia bouncing across the floor.

Boo immediately rushed to the desk and ducked behind it, poking her trembling head out and watching fearfully. Then, suddenly, she seemed overtaken by an odd calm and simply looked out from her protective little nook. If I wasn’t wrestling for control of my body...

He just narrowed his eyes as he passed right through the table. “Who are you? You’re not Blackjack.”

“Enough,” my body said with a scowl. “The Goddess has her now. The Goddess shall recall the Lacunae and have her teleport Blackjack to us! You can not interfere.”

“The Goddess? How did you get inside her? Where are you taking her?” the Dealer demanded. Boo frowned and looked up at the ceiling, her ears twitching.

“To the Goddess’s seat of power at Maripony, fool. And once she and the black book are in the Goddess’ possession, the Goddess shall save this Wasteland and all within it... save those that have vexed the Goddess. Oh yes. There will be a special fate for them all!” she crowed. A purple flash, and Lacunae arrived. “Good. Teleport this one to the greens outside the valley. The Goddess is through waiting.”

Lacunae lifted a tied up bundle off her back. “Yes,” she said as she looked at me with infinite regret. Then I heard a ping at my hooves and the Goddess looked down to see two bolts lying at my hooves. Then a third dropped.

That prompted me to look up.

And that resulted in me catching the air grate with my face. I staggered to the side, the Goddess fumbling for my guns. Lacunae raised her shield, but what came down was not an onslaught of bullets or energy blasts but a spark grenade and a strange black river rock with a spiral carved into the surface. The world flared to white static, then darkness, as I perceived the most curious slurping sensation. It was as if

something was being sucked through my entire body. Then the Goddess let out a scream that trailed away to nothing.

“Hello?” I asked. But I couldn’t move. Couldn’t hear. I could only wait for my systems to reboot. I could feel myself being moved. Then myself being blindfolded and something hung around my neck. “Glory? Honey, thanks, but this really isn’t the time.” I laughed, wondering how... Then a gun pushed to my head. “Okay, not Glory.” What did it say about my life that I knew exactly what a gun to the head felt like? “If you’re asking me questions or are here to gloat over my death, I can’t hear you. You’re going to have to wait till my hearing comes back,” I said, probably loudly. “So take some time to compose yourself while you have a gun to my head!” Honestly. I was going to fire every last guard here. From a cannon...

My hearing returned with a squeal of feedback, making me hiss in pain. Of course, I had a blindfold on and tied tight. It’d take me a while to undo the knot with my TK and be impossible to hide the glow. Really, why hadn’t Twilight developed a spell for that?! So no magic bullets. My legs felt tied together too... hmmm... if it weren’t for the gun I might be getting excited. Ugh... why was I so crazy today?! “Okay, if this is something kinky, thanks but now really isn’t the best time,” I said, hoping to not say whatever phrase would result in a pulled trigger. “And we really should ask Glor—”

“Release your curse on him,” a stallion muttered from behind me. Soon as he spoke, my back began to itch.

“Lancer,” I muttered. Sexy thoughts retreated... a little.

“Release your curse on him now, Maiden. Or should I call you ‘Goddess’? I won’t ask you again,” he muttered. “And don’t bother yelling for help. Your friend is unconscious and the batspeech talisman makes you quite silent to any not wearing another talisman.”

Okay, bound and helpless with a male who wanted to kill me. How to sort through these emotions? Panic? No, I’ll clamp down on the hysteria. I’ve been in this position before and lived through it, more or less. Rage? Blew that charge with Charm. Best I could do at the moment was huffy resentment. Lust? What the hell was that even doing in my head right now!? Reason. Okay. Reason with the crazy pony. Sure. And... stop getting stupidly turned on. This was NOT the time for that!

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Lancer. I’ve never cursed anyone,” I replied, stretching out on my belly and tugging the bonds on my legs. Smooth metal wasn’t the easiest thing to tie. I could probably yank a hoof free if he gave me a window.

“Lies!” He snapped. “Free him!”

“Who?” I had a guess...

“My father...” he growled, long and low. “Remove whatever spell you cast upon him to... to make him spare you!” He kicked me over onto my back and pressed the gun under my throat.

“If I had a spell like that, don’t you think I’d be using it on you right now?” I countered. “I didn’t curse your father with some kind of magical mysterious maiden powers. I’m not even a maiden. You can check yourself if you want!” What?! Why in Equestria did I blurt that?! This was not tied up sexy time! This was tied up and going to die time! Get with the program, libido!

He was silent. Sweet Celestia, tell me he wasn’t checking! Finally he spoke in a tense, trembling voice. “He should have killed you. My father is the finest hoof combat specialist of this age. He crushed the dragon Bleakflame with his bare hooves. How... how could you beat him? How could he possibly allow you to live?” He pushed the gun against my throat again. “Release him and I’ll grant you a quick and clean death. I won’t even kill your friends.”

“Touch either of them and you’ll wish I cursed you,” I countered in a snarl of my own, making him pull the gun away. “I don’t know why your father spared me. I’ve fought ponies before and you’re right, he was good. Damned good. Better than me, even. But he kept stopping and letting me recover. He left openings. That fight was all wrong.” He was silent and I added, “And you know it.”

“Silence!” He snapped. “How did you curse him? How do I break the spell?”

“Why are you so certain I cursed him?” I asked in reply, relaxing a bit. He needed me alive. If he thought killing me would break it, he’d have shot me already. Even bound, I could take control of the situation. So long as he didn’t do anything to Lacunae. “I might be a unicorn, but trust me, I don’t know any magic capable of doing that. If I did, my life would be a lot easier.”

“My whole life, my father has told me about how he was going to defeat the Maiden. He’d tell me all about the epic, final battle where he’d crush wickedness from the world. He’d even play them out with me and my sisters. And I knew... I *knew*... he would defeat you. And when you were found at that base, I saw the moment had arrived. I sent word to all that you were here and he was to defeat you!” He said from above me. “And then... he arrived...” Lancer’s voice broke.

“And he wasn’t happy. The timing was wrong. Or fate wasn’t right. Or whatever,” I

said as I laid there, imagining the strong, striped, masculine body above— Stop. It. Now is *not* the time!

He huffed, “No. But it shouldn’t have mattered. The prophecy doesn’t say when the champion of the stars is defeated, only that they must be. What better time than then and there? And yet... he didn’t fight as the father I knew. You should have been broken! And when you were ready to slay him... I couldn’t take it. And yet... when I tried to kill you... He was not the father I knew. Not the champion of my people. So you did something to him. Cast some... some vile Equestrian spell. Like you’re trying to do now!”

“Now?” I asked, nonplussed.

“With... your body... and the thoughts you’re trying to put inside my head! Desist! Now!” There was a note of panic in his voice as I gave a little squirm, smiling. “That! Stop... that!” A rather disturbing level of my subconscious positively purred. Maybe I was the one who was cursed...

“Lancer, I’m just laying here. I didn’t curse your father, or Xanthe, or you. I can’t even pick who to give a crown to. I just want to get Glory home so she can stop a madman from killing tens of thousands of her people. Then I get to deal with a different madpony named Cognitum. Then I might have to deal with your father if he won’t leave the Hoof alone. But I didn’t curse him to spare me.”

Lancer was silent above me. “You know there’s something going on with your father, don’t you?” I finally asked, suspecting the answer.

“Mother... mother said father was not what he seemed. I called her a liar! One of his wives shouldn’t speak so dishonorably to him! But... but she persisted. She said there was a wrongness in him. And she took my sister and other doubters and fled.” His voice shook. “Father told me to prove my strength. My loyalty. My honor. And I did. I tracked them down. Made my heart as hard as stone, ignored what she’d told me, and slew her.”

“Sekashi’s your mother?” I asked, and then cursed myself for the slip of my tongue and tried to catch myself, “She was, wasn’t she?”

“Yes,” he said in a confessing tone. “Now, all I have is my father. I must free him. Now tell me how to break the curse you’ve place on him!” And the gun was pressed between my eyes. “Tell me, or your death shall free him!”

Not the direction I wanted, at all. “Okay. Okay. I know a counterspell that might work for... whatever. But I can’t speak it aloud. I can only whisper it.” Oh come on, there

was no way he'd fall for this! Then the pressure of the gun relaxed a little. "Come closer," I said, unable to hide my smirk as I laid there, helpless, giving a little flex. He couldn't... he wouldn't...

The gun was pulled away and I heard him moving over me. Damn it, I couldn't stop grinning as he moved his head closer to me. "Closer..." I whispered. "You know, when I first saw you, I couldn't help but think how strong and powerful you looked."

"Stop it," he muttered, and I felt him move over me. "Stop your... magic..."

"Closer," I purred, images of black and red maned zonies frolicking in a part of my mind that had gone quite crazy. I could imagine his strong striped body above me. Felt his strong, lithe frame above me. Felt the tickle of his breath on my muzzle. Felt his... it...

"The counterspell is..." I breathed...

Then rammed my metal hind leg as hard as I could up between his legs. I felt it connect to something particularly firm and vulnerable and he let out a squeak as he went rigid above me. I then brought my forelegs up and felt them connect with his head. Grabbing him, we rolled over and I came to rest on top. I magically removed the blindfold and looked down into his stunned face.

"Evil..." he whispered, and then went limp.

"If it's any consolation, I really wanted to..." I replied as I pulled the binding from my forelegs. That crazy little part of me gave one last purr of regret as I looked down at him. He didn't look so good, now that I saw him properly. His face and body were covered in bruises and one eye was swollen completely shut. I slipped off with a little petulant groan and trotted to Lacunae. The strange black rock with its carved spiral lay close beside her, its surface cracked through the spiral. "Lacunae? Lacunae? Are you okay?" I asked as I shook her. Boo emerged from behind the desk and trotted over, giving Lacunae a little nudge with her nose.

She groaned, then blinked and looked at me. She frowned. "Why are you squeaking like that, Blackjack?" she asked aloud, furrowing her brow in confusion.

I blinked, then looked down at a small stuffed bat that hung from a leather thong around my neck. I tugged it off, and then tugged a similar bat off of him as he started to stir. "Are you okay?"

"I... I believe so." Her horn flickered twice, then she physically reached over and picked up the rock. "A voidstone. I never imagined I'd see one."

“Stable pony here. What’s a voidstone?” I asked as I reached over and took his sniper rifle... no, not his; this one looked standard-issue.

“A zebra antimagic grenade fetish. Very rare and dangerous. They disrupt magic in a wide area,” she said as Lancer pulled himself into a sitting position.

“You are wicked... vile...” he muttered bitterly. “Tempting me...”

I looked right at him. “Right now, Lancer, if it wasn’t for the fact you might have killed my friend and I, I might have actually done it.” And that stupid part of me still still wanted to! “I am feeling that crazy right now. But I didn’t curse your father, or you.” Now I saw shame exploding across his features as he dropped his eyes. I guessed the tears weren’t just from bruised testicles.

“What do you want to do with him?” Lacunae asked. Boo looked at me with her big pale eyes, and I could practically feel Fluttershy staring into my soul.

“Take him out of here,” I replied, then knelt beside him, searching him for any other voidstones... but no. “You are one scary, messed-up zebra. I hope you find some peace, Lancer,” I said, and kissed his cheek. He was a murderer, true, and would probably try to kill me again, but then so was I and I couldn’t honestly say I didn’t deserve it.

Lacunae left in a purple flash. I considered the Goddess... yes, she was still there. The voidstone had scrambled the connection a bit, but I was still locked in Unity. I tried to speak about her aloud, but my tongue refused to form the words. The voidstone had bought me some time. Hours. Days if I was lucky.

Then she’d be one pissed Goddess. But until then, there was something I had to do...

I cleared the door, poked my head out into the hall, and eyed one of my bodyguards. The two stallions jumped, “Yes, your majesty?” one asked. Stringy. Not what I was looking for. I eyed the other. Better, but not quite what I wanted. If I couldn’t imagine the babies... And, I thought with a sigh, Glory would kill me. And not in a fun way.

“Nevermind,” I muttered as I stepped back inside and closed the door. Well, in the meantime, I had the old stable 99 standby... Sticky hooves...

When Glory stepped through the door a while later (the guards not trying to stop her, I noticed), we wore matching expressions of tired and awkward. Boo trotted out

immediately, flushing and looking like, at the moment, she wanted to be anywhere but here. Glory gave her a curious look as she departed for said anywhere else, but then shrugged, walked right up to me, pushed herself into my hooves, and snuggled down atop me. "Make me stop thinking about boys," she groaned as she nuzzled my neck.

"You too?" I asked with a small, sympathetic smile.

"I hate this time of the year," she growled softly. "This is when most stallions get sent on long distance patrols so mares back home don't have to think about them. Stupid biology," she growled and huffed.

"So... have fun with them," I said, and immediately she flushed. "What?"

"Nothing!" she said in a way far too quick and defensive for it to be nothing. I watched her start to crumble and kissed her firmly.

"So who was it?" I asked with a small smile.

"You're not mad?" she said barely above a whisper.

I sighed and shook my head. "Glory, you could rut every stallion in this place and I wouldn't be mad with you. Every stallion and mare. At the same time! I wouldn't be mad with you, or disappointed," I said as I stroked her mane. "Stable 99, remember?"

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and gave a disgusted huff. "You don't understand, Blackjack. I don't like stallions like that. But... he was nice and handsome and... ugh! I can't believe I did it."

"So, who was it?" I asked with a smile. She hid her face in her wings. "Please tell me it wasn't P-21, because if it was I think I'm going to need to go find him quick if you did."

"No..." she muttered. "I thought about it... a lot... but no..." She sighed and looked away. "Splendid."

Ah. Well, I couldn't fault her taste. "And was he?"

She smacked me with her wing. "Blackjack!"

"Well was he?" I pressed, grinning at her. "You got to throw me across the room for my little indiscretion. The least I should get is saucy details!"

She whined, then deflated. "He was... okay. He was gentle, but it was still... weird. Not what I was expecting for my first stallion. Definitely not as fun as with you, but

it was bearable,” she finally admitted. “But I am not going for a repeat performance, thank you very much.” She chewed her lip a moment, “Probably...”

“So are there baby Dashes in the future?” I asked, and she shivered.

“I hope not. Just...” she trailed off and tapped her forehooves together. “Ask me when I’m a little more myself, okay. Honestly... I hate thinking about males like this...” She looked around the office and then looked at the pile of cloth that Lacunae had brought. “What’s that?”

“I think our dresses for the Gala,” I answered with a small smile, then kissed her ear, making her smile.

“You seem... better,” Glory said with a smile, looking me over.

“I had a friend die, was made queen, had three assassination attempts and one fillynapping, and almost had sex with a zebra who wants to kill me. Being queen sucks.” I snorted.

“*Almost* had sex with a zebra?” she asked archly.

I tapped her chest. “*Did* have sex with a unicorn,” I teased

“Touche,” she sighed, pouting a little. “Fine. You can have a stallion too, if you want. Just one! And I better not hear about it over the radio. In fact, I’d rather not hear about it *ever*.”

“I love you,” I said with a laugh, holding her.

“I’m getting used to the fact that... you’re just not like me... like that.” She sighed and shook her head. “It really is just sex to you, isn’t it? Just... orgasms?”

“Sure. It’s fun. It brings the stable together. It passes the time. Oh, yeah, and fun. Just don’t do it in public or with family, and make sure it’s all consensual,” I said with a bitter smile. Pity I had no idea what consent actually meant back then. “I never meant to hurt you, Glory. And if it does, I won’t do it with another pony. I’ll want to. But I won’t.”

She closed her eyes and sighed, then smiled a little and shook her head. “No. If it happens, it does. Just... keep it discrete. One pony, for now. We can take it case by case.”

I gave a squee and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. I wondered if I could catch Lancer again and give him a reason not to want me dead. I’d show him curses! I’d curse him with the inability to walk straight! I’d... I blinked and caught

Glory's flat look. "Um... thanks?" I said tentatively.

"Try not to drool too much," she replied with a touch of sarcasm before cuddling with me. After a moment, she asked in a much less arch tone, hugging me with her wings, "So, you seem... happy. Have you made a decision about who to give the crown to?"

I paused, frowned, then realized. "You know... I think I have..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

57. Best Night Ever

"I can't believe we're finally here. With all that we've imagined, the reality of this night is sure to make this... The Best Night Ever!"

I've never been good with parties. I'd had a few celebrations at 99, but, by and large, parties were things that happened to other ponies. Even after getting outside, I always got a little squirm in my gut from the idea of being in a social situation where I was the center of attention. Cuddling with Glory and talking about 'psychosexual metamorphic influences' was more appealing than being in a place where I was expected to actually interact. If it meant I'd be alone with her, I'd happily speculate with Glory all night about whether or not her different body accounted to her being receptive to Splendid's offers of 'comfort' after I'd gone off to sulk.

Unfortunately, the day was almost over, and the guests were arriving. I had no clue who would be attending, though. While I'd assumed that the Gala was Society only, apparently it was more than simple revelry and excess. It was an opportunity to invite important outsiders and bedazzle them with demonstrations of all that the Society had to offer. I supposed the point was so their guests would return home and sulk all year long that they weren't as good as the Society.

Hoity arrived, looking quite pleased. Glory excused herself, muttering about a bathroom. "It looks as if this is going to be the greatest Gala in generations. Almost everypony invited is attending." I supposed the Gala was the best social event in the Hoof, and he flourished at social events. "So, Your Majesty, there is just one last tiny detail to cover. Have you selected your regent?"

"I have," I replied, and opened my mouth.

He quickly raised his hooves before I could speak, though. "And please don't say me. I won't do it. I'll support whoever you select, but I have no desire to put my undead *derriere* on the throne and my excellent coiffeur in the crosshairs. I am a majordomo *par excellence*, but many ponies have difficulty taking my advice straight and undiluted."

Hmmm... well... that killed one idea... "Can I make three ponies my regent?" I asked.

"Only if you want two of them dead," he replied casually. "Triumvirates don't last long."

And that spiked that idea. “Can I make one regent and have the other two swear an oath to help them out or get kicked out?” I asked in a huff.

He pondered it a moment. “Yes, I imagine that might work. For a time, at least. Who did you want as your regent?”

I told him.

He blinked. “Really? That’s quite. . . are you certain?”

“I am. And I expect you to do everything you can to help.” I replied with a smile. “With luck, this will be a turning point for the Society.”

“Yes. . . well. . . I’ll go make the proper arrangements,” he said and trotted out.

I had to take a quick trip outside to take care of one last bit of work. Deus was parked next to the reservoir, his cannons pointing out over the water. “Hey, how are you doing?” I asked, tapping his armor.

Something in him released a wheezing sigh. “Yeah, I hear that,” I said with a smile. “I need to ask a favor.” The engine emitted a low grumble. “Yeah, I know I’m the last pony you want to do any favors for, but I need your help. We’re going into the sky soon, and there’s no way we can take you with us.” Silence. “I need you to stick around the Society a little while.” He swung his turrets towards me, and his engine snarled, the cannons waving back and forth.

I raised my hooves defensively. “Hey, I know you don’t like it. I don’t like them much either. I put the fear of Rampage into them, but I’m afraid that when she and I go, they’re going to resume their old bullshit games. So I want you to stay here. If anything deadly happens to the regent and Hoity Toity, I give you full permission to take over and give this place to Big Daddy, the Collegiate, or the Keepers; whoever you want. If this place stays sane for a couple weeks, go back to Chapel and keep it safe. Just keep a radio ear open. You can travel faster and safer than almost anypony.”

I think it was the word ‘pony’ that did it. His cannons raised and dropped, and then the turret pointed back over the water. Call me crazy, but the image seemed so. . . lonely. I tapped his armor again and he swiveled a camera at me. I reached out and hugged his tank tread; it was too wide for my legs to fit around, but it was the thought that counted. “Thanks. I mean it. You’re a better pony than the one I met in 99.”

That started his engine rumbling softly.

One last bit. The Society's jail was a cinderblock-walled storage shed built into the side of a hill. Despite the heavy metal door, I suspected that the occupants inside could have escaped if they wanted to. The power-armored guards outside might have been a bit more of a challenge, though. I stepped through the door and looked over at Lancer sitting quietly in the corner. While I'd wanted him released, Hoity had convinced me that letting a zebra sniper go was simply asking for trouble. I hoped he might get me more of those anti-magic bombs and give me more time away from the Goddess, but apparently they were exceptionally rare, even for zebras. I walked up to the large gray minotaur. "Hey," I said, noting that he'd yanked the chains right off the walls. There were others I could have asked, but I'd seen what passed for loyalty for most of the Society.

"You," his eyes glittered in the dim light.

"You let Scotch go without a fight, and I appreciate that. I've come to make you a deal," I said as I sat before him. "You've been working with the Society for a while, haven't you?"

"I was in that King's menagerie for years before they shut it down," he said with a low growl. "There's always folks that need muscle, though. I'm guessing that's why you're here, too. Ponies only talk if they want something."

I took that in. "I do want something. I want you. You seem a decent enough sort. You let Scotch go and knew a stupid plan when you heard one. You've also seen what passes for bodyguards in this place. Mine let a squad of five Harbingers in to kill me. I don't want to pick a regent only to have them slaughtered because someone makes a deal. I want you to protect my regent."

His dark eyes bored into me. "And if I say no?"

"Then you go home. Or I'll write you a letter of recommendation for the Reapers, if you want. If they let Gorgon fight, they should let you." He let out a snort. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Ponies..." He slowly rose till his horns scraped the ceiling, and despite myself I took a few steps back. It was silly; I'd faced far worse things than him, but there was something about the sheer presence of him. "Do you think I really care about fighting? My kind were a strong race, removed from your petty war. We had no interest in either side; your war and the things you battled over were trivial. We're not catcrows like Griffons. We were not mercenaries peddling our strength to the highest bidder. We simply wanted to be left alone. And now you come here and assume I'd want to... that I would choose to... continue to be wrapped up in your

petty conflicts.”

My, he was much more talky than I recalled. “Alright then. What do you want to do?” The question seemed to surprise him, and he scowled in thought a moment.

“What I want is respect. What I want is to find another of my own kind. To know whether or not my species is doomed to extinction or not. To learn if my home still exists. Fighting. Politics. Petty squabbles for transitory power.” He turned his head and spat to the side. “None of these matter to me.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “You’re right. It is stupid. And that’s exactly what I’ve been thinking since I got here. All this backstabbing and scheming... it’s insane. It’s the exact opposite of what the world needs. So I need someone who can rise above it. I need a person who isn’t going to be bribed. And if you stay, well, word will get around. And if any of your people hear of it, they might seek you out. At the very least, you’d be in a position to hear news of abroad for when you decide to leave.”

The minotaur pursed his lips as he looked down at me. “This is a bad place,” he finally said in his low, slow voice. Lancer’s eyes watched me with a silent stare, but thanks to the little pink pony in my head, I caught his minute nod.

“Oh, I know the Society has a lot of rot to it, but—”

“Not the Society. Are you so removed from your roots that you can’t feel it?” He snorted, and his muscles flexed powerfully. His fist smashed right through the cinderblock wall. Two more punches and he’d pulverized a hole. I started to think that he might have gone easy on me our first battle. From the hole he pulled out wet earth and muddy pebbles. “This land is poisoned. All of this land. It is a poison seeped into the very stones,” he said as he turned them over. He turned the pebbles over and then met my gaze. He seemed to be searching for some comprehension from me, and when it didn’t arrive, he snorted, “Pah. I don’t know why I bother.”

“No! Please. Continue,” I said, as I stepped closer. “What do you mean?”

He seemed to consider me, working out if I was serious. After a moment, he answered, “This land is poisoned. A sickness seeps away its life. My kind has felt the cries and weeping of the earth for centuries. Since before your war.” He smashed a pebble between his fingers. “They are dead. Lifeless.”

“The stones are... dead?” I asked in bafflement.

“Stones contain a life and spirit all their own. Strength beyond mere rock. Some ponies once cultivated the life of stones, encouraging the growth of gems and strong

bones of the world. But the very bones of the world here are rotten.” He snorted and flung the dirt away. “I came here as a young bull to discover the source. More the fool, I.”

I began to scoff, but then stopped. “You’re talking about Enervation. You’re saying that it’s sucking life out of the *rocks*?” He scowled at my question, then nodded. I frowned, idly rubbing my chest. I remembered... was it a dream or a memory? “A long time ago, something happened to Equestria. A disaster. Do the minotaurs know anything about it?”

Now he appeared surprised, but gave a small nod. He lifted a rock. “The stone remembers. Eons and eons ago. A calamity from the skies that fractured the very earth. But how do *you* know?”

“Because we found it,” I said, frowning. “A machine... or... something else. Something powerful. We found it and tried to use it. I think it’s generating the Enervation.”

His harsh glare relaxed a touch. He seemed to be reassessing me. “Never have I heard your kind speak of important things. It has always been war, power, and greed.” His earlier scorn was now giving way to sincere consideration. “Our world is dying. It is more than the radiation. More than the taint. Such poisons eventually fade. This is growing. It chokes the life from the very stone.”

“Can the world be restored?” I asked, remembering layers of stone and trapped bones. The glowing gems above the fossil-bearing layers.

He looked troubled. “I... don’t know.” Pain Train knelt and stared into my eyes. “You seek to end this?”

“I just want to save ponies,” I muttered, at a loss. “That’s what Security does.”

“Just ponies?” he asked with a scowl.

“No. I mean... not just ponies. I want to save the lives of everyone I can. Griffins. Minotaurs. Zebras. Everyone,” I added and then looked at the pebbles he held and levitated one out of his grasp. “Even little rocks, if they’re alive.” Lancer looked up at me, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

The words made Pain Train actually smile... a little. “Very well. If you can be selfless enough to protect my kind, and little rocks, I will do the same and protect yours. For now,” he replied.

Since King Awesome's bedroom was full of holes, Glory and I'd relocated to Grace's room to get ready. Lacunae, Scotch, Boo, and Rampage had hijacked Splendid's bathroom, and Hoity had sworn to take care of P-21. I'd never seen so many real flowers before, precious decorations placed all over. I recognized the roses, and I assumed some others were tulips or daffodils from pictures in books, but there were others of such delicate beauty that I had no idea if I were supposed to sniff, look, or eat. Besides the flowers, her room was decorated with laces and fine soft cotton sheets.

Unfortunately, her tub didn't have room for two, so after I washed, I dressed while Glory bathed. Standing in front of the vanity, I looked at the collection of makeups, brushes, and ribbons, and just stared at myself. White hide and black steel didn't really promise a good look. The clothes I was supposed to wear lay in a heap of purple on the bed. I'd be lucky if I didn't simply rip the dress Lacunae had picked up. . . wait. Where did she get these dresses? I'd tried to ask her telepathically, but after that grenade the telepathic link had been rising and falling like a tuning radio. From the shrieks of rage I'd picked up through Unity though, the Goddess was *not* happy.

Just get me through tonight.

Grace stepped in, already looking positively gorgeous in her silver-threaded blue ballgown. It appeared as if she was dressed in sapphire flame. "Aren't you going to get ready?"

"I . . . um . . ." I waved a hoof a little. "I'm just trying to figure it out."

She sighed and shook her head. "I take it there's not much call for makeup in the Wasteland," she said as she levitated a brush and began to stroke my mane into line.

"Actually, this is the first time I've ever worn it," I replied a little sheepishly. "I mean, there were other ponies in 99 who did. Made themselves look nice all the time and the like. I was just always on the night shift, so it never really mattered how I looked. And then once in the Wasteland. . ."

"I see," she replied. "The Society puts a great deal of stock in appearances. It makes substance an undervalued commodity." She levitated two more brushes and gave the same attention to the rest of my body. I had to admit that it felt good! "Did my brother do something this afternoon? He's been acting. . . smug."

"Glory had sex with him." I had a feeling he'd thought it would give him an 'in' with

me. I frowned in annoyance, then saw Grace gaping at me in shock and added, "He behaved himself, didn't cross the line." At least Glory hadn't said he had. If that changed. . . But Grace seemed even more disturbed. "By all accounts, he was okay at it."

"Blackjack," Glory called from the bathroom in that tone that meant I was doing something Blackjacky.

"What?" I asked looking over at her through the door.

"Most ponies don't talk about other ponies having sex with other ponies," she said, looking through the door from the tub, folding her blue forelegs under her chin. She spoke exactly like mom when explaining to me that guns were dangerous.

"They don't?" I blinked in confusion. "That was a least half the gossip in 99."

"Really? What was the other half?" Grace asked with an amused smile.

"Everything else," I answered.

Grace furrowed her brows, then her expression turned a touch baffled. "I'm afraid I don't get the joke," she replied.

I looked from Glory in the tub and back to Grace. "I was making a joke?" Glory covered her face with a hoof as Grace flushed, staring at me.

Glory sighed, smiling and shaking her head. "Blackjack. . ." she began helplessly.

"What? We did! There's not a lot to talk about in a stable, day to day!" I said defensively, spreading my hooves and pleading for understanding as Glory started to laugh.

Grace seemed to process this thoughtfully, her flush fading as she composed herself easily. "I see. I suppose we can chalk it up to candor," she said diplomatically. She set down the brush. "Well, he was always the charming one. I suppose he told you how tough your life must be, and how much he admired you?"

Glory frowned and sat up. "Yeah! How'd. . ." She slumped in the tub. "Let me guess. He uses that line a lot?"

Grace gave a small sigh. "To be fair, no. He's actually quite discriminating. He was likely sincere, too, in his own way," she said primly as she took up a little brush and began to put some powder on my face. "Splendid is always good at whatever he sets his mind to."

"He was the first male ever openly interested in me," Glory said with a frown. "Couldn't

believe it was happening, and by the time I really processed it. . .” She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Normally all guys get from me is a constant string of mental ‘no’s. He managed the first ‘maybe’ and turned it into an ‘okay’.”

“Maybe he used some sort of sex spell on you. Zap. Instant lovings,” I suggested. If that were true, it would really simplify how to handle him. I had experience with that.

Grace let out a patient little sigh and smiled as she levitated the bundle of purple off the bed. “Doubtful. Splendid simply knows how to talk to mares. A blend of flattery, semi-honest praise, and somewhat sincere admiration is a potent mix. I never had the talent myself, but then, I’m usually fending off the hollow flattery.” She paused and stared at the violet and silver-threaded dress. “Sweet Celestia. . . this. . . this is a Rarity!”

“Yeah, I imagine dresses are pretty rare in the wasteland,” I replied.

“Not ‘rarity’ as in scarce. ‘Rarity’ as in one of Rarity’s own designs.” Grace turned it about. “They were precious even before the war. I think I recognize it from old copies of Image Magazine. This was from Luna’s Nocturne Ensemble five years before she assumed the throne! And this!” She lifted Glory’s dress, the rainbow colors still magically vibrant and the trim still fluffy. “It’s one of her original designs for Rainbow Dash’s very first attendance at the Gala! Ohhh!” She gushed in delight and rubbed her cheek on the fluffy white trim. Then she caught my smirk and immediately flushed. “Aheh. . . sorry. I have a bit of a thing for pre-war trends.”

“Like your father,” I noted. I suspected that Lacunae had pulled some favors with Charity. I wondered how much I’d owe for renting priceless dresses. “Well, it’s a shame to put it on me. I’ll probably rip it in three steps.”

“Tch. Not if I have anything to say about it,” Grace said as she placed the dress on me. “This is a crime against fashion, but I think I’ll be able to restore it.” She said as her horn glowed.

“Wait. What are you. . .” and I blinked as I felt it shift over my body and become perfectly snug. I blinked and twisted my head, taking a few experimental steps, but the garment didn’t catch and tear on anything. “How’d you do that?” I twisted my head and saw the spine reinforcement melded almost perfectly with the violet fabric.

“Clothing alteration spell. No Society unicorn would be caught dead without one.” Only the Society would have a spell like *that* in the Wasteland. She finished with her brushes and placed the headdress on top. A few bobby pins. . . so that was

what they were for. . . and she gave a little nod. "There. Now you look impressive, commanding, and beautiful."

She gently turned me away from the vanity and towards a full body mirror in the corner. "Yeah, right. It's going to take a lot more than that to make me look. . ." A mare stood in that mirror that I'd never seen before, wearing a dress of deepest purple with silver threadwork moon motifs on the breast and haunches and stars along the hem. Countless tiny amethysts glittered softly, catching the light to make it appear as if she were wearing a silken swatch of the night. Atop her head rested a purple headdress decorated with a crescent moon surrounded by four silver stars and matching purple feathers. She had glossy black metal limbs, but they so blended with the dark fabric that it was almost impossible to tell where steel ended and silk began. Her unblemished white hide betrayed none of the abuse and hardship its owner had suffered.

And that mare was me.

I couldn't talk as I looked at Grace, tears welling in my eyes. If only mom could have seen me like this. "Thanks," I muttered, dropping my eyes.

Glory stepped out of the tub and shook herself, then fluttered her wings and walked up to me. "If you say you don't deserve to look like this, I'm going to thump you," she said, giving me a wet nuzzle. Grace smiled, levitated over towels, and gave Morning Glory every bit of attention she'd given me. "You're quite good at this, Grace," she commented as her rainbow mane was brushed by one floating brush while another took care of her tail.

"Since pleasant appearances are so rare in the Wasteland, they are a mark of superiority. The Gala used to be a parody of grotesqueries with everypony pretending that they were magnificent. I always preferred substance over satire, though; I refused to look ghastly and depend on others to be cowed by my father. The game that so many here play is ridiculous in the extreme. So, simply, I raise the bar, and others are required to expend a little effort in turn. I might not be able to demand excellence, but I can model it," Grace declared grandly.

Glory winced as her mane was tamed by Grace's brushes. "It actually reminds me of home."

"It does?" I asked in surprise.

"Up above, the Enclave maintains the delusion that the Wasteland ends at the clouds. Things are falling apart from one end of the Enclave to the other, but every-

pony smiles and insists that everything is okay. Even when there are famines at the drop of a feather and half our cities are empty due to a lack of actual resources to support them, everypony pretends that things are wonderful because we're not the Wasteland. Thunderhead refused to follow that line. That was why the Volunteer Corps were pushed. To tear away that illusion of superiority." She gave Grace a warm smile. "I suppose I can fully support your drive for substance."

"If the Society is to be better than the Wasteland, we must be better in truth, not just in presumption," Grace said with a prim bob of her head.

"Isn't that a little arrogant?" I asked her with a cock of my brow.

She looked back and replied coolly, "Not if it's true. And even if it was, isn't aristocracy *supposed* to be arrogant?" I couldn't think of a counterargument to that.

As soon as Glory was finished, the dress's laurel headdress resting upon her rainbow mane, we stepped out. Somewhere, a band began to play classical music, and I found myself nostalgic for Octavia. Lacunae stood outside Splendid's room, talking to the closed door. "You look fine!" the alicorn said aloud in exasperation. She wore the dress that Velvet had altered for her larger frame, looking like an echo of a princess of yesterday in magnificent burgundy and gold. As we approached, she looked at us and gave a start. "Rainbow. . ." she breathed as she stared at Glory for a moment, then shook her head. "Forgive me," she said with an apologetic smile. "You three look quite lovely," then she looked back at the door and sighed. "Unfortunately, Rampage is having some issues."

"Not having issues. I'm not coming out," Rampage's voice replied, slightly muffled. "There's no way I'm coming out dressed like this."

"Come on, how bad could I be?" I asked with a smile. Lacunae shook her head, and I felt a little concerned. I pulled a bobby pin from my mane, carefully worked it in, and popped the lock. Returning the pin to my mane, I pushed the door open. Splendid's room was decorated with photographs of Ministry Mares, particularly Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Huh, who knew? Boo wore an absolutely adorable pink dress with bows and tiny stitching of cupcakes along the hem and a small round cap decorated like a cake with pink frosting. To her credit, only one tiny spot looked like she'd given it a nibble. "Rampage, where. . ."

"Don't look at me!" wailed a voice from the corner. A beautiful striped mare without steel wire in her tail cowered there. Her tangled, curly mane had been straightened and trimmed by what had to be magic. She was wrapped in a lovely white silk dress. It was simple, elegant, and lacked a single barb or spike anywhere. Instead,

it was beaded about the waist with strands of pearls and delicate rubies. An ivory manecomb with a heart-shaped fire ruby gleamed in her scarlet mane. "I can't go out dressed like this! I'd rather go naked than like this!"

"Wha... what's wrong?" I muttered in shock.

"What's wrong? What's wrong! Look at this!" Rampage said as she gestured to the outfit. "I wouldn't have even put it on except she used her cheating alicorn magic to take off what I'd planned to wear!"

"I had to levitate her off her hooves, telekinetically unbuckle her, and scrub her like a filly," Lacunae said to me out of the corner of her mouth, then said firmly to Rampage, "Spiked armor is what you always wear. This is a special event."

"You look... amazing," Glory said, her wings fluffing up a little.

"I look soft," Rampage muttered, going pink as she hugged herself. "I feel naked like this."

"Quite the contrary," Grace murmured in clear approval.

"You're fine. I never thought that a Reaper would be scared by wearing a dress," I said as I touched her shoulder.

"Shows how much you know," Rampage retorted, going redder as she looked away. "I expected black with chains and spikes and skulls..." She looked almost near tears.

Glory rubbed her chin, "You know, I've heard that, in some cultures, white is the color of death. So really, if you think about it, you are a maiden of death."

I looked at Glory in bafflement, and she snapped my rump with her tail. "Oh, yeah! And the red... um... it looks like blood!"

"Really? You're not just saying that?" she asked as she rubbed her eyes.

"Absolutely," Grace said with utter sincerity. "If you think about it, those pearls symbolize the... skulls of your defeated enemies. And that mane pin is the heart of your foes that you've ripped from their chest."

Rampage stared at the white unicorn, then smirked. "You are so full of it. If it symbolizes that, then I should give it to Blackjack. She's actually eaten my heart." Well, didn't that comment get a somewhat disturbed look from my cousin! Rampage, though, appeared somewhat mollified. "Alright. Fine. I'll wear this stupid, lacy, frou-frou outfit." She looked to the bathroom door. "Hey! Scotch! You ready?"

“That is not a frou-frou outfit! That is a Rarity,” Grace said with mild reproach.

“So’s mine!” Scotch squealed as she jumped out of the bathroom. It was certainly . . . something, though nothing I could ever see Rarity creating. It was a one piece vivid pink bodysuit with glaring neon green slashes all across it. Perhaps it might have been tolerable, but Scotch Tape had taken it upon herself to . . . where did she get her hooves on bright pink makeup!? It was painted jaggedly around her eyes, and she’d styled her blue mane in spikes with some kind of stiff mane gel. “Don’t I look awesome in my Rarity outfit?”

“That is not a Rarity,” Grace said delicately. “That is a Sweetie Belle.”

“That! I wanna wear something like that! Quick! Someone disintegrate me!” Rampage said with an eager grin. “Do you have one in black?”

“Sorry. That was the only filly-sized outfit that Charity possessed,” Lacunae replied. “And she insisted on the makeup.”

“What? It looks good, doesn’t it?” Scotch Tape asked plaintively.

Grace, without missing a beat, replied primly, “Yes. Yes it does.” Then she looked at the rest of us and asked smoothly, “Don’t you all agree?” Her tone implied that, if any of us didn’t, then clearly there was something reprehensible about us, so naturally we all nodded. The olive filly beamed quite happily.

As my friends and I walked along the hall towards the stairs that lead to the ballroom, I looked from one to the next. Scotch Tape commented on how Glory’s dress made her at least one fifth cooler. Rampage hung back, looking oddly sweet in her insecurity. Boo just seemed keen on getting to the festivities. Lacunae met my eyes, visions of Galas long ago swimming in hers as the Goddess slowly eroded what little resistance remained between her and us. The void fetish had bought me one last evening, at most.

Maybe I was squandering what little time I had left, but the Goddess had filled my brain with so many blocks and erasures that I was worn down trying to fight her. I wasn’t sure I could physically say the word ‘goddess’ after all she’d done to me. So, I could make sure my friends could take care of everything once I was gone.

That was the least I could do after all the trouble I’d caused them.

We walked to the staircase leading down to the ballroom. Prince Splendid waited at the bottom, and Glory sighed. Then I noticed a stallion in a tux waiting casually beside him. Small, a little thin, but incredibly handsome with an impeccably combed mane. Calm blue eyes looked right into mine, and for a moment the crowd seemed

to fade into the background. It was just the two of us as I descended, each step like a timeless eternity until I reached the bottom. Then he reached out, curled his fetlock around my foreleg and lifted it to his lips, pressing his lips to the end. Then he looked into my eyes, his lips curling slightly, and asked casually, "So, was all this a part of the plan?"

"P-21?" I asked, a little bemused at the sight of him. Hoity Toity stood nearby in an equally magnificent maroon tuxedo. I wondered where he'd acquired such fine garments, but I supposed that, if I were a ghoul like him, my most precious possessions would be such clothes.

"Woah. You look good, Daddy!" Scotch Tape gushed, rushing down the last few steps to hug him.

"He cleaned up rather well," Splendid said with a warm smile. Then he looked at Glory and said just as warmly, "Morning Glory." She went even redder as she gave an awkward nod. Then he regarded me, "Your Majesty. Would you permit me to escort you to the Gala?"

"I need to speak to Hoity a moment," I replied, and his face become downcast.

"Ah, of course." He looked to Glory, trying that same winning smile, but she'd moved to put Lacunae between him and her as they walked to the ballroom. Rampage just gave him a stomp look and walked past while Scotch Tape rushed to P-21's side to enter with him. Finally, Splendid looked at Boo and hesitated a moment as she blinked cluelessly at him. Finally, he smiled and moved up beside her, "May I?"

She looked at me, and I glanced at Grace and gave a little tilt of my head. "Perhaps you can escort us both inside, Brother? Like when we were young?" Grace said as she moved on the other side of Splendid.

He blinked in surprise and then smiled a little before he nodded. "Very well. Together then." They followed Rampage to the Ballroom.

As the trio moved off, I trotted up to Toity. The ghoul grinned. "Nicely played," he said. "Please tell me it was intentional."

"Was what intentional?" I asked in bafflement. He just sighed and shook his head, as if I were a filly who didn't understand the rules. "What am I supposed to do at this Gala? When do I make the announcement?" I asked, a touch cross.

"I've talked to the necessary ponies. The guests have all been searched for weapons. I'll declare that the Gala has begun, and you'll say a few words. We'll have a few short introductions, then you are free to mingle. Circulate. Enjoy yourself. Dance, if

you are inclined. You'll likely receive some gifts, all unwrapped, of course. No need to risk a handsomely packaged bomb. In a few hours, I'll announce your declaration, and you'll address the crowd. Then you'll retire. In the morning, you leave in the Fleur, and we'll deal with the repercussions," Hoity said with a carefree wave of his hoof, as if they were of no matter.

"Sounds good to me," I replied, wishing I could ask him to add 'The Goddess Resumes Control' to the party schedule. Actually, I'd love to just tell anypony at all! I stepped up beside him. "Care to escort me inside?"

"You'd want to enter with me?" He said, an expression of surprise on his mottled face.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" I asked in bafflement, smiling as I knitted my brows. He pulled down his glasses, staring at me for a moment. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just an interesting reminder of why King Awesome picked you to select his heir," he said with a smile as he walked beside me.

Epicure, the pine green colt, stood by the doorway and nodded to both of us. "Fillies and Gentlecolts!" he proclaimed loudly, making a gesture that killed the music. "Presenting her royal highness of the Society of Equestria, Queen Blackjack, and her escort, Sir Hoity Toity of Canterlot!"

Then we stepped through the doors, and for a moment I was overwhelmed by the lights shining on me and a thunderous noise that almost had me jumping into S.A.T.S. to determine the target. Then I realized that nopony was shooting at me. . . no. . . they were stomping their hooves in applause, cheering, and chanting my name. I froze in place, wanting to turn tail right there and run. There was no way I was going in there with hundreds yelling and calling my name! I would have been happier being shot at.

Hoity, as if reading my mounting panic, hooked his foreleg around mine and kept me from flight. "Just smile, walk to the throne, and wave when you get there," he said, giving me a forward nudge and starting me walking across the ballroom. The band. . . correction, the strange robopony DJs from Flank. . . played a grand tune from two centuries ago, and I stared straight ahead at the throne on the far side of the room. It seemed like it was farther than the moon and that I walked forever as we proceeded through the crowd. Around me had to be the greatest collection of pre-war clothing in the world; most of it wasn't as spectacular as the Rarities we wore, but all of it was formal wear to some degree.

I reached the dais on the far side of the room. The crown sat upon a purple pillow beside the gilded throne. I took a seat and looked at the hundreds of eyes all locked on mine. If I'd had a heart, it likely would have stopped then and there. Glory sat beside me and P-21 next to her. They looked at me with eyes brimming with confidence. Hoity moved to the other side of the throne. "Thank you for coming," he said to the room. "May the Grand Galloping Gala commence!"

"What?" I blinked at him a moment then back at the crowd. "Oh." I smiled and struggled to get the words out as he'd told me. Damn it! Why wasn't the Stable Dweller doing this? She could have just sashayed in and wowed them all with just her sheer awesomeness. "Um. . . Thanks for coming. Let's get this party started!"

The two robot-helmeted ponies I'd met a lifetime ago in Flank began to play music, a strange blend of classical melody and modern beat as they worked the controls. "Now you'll meet the honored guests," Hoity said to me. "Shake their hooves, welcome them to the Gala, and graciously accept whatever gifts they give you," he murmured, then looked at my friends. "You can go. Mingle. Dance if you like."

"I'll stay with Blackjack," Glory said, leaning over and giving me a nuzzle. "She gets in trouble on her own."

"I wanna dance!" Scotch Tape squealed. "Dance with me, Daddy!" P-21 looked at me with the strangest smile. Happy. Simply happy as he followed her to where the Society ponies were pairing off in the middle of the floor.

Rampage curled her tail around Boo's neck. "Come on, Boo. Let's hit the buffet. If we're lucky, maybe we can find some drunks to mess with."

"I'll keep a close eye on them," Lacunae said aloud.

"Lacunae," I said before she moved away. She looked at me in surprise. "Try and have fun," I told her. She looked unsure, then gave the smallest of smiles and nodded.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked with a small frown. When I turned to her, she cocked her head. "Are you okay?"

No. I'm not. I wanted to tell her. My mouth twitched as I fought to say those simple words. Tell her what was happening. Say what the Goddess was doing to me. Let her help. A sensation like a sword stabbed into my brain and twisted, but my body simply froze. I couldn't speak. If my body hadn't been synthetic, I would have collapsed. It was only a few seconds, but finally I abandoned my attempt to speak. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Just stressed. . ." at least I could say that!

"Well... okay. Just... try not to mention sex to anypony you meet here, okay?" Glory asked with a worried smile.

"I'll try," I said sarcastically. What followed next was an exercise in tedium. Epicure made the announcements. All the movers and shakers of the Society. 'Full share ponies', Hoity said as if it should matter to me. As they came up, Hoity usually muttered a few suggestions of what to say. First Splendid, then Grace. The Carrots. The Oranges. The Horseshoes. All strange ponies whom I didn't know and who didn't know me. Still, I got a brand new riot shotgun, six boxes of specialty ammunition, and some combat barding that I couldn't wear anymore. Maybe Scotch would grow into it.

"Princess Charm," Epicure said with an uncharacteristic break in his voice.

I turned to address the filly... and nearly choked with the effort of containing myself. Her spectacular mane looked like she'd cut it with an air duct fan. Her tail sported only a few dozen tufts here and there. Her pristine white hide had proven to be quite accepting of at least a half dozen different colors of stains. Her horn had been scribbled black with a marker of some sort. Not even the fancy party dress she wore could cover the sheer ridiculousness of her appearance. "So... so glad you could m... make it..." I managed to get out.

If looks could kill... She gave a nasty smirk, "Oh, I didn't want you to miss out on your present, Your Majesty," she said as she levitated a bag off her back and tossed it to me before trotting off the far side of the dais. I glanced at Hoity, then opened the drawstring. It didn't sound like a grenade or anything. It clinked when I levitated it, and I peeked in.

"What is it, Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern.

I couldn't answer. I just felt... tired. I cupped my forehooves and poured a small pile of broken glass into them from the bag. Curved glass. The exact curve of memory orbs. "I guess she found out she wasn't my pick for regent," I muttered as I dumped them back into the sack.

"Do you want me to have her removed from the Gala?" Hoity asked low as the next pony I was to meet fidgeted.

"Maybe order a royal spanking?" Glory suggested. I managed a halfhearted grin... maybe not for her...

"No. I just... no," I replied with a sigh. Knowing my luck, it was just the beginning. I fully expected tonight to end in some sort of disaster or attack or... something. The

Goddess creeping up on me was pretty high on that list. But what could I do? Run? Give myself a brain hemorrhage trying to spit out the phrase 'goddess mind control me is gonna!'? Glory had a way back home. With luck, she'd get Thunderhead to listen to her. P-21 and Rampage could back her up if they didn't.

Another four 'honored patrons' passed me a bottle of Wild Pegasus, some very nice emeralds, a magic beam pistol, and some overcharged gem cartridges. The latter two I immediately passed to Glory the second the patron turned away. She examined it closely and then grinned. "Wow. Mint condition Shadowbolt sidearm!" She turned the gun on its side and cocked her head. "There's an inscription. 'Pew-Pew'? Who names a beam pistol pew-pew?"

"With your luck, Rainbow Dash," I teased, but she didn't share it.

"Ugh. I am so sick of Rainbow Dash," Glory slumped. "I'm sick of her face and her stupid mane and her boy-liking body and ponies calling me Rainbow Dash. I want to just be Glory again. Boring, plain, everyday Glory. This joke has run its course, and it's not funny anymore."

"I'm sorry," I said, giving her a little nuzzle. "Sometimes I feel like that's my whole life."

"You're not serious, are you Blackjack?" Glory asked as my attention drifted to someone keen on giving me a brightly wrapped box and guards who were finally living up to their name and escorting the pony out. I gave a little shrug, and she sighed and covered her face with a wing. "Celestia give me strength." Then her wings and hooves seized my shoulders and turned me to face the room. "Look at where you are. You're Queen of the Society. No pony is laughing at you. Everypony in this room respects you in one way or another. Sure, you can be a little aggravating at times, but a joke? Never!"

"But the shooting and the mess ups and the... everything," I trailed off lamely.

"That's life, Blackjack," she said evenly. "I trusted Lighthooves and mother when I shouldn't have. My mistakes nearly got my father killed." She hung her head. "I was so sure I was inadequate that at first part of me was glad I was turned into Rainbow Dash. That I'd be better for you if I was somepony strong and assertive."

"Then what was all that mane dying and stuff?" I asked with a baffled smile.

"That was me being an idiot too," she said with a roll of her eyes and a rueful smile. "You're not the only pony who can be a hypocrite, Blackjack. Yes, I didn't want this, but at the same time I did. Just a little. For flying if nothing else. Being grounded

was horrible. . . so part of me was glad to be her. Maybe that was the joke on me.” She sighed and shook her head. “I never deserved any of the things that Morning Glory had. Maybe it’s time I just embraced being Rainbow Dash.”

“Hey,” I turned to face her, staring into her eyes. “You have things that Rainbow Dash never did. You have a father whose life you saved. You have sisters. You have a mother, even if she is a madmare. You are ten times smarter than Rainbow Dash, and a hundred times a better pony than me. Someday this curse. . . spell. . . thing will end, and you’ll have the last laugh.” She smiled a little, and for a moment I could see the purple-maned mare as clear as day.

Hoity cleared his throat, and I glanced out to the side at a hundred or so ponies witnessing our tender exchange. Some wore expressions of scandal, others amusement, and more than a few with the detached interest of a sporting event. I flushed from ear to augment and waved a metal hoof. “Hi. I think that’s enough gifts. You can just forward them to my room or something. Time to mingle!”

A ripple of chuckles rolled through the room as I trotted down to the ballroom floor, my friends mixing in with the others. At first, a gaggle of Society ponies closed in, but there was something about me that seemed to keep them at hoof’s distance. Maybe it was the glowing red eyes of death? Grace, Splendid, and Charm had far more ponies lingering near them than I. I was the placeholder, and everypony knew that I was going to leave. That assurance kept me in the position of ‘curiosity’ rather than ‘threat’. . . of course that wasn’t enough for some of them to stop trying to kill me, but still.

Pain Train kept a watchful eye from the edge of the room. I knew he could cross the ballroom in ten seconds flat; sure it would be over a trail of ponies, but he would still make it to protect his ward. Hoity had his own audience where he reassured everypony in the Society that I had no plans to hang around. That just left everypony in breathless speculation on who would be chosen. Already it seemed clear Charm was disfavored, as only a half dozen or so crowded around her. She’d had five times as many around her at Awesome’s funeral.

“Well now. From Stable Pony to Queen of the Hoof,” a mare said from the throng, and I turned to the yellow mare Bottlecap. The manager of Megamart looked at my dress and then back at me as she sized up my evident fortunes. “I always knew you were going places. Granted I never expected this, but still.”

“What brings you to this?” I asked with a grin.

“Splendid decided that I was worth an invitation,” Bottlecap replied. “Really, I think

he's just trying to set up a supply line for the Fluttershy Medical Center, but his caps are good. Right now we can certainly use them, what with our zebra problems."

"Zebra problems? In the northwest? Isn't that the exact opposite direction from where the Remnant operates?" I asked with a frown.

"I have no idea where they came from, but they're scaring the shoes off of the caravaners. They're not threatening. Not hiding. Not doing anything besides setting up camps along the road between Manehattan and Hoofington. But they're armed twenty times worse than any raider, and they're watching. It's been a boon for the arms sales, that's for sure, but everypony knows that they're going to do something sooner or later," Bottlecap said with a frown.

"You might want to think about reinforcing Megamart," I said in concern. "Between the Remnant and the Harbingers, something is going to happen soon. Maybe move Gun so it fires out rather than down. You could have some bigger problems than shoplifters soon." She looked worried, so I followed up with, "Sorry it's taken me so long to deal with Paradise, too."

"Oh, that? That was taken care of," Bottlecap said with a warm smile.

"It was? How? By who?" I felt my mane frizzing. No pony in the Hoof could fix anything besides me, if my experiences were any indication! I immediately began imagining the worst case scen—

"Keeper found four very capable people, and they were able to dislodge Red Eye's forces. Not so difficult, since most of his forces had already been withdrawn to the Everfree Forest. It was just a matter of sweeping out the dregs," Bottlecap said, giving a little shiver. "Two of them were ghouls and one a zebra, but they were quite capable. They said they were funding a trip to Shattered Hoof Ridge of all places."

"Xanthe? Snails? Carrion? Silver Spoon?" I asked with an idiot grin.

"That's them," Bottlecap said, then grinned. "Keeper was very put out that you didn't do it, though."

"Yeah, it kinda fell off my radar with everything else going on," I muttered. Little things like the Harbingers and the Goddess's takeover really put a crimp in dealing with those little side quests.

"Oh, he wasn't upset because of that! Keeper hoped that you'd do it for free, or at least that he wouldn't have to pay you as much as a pony who can actually barter," she said with a sympathetic smile. "No offense, Blackjack, but you do way too much without ever charging appropriate rates."

"I thought it was called charity," Glory said with a cool look at Bottlecap.

"Charity? Where?" I looked around in horror for a moment, feeling poverty sneaking up on me. Then I forced myself to calm down. . .

"Right here," the filly snapped as she stepped up to my side. I nearly jerked away when she pinned me with her glare. "Don't you dare rip that outfit, Blackjack! One tear. One stain. One speck of dust and I'll *own* you. Understood?"

"What are you doing here?!" I gasped. The filly wore a light pink dress trimmed in darker purple with a large white silk flower over her chest and smaller ones decorating the trim. A band of lavender and white flowers encircled her brow.

Charity rolled her eyes. "Where do you think half these ponies bought their fancy outfits? Megamart?" The two yellow mares regarded each other coolly, small smiles on their faces. Finally Charity said in a tone of smug import, "Six."

Bottlecap smiled a little smugly in return. "Seven."

That made Charity slump a little before she looked at me. "If I figure in what Blackjack owes me, I should clear seven!"

Glory looked from one to the other as Bottlecap said, "No IOU's or outstanding debts. Don't be sad. Last year you were at four."

"Yeah. Between the manor and the gear we scavenged, I should hit seven next year. Maybe eight." She said with a little swish of her tail and a sneaky look at Bottlecap.

"Just don't make the same mistake as Usury. She was at seven too. Now she's at three. Celestia only knows what Caprice is at."

That made Charity look a little mournful. "Caprice is at zero," she said. Bottlecap looked startled. "She died in the battle for the manor. I meant to tell you earlier."

"Damn," Bottlecap said with an upset look.

"These numbers are. . . ?" I asked with a small frown.

"Number of digits of personal wealth. The value of all a pony's property, liquid assets, and facilities. I get to figure in Megamart, Charity her. . . post office and vault, and the like. Otherwise, we'd be lucky to break a four." Charity sighed and nodded.

"Pardon me, but are you two related?" Glory asked as she looked from one to the other.

Charity narrowed her eyes, clearly contemplating a stupid questions fee. Bottlecap just smiled sadly. "Probably. Father doesn't keep track."

Charity snorted. "Semen's the only thing he gives out for free, and then not always." Glory turned profoundly red, glancing aside at Splendid across the hall.

Bottlecap continued, "Ursury, Caprice, and I are the daughters he's confirmed are his. Charity..."

"Doesn't need Keeper's help, thank you. The Crusaders stand on our own. Adults are nothing but trouble. Case in point," Charity said with a gesture towards me.

Bottlecap sighed and shook her head. "One day you'll learn about the value of things besides money," the mare said with a genteel smile. "Blackjack," she said with an amused nod of her head before she moved off.

Charity looked around sharply, then gestured me to come closer. When I balked, she gestured once more, more rapidly. Finally, our faces inches apart, she stared right into my eyes and poked my chest. "One stain... one tear... You're mine. Understand?" I blinked in shock before she smirked, "And thanks." She turned away and headed into the crowd. I straightened up, now acutely observant for any fluids that might splash.

Glory had gotten swept away while I'd spoken to Charity, but I noticed somepony else I hadn't seen in a while. The green unicorn, Sagittarius of the Zodiacs, was in close discussion with Windclop, the ghoulish mayor of Meatlocker. "I don't know what they're up to. That's the problem. They have no reason to..." Windclop trailed off as the pegasus ghoulish saw me approach. "Blackjack! Good to see you. Hard to imagine it was only last week you left us, and now you're head of the Society." He grinned widely. "I... hope you're not thinking of running for office any time soon."

"Politics really isn't my thing. Way too much annoyance and far too few opportunities to shoot them," I replied. "How are things at Meatlocker?"

"Fine! Wonderful. For the most part..." he trailed off a bit, then sighed, his mottled ears drooping. "Truth be told, I'm worried. Even though Hightower was vaporized, the... ooze substance you described is still present in the tunnels and sewers. The... 'slime ponies' have also taken to walking out of the crater, and we've had to maintain a constant vigil to keep them from straying close. Fortunately, they seem rather mindless, but it's just a matter of time before they get in."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked with a small frown.

"Don't you have enough on your plate?" Sagittarius asked, the green unicorn twirling

his dark pine-green goatee.

“Actually, that’s what I was discussing with Sagittarius here. We’re hoping to bring in some professional help to neutralize the ooze. If we can’t, we might have to evacuate the hospital and relocate to Rocket Town at the Luna Space Center. Unfortunately, we have friction with the ghouls who live there,” Windclop said with a sour twist of his lips. “They believe they can use their rockets to fly away to a promised land. Madness, really, but they are my own kind. I’d much rather stay in good old Meatlocker, of course.”

I nodded in understanding, then looked at Sagittarius. “I am glad I met you, though. Tell Triage that the Roseluck Agrifarms facility has Enervation fields that nearly killed me. I cleared out a number of defending robots and turrets, but, short of sending in some robots to clear every bit of debris, I don’t see you getting it working soon.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Virgo would be all over that, I think. Thanks. I’ll pass it along right away.”

“How are Pisces and Capricorn?” I asked with a grin.

“They’re well. I think they miss you. You should visit them sometime. We replaced Taurus and Gemini, and Leo retired. He never really recovered after his punting from Rampage,” he said, and frowned. “I’m a little concerned with the new Gemini; I’m not one to trust a pony with severe personality disorders, but she does bring in the bounty. The new Leo’s a griffon. Went by the name Tigerhawk before. Definitely one who’d give Rampage a run for her money. The new Taurus is from Applelanta. Tracker sort. Doesn’t talk much, but he fills the bounties.”

“Having much business?” I asked with a coy little smile. My eyes roamed freely over his fit emerald form, his verdant goatee, and drifted back towards his... he cleared his throat and snapped my eyes back to his. A sardonic arch of his brow prompted a grin from me. “Right! Business! Have any?”

“Not so much around the Hoof, but across the greater Wasteland, oh yeah. There’s no shortage of ponies with caps who want somepony else dead. Still, we keep half of us in the Collegiate at all times. Things are feeling tense, and Triage doesn’t want things getting unmanageable.” He paused, then added, “The Professor is back. Or her brain, in any case. Mounted it on a hover robot and she’s back to work in the observatory.”

“She is?” If I wasn’t the Goddess’s perpetual puppet after tonight, I’d look her up. Probably. Eventually! Ugh, there was so much to do! Still, I made a mental note to

track her down. I had questions regarding the cybernetics in the Brood. "I should say hello," I said.

"I think she'd like that. She seems well-appraised of your travels, despite being a brain in a jar," Sagittarius said. I bet she is, I thought to myself. She gave me my eyes and ears, after all.

I looked over at Windclop and lowered my voice a little. "How's Boing doing?"

His genteel smile fell and he squirmed a little awkwardly. "She's... well... I think? I'm no expert on living ponies. Adapting? Coming to terms, I suppose. She works in the market, sorting things. Not... well... ahem..." the brown ghoul gave an apologetic shrug, then looked around awkwardly and spied the buffet. "Oooh! I am starving! I think I'll go pick up a snack! Excuse me!" And with no further ado he rushed away from the unpleasant conversation topic.

I sighed and looked back at Sagittarius. "Can you do me a favor? Can you ask Triage to send a full medical healing whatchamacallit for a filly? Stick her in that healing can or something. I hurt her badly when I wasn't well, and I'd like to fix her if I can." I was ashamed that I'd hadn't done so sooner, but then, I had been rather distracted. "Tell her to bill the Society Regent." They could afford it.

"And I'll remind her not to pad the expenses too much," he said with a little chuckle and a nod of his head to me. "Take care, Blackjack."

As Sagittarius trotted off, I gave a half smile. That went fairly well! My mane began to crawl, and I looked around. Bomb? Assassin? Something had to go horribly wrong—

I felt someone step up behind me; ahah! I whirled, ready to defe— I was yanked off my hooves like an insolent filly and hauled into the air! I felt my body whirled around as a massive stallion crowed, "Glorious day, Your Majesty!" He held me like a cyberpony doll with one powerful foreleg while the other thrust towards the heavens. "Never would I, Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, have imagined that such a low and listless young mare would rise to such glorious heights!" He pressed his hoof to his brow beneath his miniscule horn, "It is truly an inspiration to us all!" Luna as my witness, there were sparkles cascading around us.

A mare rapidly trotted up to us. "Paladin Stronghoof! You know you promised not to... do that!" She spoke in the odd accent from Trottingham and had a toasty orange coat with a crispy tan mane and tail and a cutie mark of some sort of biscuit with butter atop it.

I was dropped, and he loomed over her. “Knight Crumpets, it is well known that friendship is magic and magic is strength and strength is the ability to do good in this world! Are you denying the strength of my friendship? Are you?” He quivered as he flexed his massively muscled forelegs, body pulsating. “Feel the power of my friendship! Feel!” he demanded, his mustache quivering.

Crumpets leaned back, her face flushing in complete mortification before she covered it with her hoof. “Oh for pony’s sake. . .” then she scowled up at him, twisted, and rammed her hoof upside his head, “Bloody well stop!” Glory’s jaw dropped at the sight of the smaller mare knocking back the massive muscled stallion.

She was about half his size, but thankfully she seemed to break the spell. At least the sparkles stopped as he sat back and held the side of his head with a hoof. “Ah, so very sorry,” he said with an embarrassed expression.

Crumpets sighed and shook her head before smiling at Glory and me, “Nice to see you again, Your Majesty.” Crumpets was one of the least dressed mares here, clad only in a yellow sundress and matching hat.

“Likewise,” I said with a happy smile at the two. “Were you two invited?” I asked as I gestured at the pair. I didn’t think the Trottingham Steel Rangers were around long enough to be known by the Society. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“To be honest, no. We came on completely different business, but since we were here, Princess Grace was generous enough to allow us to attend,” she paused and looked sharply at Stronghoof. “Provided we conduct ourselves with decorum.”

“Manners and etiquette have been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations, Knight Crumpets. Observe my civilized and principled conduct,” he said grandly as he knelt before me and took my hoof between his. “Queen Blackjack, it is an honor and a privilege to meet you once more.” Then he kissed it regally.

Crumpets knitted her brows. “Better, but you better not start sparkling or throbbing again. And grabbing is right out!” Glory gave a little snirk and hid her smile behind her wing.

When my hoof was free, I smiled, “So what are you here for?” It was easier to ask that than to ask about Stable 99. The pair seemed to understand my question, through.

Crumpets cleared her throat. “Well, let me be the first to say that your stable is a marvel. Even if some of the recycling systems are a little icky, it is a masterpiece of sustainability. And I thought Stable 2’s orchards were impressive. I think you could

put a Stable 99 anywhere and it'd be viable," Crumpets said with a worried smile. "But I'm afraid that unless we get substantial reinforcement from Trottingham, we might not be able to stay there. It really does need a sizable population to run such a facility. If it wasn't for the survivors' help—"

"Survivors!?" I gasped, grabbing her shoulders. "Who? How? Where?"

Glory came to her rescue. "Hey, no grabbing ponies, Blackjack!"

"Thirteen!" Crumpets gasped as I released her. "In the maintenance around the reactor. They'd sealed off the lowest levels of the stable when the... first attack... happened and didn't come out. Seemed they didn't believe the all clear, so somepony named Rivets told them they could stay till they got bored and wanted out."

"She never told me!" I said, sitting down hard. "I... I thought Scotch Tape was the only uninfected pony! I..." Then a horrible feeling crept over me. "Do they... do they know how the stable was gassed?"

The pair looked at each other, all smiles gone, and I got my answer. Stronghoof put his hoof on my shoulder. "I'm sorry. In the service of doing what is right, hard choices have to be made. But that does not mean others will understand or forgive those who have to make them."

So, they knew what I had done. I hadn't ever planned on returning, but still...

"We've a medical specialist in our acolytes for biological work, mostly to identify hazards in ruins we study. He found evidence of your infection in more than twenty of the ponies killed," Crumpets said respectfully. "It was a full outbreak. If you hadn't done what you did, I think half the Hoof would be infected. We found other infected 'survivors' in other sealed areas, and seeing what they did to themselves... I wouldn't wish that on anypony."

"And your warning spared us as well," Stronghoof added. "Had we not been diligent, we would have eaten the same contaminated food. There were some," and he huffed, his mustache fluttering, "some Rangers who were less than respectful with the slain suggested that we repeat the previous mistake. Their behavior was corrected." Good.

"We purged the entire recycling system and buried the bodies outside the stable. It's hard and messy work. We've been spending most of our time just on cleaning up, which is where the lack of help comes in. We sent message to Trottingham, but with the civil war in the Steel Rangers, we haven't much hope of reinforcements soon." She looked around sharply, then lowered her voice. "Officially we're here for

biomass. . . waste clippings and the like. . . to reprime the recycling system. We're also trying to bring back any Rangers that didn't join Steel Rain."

"Can you recruit from outside? I can introduce you to Bottlecap," I said, pointing a hoof in her general direction.

"If only it were so simple," Stronghoof sighed.

Crumpets nodded in agreement. "Thanks, but we need more than just willing, working, loyal bodies, which are hard enough to find. We need ponies who are used to living underground and handling cramped living spaces, and are used to the kind of social order you find in stables and the Steel Rangers. We've got thirty or so Rangers, twenty acolytes, and thirteen survivors trying to run a stable for five hundred. With two hundred technically trained ponies, we might be able to cover all critical systems."

"What is your plan if you can't get 99 going?"

"We shut everything down that we can, lock the door, return to Trottingham, and try to get enough ponies to come back and restore it," Stronghoof declared with a determined set of his eyes. "We won't abandon it to scavengers. Nor will we cast the survivors to the waste, nor condemn them to die alone in a failed stable."

"Thank you. I hope you get what you need," I said with a small frown, thinking back to what Bottlecap said. "Are there a lot of zebras around the stable?"

The question seemed to catch her by surprise, and she nodded. "Yes. They haven't been hostile, though. They keep their distance, and we're grateful for that."

So what were the zebras doing up there? I knew they were operating to the south-east, but my stable was on the far side of the hoof. How'd they move all the way up there with nopony seeing? What were they doing? "Well, I'll see about Hoity getting you some green waste. I doubt he can object to giving away garbage."

Stronghoof wasn't listening, though. He stared across the room, and his eyes shone with tiny stars. Like a stallion possessed, he strode away from us towards Lacunae, who stood beside the buffet. Crumpets, Glory, and I followed him with a touch of concern, though I didn't think a sparkly gaze was necessarily dangerous. Lacunae's expression started in bafflement and then shifted rapidly to alarm as Stronghoof knelt before her.

"Dear lady," he said as he clasped her hoof between his. "Such a vision of loveliness as yourself should not be left alone in such a time. Please, allow me, Sugar Apple

Bombs Stronghoof, to escort you in this social affair. Beauty and grace such as yours should not be consigned to the wall.”

Lacunae’s mouth worked silently. She looked at me, and I waved my hoof and tried to think at her to go on, but the mental static still lingered. She looked down at him; despite her alicorn mass, they were very nearly the same size. “G... gallant sir. I am unworthy of your praise. Surely there are others here deserving of your genteel attention.”

“Dear lady! You merit yourself far too little! If you are unworthy of kindest attention, then truly Equestria is lost for good. I pray, gift me your company, and I shall consider myself honored more than any stallion ever,” Stronghoof said as he gazed up at her. I swear, it seemed a spotlight shone only on the two.

Lacunae looked around as if hoping someone would object. I wondered if she’d teleport away; if she did, I was going to drag her back here! “It should not be. Your order and my kind are terrible foes. It would reflect badly upon you to show such kindness to me.”

“Reflect!” he said with utmost scorn. “The enmity between yours and mine is of no matter here. Not here. I have heard of you, Lady Lacunae, and I know you are apart from your kind. That you show a degree of gentleness and a good demeanor unknown elsewhere. Never would I think ill of you for that, nor would I care for the thoughts of any who would think ill of us for it!” He kissed her hoof, and her purple wings fluffed a little as she blushed. “Please, dearest lady. Allow me this honor, and I shall be forever satisfied.”

Lacunae looked helplessly at Crumpets, Glory, and me. The orange earth pony waved her hoof. “Oh, don’t mind me. I’m strictly for the mares anyway.” Glory and I glanced at her with simultaneous, identical arched brows, and she flushed, “What?”

The majestic alicorn finally sighed and smiled to him, bowing her head and spreading her purple wings wide. “Good sir, I accept.” He stepped up beside her, and side by side the pair marched out to the dance floor.

I’d kept it contained for as long as I could, but I let out a little giggle, prancing on my hooves in decidedly unregal fashion. “Yes, yes, yes, yes!” Oh, nothing could be more perfect! Then I frowned and looked around the ballroom. Something had to go wrong. Something! But what...

“You’re Morning Glory, right?” Crumpets asked Glory, and the blue pegasus swapped her amused look at me to a nod at the orange mare. “I was wondering if we could

talk a little. We found some notes on the virus in Blackjack's bedroom, and I was hoping you might have some advice on making sure the recycler is clean."

Glory frowned and looked from Crumpets to me. "I... um... I'm not sure this is a good time..."

"Oh go on. This sounds like something Rainbow Dash couldn't do," I said with a warm smile. Glory blinked, then smiled back. I couldn't resist, grinning and saying in a much lower voice, "And you heard what she said." She looked at me flatly as I grinned back.

"You have some kind of personal vendetta against monogamy, don't you?" Glory countered.

I spread my hooves wide. "Love wants to be free!"

"You're impossible," she said with a smile and a shake of her head. Then she turned to Crumpets. "I think we can talk a bit. Let's get a drink first."

As the pair walked off talking about decontamination procedures, I gave a broad smile and then lapsed back into my brooding, waiting for something to go horribly wrong.

Half an hour later, I was absolutely positive that everything was going too smoothly. The Goddess at bay. Lacunae. Glory getting to talk smart pony stuff! Something had to go bad. It was just the way things worked. I was so paranoid that I lifted the tablecloth of a buffet table, half expecting to find a bomb or something underneath! Dawn swooping in from above. Zebra invasion.

Nothing. I plucked a sandwich off a tray, checking for poison... or expired mayonnaise. "Blackjack, what are you doing?" Rampage asked behind me as I furiously masticated some excellent daisy sandwiches. Even the food was going perfectly!

"Just wondering when the party is going to blow up," I said as I turned and faced her... and saw her with five other very tough-looking ponies. It took me a few seconds to recall their names, but there was no way I could mistake the enormous jet black stallion. Looking as if carved from solid onyx, Brutus the Reaper looked down at me with his calm and sure expression. Bluebelle, the Highlander mare, stood beside the scarred stallion Candlewick and the lavender unicorn Dazzler. The only one I didn't recognize was a teal pegasus stallion with a Dashite Brand and a Halfheart pendant. All were dressed in rough and tumble gear and were being

viewed with a mixture of revulsion and fascination at the ‘primitives’.

“You. . . I. . . why are you here?” I asked, astonished.

“A question I’ve asked all night,” Rampage said with a sigh.

Dazzler smiled at me, “I think the Society expects us to go back home with stories about how awesome they are. I wouldn’t even be here if they didn’t bribe me with caps and ammo.” She grinned at me. “You’re well dressed for a Reaper, Blackjack, but it seems to be a thing.” She traversed her grin to Rampage, who rolled her eyes.

“I’d love to see y’all fight in that get up,” Bluebelle said with a chuckle.

“Big Daddy always makes sure some of us attend the Gala. Mostly to bear news about Awesome,” Brutus said in his deep, calm voice. “It’s mostly an evening of tedium. Then we get bored, smash the furniture, and get thrown out. It’s tradition.”

“Not tonight, it’s not,” Rampage snapped. “This is Blackjack’s party.”

“Really?” Brutus said as he looked down at me. I tried to look tough in return, but he just shook his head. “You’re no more queen of the Society than you are a Reaper of the Top Ten. Everypony wants to claim a piece of you, Security. But you don’t belong to any of us.”

“Deep, Brut. Deep,” Candlewick said with a roll of his eyes.

I could definitely see myself belonging to the powerful black earth pony. At least for a night. See just what kind of power he could unleash on a cybermare who could take it. I hitched my hips a little as he looked down at me, swishing my tail just a bit more.

Then a smack to the back of my head nearly sent me on my face. “Cool it, Blackjack. Save that kind of wrestling for when you’re back at the Stadium,” Rampage said sourly.

“What?!” I said defensively. “I was just looking at him!” And undressing him. And me. And sidling up... and... Rampage was eying me for another smack, and with great effort I pushed those thoughts aside.

It seemed like a heck of a coincidence that the ponies I’d met were the ones who were attended the Gala, but given everything else that was going on tonight, I simply rolled with it. I turned to the pegasus, “We haven’t met.”

“Storm Front,” he replied, taciturnly. He had that nummy flier build, but I could see in his blue eyes that he wasn’t interested in me in the slightest. “Nice to meet you.

I've heard interesting things about Security."

"You're a Halfheart?" I asked, and he pressed his lips together and nodded. "I'm sorry." I wondered who it was he'd lost to gain entry to that wretched bunch.

"It's all right," he answered. "We were in security operations down here on the surface a year or two ago. She didn't come back. I requested to stay to look for her. Was denied four times. Told me she was probably dead. Finally went Dashite to find her. Did."

"Was she?" Dazzler asked.

"No. Went raider. Found her screwing a young stallion with a gun to his face. Put her down myself," he said with a small shrug. "I just put down her body. Mare I knew died a year before."

Rampage sighed and gave a mirthless smile. "This is why I love Halfhearts. They're absolutely perfect for the Hoof."

"There is something about this place," Brutus rumbled. "I've fought in the pits of Fillydelphia. Walked the western waste. Battled in the shattered canyons of Manhattan. The Hoof was the only place I've been that felt like home the minute I arrived. That welcomes the broken soul and the bleeding heart." The magnificent hunk of pony shook his head. "Even Big Daddy knows."

"How is he?" I asked. "Have you recovered from the Celestia's attack?"

"The shells destroyed half the building. Fortunately, it was the half we did not use. The Stadium will survive. We're recovering. We'll find the strongest, and we will thrive. As we always have," he said with a matter of fact shrug. "Big Daddy faced a brief insurrection. Very brief, as it was over ten seconds after he joined the battle." He gave a little half smile. "There are few chastisements greater than having your face broken by a stallion old enough to be your grandfather."

Blue Belle snorted. "Still no match for White Lightning. Momma'd give him a run for his money."

"And how about the Highlanders?" I asked her with a small frown.

She seemed surprised, but the strong baby blue mare answered, "We are as we always are, fighting for our land and our kin. Momma thanks ya for the family gun, though. Gave it to my nephew. Good to keep it in our family." She looked around the party insolently. "Dunno why Momma sent me. Almost didn't make it past all the zebras."

That made my mane and tail twitch. “Zebras? You’re having problems with zebras?”

“Highlanders always have problems with zebras. Usually we ambush their patrols when they try to pass through the mountains. These zebras though,” she turned and spat. “Came out of nowhere. Dozens. Hundreds, even.”

“So these zebra didn’t come through the mountains?” I asked, confirming what she’d told me. She shook her head.

“They’re also in the southwest,” Storm Front said quietly. “A dozen groups encamped all along the badlands and throughout No Pony’s Land.” My questions must have been showing on my face, because he added, “The Halfheart territory is in the southwest. I do daily patrols looking for threats.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” I replied, surprised. I supposed there were plenty of places in the Hoof I hadn’t discovered yet. “And what are the zebras doing?” I suspected the answer, but I couldn’t think of why.

“Nothing,” he replied, confirming my suspicions. Bluebelle scowled, but nodded as well.

“They’re in the north, too. Near the old Ironmare base,” Candlewick replied. “Don’t know how they got there, but they just sit around. They’ll blast you if you get too close, but otherwise they just sit with their striped heads up their asses. Why? What’s the problem?”

“And they’re well armed?” I asked with a frown.

“Assault Carbines. Anti-machine rifles. Miniguns,” Storm Front replied. “Only six to ten or so in each camp.”

I imagined a little purple unicorn in my head writing on a chalkboard. Eight zebras per camp on average times at least twenty camps equaled... a potential huge problem. Zebras from nowhere. Well armed. Doing nothing. The purple unicorn wrote ‘WHY?’ and circled it. “Why?” I echoed her.

“Maybe the Wasteland is magically repopulating itself with small groups of zebras to kill so we can take their stuff?” Rampage said with a grin.

“Like that would ever happen,” Candlewick snorted.

“Hey, you have no idea! For the last four or five weeks, we’d get armed bands charging out of nowhere to kill us. Scavengers. Or Sanguine’s ponies. Or those damned Harbingers,” Rampage snorted contemptuously. “We’d just be walking along and here they come! Least their gear always paid the bills.”

“What are you thinking, Security?” Brutus asked in his low, deep voice. For a moment, I wondered if he was being sarcastic, but when I looked again I saw he listened in earnest. Even the scarred, boiled-looking Candlewick seemed to be listening to me.

Well, if they really wanted to know... “I don’t care that they’re zebras so much that they’re all around the Hoof. Even if the individual camps aren’t that big, there’s a lot of them. And no one just sits around in the Wasteland admiring the scenery. They’re up to something.”

“Might be they have something to do with all the raiders getting hit across the Wasteland,” Brutus said deeply. I cocked my head curiously at him, and he went on, “For the last week now there’s been attacks on raiders. We get stragglers coming this way and joining up with other gangs. Whoever is behind it hits fast and hard and doesn’t leave much in the way of survivors. Stallions. Mares. Young. Any group out on their own gets hit. Most get dusted, others taken. Then gone without a trace.”

“That sounds like something zebras might do. They’re scary ambushers. If that’s the case, though, why let the survivors past?” Dazzle asked. “If they were planning on trouble, wouldn’t it make sense to cut us off from all possible sources of reinforcements?” She shook her head. “What do you think we should do?”

“What I would do is get ready for something bad. Arm yourselves. Reinforce your numbers from survivors if you have to. But don’t do anything stupid and fight each other,” I said, feeling a certain rightness in my guess. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the zebras were there for some inconceivable zebra reasoning I couldn’t imagine, but I didn’t like it at all.

For several seconds I thought they might laugh at me or make a sarcastic quip, but the four nodded in agreement. Candlewick said that somepony named Napalm would be tough to convince, but nopony wanted to get stomped by zebras or Security. I tapped Storm Front’s shoulder and nodded to the side. He frowned, but joined me off away from the others. Rampage seemed to think I was flirting.

‘Security operations...’ A little pink pony in my head whispered questions to a purple unicorn. “Were you a part of Enclave Intelligence?” I asked. He frowned at me, seeming to weigh how much of his past life he could discuss, but nodded. “Do you know anything about Lighthooves?”

“You mean he who must not be named?” Storm Front replied with a small smile. “Yeah. I knew him. Smart bastard. Scary conviction. We all love Thunderhead, but I’m pretty sure he wanted to make Thunderhead the Enclave.”

"Do you know about his biological weapon?" I asked in a low voice.

"I heard rumors about it before I left," he replied. "Some surface plague he wanted to weaponize and disperse more widely. Neighvarro gave him the okay since it didn't affect pegasi."

"It does now," I said grimly. "Lighthooves created a new strain. He has plans to use it against pegasi loyal to Neighvarro."

Storm Front's eyes widened in shock. "That's. . . that's insane!" That was my general reaction. "Unless he plans to use it to turn other settlements against Neighvarro. Or keep them out of the fight. Or. . . no, he can't be thinking that."

"Let's just imagine he is and you tell me," I replied patently.

"The Enclave is. . . on paper. . . a democracy. We elect or mayors and our councilors. Of course, only members of the Enclave can run, but every settlement gets a vote of confidence on the Grand Pegasus Enclave every ten years. It's a joke, really, because Neighvarro controls the guns and always makes sure that everypony knows that it's in charge. So really, it's treated as a vote of loyalty. Fail to vote for Neighvarro and you get cut off." I recalled somepony telling me how the Enclave staged 'spectacles' every so often. "If Neighvarro failed a vote of confidence, leadership would pass to the settlement with the next highest amount of resources. New representatives would have to be appointed. Neighvarro would have to either stand down or be revealed for the thugs they are."

"So where do biological weapons come into an election?" I asked, a little baffled.

"It's a counter loyalty ploy. Vote for Neighvarro and your crops might get infected." I was starting to feel shooty, and it must have shown. "I don't think he'd actually do it," Storm Front added quickly. "But it'd allow those settlements to vote in support of Thunderhead without fearing reprisal from Neighvarro."

I think politics made my brains hurt worse than the Goddess. "Doesn't that sort of undermine and demean this whole democracy thing? 'Vote for us or we'll shoot you.' 'Vote for us or you'll eat your children.'?"

"You talk as if the Enclave has ever had a fair election," Storm Front replied cynically. "But something you need to realize is that most of the Enclave doesn't have much love for Neighvarro. They're thugs, skimming the cream of the crop for themselves and leaving other settlements to struggle. You either have to suck up to them like a tick, or get used to a lot of requests getting turned down. A lot of the settlements would support any contender in the hopes of improving things, even Thunderhead."

Thunderhead has it good. The Tower is a bit of an issue, but beyond that, their trade with the surface is bringing stuff the skies need.”

I sighed, feeling the headache grow. “Okay. Point is, I’m not leaving a weapon like that in anypony’s hooves. Even if he doesn’t use it against the rest of the Enclave, the Neighvarro might deploy it against the surface.” He nodded thoughtfully. I loved smart ponies. “Where would he keep a weapon like that?” Please say on the surface!

“Shadowbolt Tower,” he said without a moment’s hesitation. “Absolutely. The Neighvarro want to capture the Tower, so they wouldn’t shell it directly. Likely near the top, above the unicorns and below Shadowbolt command.”

“Right.” I took a deep breath. “How could some ponies break into the tower if they had to?”

“They can’t. It’s impossi—“ he started and then silenced himself.

“You were going to say impossible?” I asked, and he gave a little nod. “Has anyone ever gotten in?”

“Twice. The first was Contrail. Old ex-Wonderbolt a hundred and fifty years ago. Flew above the top of the tower and landed on the roof. . . which is quite a feat. Had to bring his own oxygen source, and he still died even after getting inside command. The other was the wife of some war hero. Flew in low over the Core. Craziest thing I ever saw. Aside from the very real chance of getting dusted by the city’s defenses, she was in the Enervation. Somehow she made it to an old maintenance accessway below the living areas and got inside. Damnest thing I ever saw.”

“Blackjack,” Hoity said from behind me. “It’s almost time.”

“Alright,” I replied, looking back at the others Reapers and gangers. “Remember what I said. Tell your people. Get ready for a fight.” I turned and walked away alongside the glorious-looking ghoul. “I think I’m going to need to talk to Grace, Splendid, and Charm alone for a second beforehand.”

“I’ll summon them. Though I’m not sure where Splendid and Charm are off to.”

“I’m sure you’ll find them.” I looked at him, then around at the party. “Everything else is ready?”

“It should be a consummately *horrendous* melodramatic display,” he drawled, then chuckled. “Which means the Society will love it. It’s something that should stick with them for a while.” He tapped my chest lightly. “You are somewhat skilled at this, Your

Majesty.”

“Skilled? Hoity, people tried to kill me four times today and foalnapped one of my friends!” I said in disbelief.

“And you survived,” he replied with a grand smile. “Dearest Blackjack, survival is the greatest skill of all in politics. Some might say it’s the only one that truly matters.” He trotted away, leaving me alone with my worries. Rampage and the gangers behaving themselves? No one had tried to kill me yet. Was it truly possible that tonight was going to go off without a hitch? It seemed. . . inconceivable.

“Your Majesty,” a smooth, familiar stallion’s voice said behind me. “Congratulations.”

I froze at the sound, and then actually smiled a little. “I knew it,” I muttered as I turned and looked at the kindly pink face of Steel Rain. The stallion was dressed in a tux every bit as fine as Hoity’s; I supposed that, being with the Harbingers, he could get his hooves on anything. “I knew things were going too smoothly.”

He arched a brow and gave me a sardonic smile. “If you’re under the impression that I’m here to cause trouble, you’re quite mistaken,” he said genially. “I am here with an invitation from Princess Charm.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, and I batted it away. He sighed, “You’re under quite a bit of stress. I understand. Social events like this are quite a hassle.” He reached over to a passing waiter levitating trays of champagne and snagged a glass. “Though I will admit that the Society offers quite a few pleasurable amenities. Almost makes it worth playing their silly games.”

“So, let me guess. As we speak your forces are surrounding this place and if I don’t give you EC-1101 you’ll storm in and kill everypony?” I snapped.

“My, that would be dramatic, wouldn’t it?” He countered with a smirk that made me want to shoot him right there. “I don’t suppose you’ll be amenable and just surrender it? It’d be such a shame to ruin such an excellent party.” He looked at me as he took a sip and then added, “Lovely dress, by the way.”

My magic bullet shattered the glass in his hoof and he grimaced as he drew back. A few ponies looked over, but the disturbance hadn’t been noticed. I advanced on him, crushing glass underhoof as I growled, “I will never give you EC-1101. Ever. Stop asking.”

“Pity,” he said as he wiped champaign from his sleeve. “Well, you needn’t worry. As delightful a target as the Society is right now, its wall to wall security would make taking it by force unlikely. We’re going with a plan B. And since it doesn’t involve

horrible, hideous violence, I am here attending to other business.” He gave a little smirk. “Contrary to what you might believe, not everything the Harbingers do is about you.”

I actually queued up four shots to his face in S.A.T.S. If I was going to be an executioner, I couldn’t think of a better pony to start with. I just had to execute the command. Just push the button. . .

Damn it. . .

He snagged another passing glass from a waiter and downed it all in one go. “So what is your business here?” I asked him.

“Why, none of yours. But if you must know, there’s a certain person here that we loaned a few of our soldiers to in the assurance that they could bring us your forehooves. I thought it a long shot, but they insisted they could pull it off, and all they asked in return was the crown. Now we need to settle accounts.” He idly rubbed his chest as he looked aside. “And I saw Sagittarius here. I need to talk to him as well.”

“About getting that kill implant removed?” I asked.

His smile disappeared. “Cognitum has been. . . pressuring me. . . to get certain improvements. I’ve seen what she did to Dawn. I have no desire to join her. I like power you can take off at the end of the day.” He frowned as he looked away and set the glass on a table beside us, glancing at my cybernetics with a barely hidden shudder. “I’d bet that Dawn’s failures would translate to further trust of me. Sadly, that’s not the case. She wants me more. . . augmented.”

“Well, good luck with that,” I replied. Out of his armor, I was struck again by how positively cute he appeared. Fit body. Athletic. Smart.

Ack! No! Mortal enemies was where I drew the line! Like Lancer... though I really wished I hadn’t drawn that line and... he seemed to catch me staring and smiled smugly from ear to ear.

“Indeed. Things would have been much simpler if you’d simply left me the Celestia. But who has time for regrets?” he said with a smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I need to see a filly about a collection of memory orbs.”

It must have been the drink that made him slip. “You mean this collection?” I asked, pulling out the bag of crushed glass and giving it a little jingle. He blinked as he took the bag of smashed orbs and opened it up. For the first time, he looked truly stunned and horrified. “Charm decided to smash it when I didn’t make her regent.”

"That... the technical schematics. The technology! How..." he pursed his lips and silenced himself as he fought for composure. "Tell me you punished her for this... this... insult!"

"She got to watch her hopes and dreams crushed before her eyes. Does that count?" I replied, marvelling at the surreality of commiserating with a pony who had tried to kill me repeatedly. "I never imagined you like this, Steel Rain."

"Well, we never did meet outside the battlefield, Blackjack. I'm quite sociable, actually," he replied with that kind smile. "I just happen to like power, control, and the ability to destroy my enemies instantly with the pull of a trigger. Quite unsophisticated, really. Tends to spoil social events, sadly," he said with a sigh of regret. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go see a filly about respecting the technical achievements of the past."

"Oh no you don't," I replied as I took him by the foreleg.

He smiled at me in clear condescension. "Oh please. Don't tell me that you're calling for the headsman. Despite what happened on the bridge, I know you're not a killer, Blackjack. You're not somepony to employ killers." I whistled sharply and some guards appeared almost at once. "What do you think you're doing?" They started patting him down, but didn't find any weapons on him. Just a pendant that I confiscated... just because. "Give that back!" He shouted, stretching a hoof towards it.

"I've been reading the 'Pinkie Pie guide to tyranny'," I answered him with a grin. "While you're right that I have no interest in killing you unarmed like this, I also don't mind locking you up for a few days." A little purple unicorn in me gave a nod of satisfaction.

Steel Rain did not take it well. He was dragged from the party kicking and shouting about destroying me, the Society, and 'everypony'. That was more like it, really.

I'd embarrassed and humiliated a foe. Rampage was behaving herself. Glory was talking smart pony talk. The Harbingers weren't going to attack and mutilate everypony at the last minute! Lacunae was actually dancing with Stronghoof. It might actually be...

"No. No, I won't jinx it," I said, shaking my head firmly. Something was bound to blow up in my face. Some... something!

"That guest has been detained," Hoity Toity said as he returned with some disdain. "Although I suspect half of his protests were feigned. No real struggle nor attempts

at bribery make me suspect that he's up to something."

"He probably is," I replied. "He came right up to me. He must have known I wouldn't kill him out of hoof. So..." meh, I was getting that annoying sensation that maybe I hadn't gotten the better of him. I pulled out the pendant I'd taken off him and turned it over in my magic. It was a simple round, plastic-covered disk on a nylon lanyard. Something about it was familiar, though. I placed it around my neck and tucked it out of sight beneath the dress. If he'd been carrying it, it must have been important. I placed it on the endless mental list of shit I needed to do but probably wouldn't get around to doing.

I looked around the Gala. Not exactly what I'd expected for a party, but there wasn't any blood and gore yet. Boo stood with a dozen fancy ponies around her, and I frowned as I moved closer. If they were bothering her...

"Yes, clearly the political situation with the Twilight Society is one that needs to be addressed first, don't you think, Lady Boo?" a mare asked, and Boo cocked her head in reply.

"Oh, I agree completely! While the Twilight Society should be considered, it's clear that Red Eye and his army is a far more pressing concern," a fancy stallion said immediately, and Boo just cocked her head at him instead. "I'm certain that you agree, Miss Boo."

Boo seemed far more interested in the hors d'oeuvre cupcake he levitated beside him. She stretched up to take a bite, when another mare reached out and hugged her. "Oh, you are too right, Baroness Boo. We're stretching ourselves out trying to concern ourselves with problems abroad when we have so many right here! All these refugees streaming into the valley are a ripe opportunity, wouldn't you say?"

Boo's nostrils twitched and she took a deep breath. The fancy ponies leaned in raptly, and then she sneezed right in the mare's face. For an instant, all were silent. Then a stallion crowed, "Hear hear! We shouldn't be exploiting these poor folk, Wineglass! Take a page from our new queen. Exploitation might get you ahead in the short term, but we need to look at things from a longer perspective."

Boo, who had snagged his cupcake while he'd been distracted, gave a beaming smile that set all the others talking and nodding in agreement with her. I couldn't keep from grinning as we moved past. Fortunately, no pony seemed to want to bother me with their trivial concerns. Instead, they seemed to be focusing on Grace and the other ponies who would really matter once I'd gone.

"Did you find them?" I asked Hoity.

"It looks as if Splendid is ready and waiting on the dais," Hoity said with a sniff. "Sloppy, but I suppose he's apprehensive. Charm is probably sulking under the buffet table. Grace is engaged with the Oranges. I'll be hearing about my rude interruption from Tangerine for months." He gave a long-suffering sigh. "The toil of a majordomo is neverending." And he moved off through the crowd. Majawha?

As I approached the little stage, I saw he wasn't alone. Glory was there too, and I hesitated. My augmented ears weren't all *that* much better than my normal ones, but now I strained to pick up their words.

"I don't understand why. You enjoyed it well enough before," Splendid said in low tones that would not carry far to anypony without microphones for ears. "You can't deny that."

"I enjoyed it physically, sure," Glory said as she blushed and looked away. "You treated me well. Better than I thought a stallion ever could. But afterwards... the way I felt."

"I did not mean to make you feel used," Splendid said swiftly. "I meant every word..."

"Splendid... I know you did, but you don't know me. You see a young Rainbow Dash. I'm not her. I'm a gray mare with a purple mane and one wing. Who's gay," she added, a touch lamely.

"I see a mare who is loyal, intelligent, compassionate, and unappreciated for those talents," Splendid replied, his voice rising. "I love you, Glory, and no matter how you look, I'd want you as my wife."

"Hello!" I said as I immediately trotted up onto the dais, right in between the blushing pair, and threw my forelegs around each. "What a party! Did you see that buffet? And that little display with Boo and those Society ponies. Priceless!" Glory was trying to vanish into the floor while Splendid, judging by his color, appeared to be transforming into a male Pinkie Pie. "So! How are you two doing?" I asked with as wide a grin as I could manage.

"I'm fine!" Glory squeaked. "Had a wonderful chat about prion infections and cleaning with hydrochloric acid."

"The Oranges were absolutely delightful conversationalists this year," Splendid went on.

"And we discussed being gay. And... yeah... mares! Woo-hoo!" Glory said in a little

cheer.

“And I must say your friends are quite the interesting addition to this soiree,” he finished.

“That’s nice. That’s... really... nice...” I said, keeping the grin on my face. Hoity returned with Grace and Charm. Saved by the ghoul. “Oh good! You’re here! Everypony is here! That’s great. That’s really great. Isn’t that great?” I said as I released the pair.

Grace looked on in shock. “Yes... great,” she said guardedly.

“Great...” Charm said in confusion.

Somehow all the eyes settled on Glory, whose eyes twitched nervously before she pointed at Charm, gave a straining grin, and said, “I really like your mane!”

“Huh?” the filly asked with a scowl.

“Oh, uh, bathroom!” And she darted into the air and swooped away, trailing a rainbow-colored afterimage.

I tried to focus less on what I’d just heard and more on what I needed to say now. “So! I bet you’re all wondering why I’ve called you here together.” Patient silence answered me. “I’m going to choose one of you as my regent. And I want the other two to swear loyalty to them.”

“I beg pardon?” Grace asked with a small frown.

“You three complement each other really well.” I looked to Grace, “You handle problems with poise and care and worry about what’s right and wrong.” I swapped to Splendid, “You’ve got vision and an idea for the future.” I looked at Charm, “You get things done. Together, you can have a much better life than fighting and squabbling over the throne. And life here is far better than life in the Wasteland. So I want a public oath from the other two pledging their support.”

“I see. And the alternative is exile?” Splendid mused.

“Pretty much. I want the Society to work better than it has been during my visit. Together, you can achieve more than you ever could alone.” I saw a few shifty looks from Charm. “Also, if you think you can kill my pick and take their place, you’re wrong. Besides the bodyguard I arranged and Deus, if they get killed, then I’ll pick somepony from outside the Society to run things. Understand?”

The three didn’t look all that convinced as I moved to stand in front of the dais. Hoity

tapped a wine glass with his hoof several times, and the ring spread out through the party. The music stopped and soon every eye was on us. "I know that King Awesome named me Queen of the Society. And I also know that while I would be honored to accept his gift, I'm going to have to pass it to another to rule in my place. My mission in the Hoof takes precedence over running one group, no matter what wonderful company they may be." A little yellow pegasus inside me gave a tiny cheer.

I looked at the crown on its pillow beside the throne. Such a heavy gold thing. The front of it was decorated with an alicorn in the middle, flanked by a pegasus and a unicorn. Apparently earth ponies didn't warrant representation. The rest of the crown was a band of gold studded with rubies. I levitated it before me. "I can't wear this crown myself, and the burden is too much for one pony to bear." And it was much too coveted, to boot.

I nodded to Hoity, he nodded to Epicure, and the green colt lifted my sword carefully in his hooves. I levitated the blade and, with a sweep of glittering silver, sliced the band. A second cut. A third. And the crown glittered in three pieces in the air before me. I lifted the front of the crown. "This piece, I give to my regent, to rule in my place until such time as I see fit to return and mend this crown." And I looked at the three. Hope danced in all their eyes, even Charm's, that I would pass it to them.

I looked from one to the other, dragging out the moment just a little. Then I knelt and pressed the gold to their foreleg. With my metal hooves, I easily bent the gold to wrap it around like a torc. Finally, I rose. Hoity turned and addressed the crowd, "May I introduce the regent of the society: Princess Grace!"

"No!" Charm screamed at the top of her lungs. "It should be me! Me! I'm the one who deserves it! Give it to me!" She lunged for her sister's legs, her hooves prying at the gold. Grace, for her part, seemed so bedazzled by events that she didn't punt her away at once. But then she levitated Charm up and held the filly by the scruff of her neck.

"Blackjack has made her choice, and you will respect it, Charm," Grace countered.

"Fuck Blackjack! Fuck you! Fuck him! Fuck all of you!" she shrieked as she thrashed at Grace. "I'm gonna kill all of you, and then you're going to be sorry! You'll see!"

"Right. I think that's enough of that!" I said loudly. "Scotch Tape! Rampage!" The pair rushed to the dais, looking at me with nigh salivating grins.

"Yes, Blackjack?" Scotch said eagerly.

"You called?" Rampage asked.

"Please escort Charm to her room, and teach her to watch her language," I said as regally as I could.

"Fuck yeah!" Rampage grinned at the filly. "Run, little piggy! Run!" Charm screamed as she raced for the door, pursued by the pair.

"Don't rip those dresses!" I yelled after them. Then I sighed. "Who named her Charm anyway?"

"I think she always preferred 'Princess' personally," Hoity said lightly.

All eyes then turned to Splendid. Clearly deflated by my choice, he gave a half smile. "We could have saved the Wasteland. Twenty or thirty years... I had it all worked out."

Using bomb collars and slavery... "Somehow, I don't think any one pony can save the Wasteland," I replied evenly, with a small smile. I held up the cut band of gold and gems.

He sighed, and with far more dignity than his younger sibling he addressed the crowd. "I will respect the decision of Queen Blackjack, and I do swear upon my bloodline and ancestry to support her regent loyally and diligently. Never will I raise arms against her, nor forment others to do the same. On my name, Splendid, I do so swear."

I knelt and bent the gold band against his hoof. That left me with the third piece. Since Charm wasn't going to take me up on my offer, I looked at the crowd and then cleared my throat. "This piece I shall keep, and if I need ever abdicate my position permanently, it shall be returned so the crown can be made whole again." The notion that I might give up the position bestowed by Awesome made the crowd go wild.

"Go on," I said, giving Grace a little nudge to the front. "Make a speech."

"I had one planned," she said lightly, "But... you picked me." She looked at the gold on her hoof, as if she still couldn't believe it.

"I want the Society to be better ponies. You're the best pony for the job. Once you've cleaned out the bad apples, then you can start taking over the world," I said with a look at Splendid.

"Yes. I suppose that's a place to start," she said, before clearing her throat and stepping to the front as I moved back. I'd played my role. Hoity had put the protections

she'd need in place, and I'd added a few of my own to make sure she'd have the chance. I wasn't going to let what happened in Flank happen here. And as Grace addressed the crowd, I felt a little purple unicorn inside me being quite proud of what I'd learned. The only oddity was... why did I want to write to the princess about it?

I shifted back and snuck a bite of the crown. Mmmm, sweet mellow gold and spicy ruby. Then I saw Hoity staring at me over the tops of his glasses and I gave a sheepish grin and nodded to the side, off stage. "I need to find Glory." Pressing the band of gold to him. "Hold on to this for me, okay?"

"You don't want to hold on to it?" he asked in surprise.

"Hoity, I'll eat it. That gold is delicious. I can taste hints of platinum too. And those spicy rubies... no. Besides, I might get vaporized tomorrow." I glanced over at Grace addressing the Society about her father and his ideals; it looked like a few members might already be really interested instead of just humoring her. Then I turned my attention back to Hoity. "I need to find Glory. Think I can slip away?"

"I think so. Just be here for the final dances. Make it clear you didn't proclaim and run," he said, and offered his hoof. "May I shake your hoof and congratulate you on your marvelous debut? I was certain you were going to run through the halls shooting and screaming 'Emancipate!' at the top of your lungs." I shook my head, trying my best not to blush before heading in the direction that Glory had fled.

That lead me up stairs and to a balcony overlooking the reservoir. And I slowed as I heard Glory's voice. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know... is it this body? Is it him? Is it me? What's wrong with me?"

Then I heard P-21 answer her. "You've gone through a lot of changes, Glory. So have we all. Yours are a lot more fundamental than most of ours."

"I can't believe he wants to marry me. I can't believe I actually considered it!" I heard the anguish in her voice and leaned over to see her kneeling here, P-21 holding her lightly. "It's got to be this body. It has to be! There's no other reason why I should be attracted to him!"

"Do you like him?" P-21 asked.

"I... it's... you..." Glory stammered. "He's... nice! I thought he would be stuck up and insincere, but he's not. He's a genuinely nice stallion. And he wants me to marry him! He says he loves me. And with Blackjack... she says the same thing and I know she means it but..." She sniffed and beat at her head. "I feel like I'm going crazy!"

"You're not going crazy, Glory. You're in a relationship with Blackjack. It's not unpleasant, but it is a little surreal. It would be easy to simply dismiss her, but you can't. It'd be better to leave her, but you won't. And even though it hurts to be around her, you can't help but want to be there just in case she needs you." He patted her shoulder gently. "I'm sure your condition isn't helping."

"Ugh... don't start that. Just because I'm a mare doesn't mean this is due to hormones," she snapped. "Mares aren't weak just because we get this way."

"Glory, I'm an expert on mares when you get that way," he said, closing his eyes. "Yes, I didn't have any choice in the service I provided, but I know mares, and always it was more than just sex. Duct Tape liked to pretend we were married. Marmalade wanted a friend. Sometimes we didn't even have sex. Palette wanted body paint. Misty Hooves wanted everyone to hear us so people would stop thinking she was a filly. Gin Rummy would tell me her worries about her daughter. Rivets would rut, then complain about the Overmare to me, because I'd listen and not report her. Mares need things in this time. So what is it you need?"

"I... I... I... don't know," she stammered. "On one hoof... I'm... horny..." she said the word with mortification. "And on another I feel ashamed... and I want to be bold and free like Blackjack and on another I... need to apologize." She hung her head and shook it. "That's what I need."

"Then do it. Blackjack will understand. You could have an orgy with half the Society and Blackjack would want to know the juicy details. Don't worry about that." He then gave a little smile. "Just make sure you can accept the consequences if you do. Pregnancy is the last thing you want right now."

"Splendid has a contraception spell... said it was a requirement in his position..." she shook her head and groaned. "Why does everything have to be so complicated?"

I coughed and knocked on the doorjam before stepping outside. Glory immediately looked away. P-21 sighed and smiled at me before walking past. I trotted up to her side and took a seat. "Well. Interesting night. Things are definitely... nightish."

"I'm sorry," Glory said as she looked away.

"For what?" I asked.

"Oh, Blackjack, you know what!" she snapped as she turned to face me. But I cocked my head and knit my brows. "Sex!" she erupted. "With Splendid. Ugh... I can't believe I did it at all."

"Do you want to do it again?" I asked politely. She grit her teeth, eyes popping a

little, before she turned away. I sighed and looked away. "Glory... we can't keep doing this. Not if it's tearing you up this much."

She looked a little terrified as I gazed out into the rain. "Blackjack..." she whispered.

"Sex and monogamy are big deals to you. They're not to me. In fact, the entire monogamy idea is stupid to me," I said bluntly as I looked at her. "I don't care with who, how often, or what toys you use to get off with, so long as at the end of the day you're in my embrace. As long as we're first, I don't care about seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths. Do you understand? I don't care." I stressed those three words as hard as I could before I stroked her mane. "But you do."

"Blackjack," she repeated softly.

"I care that you're upset. I care that you're feeling guilt. I care that you're going through these changes and I can't help you. I care about what you're feeling. But I don't care that you played 'hide the carrot' with Splendid." I closed my eyes. "Maybe it's time we stopped this relationship. All I ever do is hurt you."

She didn't answer, and that was the worst response of all. Okay, she could have laughed and called me a loser, but still. I glanced at her and saw her looking at me funny. Then she stared out at the night as well. "Was Stygius nice?"

"Nice?" I blinked. That's one way of putting it. "He was a bit of a goofball, but nice... sure. Maybe it was a part of the whole 'prince' deal." I rubbed my chin. "I needed someone nice and safe, and, above all, somepony I didn't have a relationship with. I used him," I admitted with a shrug as I looked out into the night. "Not the noblest thing I've ever done, but he was pleasant enough about it and even helped me when he could have just taken off. I guess that's what made it okay for me." I looked for the expression of outrage on her face but was surprised to see her smiling.

She walked to the rail and folded her hooves on it as she looked out into the night. "I was just trying to do it without dying of embarrassment. Definitely different... feeling him move. Not at all like with you. And a lot stickier than I expected," she said as she made a face, then giggled. "You know what's funny? The whole time, I was comparing him to you. Blackjack does this and Blackjack does that. More than anything... I wanted you to be there with me. I wanted to compare and contrast and enjoy things. And of course I immediately thought I was being perverted."

"Why? What's wrong with a threeway?" I nickered and nuzzled her ear.

She laughed and shook her head. "The fact that you can ask that so easily is what astonishes me."

"Glory, if *that's* what's bothering you, I don't mind including others." She groaned and hid her face in her wings. "We could go get Splendid and really see how he treats a pair of ladies." She groaned even louder, and I grinned. "Or Grace? I think Grace would really appreciate it." Glory let out an even louder groan and waved her hoof, trying to hit me.

Finally she sighed and looked at me, then leaned over and pressed her head to my shoulder. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should start imagining less and experimenting more, Blackjack. Trying things with other mares. See what kind of experiences I can have." Then she looked at me. "You'll always be there for me if I need you, right?"

"Always," I replied.

She stretched up and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said quietly as she walked away.

I watched her go, then closed my eyes, sighed, and shook my head. Then P-21 stepped out and looked at me. Just... looked at me with a small smile and a warm look in his eyes. "So... is this part of the plan?"

"Plan?" I gave a little half smile. "I'm so far off a plan that I'm just totally winging it here. I'm personally waiting for everything to explode. That seems to be how most of my 'plans' end."

"Well, if that's what you need," he said calmly as he offered his foreleg. I took it, but turned my head and pressed it to his neck. He felt... nice.

"P-21?" I asked quietly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you still hate me?"

"Blackjack, when it comes to you, I haven't a clue," he replied with a chuckle. "But no. No, I don't think so."

"Oh," I said as I gave him a tighter hug. "That's... nice."

He lead me out to the ballroom. "Shall we dance?" he asked me with a little smile. At the question, it seemed more eyes than just his were turning towards me. Murmurs were spreading about the queen taking the floor. Lacunae and Stronghoof looked over to us. Grace smiled beatifically and nodded her encouragement. Splendid smiled regally.

I looked from him to them and back again. "You... dance?"

"Don't sound so surprised," he replied, arching a brow with a playful haughtiness. "I'm well-trained in a variety of skills. It'll be nice to use them because I want to rather than because I'm being threatened with a needle."

Oh. Right. I looked over, spotted the bartender beside the buffet, and levitated over the first bottle I could. My trusty horn did not let me down; I gazed upon the amber mana of Wild Pegasus and polished the whole damned bottle off. With liquid courage at war with an artificial liver, I set the empty bottle aside and then smiled at him. "Okay. Let's do this."

I don't know if it was the drink or the company or the music, but he lead me to the middle of the dance floor and the music began to play. One two three, one two three, one two three... I began the foalish motions that Grace had drilled into me earlier. I stared into his eyes and the numbers just melted away. He moved, and I moved with him. I was sure that I looked idiotic, but I was Blackjack. What did I have to lose?

And when one song ended, we moved to another. I did what he did, moved as he moved, and laughed. We twirled around, and I spotted Lacunae and Stronghoof twirling magnificently. And then Grace and a pink stallion were dancing beside us. Glory and Crumpets. And before I knew it, P-21 had been replaced by Glory. Then Glory replaced by Splendid. And I had a few more drinks as the world became a wonderful blur of blue and white.

I recalled seeing Brutus and Stronghoof locked in a flexoff that seemed to envelop the two in a nimbus of masculine power. Shirts and harnesses were destroyed in the eruption of pectoral might, and it ended with a hoofbump. Scotch Tape hopping up between the two robotic DJs and playing music that was less twirl and more bouncing base. And everypony danced to it because I did. Rampage beating Stronghoof and Brutus in a hoof wrestle without mussing up her dress. On and on the night continued till finally I laughed and laughed and couldn't stop.

And I was escorted to a bed, my own or somepony else's... and there was blue and white... and dresses being removed and then nuzzling and stroking and kissing... such wonderful kissing. And there was licking in places that were wonderful to be licked and filling and finally the evening really did end in explosion after explosion after explosion...

Not a bad night at all...

When I woke, the music had ended. It was just past midnight. My liver had broken down the alcohol, but the hangover would linger for a while longer. I was tangled up with another pony, awash in the scent of sweat and sweeter smells. I nuzzled soft and wonderful pony before cracking open my eyes. Mmmm, blue. Glory had come back after all. And from the feel of it behind me... a him. Splendid? Slowly, carefully, I rose. There were empty champagne bottles on the nightstand and nearly drained glasses. I wondered if she'd ever drunk before.

Then I looked behind me and froze. No. Not Splendid at all. Flushing far more than I ever had after coitus, I pulled myself free from them. P-21's eyes opened a little, his lips curling in a slightly inebriated smile. "Time to go?" he muttered sluggishly. "Don't call medical. They'll think I did a bad job."

"Shhh..." I muttered gently, leaning down and kissing his brow. "Don't worry about that. I just need to use the little filly's room." He relaxed and closed his eyes, and I stroked his brushy mane before I carefully climbed out of bed. When I was free, I looked down at the pair and felt a twist inside me, but I had no choice now. "Get her home, please," I whispered in his ear. He gave a little smile and nodded in his sleep. I walked past the detritus of priceless dresses and strewn party paraphernalia, slipped into the bathroom, and closed the door.

I walked to the sink; oh Luna, I'd sure been taken care of. Too bad I couldn't remember specifics. I filled the basin and started to wash my face. Then I set the washcloth down, took a deep breath, and looked into the mirror.

A blue unicorn mare with a silver mane looked back. With a flash, Lacunae appeared in the bathroom beside me. "It's time," the goddess said simply in my mind.

Yes, it was time. The Goddess was linked back with me, and it would take more than a hangover to keep her out. Worse, she wasn't threatening my friends or giving me anything I could work with. No righteous anger to shake her control. We were in Unity. She willed, whether I liked it or not. Once more or less clean, I dressed in my gear and lifted my sword. Carefully, I cut out my PipBuck. No way my friends could track me without it, and no last minute radio pleas to try and break the Goddess's control. The Goddess would provide a lesser PipBuck for S.A.T.S. soon. She had PipBuck technicians in Unity to give me the knowledge to install it.

"So. Now what?" I asked the mare in the mirror.

She firmly locked down on my body and told me. There would be no verbalizing this

scream. No fights that could wake my friends. Nothing. Lacunae's horn glowed, and together we disappeared in a flash.

We were on our way to Maripony to kill LittlePip.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: And here is the conclusion to the Society arc. I know a lot of people wanted to see the fall of the Goddess, but really it would have clashed with the tone of the chapter and I really think the Goddess deserves an entire chapter to herself. This is a chapter I wanted to do forever. One good night for Blackjack. I hope that everyone enjoyed it.

I'm hoping to get the Goddess chapter out before I move. There's no answer on the job front, so I might have to move to Vegas to sub. Therefore, the tip jar is always open for anypony with bits to spare. Also, feedback and critiques are more than welcome at the Cloudsville forum. I want to thank everyone who's read thus far, Kkat for creating FoE, Bronode and Hinds for editing, and Squeak for being kind enough to stop by and take a peek. I hope it was an enjoyable chapter. Take care.)

58. Reunion

“You and I have some unfinished business. My magic’s gotten better since I was here last. And I’m going to prove it! Me and you. A magic duel. Winner stays, loser leaves Ponyville forever!”

I’ve never liked gravity. It’s not heights that’re my problem. It’s falling. It’s the idea of gravity pulling you downward. The sense that there was some force constantly clutching at you simply because it could. It didn’t matter how hard you tried or what you wanted, gravity was always there; inescapable, inexhaustible, and unforgiving.

Lacunae looked on, the purple alicorn having replaced her formal wear with the black mourner’s gown. She had a minigun from the Harbinger attack squad and an anti-machine rifle floating beside her as she waited patiently. Idly, I wondered where she kept her ammo. I supposed it really didn’t matter at this point. Despite her wings, she too was trapped in gravity’s inexhaustible pull. So much energy being expended to keep her self from being crushed by its force.

I was falling now as I scribbled out a note in Awesome’s study. Every letter was a struggle to put to the page. ‘wanted to give you this. Take Fleur and go home. Stop Lighthoves. Hope I see you again. Sorrie if I don’t. Talk to’ And I tumbled a little bit more as gravity compelled me to scribble out the last two words. ‘Love you. Blackjack.’ I’d just have to hope that they’d finish what I couldn’t. Gravity told me to move. Gravity wanted me somewhere else. I told gravity to fuck off as I looked to the page and scrawled in a trembling pen, ‘PS: don’t freek out. Last nite was awesem. Giv 21 a hug frm’ but that was all I was allowed. I wanted to add a PPS and a PPPS, but if I did, gravity would make me fall on my friends and kill them.

Gravity was a bitch...

I left the note on the gift I’d found in Meatlocker. I’d forgotten to give it to her... being thrown against a wall by an irate marefriend can have that effect... I struggled to stay there a few seconds more. My PipBuck lay beside it; no calling for help in a moment of lucidity, no navigation tags to lead my friends to me. All very neat. I wanted to linger... Just a few seconds. But gravity tore me away, and I turned to Lacunae. “You can port me all the way to Maripony?”

“No. It will take several teleports, and I will need assistance,” she said in solemn tones. “You will have to help me till we meet up with the others.”

"I don't want to do this," I whimpered as we stood together. I looked at the pathetic note I'd scribbled and ached to stay just another instant, but I couldn't fight it anymore. Neither of us could.

"I know, Blackjack." I looked into her sad eyes and touched my horn to hers. Together, we triggered the spell, her magic supported by my own meager offering. Together, we disappeared.

Our arrival at Miramare felt like I'd slammed through a solid wall. And I could make that comparison; I'd had more than a bit of experience in the slamming-through-solid-walls department. Every cell of my body ached and my horn had some char on it, but it was beyond relevance now. The spell would be cast again. And again. And again, for as long as it was necessary. Indeed, with Lacunae's guidance, teleportation almost seemed easy. "Go get it," Lacunae told me as she trotted out to the crater to soak up her rads for the next leg of our trip. I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. The Goddess pulled at my every thought, dragging me down into the mass that was Unity. Oh, she wasn't going to consume me fully just yet. She wanted a trump card. Already, I had to think of ways to kill LittlePip and her friends.

If it was just LittlePip, I'd have to take her out from outside the range of her E.F.S. I did not want to fight her up close where she could drop a boxcar on me! How such a little mare had such terrifying telekinesis was beyond me. If I did have to fight up close, I'd need the shotgun with flechettes. She wore light armor; if I was lucky, I could take her out quickly. Maybe blind her... she wouldn't be very good with her super telekinesis if she couldn't see, and E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. don't do you any good if you don't have eyes to sparkle at... oh dear Luna, did I just think that?

If her friends got involved... I absorbed everything the Goddess knew of LittlePip and her friends. Calamity would die first. Headshot, long range. I couldn't worry about him and LittlePip at the same time. Velvet Remedy would die next; she'd likely linger over his body. That'd eliminate healing and really distract LittlePip. No matter how she denied it, there were still warm and sexy feelings associated with Velvet in her subconscious. Kill her friends and hurt her too badly to come at me thinking straight. Steelhooves would be risky. Oh, not killing him; Steel Ranger armor was tough, but all I had to do was teleport onto his back and cut his head off with the starmetal sword. No, the problem was that that would put me in range of LittlePip and Xenith. Ultimately, magic bullets to the head would be my best bet for LittlePip. Xenith would probably kill me, but the Goddess would be saved from

whatever plot LittlePip hatched.

I just needed one little thing.

I walked into Miramare's admin building; I didn't need E.F.S. to spot the squatters who'd moved in. A dozen or so emaciated ponies and three tough, scarred, and all around battle-hardened griffins immediately roused themselves as I entered. From their leather gear and service rifles, I doubted they would be any kind of trouble to me. "Hey! This is our place! Get—" one griffin female shouted as she rose. Then she took in just what she was talking to as my eyes locked onto hers. "By the First Egg... who the fuck are you?"

"No pony you want to fuck with tonight," I answered. The force of the Goddess was pushing me to end the three; there was no future for the griffins, zebras, or dragons. Their extinction was unfortunate but inevitable. I thought back that they might be protecting the ponies, some contract arranged. The pressure eased.

"She's with Red Eye. She's a cyberpony, just like him!" one of the earth pony mares shouted in a panic. "She's come to take us back to the pits! Kill her, Lyonesse! Please!"

"I'm not here for any of you. I'm not with Red Eye. In fact, I'll probably be killing him soon." I could feel a whole hit list of people the Goddess wanted dead. I'd be more than her Lacunae; I'd be her personal hitpony. Her executioner. The thought made me clench my teeth and try to think of a way to escape her pull. All I accomplished was a headache as my legs resumed movement through the admin building.

"If you're not after us, we got no argument with you," Lyonesse replied, the young tawny griffin looking at the other two. From the looks they all exchanged, it was clear that this wasn't a fight any of them wanted. That might save their lives. "If you're here for salvage, we picked it all clean and stashed it, so there's nothing for you here."

"Funny. I thought I picked it clean when I swept through here," I replied as I walked past towards the barracks. The three followed. I had to obey that force, but that didn't mean I couldn't chat in the meantime. "You all new to the Hoof?"

"The ponies came from Fillydelphia. Met up with them near Ponyville a couple weeks back. Heard Hoofington wasn't controlled by Red Eye anymore, so we agreed to escort them in exchange for any ammo or weapons we came across," she said, keeping her voice calm as we trotted into the locker room. "So... are there a lot of you around here?"

“Some free advice. Go northeast. Look for a place called Megamart. Premiere traders. They’ll buy anything you folks find. Don’t go southeast. You’ll run into a place called Flank. Used to be a community, now just a lot of killers. Be very careful who you fuck with,” I said as I trotted to the terminal and selected Psalm’s locker.

I typed in the password. ‘Unforgiven’. The locker popped open with a heavy clunk, and I lifted out the large matte black metal case and the black riot armor she’d worn before. I felt the wave of shame from my friend, along with the memory of her placing these objects within when she first returned to Hoofington in exile. Testaments of the bloody legacy she’d carved through ponykind. Popping its catches, I opened the case and looked at the disassembled Penance in its padding. Dozens of tiny scratches on the polymer butt hinted at its bloody legacy. “Forgive me, Luna,” I murmured, despite myself. It still smelled of gun oil. It was a gun of beauty, awesome in its design and terrible in its purpose.

The three griffins looked at me, and one of them suddenly grinned covetously. “Scramble me, that fucking shit is mi—” Her hand reached for her holster.

I obliterated her head in a spray of blood, bone, and brains with a magic bullet. “Oh shi—” screamed the second, trying to bring her guns to bear behind me. One applebuck with two metal hooves, and she made a sound like plywood snapping as she was embedded in the flimsy lockers behind me. Lyonesse I fixed with two glowing pinpricks right in her eyes. The tawny griffin shook as she stared back, filling the room with a salty smell as she wet herself.

Only the fact that she might keep the ponies safe till they could be transformed saved her. I closed the gun case and took the riot armor. Grace’s alteration spell was fresh in my mind; I couldn’t have cast it myself, but I was connected to the analytic genius of Mosaic and Gestalt. In a trice, the alterations had been made, and I pulled the black armor over my body. When the coat was in place, few ponies would guess I was augmented, but everypony would know I was bad news. No dragonkiller rounds in the locker, unfortunately. I’d have to use normal antipersonnel and armor piercing against LittlePip.

Closing the locker, I made my way to the door, leaving the bodies of the two griffins untouched. I think that unnerved Lyonesse even more. “If you really want my advice, though, get the fuck out of the Hoof as fast as you can,” I said calmly. “This place will fucking kill you.” And I turned my back on her, walking out the way I came. The dozen ponies shrank back into the offices and barracks as I strode past. Who could blame them?

The Operative walked the Wasteland once more.

When I approached the balefire crater, Lacunae looked at me with profound regret. “No. No. Please. Don’t do this to her. Don’t make her into her antithesis.”

“You are in no position to tell us to do anything. You are the trash bin, and you are starting to stink. Now make the next jump,” the Goddess replied contemptuously.

“No!” Lacunae shouted, her eyes flaring bright purple. “I won’t!” Dreadful silence filled Unity at those words.

“You what?” the Goddess replied, as if not understanding those two little words.

“I refuse! I will not obey!” Lacunae shouted, sitting in the crater as she pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. “I... I am not your garbage bin! I am... more!” she yelled aloud and across Unity.

“You dare? You think yourself more than us?!” the Goddess retorted haughtily. “You are nothing! You are merely the collection of our weaknesses, flaws, doubts, and pains! You were never born. That vessel isn’t even yours. You are nothing! Now obey!” And gravity strong enough to crush her, the focus of not just the Goddess but hundreds of wills, pressed in upon her.

“I... will... not!” Lacunae roared in response to the dark skies overhead. “I have friends! I am... I am lo... I am cared for! I matter to others! I will not fail them now and deliver them to you.”

“You have friends...” the Goddess murmured, and a ripple spread through Unity at the word. “How... how could a... a nothing... a nopony... a neverpony... have friends?” she demanded scornfully. Then she growled, “Of all the times you could do this, you choose now? Now that LittlePip is coming! She means to destroy us! Blackjack’s own thoughts confirm it. And you dare to do this now? Now?!”

“I will not...” she whimpered. “Think about what you are doing.” She fell to her knees in the crater, eyes clenched shut as her whole body shook.

“What we are doing? We? We are saving the pony race! We are becoming a viable species! We are eliminating three of our greatest threats all in one go. We are also going to make sure a zebra artifact will never corrupt another after we’ve extracted the knowledge we need. We are doing what must be done! What *will* be done! And nopony, not you, not Red Eye, not Blackjack, and certainly not that undersized pain in our ass is going to stop us!” Unity roared into her like an avalanche. “But what about you! What are you doing? You are putting our entire race at risk of extinction because you’re worried about your friend. You are fighting our efforts to

protect ourselves from Red Eye, for your friend. You are blind to threats to us out of concern for your friend! How can you be so shortsighted? How can you be so selfish?" It was not rage that poured through the link, but disgust and contempt. "If only we could execute you safely. . ."

Lacunae pressed her face to the glowing earth as she struggled against the gravity tearing her apart. "Please!" I begged into that raging collection of thoughts and voices. "You had friendship once! You had to! Twilight had friends! She had friends!"

"Echoes and shadows of immaterial things long since passed," the Goddess replied coldly. "Hurtful, wretched, terrible things... do you know what friendship, love, is? It's pain. Pain of loss. Every one of us had friends, family, and loved ones. Do you know what the grief of a thousand ponies feels like? I do. That is why we created the Lacunae. That is why we need her. We couldn't stay sane if we had to feel that."

"But I do feel it!" Lacunae wailed as she rose slowly to her hooves. "Every second of every day. Friendship. Family. Love. And Blackjack feels it. You might have stripped away the feeling and the memories but they're still there. And if you felt them for one minute, then I know you'd realize what you've beco—"

"What we are is what we must be! Radiation and taint will only spread. We must adapt to survive. That was Mosaic and Gestalt's grand conclusion, and Twilight agrees," the Goddess growled back. "Do you think all of this was made despite Twilight's wishes? No. Her will and intellect have made us possible!"

"She wouldn't! If you returned to her all that you've put into me, she wouldn't! And neither would you. Any of you!" Lacunae wept as she turned about, as if appealing to a massive invisible audience. "Take it back. Before you do this. Take all of what you've put in me back. Then see what conclusions you reach."

"There is neither time nor a point to such an exercise," the Goddess said gravely. "We stripped away those thoughts and feelings decades ago. Only our children matter now, and you will stop behaving so immaturely and do as you are told!"

Lacunae swayed to and fro, staggering in circles. Finally, her eyes came to rest on mine. Tears poured down her cheeks as she whimpered, "I'm sorry, Blackjack. I. . . I wanted to do better too. . ."

"You did," I murmured as I bent my head, as the Goddess wanted. Gravity always won in the end. I could see our destination clearly; there were fundamentals of teleportation being dumped into my head to aid in the trip. I tried to project back my own memories and the feelings I'd gotten from Twilight, but they went no further

than Lacunae. The Goddess didn't want to feel, didn't want to remember the past.

Our weeping eyes met as we touched our horns. Together, we channeled the spell and disappeared for our next destination, outside the Hoof entirely. We reappeared on the tracks southwest of the city; this time I didn't land on my face, since Lacunae's own radiation-empowered body provided most of the energy.

This was the first time I'd been out of the Hoof while connected to Unity, and the difference was startling. Before, I'd only been aware of Lacunae and the omnipresent screaming note. Now, that scream was just a barely perceptible wail on the horizon, and in the clarity I could hear the individual whispers of dozens, even hundreds of minds. I knew them, and they knew me, and yet... something was wrong. Okay, maybe I didn't have much of a right to judge the state of telepathic mass minds, but as I felt all those different intellects, there were so many and so... little.

Like the two greens flying towards us. I knew that one had been an opportunistic scavenger who'd stumbled upon Maripony a century and a half ago... yet, he didn't even know his own name. He didn't want to know. He didn't even care. And his companion had grown up in a settlement... but that was all she knew; there were no faces of a mother and father. No games played, or friends. The memories she did retain were banal and functional things: how to fix leaky water pumps with scrap metal, and twenty-five different uses for duct tape. But when I pressed on who had taught her, there was only an empty gap.

Hundreds of souls all humming in harmony, but it was a spiritless tune... all the more heartbreaking for what it could have been. Had they been bound in friendship, tapping into that elusive and powerful magic that transcended definition, the Goddess would have been a Goddess in reality. But now that I could see Unity directly, I saw how pitiful they were. Even if they were monstrous, they were still so very sad and small compared to their potential.

And as soon as I was dipped, I would be just like them. Oh, there'd be an alicorn called Oubliette or some other oddly fitting name that had once been Blackjack's body... maybe she'd still have her augmentations... but the real me would be another of those masses of voices around the Goddess. I wouldn't remember my friends, but I wouldn't miss them, either. And I wouldn't remember the bad things. Everything distressing or disruptive would be shoved into the new dumpster. Because despite her threats, the Goddess needed me.

Others besides the greens were coming. In the meantime, I had to find out what LittlePip was up to and how to go about killing her. Because while the Goddess had

dozens of technicians, scientists, scavengers, and even raiders, she had precious few heroes connected to her. The idea was alien, stupid, and even insane. The Goddess literally could not put herself in LittlePip's horseshoes and anticipate what she might do. In a rush, I was learning more about the Stabl...

Oh dear sweet Luna. They were the same pony? They hadn't been joking about that?! How... she... I... I couldn't believe that a tiny, sweet, smart mare like her could be the strapping goddess of Wasteland death! I... I'd just not think about it.

Thank goodness, the Goddess seemed to reply as I refocused on my job and on LittlePip's biography. How she'd gone after Velvet Remedy half out of lust and half out of a desperate need for a friend. How she'd met Calamity. How she'd dealt with the crushing realization that she and Velvet would never be, and how she'd met Homage... and *oh* the things she'd *done* with Homage!

Really. It made me wish I remembered the events of a few hours ago a lot more clearly...

The Goddess had my meager memories, as well. The thing we did together at Red Eye's camp. Of course, I'd been half drunk the whole time and had no clue what LittlePip had actually gone there for, just that she'd done it. She'd needed... what? Information? It was no secret that Red Eye was trying to duplicate the events that created the Goddess, but hadn't succeeded. Maybe he'd discovered a weakness and LittlePip had asked him about it. Or maybe she'd needed something from him. His Balefire bomb? Could LittlePip actually talk him into surrendering it? Doubtful. Red Eye wasn't a hero. He'd never trust LittlePip. If he did give her something, it'd likely be a fake. How about help? An army? He had the soldiers to spare, but would they matter? Something from his Stable? Some kind of tech that could be used against the Goddess?

"What is she going to do?" came the constant pressing question from Unity.

"I don't know. I'm not a smart pony. You should have taken P-21 and Glory," I countered, but I was already imagining it. LittlePip was smart. She'd try and hit the Goddess in some way the Goddess wouldn't see coming. Maybe she was going to dump those thousands and thousands of memory orbs that had been hidden under Shattered Hoof into the Goddess. No clue what would happen. The Goddess made sure she'd telekinetically repel anything small and round. The Black Book? Maybe she had some spell to affect the souls in Unity? That was pondered gravely. What if LittlePip could extract the Goddess's soul from Unity and bind it in a soul jar? Or an even more powerful spell. Twilight recalled the zebra lore of a star falling on

Equestria. Perhaps that?

It was a huge unknown, but it was all the more frustrating because every memory of Twilight studying the Black Book with Rarity had been removed from Unity. All Twilight knew was that she *had* done it. And that she couldn't recall a spell like that... but what if she was wrong? What if there was a clue in one of those missing moments that had been thrown away because the thought of her friend hurt so very much? Unity couldn't bear those emotions, so said the Goddess...

But I wasn't just in Unity, was I? I was connected to Lacunae. I could dig through the 'trash' and try and see for myself. I met her eyes, said "I'm sorry," and invaded her as surely as I'd been invited. I had no choice. Gravity compelled me, no matter how much I hated it. The Goddess knew what I knew, and the Goddess wanted me to look.

But inside Lacunae's mind, past the surface of her consciousness, the contents were a solid mass of compressed thought. There was no organization or cataloguing, simply presence. Like geological strata, the newest memories inside her were all of me and my friends and her experiences with us. Worse, the merest digging shifted psychological structures that even the Goddess didn't fully understand. She'd overfilled Lacunae, pressurized her with so much that even this minor disturbance threatened a chaotic reaction.

The act, ironically enough, was like digging through colored stones tagged with cutie marks. The memories had condensed until they crystallized like amber. Many had no identification at all, lost to Unity's members for all time. But I could find interesting stones of purple with Twilight's cutie mark upon them. And with Gestalt's help, I could look inside.

Odd; I had the feeling that half of Unity was trying to peek over my shoulder and see that which had been stripped from them. But which to look in... which to look in... I touched one of Twilight's memories and heard two names at once. 'Rarity' and 'Goldenblood'.

Oh, this I had to see. I took the memory into myself – don't ask me how, that was being handled at a higher level – and Lacunae's mindscape swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I found myself in a sumptuous hallway approaching a door emblazoned with three rhomboid, blue gems. No further title was needed. I shifted the scrolls in my bags; only an hour, and all of it would probably be spent working on new M.A.S. recruit-

ment slogans. Then it would be time to go back to Manehattan and finish a report for the Princess. Time... there just wasn't enough of it. Not enough time with Spike. Not enough time with my friends. Not even enough time with my magic. When was the last time I did an all-night book trawl of Starswirl's spells? Or even just read a book because I wanted to read it?

I walked up and was about to knock when I heard the familiar, rusty voice. "You must have something, Rarity. You always have something." I froze, my hoof an inch from the door. Eavesdropping was horribly rude, but this was Goldenblood. He was up to something. He should have had an oil slick for a cutie mark. Why would he be meeting with Rarity? I turned and pressed my ear to the door.

"Goldenblood, *darling*, you make it sound as if I'm collecting books on zebra lore," Rarity's voice barely penetrated, but I could hear the poisoned sarcasm of the word.

"I know you haven't turned over all the writing on zebra magic to Twilight," Goldenblood countered. "Especially critical tomes you keep on your person," he added archly.

"We have a deal, Goldenblood. I keep your dirty laundry out of the press and history books and you don't harass me," Rarity countered. "The confiscation of tomes and texts that are hazardous to the war effort falls under my jurisdiction, and I take my ministry responsibilities seriously."

"If you could just give me an hour or two with it, then I'd be satisfied!" Goldenblood said forcefully, before collapsing into a fit of coughing.

"Perhaps you should have thought about asking before sending your little black assassin to steal it," Rarity replied coldly. "You're lucky I didn't turn her over to Pinkie Pie. Most of what you seek isn't here, anyway. All copies are erased, and the originals are archived outside Canterlot. I keep all those unpleasant things in Hoofington."

"Please," Goldenblood rasped. "Please. I need to know. There are things happening! Things that only the zebras know. I need to read about the disaster that befell their people long ago. How did they call down the star? Was it one or several? What were the effects afterwards? I must know!"

Calling down stars? That sounded serious. Megaspell serious.

Rarity didn't answer immediately. "Is this professional or personal?" Rarity asked pointedly.

Now it was Goldenblood's turn to pause before he answered, "It's personal. This is

something outside the O.I.A. This is something I have to know.”

Rarity didn’t answer immediately. “Very well. I won’t lend you my primary source. I didn’t even give it to Twilight. But I will give you a few hours of access in return for a favor. Pinkie Pie has been sniffing around my projects. I’d appreciate it if you could do something nefarious to distract her. Perhaps skulk about Manehattan in a black cape and top hat. Oooh! And you simply must add a mustache to twirl. She’ll be following you in seconds.”

“I’ll consider it, but I think a word to Quartz might be more effective.” Then he paused and added, Thank you, Rarity.” He replied in obvious relief. “I’m sorry,” he said a moment later.

“I beg pardon?”

“Sorry. Sorry for everything. For... you... your friends... everything...” he muttered something I couldn’t hear and then let out something that sounded almost like a sob. “It’s one thing to plan... it’s quite another to execute...”

“Goldenblood? What’s going on?” Rarity asked, now with real concern. “Is this about Horse taking your position at the O.I.A.?”

“No, Rarity,” Goldenblood choked. “I think I made a mistake... and then I made mistakes to deal with my mistake... and now... Rarity... I think something’s gone horribly wrong and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“What is it? Tell me. Perhaps I can help,” Rarity said generously. “I know something about mistakes. Sometimes I just want to trot up to Luna and tell her to take this ministry and... do something unladylike and anatomically uncomfortable with it. If it weren’t for my friends loving every minute of it...”

There was a long pause in response. “Thank you, Rarity, but this was my mistake. I’m the one who has to clean it up. Please, excuse me.” There was an implosion of air and a faint flash under the door. I backed up and chewed my lip. What to say? Admit that I was spying on my friend? Accuse her of holding secrets? Admit that working at the M.A.S. wasn’t the dream come true I’d imagined years ago, now that most of the research was being done by other ponies?

I turned away from the door and walked back down the hall to Rarity’s secretaries. “Um... excuse me. I just remembered something that completely slipped my mind. I was hoping we could resche—“

“Twilight?” came Rarity’s voice from behind me, and I froze, then turned slowly and frowned. She looked... terrible. There were shadows around her eyes and a

gauntness that made her look as if she hadn't eaten in days. Even her magnificent mane had more gray tips than I'd ever seen before. And how she moved... as if she were in pain... still, she smiled. "Twilight, Darling, it's so wonderful to see you again!"

"Rarity? Are you all right?" I asked as I trotted quickly to her side. "You look—"

"Glamorous? Stunning? Beautific?" Rarity suggested at once, bringing a smile to my face.

"Old, actually," I answered honestly.

She slumped a little and gave a small indulgent smile. "Twilight, I really do need to loan you a copy of *Principles of Proper Pony Speech*." Her smile faded, replaced by a look of clear fatigue. "Actually, I'm just a little tired after my latest creation," she said as she started back towards the office.

"You're still making dresses? Even while running your ministry?" I said, both impressed and a touch envious as I followed her inside. I caught her sliding a drawer closed as she walked behind the desk.

"No. I wanted to... well... branch out a little, as it were," she said as she lifted a purple and pink box wrapped in star-printed ribbon and set it on the desk before me. "These are for you, Twilight."

I cocked my head, feeling something was off about this gift, but not in a bad way. Carefully, I tugged the ribbon, undid the bow, and then started to pull up the tape very... Oh, Rarity was giving me the look that meant that now wasn't the time to save wrapping paper... I ripped it right off at once and opened the box inside. I tugged the paper free and...

There we were... all six of us together like when we were young, before this horrible mess had occurred. And there was Pinkie Pie, and she looked happy and free. And Rainbow Dash grinning confidently and Applejack mid-buck. And... was that me? Was that really how I used to look? I pulled out the tiny figurine. It felt... warm. "Rarity..."

"I put my heart and soul into them. One set for each of us, and a seventh for Princess Luna." Her smile faded a touch, "Do you like them?"

"Rarity... they're amazing! I... I don't deserve them," I said as I lifted the rest out. "They're so lifelike," I said as I assembled them on Rarity's desk.

"While I originally planned on keeping them together... I really couldn't. I gave one

of mine to Sweetie Belle, along with an apology. I've given her so many, but I hope she realizes that this one's sincere. And I know Rainbow Dash is giving one of hers to Scootaloo. I expect that Applejack is giving one to Applebloom. And I believe Fluttershy has given one to Angel Bunny, can you imagine?" She smiled and lifted a tiny Applejack with her magic. "Well, at least she doesn't have to worry about them breaking." And she thumped it solidly against the table. For an instant I moved to stop her, but she was right. The figurine was unharmed.

I lifted the tiny replica of myself. "I... it's... I could give it to Spike... or Princess Celestia... or..." Mom. I swallowed as I sniffed and smiled. "It's like the Gala tickets all over again."

"Yes. There's never quite enough to go around," Rarity replied, her smile fading. "If I'd known how the Princess would take it, I would have given a whole set to Spike."

"How did she take it?" I asked with a touch of concern.

Rarity seemed to consider her words for a moment, then sighed and rolled her eyes a little. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose she's used to lavish presents. But when I gave it to her she seemed... disturbed by it. I've never seen her so discomposed before. She thanked me, of course, but I'm not quite sure she knew what to do with them. I suppose it'll end up on a shelf somewhere. I rather hoped she'd give a figurine of you to Celestia, but..." she sighed and shook her head, then lifted the tiny copy of herself and gazed into its eyes with profound sadness. "I suppose this is as close as I will ever come..."

"Rarity?" I asked, wanting to put a hoof on her shoulder.

She laughed mirthlessly and casually wiped her eyes with her fetlock. "Oh my. Becoming so maudlin over such a... a silly little thing." She glanced at me, then gave a little smile. "You know... I still have the Twilight Sparkle from my set... I could give it to Spikey Wikey so he'll always have you with him."

I caught on and returned her smile. "And I could give him my Rarity. So he'll always have the love of his life." I looked at the six, feeling a little tight in the chest and throat as my gaze lingered on the friend whose problems I couldn't help, no matter how smart I was. "It might have been simpler just to give each of us seven of ourselves. Then we could just give them those people we cared about."

"I... considered that..." Rarity murmured, but so softly that I looked over and saw her face shielded by her mane. Then she gave a sniff. "I did. But... I wanted each of us to remember our friends as we used to be, not as we are today." She tried to

wipe away her tears behind the veil of her mane but couldn't hide the thickness in her throat as well. "He was right. It all seems to have gone horribly wrong, doesn't it?"

"Rarity?" I asked gently, putting a hoof on her shoulder. Should I bring up what I'd overheard? But then it was too late as she broke down, sobbing, pushing her face into my shoulder as she clung to me, trembling. Great hot tears spilled down my neck as she clung to me.

"I was supposed to be a fashionistia! I wanted to design things for other ponies. Not... not micromanage and direct others and pretend like... like all *this* is important to me." She flailed a hoof at the sumptuously decorated office. "Managing Luna's image? Confiscating books? Authorizing press releases? I was supposed to have a handsome husband and a foal that I could spoil absolutely rotten and a boutique for Canterlot's finest. That was what my life was supposed to be! But you and Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie... oh Pinkie Pie!" she wailed and shook her head. "How did it come to this? Where did it all go so... so wrong?!" she asked as she pulled back and looked at me with a devastated gaze.

"I... don't know," I whispered as I stared straight ahead. Tears of my own ran down my cheeks. "I don't know anymore. I look back these ten years and it just feels... empty. Like everything we've been through... anything good... has been sifted away. I... go to bed and I feel like somepony should be there with me! But he's not there... and I don't even know who he is. And that I'm supposed to have... more! But it's not there either. Like everything that I'm supposed to cherish is just smoke and the things that should matter aren't there anymore!"

"But we have to do it," Rarity whispered, guilty and ashamed. "It was like Rainbow Dash said. There're so many ponies fighting and dying for us that we have to give back to them. We owe Equestria. And Applejack... it's not just other ponies fighting. It's family."

I thought of Big Macintosh, and that huge gulf threatened to consume me. I had a precious few memories of the red stallion before the war... but that was it. "Maybe," I answered drying my tears in her mane. "But that was ten years ago. It might be time to think about changing things... soon." Once the I.M.P. was finished, I could step aside. Let Mosaic and Gestalt run the Ministry. Or Luna could pick somepony else. I was tired... tired of the stress and the pressure and the meaningless sacrifice. There were just a few loose ends to wrap up.

Like meeting the candidate for the I.M.P. test tomorrow...

“Enough,” the Goddess snapped, breaking me out of my reverie. Three more alicorns, a blue and two greens, had joined us. There’d be more at the next destination, I knew. “You’re wasting time. All these... these... emotions. They’re pointless! You need to focus on eliminating LittlePip.” I shared Twilight’s tears. She hadn’t known, the life that could have been. That should have been. What would Twilight have ended up as if she hadn’t accepted Luna’s offer? Wizard? Princess? Wife? What about Applejack or Rainbow Dash? Or poor Pinkie Pie? Would Fluttershy have committed high treason if she’d never been put in a position where she could do so?

It was wrong. All of it. Every last bit felt contrived and pointless and... stupid! What was all that for? “What’s the Goddess-damned point!?” I screamed aloud and through Unity. A war over resources that destroyed the countries that wanted them. Ministries that consumed the mares that directed them. Princesses who seemed absent just when everypony needed them. A Goddess who was planning to kill a mare whose greatest driving goal was to help others.

Then the Goddess showed me.

An irradiated world, one in which even the Enclave had been driven to extinction. No ghouls; those would be stamped out eventually. Zebras, griffins, and dragons were no more. Just a world of alicorns. A few males; it would depend on how the Black book would make the changes, but the Goddess had no interest in creating an equal distribution of sexes; she knew the effectiveness of Stable 99. New alicorn types, perhaps red ones that specialized in fire or white ones that specialized in ice would be developed and evolved. Perhaps alicorns who traveled in time? Super telekinetic alicorns? The Elements of Harmony and the Gardens of Equestria would be reclaimed and repurposed; Twilight might only have generalities and scraps, but they’d be a foundation for a new Gardens. One that spread balefire and magical radiation to every land till the very oceans glowed with power. There would be only alicorns and their Goddess, a mother and her children. One mind. One will. One note united forever. They’d use their magic to defeat Horizons, whatever it was, and cast down Hoofington once and for all.

And that was the point of the world. By Alicorns. For Alicorns. Only Alicorns. A monorace with a singular will and a Goddess with the power to exceed any Princess.

And I was going to be a part of it, whether I wanted to or not. So would all my friends. Everypony. And if you weren’t a pony or resisted, the alternative was simple and

permanent death. And most terrible of all was who in Unity had come up with this plan. Not Trixie, the showmare. Not even Mosaic and Gestalt. This was Twilight Sparkle's plan... a Twilight stripped of compassion and concern and ethics. A Twilight more machine than mare, fulfilling Trixie's ego. It felt like there was more Twilight inside Lacunae than inside the Goddess. Almost.

Twilight was a part of that monster. As was Trixie. As were Mosaic and Gestalt. Fused. Stripped of those parts that allowed compassion for others. Trixie had suffered, knew shame and humility, but that was gone now. Mosaic and Gestalt had felt a love and a desire to understand others... but that was gone as well. Weakness shoved into Lacunae... like soul jars of memory. The Goddess had become like a void sucking in everything good and transforming it into more of itself. Would it stay on this world, when every last living thing was altered to suit it? Or would thousands of purples and millions of greens teleport them to distant stars and innocent worlds?

And I was going to kill the mare best-suited to end her now.

The greens touched horns, their magical fields boosting Lacunae's. With another flash, we disappeared.

There were a half-dozen more alicorns at our destination. An old train switchyard; in the distance was some large structure with hundreds of mirrors. Aside from some gutted concrete storage buildings and some rusted train cars, there was nothing of interest here. LittlePip had entered the crater; I had to hurry. There was no more time for delays. There were no signs of her friends; both they and Red Eye had pulled back. Did Red Eye know what was going on? Her spies hadn't learned it. If so, it meant only Red Eye himself knew. LittlePip and Red Eye in collusion... the possibilities made gravity crush in on me as a green brought a PipBuck from Fillydelphia and began to wire it into the hole in my leg. She'd once been a father and a stable technician; beyond that, she didn't matter. Anything that made her matter had been shoved into Lacunae.

"Think! What is she going to do? What might she do?" the Goddess demanded.

"I don't know! She's smarter than me!" I shouted back as my head felt like it was being pressed between two crushing hooves.

"You have endured and faced ridiculous odds! How would you kill me?" The Goddess pressed.

"Me?!" I laughed madly aloud and into the link. "Oh, let me count the ways! Hijack a Raptor and crash it into Maripony with all guns blazing? Work out a deal with the Enclave to give them Shadowbolt Tower in return for killing you? Fill your head with horribly catchy pre-war pop songs that would drive anypony crazy? Oh! There's an overcharged megaspell in Hoofington! I'd totally use that! Oh! Better than that. I'd warn the Hellhounds and tell them to clear out in return for planting it right under your goopy blue ass!

"And don't get me started on all the ways she *might* kill you! Maybe she's gotten Gardens to work and she plans on neutralizing Maripony's taint. Or maybe Velvet Remedy has that spell; seems like it'd be right up her alley. Or the Black Book! Maybe it's given her some kind of superpowered soul spell. Or Spike might make an appearance just to kick your ass! An army of Steel Rangers! Zebra death comandos! The possibilities are endless!" I laughed wildly, madness being the only escape I could see open for me.

"Enough! She has none of those things!" the Goddess countered.

"Oh, but you don't know, do you?" I retorted at once as the green finished connecting the PipBuck to my systems. I was forced to chow down on some gems, but that didn't silence my mind. "You know she planned to remove those memories of me. But you don't know. You can't even imagine what she might have up her PipBuck sleeve." New possibilities of deicide bloomed in my mind as the Goddess imparted all she knew about LittlePip. "Maybe she found some severed greens in Canterlot, and they're going to help her lift the whole Maripony building and shove it into the sinkhole! You don't know!" I swallowed and laughed even louder. "And what's so pathetic is that you brought me, the stupidest damn pony in the Wasteland, to help! How dumb does that make y—!"

"ENOUGH!" the Goddess yelled as I collapsed and started to convulse. "You are quite right! I don't need your intellect or morals. I just need you to kill one mare. You don't need anything besides that!" And I screamed as I felt gravity tear a piece of me away. A... place. Where had I come from? I was Blackjack, and my mom... who...

"No! Please!" Lacunae screamed as she turned from one stoic alicorn to the next. "Stop it!" Things seemed to be falling away from me. A place with a filly who filled me with dread... what was her name? A boat where I felt horrible pain... but why? A stallion I wanted to kill... but I couldn't recall the reason. "Don't do this to her!" the strange purple alicorn shouted.

I... I should be doing something. Following something with my friends. Scotch Tape... and... and who was she? And there'd been another... I could see them for an instant: a blue stallion and a gray pegasus. They were frustrated with me... amused by me... I loved them... I...

I loved who?

An echo whispered in my mind. "It fucking sucks not to remember."

Yes. Yes it did. Then that went away too.

"Stop it!" the aberrant alicorn screamed as she lifted the two guns. Crude weapons; inelegant. "I won't let you do this to her!" She dared to turn against us? To fight us? To betray her own? The motors began to whirl on the minigun as the anti-machine rifle loaded a round into the chamber.

"Madness," I said, calmly.

Gravity directed; universal and inescapable. Do not kill. Disable. I brought up S.A.T.S. and queued four magical bullets, boosted by four greens. Limbs and wings; she would survive that. Eighty-one percent probability. I activated the spell, the bullets blasting with the ferocity of our unity at the aberrant. Why was I... why didn't matter. Do.

Unfortunately, the aberrant disappeared in a purple flash. We were working to bring the aberration into line. The recent additions had caused her to slip free. Where... I knew, but we could not react in the half second of time we had. The anti-machine round blasted right through the skull of the purple beside me from directly above. Shields raised around all of us, except myself and the blues, as we looked up at the aberrant above us. Rage and grief filled her face. Madness. She would not target me, but the aberrant's powerful rifle would be problematic. The two blues disappeared into invisibility as two of the greens boosted each other's shields. The minigun would be far less effective as it needed several seconds to chew through shields.

The battle should have been finished in seventeen point nine seconds. I teleported directly above the aberrant. I expected some... something... as gravity dropped me upon her back, my mass penetrating her shield with only moderate discomfort. Silver sword emerged from its sheath. Severing her horn and wings would simplify things greatly. If horn amputation severed the aberrant from us, we might even be able to kill her cleanly and rid ourselves of her toxic emotions for good.

Only she flipped upside down completely the instant I made contact. I tried to flap

my wings, but I was aberrant as well. Heavy. I passed through the bottom of her shield with an electric crackle and slammed into the muddy ground. One of the free greens shot powerful silver arrows into the aberrant's body. The blues would move to ambush her. Already they were flanking, and with their shields down there was nothing to betray them while I recovered from the impact.

The aberrant swore impotently as she sprayed wildly about her. Futile. Madness. The madness of everypony outside Unity. The minigun rounds zinged through the air as the blues moved in. One remained silent when the line of bullets was interrupted by her body. The aberrant continued to fire wildly with the minigun. . . but not with the rifle. That weapon swung around to where the minigun's bullets had disappeared in mid air and blasted the blue vessel with an antipersonnel round. The pain was significant as the round fragmented, expanded, and exploded out the far side in a significant spray of organic fluid and protein.

The non-shielding greens were working through the aberrant's shields, and seeing the death of its twin, the blue evaded that revealing stream of bullets. Without that, there was nothing to betray its approach. Gunsmoke wreathed the black form. Another sign of aberration; clothing was irreverent social symbolism. I rose up and drew the dual dueling revolvers, waiting for the PipBuck's spell matrix to recharge so I could maximize my accuracy. The aberrant seemed to be avoiding targeting me. I could use that to our advantage.

Seventeen point nine seconds elapsed. . . frustrating. Silent wings carried the blue behind the aberrant, swirling the smoke. . . swirling. . .

The blue raised her shield, the greens pumping the anti-kinetic shield to maximum; even the rifle's bullets shouldn't penetrate! But the aberrant didn't fire either gun. No. Instead she bit hard on the barrel; the metal burning her mouth as she swung with both muscle and telekinesis, slamming the heavy butt with incredible force. The slow, heavy mass (relative to a bullet) pierced a shield anticipating far higher velocities, and the butt crashed hard upside the blue's head. She screamed instinctively, but that just allowed the second return swing to crash right against her temple. Her shield flickered as focus was lost, and it broke completely when the final blow smashed her skull and sent the other blue crashing down.

The aberrant had taken severe damage, though. Her shield had fallen and that black garment was spotted with a dozen bleeding wounds. A few more and she should be exhausted enough to disable. The greens prepared another barrage as two focused on shields and two on the magic arrows that streaked after her. The aberrant was saying the word 'blackjack' over and over again, but what relevance a gambling

card game played I couldn't imagine. With her shield down, she was taking shelter behind one of the rusted boxcars. Reinforcements were minutes away, but we didn't have minutes to waste with the aberrant.

I had her on my E.F.S. The red bar stood out; she hadn't teleported away. Knowing she wouldn't attack me directly, I darted around behind the boxcar. Nothing! I turned to face the car, frowning. Where did the aberrant. . .

Two booms erupted through the metal of the boxcar. The shots were wide; I was correct. The aberrant had a critical weakness to this shell. I jumped inside and rolled, but the aberrant seemed to anticipate me as she jumped back atop me. "Stop it, Blackjack! Fight her! Fight!"

I didn't understand what she meant and I didn't care. I brought the sword around; not towards her but towards the anti-machine rifle that had been so devastating. The starmetal edge cut through the weapon's barrel, rendering it useless. The greens moved to either side of the boxcar as I swung the weapon at her horn, but she parried with the ruined butt, twisting the weapon to prevent the edge from simply slicing through it as well. The black dress ripped off her purple body; perhaps a sign she was returning to the guidance of unity?

No. The garment was thrown in my face, and even when the sword sliced it neatly in two, her magic grabbed the tatters. With magical swiftness, she tied them tightly in place.

Then she threw me into the face of two greens in the doorway. It was only for a moment, but the impact of my heavy metal body disrupted the focus of the pair. And I heard the spinning up of the minigun in that second. At point blank range, the five millimeter rounds ripped into all three of us, but I was far more resilient than the other two in the heap. Still, the few seconds it took for the aberrant to dispatch the pair allowed the other two to grievously injure her. And using the sight of the greens, I rammed the blade into the spinning barrels. The metal sheared off and flew away in a dazzling circle of sparks and steel.

Just a few more seconds. Just a few. . .

She disappeared in another purple flash and reappeared atop a boxcar twenty feet away. Blood dribbled from her wounds as she slumped. The aberrant was almost finished. She would submit, and if she would not, then this one would perform the task personally. She was clearly straining with another spell, her horn crackling as she gritted her teeth. Perhaps an attempt to teleport away? Annoying, but manageable. The two greens approached the injured aberrant.

Then she disappeared, and the source of her strain was evident.

The boxcar had disappeared too.

I suddenly felt a sensation of déjà vu. . .

The car crashed down upon the remaining pair of greens with a squeal of broken metal. I sliced the cloth tied to my head carefully and caught sight of the aberrant falling limply from the top of the crushed car. The pair had gotten their shields up in time, but it'd take them a while to disentangle themselves from the wreckage. The aberrant's horn was blackened along its entire length to her face and it still gave wild sparks from being overtaxed. Slowly I approached, pistols and swords ready. She opened one pain-filled eye and said, "You idiot. Don't you get it? She's worthless like this."

That was true. Resilience aside, this body lacked. . . something. It would have to. . . be. . . "Oh Goddess. . ." I breathed as I stared down at Lacunae's broken body. "Oh no. . . no!" I collapsed at her side, and held her close, shaking as I wept. The pieces that had been removed from me were back, and more. I now knew what Unity was like. Perhaps my tenure in the group mind might be a little different, but not by much. I'd be hollow. Cold. Dead in the ways that mattered.

I bowed over her, cradling her as more alicorns teleported in around us. "Why didn't you just kill me? I'd rather you'd done that," I whimpered like a filly as I held her. I felt like I was being dragged back to the Seahorse. . . only worse. At least then I could have died.

"You don't kill your friends, Blackjack," she replied with a pained smile. And I looked into my friend's eyes, and I knew why. I could see it glowing in the middle of that jumbled mess of memories. . . the one true thing that was Lacunae's and only hers. Hope. Hope that she could delay long enough for LittlePip to defeat the Goddess. Hope that, somehow, I'd be free. It was small and pitiful and so beautiful.

"Give me a healing spell," I demanded of Unity as I held Lacunae's bloody body.

"Already makin—" the Goddess began, but I pressed Sacrifice against my head and Duty against Lacunae's. I wouldn't leave her with the Goddess. I felt like I was in Flash Industries once more, fighting with all my will against gravity. "Really?" the Goddess asked, sounding skeptical and disappointed.

"Heals. Now. Or I'll blow my brains out and laugh at you from the afterlife as LittlePip kills you. I'll even get a special spot in hell ready just for you," I hissed, my muscles shaking as I kept all my focus on the trigger. I think, like this, Glory would forgive me

for breaking my promise to her.

The dropped boxcar rocked as the two greens telekinetically heaved it off themselves. They approached slowly with the others, forming a ring around us. I could feel the Goddess calculating. Did she need me? Would it be better just to let us die? Some part of the Goddess decided a sliver in my favor. Their horns glowed in unison; the Goddess wasn't going to trust me with the spell. Carefully, they healed most of her injuries as I watched. Only when she stood did my resolve crack, and I yielded to gravity once more.

"You are a pain in our ass," the Goddess muttered softly, but there was something else in her tone. Frustration? Admiration? Resignation? I couldn't tell for certain.

The greens touched their horns, and the purple alicorns' horns began to glow. Two more teleports. What could we do? How could we stop the Goddess? I looked at Lacunae and that tiny glowing emotion inside her that I lacked. Hope. Just a little bit in the Wasteland. . .

Lacunae's delay had bought LittlePip a few minutes. She'd arrived already and was inside and approaching the Goddess with the Black Book. There was no time left. The Goddess was hesitant to probe LittlePip too deeply, and yet at the same time she was eager to strip away and discover all she could. Like a foal with a Hearth's Warming Eve present, parts of her wanted to wait till the book was taken care of, but others wanted to devour every thought from her perilous enemy. LittlePip believed she was dooming all of the Wasteland with this action; she was right.

We'd teleported to the lip of the crater. I'd take care of her from here.

Under cover, I immediately unpacked Penance and began the exacting assembly of the weapon. Even if I wanted to foul it somehow, I couldn't. Gravity wouldn't let me. Even after two centuries, the rifle fit together perfectly, one piece into another. It was a work of art, terrible and awesome all at once. I carefully slid the scope into position, then tightened the screws to exactly the right tension.

And the icing on the cake? The small black container marked 'M.A.S. / M.W.T. / O.I.A. EBP#12.' which had also lain in Maripony's research facilities for two centuries. Within was a .50 caliber round of black diamond carefully etched with magic glyphs. A wonderful application of bypass magic. A bullet, magically precise, that would ignore stone and steel and impact flesh. According to classified notes discovered in the facility, #8 and #9 had performed marvelously. The Goddess felt a smug

glow at withholding this treasure from Red Eye. I slid the round home and I lay out on my stomach. I had Psalm in me, her training and her habits, and I had my own precise control of my telekinesis. As the chamber closed and locked, a cold shiver ran through me.

Time to kill LittlePip.

I raised the rifle and stared. The magical scope made the stone, wires, piping, and rebar disappear in a cylinder along the path. It took me almost a minute to find LittlePip; it was like peering down a straw, a magic straw that could see through walls. My horn turned a little dial back and forth, moving in and out of the structure as I swept the weapon back and forth. Then she appeared, the tiny, brave mare approaching the vats. Saddlebag floating beside her. The black book was in there; the Goddess had skimmed that fact. . . but what if her friends had tricked her? What if there was a megaspell targeting talisman inside?

LittlePip was talking. . . stalling. For what? The Goddess couldn't tell. I couldn't. LittlePip was talking about weather control and how it mattered to somepony else. I settled the crosshairs on LittlePip's pretty little temple. The Goddess could kill her without warning; with but a thought. LittlePip didn't have any Pinkie Sense to warn her. Smugness rose up in Unity.

The insecurity of it made me gag. Supreme telepathic and telekinetic powers and an army of minions, and she still wanted an ace in the hole. Because she knew that LittlePip would try something, and she knew I might guess what it was. The Goddess was wracking her memories for everything she knew about weather control and how it could endanger her. Flash floods, lightning, even tornadoes wouldn't be able to do much to the massive structure, even damaged as it was. Still, there were giant gaps on the topic of weather control spells. Had Twilight ever worked with Rainbow Dash on them?

The Goddess didn't know. She would, though. Now that she had everypony under control and LittlePip hopeless and defeated, she luxuriated over her enemy. The power! The ability to do as she wished! She was the Goddess! No pony had this power. She wanted the sensation to last a little longer. LittlePip was stalling. . . waiting for her friends, no doubt. But I could see. . . and through me the Goddess could see. . . that her friends had abandoned her. Calamity wasn't sneaking through the ducts. Steelhooves wasn't charging to the rescue.

LittlePip thought something. . . I didn't hear it specifically so much and feel it. Names. But not just names. There was something more attached to it. Some-

thing... personal. Like a familiar, nagging tune long forgotten. “Yes! Your silly little plan against the Goddess is hopeless! The Goddess is not impressed! You... wait... who?”

A moment later, LittlePip thought them again. This wasn’t a part of the plan. This was... different. Unexpected. I was all set to turn the small unicorn’s brains into red paint, but those four simple words. Trixie. Twilight. Mosaic. Gestalt. Of course the Goddess knew who they were, but to the Goddess they were four flat entries akin to what one might feel reading a dictionary. The names from LittlePip rang with memory and thought and emotion. Music playing in a simple mental harmony.

As LittlePip remembered what she’d viewed in the star orb, the melody began to grow. Feelings that hadn’t been scraped off into Lacunae began to resonate as we watched Trixie getting a second chance from Twilight. And the other memories! The fall of Canterlot and Rarity touching the holed window tore through Unity like a fresh wound, aching with the image of the unicorn skeleton with her hoof melted to the glass. My aim wavered as tears obscured my vision a touch. Applejack losing the love of her life. Pinkie Pie... quitting her ministry? Pinkie Pie... the true Pinkie... talking to herself?

It was like an earthquake rolling through Unity. Yet the Goddess, perhaps not having felt so much pathos in so long, hesitated to shove it all away. No... not hesitating! She was trying to do exactly that... but Lacunae was full, and unlike myself, LittlePip wasn’t in Unity. The memories and emotions kept rolling out.

I don’t know how long I was there. An hour. Two? Three? Even my horn gave out, and I just lay there, hoping this was the plan. Maybe LittlePip would get through to the Goddess! Maybe... just maybe... this was the plan! But as I lay there the clouds high above parted, and... no. It wasn’t the clouds parting. It was the clouds *descending*. A colossal, swirling, gray machine of death. It hovered far above, tornadoes seeming to curl around the powerful engines propelling the machine. Before it, dropping down towards the valley, were four immense Raptors. Their engines filled the air with a ghostly whisper that made my mane stick up.

So... that’s a real Thunderhead. As impressive a machine of war as it was, it seemed to be keeping its distance high and away from the facility. *Triumphant*, a pegasus within Unity identified. The Enclave leadership were here to mark this momentous event. More than just dangerous, the machine appeared... gaudy. Its metal spire tips and whirling propeller blades gleamed with gold, and the massive curve of its body was decorated in swooping, curling designs. From its position miles away, I wondered if it was staying high out of aloofness or caution. Then again, it

could probably annihilate me from there anyway.

From the Raptors dropped small teams of power-armored pegasi, then whole wings flying in glorious and impressive formation. It certainly looked intimidating.

They were greeted with a grand sight of hundreds of alicorns arranged in a band of green, blue, and purple. Perhaps all of them. Beneath the wings of power armor, small pegasus camera teams flew about, capturing the glorious sight. A new age for the Enclave, I supposed. A team flew by me, no doubt intrigued by the odd unicorn and her gun. "Who is that?" they asked, half accusingly and half questionly. An illusion hid my rifle from view immediately.

"Blackjack," Lacunae said, before gravity crushed down upon her to be silent. "She's the Security Mare of Hoofington," she gasped through the pain.

"Nopony for you to concern yourself with," a pair of greens replied to the camera teams in unison. "She serves the Goddess."

They looked at each other, then touched the sides of their helmets, no doubt receiving orders. Together, they flew away. LittlePip had succeeded in stalling the Goddess; now what?

The Goddess had hoped to have the Black Book and LittlePip dealt with before Harbinger's arrival. "Enough of that memory! It. . . It is not important!" the Goddess thought as she tried to actually deal with real feelings rather than shove them away. Lacunae could barely stand as the Goddess tried to force them into a vessel that would not hold more.

She was so overwhelmed and off balance that she missed LittlePip's stunned thoughts initially. Harbinger was approaching; no doubt his escorts would film every second of this exchange. She should be getting ready! She'd had a whole speech prepared about a glorious new beginning for Enclave and Alicorn alike! Finally though, the Goddess latched onto two words in LittlePip's mind. . . 'Balefire bomb'.

Like dominos, the missing pieces fell into place. The meeting with Red Eye had been for the one thing the Goddess been sure he'd never part with: the balefire bomb. How had LittlePip talked. . . but it didn't matter. She had. The bomb had been small and portable. . . but how had she gotten it inside? Stealth cloaks! But that was impossible. Anypony foolish enough to enter would be. . .

Anypony. . .

"The zebra!" the Goddess gasped as she put two and two together along with LittlePip. Xenith, in the cloak, could evade even the Hellhounds beneath Maripony!

LittlePip was running... Harbinger was here and beginning to blather on about something the Goddess could care nothing about. I returned the rifle's sight to LittlePip as she backed into Harbinger. I could kill her now, and good riddance... the Goddess had to find that bomb!

In a rainbow cloud, the ring of alicorns began to fly towards the building. No doubt dozens, perhaps hundreds would die to the Hellhounds. How could LittlePip have endangered them as well? She was more ruthless than I, clearly. I rested the crosshairs right between LittlePip's eyes. The rifle's magic would make sure she died. Then I would join the search.

But something was amiss. Something wrong. I was playing my role, as were we all. Only one part of the Goddess wasn't: the garbage dump. The lingering, teasing melody of those four names and the emotions associated with them played in the back of the Goddess's mind. A splinter in the hive mind.

"Perhaps you know something," the Goddess said after a moment's hesitation. "Some... schematic... some spell... some... something about balefire. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look," she said, and Lacunae groaned as the Goddess's will picked through the countless memories deposited within her, no time for the Goddess to use me as a filter.

Distantly, I could hear Twilight Sparkle's voice as the Goddess retrieved the memory. It wasn't quite like a memory orb. Instead, I saw a ghostly shadow of Twilight and Rainbow Dash inside the Goddess. "It isn't a natural explosion."

"What do you mean? It goes boom, right?" Glory – no, Rainbow Dash answered.

"Balefire isn't normal combustion. It's not even megaspell combustion, like we thought. It's more like a megaspell teleportation field. It brings a phenomenal amount of fire from... somewhere else. Don't ask me where. It could be the sun, or even another world! It has a chaotic element that defies our normal laws of physics. If one of these goes off, spell effects could be disrupted. Worse, just as it teleports fire here, it teleports other material there. It's almost perfectly destructive."

"Almost? You have something that'll work?" Rainbow Dash asked eagerly in my mind.

"Work is relative. I think I can modify Shining Armor's shield spell, though. With some fiddling, we might be able to protect critical ministry buildings from harm. Power is going to be an issue..."

The ghost images faded, but with that memory, the simple tune LittlePip began

deepened. Shining Armor and Rainbow Dash's notes joined as those emotions were renewed. "Perhaps some more. Something that will help us."

I heard Princess Celestia's voice. "No. I think that Mosaic and Gestalt are incredibly gifted ponies, and I'd be honored to accept them at my school." I saw Celestia addressing two shabby-looking green earth ponies. The couple looked like they could have been Wastelanders. A pair of identical green fillies hid behind them.

The father said in a worried voice, "Are you sure? They don't have much magical talent. We... well... we never could afford them schooling or magic books. Being earth ponies, the missus and I couldn't teach 'em magic at all."

"I assure you, Mr. Pebble, my school is not simply for the children of unicorns. I think that, with their talent, your children will excel at my school for gifted unicorns," Celestia said, and the twin notes of Mosaic and Gestalt thrummed with new life.

The Goddess scoffed as the images faded away. "What... what was that!? I said to find some useful memory! Not sentimental nostal...gia..." The greens were replaced by an elderly gray unicorn in a pointed hat. The little blue filly shot fireworks into the air from her horn; impressive. At her age, I couldn't even do magic.

The unicorn stallion spoke warmly, "Bravo, Trixie! Très bien!"

"Did you really think so?" a filly replied. "I never be as good as The Mighty and Majestic Mystere."

"Bah. I left that name with the stage, *ma chère*. But trust me. Your raw talent is beyond compare. You really should apply to Celestia's school. Those fireworks were très magnifique!" The stallion said grandly with a wave of his hoof.

"But all I can do are silly little tricks, Mystere." the filly said softly. "Nothing I do is useful at all."

"Trixie!" the stallion gasped. "Useful! What is useful? Useful c'est commun. Boring. There are a million practical unicorns. Equestria does not need another."

The tiny ghostly Trixie brightened a little. Then a mare's voice snapped, "Trixie Lulamoon! What have I told you about talking to that old coot? You should be doing your homework!"

For a moment she crumpled, and then she glanced back at the old stallion. The filly frowned away, then raised her nose as she declared in a quavering voice, "T... the great and powerful Trixie doesn't need to do homework."

The old stallion clapped his hooves together, laughing uproariously. “Bravo!” He levitated his pointed, star-covered cap and set it atop the beaming filly’s head.

“I... Mystere... I’d... I’d forgotten...” The Goddess murmured. Then it was like a breaching flood as memories began to flow back into the Goddess. The balefire bomb was almost forgotten as memory after memory was returned to the Goddess. Sterile, clinical facts were thrown into beautiful context, and emotions long suppressed were renewed.

LittlePip had started the melody with four names and a few memories. With these four, an orchestra began to play. It carried whimsical piccolos of Twilight’s memories of Spike. Guitars played for Applejack. Accordions for Pinkie Pie. Violins accompanied Trixie standing alone in the rain. The delicate ringing notes of a hammered dulcimer for Gestalt and Mosaic finishing each other’s sentences in magic kindergarten. The beat of Twilight’s rage at Littlehorn. The violas and cellos of her last terrible fight with Pinkie Pie. The slow contrabass of Big Macintosh and the pain of his death. Trumpets of pride for Trixie’s second chance. Woodwinds sharing Gestalt and Mosaic actually working under Twilight Sparkle when so many others didn’t understand or value their gift. For the first time ever, the Goddess was torn.

“Children! Flee!” she blurted, instinctively, and that wave halted and undulated as Unity became Uncertainty.

Harbinger was confused. This was not going as he’d anticipated. “There is no need to flee. We mean you no harm. In fact, we’ve come to offer you an Alliance between the Enclave and the Goddess.”

Doubt, after all the seductive thoughts of putting Thunderhead and the surface in its place, was starting to creep into his thinking as he launched into a monologue about how they would team up against the bad surfer Red Eye. Of course he had plans for treachery down the road, eventually. Just as he expected treachery in turn... but perhaps not THIS soon. Clearly this was going quite far from what he’d anticipated.

But within Unity, I could see two Goddesses; one a horrible amalgamation of mares and the other a union of four ponies, each fuzzy and indistinct. They were opposites and yet the same, one cold and hard and monstrous and the other compassionate and empathetic. “We must survive!” the Goddess roared. “We must find the bomb at any cost!”

“Any cost?” Trixie replied contemptuously. “Can you even imagine the cost? This is more than smashed wagons and hurt feelings.”

"There is more at stake than us," Mosaic began calmly.

"This is a question of Legacy," Gestalt finished.

"Legacy?" the Goddess scoffed. "We are the beginning and the end. Without us, we are nothing!"

"We are more than the sum of our minds, bodies, and memories," Twilight Sparkle said quietly.

"Together," Gestalt began.

"We are greater," Mosaic finished.

Trixie looked herself in the eye. "Think of all the things I really wanted. Like respect?"

"We are better off feared!" the Goddess countered.

"Happiness?" Trixie suggested.

"Power makes us happy!" the Goddess sneered.

"Friendship?" Trixie said quietly. A ghostly Twilight rested her hoof on Trixie's shoulder, and the blue mare looked back at Twilight with a small smile.

"We are closer than any friends! Any family! We are one. And when we have ripped the souls from that book and tossed them to oblivion, we will have power like we could never imagined!" The Goddess roared. Even now, I could feel those hundreds of alicorns returning. LittlePip had tossed the book into the mass of blue IMP, and it was slowly sinking into the depths. Then she'd sealed herself into a saferoom. It didn't matter; already the gravity was pulling my aim back to the small mare. The shielding and spells in the saferoom's walls made even the truesight scope's image dance and waver, but I was still able to make out the ponies inside. I had to be patient. Perfect. I might not even have to kill her. She was furiously talking to the Enclave soldier she'd trapped with her. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Harbinger, meanwhile, had stopped his grand speech. He scowled as he pressed an earbud with his wing. "Ambrosia! Come in. Ambrosia!"

"You won't be able to contact her inside that room now that the seal has activated," the Goddess said as her image flickered erratically. She seemed to be struggling to maintain the illusion. "Nor can the Goddess's own children teleport in and extract that little wretch to rip all her thoughts out of her skull. Do not fear. The Goddess will deal with her."

He looked at her, wariness pricking through his thoughts like icewater. “You’re speaking differently now. What’s going on? This isn’t following the script.”

The goddess twitched again, and I could feel her straining. “Unfortunately, that miserable little nag has interfered yet again. She has smuggled a bomb into this facility somewhere.” The coldness of her words, so free of her grandiose showmanship, made me shiver.

He feigned confidence. “A bomb? Really? Is that all?”

“Excuse me. A balefire bomb,” her image twitched again, and I saw the blue amalgamation of four for an instant before it disappeared again.

He laughed. Then he looked at her, and his mirth turned to ashes as his schemes rotted on the vine. “You’re serious! A balefire bomb? Here!”

“Yes. There is a balefire bomb in this facility. It will detonate in thirty-one minutes,” the Goddess replied coolly as she turned both eyes on him. Another flicker, and he saw what I did for an instant. A thing that should not be bartered with. “It is likely in the tunnels beneath the building. You will use your formidable Enclave assets to assist us.”

“What?!” Harbinger blurted, then added, “Why, certainly! Just allow me to return to the *Triumphant* and we will... assist.” His thoughts didn’t turn to assistance. They turned to getting the heck out of here and salvaging this fiasco. Already he was spinning how to tie this in with Red Eye and give credit to himself for destroying Red Eye’s ally.

“You don’t have to do this,” Twilight said in tired resignation.

“This isn’t going to change anything,” Trixie added. “You’re still going to be a monster.”

“We are NOT a monster!” The Goddess countered as she ordered her children back.

“I’m not getting through to the *Triumphant*,” the second pegasus soldier said. “The signal’s not penetrating the walls.”

“You will assist the Goddess!”

“What should we do, General?” wailed the third as she backed away.

“Get out of here! Now!” Harbinger shouted, lifting into the air and flying for the exit. “Let this freak burn!” he said in a sublime example of diplomacy.

A telekinetic tendril reached out and wrapped around Harbinger. Two more snared

the second pony. The third got as far as the door before the tendrils grabbed her wings and dragged her back. Her hooves scraped at the catwalk. "You are not going anywhere!" Then the Goddess looked at the other soldier. "You! Take all your soldiers into the tunnels! Find that bomb!"

"The hell I will! I don't take orders from big blue goop monsters!" the soldier shouted.

"Just let me contact my forces, and I'll be happy to..." Harbinger demanded desperately... but it was all a lie. If he got free, he'd laugh as she burned. It'd save him the trouble of levelling Maripony after he finished using the Goddess. She could see it in his mind. 'Freak. Creature. Monster.'

The Goddess dissolved into one inarticulate roar of rage and frustration. Her telekinetics crushed the three like sparrows in the claws of a hellhound... but that wasn't enough. No. With an almost bestial fury, she smashed the bodies into the catwalks and vat walls, ripping them to pieces. I kept trying to line up a shot of the entrapped mare. If LittlePip would just remain still for a minute I could do as the Goddess wished. No matter how wrong it was...

The four ghostly mares put their hooves on the Goddess's shoulders, and she froze, looking at the meaty gobbits floating before her. Gravity halted, and I felt my mind floating. And for the first time, I saw tears in the Goddess's eyes. "I... I just wanted them to help..."

"I know," Trixie said, gently.

"I... I just wanted to be loved. I wanted to save everypony..." she whimpered as she let the bloody metal clumps fall to the floor. "I wanted to be the hero for once."

"Yes," Twilight replied. "I wanted to save everypony I could, too."

"I... I... What have I done?" the Goddess pled, and I saw her harsh and horrid lines blur a little as she seemed to blend in where the others touched her. "I don't want to be alone."

"You aren't alone," Gestalt said with a smile.

"You have us," Mosaic finished.

The image of the Goddess and the four transformed into one glowing form that grew brighter and brighter. For the first time, I could see the ghostly outlines of other ponies in that vastness. Small and foallike compared to the Goddess, yet ponies all the same. "I don't want to die," the Goddess said, fearful and small.

"Nopony does," Twilight answered. "But we can leave something behind. We have our children."

"Our children," the Goddess murmured. "Perhaps we can survive in them?"

"Unlikely," Gestalt said solemnly.

"Without the I.M.P. biomatrix, our ability to remain cohesive will be severely compromised and will last only hours at best," Mosaic explained.

"I'm scared," the Goddess confessed. "I'm so tired of being scared."

"I am too," Trixie answered. "Remember how scared we got going out on stage? How worried we were that each show would be our last and we'd never find another? Well, now we don't have to worry about another show. Now... all that matters is how we go out, together."

"Together," the Goddess replied, her voice aching with the need for relief.

I pushed Penance away as I slowly rose to my hooves. Lacunae lay beside me, breathing weakly. Blood ran out her nostrils and ears. I wanted to tend to her, but the sight of what was happening in the valley astonished me. The horns of the blue alicorns were glowing as greens paired up beside them. Blue stars began to fill the air, swirling and finally coalescing into the front half of a blue mare with a silver mane a mile tall! The blue, ghostly form looked at the Enclave ponies that fluttered like gnats around her.

"Enclave," she said in a voice from a thousand throats magically magnified. "I wish to thank you for your generous offer. However, I cannot accept. There is a balefire bomb about to detonate underneath this facility. Please evacuate as quickly as you can. High General Harbinger will not be able to join you. You have fifteen minutes till detonation.

Then she turned and looked off to the south. Her eyes were hard as she scowled. "And Red Eye. I know you're watching this... you, or your minions. I have only one thing to say to you: it's not worth it." Then her violet eyes glanced down towards Lacunae and myself. "Goodbye, my children," she finished, "I love you all." Then the blue motes flickered out and scattered.

I didn't know how the Enclave would take it, but all at once, gravity reversed, now pushing me away from Maripony. In purple flashes, the alicorns were disappearing and escaping any retribution the Enclave might have attempted. Two green alicorns swooped in to myself and Lacunae. "We shall help you on your way," they thought as they landed beside us.

“Thank you,” I said to Unity as I hastily took the gun apart and stowed it in my saddlebags.

“I’m sorry,” the Goddess replied as the pair levitated the staggered and semi-conscious Lacunae between them. “I know you cannot forgive me for what I have done to you.”

All that she’d done. . . I suppose it’d been quite a bit, at that. Still. “Hey. No problem,” I answered, sincerely. Sure, the Goddess had been a real monster, but she was going to die in a few minutes. I could give my forgiveness. I could feel her children teleporting further and further away. Now for me to do the same... though teleportation was hard enough for me to pull off on my own, even with the Goddess still connected, the greens feeling like two wings lifting me up and pushing my magic forward. ‘Come on. . .’ I grunted as I tried to pull off the spell.

“For the High General!” screamed a voice from above us. I barely had time to get my guns up as I saw a wing of five Enclave divebombing us. The greens hadn’t even had their shields up, as we’d be on the verge of leaving. A barrage of crimson struck the left alicorn, and she transformed into a glowing alicorn shape before collapsing in a pile of ash.

“You stupid sons of mules!” I shouted as I pulled out the dueling pistols and targeted the lead pony. A step into S.A.T.S. and I had five shots targeted. Executing, the pistols seemed to roar in slow motion as one, then the other, blasted the helmet of the leader. I’d only needed four before the visor exploded inward. The fifth painted the back of his helmet with his brains.

The remaining green threw a shield around both of us, leaving a tiny window for me to shoot through, as rage exploded inside me. “You pull this shit now?” I yelled as I fired at the headless formation, which split into two pairs, their gatling beam guns blasting me and the green. The pairs started to pull up, but one of mine was just a little too low. The starmetal sword arched up and caught his chest, the impossibly sharp blade slicing from sternum to stifle in one bloody arc. While his armor tried to lift back to the skies, his viscera were pulled into the dirt. The three banked and dove again, two blasting the green with a focused barrage while the third still aimed for me. The green used some kind of spell. . . a green ray I’d never seen before. The beam sliced through the air, but the two twirled away from it and, with a flash, the alicorn’s shield dropped under another burst of fire. I ignored the beams cutting me, the Operative barding withstanding them well enough, as I blasted at the pair, but when they lifted away again, the green had fallen.

“Leave me,” Lacunae murmured weakly aloud. “Teleport yourself to safety.”

“As if. I’d be lucky to get fifty feet.” The three began to dive once more. Their mistake. The crimson gatling beams ripped into me; individually they didn’t do much, but I wasn’t going to last long at this rate, even with the armor. And I had spoken truthfully; I doubted I’d be able to teleport any real distance without the boost from greens.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t teleport a short way straight up.

In a flash, I’d left the ground. Equally fast, I realized as I was rammed by the central flyer that this was a very bad idea. I wrapped my hooves around his neck and chest. He struggled to stay aloft, which suited me just fine as one of the two came around to grab my back. Big mistake. The sword flashed as it eagerly sliced the helmet off, along with the head in it. After that, the remaining Enclave began to blast both of us, and my ride started to tumble out of control.

“Oh brown rain!” he wailed we flipped over and over together and then landed with a heavy crunch, sending my armaments flying across the rocks. His gatling beam guns broke, scattering fragile components over the rocks as we rolled. As we finally came to a stop, he collapsed on his side with a grunt. I rose.

The other flyer landed, her hoof stomping down on my sword as her guns began to hum. My pistols had landed behind her, and it would take me a moment to retrieve them. “Now what are you going to do?” she jeered.

Five magic bullets blasted her faceplate, and she collapsed in a heap. “That,” I replied to her corpse, then turned to the survivor. The wrecked guns had entangled his wings. I levitated the sword as I approached.

“Oh... oh... please! Don’t kill me!” He wailed as his wing covers flapped and failed to give him lift. “Mommah! Daddy! Somepony! Halp!” he screamed.

I sliced the wreckage of his guns away and then grabbed his helmet between my hooves. “Security doesn’t kill ponies if she can help it. That balefire bomb will. Now get the hell out of here and tell whoever your radio will reach to join you!” I shoved him away, but he just stood there. “Fly, you idiot!” He crouched and launched himself into the air.

Unfortunately, that attack had eaten up precious time and taken out my own escape route. Lacunae, her horn still blackened, struggled to stand. “I’m sorry,” the Goddess said, and I knew what she meant. In the time it would take for purples to jump back to me, the bomb would have gone off. She could have sent some immediately to me, but that would leave dozens of blues and greens who could otherwise be evacuated trapped in the blast zone. Neither of us wanted that. The Goddess had cast an

enormous shield around Maripony to try and buy more time, but that would only last as long as she herself did.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied as I moved underneath Lacunae and hefted her up. “I’ll just run out.”

“Blackjack,” Lacunae began.

“I’m not going to leave you. Don’t even think of arguing,” I said tersely as I pointed myself in the direction of away and ran as fast as my hooves could carry us. Unity was a buzz of questions. Would LittlePip survive a point blank blast? Would the Goddess’s children? Would I? Could alicorns even survive in the Wasteland without the Goddess? How could they, when so many memories had been taken? When so many thought them monsters.

I just ran. It was all I could do. I checked above me and saw the Raptors and the *Triumphant* laboriously pulling away. The swarms of Enclave in the air were trying to return to their ships as quickly as possible. I couldn’t pay any further attention to that, though. Nor was I the only creature running for their life on the ground; I spotted packs of hellhounds who had overheard the warning. Could they get away?

Could I?

Doubtful.

Minutes were down to seconds. All the Goddess’s children were away. All but two. To the side, I saw a pair of large rocks about three feet high and five or six feet long, arranged in a wedge pointing towards the crater. It was the only thing in that blasted landscape that might count as cover. The Goddess was saying something, but I focused on getting Lacunae and myself behind those stones. Pressing my back against them, laying flat, I counted. Thirty seconds. Fifteen. Ten. Five...

One...

I blinked as nothing happened, frowning and looking around the dead woods and rocks. “Don’t tell me it was a dud,” I muttered as I looked back towards the crater.

If my eyes hadn’t been mechanical, I’d have never seen again. From the valley came a flash brighter than anything I’d ever seen before, and time seemed to freeze in its terrible brilliance. The myths of Celestia raising the sun came to mind, but this was more a wrathful Celestia ripping the sun from the earth. The telepathic scream of the Goddess could have been the wailing of the earth itself. The rim of the valley deflected the flash just a little bit, just enough that my face and mane didn’t instantly burst into flame. Time began to trickle, and I fell backwards as that horrid

illumination washed across everything. Every dead tree and bush bloomed with fire almost instantly. The Goddess's scream matched the horrible, billowing green-and-rainbow fire rising higher and higher into the skies, her shield already blown apart like a paper bag with a grenade in it.

Then, in advance of the flame, a strange, shimmery bubble of air blew out from the crater. It expanded in every direction, beautiful and terrible. And as it passed over the lip of the valley and through the burning woods, every blaze was snuffed out in a terrible expanding crescent. Every trunk bent as one as it passed by. I felt as though I was trapped in S.A.T.S., save for that terrible shimmering bubble.

Then it struck me, and I was nearly blasted away. The rocks kept me from being swept away immediately, but they didn't stop every medical signal on my Pipbuck from flashing red as I was hit with more force than I'd ever imagined. Even having a boat dropped on me was nothing compared to this. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Could barely even think. And oddly, I imagined I could hear the Goddess still talking in my mind. Not even a balefire bomb had shut her up, at least in my imagination.

The dead trees had been snapped and tossed on the wind like so many matchsticks. I lay on my back, watching with almost abstract interest as the mighty Raptors were caught in the rising fireball like tiny models in a whirlpool. One was coming apart before my eyes, cloud and steel just scattering as the machine of war was transformed into so much rubble. A second was on fire, plummeting towards the earth like a dying phoenix, only this time never to rise again.

Really, if I hadn't felt myself internally bleeding as my talismans raced to restore me, it'd actually be kinda cool. I was so injured, I couldn't even feel pain. Then I became aware of the ground shaking. My eyes slowly returned down to the lip of the valley. A luminous green baleful light was sweeping across the landscape. It covered the earth as the fireball had filled the skies. Even if I survived the shockwave, I wasn't going to survive this. It was oddly a relief.

"No," Lacunae said as she rose to her feet. Even battered and bloody, she climbed to her hooves in the face of the catastrophic wall of green balefire. By the second, her injuries disappeared and her body swelled. The char fell from her horn as she faced the rending storm of fire. Her eyes blazed with violet light. "No. You will not die here, Blackjack! You will not!"

And around us both appeared a shimmering shield, not a bubble but a wedge. And like water on a magical ship's prow, the fire rammed into it and split to either side.

Were I not synthetic, I would have been deafened by the roar, but the fire simply scraped against her field instead of racing through us.

Through gaps in the green flame, I could see one of the Raptors turning end over end in the sky, as if hurled by an immense iresome foal. Then it snapped in two, the ends flying away out of sight. I watched in awe as Lacunae swelled, larger and larger, absorbing the energy pouring in around her. Of course, I was absorbing it too, but for me it meant something a lot less pleasant than more power and a growth spurt...

“Hold on, Blackjack!” wailed Lacunae as my radiation meter passed from yellow to red. 100+ rads a second. I didn’t know it could go that high. “Hold on!” she screamed, her field flickering as it battled with the immense stream. She wasn’t the only one. Above, I could see the *Triumphant* flying away. Its proud gold spires were melted and its fancy designs burned away, but its immense bulk and armor, not to mention distance, had spared the Enclave siege platform from destruction.

“Funny. Never thought it’d be radiation that got me,” I muttered. Even with her shield, the heat was utterly stifling. Lacunae struggled to keep her grip, but she was still growing. Her alicorn magic was the only thing keeping her alive. Me, I might be resistant to radiation, but there was a world of difference between resistance and immunity.

“Don’t you die, Blackjack!” Lacunae warned, but it was so hot and I was so tired and hadn’t I earned it? “Blackjack?” the giant alicorn said above me as my vision faded. I quite blissfully passed out as the world disappeared in an emerald hell. “Blackjack!” Lacunae screamed, her wail following me into that oblivion.

I really hated almost dying. First getting my legs cut off, then having my soul sucked out. . . now I was coming back from a balefire bomb. It said something pathetic that I was becoming familiar with near death experiences. Of course, my body felt as though it had been stepped on. Correction. . . danced on. By a whole dance troupe of minotaurs. With steel hooves.

“Lacunae?” I groaned, opening my eyes. I was astonished to see my rads at zero. We were on the smoking lip of the valley. A haze surrounded us in all directions. A few hundred feet away lay a raptor, smashed prow-first into the earth like a foal’s bath toy. Down below, a brand new crater gave forth a chaotic glow. Maripony had collapsed completely into the sinkhole, nothing now but a jumbled pile of rubble.

Bodies lay everywhere. Smoking pegasi, like steel sparrows, littered the ground around the fallen raptor. Dozens of hellhounds also lay in charred, clawed lumps where they'd cooked. Smoke billowed from their holes like great volcanic vents. I wondered just how long the fires underground would burn.

Forget Stable 99; that was nothing. Between Enclave and Hellhounds, LittlePip had killed *thousands* with this bomb! Granted that Hellhounds and Enclave weren't automatically good and blameless, especially not after those five had attacked me, but the immensity of the deaths was staggering. Somehow, I'd imaged that LittlePip's plan, whatever it could have been, would be more discriminating. The Stable Dweller should have done... something. Something better. Warned the Hellhounds! Evacuated the Enclave! Something!

From out of the haze approached a blue alicorn. I tensed... but then realized that there was silence in my head. I could make out the faintest of whispers from my friend, but what remained of Unity was denied me. A second alicorn walked forward: a green. Then a half dozen. A dozen. Twenty. Fifty. They stared silently at me. "H... hello? Lacunae?"

In unison, all of them turned and looked to the left along the ridge. That was when I saw her; a colossal purple alicorn with a hide so dark that I imagined she was black. She was speaking to a glowing ghoulish form pulling a wooden skywagon. I started to approach, but before I'd gotten twenty feet, my rads spiked and I backed away again.

"Lacunae?" I asked. "Ditzy?" I said as I looked at the luminesant ghoul. How many undead pegasus mares wrote in chalk? The ghoul smiled worriedly at me and scribbled something on the board, showing it to the alicorn.

"We will try," Lacunae said in a deep voice, and my whole body shivered. She looked worried, then turned to me. Her face was clearly torn. Had the Goddess survived? Somehow possessed my friend? Was that why she was so huge? Her eyes glowed a solid purple as she looked down at me. Then my fears abated as she gave a small smile. "Blackjack. You survived."

"Yeah. I always seem to," I said warily as I looked at the charred ground around me. "Unless I have wings now or I'm a ghoul too, I'm guessing you did something?"

"You forget: Twilight created a spell to purge radiation. As soon as the fire abated, I used it to nullify the radiation dose you'd taken," Lacunae rumbled. She turned to look out at Maripony's shattered remains, and I saw on her flank something that made my... well, made me wish my heart could stop. Five small white stars sur-

rounding a purple sixth. It wasn't clear as a normal cutie mark, though... like a ghost.

"What... what happened?" I breathed. "Are you... you?"

"Both very good questions," Lacunae replied. "I suspect that so many memories of Twilight's were put into me that, when the Goddess died, Twilight's soul was attracted to me rather than the everafter, turning me into a temporary soul jar. I do not know how long it will last. Minutes? Hours?"

"And you being an alicorn of unusual size?" I gestured to her immense bulk.

"A side effect of the prodigious amount of radiation I absorbed," Lacunae said as she looked down at me. "You have been unconscious for several hours," she said quietly. "Did you dream?"

The question was so unusual that I actually thought a moment. "No. I didn't. Why?"

"I took back the mental contamination of Psalm. Anything that remains are your memories of her, not hers. She'll not trouble you again, Blackjack." She closed her eyes. "A parting gift."

Oh, I didn't like where this was going. "What are you talking about, Lacunae? You're scaring me. What is Ditzy here for? What's going on?" Panic was nibbling at my spine; the need to act, no matter how danced on I felt, pushed at me.

"LittlePip was supposed to have escaped while we searched for the bomb. The arrival of the Enclave ruined that plan. Xenith escaped on the griffinchaser, but with the radiation levels so high all across the valley, it was impossible for LittlePip's friends to return. So they sent Ditzy to find her," Lacunae said solemnly, in the tones of somepony who was trying to break bad news.

"It doesn't seem possible," I said quietly. How could anypony survive, and if they did, how could help reach them? "Can I do anything?" I asked weakly, unable to voice my fears that LittlePip was likely so much irradiated jelly. Even with the scope, it would take hours... days... to scan the devastation for the saferoom, if it survived at all.

Ditzy stomped her hoof and tapped her board. Lacunae looked over and shook her head once. I wondered what the ghoul had written... I couldn't tell; I was no longer able to see into her mind. Ditzy chewed her bottom lip and lifted into the air, flying over the crater.

"She wants to know if all the alicorns can search, but there is another, more press-

ing, concern.” Lacunae said as she looked at the crowd of alicorns around me. “What happens to them?”

“Well... they try and survive as best they can, right?” I gave a little, weak smile. There was no way that LittlePip survived that. I was an augmented cyberpony with regeneration talismans. How could she have pulled through? That the Wasteland had lost a pony it needed... I didn’t want to think of it.

“You don’t understand. Without the Goddess, their souls returned to their bodies, but their minds are hollow and damaged. The Goddess removed countless memories from them. Who they were, where they lived, what they loved... and so they will be easy prey in the Wasteland. A few fortunate individuals will be able to recover enough to survive on their own, but...”

“So... can’t you give them their memories back?” I asked with a hopeful smile.

“With Twilight’s soul maintaining a faint Unity to them all, I can,” Lacunae murmured, head bowed.

My smile wavered. “So... so what’s the catch?”

“I am not a pony,” Lacunae replied quietly. “I was never born. I never had parents. I was not transformed into an alicorn. In fact, I was never supposed to exist at all. I am a collection of memories and feelings placed within my body, and that gave rise to my consciousness. If I give those memories back...”

“No,” I murmured. “No. No!” I shouted up at her. “There has to be another way! There has to. Just give back half! A third! Keep enough to survive!” I implored the immense alicorn.

“Even if I could divide all the memories within me, I would have no right to a third of a pony’s happiness or sorrow. If I return them, I must return them all, and even then many alicorns will be lost and confused. But it might give more a chance to survive. Enough to have some future in the Wasteland.”

“I don’t care!” I yelled up at her. “You’re not dying like this!”

Lacunae gave the saddest of smiles. “I can’t die. I was never born.”

I looked on in desperation. “Maybe... maybe you can hold onto a few. Some? The memories of alicorns that don’t have bodies to go back to? There has to be enough for you to stay... you...”

But Lacunae just smiled like she always had, in pain and love and sadness. “The connections in Unity are failing without the Goddess to maintain them. In a few

minutes, parts of it will sever completely. I don't have the time or ability to sift through each memory and determine if it should go or stay. Such a thing would take a lifetime for me to do on my own. If I am to return them, I have to return them all. I'm sorry," she said as she looked down at me. And I knew she was, not just for me, but for all that would be lost when she finally went.

"Horseapples!" I hobbled to her, ignoring the radiation and my battered body. "I won't! I won't let you!" I said as I tried to wrap my hooves around her fetlock. "I won't!" It was childish and immature, but I didn't care. I wept as I held her, looking up at her. "Please. . ." I begged.

"Shh. . ." she stroked my mane gently with the very tip of her wing. "Shhh. . . I have to do this. And you know why. If you were me, what would you do?"

I wanted to lie. I wasn't connected to Unity anymore. I could just lie! "I'd. . . I. . ." but it stuck in my mouth because we both knew the truth. "I'd give them up too."

"And I would weep, and beg you not to go," Lacunae answered me. I hated the truth, but it was like gravity. There was no fighting it. "Because I love you."

I closed my eyes, ignoring the rads coming off her as I nuzzled her warm, dark fur. "I'll miss you."

"I know. And I am glad that somepony will." She closed her eyes a moment, smiling broadly. "I was never supposed to exist. But you offered me your friendship. You made it so that I mattered. You gave me a life and made me feel like an actual person, and that was more than I ever deserved. You forgave my betrayal, and you stood by me when I could not stand by myself. And you made me dance," she sniffed, great tears rolling down her cheeks as she raised her head. "Stronghoof..." she murmured, but shook her head. "I love you, Blackjack."

"I'm sorry," I said, pointlessly. Needlessly. Sorry for what, I couldn't be sure. Sorry for something I'd done. Something I hadn't done. Something that I wish I'd done. Right now, all I wished was that I had done something more for her. Been somepony better to her. "I love you," I managed to choke out as I backed away.

"Farewell," she said. She lifted her head, and a golden light issued from her horn. It reminded me of glowing motes of thought freed from their confinement in memory orbs. The light formed gleaming streams that poured out of her and into the brows of the collected alicorns. More rivers of luminance passed away into the distance, fading from view. As the memories left her, the starburst on her flank became clearer and more distinct.

The alicorns started and jerked, for once breaking from uniform movements. They flew away, or teleported, running to find a place to process what had just happened to them. My eyes remained locked on my friend, hoping that when the transfer was complete that somehow... some way... something would remain of Lacunae. But when the glow ended, the behemoth alicorn remained dark and still as the scorched earth.

“Lacunae?” I asked, backing away. For an instant, she turned and looked at me. A tiny smile formed on my lips as tears ran down my face. That somehow... but then she turned away back to the desolate valley. “Lacunae?” I whimpered, reached towards her with a hoof and touching her fetlock again gently. I grit my teeth, bowing my head, doing my best to keep myself together. “Twilight?” I asked.

Slowly, she looked at me again. But she didn’t answer. Not verbally, at least. What I heard was the faintest whisper over the evaporating Unity connection. “You have my friends,” came the whisper. For a moment, I didn’t understand. Then I saw her eyes on my saddlebags. I opened them up and lifted the first figurine I found. Rarity smiled glamorously at both of us. I levitated it before her, and she stared at it with her immense eyes. Then she blinked and turned away, back to the crater.

“She has my friends too,” Twilight whispered.

“She?” I frowned in confusion. “You mean Ditzzy?” No response. I looked at the devastation. “You mean LittlePip?”

Slowly, she gave the tiniest of nods. “She needs help.”

“How do you know?” I asked, feeling the connection fray.

“My friends told me,” was all she said before the link broke completely. Slowly, she spread her enormous wings and gave a great flap that knocked me back. Slowly she began to circle over the tangled heap of concrete, steel, and rock. Many of the pieces were even bigger than the behemoth.

Her horn glowed like a violet star. I hugged Rarity’s figurine to my chest. “Come on,” I breathed as I watched some of the massive boulders shift. “You can do it...” *Be enduring, darling*, a little white mare cheered along with me. It was impossible. Inconceivable. Nopony could move such weight!

Then one immense boulder lifted up and was tossed aside. Then a piece of wall. A chunk of foundation. A heap of stone. Each was cast aside as if it was nothing. And then there was a rumble and screech that I heard from miles off as something dark and battered was hauled from the rockslide. It looked like a giant brick of steel and

tanlged reinforcement. Hunks of foundation dangled beneath it, falling away with crashes that I heard from here. Greenish water cascaded from the base of the huge block.

For a moment, I was utterly sure that the block would tumble back to the ground, but with strength I couldn't imagine, the metal top was peeled open. I scrambled in my bags for Penance's scope and got it out just as the behemoth extracted something from within the block. I looked through the scope, zooming in. LittlePip was alive! She was talking!

I collapsed, dropping the scope as Twilight dropped the shelter. It crashed like an avalanche into the earth. I pulled out Twilight's figurine. "Thank you," I muttered before kissing her brow. "Thank you."

I carefully packed everything up as Ditzzy flew over to meet LittlePip. I knew she'd get her home safely.

Now it was my turn. The behemoth disappeared into the clouds, and Ditzzy raced off, likely to get LittlePip to medical aid. I didn't begrudge her not coming to pick me up. No doubt LittlePip had to be in a bad way. I could endure. Ash tinged a faint green began to fall like snow across the charred woods. The silence, within and without, was deafening. "Goodbye," I whispered into that void, in a vain attempt to fill it. I would have lingered, but the ash was making my Pipbuck tick. I started the long walk back home. . .

Alone.

* * *

I didn't know where I was or how to get to Hoofington from here. The PipBuck installed in my hoof had none of my old navigation tags in it. Worse, the radio was busted, so I couldn't even try to hear what was happening in the wider world. Ahead of me, fires flickered and crawled about like sullen molten worms through the brush and dead trees. Every hour, I'd take a dose of RadAway and Rad-X. If I didn't get out of the fallout before my supplies ran out, then I'd really be putting my endurance to the test.

I found a nice little ridge of stone that took me southeast and downhill. Not as good as a road, but it was better than nothing. The silence wrapped around me, and I found myself starting at flakes of ash drifting down in the corners of my vision. I'd turn, expecting somepony behind me. I looked above for Enclave. Below for hellhounds. Something. Anything! "Something attack me, damn it!" I yelled into the

falling green ash. My own voice made me jump.

Alone. Sweet Celestia, I fucking hated being alone. Walking was better than thinking. Thinking led to pitying, and if I started that, then the rock would turn into a mattress I'd never get off. Follow the rock. Look for hostiles. Watch the radiation meter.

Don't think about it. Don't think about what happened. Don't think about what would happen. Don't think about – and I was so busy not thinking that I misstepped and discovered a whole new way of travelling: falling down a hillside. I flipped end over end, crashing through the underbrush and cannonballing through smaller trees. I finally came to a stop at the base next to a large rusty refrigerator on the banks of a muddy creek. I saw, as I struggled to sit up, a pony skeleton lying curled up on its side within the metal container. I looked at it a moment, wondering how the bones, the refrigerator, and an old gambler's hat came to be on the banks of this muddy little trickle in the middle of nowhere. Slowly, I collapsed back.

Gravity of a different sort pressed down on me as ash began to cover my visor. My friend was gone. I wasn't upset. I wasn't anything. Since we'd met, she'd always been there for me, quietly supporting me. She'd been my only confidante to what the Goddess had done to me. Somepony who could sympathize with me. She hadn't been perfect... she'd used me, put Psalm inside me to ease her own burden... but I could live with that. Her companionship had more than made up for it. 99. Hightower. I would have died so many times over, if it hadn't been for her.

I should be like that pony in the fridge. What would it take?

And I could be. All I had to do was lay there and let the ticking continue. I'd survived a boat falling on me, a building falling out from under me, poison gas, radiation, smooze, and Enervation. I'd sucked up pink cloud, had my legs chopped off and my body violated, and lived through a fucking balefire blast. To think that this was what would kill me. Behind the visor, I sniffed and smiled all at once. Was I really this weak? Was I doing this to myself again? *Be enduring*, a stoic white unicorn mare in me urged. *Be strong*, her orange earth pony friend agreed.

Slowly, I rolled over and onto my hooves. Lacunae wouldn't want this. None of my friends would, no matter how much I wanted to be selfish and give in and give up. Do better than this, Blackjack. Step by step, I proceeded on in the general direction of east. Eventually I'd find a road or... something.

I don't know how long I wandered. A few things – scorched radhogs, weird floating plants, and agitated radroaches – made suicide attacks on me. The red-barred

hellhounds I avoided; when they spotted me, I ran. They'd lost so much that I couldn't bring myself to fight back when I could just flee. My meandering course was getting me nowhere; more often than not I found myself backtracking towards Splendid Valley.

And the hellhounds weren't giving up. Not that I blamed them. Not after how many of theirs had died with the destruction of the alicorn Goddess. There were more and more red bars in my vision, and I suspected they weren't irritated bloatsprites. They were moving around me, trying to drive me around and finish me off. Twice, they'd attempted to spring from the ground and rip me to pieces, only to learn that my sword wouldn't just block their swipes but go right through their entire limb. Two missing arms later, they'd fallen back to trying to blast me with their energy weapons. The overpowered, chaotic beams crackled through the air. Eventually they'd combine the two and make for a serious threat. Then I'd have to start killing them.

"Please. Hasn't there been enough pain and suffering today?" I begged them as I made my way up a rocky hill. The hellhounds were popping up right and left and began moving up after me. "I don't want to kill you!" I yelled down at them.

The roar of a dozen beam weapons tearing at the stones around me voiced their sentiment on the reverse matter. I ducked behind the cover of boulders as I set myself to doing what I had to. A thirty foot drop behind me should keep them off my back. Popping up, I sighted carefully, hopped into S.A.T.S., and... a tiny yellow pegasus in my mind gave me huge pleading eyes, begging me to spare the poor upset hellhound. Fluttershy was going to get me killed... I fired at his limbs and body. The hellhound howled as it fell back a moment, but there were others coming. I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy; I tried. I took out Penance and fitted the parts together, swapped out the bypass round for fifty caliber explosive bullets, and took my position.

I wasn't a sniper, but I'd had one's memories for a while and knew my guns. Penance worked like the machine of death she'd been designed to be. The dozens of hatchmarks on the butt would need a few more added to it as the rounds blasted into the resilient armored hide of the Hellhounds coming up the hill. I didn't try for headshots; at this range, the scope was a hindrance rather than a help. The detonation of each orange-banded round echoed through the woods, the shrapnel and flames keeping them scattered. "Go away. I'm not worth it. It won't bring them back!" I shouted down at them between blasts, not even knowing if they could understand me.

Maybe I should let them kill me. Give them a little bit of satis—

“No!” I shouted as one got too close, his claws scraping on the gray rock. The bullet caught its shoulder, blowing off the limb at the joint. “No, I’m not going to give up!” Not after what Lacunae had done. Not after what I’d promised Glory. I reached for another magazine of explosive rounds...

Nothing.

I switched to armor piercing rounds, trying to put the bullets where I guessed hearts would be. But without the blasts forcing them to take cover... I was only one pony with a gun that could point only one direction at a time. They were being smart, using the boulders and rocks to shield them. It was almost as if they were waiting for som—

“Pony die!” roared a Hellhound behind me, raising his arm to strike. Apparently those hands were also good for climbing! I dropped into S.A.T.S. and bombarded his face with magic bullets, but the hellhound’s hide was tough enough to remain intact. I swung the massive sniper rifle around in futility as the hounds gave a howl of victory.

Then the air was split by the crack of four hooves impacting against the side of a hellhound’s skull, and I stared at the sight of a blue pegasus with a rainbow mane slamming into the hellhound above me. The beast reeled, swiping a clawed hand against her torso as its teeth sprayed from its maw in bony shrapnel. The claws, which could tear through earth, failed to rip through the brown dragonhide leather. With a scream, it tumbled off the cliff just as a second poked its head over the lip. The pegasus pulled out a boxy beam gun as she landed in front of the rising hound. With the precision of S.A.T.S., she blasted away at its face with a dazzling barrage of kaleidoscopic light I’d never seen before; the beam, rather than being the standard red or green, was a startling spectral rainbow. The overcharged blasts turned the hellhound into a cloud of glittery dust, but a second poked its head up immediately and started to climb over the edge. Undauntedly ejecting the spent gem cartridge, she pulled a brilliantly glowing fresh one from her bags, slapped it into place, tossed the gun into the air, bit down on the grip, and blasted away again, with the same result.

I could have made love to Glory right then and there. But there were plenty more hellhounds coming up the hillside now behind me. Rather, there were before the hillside was washed with a series of explosions. Hellhounds reeled, blasting at random for their attackers. One seemed to sniff out the source of those blasts and pointed to a blue pony hidden in the rocks a dozen yards away to my right. He started to charge P-21, but then there sounded a wild scream of delight. “Death

from above!” cried Rampage as she dropped from the sky and onto his head. Powerhooves discharged in unison, blowing away most of the hellhound’s cranium and chest cavity.

P-21, suddenly a dripping red stallion, wiped the gore from his face. “You meant to do that!” he yelled.

“Well, duh!” Rampage drawled.

Then a claw burst through the chest of the mare as a hellhound pushed itself out of the ground beneath her. With one sweep, Rampage’s head was sent bouncing away over the rocks. “Stupid pony talks too much!” the hellhound hissed. Then paused as Rampage’s decapitated body reached out with her power hooves and touched its face, patted its cheek, and then smashed a powerhoof upside its head. The hellhound hissed in shock and outrage as the headless mare battered at the very confused beast.

“Shouldn’t you be shooting?” a stallion growled beside me, and I jumped as I saw the shimmer of a zebra stealth cloak. Lancer lifted his rifle and silently blew out the eyes of a hellhound with a wicked beam rifle who had been taking aim at us.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted in amazement at Lancer.

“The Proditor said it was the ‘Blackjack defeat effect’.” Lancer calmly blinded another shooter spraying red death at us. “Apparently I now have to follow you around until I find a new purpose in life or something,” he muttered sullenly as he fired again. “I don’t care how much the Proditor says you need a brooding hot male on your team. I am out of here first chance I get.”

P-21 hauled Rampage’s squirming body up to us and gave a smirk at Lancer. “Oh, how many times I’ve said that.” And he actually chuckled before looking to me. “But Blackjack has this certain gravity that keeps us all coming back to her.” I was so stunned, I couldn’t even keep Penance levitated.

The hellhounds had had enough. With howls and snarls, they were pulling back. Apparently this wasn’t a good day for anypony. Glory pressed Rampage’s severed head to the stump, and it slowly sealed back on. She blinked and looked around. “Oh? We won? Yay!” she slurred.

“But... how... who...I...” I muttered weakly. P-21 and Glory looked away from everything, especially each other, as the former wiped his face and the latter checked Pew Pew. “How did you know where I was?”

“I told them,” Lancer replied grimly, not taking his eyes off the hillside. “They ques-

tioned me about your disappearance. Eventually, I informed them that you had seemed... not yourself. You spoke of a Goddess and this place called Maripony. And so we came here when we could not find you.”

But what... how... My shock was increased when Scotch Tape screamed from overhead, “Glory! I don’t know how to fly this thing!” Directly above me hovered a boat. I nearly teleported away then and there, but this boat was suspended beneath an enormous purple bag and had fins sticking out the sides with propellers out the rear. “Without Rampage I can’t steer anywhere! Help!”

“I’ll be right there,” Glory shouted, launching herself up to the floundering airship.

Rampage blinked and worked her mouth, rubbing the vanishing seam in her neck as Lancer watched in shock. “Whew. Lost my head there for a second,” she said as she trotted up to me. “Hey Blackjack. If you are Blackjack, but really, how many other ponies would be dumb enough to fight Hellhounds alone? Nice armor. Very badass. How are you doing? Where’s Lacunae?”

It was the simple, causal question that hit me the hardest. There was only one response to all the feelings churning inside me. I bowed my head and sobbed like a heartbroken foal. Rampage sighed and shook her head. “Definitely Blackjack...”

Aboard the *Fleur* and away from the ground, I told them everything. We sat in a circle on the deck, with Boo at the helm, seeming fascinated by the wheel. Somepony had put an old captain’s hat on her head, and the sight was so ridiculous and precious that I couldn’t keep from smiling a little when I looked over at her. Scotch Tape returned my Delta Pipbuck to where it belonged as P-21 held her. On my other side, Glory snuggled up against me. Rampage and Lancer looked on from across the circle. The zebra stallion hadn’t taken his eyes off the red-striped mare, and leaned away from her slightly with wide, skittish eyes. Funny how he reminded me of Xanthe...

I started with how I’d connected to the Goddess in Hightower. How she’d slowly gained more and more control over me. How she’d wired my mind to make me unable to speak of her. Even saying the word ‘Goddess’ made me stammer and my head ache, despite the fact that she was dead. As I went on, Glory hugged me repeatedly and Rampage and P-21 looked ill. Even Lancer seemed to be reassessing me with a disturbed look. I generalized a bit when it came to what had happened inside the Goddess and skipped right to the balefire bomb.

"I knew it," Rampage said to Lancer. "Second we saw that flash, I knew Blackjack had to be involved. She's always around when the best shit blows up."

"Get away from me, you freak. He cut your head off!" Lancer replied, leaning further away from her.

"Eh. You make it sound like such a big deal," she said with a negligent wave of her hoof.

I quickly moved on to tell them what happened afterward, and Rampage's laughs stopped. When I got to Lacunae, they all looked seriously at me. "Lacunae's gone? Just... gone?" Scotch Tape asked plaintively from P-21's hooves. When I nodded, she looked away. "Oh... just like momma." She pressed her face into P-21's chest. "I didn't even get to say goodbye to her," Scotch murmured through her tears.

"It was a very noble thing she did," Glory said as she hugged me with her wing.

"There is no greater honor than to give oneself for one's tribe," Lancer agreed with a small nod.

"Oh, come off it!" Rampage snapped as she rose to her hooves. "She died! She's gone! It doesn't matter how she died. Her shit is over. She's fucking lucky!" The outburst surprised me as Rampage turned away. "She was a great... a great big... freak. With her freaky dress and guns and magic and not talking and... just... damn it!" she yelled. "Couldn't you have taken me with you, you big purple bitch?! Fuck! You were awesome! You used a minigun in a black dress! Who the fuck else could pull that off but you!" she roared, as if, if she yelled hard enough, she might be heard in the everafter.

"Rampage," I said in concern.

"Fuck you, Blackjack. Leave me alone," she said as she walked to the rail of the Fleur and hugged it, looking down. "Fuck..." she finished lamely as she sulked.

I knew why she was so upset. I'd hoped that the time we'd spent together had curbed her desire to die. Now the loss of a friend had brought it back in force. I looked at Glory. "What happened when you... ah... woke up?"

She immediately went bright red. "You mean alone?"

"Completely alone!" P-21 butted in immediately, turning scarlet as well as he suddenly looked away.

"Oh yes. I was so shocked to find myself by myself. Alone. With nopony else in bed with me," Glory said as her mane frizzled a little. "Especially not a stallion. Because

I would never, ever have a stallion in bed with me.” She gave a tense little laugh. “Stallions! Ew!”

“Oh I know. I feel the exact same way about mares! Can’t stand em! Nope!” P-21 laughed as well.

Scotch Tape cocked her head. “You’re acting weird again, daddy. I told you you drank too much last night.”

I smiled, glad for the poor humor. “So. After you woke up alone,” I said to Glory, “you found my note?”

“Yes. At first I was upset, but when we found out Lacunae was gone too and your PipBuck had been torn out, we were really worried. We went to question Steel Rain, but that was when Lancer said he’d heard ‘the Goddess’ talking to herself. That was when we grabbed everything and came as quickly as we could.”

“I held on to your PipBuck, Blackjack,” Scotch Tape said. “That dealer pony is freaky, but he was really worried about something happening to you.”

“When the bomb went off, I was sure... I thought...” Glory began, then shook her head, sniffed, and hugged me again. “I am so sorry! I knew something was bothering you, but I thought it was the zebras, or Mother, or Cognitum or something!”

“Hey! It’s not your fault!” I said with a little smile. “The G...G...she wasn’t stupid. She knew that all of you would help if I told you and made sure I couldn’t. No matter how much I wanted to,” I said as I nuzzled her teary cheek. “Believe me, I almost gave myself a seizure trying to tell you, and I still couldn’t do it.”

“It’s sad when you’ve been through so much that we didn’t notice you in trouble,” P-21 said quietly.

“Yeah,” I muttered softly, looking in the direction of Maripony. The dead are gone. I had to focus on the living. “Well, I guess we should be dealing with Lighthooves before he fills half the skies with pony-eating psychopaths.”

Rampage sighed. “Okay. Okay. I’ll get pedalling.”

I frowned after her and looked at Glory. “Pedalling?” Rampage trudged slowly downstairs and into the hold.

“Ah! Yes.” Glory flushed. “Well, I thought that the engines might be a little too high-energy, so we disabled them and hooked up the main drive shaft to some pedals.”

“Now we’re flying on rage,” Rampage said from below. “You’re welcome,” she added

dryly as the propeller behind the airship started to turn and the wings began to flap.

"I meant what I said. Soon as we're close to the Hoof, let me off," Lancer said as our circle started splitting up, Scotch Tape returning to Boo and P-21 going to the bags of supplies brought from the Society. "I mean it! I am not joining your little group."

"You don't have to," Glory said coolly. "And honestly, I don't want you to. We took you with us in case this was a trick of some sort, and to help Blackjack. She's helped. You've paid back your debt. You can get off whenever you want. Because, quite simply, you're not good enough to make up for the mare we lost." Lancer scowled at her and moved away, head bowed as he muttered to himself.

"Ouch," I muttered.

"Sorry. I... didn't have a good morning," Glory replied as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She smiled as she sighed. "I'm removing that word from my vocabulary. I'm not sure how it should be applied to me."

"I can relate," I said quietly. "So, are you?"

"I want my old body back. I want to be me." I watched as she reddened. "Last night felt good. Really good, to be honest. And part of that bothers me. And it bothers me that it bothers me. I know I drank a little... but I never realized what it feels like to be so... heterosexual."

"Bisexuality for the win," I answered and shook my head. "Sweet Celestia. I just lost a friend, and I'm teasing you about sex. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"I think it's your coping mechanism. One of them. It's something you enjoy. Straight. Gay. Kinky or normal. I think it's a safe place you can come back to to feel good about life," she said quietly. "Bad stuff happens, and you want to get laid so you don't feel so bad. Could be worse. Could be your other coping mechanisms." When I looked at her blankly, she elaborated. "Wild Pegasus?" I flushed. She did have a point.

She curled her tail around my neck. "Come on. There're some rooms below. I think we both need a little coping time."

"Yes, ma'am."

It'd been a much tamer coping than usual, with far more cuddling and tears and talking about what had happened than sweat and orgasms. When we finally emerged, I did feel better. We were high in the clouds. Maripony, and the pain of losing Lacunae, now lay behind us. Ahead was an entirely new mess for me to deal with. Glory had gone below with P-21 to check on the life support rig for me, and so I was in the prow with Captain Boo.

The *Fleur* was remarkably quiet, save for the woosh of prop and wing. We moved through the cool mist of the clouds, the field of gray broken by intermittent gaps that allowed blue sky to wink through. In places, I was almost sure I could see the sun. Boo lay curled up beside me, lightly snoozing with her crazy cap slightly askew as the music played.

Wait? Music? I opened the panel and glanced down at my PipBuck, frowned, and tapped it a few times, but it continued playing one old audio file or another. I sighed and leaned against the railing, looking out as we passed through the wispy clouds. The violin and piano notes carrying back.

I remembered when I first saw her, that shadowy image in the dark outside the Hoofington Museum and within Blueblood manor, like a ghost of Princess Luna. How we met within Star House, and how I'd quickly realized that she was much different from anypony else I'd ever known, and not just for being an alicorn. How she'd behaved as if she were just a tool of the Goddess. The pony who wasn't.

I remember the despair I'd felt when she'd pulled me out of 99 and how I'd hated her for denying me my deserved death. And I remembered her shielding Glory and myself from the rain. How I'd gone into her mind after she'd lost herself under Hoofington, and how she'd put memories of herself into me. Except Lacunae wasn't Psalm, no more than I was my metallic legs. Psalm had been her foundation, but the mare herself had been someone completely different. She was closer to me than my own mother had been. She'd known my faults and accepted me for them. Her kindness and humility were all the more emphasized by what she'd been connected to.

She'd come to save me when I needed help on my lonely trip after Happyhorn. She'd travelled through hell with me in Hightower. She'd been an object of both mirth and adoration. And she'd grown, too. From a seemingly emotionless cypher to a mare who knew and loved. She'd danced. Something I'd never seen Psalm do. What could she have been if she'd had another few months? What might she have become if the Goddess had lived and realized her mistakes without dying?

I stared ahead, seeing the clouds stream around us, and reached down, stroking Boo's mane gently. And I looked at Boo's blank flank as the music swelled and the enormity of what Lacunae had done finally hit me. I began to shake, tears running down my cheeks.

Lacunae had no soul. She'd been that collection of memories. Any soul connected to that body had been Psalm's, not Lacunae's. There was no everafter for Lacunae. There never had been a chance of one. And she'd still gone through with it and returned the memories to the alicorns, in the hope that there'd be a future for her race.

Hope... that had been Lacunae's virtue. Hope that I would survive. Hope that I would succeed. Hope that... somehow... things would be better. Boo looked up at me as I put my hooves around her neck and pressed my face into her mane. "She's gone. She's... she's really gone! She was dancing with Stronghoof and... and..." I imagined her life, marrying that great overdramatic goof of the Wasteland. They'd have been an epic couple, with a romance that would have been the stuff of legend! That somehow she'd have children, or adopt them, and teach them in her kindly way. That she'd be there to help me when I screwed up with Glory or P-21... or just in general. "I'm never going to hear her laugh or her calm voice telling me things will be alright or... or anything!"

And as the music played, I remembered all the beauty she'd brought. The violin music she'd created with her horn alongside with Priest and Medley. Or the sight of her fluttering her wings as she bathed in magical waste! Or how the ghouls in Meatlocker had been taken back to a time two centuries ago when they'd been alive just by seeing her dressed up. She'd improved the Wasteland just by being who she was. All I could do was blow holes in it.

Lacunae was gone, like tears lost in the rain... but was hope? Would she want me to sit here and weep for her? Yes. For a time. She knew the value of grief. And so I didn't try to keep it in. Tears were how the heart purged itself of grief. They were not a weakness. But then she'd want me to keep going. To keep up hope in bringing all this to a close. So after I'd had a good cry, I wiped the snot off Boo's neck. "Sorry, Boo." The white mare just looked at me a moment, then smiled. I blinked at her, and she blinked back, then smiled again. Slowly, I smiled a little too, and the odd blank leaned forward and nuzzled my wet cheek before beaming at me.

"You really are an odd one, you know that?" I said as I finally composed myself. Together, we sat by the rail as we flew into tomorrow.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Wow. This was one of the most challenging chapters I've ever had to write. It wouldn't have been possible without extreme assistance from Lucid, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune. The latter of which was willing to donate two days of her time to making sure this chapter was close to canon. I understand this was a pivotal moment for many readers of FoE, and I wanted to present it well and respectfully. I also want to thank Hinds and Bronode for, as always, putting their meticulousness and their wordsmithing talents to good use.

This month I'm moving down to vegas, so I can't put an honest ETA on when 59 will be out. School is starting too, so things are going to get interesting soon. I hope things work out for me both professionally and financially so I can keep plugging away at Horizons. Just the Enclave left to go.

I'd like to also thank Kkat for creating Fallout:Equestria, even if some of her finer details drove me to tears this chapter. I'd like to thank everyone who has read this far, and I'd like to thank people who leave feedback at cloudsville. I'm always trying to get better. Donations can be given through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com and are greatly appreciated at this time. Thank you.)

59. Turbulence

“I simply cannot imagine why the pegasus ponies would schedule a dreadful down-pour this evening and ruin what could have been a glorious sunny day.”

The *Fleur* floated whisper-quiet through the air as we cut our way through the clouds, the wet vapor coating everything in a layer of shininess. Occasionally, we passed into a dip in the upper surface of the clouds and broke into open sky. Scotch Tape and P-21 ignored Glory’s warnings against staring at the sun, marveling at the amazing azure that arched overhead. For me, on the other hoof, looking up produced a feeling much like looking down. I envied both of them; they’d shaken 99’s agoraphobia far more quickly than I, if they’d ever had it to begin with. Boo also seemed quite impressed by the sun and stretched out her hoof as if she could nudge the glowing orb aside. Of course, then we would plunge into the clouds once more. It was definitely for the best, though, as we’d spotted at least one Raptor off to the northwest.

As we were crossing another of the cloud valleys, my attention turned to Lancer, who was keeping to himself by the rail. I trotted over, and I noticed him leaning away a little more with every step I took. “Oh, stop. I’ve already got my curse cooties all over you,” I teased as I sat down beside him. That certainly didn’t cheer him up, so I commented on the sky. Sure, looking up gave me problems, but if I just stared down the valley at the horizon... “Celestia, that’s beautiful,” I said as the sun washed over us. Then I glanced back over at him and saw his indifferent shrug. “You don’t think so?”

“It’s the sun. I’ve seen it before,” he commented quietly, then met my skeptical gaze. Huffing softly, he rolled his eyes. “Do you think your pegasi keep our homelands cloud-covered as well? Sun. Moon. Stars. I’ve seen all the skies have to offer.” He turned away, but then added, “It is... nice.”

“Right. Nice,” I said, feeling the awkwardness grow. To spare him, I averted my eyes. “So, what are they like? Your lands, I mean.”

“Save your breath, Maiden. I have no wish to speak with you. I hate and despise everything you are,” he growled. P-21 and Glory looked over at us as he began to build up steam. “You are the ruination of everything you come in contact with. You... did you see what you just did? You kill Goddesses!”

"That wasn't my kill, Lancer," I countered, frowning at him. "The Stable Dweller got the Goddess. I was just along for the ride."

"Yes! Along! Wherever you are, death and destruction follow!" he said, then looked around, his eyes widening. "I want to land. Let me off."

"You get off when we're clear of any Raptors. If we drop below the cloud layer, we'll be visible for miles." Glory said, trotting up and looking around at the *Fleur*. "I talked to Storm Front during the Gala about it. Raptor radar is tuned to detect high-density objects like dragons, flying tanks, mountains, and missile casings. If they get a return off the *Fleur*, they'll hopefully chalk it up to two-century-old radar systems and write it off as a glitch."

"They could not detect our Tempest," Lancer sneered at her. Oh. . . that didn't sound good.

"That was a myth," Glory countered with a sweep of her hoof. "Living storms do not exist."

"Keep telling yourself that," Lancer replied with a smug look. "You ponies had your 'Thunderheads'. We awakened the storm itself."

"Do you have anything like that now?" I interjected. "Or is this a two-century-old prickwaving dickfight of who *had* the deadliest toys?"

He cooled a bit, seemingly caught between discretion and arrogance. "Well, Thunderheads still exist," he commented with false levity.

"Right. . ." I turned to Glory. "And these were. . ."

Glory sighed, rubbing the bridge of her muzzle with a wingtip. "According to some conspiracy nuts, balefire bombs weren't the only megaspells in the zebra arsenal. Only the most prolific. There were rumors. . . myths. . . war stories. . . right before the end that the zebras had used megaspells to create super talismans that. . . well. . . had *excessive* effects. Whole mountains that would advance on pony positions. Living storms and cyclones. Behemoths of vegetable matter." She then glared at Lancer and tapped his chest. "But they were *just* stories. They're used as plot devices in our war dramas!"

"The superweapons of your side still exist. Why do you suppose that ours do not?" he retorted with a scowl. "Ponies were right to attack first before we could deploy them offensively. The elemental forces were encased within the greatest talismans ever created, and those could then be smuggled into your greatest cities or fired on missiles into the heart of your lands."

"Oh, so the ability to devastate an entire city wasn't enough? What could your mega talismans do that your balefire bombs couldn't?" Glory asked with a roll of her eyes.

"Go off more than once while not targeting us," Lancer retorted grimly. "A Tempest would tear your clouds apart and break your control of the weather. A Behemoth could prowl through your forests, hiding like a hillock during the day and savaging your towns by night. A Colossus would walk over your armies, resisting any megaspell you threw at it. And when the war was over, we could use them to reconstruct and rebuild."

"But... why?" I asked, pleading for him to see the madness of it all.

"We knew that the balefire deterrent wasn't going to last! Someday you'd have all your megaspells ready, and you'd attack. And you did!" he snapped, pointing a hoof at her. "In an instant, Roam was gone! The fire still burns! You liquefied the Atori Islands in minutes! Millions dead, and the radioactive slag is still toxic today! And that, by our accounts, was from just one megaspell! You turned the sun against us! Why would we not turn the sky and land itself against you?"

"And you have one of these... mega-talismans?" I asked lightly, afraid that the Legate was going to move up several orders of magnitude in importance very quickly. Maybe it was something in my eyes. Maybe it was something in my tone. But Lancer seemed to realize very quickly that I was shifting my priorities against the Remnant.

"... no." He said the word like he was extracting a tooth. "Father sent representatives back to the homeland to find one. We'd not made more than a dozen before the spells struck. If we'd had another year..."

"We'd have had some other horrifying superweapon to terrorize you with," I replied... but maybe we wouldn't have. Maybe Twilight would have resigned... maybe Rarity and her other friends with her. Maybe the war effort would have collapsed. Maybe one of the zebra weapons would bite them in the ass. Something had to break, sooner or later. I scowled at him. "You guys weren't any different from ponies. Always looking for that one thing that would let you win. That one advantage. That one... whatever... that'd let you kill more ponies than zebras. You used dragons. We made Raptors. We made power armor. You make armor-piercing bullets. We made megaspells. You made balefire bombs. We made Thunderheads. You made Tempests." I hissed sharply through my teeth. "It's annoying."

"Yes, well, you've never had to deal with a pony who defies everything thrown at her," Lancer countered.

“Excuse me?” I asked, my eyes widening.

“You always win,” he said with a scowl.

“I do not. . . always. . . win. . .” I muttered, glaring back at him. The tension inside me began to grow more acute. I looked over at my friends, but even they seemed unsure how to respond. That made the wires in my head draw even tighter, and then Lancer laughed harshly.

“Oh, please. Deus faced you, and now he serves you. Sanguine opposed you, and now he’s dead. The Harbingers brought all they could, and you’ve fought them off time and time again. You just survived a balefire bomb!” he declared. “What more can be thrown at you?”

“I don’t always win!” I shouted at him, springing atop him and yelling in his face. “I only survived the bomb because of my friend, and I lost her! I saved my stable only to have to kill it! Beating Sanguine didn’t bring Priest back! I broke the link, then had to kill forty helpless children.” Every win came at a price, and honestly, looking back, it sometimes made me wonder if I’d been right to win at all.

I wanted to rage! Damn this body! Pant! Gasp! I wanted a heartbeat to thunder! I wanted to feel like something other than a machine. Suddenly, I realized his face was screwed up in pain as my metal hooves ground his body into the deck. Just as quickly, I backed off. “Sorry. . .” I muttered. “I just. . . I don’t always win. Not. . . not like you think.”

He glowered at me but was apparently uninjured. “I hate you,” he growled. “I hate all of you,” he said as he glared at each of us on the ship. “Especially you,” he added with a look at me. I sighed and dropped my eyes; oh, well. He wasn’t the first. Then an unexpected voice spoke up.

“Let’s take this topic off Blackjack. You want to talk about hate?” P-21 asked casually as he stepped up towards the larger zebra. Lancer seemed surprised by P-21’s advance. “I know a thing or two about hate. You know what I’ve hated? I hated seeing a dozen helpless zebras, some of them children, being gunned down by a coward. I hated seeing him shoot the pony who’d saved their lives, and his, in the back. I hated and will *always* hate any world in which fuckers like him could get away with that.”

Oh Celestia, they were doing this now? “Coward?! How da—” Lancer began, and then P-21 swung his head around and smashed Persuasion across Lancer’s face. The surprised zebra fell down, looking at him in shock and rage. But there was no

bellowing rage in P-21, only a cold hatred I hadn't seen in weeks.

"You *are* a coward. You're afraid of everything. You kill from hiding where you can't be seen and from a distance where you won't be hurt. You're afraid of Blackjack, what she can do and what she represents. You're afraid of powers beyond your control. You're afraid of your own father. You're afraid of everything, but most of all you're afraid to admit it," he said as he looked down at Lancer.

"You came to m—" he began again, but he was again silenced by a blow from Persuasion. This time the zebra blocked the barrel with his hoof, but he still closed his mouth and stepped back.

"*Glory* went to you," P-21 snapped, "on the off chance you were behind Blackjack's disappearance. She was desperate. I wanted to implant a grenade rectally and watch you try and get it out," P-21 seethed, then glanced at me for a moment. "Blackjack might be able to forgive you. Blackjack lets go of shit that I can't even imagine. But I don't forgive you, Lancer. I saw a coward murder more than a dozen of his own kind, including his own mother and sister, in cold blood because he was too afraid to do the right thing and tell whoever gave that order to go fuck himself. Or simply let them live and then lie about it. You're a coward and a murderer and I don't expect that that will ever change."

Lancer looked like he was about to explode, but P-21 didn't look away. "You... have no idea..." the zebra said, searching for words.

P-21 actually smiled a little. "Oh? You think that I don't know what it's like to be afraid? I've been afraid almost every damned day of my life. Afraid for my life. Afraid for the life of someone I care for. Someone I love. So afraid that I wanted to die just so I wouldn't have to deal with the fear anymore. And yeah. I hated it too. Hated it and everything that made me scared. Everything that hurt me was my enemy, and everything hurt me." He glanced at me again, then back at the zebra. "But hate doesn't make the fear go away, and it doesn't make you strong. It makes you mean. And that doesn't get you anything but pain and misery."

He pointed a hoof at me. "That mare that you hate so much? The one you accused of winning all the time? She's gone through stuff that I can't even imagine, and suffered things that I know no pony should. And she will always do what is right. Right for her friends. Right for ponies. Right for zebras. Even right for hellhounds. No matter how much it hurts her or how afraid she is. And sure, she fucks up. But she keeps moving ahead. And as long as she can keep going, I can too. No matter how afraid I am."

I stared at P-21 as he walked away from Lancer, turning his back on the zebra. Lancer bored a shooty look into his back as the blue stallion walked over to Scotch Tape and gave her a firm hug. I felt a little lightheaded after that and stepped between them. "We'll get you down right away," I said to Lancer.

"Don't do me any favors out of pity," he snapped, his eyes full of rage as he glared at the smaller stallion. Finally, he turned away. "He speaks truthfully... that's what is so intolerable. I've been afraid of my father every second I've known him. Afraid of his approval and what it would mean. Afraid of his disappointment. Afraid of his wrath." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Do you... do you ever think of those you killed, Blackjack?"

"You could say that," I replied. "Especially the ones that were my fault. Killing someone in self defense is one thing, but someone dying because of a choice I made... I can't ever forget those. And I hope I never do."

"I see," he muttered. "Your friend was right. It was cowardly of me to slay my own people. One should never kill the helpless."

I closed my eyes, the ghostly tune of a song returning to memory. I'd thought I'd forgotten, but now I could hear it as if I were singing it once again. Hush now, quiet now... "You're not the only one who's done that. And you're right... we never should." Even if they were crazy.

For a moment, he was quiet, and then he said, as he looked off at the clouds, "Father has a balefire bomb."

"I know," I replied. "Xanthe told me."

He glanced at me. "I was... proud... we had it. When we dragged out of that silo, stabilized it... I was thrilled. A weapon to end the evil city and the Maiden all at once. But... he never really said he was going to use it on the city. It was implied, but he talked about others. Your Goddess. This Red Eye and his army. Something called the S.P.P. up in the skies. And now, after you two battled, I'm questioning everything he's told me and what I did for him. And that is what I hate you for most of all. Making me doubt." For a moment he just stared out at the passing clouds. "I wish that I had been stronger when we first met. I think I could have caused far less harm."

"Yeah, but if you'd come with us then, you'd have been dragged through a world of misery and angst. Trust me. You're better off. And you and I would have had sex eventually, and that would have complicated things with Glory, and—" I started to say

when he actually chuckled.

“Maiden, no offense, but your horn aside, you’re missing far too many stripes for us to ever be intimate,” he said with an actual honest smile. It looked good on him.

“Oh, really? Cause back at the Society, you didn’t seem to mind. Besides,” I said with a smirk, “ever hear of body paint?” Well now, that was quite a look of surprise!

A smack to my backside made me yip, and I turned and grinned sheepishly at Glory. “Oh! Um! Hi. We were. . .” Don’t say sex.

“Talking about sex,” Glory finished as she walked up next to me and sighed. “What am I going to do with you?” In the short term, the answer was apparently ‘smile at her and nuzzle her neck’.

“Well, you were off to a good start,” I replied, glancing towards my rear.

Lancer’s smile had been replaced by wariness. “I don’t think the legends of the Maiden could cover this part. My mother’s told me many stories, but none of them mention the Maiden getting her hindquarters paddled.”

An image of Princess Luna entered my mind, and I snickered. Scotch Tape and P-21 approached, though, and the filly asked Lancer, “Can you tell me more about zebras? I mean, I heard a few things, but most of the lessons in the stable were about how you were all bloodthirsty barbarians that ate young fillies.”

Scotch Tape looked up at P-21 and gave his foreleg a nudge. He glanced at Lancer, turned away, and finally sighed and said grudgingly, “I have to admit, I’m a little curious about the zebras as well.”

Scotch Tape smiled up at her father proudly, then asked Lancer, “Do you have a wasteland there?”

“Now. . . wait.” Lancer frowned. “I am a warrior, not a storyteller.”

“Be both,” I suggested. “Can’t hurt to branch out, can it?”

He seemed to weigh the choice between telling us and blowing us off, then answered, “Fine. I suppose I can tell you about our people. Better than hearing just your pony propaganda.

“Ours is a different sort of wasteland. Your wasteland is stark, cold, and empty. Ours is harsh and wild. Equestria did many terrible things during the war. There are still places where the megaspells rage. A pillar of fire that wanders a shattered plain of glass, seeking out any intruders. A city that traps the minds of any who sleep within

its limits in endless dreams. There are many other places where industrial works still poison the land. There are mines deeper and more vast than any valley, gouged into the earth and now filled with pollutants. And beasts. . . some native and others introduced during the war. . . they stalk and hunt us. The cities are too dangerous or contaminated to live in. And, of course, the tribes constantly bicker and fight.”

“Some things never change,” I muttered.

“No,” he said harshly. “Some things should not change. Some change should not be allowed.” Lancer met my eye again. “My mother told me stories when I was young of the good times. Before the war, when the twelve and one tribes worked in unity to survive and prosper. But all that changed.”

“Twelve and one?” I asked with confusion.

“I doubt you want to hear the story,” he said with a flush. But we did. Soon, we’d moved over by the wheel so that Scotch Tape could steer while she listened. I didn’t know why Scotch Tape was our designated pilot, but she seemed to be handling steering well enough; we hadn’t hit any mountains yet. We’d even opened a little trapdoor so that Rampage could listen in as she pedalled below.

“Once, there were the sun and the earth. Both were lonely, but they could not be together for long. Many times the sun came and made love to the earth, and when he did, life was born. Twelve times they coupled, and each time a new tribe was born. But then the moon saw their lovemaking and waited till the sun was away. The moon was wicked and pale, for his illumination was not nearly as bright, and so he took the earth by force. From the coupling one tribe was born, along with all the beasts and monsters that hunt under the cover of the darkness. When the sun saw what the moon had done, he was outraged, and from then on chased the moon across the skies so he would never get another chance. But occasionally the moon would lay a trap for the sun, and all the world would turn dark as they battled. But each time, the sun would be victorious and continue the hunt.”

Glory looked over at Scotch Tape with an expression of worry before the filly quipped, “Is this story a little too saucy for you?” Flushing, Glory returned her attention to Lancer. I gave her a little nuzzle. She gave my ear a little bite. Ah, good times. If only Lacunae could have been here to share them. . .

“The twelve tribes are the children of the sun. The one are the children of the moon. Each coupling, the land gave rise to the tribe. The Achu were born of the high and fiery mountains. The Propoli in a village. The Carnilia on a fertile plain. The Mendi in a deep wood.” I couldn’t help but smile at his tone as he seemed to get into it.

"The Zencori were born on a wind, the Atori on the islands, and the Eschatik in the deserts. Even the southern snows birthed the Sahaani, and the ice has always borne the springs of steaming water heated by their passions. The swamps birthed the Orah and the jungles the Tappahani. The final two, the Logos and the Roamani, were sired in a library and on a battlefield."

"Wait. Sired?" Glory asked skeptically. "I'm pretty sure that violates every code of conduct in every library I've ever been in."

"Nah. All the best libraries have got great orgies going on," Rampage drawled sarcastically from below. "You just have to fuck really quietly."

That made us all laugh, and Lancer sighed. "It is a story. Believe it or don't. The story doesn't care." He snapped his tail and then smirked. "Or can you ponies tell me your origins with greater veracity?"

He had us there. I had no clue where ponies came from. Everything was rather fuzzy prior to the Princesses. "Ah. . ." I looked at Glory, and she gave a little shrug. "Not so much."

"Then accept the story, or I can be silent," he said with a frown. "I'm likely making mistakes all over. I can't tell stories like Mother, starting everything with 'that reminds me of a funny story.'"

"No no. Go on." I said, mollifying him a little.

"For a time, the twelve tribes lived and spread all across the land. They worked together to fight the many beasts of the wilderness, but unlike ponies, we did not seek to tame nature. We respected its might. In the homeland, once, were great tracts of wilderness as far as a zebra could walk in a year. But then the tribes encountered the children of the moon. The Propoli invited them into their village. The Mendi healed their wounds. The Tappahani cooked a fine banquet, the Atori danced, and the Zencori told stories to the newcomers. But the children of the moon remained aloof, mysterious, and arrogant. They claimed they had a power greater than all the twelve tribes put together, and that the twelve were to be slaves of the one. Thus, the twelve went to war with the one.

"For generations they battled, for the children of the moon were numerous, but cold. Hard. And they had learned many foul magics to bind spirits and souls. Their armor would not fail and their weapons could not break. Even in death, their mightiest warriors fought on. They enslaved and killed the twelve in a mad pursuit of their dark powers. Their lies turned tribe against tribe for a time, and nearly destroyed

the twelve. But the twelve rallied, united, and pushed back. In their desperation, the one tribe called down the power of the stars themselves. . . madness. For the stars came. They fell all across the land, shattering the great and dark cities of the one tribe and the armies of the twelve. But when it ended, the twelve remained and the one had broken. The twelve cried for blood, but the earth begged the twelve for mercy, for although they were sired violently, they were still her children. The One tribe was marked; all who bore their blood would have their stripes marked in glyphs of warning. And thus the One tribe was named Starkatteri, 'star branded', and shunned."

"What tribe is the Legate?" I asked, curious.

Lancer opened his mouth, then closed it again, frowning. "He is one of the last Achu."

"He is not," Rampage said below, her voice becoming oddly accented. "He does not fight like an Achu."

"He claims he is Achu! Who are you to deny that, Proditori?" Lancer snapped.

"Does that mean you are Achu as well?" P-21 asked. All this talk made me want to say 'bless you'.

Again, the question made him grimace. "No. . . blood passes from mother to child, not father to child. I am Zencori." I thought of telling him that his mother was alive, but decided against it for now. Still, storytelling was a big improvement over killing people. "My tribe were wanderers and storytellers. We sought the lore of the world. Many came and settled in Equestria long before the war."

"Why did the zebras fight the war?" Glory asked. "I've never heard your side before."

The question seemed to shock him. "You want to know?" he asked, looking from one to the next, as if he'd never seen ponies interested in it before. "Our people were not ruled by immortal royalty. We elect a Caesar from the tribes. All thirteen tribe elders get a vote, and no tribe could have consecutive Caesars."

"Wait? Even the evil tribe of star and moons gets a vote?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course. They are a tribe. A cursed, evil, conniving tribe that none would trust, but a tribe. Their elders used their vote to protect their people from the wrath of the twelve. Better to keep one's wicked in the open where they can be watched than to force them from sight where they can be forgotten and allowed to plot in the shadows," Lancer said quite matter of factly.

He continued, "The Last Caesar was elected amidst great controversy. There were four tribes with strong candidates, and each had three votes. It was the Starkatteri who decided the election, which did the Roamani candidate no favors. Thus the Last Caesar was terribly weak when he came to power. There was even talk of breaking tradition and re-voting with only two candidates, but tradition is tradition. The Roamani are soldiers, one and all. They have fought against dragons, the Moleke, and other great beasts and reptiles. They did not take the disrespect well.

"When some Atori bandits captured a boat full of pony tourists and demanded a ransom, the Last Caesar insisted that the Roamani would handle it. But the Atori lived on islands, and it took much time for the Roamani army to board ships and make the journey. It was a terrible mistake. A band of a half dozen Achu warriors, or even Atori fighters, would have sufficed. But the Last Caesar wanted glory and respect. Your princess grew impatient and sent in the flyers you call the 'Wonderbolts'. They succeeded in freeing the hostages, but four of the pegasi died. It was a terrible blow to the Last Caesar. There was even talk of holding a special election to replace him. But tradition is tradition, and he remained. He treated the pony interference as a terrible insult to our people and demanded that the trade agreements we signed with your people be suspended."

"So wait? That's why the last war started? One zebra's bruised ego?" Scotch Tape blurted.

"It was more complicated than that," I said. "Equestria was also being pushed into it by nobles and businessponies who would never actually have to fight a war." This earned me my own surprised looks. "What? I saw it in a memory orb."

"Cheating unicorns," Rampage muttered below.

"For us, the war began with your Princess. When she seized a coal shipment, it was a great insult to our people. An insult the Last Caesar used to call for war. At first, only one tribe answered him: the Roamani. They are a martial tribe, what many think of when they think of the war. Duty and sacrifice are their creed. The other tribes abstained from war at first, but as the fighting dragged on, the Propoli eventually joined as well. They were a powerful and influential tribe. With them came the Carnilia and the Atori. Still, even while we were at war, our mightiest tribe, the Achu, and our most respected, the Mendi and Logos, spoke against the war," Lancer said, speaking more now than I ever imagined he could. He had a certain rhythm and tone that was just pleasing to listen to.

"Wait? There were zebras who protested the war?" I said in shock.

“Proditor,” Rampage said from below over the squeak of the wheels.

“Many, though few declared it so brazenly as the Proditor. There were Equestrian sympathizers throughout the conflict. Thousands of Mendi, Eschatik, and Zencori were arrested for their support of the enemy. But you see, the sun is sacred to us. Many zebras, especially ones who had made Equestria their home, saw your Princess Celestia as the incarnation of the sun. They questioned the wisdom of fighting against her. In fact, the fighting had become so terrible that the Last Caesar was nearly forced to surrender by the other tribes,” he said as he bowed his head. “Then the sun was ambushed by the moon.”

“You mean Luna taking over?” I asked, remembering the dream memory of Littlehorn. The dreams of Psalm were now more like memory orbs; I remembered experiencing them, but the experience was no longer so raw and personal.

He nodded, raising his head up with a glare. “The Princess of the Moon, the Maiden of the Stars; when we heard she was assuming control, it was the greatest gift to the Last Caesar. There are tales about the moon and stars’ evil back to our creation. From the actions of the Starkatteri to the horrors of the Maiden.” He gave me a very skeptical look. “The first Maiden of the Stars blackened the world while she was challenged by Celestia. To be fighting her was... intoxicating. It brought all the tribes fully into the war. Even the Mendi reluctantly joined, though they constantly called for peace.”

“I never really understood that. How could Nightmare Moon keep the sun from rising? Does the sun really just go away?” Scotch Tape asked with a small frown.

“No no,” Glory replied, matter of factly. “The sun and the moon orbit this world, as do the planets, due to the fundamental attraction of magic. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna just gave the sun and moons little nudges to keep them moving on time. Since they’ve... gone... the length of days and nights has varied year by year. The moon is much closer than the sun, even though they look about the same size. When the moon and sun are in the right position, the moon blocks out the sun. Position the moon just right, and it can darken a large area of the world.” She grimaced. “The first time we saw that... well... it was unsettling to say the least.”

“When the Maiden of the Stars took over the war, the twelve tribes united. It was no longer about bruised pride; this was a war of good triumphing over evil. With her ascension, the Last Caesar gave greater orders and passed sweeping laws more radical than any before in the Empire. Always, the justification returned to defeating the armies of the Maiden. The establishment of the Ministries, the weapons pro-

duced, and the megaspells. . . all became further justification. And as the death toll rose, it seemed impossible to surrender.” He sighed and frowned. “Truthfully, many felt the war glorious. Virtuous.”

“What about trying to abduct Celestia?” I asked, almost using the word ‘assassinate’.

“We did not try to abduct her!” he retorted. “The Mendi, Celestia, and the one mare called Flutterbye all worked to bring an end to the conflict. They were attempting to help her defect!”

“Defect? Celestia?” P-21 asked skeptically.

“Yes. She knew her mistake years after it was made. If she had left with us and denounced the Maiden, then Equestria would have abandoned the war. A peace could have been negotiated between her and the twelve tribes that would have bypassed the Last Caesar entirely!” Lancer said heatedly. “The war would have been over!”

“Funny. Our histories say you attempted to assassinate her,” Glory countered, and I groaned.

“Equestrian propaganda,” Lancer said with a wave of his hoof, “Something that your Ministry of Image excelled at.” Glory bristled, and even P-21 frowned at the thought of Celestia betraying her sister and abandoning Equestria to ‘save’ it.

I couldn’t say which was true. Celestia hadn’t looked like she’d been all that willing to be taken, but the zebras also hadn’t been outright trying to kill her, from what I’d seen. I supposed the exact truth would never be known, unless somepony decided to ask Celestia’s ghost. I started to ask another question to head off the argument, but then I saw Boo’s ears twitch.

I froze, watching her. Her ears flicked again, and she frowned, looking at the clouds around us. “Shh!” They continued to argue as Boo’s frown turned fearful. “Shut up!” I snapped, cutting off their squabbling. “Stop pedalling!” I said briskly down into the guts of the ship. Rampage frowned up at me, but she stopped. The propellers and wings slowed, then went silent.

“What is it, Blackjack? We’re still hours from the lightning rods,” Glory said in confusion. I reached out hoof and silenced her. Boo’s ears were still twitching as her pale eyes peered out at the clouds. She cringed. . . and at once I was on my hooves and scanning the clouds myself. Nothing. . . but they knew the range of E.F.S.

I froze, and the silence deepened. Every ear twitched, and more than a few eyes

looked at me with blatant skepticism. I couldn't hear anything as inertia carried us through swirling mist. Only Boo's skittish nature and my own creeping unease gave any indication that anything at all was amiss. . .

That was good enough for me. "Lancer. Put your cloak on Glory. Now."

She scowled. "Blackjack, if you're worried about detection, we should put it on you!"

This was simultaneously with Lancer saying, "I do not take orders from. . ."

"Put it on her, now," I commanded as the clouds began to thin. We were drifting into a gap. Lancer gave one last defiant look, then pulled out his cloak and draped the shimmery garment over Glory. When the blue gemstone clasp was closed, she seemed to blur away from sight.

Scotch Tape reached out with a hoof to where Glory had stood. "Ooooh," she giggled as the 'air' bunched up under her hoof.

"Scotch Tape, stop poking m—" Glory said as we broke into another open gap between clouds. On our left, barely beyond range of my E.F.S., was the long, dark form of a Raptor. Dozens of black specks, wings of power armor, flew in wedge-shaped formations next to the long, lean, lethal machine. Beyond it, I could make out a second Raptor. I could barely hear the hum of their motors, somehow muffled from detection. Nothing so big should be so quiet.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape warned. I glanced behind me and saw two more on the other side of the *Fleur*, one even closer than the first I'd seen. It appeared filled from one end to the other with red bars. I slowly leaned out, looking down at the silently swooshing props of a Raptor below us. I looked up past the balloon to see a half dozen beam turrets pointing down at the tiny *Fleur*. Two above. Two below. Two to the left. Two to the right. We were flying smack dab in the middle of a wing of Raptors, any one of which could reduce the *Fleur* to kindling.

I closed my eyes briefly and then looked back. From the cloud bank behind us burst the twin muzzles of a great warship's forward plasma cannons, the dark thunderclouds to either side of the following hull trailing streamers of white. The quiet propellers flung off chunks of cloud as it closed in behind us. Maybe my luck would have them all be completely blind to the ancient giant purple airship flying through the air in front of them.

That hope was cut off by the wings of black power armor moving in slowly and deliberately from all sides.

Rampage popped her head out of the hatch and glanced around. "Huh," was all

she said before dropping back down belowships. “Down worry, I got this!” she shouted. The wheels below began to shriek as the propellers buzzed behind us and the *Fleur*’s wings began to flap wildly. A minute or so and we’d be in the clouds. Hopefully that would do something. . .

Then the clouds ahead of us exploded as another Raptor, facing us nose-on, gunned its engines and leapt out of the clouds like a massive sea beast lunging for its prey. The wind from its speed blowing us back was the only thing that prevented the *Fleur* from smashing itself to pieces against the great ship’s armor. Spinning wildly, the *Fleur* pirouetted out of control. The four Raptors to our sides began to circle, turning inward to present bank after bank of energy weapons. The one to our rear glided to a halt while the one before us turned like an implacable wall in the sky, *Castellanus* painted in imposing stenciled letters on the bow in front of the thunderclouds. There were so many red bars in my E.F.S. that I turned the damned thing off.

I reached out and felt my hoof connect with solid air. “Ow! Blackjack, I. . .”

I grabbed Glory and pulled her close. “Whatever you do, do NOT get out from under there. Remember what Sunset tried to pull. These guys are likely to go crazy if they see you, so stay under there, understand?”

“Y. . . okay,” Glory stammered.

“What are you going to do?” Scotch Tape asked as I walked past her towards the bow of the airship. As I passed Boo, I tugged off her captain’s hat and set it atop my head.

“Let me down! I’m not with them!” Lancer began to shout when P-21 grabbed him around the neck.

“Unless you want them to drop you, shut your mouth,” the blue stallion said, then looked to me. “Trust Blackjack. She knows what she’s doing.”

That made one of us who thought that.

I walked up to the prow and looked up at the Raptor across our bow. The breeze from her props caught my mane as I stood upright, put one hindhoof on the rail, and rested my left foreleg on my hind knee. I levitated out my sword as I examined the massive Raptor and took in her name. Dozens, possibly hundreds, of beam weapons from power armored ponies all pointed right at me as I switched on my broadcaster and turned it to the channel that had gotten me in trouble at the Rainbow Dash Skyport.

“Raptor *Castellanus*,” I said formally as I pointed my starmetal sword at the colossal

machine. "This is Captain Blackjack of the airship *Fleur*. Stand to and prepare to be boarded!"

"To be honest, this really wasn't what I expected at all," I admitted as I sipped a cup of rather bland steamy brown water, but, given that my host could have thrown me in a cell or simply reduced me and my friends to crackling clouds of rapidly dissipating meat vapor, I kept my beverage opinions to myself. "I mean, I know I told you I was going to board, but I didn't expect you to actually let me."

"Occasionally, the unexpected is the most expedient," the General said as she inspected some papers on her desk. Of course, I'd only been let on board unarmed, and I had two guards watching me. To the General's credit, though, she knew how to pick them. Twister and Boomer flanked me, the two Neighvarro Enclave I'd be least likely to kill. The brown stallion had swapped his missiles for beam guns, too.

General Storm Chaser reminded me a lot of Mom: mature, intelligent, and giving me the feeling that if I didn't watch myself I'd be in far more trouble than I'd like. The gray pegasus mare with the white mane watched me with a steady gaze that said that she knew more than I'd prefer her to. Her office on the *Castellanus* was comfortable and tasteful, with everything neatly organized on shelves rather than in heaps. The pictures of ponies on her desk suggested a family. Children, certainly. She wore only her dark purple Enclave uniform; if I killed her, my friends would be vaporized. The Enclave were all over the *Fleur*, and all I could hope was that while I was here there wasn't a Rainbow Dash sighting. The *Castellanus* had apparently been tracking the *Fleur* for more than an hour before they'd swept in to catch us. Wood might not have had much of a radar profile, but my cybernetic body had been a red flare to their sensors.

"I've gotten several interesting reports of the goings on down below. The Enclave military wing may not have as extensive an information base as our intelligence wing out of Thunderhead, but we're not blind. We've been keeping apprised of things going on below for generations now. Generally from afar, of course; less risk of entanglement." She sipped her cup of tea slowly, then sighed, staring at the curls of vapor rising from it before glancing up at me. "Unfortunately, now it seems the surface is insisting on entanglement with us."

"I don't have any issues with the Neighvarro Enclave," I said defensively.

"I can vouch for her, Ma'am," Twister said respectfully. The General gave the mare

a long stare, and she drew herself more rigid. “Sorry, Ma’am. . .”

Storm Chaser dropped her eyes back to the neatly organized papers. “Testimony from the Maripony facility just before detonation suggests otherwise,” she said as she reached over for a clipboard with a wing. She looked at it a moment. “Blackjack, aka Security. Stable mare. Appeared in the wastelands roughly two months ago. First identified by ‘DJ PON-3’.” She flipped a page. “Prioritized by Enclave Intelligence as an alpha level threat following a megaspell discharge at Miramare Air Station. There’s a memo that you might have had contact with a Spike Observation squad, but no confirmation.” Her eyes glanced at Twister, who stood so straight that I imagined that not even a balefire bomb could knock her over. “Reprioritized as a gamma level threat two weeks later. There’s a note that you might be an asset to Intelligence. Re-emerged at a surface skirmish in which you destroyed the Pre-war battleship *Celestia*.” She glanced up at me from over the top of the clipboard. “Impressive.”

“Yeah. Blackjack does things like that,” Boomer chuckled. The general’s eyes locked on him, and he coughed. “Sorry, Ma’am.”

I flushed a little. “I had help. And I cheated. . . .”

“You won,” Storm Chaser replied, then returned to the clipboard. “Disappeared for several days and was redetected by Neighvarro intelligence assets at the Fluttershy Medical Center while we investigated the fate of an intelligence squad we sent to spy on the Volunteer Corps’s activities. You were in possession of several unidentified cybernetic augmentations and in the company of an alpha priority target tentatively identified as a Rainbow Dash clone. Mane clippings proved inconclusive.”

“She. . . changed back. The spell wore off. Killing joke; it’s fickle stuff,” I said as I gave the best bullshitting grin I could manage.

She stared at me without comment for a long second that had my grin sliding off my face like soft tar. Heck, now I was standing more at attention! Then her eyes returned to the clipboard. “Next reported at Yellow River where you helped extract three Neighvarro troopers investigating allegations of a biological weapon. You confirmed these allegations.” She stopped and then read slowly, with emphasis, “Allowed Neighvarro troopers to report this information.” She looked at me sharply, “Given your association with one Morning Glory, third child of Sky Striker, I’m surprised. I would have expected you to side with her by default.”

“Bioweapons are wrong. Those things killed my stable.” With my help. “If I can’t stop him, you’d have to.” She didn’t reply, but I got a feeling that she was pleased by my

answer as she read on.

“Possible presence at the Rainbow Dash Skyport; unconfirmed. Re-encountered by the squad you helped in Yellow River. Encountered the synthetic being known as Dawn and fought her and a zebra Behemoth class tank... in hoof to hoof combat?” She paused again and looked at Boomer with an arched brow. “Is that right, Corporal?”

“Yes ma’am. I mean, I know tanks don’t have hooves, but she beat it. No clue how, but she did,” Boomer confirmed with an eager nod.

I flushed, waving a hoof as I tried to set the record straight. “Technically I lost. I only survived because the tank was being controlled by the brain of a stallion who raided my stable and tried to kill me. . .” I trailed off and waved my hoof at her clipboard. “Look, that report doesn’t really. . . there’s a lot of stuff you’re missing. . .”

She was silent till I shut up, then only answered with an “I see,” before looking back down. “Next report at the Grimhoof Army Base where you helped confirm Thunderhead’s acquisition of several long range cruise missiles. Killed one of the three who attempted to accost the clone. Let the other two return to report.” The general tapped her chin with a wingtip as she gazed at the paper. Then she went on without looking at me, “Final appearance was at the Maripony facility immediately prior to the detonation of a suspected Mark III ‘Chernobog’ class balefire bomb. Presumed dead along with High General Harbinger and the surface terrorist known at LittlePip, aka the Stable Dweller.” She reached over with a wing and lifted a clipboard that was as thick as mine. “Since you’re here, I suppose we’ll have to wait and see if those other two are actually alive or not.”

“Pip might be. Harbinger. . . isn’t,” I replied, feeling a little sickly as I remember him being torn to pieces. “I saw him get killed prior to the bomb going off.”

“I see. Was the balefire bomb an attempt by this LittlePip, Red Eye, Thunderhead, or the entity known as the Goddess to assassinate the leader of the Enclave military and decapitate our command apparatus?” Storm Chaser’s cool tone reminded me of when I’d asked Lancer if he had a mega-talisman.

I could withhold, lie, or tell the truth. As General Chaser looked me in the eye, I had the distinct feeling that the first two were extremely risky. “The Goddess was using LittlePip to get some sort of black magic. LittlePip turned the tables and used the bomb to kill the Goddess and the book. I don’t think the Goddess intended LittlePip to live, but she got distracted. Your High General was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

"I see." She set LittlePip's clipboard down and then set mine next to it. "Well, if you see her again, congratulate her on causing more havoc in the Enclave command structure than we've endured in a century and a half. High General Harbinger's death, the *Triumphant* being severely damaged, the loss of two other generals aboard the four Raptors destroyed, and the loss of two colonels has thrown the whole chain of command straight into a cyclone. Half the remaining leadership is busy pointing at anypony else to blame while covering their tails, a quarter is claiming they're the legitimate heads of the military now, and the remainder are actually doing their jobs. I've got three councilors blaming me for not physically stopping the High General from going in there, or for not demanding that he take a whole Raptor squad with him." She folded her hooves on the desk before her as she looked at me evenly, "And, according to you, there's a rogue intelligence element with a bioweapon pointed right at the Enclave's citizens from one of our most secure and sensitive military facilities. You'll forgive me if I'm a little skeptical that all of this is just one big coincidence."

"Yeah. I know. But sometimes life is like that," I replied with as much levity as I could manage. "I'm sure if LittlePip had known you were going to come in unannounced, she... nope, actually I don't think she could have managed it more perfectly. Maybe she might have gotten the *Triumphant* too. But really, she didn't know. Unless she did know and removed that memory so the Goddess couldn't read it... she is scary good like that." I grinned sheepishly at the general's flat gaze. "What? I'm telling you, it probably wasn't intentional."

"Forgive me if I'm not reassured." She finished off her cup and set it beside the teakettle and hotplate. She looked at my clipboard again, silently reading it, then glanced at me once more. "Blackjack. You've put me in an awkward situation where I'm going to have to creatively interpret my orders. Officially, I'm to bring you, and anypony involved in the Maripony attack or associated with such people, to a secure facility for interrogation. Or summarily execute you." I could teleport behind her and use her for cover... The general then gave a little smile. "Well, I'm not going to do that."

You could feel the tension drain out of the room. "Thank you, Ma'am," Twister blurted.

"I understand. I wouldn't want to try to execute somepony I'd fought with either, Sergeant," the General replied.

"No, that's not it, Ma'am," Twister replied.

"I'd rather tackle a Talon squad naked than try and force Blackjack to do anything," Boomer replied.

"Naked and unarmed. . ." Twister agreed.

"And covered in barbecue sauce," Boomer added.

"I'm not that bad. . ." I muttered. "I mean, that one time I was half psychotic from lack of sleep. I'd have to really work to kill a half dozen pegasi now." The three of us were drawing some very uncertain looks from the general.

"Be that as it may, you seem like a pony who wants to avoid as much death as possible in this situation. If it wasn't for you, Lighthooves could have deployed his bioweapon at his leisure, and you've helped us in the past. Right now, with our leadership so fractured, would be an opportune time for him to attack. Autumn Leaf will be mopping things up on the ground. My mission is dealing with Lighthooves, his weapon, and Shadowbolt Tower. Will you assist us?"

I rubbed my neck nervously. "That depends on what you had in mind."

"From all our reports, you're a superb combat specialist. If you can help us seize the tower, we'll be able to avoid engaging the city directly," the General said. "I'd like you on the vanguard raiding the tower and neutralizing its defenders. Once the biological weapon is under our control, disabled, or destroyed you'd be free to go."

"Neutralize. You mean kill," I replied.

"That is the standard euphemism," the general replied with a little bit of amused confusion. Her lips curled up a little. "Would you prefer 'take out'? 'Eliminate'? 'Terminate'?" It still tasted sour to me. "What is it? You've killed before. In fact, according to your dossier, you're rather effective at it."

"Exceptionally," Boomer agreed.

I frowned back at him, then returned my attention to the general. "Just because I'm good at it doesn't mean I like it. I'm not as good as you think I am, anyway. I. . . I don't want to hurt people," I said, looking down. "I'm Security. Not 'Soldier'. Security saves ponies."

The general didn't answer for a moment, then asked coolly, "I see. So security defends, whereas soldiers attack?" When I nodded, she pursed her lips a moment, pressing her hooves together before her mouth as she studied me. "Interesting. Do you think I am attacking Shadowbolt tower because I *want* to, or because I am trying to defend my people against a pernicious threat that you are familiar with?"

When I didn't answer, she gave a little smile. "I assure you, it would be much simpler to simply attack Thunderhead, take the populace hostage, and demand Lighthooves's surrender while summary executions begin. That was Harbinger's plan before mission creep set in."

Okay. Neighvarro definitely slipping on my scale. "I get it. I do. It's just a lot more offensive than I'm comfortable with," I admitted.

"I see," she replied calmly, with a small smile. "If only you'd been born a pegasus."

I blinked in confusion. "What's that?"

"Nothing," she said as she dropped her hooves to the desktop. "I am a soldier. One of the few command officers with actual combat experience. While many see us as attackers, the reality is that a soldier's life is to defend. If we existed to kill and slaughter, we'd be little different than the raiders who infest your surface. If we wanted to simply kill ponies, we could do so with impunity." She paused, then asked with a small smile, "Have you known any soldiers?"

"A few," I said, thinking of the Marauders. I could see her point. None of them had been bloody butchers. . . well, maybe Doof, and Applesnack I honestly didn't know. Twist. . . Psalm. . . Big Macintosh. . . They hadn't been fighting to kill. They'd fought to protect their homeland. Their Princess. Their family. "I see your point, and I apologize. I'm just. . . not a soldier."

"We'll have to disagree on that," Storm Chaser said with a sigh and a small frown. "The Enclave needs ponies like you. We've got far too many who are eager to attack. High General Harbinger was a symptom of a disease, and after Maripony. . . I don't know what the Enclave will be like in the coming months."

My ears drooped; I felt like I'd disappointed her. Why should it matter, though? I wasn't a pegasus or a soldier. "Sorry," I muttered. She waved her hoof like it was no matter. Then I frowned, "It's also something else, though. . . it feels like. . ." I faltered.

The general frowned at me, but gestured with a wing for me to continue. "Feels like what?"

But I didn't have time to finish, as the doors to the office were opened with a loud bang. Two mares and a stallion, all dressed in the same dark purple uniforms, stormed in. The mares were red and blue and looked enough alike to be related. The green stallion hung back, his black mane cut short and a trimmed black mustache curled above his top lip. "Is this her?" the red mare with the orange-and-

yellow-striped mane demanded. "Is this the terrorist scum that killed the High General?" Her orange eyes blazed at me as she answered her own question. "I'll drop you back in that irradiated grave!"

"Enclave directive 122639J demands immediate and summary execution of all parties affiliated with the intentional death of party leadership," the blue mare said with a smug smile, her lovely face framed by her lavender and ivory mane. Her wingtip curled down and pulled a beam gun from her holster as she said coolly, "This will only take a moment."

Indeed it would. Smash red feathers, grab her as a shield, ram the blue one, crush her head, throw red at green. Finish both if need be. Twister and Boomer looked from the general to the trio. "Don't kill them, Blackjack," the General snapped, making all three of them pause. The General clenched her jaw as she rose behind her desk. "Captains Afterburner, Hoarfrost, and Crosswinds... your timing couldn't be more ironic. How dare you interrupt my interrogation?"

The three stiffened somewhat. The green stallion still smiled a little, though it was hard to see beneath his mustache. "My apologies, General. As soon as we were aware that one of the terrorists from Maripony survived, Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost both insisted on seeing you," he said with amused tones. "There's four others who are very keen to know what you'll do with her."

"Yes. A pity that information couldn't have waited till the interrogation was complete, Captain Crosswinds" the General snapped.

"I'm going to cook you. I'm going to light your pretty little ship on fire and watch you dirtsiders burn or jump for what you did to the High General," Afterburner said with a grin. I could have dropped her with five magic bullets through her head, so her menacing expression lost some of its edge.

"The law is patently clear on the matter, General Storm Chaser," Hoarfrost said primly. "As are your orders."

"Captain Hoarfrost, if you bite that weapon, it's you who will be summarily killed, by me," the General replied, making the pale blue mare freeze. The two power-armored ponies turned and directed their weapons at the three, to their surprise. Afterburner hissed through her teeth as the General pinned her with a glare and continued. "I understand that you are upset. All of you had a... personal... relationship with the High General. Right now I am ordering you to set that aside and to conduct yourselves with the duty and professionalism the Enclave expects of its officers! Is that understood?"

The three seemed to weigh the order a moment, and that was when I understood just how soft General Chaser's position was. Maripony hadn't just destroyed ships. It had shaken the Enclave badly. The well-oiled military rulers had just been reminded that they could die. They'd come to the Wasteland, been touched by it, and now knew that the Wasteland was coming for them. The trio of captains finally stiffened at attention, but Afterburner kept her eyes locked on me. If she'd been a unicorn, I had no doubt that she'd be lighting me on fire with her mind. "Yes, General," the three said solemnly.

"Now get back to your posts, immediately. We're on high alert, and you won't do your ships any good if you're here!"

"She killed the High General! Everypony knows it!" Afterburner raged as she glared at me. "I swear, Stable Dweller, if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to see everything you love burned to ashes."

I should have just kept my yap shut, but not being for once the not-smart pony made it impossible to resist. "One, I just love the flame motif you've got going on here. Really. Well done," I said as I approached her with a smile. "Two. I'm the 'Security' stable mare. Not the 'Stable Dweller'."

She rolled her eyes. "Pfft. Security. Stable Dweller. Whatever!" Her gaze narrowed. "I'm going to see you pay for what you've done!"

Was it a bad sign when I was more mature than a 'captain' in the Enclave?

"You three are dismissed. Are you going to leave on your own, or am I going to have to have you escorted out?" Storm Chaser challenged.

Captain Afterburner opened her mouth, but Hoarfrost, having returned her beam pistol to her holster, covered the red pony's mouth with her wing. "We'll be leaving. Come along, sister. And we'll be filing a full report, immediately, General." Afterburner seemed like she wanted at least a few more threats and bit down hard on her sister's wingtip. The blue pegasus just shivered and smiled, her wings poofing a little. She looked at me. "Oh, incidentally, Blackjack? I find it very hard to believe that the Rainbow Dash clone you are so attached to isn't with you. I'll be keeping a very close eye out for her."

"You do that," I countered, just as coldly. The pair turned and walked out, Afterburner starting to argue aloud as soon as they cleared the door. The green stallion grinned, saluted Storm Chaser, and followed them. As the door closed, I could hear him laughing.

"So! You were saying?" I brightly asked the General as she sat down hard behind the desk and rubbed a temple with a wingtip.

"Those three. . . why couldn't they have been assigned to Autumn Leaf?" The general shook her head. "I have until one of them gets on a radio, so we'll have to wrap this up quickly."

"They seem awfully young, and not quite what I pictured a captain in the Enclave to be," I said delicately.

"Well bred," Twister said sarcastically.

"That's enough, Sergeant. They're still your superior officers." She tapped a button. "Captain Racewind? Delay the three captains however you can. Jammed hatches. Stuck cargo. Be creative and don't let them anywhere near a radio."

"Yes ma'am. Please disregard any fire alarms you hear," a stallion said through a speaker.

She frowned at me, then leaned back. "They were all extremely, inappropriately, close to the High General. If they hadn't been out here getting ready for operations, they would have been at Maripony. That would have been quite a burr out of my feathers. All three are from military families, all three are privileged, and none of them have been in serious combat. Oh, but they want to."

"Raiders with Raptors," I sympathized, and shivered.

"Apt analogy."

I looked back at the door, then gestured towards it with a hoof. "Was that intentional? That whole fire. . . ice. . . thing. I mean, seriously?"

She gave a mirthless smile. "Oh yes. They've been like that since they were fillies. Twins, you know. Absolute terrors. I know their father." She sighed again, "And thanks to their connections, they're now in charge of the *Sirocco* and the *Blizzard*. Given how much they shower their crews with bonuses, I can only hope they'll follow orders and stay in position."

"And the stallion? What's his deal?"

"Crosswinds? Less blatant nastiness and more callous amusement. He doesn't have the seriousness his position warrants, but he was remarkably proficient at ferreting out information for the High General. As a reward, he was bumped to being put in charge of the *Cyclone*." She sighed and leaned forward, frowning at me.

"They're what I'm trying to prevent. The Enclave is not a clubhouse for overprivileged idiots to play with war machines."

"I hope you're right," I answered. Had those three not made an appearance, I might have signed on. As it was, I couldn't. I didn't have a soldier mentality... maybe I could have been, if it had been an army commanded by Storm Chasers, but I had an inkling that there were more Harbingers in the Enclave than there were Storm Chasers. "Now... about stopping Lighthooves. I can't be your soldier. But I do want to help, and maybe I can in a way outside the Enclave." We were short on time, so I'd have to cut to the proverbial chase.

"I see." She narrowed her eyes a little as she considered me. "What did you have in mind, then?"

"What about contacting the Thunderhead government directly? Work with them to close him down?" I suggested, and the General frowned thoughtfully. "Now that the High General is dead, you have a chance to engage in good faith without him calling ponies traitors and stuff like at the Skyport."

The General stared at me, then rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. "Clearly your dossier is incomplete. It didn't mention that you have a tendency to listen in on highly classified diplomatic exchanges."

"I have a way for getting into systems," I said with a small smile. I wasn't as sharp as my sword, but even I knew better than to mention EC-1101. If it really came down to it, I might be able to simply turn off the tower's defenses.

"I can see that. But as for your suggestion, if Lighthooves has gone completely off course, what makes you think Thunderhead can bring him back? Even assuming that they're willing to try." The General shook her head. "There's no guarantee that they'll be any more capable than we are. Meanwhile, Lighthooves could launch at any second."

That comment made a niggling little connection in my head. I frowned as I thought a little about the smug pony launching an attack while the Enclave was disorganized. "I'm not sure he will, General. I think he's waiting for you. In fact, I bet he'd give everything up to his own people at this point."

"Excuse me?" she asked with a frown. A beeping began to ring somewhere above us, but the general ignored the shrill notes.

"Look. Lighthooves and Thunderhead have one thing right: long term, they're going to win. You just lost a bunch of ships, and unless I'm missing something, you can't

replace them. A first strike biological attack on all the other settlements would work against him. Think about it. He'd be the ultimate villain. Thunderhead would be guilty by association." I tapped my forehooves together. "But what if he's *stopped* by Thunderhead? Gives everything up. Makes his impassioned speech about how he did it for the long term survival of the pegasus people. . . in front of all the cameras?"

"You're suggesting that this is nothing more than a self-sacrificing PR stunt?" the General asked in low, skeptical tones.

"Sure. Thunderhead can't win a shooting war. You have the ships and the firepower. But what if he can influence enough settlements to shift the civil authority? Your Enclave is a democracy, right? So what if everyone votes to back the government that just stopped one of their own from going too far?"

"That vote would never happen. The military wouldn't allow it," she said quickly, but then her eyes narrowed. "Ah. . . ."

"Right. Folks realize that their democracy isn't. Then your choice would be to either hand over control to Thunderhead or risk a civil war," I said, hoping that this wasn't all just desperate guesswork. A little purple unicorn in the back of my mind gave a prim nod. Lighthooves was too smart. . . too smooth. . . to just be a classical villain.

"Unless you're wrong and he *is* going to use the bioweapon. It'd take us years to clean up the mess. The famine alone would be intolerable," General Chaser said with a frown.

"My guess is that he will if you attack Thunderhead. A plan B. Then Thunderhead takes him down, and Thunderhead becomes the vital food source to address the famine. They're the ones with the extra food. Thunderhead is a hero. And if you do too much damage, Neighvarro looks like the villain." Lighthooves wanted to save his home. I had to believe that. If he just wanted death, then all I was doing was getting ponies killed.

General Storm Chaser closed her eyes. "Ordinarily, I'd prefer to take time and work something out, but Maripony has thrown everything into the air. You saw Afterburner and Hoarfrost. Some of the Enclave leadership is convinced that Thunderhead was behind the balefire bomb. Originally, we were going to destroy Red Eye's army below and then call for unity. Put some of our own security in Thunderhead and winnow out the bombs. I can only hope that Autumn Leaf uses some discretion until I get finished in the east."

"Then that's his plan C. I bet that if you contacted him, you could work out a deal.

Lighthooves wants Thunderhead to survive. As long as he gets that, he's won." But that lead me to a disturbing thought. What if he offered to trade the weapon to the Neighvarro for Thunderhead's survival? Storm Chaser might be decent, but I had no problem imagining what a pony like Afterburner or Hoarfrost would do with a biological weapon: they'd use it. Even if it could infect pegasi now.

Crap.

"Interesting," Storm Chaser mused. "I'd planned on a surgical strike. Five Raptors doing long range, pinpoint strikes on the tower's air defenses, with a picket line to intercept the missiles. Odds are 70-85%, depending on how lucky we get with our deployment and if he fires them one at a time or in volleys. Once they're down, we storm the tower and Thunderhead. Make sure it stays under our control this time." She closed her eyes again and sighed.

"Even if you got most of them, all it would take is one missile getting through. This disease makes ponies eat other ponies. I saw it happen to my stable. I had to gas all of them before they ate the Wasteland," I said as seriously as I could, hoping she believed me.

The beeping stopped. "General, they're off ship. Ten minutes before they're aboard their vessels," the stallion said through the terminal speakers.

"I can do it, General," I promised.

She sighed. "Very well. Given that you seem to have lost both fliers, I'd like to assign the sergeant and corporal here. You've worked together in the past."

I looked at the two power-armored pegasi for a long minute. They hadn't blabbed about Glory being Rainbow Dash. I nodded once to the General.

"Great. Well, at least we won't have to worry about hellhounds," Boomer muttered.

"Don't be so sure. You wouldn't believe some of the rumors coming out of R&D about some intelligence programs. I've heard stories that there've been hounds spotted in Neighvarro," Twister replied.

"Yeah yeah. No pony's crazy enough to bring one of those things up here," Boomer chuckled.

"You've got five minutes to get on the *Fleur*. We'll need some stealthbucks to hide our energy signatures from the lightning rods. Otherwise, you'll have to leave your armor and energy weapons behind," I said to the pair, then turned a questioning expression to the General. She considered a moment, then nodded. The pair

looked at each other and immediately ran for the door.

“Sweet! Field work!” laughed Boomer.

“I got my bag packed just in case we got permission!” Twister said happily. Well, I supposed most Enclave soldiers weren’t detached for ‘special missions’ as often as they.

Then I remembered... If she was still here... “Also... we’re going to need one more pony...”

She was an absolute wreck, even after two weeks. ‘They don’t have unicorn medics’, I reminded myself as I carefully carried her upon my back and a dufflebag of Dusk’s belonging in my jaws. My telekinesis wasn’t up to levitating it all, and it’d take too long to let the others transfer her; if only Lacunae were here. Not just for her confidence... she’d also been telekinetically stronger than me!

A little orange earth pony and a little white unicorn in my head told me to buck up and stick it out. I had to be stronger and tougher now, and while there was nothing wrong with missing her, there was no point in me tearing myself down over it. Then the pair started quibbling over if I needed to be stronger or more enduring...

Soul jars were weird.

Aboard the *Fleur*, Glory was still out of sight. Any stuff we’d had had been thrown all over the deck; the Enclave version of a ‘search’ I supposed. Boomer and Twister were coming with their power armor deactivated; they’d have to reactivate it once we were past the lightning rods, but at least they’d be able to bring it along. We were also bringing Dusk’s armor, which had already been shut down; apparently its repair talisman could repair the faceplate. Rampage saw my injured burden and immediately got a look I didn’t like at all. I directed P-21 to head her off with a toss of my head, though I wasn’t sure just what he’d do if she tried to press the issue and ‘help’ her pain.

“They thrashed the pedal system,” Scotch tape complained as I set the bag down on the deck.

“It’s okay,” I said as I looked at Sunset and Boomer.

“What?” the brown pegasus stallion frowned. “Do y’all expect us to push this thing all the way to Thunderhead?”

I smiled a little wider.

“Come on, Turkey. Like back in basic. Hup one. Hup two,” Twister said as she flew to the back of the *Fleur*. The pair began to flap their wings hard, and the ship moved off at an even quicker pace than when Rampage had been pedalling! The power armor paced us as we moved back into the clouds but finally veered off as I carried our disabled passenger down below to the old cabins. Whatever those three captains had planned, we’d deal with it another day.

There wasn’t much space, but it’d be more comfortable than being on deck while P-21, Rampage, and Scotch gathered up our belongings and put them away. The clouds were becoming so thick that it started to feel like I’d just stepped out of a cold shower. I ducked into one of the cabins that was relatively intact, kicked the junk on the floor aside, and then used my telekinesis to slide her onto the bed.

Dusk groaned, half of the dark pegasus’s head bandaged up. Given what I’d nearly done to her... The air beside me shimmered, and Glory appeared. “Oh sweet Celestia!” she said as she took the cloak off. “She should have been in a hospital. A real hospital. What happened to her?”

“Me,” I replied. “This is what I did at Yellow River. I tore off her helmet with my metal fingers,” I said shamefully. “She got off easiest. The rest didn’t survive.”

Glory went through her usual cycle of emotions for when I screwed up. Anger that I’d hurt her family, acknowledgement that at the time I’d been half out of my mind, and acceptance of these new facts. I was lucky she wasn’t throwing me through a wall again. “I should have sat on you rather than let you run off alone. At least sent Rampage with you,” Glory said as she began to dig out healing potions and trickled them into the unconscious mare’s mouth, waiting for her to swallow before giving her more. “You shouldn’t let her see you, Blackjack.”

Yes, I supposed that seeing her near killer might cause a bad reaction. I wanted to apologize... but really, what could I say? Dusk. Boing. Those survivors who’d stuck it out in 99’s reactor maintenance area. How did I apologize to them? After the second potion was empty, Dusk let out a groan, and one violet eye opened up. “Who...” Dusk groaned, then looked up at Glory. “Rainbow Dash?”

“It’s me. Morning Glory,” Glory said as she moved between me and her sister.

“Buh... must be drugged...” she said weakly. “Can’t be.”

Glory sighed. “When I was young, I used your secret Wingboner magazines for illustrations for my health and biology presentation. I got an A-, and you got grounded

for a month.” I fought the urge to snicker as she huffed and muttered, “I would have gotten an A, but I didn’t know that Playmare wasn’t a noteworthy source.” . . . Huh?

Dusk’s lip curled a little. “Oh yeah. . . it is you. . .” She raised a hoof and brought it down in a limp smack atop Glory’s head. “That’s fer getting me grounded. . .” she mumbled as she blinked up at her sister. “That’s. . . a much better disguise. . .” Dusk muttered softly. “Where’re we going? And why do you look like Rainbow Dash?”

Glory smiled and took her sister’s hooves between her own. “We’re going home. We’re going to get you fixed up. And I have things to tell you. . . about Father. . . and Mother. . .” Glory shielded me from Dusk’s sight with a wing, then smiled at me and glanced at the door. I nodded, kissed her cheek, and stepped out. They had a lot of catching up to do.

I moved out into the hall and helped clean up some of the mess. . . Well, I collected the mess into piles for other ponies to clean up. I didn’t find anything valuable. There were some old newspapers with pictures of Rarity at some social event alongside a dashing-looking gray-maned stallion sporting a monocle. I caught sight of a certain scarred individual accompanied by the black pegasus Eclipse in the background. The caption under the yellowed picture read ‘Princess Luna a no show at the Canterlot Garden Party.’

By Ace Buckley- It’s the society season in Canterlot, when all the nobles trot out to Canterlot for their parties de rigors, charity auctions that don’t address the people needing help, and other social gatherings that are only important to ponies whose lives revolve around the getting and not getting of invitations. One has to wonder a great deal about an event like this. How do they eat all that caviar? Is it possible to bore a pony to death with endless prattle? Can association with the urbane cretins passing for aristocracy drive a pony to madness? And, most importantly, what grave crime could Equestria’s most humble investigative journalist have committed to be assigned to such an event and ordered to write an article documenting every excruciating detail?

Really, Rarity, you have been putting on a little extra padding, but did I truly deserve this? Fortunately for me, this column is going up before those trolls at the Ministry of Image can polish, nip, tuck, remove, edit, and redact all my wonderful words. There’s nothing like a weekend print deadline to really slip past the gatekeepers in the final frenzied rush.

So what did yours truly notice at the most ahem-ahem social gathering in all of Equestria? Well, there were plenty of fine, overpriced garments on mares who, quite

honestly, couldn't pull off the twentysomething look if they had a zebra stealth cloak, an old picture, and a Flash Industries projector. Lots of stallions compensating for. . . honestly, most of these folks are so rich that if they can't afford male 'enhancement' spells they wouldn't be here, but clearly there's some reason for all the fancy frivolity. The new money was in full swing; rest easy knowing Equestria's finest profiteers are doing well. So plenty of movers, shakers, editors, and newspaper owners who will go unnamed were in attendance doing what they always do: little to nothing worth as much as they imagine. So I'll spare you the more odious details.

The canapés were alright.

But do you know what struck me as I listened to a portly gentlequous complain about 'the declining state of affairs', nodding my head spastically at appropriate times to feign interest? The party was missing some of its usual A list material. No Ministry Mares; for the first time ever, Madame Marshmallow Buns didn't grace us with her genteel presence. Pinkie Pie, ever one to crash formal and stuffy events with party cannons and spot arrests, was also a notable absentee. Applejack, who's never far from family members raking in bits right, left, and center, has been a no-show for months now. One would expect Rainbow Dash to pop in to an event with little thought and mass public exposure, but the skies are clear. And while no one has expected Twilight Sparkle to do anything social for the last four years, Fluttershy almost always makes an appearance where she can make appeals on behalf of the widowed, orphaned and maimed. After all, if she doesn't, how will the audience nod sympathetically and then ignore her?

But you know who's really been gone? No, not Princess Celestia. I know. I know. It's been four years since that mess that got Big Macintosh killed, and she's still in that school of hers. No. It's the other alicorn. The big alicorn. The one who's supposed to be sitting in seats of power and making the grand speeches and cutting ribbons, launching ships, and running the country. The dark one.

Where the heck is Princess Luna?

It's been nine years since Luna assumed the throne, and I can count the number of appearances she's made this year on my hooves. Oh, there's always the obligatory fifteen minutes she spends at the G3. We might get treated to a canned Hearth's Warming Eve broadcast. But getting the mare herself to show up to any kind of social gathering is like trying to raise the sun or get an article like this past a gauntlet of Image editors: impossible for all but the most exceptional of ponies.

Now, I know what you'll say. Oh, she's a princess. She doesn't have to leave

the palace. She's probably far too busy. Well, if she is busy, nopony can say what exactly she's busy with, because so few ponies have access to the Princess. Thirteen requests by yours truly this year for an interview have been denied by the royal guard with no reason given. Sixty-four requests through the M.o.I. were also turned down. I've spoken with dozens of other journalists who have had similar experiences: denials, refusals, or 'scheduling conflicts'.

The lights are on in the palace, but there's nopony answering the door. Somepony is getting work done there, but you'd be hard pressed to find out who it is. Is the Princess deep in conference with her Ministry Mares, or is it, as some have alleged, that the Princess meets with them only to approve specific projects and proposals? We don't know. Is she working closely with generals to win the war or simply passing on instructions through bureaucrats? We don't know. What is Princess Luna actually doing to run the country?

We don't know.

So this is Ace Buckley's report from the Canterlot Garden Party. Very boring. Okay canapés. No Ministries Mares. No Princesses. And if this is my last printed article, let me say this, Ministry Mare Fatflanks: you can silence, censure, and fire me, but don't think that by getting me assigned to the Canterlot 'social pages' you can stop Ace Buckley from asking the hard questions.

I smiled as I glanced at the yellowed picture of an emaciated-looking earth pony stallion. He was completely bald, and his eyes were concealed behind round, dark glasses. His jaw was covered in stubble, and I had no problem imagining him reeking of booze. From the sneer of his lips and the scowl of his brow, I imagined his favorite line to be something on the nature of 'Fuck you. Give me the damned story!'. Best of all was the rumpled, ill-fitting tuxedo he'd been crammed into and the way he had each forehoof clenched around the neck of a well-dressed mare and stallion who seemed to be verging on asphyxiation. 'Ace Buckley, social pony' read the caption at the end of the article.

There were other papers strewn along the floor, most of them too smudged to be legible. I squinted and tilted my head as I made out Rarity's name.

Rarity,

I'm so sorry to hear about the difficulties you've had recently with Sweetie Belle and Blueblood. I'm afraid he hasn't abated his mudslinging one bit; it might not make it into the papers, but word is getting around. However, he has something new. He claims that he has some exclusive stable reserved for the finest ponies. I

was skeptical at first, but he's getting the attention of some exceptionally well to do ponies. The price tag is an extravagant ten million bits per reserved seat.

I'm skeptical about anything involving him, but Vanity has confirmed, if grudgingly, that this 'Redoubt' exists. He has stated it lies somewhere in the Hoofington region, is protected by magics far older than most, and will withstand even the strongest megaspells. May I be blunt? I know your finances are not excessive, no matter what the common slob may believe. If you wish it, I will procure additional spots for you, your sister, and your parents. I hope that you will

But the letter was unfinished. I could only assume that the author was the 'Fancy Pants' who'd once owned the *Fleur*. I thought about what had happened to Rarity. How she died in Canterlot, her hoof fused to a window... I wished she'd escaped to some remote stable with Fancy Pants or Vanity... I wished as many ponies as possible had survived that mess. I knew better...

I sighed, Lacunae's memory walking into my thoughts as casually and gently as the mare herself once did. For an instant, she'd been Twilight. I'd wanted to tell her about Big Macintosh. Wanted to let her know that she had a child, if via Marigold. I wondered... would she have been proud of me? Or would she have covered her face in embarrassment at her barbarian descendant? Pure Twilight... gone. Lacunae... gone. As if she'd never existed, like she'd insisted.

"You idiot," I sniffed. "I miss you, so you existed. Damn it..." I wished she was here. With her magic and wisdom and silent confidence and... just... here!

"Are you all right?" Lancer said from behind me, making me start. I needed to put a bell on him!

"I think this is the first time you've snuck up behind me without shooting me," I said as I turned to look at him. "What's up?"

"You said you've killed ponies who didn't deserve it," he said as he walked into the cabin I was 'cleaning'. "How did you... How...?" Clearly, he wasn't sure how to ask the Maiden this.

"Did I go on?" I prompted. He bit his lip and nodded. "I almost didn't. But then a friend told me something I'll never forget. You make your life about making up for that death. You devote yourself to doing the right thing and helping as many as you can. And you hope... hope as hard as you can... that when you die, you've made up for a tenth of the life you took." I sighed, rubbing the back of my head. "Unfortunately, I am not the smartest or safest of ponies to be around. Maybe there

is something to your Maiden story.”

“Perhaps. I do not know. You still scare me,” he admitted. Maybe there was something about candor that was a zebra thing.

“Why did your father order you to kill them? What did your mother do?” I asked quietly.

“I . . .” he opened his mouth, then closed it and thought a moment. “I cannot say for certain anymore. Since that duel, nothing is certain. We were told that they were cowards who spread falsehood and lies. But now . . . now I cannot recall Mother saying anything about Father before she fled. His other wives said nothing, but simply agreed with his claim.”

“Other wives?” I asked with a grin.

“Yes,” he said baldly. “Is that a problem?”

“No. It’s just. . .” I couldn’t help myself, “How many wives?”

“Eleven, now,” he answered.

“Wow,” I murred. “Wonder how he finds time to sleep.”

He shook his head. “Father is a great warrior. He has slain dragons with his bare hooves. Conjugal duties are hardly taxing.” Lancer looked towards the window, frowning. “The day before she fled . . . they hunted a balefire phoenix . . . a great and dangerous prey. Something happened, but I know not what. Only that when Mother returned, she said she’d done something terrible. Then she left with my little sister and begged me to come with her. I refused. Two days later, Father returned and said that mother had tried to kill him. When I told him she’d asked me to leave with her, he sent me to kill all the traitors.”

I sat on the ruined bed, facing him. “Lancer, do you know anything about the zebras around the Hoof? What is your father planning?”

“I do not know,” he answered quietly. “Most of those at the far camps are the Brood. They are . . . terrifying. They come from no tribe. They barely speak at all, and yet they have the knowledge of veteran warriors. No fear. No questioning. They obey Father’s every wish.”

“But where did they come from? I thought they might be from your homeland,” I ventured.

He shook his head firmly. “The passage across the strait is perilous. Only a few

small ships will risk a Megalodon swallowing the vessel. It would take a year to ferry the numbers he has found.” He closed his eyes. “For the last year, Father has frequently gone out alone. He says there was an ancient prize to be had in the Hoof. A weapon which would allow us to sweep the valley clear. For a time, I thought he meant the balefire bomb. . . yet that was found far from the city. Then, one day, he emerged from the tent looking more overjoyed than I’d ever seen him. He said half of it had been unsealed. Then, one night, he laughed long into the night. He said it was the beginning of the end.”

Well, that certainly sent chills down my spine. “Did he ever elaborate?” I asked, hopeful. From somewhere, I heard the long low growl of Hoofington thunder. A deep, bassy growl that seemed to be welcoming me home.

“No. But soon after, he went alone into a bunker in the southeast, near Grimhoof. I am not sure if it was zebra or pony in origin. It was hidden beneath an empty warehouse. We waited outside the star-marked door. For hours he was inside. Then he emerged with a dozen of the Brood. Some of the warriors protested, and Father had them killed on the spot. Since then, whenever Father leaves, he comes back with more of the Brood. Dozens. Hundreds. ‘A gift of Four Stars’ he calls them.”

“Four stars? What four. . .” but then I remembered something Boing had said. They’d been camped outside a bunker with four stars on the door. Those events were thankfully blurry for me, but I thought there might have been one somewhere else, too. Inside the foundation of some building in the midst of construction. And Bottlecap had talked about a bunker up north. I’d thought she’d been talking about my stable. . .

“Can you wait just a minute, please?” I’d have loved to ask Lacunae this right now. . . Instead, I flipped open my broadcaster and thought of who I could bug. Pinkie Pie had mentioned something about them too, hadn’t see? Bad ponies. . .

I found the right terminal address and established the connection. “Security to Watcher. Security to Watcher. Come in you big, handsome, purple guy.” There was a hiss of static, followed by a click, and the connection went dead. Instantly fear ran through me. Was the Enclave, or somepony else, trying to raid Spike’s cave? I peered down at the Pipbuck screen. ‘Connection manually interrupted, MASEBS Tower #19.’

What? Manually? Somepony out there was dicking with me. I smiled sweetly. “Dealer? Dealer? I need your help.” I looked around. So often he just appeared.

New fears bubbled up inside me. First Lacunae, now Dealer? “Dealer? Come on. . .”

“I’m here,” he rasped slowly. I peered around again, but I couldn’t see him.

“Are you okay?” I asked in concern.

“Just tired. EC-1101 wasn’t meant to be crammed into so small a PipBuck. It’s been a strain. Hopefully you’ll get. . . well. . . nevermind. What’s wrong?” he muttered in my ears.

“I need to know about ‘Four Stars’. I wanted to ask Spike, but somepony is blocking the connection. Can you do something about it? With EC-1101?” I asked, for some reason my eyes being drawn up. Lancer was giving me that funny expression again. “Yeah, I talk to things only I can see and hear. Wacky, huh?”

“That is a word for it. . .” he replied as his ears folded back.

Dealer was silent for a long minute. “Try now.”

“Security to Watcher. Come in,” I said, now with no joking around. There was a distant flash through the portholes; miles off, but still a bit too close for my comfort. The thunder rolled through the clouds.

Fortunately, almost immediately a deep, ominous voice growled out. “Blackjack! You’re alive? This is great! I’ve been frantic since Maripony. I haven’t been able to contact anyone! Someone is blocking me out of the MASEBS, and my remote links are all compromised. I’m blind here!” The voice made Lancer’s mane and tail stand nearly upright.

If the Enclave thought that LittlePip and I were terrorists, and knew we’d associated with Spike, it wouldn’t be hard for them to put two and two together and try to cut off Spike. Maybe even draw the dragon out with worry. “The Enclave is going nuts right now. The Stable Dweller accidentally killed the head of their military, as well as a whole bunch of other important ponies. I don’t know what they’re going to do, but it appears like they’ve tried to cut off access to the MASEBS network.” I paused and added, “The Stable Dweller is all right, Watcher. She survived too.”

I heard the breath let out in a great gust. “Thank Celestia. Thank you, Security.” There was a pause, and the deep growling was replaced by the tinny synthetic voice. “I’ll keep working to break through their interference. They must have done something at Tenpony to have this kind of access. I hope DJ PON-3 is all right.”

“Me too,” I said, now wondering if I should. . . ugh. . . no. I had my own crisis to worry

about. “The Stable Dweller can handle it. Listen. I need to ask you a question. Does the word ‘Four Stars’ mean anything to you?”

“That’s two words,” Spike and Lancer replied simultaneously. I rolled my eyes and then gave the stink eye to the one I could see.

“Before the war, Four Stars was a transportation company. Big connections. They were plugged into the import business. Pinkie Pie was dead set on taking them down. She started with a raid in Manehattan, but they were going to storm every holding from Hoofington to Las Pegasus,” Watcher replied.

“Why?” I asked, glancing over at Lancer. The *Fleur* began to creak as the wind picked up outside.

“Zebra sympathizers. A whole network of ponies who ended up helping the enemy. Major players. Right before the bombs fell, Pinkie focused on them. I don’t know if it was the raid that set off the attack or not. They had built bases of operations all over Equestria, smuggling in weapons and even enemy soldiers. Funny thing is. . . nopony is sure who owned it. Maybe Pinkie or somepony in the M.o.M. knew.”

I frowned. Bases all over Equestria. Bunkers hidden in buildings under construction. “Why four stars? And do you know if they were connected to the O.I.A. or Goldenblood?” After all, the O.I.A. did seem to be the Ministry of secret underhoofed deeds.

“I don’t know. I never heard Goldenblood mention them. I think. . .” Spike was silent a moment, then went on, “Wait. I *do* remember something. I remember way back, when Twilight first travelled to Ponyville, she thought Nightmare Moon was going to return. Nopony seemed to believe her at the time. Twilight found a passage in one of her books, right before we left Canterlot. It said ‘The four stars shall help with her escape,’ or something like that. And then Nightmare Moon showed up the very next day.” He trailed off a moment. “It was when we first met the pony gang. That’s why I could recall it. . .”

If I could give hugs through a radio link. . . “And you’re positive that these folks were working *with* zebras? And they named their company after something that set Nightmare Moon free?” I frowned as I regarded Lancer, to see if he thought that was as messed up as I did. From the bafflement and disgust on his face, I thought so. “Well, thanks for telling me that. How are you doing?”

“I was chewing my claws till you called. I knew Litt- er, the Stable Dweller was in the area of Maripony, and. . . well. . . I’m just glad to hear from anyone right now. The Enclave have control over the EBS now, so I’m struggling just to network spritebots

together and carry a signal.”

“Well, keep your eyes open, and watch out for her as soon as you can, Watcher. I got my own mess to deal with out east. I’ll try to check in soon. I want to know what’s going on as much as you do,” I said, looking gravely at Lancer.

“Take care of yourself, Security. Watch out for your friends,” Spike said, then cut off.

“That makes no sense,” Lancer said sharply. “When I saw the stars on the door, I thought it was simple pony decoration. But this Watcher. . . setting the Maiden free! No zebra would do such a thing.”

I frowned. There was something not coming together. “The zebras wouldn’t have known about the four stars reference. That was a pony myth. And the ponies wouldn’t have known about the Maiden of the Stars. . . that was a zebra myth.” There didn’t seem to be any overlap, except for one. “Lancer, what did the Starkatteri tribe do during the war?”

The question clearly disturbed Lancer. Stark lightning threw his face into sharp relief as the thunder boomed seconds later. “The Starkatteri were laborers. They toiled in mines and factories. They were forbidden from fighting in the war. They suffered and died in toxic, poorly ventilated conditions instead.”

“But would the Last Caesar have used them and their dark knowledge?”

The question insulted him. “Absolutely not!”

I stared at him. “Are you certain? Without a doubt?” I glared into his eyes as the storm played in the distance. There was doubt there before he dropped his gaze. “There were two wars being fought,” I muttered as I slowly walked towards the windows. “The first one was the war we all knew. Soldiers and weapons and battle and megaspells. But there was a second war being fought, too. A hidden war. Goldenblood on one side. . . somepony else on the other. Secrets and lies. . . using the battle between your people and mine to cover what they were doing.”

“What are you saying, Blackjack?” he asked, clearly shocked.

“I’m saying that the war that we all thought was fought over borders and resources. . . someone used it. They used you, and they used us for their own ends.” I stared out at the growing storm. “What if the last war. . . didn’t end?”

“It ended! Your spells! Our bombs! It is finished!” he cried out as he stepped beside me. “Even the Remnant admits that, if in hushed tones. The last order is simply a reason to go on.”

"I'm not sure. Since I left Stable 99, I've been running into the past more and more." I stared out at the flashes of the gathering storm. "Something bad happened then, and it's been like an oozing wound ever since. The more I learn, the more relevant that secret war feels. Secrets and lies and old ponies not quite dead." Though gaps in the clouds, I could see flickers of a distant green glow and just make out the black towers biting the clouds.

What was it? Security saves ponies, but from what? What was the peril that scratched at my mane and whispered in my ears? Goldenblood's Project Horizons? Lighthooves's plague? The Legate's balefire bomb? Cognitum in the Core? Why couldn't I have enemies that I could just face? Opponents to battle and overcome? The Enclave... The Goddess... Red Eye... Remnant... Brood of Coyotl... I wanted to rage! Damn this body! I needed to feel pissed off!

"Come at me, you motherfuckers!" I screamed, slamming my hooves against the window and splintering the glass. "Come on! Face me!" I yelled, rearing again and smashing my hooves till the glass shattered and cold, rainy wind blew in. "I'll kill you! I'll smash you to pieces!" I bellowed towards that distant green glow as I kicked again and again, knocking out the window frame in my fury. The thunder rumbled before me, and to me it was the laughter of that distant spire and my enemies. "Face me! Fight me! You Goddesses-damned motherfuckers!"

"Maiden!" Lancer shouted. I stood right at the brink of the hole I'd kicked in the side of the airship, and at the word I glared back at him. The Maiden glared back at him with a rage that made him step back in fear and awe. Bringer of chaos. Destroyer of people. That was me. "You cannot fly," was all he said.

It would be nice if my body had some kind of calm down mode. But in that terrified yet respectful expression in his eye, I saw that I really was on the verge of something bad. I sat, slumping before the hole as the cold rain spat in at me. I regarded the distant towers of the Core, wishing I could destroy them with my glare alone, before I hung my head. Defeated. Impotent. And I could hear the black towers laughing.

The door opened and P-21 and Rampage ran in. They viewed me and the hole I'd bashed and Lancer. "Um, if you want to throw him off the ship, the deck is right up there."

"I... don't. I'm not," I said as I covered my face. "I'm just... it's been a long day. Sorry."

"Right," P-21 said as he looked at me, then at Lancer. "Well, don't make that hole any bigger. It's an old airship." He turned and walked out. Rampage glared at Lancer

and said something in zebra, then pointed her hoofclaws at her face, then at him, before she backed out. A second later, her head popped back around the doorjamb, repeated the gesture, and slowly withdrew a final time.

"Your friends are concerned about you," Lancer said. And him too.

"Sorry," I said, a word that was a bit threadbare for me. "I'm just. . . really sick of this place. I hate it more than you do, I think." He didn't approach me as I sat before that hole. "So. What are you going to do?"

He thought a moment, then answered, "I don't know. My whole life has been the Remnant. My whole reason for living was to make Father proud. Now. . . I do not know. But I do not wish to follow in your wake, Maiden. I know that much."

He deserved a chance. "What if I told you that your mother and little sister were still alive?"

"What?" he hissed in shock.

"Glory got to them before they died. They're still alive. Both of them."

"W. . . why didn't you tell me sooner!?" he demanded, shocked.

"One day ago, you tried to kill me. Two days ago, you were your father's right-hoof zebra," I said as I jabbed a hoof at him. "And you shot me in the face, I might add! So don't get indignant that I didn't let you know you didn't finish the job. For all I knew then, you'd go back and kill them just to get back in with your father!"

He drew back. "I apologize. You're right." I watched him think a moment, and then he replied. "If... if I could see them again? Well, I'd apologize. And then I would listen to whatever she wished to tell me. . . better than I did before she left."

I approached him, keeping my eyes locked on his. "I like your mom. She's weird, but I like her. So if I tell you where she is, and you do something bad to her, I promise you that I will show you just how much a Maiden of the Stars I can be. Do you understand? I am sick of being responsible for good ponies dying."

"I understand," he answered at once, with complete conviction as opposed to fear.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "She's in the town of Chapel. Right across the river from the Core in the southwest."

"I see," he replied, unable to hide his shiver. Then he turned and started towards the door. Then he paused and regarded me with an odd smile. "Thank you, Blackjack." He bowed his head to me, then walked out.

I walked to the hole and peered out. The towers were gone behind the clouds, but the thunder still rolled. It was more distant now, sullen sounding. "I'm coming. Just you wait."

We settled down on the outskirts of Hoofington to let Lancer off. We weren't far from Stockyard, where I'd once killed monster lizard things. How far off that felt. . . when big animals were a threat. I'd promised that we would let him off before the assault, and hopefully he'd go and make up for his mistake back at Brimstone's Fall.

The inhabitants of the farthest west settlement in the valley were all gathered up on the hillside. There were more than thirty ponies and easily a dozen brahmin. More than a few stared in awe, while the rest were wary. We had to be quite a sight. . . if only Lacunae was here to finish off the image of wacky weirdness that was our group. All blue bars. Stockyard had gotten the same treatment as Brimstone's Fall when Sanguine had been searching for me. Either he hadn't gotten everypony, though, or newcomers had moved in. Either way, better than more death in the Wasteland.

Lancer stepped out into the rain. I'd seen so much more of him than Lancer the killer. Lancer the Storyteller. Maybe even Lancer the friend. All I could hope was that he'd continue in a direction away from his father and the Remnant. That was all I could ever hope for.

Dusk joined us on deck. The bandaged mare could barely stand. Glory supported her every step and kept a wing around her. Another mare who'd once tried to kill her sister. . . she kept her eyes turned away from me, and I couldn't blame her for that. Much as I wished it, Yellow River wasn't all that far in the past.

"Here," I said to the zebra as I levitated over his invisibility cloak. It was useful, to be sure, but it was his.

He contemplated it a moment soberly, the rain hissing around us. "No. You hold on to it for now. I think it will be more useful to you where you are going than it will be to me." He glanced over at P-21. "I believe it will be good for me to hide less. Yes?"

"Maybe," P-21 said as he held Scotch Tape between his hooves. "Just be careful. Don't be so eager you turn around and become Blackjack. She gets shot a lot."

"By my friends too, oddly enough," I said with a little smirk.

"I will try to keep things in moderation," Lancer replied.

“Remember,” I told him. “Make up for it. Help, however you can.” And I didn’t add for him not to make me regret my leniency. I didn’t need to. He walked away from the *Fleur*, heading east. Maybe to a better life. He paused and turned back, smiling at me.

Suddenly Boo trotted out after him with that ridiculous captain’s hat on her head. What the heck was she doing? She moved right up next to him and plopped the hat atop his ears. “Boo...” I began with a helpless smile.

“Fucking move,” I heard on the wind, caught by my augmented hearing. The voice was tense and angry. I turned my head, glaring up at the settler ponies with a small frown. My eyes picked out several weapons... not unusual. The ponies were all still blue on my EFS.

But there was a weapon not pointed at me.

“Get down!” I shouted, a blast of lightning cutting the sky and flooding the hillside with its harsh glare while the boom drowned out everything but the sharp crack of a hunting rifle. I stormed up the muddy hillside, giving the shooter something far more pressing than taking shots at Lancer to think about. Cursing as loudly as I could at the gathered settlers, I fired my own guns into the air. They screamed and ran for the shelter of their buildings.

I slowed and stopped, my muddy body sliding slowly back down towards the *Fleur*. “Is everyone okay?” I called back.

“We’re fine. Lancer almost pulled a Blackjack,” Rampage drawled as she helped him to his hooves.

“I’m a thing now?” I asked with a frown.

“Sure. It’s what happens when you’re so in love with the Wasteland that you get your head blown off,” Rampage said with a smirk. “I’m thinking of patenting it. Maybe making shirts. ‘I pulled a Blackjack and lived to tell about it.’ Kinda catchy.”

If Boo hadn’t fouled their shot... “Ha ha,” I said as I turned to Lancer. “You should have your cloak back.”

“No. It was a good lesson,” he replied soberly. “I should remember to always be vigilant. Perhaps this will make me a better survivor.” He adjusted the hat atop his head and then smiled down to Boo. “Thank you for your gift.”

She just beamed back at Lancer. I had to wonder why she’d darted out just then. If she hadn’t... I had images of his smiling face exploding. “Just take care of yourself,”

I said with a small smile.

He nodded and once more moved off through the long grass, this time ducking down so that, in a few seconds, all but the hat disappeared. It moved off like a shark fin till it too disappeared from sight.

I frowned up at the hill. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to have a few words."

We never found out which of the settlers had fired the shots. A few condemned the gunfire as cowardly, but no pony gave up the shooter. There were a half dozen hunting rifles, and I couldn't spank the owners of all six. The settlers were more shocked that I'd gotten so upset over attempts to 'off a stripe'. Lancer was 'just a zebra'. Apparently they'd thought I was going to do it, till I let him go. When they thought that I wasn't listening, I heard more than a few angry mutters about stripelovers. They didn't know how I heard their every word.

I'd been happy to see a settlement of ponies. I'd assumed that that was a good thing.

Twister and Boomer stayed with the *Fleur* while I tried to lecture them about doing better. Not all zebras were the same. Not all of them meant harm. My words were wasted as I was given sullen nods and angry glares.

"Let's just go, Blackjack," Glory said. Since it was clear that my lecture wasn't going to be accompanied by a body count, the settlers were scattering back to their afternoon routine.

As we re-boarded the *Fleur*, I found a rail and slumped against it. There wasn't a sign of the settler ponies. They had had their fill of Security, and I had had my fill of them. The only ones I could see were the Brahmin, approaching the *Fleur* with dull curiosity.

"Ahem," one said as his heads looked up at me.

"We just wanted to say sorry bout the shots at yer friend," the other head said lowly.

"Yeah, sorry," agreed the first one.

"Thanks," I answered with a small smile. "Do they treat you okay here?"

"Oh, sure," nodded the first. "Ponies is good folks. . . more or less. Milk and cheese brings more caps than meat and leather. So they watch out fer us."

“Good. Good,” I said, gritting my teeth as I felt unsteady once again.

“Take care o yerselves,” the second head said as he moved away. “Yer good folks too...”

“Thanks,” I croaked as the *Fleur*’s bag filled with lifting gas began to rise into the air. I buried my face in my hooves. Good folks? If they were good folks, and we were good folks, then why did good folks keep doing bad things? Any good feelings I’d had at Lancer agreeing to do better had been robbed by the muleheadedness of a bunch of bigots who couldn’t see anything wrong with killing a zebra just because he was a zebra! I ground my teeth and sulked till Glory hooked my collar with her wing and lead me belowdecks to an intact cabin.

We lay together on the bed; there wasn’t any sex. After Lacunae’s death and Lancer being shot at by ‘good folks’, I couldn’t be further from the mood. She was just with me. Helping me deal with it. As always.

“Blackjack. When was the last time you slept?” Glory asked me as she brushed my cheek.

“I dunno... twenty four hours ago,” I muttered.

“You need to sleep,” Glory reminded me.

I closed my eyes. “Yeah...” I knew that too. But I didn’t want to. I wasn’t tired... and besides...

To sleep... and maybe to dream. That was the trick. For in sleep, what dreams would come?

I didn’t sleep. There were too many things to do in the meantime. Too many things that could go wrong. Lancer’s parting gift had one benefit: it would hide me from the energy sensors of the lightning rods well enough, so no need shut down and plug into Rampage. Anything else that might set them off was given to me and hidden under the cloak as well: Pew Pew, PipBucks, and the energy supplies from the three suits of power armor had all been put in my saddlebags. We’d thought that deactivating the armor would be enough, but better safe than sorry. I dolefully chewed on one of Glory’s cyberpony cakes. I might not have felt tired, but a little sustenance couldn’t hurt.

In seconds, we were in the skies of Hoofington, and even as a unicorn, I could feel the difference. The clouds far away had been white, fluffy, ephemeral things. These

clouds swirled like dark waters. Lightning flickered deep in the depths, and thunder growled every few minutes. I felt like I was trapped beneath the *Celestia* once again, despite the fact I could breathe. The saturated clouds soaked everything, and we had water streaming off the balloon and the deck within minutes. The clouds were moved by strange breezes I couldn't quite pin down. While Boomer and Twister pushed, Glory made constant adjustments against the heavy, drab gray clouds she'd packed against the hull to ensure that as much of the *Fleur* as possible was covered.

"I hate these skies," I heard Boomer mutter.

I hated them too.

Suddenly, the clouds parted, and we saw a bright yellow glow blinking and flickering in the gloom. It was a colossal black needle perhaps fifty feet long hanging down from an immense black stormcloud. Glory hurriedly finished making a shell of cloud between the deck and balloon, then ducked inside, out of view, as the winds carried us towards it. Only narrow holes let us see out at the ominous spire.

"Damned crosswind! Why'd it kick up now?" Twister complained. The *Fleur* groaned as the two forces of wind and pegasi fought over it. We were going to pass by the rod far closer than I liked. Every second made the needle grow larger and larger. Yellow lightning flickered along the black metal, and every now and then a bolt leapt off of the blinking talismans and crackled through the surrounding storm clouds. At the top, where the metal connected to the cloud, I could see clusters of cameras peering out in the storm clouds. Celestia only knew how they could see anything.

We passed a stone's throw from the lightning rod, blinking talismans the size of my head flooding the inside of the shell with a harsh glare. I only hoped that Glory's work had made us resemble just another cloud. I watched as a band of lightning crackled off the nearest talisman and stretched towards us a moment with flickering fingers, as if reaching for us. We might just get blasted by accident. Then the bolt thudded down the shaft and discharged off the tip in a yellow fork.

"I *really* hate these skies," Boomer amended.

I could also appreciate General Chaser's problem of attacking the Tower. Any motion would have to be above the cloud layer. It would be suicide to try and take a Raptor through these clouds. They would have to travel through open air, easily detected and targeted by the tower's defenses. Lighthooves would have time to prepare, and he could send missiles on flight paths where the Raptors were more spread out.

“Take us up,” I said, wanting to avoid another brush with a lightning rod.

The balloon hissed as Scotch Tape pulled a lever, and we lifted up. The dark clouds began to lighten a touch, and Glory flew back out and continued to work on the cloud layer. Suddenly the *Fleur* lurched and groaned. Dozens of pink orbs showered down onto the deck. “Take cover!” I yelled as one tumbled down and struck me right on the head. It burst open. “I’m hit! Is anyone else hurt?!”

“Calm down, Blackjack,” Glory called from above. “We just hit an apple tree is all.”

I blinked and picked up one of the mushed pink globs. It was... vaguely... appleish. I heard rustling above us, and then brown branches flopped off to the side of the ship. They resembled ropey tendrils studded with the fleshy pink globs. “That’s an apple tree?” P-21 said skeptically, and Scotch Tape appeared a little insulted.

It was an apple tree... if an apple tree had been made to float. Where the trunk should be was an immense, swollen, oval sac much like the gasbag of the *Fleur*. Atop it were hundreds thin branches with filmy leaves attached. The ‘roots’ of the tree, and the fruits growing off them, acted as ballast. “That’s not an apple tree,” Rampage declared flatly.

“It is too,” Glory said, defensively. “A lot of our food is grown on top of the S.P.P. towers, but we couldn’t begin to feed all our people with such a small area... so we turned to cloud farming.” We skimmed along the cloud layer, Glory pulling the viewing slits into windows now that we were above the lightning rods. I took a bite of a cloud apple and nearly gagged. It was like eating glass... barely any taste at all. Like faintly apple-flavored paste.

“Takes really wet clouds to sustain cloud crops, though,” Twister said. “You need lots of water and cloud cover. But Thunderhead’s always got the clouds for it; no need to irrigate with the S.P.P. at all.” She sounded a little jealous. We were floating through a veritable orchard of ‘trees’, all bobbing on top of the clouds. They weren’t so much rigid wood as flexible fibers, and so they yielded for our passage with barely a problem.

The tops of the clouds had a strange terrain to them. There were hills and valleys filled with the bizarre floating biomass. All of the plants sported some sort of gasbag. Cloud wheat was thousands of balloon-sized clumps with pale yellow grain on top and long roots on the bottom, like bobbing heads. There were cloud potatoes... that didn’t seem much different from their apples. Cloud corn was similar to wheat, except the ears all had their own bubbles to tug them upright. “That is so weird,” I remarked as we passed spidery bean plants.

There was more than just plant life up here, though. There were ponies working, too. I could make out a half dozen of teams of pegasi loading crops onto skywagons in the late afternoon light. The area up here was so large, though, that I didn't have any fear of them spotting us from so far off.

"Where's. . ." I began to ask, but as I turned I saw that everypony was staring at it.

Shadowbolt Tower.

It was utterly impossible to miss. The tower was a black hexagonal shape rising out of a massive, dark, green-lit pit of clouds. It had to be the tallest structure ever built. Each segment had talismans at every level, blinking bright blue. Shielding talismans? Levitation? Magic had to be the only way such a feat of engineering was possible. The tower didn't taper off, it widened. The higher one gazed, the bigger and more elaborate the tower became. At the top was a massive blue dome, like a jeweled scepter. There were long, black fingers stretching out into the air, landing docks for Vertibucks, Raptors, and Thunderheads, I supposed. Where the tower started to widen, each side I could see of the hexagon bore an enormous panel decorated with the winged rainbow lightning bolts of the M.o.A.

"Wow. That's really. . . really. . . big," I muttered weakly. It seemed to stretch for another mile up into the sky, but I couldn't be sure.

"That is the Equestrian Air Command. Shadowbolt Tower. The one target that, thanks to the Core's anti-missile beam technology, never got destroyed. And they tried." Glory said proudly.

Twister and Boomer were less impressed. "Y'all could refit the entire fleet with the metal in that thing."

"One, lots of it is the same ceramic as the rest of the Hoof. Two, you could easily get that metal by trading with the surface for scrap metal," Glory retorted.

Twister pursed her lips a moment, then muttered, "That's gonna be a much harder cat to swing after Maripony."

"Where's Thunderhead?" I asked, peering at all the fluffy white globs above the cloud layer. Lots of it seemed to be gathering and holding stations. Others were cloud. . . factories? Well, they had to create those fluffy cloud terminals somehow! I looked for a tire-shaped cloud but couldn't see. . .

"Um. . . Blackjack?" Glory said as she smiled and pointed past the cloud factories at a huge, curved wall of white slightly above us. It was so large, I'd dismissed it as simply the background. "Welcome to Thunderhead."

We'd finally, truly, left the Wasteland.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Whew. Well, when moving and job plans fall through then there's always getting the next chapter out. We're now into the enclave arc, where we get to see the consequences of Operation: Cauterize out east. I still don't know what's going to be happening with work and the like, so every bit donated is especially appreciated right now. I'm going to start temping soon if I can't find somewhere to teach.

Huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, and Hidden Fortune for getting this done in record time. Seriously. Four hours. New record for this year. Check out Hidden Fortune's fic *Treasure Hunting* if you have the time. It will be worth your time. Huge thanks to Kkat, as always, for making this awesome world for us to explore and enjoy. Huge thanks to folks who leave feedback. It's greatly appreciated. I hope to have the next chapter out soon. Finally, time to leave the wasteland!)

60. Civilization

“Here it is: the greatest city in the sky!”

There were pictures in books of what civilization once looked like. They ranged from the well-lit glass and steel towers of Manehattan to the elegant and classical buildings of Canterlot to the cozy, rural surroundings of Ponyville. There’d even been a picture of Cloudsdale; I remembered it as being rather white and boring-looking on the page, but now, staring at Thunderhead, I appreciated it a little better.

The city was built on the inside of a massive, hollow horizontal torus of cloud, like an empty wagon tire lying on its side. I saw, as the *Fleur* edged up into the city from below, that the bottom lip of the tire extended in towards the center farther than the top, creating a sunlit ledge that supported actual living parks! Well, if they could figure out how to make crops grow in clouds, why not grass and flowers? Large, impressive buildings were built into the thick circumferential wall of the torus, and these were decorated with Corinthian columns, friezes of pegasi and griffins in combat, and grand statues that appeared to be marble. Along the ceiling of the hollow tube, hanging down like icicles, were hundreds of plain, cloud-hewn apartments where, from what Glory told me, the poorer folk lived. Equidistant around the city were six immense buildings that ran like pillars from the lip of the upper rim to the border of the park ring below; these, according to Glory, were the houses of Thunderhead’s government.

I’d been worried about how we were going to sneak into the city. I’d been imagining the ‘city’ as a place like Tenpony, or even the Society. A building, a cluster of buildings, or even a stable were what had crossed my mind. Places with big, guarded doors where everything going in and out was looked at carefully and judged. Here, there were so many ponies coming and going that entering had been as simple as moving up over the top rim. There were flights of power-armored ponies flying around, but they seemed occupied with something else. The only interference we had was when a gray pegasus pony with a stubby chin flew over, inspected the ‘cloud’, and told Boomer to “Get that good, heavy cloud to the work site pronto.”

And then he flew on, because there were other ponies doing similar things.

This was how the world was supposed to be. How it once was. Ponies working, living, laughing. It was like a soap bubble that had persisted for two hundred years, protected by its mighty tower and advantages over its neighbors. There weren’t

ponies scrabbling for their next meal, worried about monsters, or just trying to keep from being robbed, raped, or ripped in two.

Once we were inside the ring, Glory'd directed us towards the far side of the city. At first, I couldn't tell one part from another, but now I could see that different sections of the city had some subtly different decorations in the form of colored motifs. The busiest was red, which she said was the business and entertainment sector. We were headed to the blue section, right in the middle, which seemed to have the largest and fanciest homes with the fewest ponies hanging about. As we reached the wall she'd pointed us to, she quickly flew out, nipped over to a control panel, and tapped a few keys. A side of the wall swung up, revealing an immense garage, perhaps more of a hangar, even, with an impressive gold-and-silver-surfaced sky carriage supported by hooks in the ceiling. Though we scraped off most of the storm cloud getting through the door, Twister, Boomer, and Glory were able to tie the *Fleur* to the same supports.

"Wow. I can't believe we're really up in the sky!" Scotch Tape said, jumping eagerly over the rail.

"Wait!" Glory shouted, but too late. Scotch Tape's glee turned into a shriek of terror as she plunged straight through the floor. I reached out with my magic just before her tail disappeared from view and grabbed. The filly emerged slowly, hanging upside down as she hugged herself and trembled. My horn strained; had she been full-grown, I wouldn't have caught her. When Glory picked her out of the air and deposited her on the *Fleur*, Scotch rushed to P-21 and hugged him tight.

"Don't get off the boat. Not getting off the boat," Scotch Tape murmured over and over again as I let out a sigh of relief.

P-21 held her as she dealt with that minor breakdown. "This might make walking around a little difficult."

I frowned and levitated out Twilight's magic primer. Now I was glad that it wasn't just useless magical exercises for foals. "She has a spell here that she says will let non-pegasi walk on clouds." I read the details. . . it didn't seem all that difficult. Definitely nothing I would have tried a month ago, but... "Who am I going to try it on, though?"

"Eh. What's the worst you can do to me?" Rampage asked as she trotted in front of me.

I screwed up my face and concentrated. Imagine happy, fluffy clouds on the ends of

her legs. Happy, fluffy clouds. . . I felt the magic discharge. “Huh. . . you don’t look any different. Maybe Boomer can bring in some of that thundercloud we scraped off and—“

“Banzai!” Rampage shouted as she jumped off the far side of the ship. Her cry trailed away to silence as all of us stared in shock.

“Oh Celestia,” I muttered as I slowly walked to where she’d jumped. First Lacunae and now Rampage. . . “I. . . I should have known better. I thought I cast it right!” Falling... and falling... and sure, she wouldn’t die, but who knew what we were over this second? We were near the Core! She could find herself impaled on a ruin, or—

Then a striped pony launched herself over the rail and landed atop me. “You did. I was just messing with you,” she said smugly as she lay atop me, then frowned and tapped my metal reinforcements. “Woah, how do you and Glory get your sexings on? Don’t these chafe?”

“A bit, but so long as I’m on top, it’s not too bad,” Glory replied as I worked to re-establish my ability to speak.

“Rampage! I’ll kill you!” I yelled as I tried to punch her.

“Promises, promises,” she drawled as she almost casually pinned my metallic legs under her hoofclaws. She looked over at the traumatized Scotch Tape, then down at me, and I saw a shadow in her eyes. But then she grinned as she fought it back. “Hey Scotch. Watch this.” She opened her mouth and let a giant dollop of saliva roll along her tongue.

“No! No no no! Don’t you dare, Rampage!” I shouted as I tried to heave her off. “Do not drool on me, Rampage! I’m warning you!” I glanced at Glory desperately, but apparently the ickiness of earth pony saliva wasn’t worth her coming to my rescue.

Rampage sucked the glob back in, grinned down at me, and snorted loudly before letting a wad of something awful slowly begin to drop towards my face, swinging and wriggling like some vile pendulum. “Rampage, what are you, a filly?” Glory asked in disgust. Rampage froze, a glob of slime dangling from her lips as she looked at Glory, and then she sucked it back into her mouth. “That’s better,” Glory said with the air of a foalsitter. “Honestly. . .” Rampage smirked.

Then, like a steel-plated jungle cat, she launched herself at Glory, pinning the pegasus on her back. “What are you doing? Get off!” The phlegm glob appeared once more. “No! No no nononoNO!” she pled helplessly as the Reaper let the mucus swing lower and lower. “Blackjack! Help!” I glanced over at Scotch, who

was beating back her recent trauma with amusement. Then Glory's shriek reached glass-breaking levels as the spit bomb landed. "Rampage!"

We all... save for Glory... broke into laughter. "Relax, Glory," Rampage smirked. "Scotch is laughing now. So chill."

"I'm back in grade school again," Glory said in exasperation as she sat up, but she was mollified a bit by the sight of the laughing olive filly. Her continued attempts to wipe the spittle away just smeared it into her coat, though. "Oh, gross! Is this mucus? This is mucus! Rampage!"

"What is going on?" a young mare said from the garage doorway. Her coat was a darker gray than Glory's and her mane a deep indigo. I was reminded of a pegasus Homage, except a pair of glasses lay before her lighter, blue, and currently very wide eyes. "What... how... who are all of you?"

"Moonshadow?" Glory said as she stared at the uneasy mare. Then she swooshed in and hugged the mare every bit as fiercely as Rampage pouncing. "Moony!"

Moonshadow struggled to push Glory away. "Rainbow Dash?" Her lip curled, clearly uncomfortable with the gooey embrace. "Who... what..." her eyes turned to the *Fleur*, then to all of us. "What's going on?"

"It's me! Morning Glory! I'm home!" she said with a grin. But it quickly faded as Moonshadow pushed her away. "Moonshadow?"

The mare shook her head slowly, "...no. You can't be—"

"It's Morning Glory, Moon," Dusk said loudly as she stumbled onto the deck and faltered to the rail. She glanced at me, her lips pursed, and then she awkwardly fluttered down to the floor of the garage. Her bandages had been removed, revealing the swollen, livid injuries to her head. I hadn't remembered exactly what I'd done to her... apparently it had involved ripping her helmet open and nearly crushing her skull. The swelling had gone down, but skull fractures took longer to heal without magic.

"Dusk? What happened to you?" Moonshadow asked as she rushed to swaying pegasus's side. Feeling awkward, I got to casting the cloudwalking spell on myself and the others. "And... Rainbow Dash?"

"Got hurt down below," she replied. "But yeah, that's Glory. Come on. I'll explain everything." Then she rolled her eyes a little. "Actually, I'll just hit the important parts. I can't begin to explain *everything*. But let's go inside."

Moonshadow looked from Dusk to Glory and back again. Glory grinned sheepishly and added, “And I’d really like to wash my face. Really. . .”

But Moonshadow wasn’t smiling. The dark gray mare’s blue eyes turned and regarded the rest of us coolly. “I see. Very well. Welcome to the Striker estate.” Frowning, she led us all inside. A cool welcome indeed.

I don’t know what I expected Morning Glory’s home to be like, but I certainly hadn’t imagined a palace in the skies. The soaring great room rose up for three stories with balconies reaching out like clamshells from between Corinthian columns. Rainbow-paned windows cast a polychromatic light across the floor, which was engraved with a relief of trees, clouds, and birds. As Thunderhead rotated, the light played slowly across the surface, the shards of color illuminating one spot and then another so that what was a blue bird one minute would be a blue lake ten minutes later.

Scotch Tape stared at the architecture around her with literal jawdropping awe, her fear of falling miles to the ground forgotten. She raced back to the *Fleur* for some scrap paper and charcoal and immediately began sketching what she saw and writing notes. I observed a few particularities as well: no stairs. Thank goodness there were toilets on the ground floor.

There were also not a lot of people for an estate almost half the size of my stable. Four pegasi, two mares and two stallions dressed in formal black attire, were apparently paid to keep the place neat and tidy. They stood by, clearly unsure of what to do but ready to act if Moonshadow, Dusk, or Glory needed them. I noticed a great deal of wrinkling noses, and I felt embarrassed for bringing the stink of the Wasteland into this vast and amazing structure. Then I put it out of my mind, as I had bigger things to worry about.

We’d moved into a library where enchanted, vaporous shelves held books old even before the war began. A tapestry of some kind hung from the ceiling to the floor, showing generation upon generation of ponies stretching back centuries. I’d never realized that Glory’s family, through her father, went back even further than my own through Twilight. Two identical young dove-gray fillies with pink manes listened to Glory and Dusk with matching expressions of awe. Her siblings, Lambent and Lucent. Moonshadow listened to every single word with focus, asking few questions and simply taking it all in. From the firm frown on her lips, she wasn’t happy with any of it. When we got to the part about the Enclave and Lighthooves, Dusk suggested

that Lambent and Lucent show Scotch Tape the rest of the house while the butler brought her an aspirin.

The three went out, along with a maid to supervise, while we were left with a table of stale desserts and oddities. The water was lightly flavored with lemon. Boo seemed somewhat disappointed with the bland sugar cookies provided.

Then we told Moonshadow about the plague and the upcoming attack. She took it all stoically, even more so than I thought possible given her sister's appearance and company. Her blue eyes closed thoughtfully, and I gave Rampage a stern glare before she could start making snoring noises. A minute later, Moonshadow opened her eyes again, and she did not look happy. "I need to speak to my sisters alone." Then her gaze switched to me before she added, "You can stay. You seem to be in the middle of all this."

"What? What are we supposed to do?" Rampage asked as she panned from Moonshadow to Glory. "Come on! If you're going to fight, I want to see the action. Don't just leave me with the play by play!"

"Rampage," I said with a shake of my head.

She started to whine again, but Moonshadow told one of the servants, "Show her to the media room. If you insist on watching drama," she then said to Rampage, "I suggest viewing *By Dawn's Early Light*. Quite a tearjerker."

"Aw, yeah," Boomer nodded. "I love the scene where Captain Silverwing gets shot and has to lie on the mountaintop while his squad pulls back!" He adopted a gruff tone and said, "Fight another day, boys. Fight for me. Fight for *us*. But do it tomorrow. Me, I got a dance to keep.' And they go and then the griffins start to swoop in on him and. . ." he trailed off as he realized that we were all staring at him. "What?! It's a heartbreaker of a scene. Specially when it cuts back to his special pony back home. . ."

Rampage looked at him blankly, then smiled. "Well, you sold me. I'm game." Then she turned to the butler pony and said grandly, "To the boob tube, Jeeves!"

"My name is Droplets, ma'am," he replied stiffly. "This way." Together, she and Boomer left.

P-21 turned to Twister and frowned a moment. "Maybe you and I can talk till they're done. I'd like to know more about Neighvarro. It might help me understand what all the fighting is over."

"Skybright?" Glory said to one of the maids. "Why don't you show them to the

kitchens and make them something to eat?”

The sky blue mare nodded and trotted to the door, smiling as she opened it for the pair. “This way, please.”

I looked over at Boo, the blank blinking confusedly now that ponies were leaving. Or maybe she was just struggling to chew on one of the stale white disks they called ‘cookies’. “Go with them, Boo. They might have Fancy Buck cakes.” I don’t know if she understood me, but she perked up a little, tossed the half-eaten cookie back on the plate, and trotted out after them, seeming quite pleased. Such a bizarre mare. . .

When it was down to four of us and the one remaining servant, Moonshadow frowned as she regarded Glory, myself, and Dusk. “So. You’ve been through a great deal. What is it you plan to do next?” Moonshadow asked archly as she sat on a fluffy white couch. “Get yourselves arrested and hope that they take a bunch of surfacers seriously enough to give you an audience with Councilor Stargazer? Or were you planning on having the public show of us being exiled en masse for breaking quarantine be enough for some sort of public appeal?”

“Well, that is one way to contact the authorities,” Glory said, a touch confused and defensive.

“Um, I don’t think you understand,” I said to Moonshadow with a concerned frown. “Neighvarro is coming for the Tower. If they have to shoot their way in to secure the place, they will. I think you have to look at the bigger picture.”

Moonshadow wheeled on me with undisguised contempt. “Excuse me. This isn’t your house, your home, your place, or your business. Do not tell me what I should be looking at.”

Morning Glory bristled. “Do not address her like that, Moonshadow! Blackjack is my marefriend.”

“Congratulations,” Moonshadow retorted, full of scorn, “you discovered fornication.” She rose and turned away to gaze out the window. “Maybe next you might discover familial obligation.”

“What’s gotten into you, Moony?” Glory asked, clearly at a loss.

The gray mare smacked her hoof on the table beside her, making the china rattle. “Becoming the head of a household when Father and two of my siblings disappeared ‘got into me’,” she said without turning. “Something I don’t expect either of you two to understand.”

"Hey," Dusk groaned, scowling as she started to rise. Then she touched the side of her head and leaned back in her loveseat, but she continued, "Don't talk to me about family."

"Oh?" Moonshadow whirled, glaring at her. "You ran off to join the military the first chance you could get. I understood that. Following in Father's hoofsteps and all that entails. But did you ever think about who would head this family when you just left to do your security training? There was an attempt to bring scandal on us by saying that Glory had gone Dashite!" Her hard blue eyes turned to Glory. "And so you did. More Dashite than I'd thought possible."

"I had no choice in that!" Glory began as she launched herself from my side and hovered in the air, pointing a hoof at Moonshadow. "Lighthooves branded me, and magic weeds transformed me into this. I never asked for this trouble!"

But Moonshadow, faster than I expected, launched herself into the air and poked her hoof hard into Glory's chest. "Oh, but you did! You had every choice in it, Morning Glory! You could have stayed up here. You could have married or dated anypony you wanted, or none at all. You could have continued your studies. You'd have been a doctor in a year if you'd stayed. But no. You had to pine for Mother and continue her hopeless crusade of helping the surface. You even got Father to endorse the Volunteer Corps! Well, where are Mother and Father now? A mechanical abomination and trapped in some surface stasis pod!"

Glory backed away, looking as if Moonshadow had just bucked her upside the head. "Moonshadow, how can you say that?"

"How..." She gritted her teeth and hissed in frustration. "Have you even thought about Lambent and Lucent, Glory? Or me? Or anypony else?" She pointed a hoof damningly at Glory. "If it were just your life, oh well. I'd be sympathetic. But your sojourn to the surface hasn't just affected you, Glory. Have you realized that?" She gestured at Dusk. "She kept us from exile when it was released that you were dead. I admit, I cried when I heard. But you're not dead. You're here. And you're Rainbow Dash! Are you trying to get us all arrested and exiled?"

"There's more at stake than our family," Dusk pointed out grimly.

"I realize that," Moonshadow retorted. "But unlike the two of you, I am not prepared to sacrifice myself and my youngest siblings as if we're nothing!"

"And when the Enclave comes here and starts shooting, what then?" Glory snapped.

"There's lots of folks in Neighvarro who won't shy away from civilian casualties.

Heck, some of them think that the whole population of Thunderhead are traitors,” I pointed out.

“Then we sit tight, surrender at an opportune moment, and demonstrate our loyalty.” I gaped at her in shock. She met my incredulity with sincerity. “The Grand Pegasus Enclave is the legal, elected authority of our people. Yes, the system has severe problems, but that doesn’t excuse criminality. If there are elements defying the law, then the Enclave is right to step in and stop them! They’re criminals. If Thunderhead won’t stop them, then the Enclave as a whole should,” Moonshadow countered.

“Right,” I said as I stood. “Glory, get a rope. If she’s not going to help us, then she’s going to be a liability.”

Moonshadow stared at me in disgust. “Brilliant. And what are you going to tell my employers at the university tomorrow? I have never taken a sick day in my life. And what of our servants’ families? What are you going to tell them?” Then she asked, cool and contemptuous, “Or are you just going to kill us?” I sighed. This was going to be a lot more difficult than I expected.

Glory sighed as well, slumping, clearly defeated, “Moonshadow, if you’re not going to help us—“

“Oh skies above, of course I’m going to help!” she said in eye rolling exasperation.

There was a round of absolutely baffled expressions on everypony’s face. “You are?” I asked in befuddlement.

“You think I’m going to stuff my head into a cloud and let you go about whatever foalish scheme you come up with and finish this family off? No,” Moonshadow stated firmly. “I refuse to let you, your... friends... Mother, Father, or anypony else ruin Lambent’s, Lucent’s, or *my* life!” She flew up and once more poked Glory in the chest. “But don’t think that I’m happy with you bringing this on us, Glory.”

Glory took a deep breath. “Help me with this and I’ll leave and never darken your skies again,” she said, clearly fighting the tears.

“Oh for the love of clear skies, no!” Moonshadow said, throwing her forehooves over her head in outrage. Then she seized Morning Glory by the shoulders. “You’re family! This is your home. Just start thinking about how what you do is going to affect the rest of us for a change. Otherwise, you’re just like Mother.” She sighed and landed, then pressed her wingtips to her temples. “Ugh, I’m getting a migraine. Jamboree, I need an aspirin.” Rather than trotting over fifteen feet to the bottle on the table, she waited for the butler to fish out two tablets with his wingtips and deliver

them to her. Once they were ingested, she sighed again. "Now, it's late, and I have work to finish up, dinner to eat, and calls to make," Moonshadow said crossly. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?" she asked as she looked from one of us to the next.

"No." Morning Glory said, looking away.

"Fine. Give me until tomorrow morning to get things taken care of, and then we'll see what we can do for you and your friends. Ah, and I'll have to find out if the Feathers will take Lambent and Lucent if things go bad."

"Ugh, the Feathers?" Dusk groaned. "They're so stodgy."

"And they're the least likely to be lined up against a wall and shot. They're well-connected here and in Neighvarro. And they *like* me. Just because you didn't want to marry their son is no excuse," Moonshadow said primly. I just *had* to introduce her to Grace if she ever went to the surface. They'd get along smashingly!

"Gay," Dusk complained flatly.

Moonshadow snorted. "Oh, as if that's any reason to call off a perfectly good arranged marriage," she said with a roll of her eyes, but she finally smiled. Then she turned to her servant and said archly, "I trust your discretion?"

He bowed his head. "Yes, ma'am. I shall be sure to get it from the others as well."

"Good," Moonshadow said as she pushed her black-framed glasses back up her muzzle. "Now, I need to get these reports finished. Particularly given that we might be at war any day now and I'd hate to have incomplete assignments hanging over my head. Excuse me." And with that she rose and exited the library, the servant following in her wake.

"Ten Raptors are coming here to seize the tower, and she's worrying about paperwork?" I asked in bafflement.

Dusk shook her head, then winced. Glory sighed. "She's always been the responsible one. I . . . I didn't know how angry she was with me, though. I thought she liked me."

"She does, Glory," Dusk said with a smile. "She's just cranky. Moonshadow is a perfectionist, if you hadn't noticed. Smart, sure, but organized too. I used to amuse myself for hours nudging her picture frames off level and then watching her drive herself crazy. Or sharpening one pencil a *little* more than the rest."

"That annoys me too," Glory said with a frown. "Well, it did. After the Wasteland..."

"Yeah. But Moonshadow I could see trying to organize the empty cans in order of rustiness or something," Dusk said with a tired smile.

"I can't believe she yelled at me, though. I didn't think Moonshadow *could* yell," Glory said ruefully.

"You never rifled through her desk. Could have been worse. At least she didn't try and kill you," Dusk said quietly. "Sorry about that, by the way." She rubbed her head and winced. "Stupid skull fractures."

"Healing potion didn't help?" Glory asked with a concerned frown.

"Helped a lot. Spending a week or two locked to a gurney and being questioned half the time didn't. Hopefully my brain will get the memo and stop hurting."

"It's nerves in the bone and muscle or meninges. Brain tissue doesn't have..." Glory trailed off in the face of the flat look from her sister. "Right. Sorry it hurts."

Twister and Boomer came back in. "So, what is the plan for meeting with the Councilor?" Twister asked Glory. "I mean, y'all got some sort of family connection or something. Right?"

"Actually," Glory rubbed the back of her head. "I was expecting Thunderhead Security to knock on the door five minutes after we arrived. I didn't think we'd actually make it all the way here." We all stared at her with expressions of shock. "What?" she said defensively to me. "You'd disappeared to Maripony, so I just figured I'd do what you'd do and make it up as we go along."

"Glory," I said plaintively. "My ideas are terrible! They've always been terrible. Why in Equestria would you do that?"

"I'm sorry, alright!?" she burst at me. "I'm not a leader! I don't have... whatever it is that *you* have that lets you do things. I just figured we'd get up here and, one way or another, we'd get in contact with the Councilor. Maybe she'd find a bunch of surfacers interesting enough to chat with." She bowed her head and crumpled before my eyes, hugging herself with her wings. "I know stuff, Blackjack, but I can't do stuff. Not like you can." Finally, she averted her eyes. "You have no idea how jealous I am of you for it."

Dusk sighed. "Let Moonshadow mull over it, Glory. Not only is she smart, but she hasn't been gone for two months. And the very important ponies like her better."

"What's your plan?" I asked Dusk. She regarded me coolly. After Yellow River, I doubted we'd be friends anytime soon.

“Once my head stops throbbing, I’m going back down to check on Lightning Dancer and Father. I think we’ll need both of them here. I need Dancer, and I’m pretty sure Thunderhead is going to need Father. Then we’ll see,” she replied. “Have to be able to fly for thirty seconds without vertigo sending the world onto the dizzitron first.” She stood and winced. “I’m going to go lie down. You two should probably do the same. Nopony is going to see the Councilor after hours, and it’s late.”

“Hmmm! I got it! We sneak in under the cover of darkness and talk to the Councilor in her bedroom!” I suggested, grinning ear to ear.

“Blackjack, Enclave Councilors have round the clock security,” Dusk said in tones that implied she thought everypony should know this. “And Stargazer’s husband fought with Father during the dragon attack years back. One shot, one alarm, and things go bad very quickly.”

“Maybe. . . there’s a secret passage? Or do you have a photograph of her bedroom? I can teleport in! Maybe?” I looked from one to the next, then groaned. “Ugh, I really don’t want to put myself in a position to get arrested just to talk to them about their illegal bioweapons!”

“Leave it to Moonshadow,” Glory said with a sigh. “She’s smarter than I am.” That said a lot.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have your heart,” Dusk said with a small smile. “Or my guts. She’d never go to the surface. She likes a nice, predictable life. No wonder she’s pissed. Who could have predicted us?”

I gave her a hug and a nuzzle. Moonshadow might be smart, but I didn’t quite trust her. Still, for Glory, I could give it a try. . .

Nothing much happened that evening. Rampage broke out bawling while we were in the kitchen with P-21 and Twister. Apparently the movie had been all Boomer said and more. Scotch Tape was speculating how much of the manor she could copy with surface material. Boo was quite put out at the lack of fine snack cake cuisine in the household.

That night, all of us except Twister and Boomer slept on the *Fleur*. Twilight’s book said that the spell would last for three days, but I wasn’t as good at magic as she was. There was no way I was going to get to sleep with the thought of plunging down through the clouds without warning, so we cleaned up the beds for the night.

Glory and I spooned together, me stroking her wings gently till she drifted off.

It took me a while to follow her. I never thought I'd miss being tired. I knew, abstractly, that I needed sleep. I just didn't *feel* like I did. I breathed in the clean smell of her mane... purple or rainbow-striped, she still smelled like my Glory... and let my brain gradually shut down as the *Fleur* quietly creaked around us.

What was waiting for me? Nightmares? Memories of Lacunae's passing? Worse? I guess I would see...

"Blackjack! Hurry up! You're going to be late!" Mom called from the living room, up the stairs, where I struggled with my golden armor. The dang buckles were stuck, again! I finally just teleported right out of it and into the shower. Hah! *Take that, buckles*, I thought as I turned on the shower.

Oh. Wait. The armor was still on me. Curse you, buckles! Curse you.

I dumped the saturated armor on my bed, gave myself the briskest rubdown in history, and would worry about it later. I raced down the stairs so fast that I barked my shin where the stairs took a corner. I raced past the living room, where my little sister Boo waited impatiently in her soft pink dress. "You're not dressing up? You should dress up. Mom, make her dress up!"

"Ugh! We don't have time," I groaned. "He's not going to care if I'm not all frou-froued up!"

Mom looked at me and smiled. "Blackjack. Go dress up."

Defeated. I returned upstairs, selected a red dress, and wiggled into it. "There! I'm dressed!"

"Brush your mane too," Boo insisted.

"Mom!"

"Brush your mane. You still have plenty of time." I sulked spectacularly as Boo took a brush and ran it through my mane and tail a few times.

"There. Now can we go?" I asked. A royal guard wasn't supposed to look all prissy. We were supposed to be tough and loyal and never give up! We saved ponies.

"Makeu—" Boo began to say, but I levitated a pillow off the sofa and bapped her head with it. "Mooooom! Blackjack is using magic to pick on me again!"

“Boo, she doesn’t need makeup. Blackjack, don’t use magic on your sister.” Mom was used to negotiating between us. We finally headed off towards the door. “Have fun.”

“Yes Mom,” we said in unison as we stepped outside into the warm afternoon light.

The creak woke me. It wasn’t like most of the noises on the *Fleur*. Those were soft, repetitive, soothing things. This was one, singular, groan of a plank on the side of the bed that I was facing. One eye opened, and I stared at the empty air above Glory. Nothing. Go back to sleep, Blackjack. Six sleepy ponies in my head all agreed. It was far too early for this.

But something had made that board creek. I stared at nothing while Glory slept like a log beside me. Then, not making a sound, I drew my sword from its scabbard. It floated slowly over Glory, illuminating her features. I waved it slowly through the air along that side of the bed. Then the air on the other side of the bed gave the slightest of shimmers. A pony with a stealthbuck was standing right next to Glory. . .

I tensed, ready to strike.

Then the shimmer disappeared entirely as they moved away from me and the bed. Were they just backing away to fire from out of range? The door opened with the slightest of rasps all on its own, and, as quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed. Something was very amiss here. Thankfully, Glory’s snores covered the creek of my own hooffalls. I looked out into the hallway, checked in one direction, then the other. A tin can rocked slowly back and forth by the stairs leading to the deck.

Step by step, I walked out into the open. If this was an assassination attempt, they could have dusted me a half dozen times before now. I swapped from glowing sword to glowing revolvers. “I know you’re here,” I said quietly as I turned around slowly on deck. “I also know you probably could have killed us down there before I woke up. Or in the hall. Or now. But you haven’t yet. So I’m guessing you’re here for some other reason.” Still nothing. Had they gone? All I could hear was the sound of wind outside the city.

Then the air flashed and the pony showed themselves at the prow of the *Fleur*. I’d seen Enclave power armor before, but I’d never seen power armor like this. It wasn’t the clunkier Neighvarro style of armor nor the smoother lines of Thunderhead; this armor concealed every inch of their body, even the undersides of their wings. The uniform black was broken by lines of purple. It had a black cape and a wide-brimmed

hat, of all things! The eye slits glowed pale blue as a breeze made the cape flow dramatically behind. All in all I gave it a 9.

"You need to leave," the pony said in a low, synthetic voice that raised my hackles. Make that 9.5.

I gestured to the airship. "It's my boat. You're the one trespassing." I didn't see any guns on the armor, so I lowered mine. "What's your name, friend?"

"Nopony you need to know," they replied. "You're not LittlePip, are you?"

"No. I'm Security. Blackjack, to my friends." I saw the mare start at my name. "You've heard of me. Sorry. I promise I'm not here to blow anything up."

"Blackjack. . ." she narrowed her eyes a little. "You need to leave."

"Afraid we just arrived. And it wasn't an easy trip," I added as I approached.

"Congratulations on getting here. Now go home."

I sighed, shaking my head. "So soon? But I really wanted to look around and see the sights. And we need to meet with Chancellor Stargazer and deal with Lighthooves," I answered. I suspected that this wasn't him. He wouldn't bother with disguises. "Who are you?"

"The pony dealing with the situation. Leave," the dark pegasus replied. Stallion? Mare? Well, it was hard to tell with power armor and robo-voice. "You're not one of the bad ponies, but I can't let you stay if you're going to do what she said you would."

She? She who? Dawn? "Crazy thought here. *You* could work with *me*?" I said with a grin, gesturing at them with outstretched hooves and then back at myself. "Help me out, oh mysterious one?" The pony didn't answer. "Come on. Who are you with? Thunderhead? Neighvarro? General Storm Chaser? Lighthooves? What?"

They approached me. "I'm the one telling you to get out of here. I don't know if she was right about you or not, but I can't risk you throwing everything off. You're trotting on stage, thinking you know the steps to this dance. You don't. Trust me. Go home. Lighthooves and the Enclave are being handled." They turned away.

Well, somepony got an A in their 'be cryptic as possible' class. "We can't do that. I came up here to help Thunderhead. To help the Enclave too."

The pony stopped. "I can appreciate the irony, and the sentiment. I also appreciate how asinine your position is. However, you should leave. Thunderhead law enforcement will be occupied tomorrow, so you should just pad your ship again and

go home. You have your own problems to worry about.”

“Thunderhead is Glory’s home. And I can’t just leave when everything is about to go wrong. I love her,” I finished. There. I said it. Now they had to help me!

The mysterious black and purple pony stopped. “Well. That’s admirable.” Then they looked back at me. “Go home. I’m told you’re supposed to do big things down there. Like the other one. If you don’t leave, I’ll have to tip off security, and you’ll be spending your time out of the way till this is over.” And with that, they disappeared in a purple flash.

“I’m telling you, I saw her! A power-armored pony with a cape and a hat!” I said as we sat around the fancy dining table. Breakfast... well... I didn’t want to offend, but I’d had better down on the surface. Sky food was a mix of bland with bland and a side of bland. No Sugar Apple Bombs or Fancy Buck snack cakes. I’d gone over my meeting in the middle of the night, but I was facing far more skepticism than I’d expected. “And they had a stealthbuck and they could teleport and...” there was a soft snicker from Dusk. “What? I saw them! And they told me like a dozen times to leave.”

“Sure you did,” Dusk said with a grin. “The Mysterious Mare Do Well. Who hasn’t?”

“That’s an urban myth, Blackjack,” Glory said absently as she went over some papers and drawings that Moonshadow had drafted. “The Mysterious Mare Do Well’s been seen for almost two centuries now just about everywhere.”

“Originally the mare was a wealthy transvestite recluse named Spruce Mane. He dressed up as the Mysterious Mare Do Well and flew around Thunderhead trying to arrest criminals... until the Enclave got sick of it and locked him up. A few years later he tried it again with ‘Batmare’,” Moonshadow said matter-of-factly. For some reason, a tiny blue pegasus in my mind rolled over laughing at the other five.

“We’ve had Mare Do Well sightings in Neighvarro, Las Pegasus, over Baltimore,” Twister counted off her pinions. Then she grinned at Boomer. “Remember Councilor Whatshername? The one that wanted to send the entire fleet after Mare Do Well for sneaking into her bed? And it turned out to be her marefriend doing some kinky play.”

“But I... she...” I sputtered. “She was here! I mean... I had no idea who Mare Do Well was before this morning. I didn’t imagine her.”

"Well, you do have a tendency to see things no one else did. And you were a part of the Goddess. Who knows what might have been left over in your head," Rampage said as she carved her pancakes with her hoofclaws. "Folks down below see her too. Every now and then when there's a fight with some slavers or raiders and your ass is toast... bam! She appears. Some say she soars by and kicks the heads clean off of her enemies. Others say she uses a gun. Or magic. But then she's gone..." She smirked at me. "Very... mysterious. Wooooo..."

"But I wasn't fighting. And why was she in my room watching me? If she wanted to take me out, she could have done it just then. I'm sure of it. And why tell me to leave? If she's with Storm Chaser she should help me. And if she's with Lighthooves she should stop me. I'm not seeing a third side here." I grumbled.

"Well, I believe you," P-21 said thoughtfully.

"Thank you!" I said loudly and with great satisfaction.

Then he went on, "But it doesn't change anything. We can't trust them, and we're still at a loss for how to contact the Councilor without ending up dead or in jail."

I looked over at Moonshadow, and the indigo-maned pony pushed her glasses up her muzzle with a wing. "Well, I think that I might have a solution. If we had a few days, I could make an appointment and get in to see her. Politicians always make time for campaign contributors, eventually. But there might be an even faster way." She looked over at Glory. "Dr. Morningstar is the Councilor's secretary of science. If we talk to him, he might be able to get us in to see her today."

"He is?" Glory blinked in surprise. "He has more letters after his name than anypony I know, but I didn't know he worked with the Councilor too."

"It's not something he brings up. You know how much he hates politics," Moonshadow said with a shrug. "He's been in bliss researching and cataloging the surface samples. I see him fairly regularly, and you were one of his favorite students."

"I don't know. He might not be happy to see me," Glory said, chewing her lip. "Or he might be too happy to see me."

"Why not?" Scotch Tape asked from where she was smearing around her Bland Flakes.

"Various reasons..." Glory hesitated a bit before answering. "He didn't want me to go to the surface. Said that it wasn't safe. He preferred to stay in the lab and have other ponies bring samples to him for study. I wanted to go out in the field and save the surface with Enclave science and technology. We didn't part on the best of terms."

“Well, plan B is trying to sneak in. Plan C is getting arrested trying to sneak in,” I replied. I wasn’t opting for plan D, which was letting General Chaser clean it up herself.

Glory finally sighed and nodded. “Alright.”

“Good. So... how are we going to get there?” I asked. I looked around at the hapless and thoughtful expressions as we tried to think of how to get one cyber-pony, three earth ponies, two Neighvarro pegasi, and one Rainbow Dash across Thunderhead.

But Moonshadow only smiled.

The city of Thunderhead rumbled around us with the life of fifty thousand ponies. Glory told me the city itself offered about eight square miles of living space within the torus, and I wondered how there could be any room left for the dozens of shops, restaurants, and other attractions. We passed theatres and a music hall, and I just wanted to stand there and soak it all in. Small, economical parks were tucked in between colonnades and boulevards; I again could only imagine how they’d managed to get grass to grow on clouds.

And almost all of it *was* made of clouds. Clouds! Cloud clothing and cloud furniture and cloud buildings and cloud theatres. What I took for glass and ceramics were, in fact, rainbows. The idea of it, taking something so beautiful and putting it to practical use, blew me away. What metal was in the city was largely out of sight in the form of electrical wires. Even the plumbing was made of congealed rainbow the consistency of plastic or rubber. Despite it being the middle of the day there were lights of all colors flashing and advertising and informing. Scotch Tape asked where they got the power, and Twister had amusedly reminded her that the sky was where they kept all the lightning.

A lightning-powered city! Made of clouds. And rainbows!

But it was the ponies that really made it special. Ponies talking, eating, laughing, and strolling along. The only ones I saw who were armed were a half-dozen police ponies who nodded respectfully to us as we walked past. I saw foals. Old ponies. Mares and stallions... and none of them were killing each other over bottlecaps and a half-full box of two-century-old cereal. Even Twister and Boomer seemed surprised by all the ponies living inside this wonderful bubble.

We had a few hours to kill till we could meet with Doctor Morningstar, so the six of us simply did whatever seemed interesting. We nipped into a coffee shop where we listened to three stallions and two mares recite their poetry. We browsed a shop full of clothes that only Grace and perhaps Velvet could properly appreciate. Finally, I begged Rampage to give us an hour in a concert hall, where I listened to actual ponies playing music while she alternated between grumbling under her breath and giving a professional critique. It wasn't a full orchestra or anything, but it was civilization. It was how the world was supposed to be.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. We were deciding where to go for lunch when a skeezy tan pegasus in a large coat walked up to us. "Hey. Hey. Want some B's?"

"Some what?" Scotch asked in confusion.

The pegasus grimaced. "Come on. Some B's! I got a fresh batch. Blue. Straw. Boys. Rasp. I got it all," all he said, and then he spread the coat wide to reveal dozens of small baggies filled with roundish colorful objects. "Straight from the surface! Best shit you ever tasted!"

Ah, civilization. . .

"Everypony keeps staring at us," P-21 muttered as we ate at a bizarre noodle café. A huge screen over the counter flashed advertisements for feather straighteners before going to some game involving two teams of flyers trying to maneuver an ovoid cloud through a ring. Trying to follow their moves gave me a migraine. The café was crowded and noisy enough that we could talk without being heard, but empty enough that there wasn't much risk of somepony running into me. The meals seemed to be noodles and apples, noodles and potato, noodles and beans. . . I gnawed on a cyberpony cake.

"Cause you're a handsome hunk of stallion," Rampage said with a smirk, then slurped a noodle in one long suck. Or it could have been the fact her body was white but her mouth stained with purple.

"Stop it," P-21 growled as he frowned at the crowds around us. "Is it my horn? Is it on straight?"

"It's fine. Wonderglue never wears off. You'll wish it did when it comes time to take it off," I assured him in low tones. I didn't think the pegasi around us would hear a patch of empty air talking, but why take risks? The horns came courtesy of a 'pretty princess alicorn' play kit. Scrape off the sparkles and the blue horn matched almost perfectly. There'd been a green one for Scotch Tape and white ones for Rampage

and Boo. Hopefully nopony noticed that their magical glow was all the same color as I manipulated things around them from under Lancer's cloak.

"She's right, Daddy. You look good as a unicorn," Scotch assured him, then blinked and hastily amended, "I mean, you're a good-looking unicorn. Yup! Real good." She appeared a little young for an Enclave adjunct in her purple Enclave coveralls. Flustered, she glanced at her fork and cleared her throat in annoyance. I made with the magic, twirling the utensil in the bowl and popping it in her mouth with a little more vigor than warranted.

"I'm surprised nopony's stopped us or anything," P-21 said with a frown. "Our plans don't go this well."

"Of course it's going to work. It's not my plan," I reminded him.

He glanced in my direction, then snorted. "Your plans aren't so bad." Did he forget the last month?

"Well, you are being escorted by three ponies in power armor," Boomer said. "Might be that's keeping them back. Though I have to admit that I prefer our old armor. It was a bit more. . . buckish."

"It's still your old armor. Blackjack just altered it to match Dusk's. That's all," Twister said casually. I'd spent nearly an hour casting and recasting and tweaking Grace's alteration spell. I felt like I had an army of Rampages kicking my skull trying to get the magic to work. I'd only *seen* it once, and Twilight's primer had more on turning apples to oranges than making Neighvarro power armor match Thunderhead armor. Still, I'd managed to make their pair look less like the former and more like the latter. "I don't mind the smoother lines, personally. You do a good job with magicky stuff."

"It's genetic," P-21 said warmly. Two compliments in two minutes? Was he feeling well? Then he turned to Dusk, who seemed to be on the mend after a day out of Enclave custody. "So ponies are intimidated by the armor?"

"Partly," Dusk said in low tones, "but mostly, it's that you're what everypony expects to see. Unicorns here to do a job, with a standard military escort. I've done it five times myself. Babysitting detail. The unicorns gape and stare, like you are. I know what the paperwork looks like and the lingo and most of the security ponies by name." Her smile faded and she frowned at the crowd. "Honestly, I'm a little surprised none of them have stopped us."

"My visitor last night said they wouldn't," I muttered. That got a fresh round of skepticism.

Dusk sighed and shook her head. “Well, I’m still technically MIA, so I can’t call in and verify.”

“You should go to the hospital,” Moonshadow said in concern.

Dusk scowled at her. “I’ve been locked in a med bay for more than a week. And the second I trot into a hospital, a whole lot of ponies are going to have a whole lot of questions for me to answer,” Dusk said sharply, then groaned and rubbed her temples. “I want to get back down there and see Father and Dancer before I spend a month in debriefing and medical treatments.” Then she glanced over at her other sibling. “What’s the matter with you, Glory? You keep fidgeting.”

We all looked over at the third suit of power armor. All anypony could see was a blue muzzle and wings. Everything else was enmeshed in steel. “I gotta go,” Glory muttered.

“Go where?” I asked with a frown. But at the question, three mouths suddenly grinned. “What?” I asked in bafflement as I looked from Dusk, to Boomer, to Twister.

“Oh, first time’s so precious,” Boomer chuckled.

“Shut up. How do I... I mean...” Glory stammered. “This is an emergency! How do I...”

“You just do,” Twister replied a little sympathetically.

Boomer was silent for a moment, then he sighed, “Like that.” Scotch Tape went bright red and covered her mouth with her hooves as she giggled, her eyes bulging.

“Wait... what?” I asked in confusion.

“I can go here! I... that’s disgusting!” I blinked at her and looked at her bowl of noodles. Sure, they were a little bland but... why was a purple unicorn covering her face with her hoof?

Rampage gave an ‘oooooh’ of comprehension. “Power armor handles that?”

“Oh yeah,” Dusk said with a nod. “Unless you really piss off your mechanic. Trust me. You only fly with those talismans disabled once.”

“I always wondered how they went,” Rampage mused.

Then I made the connection and blurted, “Oh! You have to go take a dump?”

A half dozen conversations stopped as every table around stared, wondering which of us had made such an uncivil comment in a civilized setting. Even though I was

hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, I still felt my cheeks burning as I sunk down between P-21 and Glory's chairs.

Glory gave one of her long suffering 'Blackjack' sighs. "I will. . . be right back," Glory said as she turned and trotted away, walking a little too stiffly for it to be just her unfamiliarity with the armor.

As conversations around us returned to normal, I struggled for something else to talk about. "Hey, Twister. Hoarfrost and Afterburner? Are they... well... typical Enclave captains?"

Twister blinked and frowned. "Well. You generally get three kinds. The first are poor folk looking to get an updraft in life. Like me. My home, Brokenwing, has only two hundred ponies in it. We're dead last on the requisition priority list. The only way we get anything is if we sign up and serve. It gets us training and money to send back home."

Boomer spoke up. "Then you get ponies like me. We're believers. We serve because we want to. It's a good gig as long as you don't mind being told what to do, and the Enclave needs fighters. Besides, mares love a pony in power armor," he said with a grin at the table beside him. The mares giggled and played coy. "Lot of us are military family. I serve. My dad served. My grandfather served. Grandmother too."

Twister then frowned. "But then you get families that are... well... *special*. They're connected. They get the best equipment. They fly up the promotion ladder. They land all kinds of cushy jobs as administrators that don't do anything besides sit in their office an hour and then go to meetings in the officers' club. A few are all right, but I can count them on my hooves. The worst, though, want command. And they get it, too, not because they know what they're doing but because they know the right ponies. And once they have command, they want to use it. They'll take a Raptor out and blast a griffin nest because they can. They love ordering the military around like it's their personal toy."

"Chaser wasn't like that," I pointed out.

"No. If they were all that way, the GPE would have fallen apart years ago." Twister paused in consideration, then went on. "General Chaser's one of the commanders with actual combat experience. There's a few like her, all older ponies. Ponies who knew better two generations ago. Lots of them were pushed out when Harbinger skipped over and was appointed High General, the first High General with no live combat experience. Most commanders get a yearly wargame, which boils down

to bragging rights. But General Chaser's fought Talon assault squads and driven off dragon incursions. She was front and center during the Windigo incursion in the north thirty years ago," Twister said with a smirk. "You might not realize it, but bumping into you has made us practically combat vets. If we live through this and the shit doesn't hit the fan, we might even be bumped up ourselves."

Boomer chuckled, "I'll finally make Sarge. And Momma said it'd never happen."

"I didn't know that. I thought that all Enclave soldiers were well experienced," I said quietly.

"Well-drilled. But drills only take you so far. Then you run into a unicorn in a restricted area and you try to detain her and she thumps all three of you and rides you off into the Wasteland," Twister said with a frown. "Thank goodness we were able to gloss over the details of that."

"Fact is, Enclave's in trouble. Most ponies know it, but we just don't think about it. Live fer today and don't think about what's goin' on. Hell, I was like that before bumping into you. But nopony's doing anything about it till now. With Thunderhead bucking the system and Maripony—" Boomer began, but then the screen lit up just as one of the stallions kicked the cloudball straight at the ring like a bullet.

The game was interrupted by a special bulletin, and the café erupted in boos and gripes. Still, the volume was more than sufficient to hear over the outcry. A somber gray stallion held paper in his fetlocks as he stared soberly into the camera. "This is TNN with a breaking report. We have just confirmed that the explosion on the edge of the Everfree No Fly Zone was in fact a balefire detonation device. The military has stated that the weapon was an obsolete citykiller equivalent to the device that destroyed Cloudsdale two centuries ago. While there are no civilian casualties, Enclave military has yet to confirm or deny rumors that several Raptors were critically damaged in the explosion."

The screen cut to green pegasus mare in an Enclave uniform. "This is our official statement of events. The Enclave discovered the presence of a zebra balefire weapon being stored at a prewar facility and deemed it a critical threat to Enclave civilians. In the course of disarming the device, it detonated. Minor radiation spikes were detected in the settlements of High Cloud, New Pegasus, and Hightown. No civilian casualties reported. If you suspect you have been exposed to balefire radiation, please report to an Enclave medical facility."

"Here it comes," Dusk said with a roll of her eyes, "the reminder."

The green mare droned on, with pictures popping up in the corners of the screen. “The Enclave military believes this should be a lesson to all citizens of the GPE that the surface, even after two hundred years, remains exceptionally hazardous and beyond our ability to return to for the foreseeable future. While we doubt there are other weapons such as this, the possibility persists of catastrophic damage from the surface. Biological, chemical, and radiological hazards abound, as well as barbarity and lawlessness.” The pictures showed ominous black and white images of two raiders standing over a corpse, an emaciated pony foaming at the mouth, a brahmin, and a hellhound crouched and ready to pounce. “We encourage everypony to keep to the skies, safe in our Enclave. Thank you.” Dusk said the last line verbatim under her breath, perfectly in chorus with the green mare.

Most of the ponies in the café who had been listening returned to their conversations or watching the hoofball match, but a few looked concerned or angry. I noticed there’d been no mention of alicorns, Raptors lost, casualties, Red Eye, or LittlePip. I supposed that the Enclave would have liked to cover it up entirely, but when a balefire bomb went off, some ponies were likely to notice.

Then a pink mare approached our table. “Excuse me. I . . . I was just wondering . . . my husband was on the *Wind Cutter*. He said he’d contact me a week ago, but I haven’t heard from him. Do you know . . .” the mare trailed off as she gazed in equal hope and nervousness at Twister.

Twister looked at Boomer a moment, then back at the mare. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t say.”

“Oh . . . I . . . I’m sorry. I just thought . . .” She sniffed and averted her head. “Excuse me.”

When she’d left the café, I said, “That was one that was lost at Maripony, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was,” Twister said, her lips in a firm frown. “I had some friends on that ship too. Good ponies.” She sighed and shook her head. “Damned Stable Dweller.”

“LittlePip didn’t know,” I said immediately, getting some more looks. Hopefully the patrons would think ventriloquism was a unicorn trait. “If she had, I know she would’ve done something different.” Actually, I didn’t know. Maybe LittlePip would have found another way. But she’d killed hundreds, maybe thousands, of hellhounds with that bomb . . . maybe she would have blown it anyway.

Twister sighed. “I’m not saying she did. But that’s hard to swallow, stacked up against friends I’ll never see again.”

Glory trotted back to the table. "We've got to go."

Dusk sighed, "For the love of clear skies, just go. The armor takes care of it. Trust me."

"Not that!" Glory hissed. "I overheard the waiter putting a call in to security."

"Not all at once!" I said as we all started to rise in unison. "P-21, Scotch, Twister, you go first and meet us back at that park with the rainbow waterfall thingy. Rampage, Boomer, you go next. Take your time. Glory, Boo, Dusk, and I will head out last. Give us five minutes. Moonshadow, go pay the bill." I rattled off at once.

"Why me?" Moonshadow frowned.

"Because of all of us you're the only pony not a fugitive, from an enemy faction, or from the surface," I replied as softly and seriously as I could manage. "And if anypony asks, you can blame it all on Dusk."

"Gee, thanks," Dusk said dryly as P-21 and Scotch Tape followed Twister towards the door while Moonshadow trotted to the counter to pay the bill.

"Hey, I'd take the blame, but I don't think Thunderhead knows about me yet," I replied.

"I'd say they do," Glory said in a faint voice as she stared up at the television screen.

A flashy, bold animation done in brilliant colors was starting, and I froze in bewilderment as I stared at an animated copy of myself blasting away raiders... or were they mutants... with a shotgun and a maniacal grin. Next to me was an annoyed-looking LittlePip. A cocky Calamity flew overhead while P-21, far more sulkily handsome than ever, blasted a whole battalion of feral ghouls with a missile launcher, then coolly blew his bangs out of his face. And where'd he get that bandana? A vapid Homage and gray-coated Glory hung in the background. Most incomprehensible of all was a strange pink filly with a toy gun that somehow brought down beams of light from the skies. Rampage seemed cast as a villain, wearing bladed armor and grinning psychotically. The animation ended with the bold title of 'Wastelander!' and that it was coming next month to the 'Fantasy Channel'.

"They made me into a cartoon," I muttered in a daze. "They... who... how... buh..." I sat down hard. I had nothing... My life had officially become *entertainment*.

Unfortunately, I was so entranced by the surrealism of seeing a cartoon of myself that I missed the waitress walking behind me with two trays of food on her extended

wings. Being invisible, it was easy to forgive her for walking right into me and dumping a half dozen bowls of steaming noodles all over me.

Really, I'd been hurt by worse, but I made a sudden discovery: zebra stealth cloaks don't work when soaked in broth and coated in wiggly noodles. The waitress gaped at me, every bit as stunned as I'd been second ago. She took in my metallic limbs and plates fused to my hide and had a completely rational reaction to a cybermare appearing out of thin air: she screamed at the top of her lungs as she backed away as rapidly as possible.

And then everything went mad.

The crowd tried rushing out at the same time that blue uniformed pegasi were trying to get in. I looked at Glory and Boomer. "Get out of here. I'll find you later." I held up my foreleg with my PipBuck.

"Right!" Rampage said as she glanced at the scrum at the door, then at the wall. "Mmm. That wall doesn't look all that structural."

"Got it," Boomer said as he pointed his beam rifle at it. The tips glowed bright red as the weapons let out a hum of charging up. "But it might tak—"

Rampage charged across the floor and slammed her hooves into the wall again and again in a fury that tore the wall to pieces. The white surface disintegrated into fog, and she trotted back to Boo and casually hefted her onto her back. "What? They're *clouds*," she said scornfully, then trotted out again.

"Wallop my withers. Are all earth pony mares like that?" Boomer asked, then shook his head hard. "Nevermind. See you later," he said as he trotted out. I saw Dusk and Moonshadow by the exit, the latter making a good enough show of panic that they didn't notice the former ducking her head in pain.

That just left. . . "I'm not leaving without you," Glory said firmly.

"Yes, you are," I contradicted. From the laying-back of her ears, I knew I was in some pretty big trouble. "Glory, they just freaked out because they saw a cyber unicorn. How will they react when they realize there's a Rainbow Dash in Thunderhead?" I grabbed her and kissed her firmly on the lips to forestall any argument. I could hear very authoritative shouts outside. Why did it feel like Mare Do Well's 24 hour leniency was suddenly a lot shorter? "Don't worry about me."

"Worry about you? I'm worried about Thunderhead! Bad things happen when you're on your own, Blackjack!" she said as she smiled, then hugged me. "I am worried about you."

“Hey!” I said as I levitated off the cloak and wrung it out in the vain hope that that would fix it. “Things were way too quiet anyway. You go meet up with the others and talk to Doctor Whatshisname. I’ll keep everyone busy.”

“Try not to blow up my home by accident. Please,” Glory said before giving me one last parting hug and rushing out the hole Rampage had ripped open. I put my guns away. These were security ponies, just like back in Stable 99. I wasn’t going to shoot them... but I was going to make them *earn* their noodles today.

I burst out the front door and beheld the one skywagon and the half dozen officers around it. They stared at me. I grinned at them... and then things rapidly went downhill from there as I pounced into the midst of them like a cybernetically-augmented jungle cat. I ducked my head under a mare who was yelling something about me surrendering right before I rolled her across my back and launched her up into the air with a buck of my rump. She smashed into an airborne blue stallion, and they both went tumbling to the ground in a heap of clouds.

“Catch me if you can!” I yelled as I raced in a direction away from my friends. I’d have to hide someplace till I got the cloak working again. I didn’t dare lead them towards Glory’s home or the university... so I travelled in the general direction of ‘away’! Only Glory could have been more conspicuous than an augmented unicorn. I raced along the street, yelling, “Clear the way! Excuse me! Coming through! Madmare on the loose!”

I raced through a sidewalk café, lifting tables, chairs, and pegasi above me and dropping them down as I rushed past. Of course, that didn’t do much for ponies who could fly, but still. It was attention on me. I dove into a shop and tore out the other side trailing a half-dozen garments. Really, polka dots? Those had to have gone out of style two centuries ago.

“Halt right there!” a burly red stallion shouted as he landed right in my path. Unfortunately for him, he may have been larger than me, but he was nowhere near as dense; I ploughed right over him like a train through a fog bank. “Or... continue. That’s good too,” he groaned behind me.

“Sorry!” I bellowed back at him as I jumped over a table and the startled ponies eating lunch. Oh yes, it seemed like I had quite shaken things up. A half-dozen police dived at me from every corner. I could have killed one, made a hole, and evaded... but if I was going to start down that road, I doubted I’d kill just one.

“We got you!” a mare shouted as I closed my eyes and concentrated. Come on horn, you can do... apparently it couldn’t, as the six ponies piled on me from every

side. I focused. Pushed as I was driven to the ground under the mound of ponies. I think more were piling on top of them! Even a cyberpony has her limits.

Then a flash as I made fifty feet. I staggered back and forth, double vision dancing in my sight. I looked back at the very un-thrilled faces of the Enclave security. From the black on my horn, no, I wasn't going to be teleporting again soon. I hoped I had enough resiliency to keep my telekinesis. From the grim expressions on the law enforcement ponies' faces, I was going to need it.

Unfortunately, things were getting crowded. There were a lot of civilians along this street. I spotted a skywagon lifting off and rushed to it, leaping into the back. Again, small inconvenience to ponies who could fly, but it was getting me away from where I might accidentally maim somepony. The mare pulling it looked back at me, her eyes wide and not quite believing what was on her wagon. "Give me a lift?" I asked with a grin, gesturing upwards with a hoof.

She screamed and rolled upside down, dumping myself and half the wares in the wagon onto the streets below. I grabbed an unrolling bolt of brilliant red cloth in my teeth, forehooves, and magic, and the fabric suddenly went taut and slowed my decent. I soared over the crowds, many whom were gaping and whooping in amazement. The blue uniformed security ponies, however, had had quite enough. They flew over the top of my improvised parachute, hooked it, and lifted. The cloth jerked me up, and I hung there until they set me down in a plaza of some sort. They'd gotten beam guns, too... that wasn't good. They might not kill me with those, but it was way too crowded to risk bystanders.

"I give up!" I said as I dropped to the clouds. "You got me. I surrender." When my horn was rested up, I'd teleport out of custody, meet up with Glory, and...

Then the crowd erupted in cheers, and a white stallion with a silver mane and a spectrum burst for a cutie mark pushed his way forward. His eyes were hidden by opaque black glasses. "That was magnificent! Exactly how BJ would do it, Babe." He put a hoof around my shoulder and waved to the crowd. "But you weren't supposed to start the publicity stunts until next week!" I noticed he had a fancy-looking PipBuck on the waving hoof.

"Huh?" the security ponies around me said, too baffled to notice that I said the same thing as well. One covered her face. "Don't tell me that this is *another* one of your damned publicity stunts, Chicanery."

"Hey hey hey! I'd say this was a good stunt. A damned good stunt. Maybe a little premature. Gonna be hard to top it before the release." He turned to the crowd, who

were now quite amused by my madcap charge through town. “You want to see the same or better? Tune in to ‘Wastelander!’ next month! Guaranteed to blow your mind!” He gripped me a little firmer around the shoulders and subvocalized, “Wave to your audience, Blackjack.” I gave a sickly little smile and waved.

“Damn it,” the mare who spoke earlier swore under her breath. “You’re lucky this was just a spectacle, Chicanery. If one pony reports so much as a bent feather or a bruised hoof from this, I’m going to fine you so hard you’ll never work in this town again!” She turned to the others. “Come on. False alarm.” She lifted off and pointed one last time at the white pegasus. “This is going to be reported, though! Don’t think it isn’t!”

“Report away, as long as you watch!” he replied gaily, then turned to me. “Come on. Let’s get my actress out of sight, Babe! That was stupendous!”

I went along as far as getting out of sight of the officers before I just looked at him flatly. “Who are you?”

Spectrum Studios had been a movie production house before the war and had seen no reason to stop when the world ended. The office was filled with canisters of film, slides, and dozens of movie posters. Many of the most carefully preserved were from before the war. “Good thing we’re in Thunderhead. Neighvarro would have destroyed them. They don’t even like admitting that there *is* a ground unless it’s to remind us that we’ll die if we get within sniffing distance,” he said as he took off his glasses and trotted over to a sofa, flopping down and grinning at me. “Wow. Blackjack. I mean. . . wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“You can say how you know things about me?” I replied, happy that he’d gotten me out of trouble but really wanting answers.

“Right! Good question, that.” He rose to his hooves. “I’ve been a huge fan of the ground. I mean. . . I’d never go there myself. I’d last all of five minutes down there. Look at me. Glory’s tougher than I am,” he said with that dazzling smile. “Would you like something to drink? Snacks? I got berries.”

I’d ignore the saliva responding to that statement. “I’d like to know how a pegasus who never goes to the surface knows about me. You called me by my name, not Security.” And he’d mentioned Glory.

He sighed and then ran his hoof through his elegant mane. “Well. I suppose I owe

you that much. I mean, I'm planning to release a whole Life of the Lightbringer in a year or two." He lifted his hoof and tapped the PipBuck. "It's because of these."

"Come again?" I frowned.

"PipBucks are wonders of technology. Storage and processing aside, they're constantly taking in and putting out signals. That's how they work. Say you pick up some junk. . . well, the PipBuck might not know what it is, so it asks another terminal. And if that one doesn't know, then it'll ask another and another. And in almost an instant, it'll identify that thing. Then it might average out trading prices to tell you, in general, how much it's worth! Astonishing!" he said with an eager grin.

"Where'd you get yours?" I asked, nodding at his navy blue broadcaster. It made his smile waver a little, but a second later the grin returned.

"Heirloom. But it's not what made me able to follow your adventures," he said as he stood, trotted to a wall, and lifted down a poster to reveal a safe. When he opened it, he pushed the stuff inside to the sides and then pushed a button in the back. The wall behind me gave a click, and he closed the safe and trotted to another poster... and behind that was a hidden panel. "I know, you might think me paranoid, but when you see this. . ." He pushed the panel in and slid it into the wall. Then, carefully cradling it with his wings, he withdrew and presented to me a silver helmet. It had all kinds of lightbulbs, talismans, and wires coming off it. "This is the Perceptitron."

"Your own invention?" I asked with an awkward smile. It was the most ridiculous looking gadget I'd ever seen. It had a little fan whirling at the temple!

"Hardly! This was developed by Stable-Tec and the Ministry of Awesome for use in the S.P.P." He turned it so I could see the winged thunderbolt on the front. "I think this was a prototype. I found it in a lab in the Tower when I was a kid. Took me years to get it to work right."

"And how *does* it work?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at it.

"It allows the wearer to spy on the experiences of a pony wearing a PipBuck," he said grandly. "Wicked, huh?"

"It. . . what?" I asked, somewhat stunned and a little baffled. And he'd been using it to spy on me?

"Well, there're limits. They have to be in range of the MASEBS towers, and cracking the encryption takes forever. Some PipBucks have only vision and others give me nasty feedback. I've only been able to do it with a dozen or so ponies. But when DJ-PON3 started talking about all of you heroes down there, I had to see for myself."

He was so enthusiastic that I didn't know if I should be impressed or beating him soundly about the head and shoulders. Maybe both. "It took me four days to access the Stable Dweller. Three days for yours."

"And what have you seen?" I asked archly.

He caught my tone and coughed awkwardly as he looked down at the helmet, "Only bits and pieces. It's only good for fifteen or twenty minutes before it starts overheating. But I saw you in Hightower fighting that ghoul. And when you faced those Harbingers at the sandpit. And a few other things. Nothing intimate. . . intentionally. I have some standards," he said with a slightly nervous smile and got himself out of a thumping.

"Intentionally?" I asked, arching a brow and watching him sweat.

"Well. . . I just happened to jump in while the Stable Dweller was with a pony named Homage? Wow. . . just. . . wow. . ." he said with a sheepish grin. "But nothing I'd ever put in film! Probably. Most likely."

"Uh-huh," I replied dryly as I surveyed the studio. "And you used this Perceptitron thing to look at the Wasteland?"

"For the last two or three years," he nodded and walked to the studio window. "For a while, I was completely baffled. Every report the Enclave gave us was either a gross exaggeration or blatant turd rain. But when I realized that they were lies, I couldn't exactly call them on it. If they found my Perceptitron, then they'd take it and destroy it. And me with it." Then he gestured to the studio. "But I could use what I saw to make films about the Wasteland."

"Come again?" I asked with a frown. "Wouldn't they ban those too?"

"If they were documentaries, sure. Faster than you can say 'redaction', Babe." He grinned even more. "But all my films are 'fiction', and so long as I show lots of horrible raider ponies and brown on the surface, the Enclave doesn't mind. A few might question how I get so accurate, but I'm seen every day up here, so they can't accuse me of breaking quarantine." He wore a smile ear to ear at his own cleverness. "But I can show more than just horribleness. I can show struggle. I can show heroism that's not out of a propaganda piece. I can give them a taste of what's down there." He polished his hoof on his chest. "Doesn't hurt that my films have made me a lot of money, too."

For some reason, I found myself scowling at him. Something about his eagerness and smugness rubbed me the wrong way. "A taste? Which? How about my friend

getting his face melted off by a ghoul? Or my other friend sacrificing her existence so her kind might have a chance? Or my love's mother almost killing her father right before her eyes?" I caught his flinch. "Oh, you saw that one, did you? Did you see the aftermath where she tried desperately to save his life, or was that not fun?"

He held up his hooves. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like life down there is fun." His grin was gone, and he lowered the glasses to look at me in the eye. "It's just that life up here is... it's like everypony is asleep! It's the same pro-war yet isolationist stories every day, every year. It's not living. You live more down below in one day than someponies their entire lives up here."

"Chicanery, be glad it's boring. Because if the Wasteland ever made it up here, you'd wish for boring. You'd *crave* boring," I said as I stared at the device, then at him. "You know about Glory?"

He gave a wary smile. "Oh yeah. The Rainbow Dash thing? Far out. But too far out, I can't use it. No pony would believe it."

"Can I use your machine thing to make sure she's okay?" I asked with a frown.

He licked his lips, frowning in thought. "If you got her PBT, we can try, Babe." 'PBT', I realised, was 'PipBuck Tag'. He put the heavy helmet on top of my head and started attaching wires to a cloud terminal. As he worked, he went on and on about this S.P.P., a massive weather control device. I'd heard snippets before, but to hear about a system that let one pony control all the weather across the Wasteland was a bit overwhelming. Chicanery talked eagerly and enthusiastically about it, seeing it from the perspective of a young stallion in love with stories.

Me? I'd seen what secret super-projects could do. I added dealing with the S.P.P. somewhere on my list of things to do before the world ended. "Why would Rainbow Dash want it, though?"

"Well, Stable-Tec had the machinery to put a pony's mind in a machine. Wicked cool, huh Babe?" I thought of Horse's knockoff and merely grunted. "Well, RD wasn't interested in that. So she got some stasis thingy and made an interface for the S.P.P. She was supposed to be able to see all across the country and control the weather though it. This works the same way, but it accesses the sensory info going in and out of a PipBuck."

He knew me, so I assumed it worked. "I just want to check on her," I said as sent the tag info to the terminal.

"Sure Babe. Hold on. It's going to be a crazy ride." There were a few beeps, and the

world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

This wasn't a wild ride. I'd done this before; a whole lot before. It was the same sensation I had in the dozens of memory orbs I'd been in. The difference was, instead of being from years or centuries ago, this was live. It also wasn't a perfect experience: the colors were all shifted a little towards the red, and there was a persistent feedback noise in my left ear.

It was also the first time I appreciated what it meant to be Rainbow Dash in her prime. This body practically thrummed with strength. I wanted to fly, and I wasn't even a pegasus. The power armor she wore moved like a second mechanical skin that I felt very familiar with as well. Glory was in some kind of official-looking building; the walls were that particular pale beige that spoke of serious ponies in serious suits having serious meetings and nodding seriously at the choice of a serious paint color and the serious number of forms needed to implement it.

"I'm telling you, that alert shouldn't have been called off. Blackjack running like mad should have brought in a wing of Intelligence ponies at least," Dusk said irritably as she limped along. "If it had been a publicity stunt, they should have hauled in Chicancery by his balls and taken them as a fine."

"Chicanery does this all the time," Moonshadow said calmly from in front of us. "You remember that griffin he dressed up as Gilda for 'The Last Stand of Rainbow Dash'? Nearly caused a panic, but you have to admit that he sold tickets. Him getting a tower unicorn to pull off a pony from his next series isn't unthinkable."

"He'd be a star in Neighvarro for his own execution," Twister said from somewhere behind Glory. "I think there's a standing warrant for his arrest."

"Well, this isn't Neighvarro," Moonshadow said sourly. "We actually have rights in Thunderhead."

"I just hope Blackjack is okay," Glory said.

They walked into a reception area where a green stallion with large wire-framed glasses greeted them with an eager smile. "Sweet, Professor Moony! Did the college finally spring for some unicorns to fix those talismans?"

"Something like that," Moonshadow said with a glance at Glory. "Could you find out if Doctor Morningstar can speak with me a moment, Beryl? It's urgent."

"About the signal?" he said as he picked up a phone.

"No. But it's really important," Moonshadow said as she walked through a door and into a room with a dozen terminals scattered around strange equipment. Some of it looked vaguely familiar; I thought I'd seen things like it in Professor Zodiac's planetarium. The machines all hummed quietly and made strange beeps. Two stallions on the far side of the room waved at their entry before returning to their work.

Glory looked back at Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape as the blue stallion said, "What signal?"

"The hundred-thousand bit question," she said with a sigh. "It's something the Tower picked up a few weeks ago, being transmitted from space." Rampage and Scotch Tape immediately perked up, but Moonshadow went on, "Don't get your hopes up for ponies with antennae. There's lots of defunct equipment up there. Even some really big weapon satellites are still in orbit."

"Of course there are," Rampage drawled sarcastically. "They ran out of places on the surface to put guns, so why not put more of them in space?"

"Relax. There were only a few put up there, and only one of them has ever fired. It would take a genius to figure that one out," Moonshadow said, then added, "Besides, what makes you think all of them are ours?" The three earth ponies looked quite uneasy at that little tidbit, as was I, but Moonshadow continued as if it were no matter at all for an astronomer, "This signal, though, wasn't some old communication lodged in a buffer and finally kicked out. This was a machine message seeking something called EC-1101." The gray mare sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, after a month of analysis, we still don't have a clue what this EC-1101 thing is."

"Blackjack's PipBuck program?" Glory asked, and Moonshadow froze.

"You know what it is?" Moonshadow asked archly. When Glory nodded, Moonshadow rubbed her temples. "Four weeks of driving ourselves nuts trying to figure it out, and you just know." She took a seat and picked up a clipboard with her wings. "Out with it." And she picked up a pencil in her mouth.

"Well, I don't know exactly, but according to Blackjack it's a special program that Luna put out when the bombs fell. It basically passes leadership of Equestria to whoever has the program. It's a megaspell of some kind and you can use it to take over any system that's been locked down," Glory said, and Moonshadow wrote it all down.

“Interesting,” Moonshadow said with a frown when she’d finished and set the board aside. “Near as I can tell, there’s at least five people trying to send a signal back to space to talk to it. Even a communication or spy satellite would be a huge asset today.”

“Five?” P-21 said with the exact same worry I felt.

“We’ve been trying to talk to it,” she said as she gestured to the equipment with a wing. “We’ve been using our transmitter, but it’s ignoring us. I picked up the Enclave’s Starwatcher transmitter on Pinnacle Peak, so Neighvarro’s trying to chat with it as well.”

“I thought they scrapped that,” Dusk said to Twister and Boomer.

“Heck if I know. PP is a red zone. We’re not allowed in,” Boomer said, then grinned at Scotch and Rampage. “They’re always looking for unidentified flying objects.”

“The last three are... strange. Two are coming from the core, but one of them is gigasparks stronger. I almost couldn’t pick out the second signal. The stronger signal, though, is a doozy.” She stretched over with a wing and tapped a terminal. “Where is it...” she muttered under her breath.

Then the scream began, only instead of hearing it inside my head I was hearing it with my ears. One long, continuous garbled screaming noise. Even though the volume wasn’t loud, it still unnerved everypony. Moonshadow grinned, “Pretty creepy, huh? It’s machine speak. I can’t even pick through a hundredth of the junk to find out what it’s actually saying.” Moonshadow killed it, but I could remember it.

I’d heard it before. I heard it all the time down in the tunnels. The scream of Elevation. That it was a signal too was even more unnerving. It was like speech that melted flesh.

“What about the last one?” Scotch Tape asked. “That’s only four.”

“Last one?” Moonshadow blinked at the filly in confusion, then her eyes widened. “Right. I always seem to forget about that signal. It’s coming from Black Pony Mountain.” She announced it, and immediately I felt a strange indifference fall over me. It wasn’t important. That was just a boring chunk of black rock. Nothing special about it at all. And clearly everypony agreed.

The door opened, and Beryl poked his head in. “Professor? Doctor Morningstar says he’ll be between test strings in an hour. That’s your best chance to talk to him.”

I wanted to listen more, but the feedback whine was growing unbearable. “Hey,

Chicanery. Unplug me from this, will you?" I said aloud; at least I hope I did. "Chicanery?" I hoped I wasn't going to have to do a manual override and break the damned thing. Then the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

I let out a sigh of relief as I returned to my own body. "Thanks. That was... interesting." I pushed the helmet off my head and turned to the terminal.

"Oh, it's just starting to get interesting," a stallion said, a stallion who shouldn't be here. He smiled his kind, polite smile. The same smile he'd worn when he'd ordered Glory's cutie mark burned off.

Lighthooves.

"I saved Glory's life," Lighthooves said in a rush moments before I slipped into S.A.T.S. It had the effect of tossing a wrench into delicate, whirring machinery. I hissed like ruptured steam pipe as I looked at him; he wore some fancy new white power armor. Something about it seemed... familiar. I couldn't see any weapons, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. Four magical bullets to the head and my job here would be made so much simpler. All I had to do was kill an unarmed pony. I tried to dig deep down, find my inner Rampage, and take his head off. Ten seconds later, he still had his head. The armored stallion relaxed noticeably. "Glad you see you still honor a debt."

"Leger?" Chicanery said from the door. "Oh. You're here. I thought I heard your voice." The white pegasus looked from Lighthooves to myself and arched a brow. "You two know each other?"

"Indeed we do, Cannery," Lighthooves said as he trotted over to a cupboard and opened it with a metal-covered wing, fished around with two pinions, and extracted a bottle. "Here. I think Blackjack will be needing this. I think her headache is only just beginning."

"You know him?" I demanded of Chicanery. "Do you know what kind of a monster he is?"

That took some of the amusement off the director's lips. "Well, I didn't have much choice in the matter. He's my brother," Chicanery said with an amused smile, then turned to Lighthooves. "Nice armor. What brings you from the Tower, Leger?"

"Wait!" I snapped, interrupting him. "Brother? Leger?"

"It's short for 'Legerdemain'. A fancy griffin term for 'sleight of hand'. Or claw, as the

case may be.” He chuckled and opened the bottle for me before setting on the desk beside the Perceptitron. “You don’t think I took my code name for the illumination of my feet, did you?”

“Brothers?” I asked, frowning from one to the other and really wishing Glory was here. “I didn’t think ponies who didn’t exist had family.”

Lighthooves laughed, “Oh, please. Any good intelligence agency has operatives off the books. The good ones don’t get caught and the bad ones never had anything to do with the intelligence agency in the first place.” He smirked at me. “For the most part, I’ve never had to deal with witnesses. Your group is the only exception I’ve made.” He turned to Chicanery. “I came because of a bizarre report I heard that you were using a unicorn look-alike for Security. When I heard it, I simply had to check for myself.”

“When I saw her tearing through the market, I knew she was the real deal,” Chicanery said with a grin. “I was right.”

“Indeed you were,” Lighthooves replied with a calm smile. “And I think that Blackjack might be just the thing I need for the coming conflict with Neighvarro.”

“Wait!” I waved my hooves at him. “Stop right there! You think I’m going to work for you?”

“Why not?” Lighthooves replied, having the gall to appear surprised at my rejection.

“Because you’re the bad guy!” I shouted, exasperated that I couldn’t just kill him. “You made Glory a Dashite, almost got her sister to kill her, and you’ve got all the parts you need for a biological attack that could kill thousands!”

“I apologize. When we first met, I honestly didn’t expect you or your friends to be as effective as you were. My actions with Glory were to stymie the Volunteer Corps. That failed. When you destroyed the Celestia... well... your potential increased exponentially.” He leaned towards me. “I saw you at Yellow River. I know what you’re capable of.”

I growled at him. “You were the one that flew away.” He nodded once. I turned to Chicanery, “Do you know what he’s done?”

“Babe, I don’t want to know and he doesn’t tell me,” Chicanery said with a firm shake of his head. “Leger has always done what needed to be done. I don’t know what his history with you is, but I know it’s for a good cause.” But the white stallion looked worried as he looked at his brother, as if searching for confirmation.

"All I've done is to try to prevent an attack on our home," he said calmly. "My methods you might not agree with, but I think that you should agree with my aims. Thunderhead must take over leadership of the Enclave."

"The Enclave is coming to break your wings and shove those missiles up your ass. I saw what they're bringing against you," I warned.

"They'll fail. The zebra missiles are more than capable of evading their patchy, ill-maintained tracking systems. One demonstration should make that abundantly clear," Lighthooves said confidently. "The missiles will be a deterrent, not a weapon. They'll make the Enclave back off, and time will make certain that they fail. Thunderhead will make new weapons with the resources of the Hoof, and as their Raptors fall to pieces, we'll take our place leading both the Grand Pegasus Enclave and the surface."

"And if they do attack anyway?" I asked sharply.

"Shadowbolt Tower has defensive weapons," Lighthooves replied, but his smug smile vanished.

"But you're not certain they can deal with what's coming, are you?" I asked, then looked at Chicanery. "When the Enclave and Thunderhead had your first conflict, how many Raptors did they send?"

"Four," Chicanery replied.

"They're sending ten," I replied.

"Ten?!" gaped Chicanery, before turning to a grim-faced Lighthooves. "Leger, that's almost a quarter of the entire fleet!"

"We have other weapons," Lighthooves replied, his smile returning. "We fought four raptors to a standstill last time they came. They won't risk it."

"Have you met Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost?" I asked, "Trust me, they'll risk it. It won't matter how shiny and new your power armor is. They want to risk it. Harbinger was going to attack you anyway despite your weapon."

Chicanery took off his glasses, his red eyes pleading with his brother. "Leger!"

"Quiet," Lighthooves replied as he turned away. "The situation is being managed."

"By who?" I asked as I trotted back in front of him. He glared at me, and I pressed the question. "Who's calling the shots here? Is it you? Somepony above you?" I asked with a frown. "This all feels... off. The whole plan feels like it either wasn't

thought through, or somepony is mucking with things. This bioweapon deterrent isn't the real deal, is it?"

"You don't know what's going on, Blackjack," he muttered, turning away again.

"Story of my life!" I said, levitating him up and turning him around to face me again.

"So why don't you tell me?"

"Why don't you tell me too, Leger? It'll make for a great story," Chicanery said with concern. "We grew up in the Tower. It was our home. So if there's something going on there, I want to know too."

"Blackjack, if I tell you, will you promise... on your life... on Glory's life... to help us in the fight with Neighvarro?" he asked.

"Will you give up all your biological weapons?" I countered.

"No. I can't," he said with a fatalistic smile.

"Then you know I can't," I replied.

"Legerdemain, what's going on?" Chicanery said in a horrified tone. "Tell me!" Lighthooves still didn't answer. "Damn it, stop trying to be the smug pony in the room and tell me what you're planning to do!"

Lighthooves whirled on him. "You like stories? Once upon a time, there was a pony who loved his home very much. But his home was threatened by idiots who were jealous of their plenty. And for years they've threatened, insulted, and derided that pony's home and everypony living there. And that pony decided he would do anything to stop them. But the idiots only respond to threats and force, so he would create a threat. A real one."

"But... Leger... that's crazy," Chicancery replied.

"No. It's sane. It's the only thing they respond to. The Enclave leadership knows that they don't have the resources to control the populace, fight Thunderhead, and deal with an outbreak of a deadly pandemic. They'll negotiate," he said grimly. "And they'll ask for the pony responsible."

"You," I said. "You're setting yourself up as a villain to take a fall for Thunderhead."

"But I am not an idiot. If the Enclave has the audacity, the stupidity, to attack my home, then I have made certain that they will suffer for it," he replied grimly. "I will see a dozen of them eating and tearing each other apart for every one of my people they harm. And that is why I can't give the weapons over to you."

Right. I needed to pull the plug on this nightmare right away. Either Councilor Stargazer or that Agent Stratus would need to rein him in. Somepony couldn't have had all the facts here, or else they were even crazier than Lighthooves. "Does the Councilor know about this plan?"

He sniffed. "The Councilor would wet herself if she heard of it. She'll be informed by certain important ponies when the Enclave arrives." I thought the Councilor needed to know about it well before then. Like right now. The urgency of getting in touch with her was definitely growing greater by the second.

"But ten Raptors," Chicanery breathed. "That's a scary amount of firepower, Leger."

"We will manage it. Blackjack herself gave us the weapons we need," he replied. Wait, what?

"What weapons?" I asked with a scowl. But he gave that insufferably smug smile. I grabbed him with my magic and hefted him up, slamming him against the wall of the office. "What weapons!"

Then he reminded me that his hindlegs were metal and my pelvis, while slightly reinforced, still had plenty of nerve endings. The impact of his leg sent me down and curled up fetally on the ground. He stomped hard on my prone body, smashing me into the cloud layer. I lifted my head to blow his damned face off, like I should have when I first saw him, but got a faceful of steel hoof that made all kinds of stars erupt in my sight. "Stop it, Leger! You're going to kill her!"

"Yes, that's the general idea," he said as he stomped my skull once again. "She's far too dangerous to be left as an unknown." I blocked another kick with my forehooves, but my EFS was sending all kinds of warnings that my head really couldn't take more of this damage. Lighthooves hovered over me though, his hooves falling with sharp, nearly surgical blows. If I covered my face, he smashed my stomach. If I curled up, he smashed my spine. If I looked at him to get a magic bullet off, he beat in my skull. And he was fast! I'd never fought him before, and I was learning that he moved like a dancer. Each motion was cool, clean, and efficient.

Calmly and deliberately, he was beating me to death.

"Stop it!" Chicanery shouted as he tried to tackle his brother, but Lighthooves struck him neatly in the side and sent his brother to the ground, coughing and gagging for breath.

I used the break and levitated out my dueling pistols and fired blindly, but he darted to the side and kicked me with his rear hooves, sending me rolling across the floor

of the office. "Contrary to what you might think, brother, the real world doesn't align itself neatly into heroes and villains," he said as he pulled out a beam pistol with his tail. "Some of us must perform the necessary evils in order to make sure that good prevails," he said calmly, not taking his eyes off me as I struggled to focus enough to strike back. Given that I was seeing two of him swirling in my vision, that wasn't a good sign. "Goodbye, Blackjack. A pity we couldn't work together." Then he tossed the beam gun into the air, caught it with his mouth, and pointed it right at my head.

And I couldn't cast a spell to save my life...

But I could end one.

With a thought, a basic counterspell targeting myself, I scattered the magic that allowed me to walk on clouds and gravity took me. My last sight of Lighthooves was his eyes widening in shock and a flash of crimson before I disappeared into the the white fluffiness. A second later I tumbled through the room beneath his office. And the room after that, missing a mare by feet. I barely heard her shout before I passed through the floor. I focused all my energy on restoring my cloudwalking spell. Clouds were fluffy, right? And the magic wouldn't magically trap me between floors like Mini stuck in a wall.

Right?

A tiny purple unicorn and blue pegasus in my head looked at each other and simply shrugged.

Now I really wanted to start screaming as I passed out the floor and into a reception area where a half dozen pegasi gaped at me in horror and confusion. I really, really wanted to get this spell off. I wasn't the best at magic, but I was Twilight's descendant and I'd really shown a lot of improvement in casting, hadn't I? It was just a cloudwalking spell! Just imagine happy clouds on your hooves! Happy clouds! I clenched my eyes closed, trying to push out the magic! I could do this! I could—

My horn gave an anemic little spark as I whooshed through the floor.

"Damn it!" I shouted as I fell out the bottom of the building and into open air. I saw the building that had housed Chicanery's studio hanging like icicles above me, and growing rapidly smaller. Now, I was too scared to scream, or maybe I was screaming and I just couldn't hear it over the wind rushing in my ears. I tumbled end over end, seeing the buildings far below coming closer and closer.

And presuming I didn't hit metal in the floors of those buildings, I doubted the ground would be all that accommodating! There wasn't anything I could do. I wasn't imag-

ining happy clouds. I was imagining cyberpony painted across the wasteland a mile down.

“We got you!” a mare shouted. “Stop swinging your hooves! Go limp!”

I forced my eyes open to see four pegasi flying around me. It took all my effort to do so. I had to trust they were here to help. If they wanted me dead, they could have simply let me fall. One by one, they took my hooves in their own and arrested my tumble and then slowed my decent. As we approached the bottom of Thunderhead, I glanced up; I couldn’t even tell which of the hanging buildings had been Chicancery’s studio.

As we approached an open plaza, I said, “Wait! I need a second to cast my cloud-walking spell.” For once, I was glad my body was mechanical. I’d likely be hyperventilating if it were all flesh and bone. It took me several tries to get it right, but the pegasi were patiently supporting me till the clouds were able to.

“That was a rough fall,” the mare who’d grabbed me said calmly as she supported my left while I tried to get the spell going again. “Are you okay?”

I pushed a hoof down and the cloud finally, obediently, supported my weight. “I am much more okay than I would have been in a minute or two,” I said to them. “Thanks for catching me.”

“No problem. It’s what ponies do, right?” she replied, with such open honesty that I couldn’t help myself. I hugged her. This was how the world was supposed to be... and it was nice to see it as normal for a change.

“Ugh, you sure you’re okay?” she asked in clear concern. She was now taking in my horn and my cybernetic legs. “Are you an actress?”

“I... yes. Yes I am,” I said simply. The truth was simply too far off to believe.

“Oh,” she looked at my legs. “That’s an amazing costume. Those legs look like they’re really made out of metal.”

I gave a sheepish laugh. “Yeah. Really amazing costume. Took me forever to get into it, and sometimes I feel like I’ll never get it off again. But I need to get to the university. Can you take me there?” Plus, I really didn’t want Lighthooves to follow me down and continue the fight. Not even the Legate had hit me so precisely or quickly.

She looked at the other three and then back to me. “You’re sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

"I'm sure. The sooner we get to the university, the better," I said as I glanced up, feeling like any second a white-armored pony could swoop down and finish me. What was the weapon he'd mentioned? Had he found Folly? That might be good for one Raptor. Or was it something else? Ugh, head trauma did not help with the thinkiness!

I still had my sword, the cloak, Vigilance, and an assault carbine in my saddlebags, but I didn't know where Duty and Sacrifice had fallen to. Were they still up in Chiccanery's office, resting on a floor or rooftop somewhere, or lying far below on the Wasteland? I also had Penance packed up in its case in my magical saddlebags. I'm sure Lancer would have had it out and sent a bullet straight through Lighthooves, but that wasn't my style.

Next time I saw Lighthooves, though, I was definitely going to shoot first. Maybe a little maiming would slow him down? Ugh. I needed to discover a middle ground fighting style between good-natured punching bag and Reaper psycho.

Skyshine, the mare that helped me get to the university, seemed to know something was amiss. While I drew stares, Skyshine intercepted them with an explanation of me being an actress... but I suspected that she had other ideas. "So, are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? Or the police? Or check in with the Tower?" the teal mare with a gray-and-aquamarine-striped mane asked for the sixth time. "Cause I had a friend and her coltfriend got pretty rough on her. I'm just saying there's nothing wrong with going to the authorities if you need help and—"

"I'm fine," I groaned as we approached one of the six large central pillar buildings.

She rolled her eyes. "I know! I know you're fine. It's just she said she was fine too. But I mean when he hits you once you know he's going to do it again and—"

I stopped, took her by the shoulders, and stared right into her blue eyes. "Skyshine... I'm not an actress. I'm a surfer who's come up here in order to stop a battle between Neighvarro and the Enclave. This isn't a costume. I'm a cybernetically augmented unicorn. I was beaten to a pulp by a secret agent who possesses a biological weapon that could kill tens of thousands. Okay? I was not beaten by my coltfriend. I'm gay, anyway. All right? That is what is going on." A little inaccurate, but I'd had a rough day.

She blinked at me, then tapped her hooves. "Really?"

“Yes. Really,” I said with a sigh of relief and waited for the freak out or the accusations of me being crazy.

“So... your *marefriend* beat you up? Because most mares I know would find some other way to get at their very special somepony.” I just stared at her. Really? Did she really just go there? Then she brightened. “Unless you are into that, which I am totally okay with. I once had a colt who liked me to bite his flanks, and while it was weird, I mean, the things we do for love, right?” she asked me with a wide grin. I felt an eyelid twitch.

I stared at her a second and then turned on my hoof and trotted for the door. “Take care of yourself, Blacksnack! And tell her to take it easy next time. Or get help!” she yelled after me.

Thank you for saving my life, but... sheesh.

Inside, four uniformed pegasus stallions stared at me. Lies, the truth, and everything inbetween all rolled up in a huge ball inside me and I sat down hard. “Look. Call Professor Moonshadow and let her know that Blackjack is here for her meeting with Doctor Morningstar. I’ll take a seat.” And I trotted over to a couch and sat down with a huff. At this point, I was seriously considering Glory’s ‘get arrested and questioned’ plan. It seemed better than my plan that wasn’t my plan. The four watched me and made a call, talking in low voices.

I sighed, imagining one enormous train roaring down a track, a second enormous train racing down the same track in the other direction, and a tiny Security and her friends in the middle when the two trains collided and went splat. All I could hope was that the Councilor could throw a switch and prevent the two from ramming into each other at full speed. And perhaps most annoying of all was how each train wanted me to be on its side.

“Blackjack?” Moonshadow said from down the hall. I sighed and slipped off the chair, walking past the four and imparting on them a little of the surreality that was my day. The indigo-maned mare looked at me in concern as I walked to her and the elevator. “Are you okay?”

“That is the wrong question to ask Blackjack,” I said as I walked past her and into the elevator. “Blackjack doesn’t understand the word ‘okay’ anymore.” My third person talking was making her face grow even more worried, so I went on, “I’m okay. I was just given a reminder that there’s a whole world of messed up stuff coming and I’m in the middle of it.”

"I can imagine," she said with a small smile.

Could she? "About that signal you're getting. From up there?" I saw the sympathetic smile replaced by sheer bafflement. "Yeah. That's how my life's been lately. Anyway, you say you're getting a signal. And it's asking for EC-1101? Does it mention the words 'Horizons' or 'Project Horizons?'"

Now Moonshadow looked positively spooked. "But... how could you know that?"

"Magic," I replied, which didn't put her at ease at all as she pushed a button. "You talked about weapon satellites. Could this signal asking for EC-1101 be one?"

"How... but... I..." she stammered as the elevator started to rise. "I suppose it could. We don't have an exact count of everything up there. The official record is far less than what we've counted by eye."

"How big are these weapon satellites?" I asked with a small frown. "How powerful?"

The smart pony question settled her a little. "Well, there's no official record of how many or how powerful. That's all been lost. Neighvarro claims they're all either defunct, failures, scrap, or under their control depending on which pony you ask, but we did record one firing a while ago. The beams were ten teraspark beams. That's strong enough to cut through a Raptor, or a dragon. Ruffled quite a few feathers."

I grunted, scowling. "That doesn't seem big enough," I muttered.

"Not big enough?" She seemed disturbed. "Bigger than that falls into the balefire bomb or megaspell range. I suppose there could be something like that in orbit, but I'd like to think we'd spot something big enough to do that." I supposed that that made sense. The megaspell chambers beneath Hoofington had been huge.

The doors pinged and opened. 'Arcane Biotechnology' was written in bright pink on one of the sterile white walls. "Come on. Doctor Morningstar is waiting."

I walked along, gazing into windows and expecting to see... things. Monsters in cages or strange bubbling chemicals. Instead, the rooms behind appeared more like Moonshadow's lab: lots of terminals and lab equipment. I guessed only secret projects were allowed to actually look cool.

The doors opened for us, and we walke—

Blue tendrils of Killing Joke lunged at my face! Out came Vigilance and up went S.A.T.S. before I realized that the slithering blue vines had slammed up against a clear glass barrier. A large glass jar full of Joke sat in the middle of a lab that was far closer to what I'd been expecting. In one pen was a snarling wooden canine. A

brahmin sat indolently in a pen, one head chewing while the other one spoke with a researcher in a white labcoat. The most disturbing specimen was a green sac... thing... that was spitting black sludge against the glass.

“Blackjack,” Glory said from the corner of the room. I looked around for the others, but only Glory was present. Given that she’d removed her helmet, I’d missed that revelation. The pony she stood with wasn’t quite what I’d have expected of a doctor. In my experience, most doctors wore glasses, were generally anal retentive, and didn’t last long outside of a lab.

Doctor Morningstar looked rather like he wasn’t all there. He was yellow with a wild white mane and tail which, having not decided on a particular direction to grow, grew in every direction all at once. This was exacerbated by an equally tangled beard which seemed just as animated on his face as the Killing Joke in the bottle. His thick glasses magnified to the point where it looked like he was staring at me through two pools of water.

“Doctor. This...” Glory began as I approached.

“At tat tat tat!” he said rapidly as he started to circle me. “Do not disturb my observations! It is very important not to form a biased impression of the subject!” He walked around me several times as Glory sighed impatiently, tapping a hoof. “Unicorn. Mare. Interesting. Showing signs of dermal trauma and restoration hinting at magical regeneration. Cybernetically augmented with a clear focus towards combat capability. Eyes and limbs are completely replaced. The rest of the body shows signs of thorough reinforcement. Hmmm.” He stopped scratched his chin. “Hmmm... are you...” he leaned in, lifted his glasses, and blinked his owl-like eyes. “...Security?”

“...Yes?” I replied slowly, not quite sure after his examination, like he might have found something that suggested I wasn’t.

“Yes, you match the advertisement perfectly!” the doctor crowed. “Wastelanders! And that LittlePip! Ooooh, she can fix my toaster any day.” He then blinked. “No. Really. She can. Darn thing has been broken forever!”

“Doctor,” Glory sighed, covering her face. “That’s not why we’re—”

“You must forgive Morning Glory. Always in a rush,” he said as he trotted towards the jar holding the Killing Joke. “And look what it’s done. Turned her into Rainbow Dash. Tsk tsk tsk. If she would have stayed in the lab she never would have turned into Rainbow Dash. Likely exposure to the Killing Joke would have given her an egg for a head. Yes? Egg head?” He laughed at his own joke and shook his head.

"But she is always hurrying. Hurrying to change the world. Hurrying to get results. Science must be patient."

With my augmented hearing, I heard Glory grumble, "I'll patient you upside your head, you patronizing old fuddyduddy."

"I saw you observing several of the specimens we've collected from the surface. Fascinating samples. Truly fascinating. The potential of this arcane plant in particular is amazing." He trotted over to a table and with a wing lifted a vial filled with rainbow liquid. "For instance, the fluids we've extracted could be used in a variety of treatments, and perhaps even aid in the manufacturing of arcane goods!"

I'd seen it before. It was Flux, the sort of thing that turned a pony's bones to jelly. "Unless it can turn me back to normal, you should toss it out the nearest window. Over the ocean." Glory growled, then frowned. "Actually, you should probably burn it. Who knows where that stuff can thrive?"

"Ack, Glory. You sound like Neighvarro!" He tisked again. "How can we use it? Destroy it if we can't. Phoewy! Do you know what we might do with this?"

"Turn you into a Thunderhead Rumbler's cheerfilly?" Glory suggested.

"Oh, that would be fascinating!" the Doctor said immediately, grinning in his brushy beard, making Glory groan once more. "But no. We could use it to replicate spells normally cast by unicorns. Perhaps even spell effects by other creatures. This substance is infinitely flexible." And he eyed Glory a moment before adding smugly, "And our dealing with it has lead us to explore ways of ending its effects."

"You mean a cure?" Glory asked, clearly stunned.

"Indeed." He trotted through a door and into a second lab room. This had fewer specimens and more lab equipment. There were also quite a few books on tables and stands. Many appeared quite old. "When we encountered that particular plant, I recalled a book I'd studied when I was a disobedient, angry graduate student chafing under my superior's brilliance." He grinned at Glory once more, and she growled at him again. He looked at the shelves and selected a green book. "Here! 'Supernaturals'."

"Is it a magic book?" I asked eagerly.

"Unicorns. You think everything is associated with magic," he snorted scornfully. I began to understand Glory's annoyance. He flipped open the book. "No! 'Natural remedies and cure-alls that are simply super.' Natural! Not magic. And there is a plant in here with strange metamorphic properties that I believe may be related

to the Killing Joke called 'poison joke'. Perhaps exposure to radiation triggered a mutation. Perhaps zebra shamans intentionally changed the plant. Who can say?" Then he looked at Glory and grinned. "But..."

Glory sighed and said as if by rote, "But if the cure worked on the weaker version, then it may work on the stronger version."

He patted her on the head. "Good grad student."

I stepped between them before Glory could snap his hoof off. After all, she needed that cure. "And you have all the things for this cure?"

"I do," he said, then nodded primly, walked over to a counter, and lifted a beaker with his wings. "I was wishing to try this out. I was going to use a researcher who was exposed to the Killing Joke and became sexually irresistible, but he has told me that so long as he is not mobbed he is not opposed to the effects."

Glory frowned and then gasped. "Wait. It wasn't Breakwind, was it?" The doctor nodded once and Glory giggled and blushed, covering her mouth.

"What? I'm missing the joke?" I asked as I looked at her.

"He was... shall we say... overweight and homely?" Moonshadow said calmly. "He also used to say a phrase when things went wrong... which they often did. What was it, again?"

"What? 'Fuck me?'" I suggested. Moonshadow rolled her eyes and Glory fought her laughter. Okay. I could see Killing Joke pulling that one. "And now he's sexually irresistible to everypony?"

The doctor sighed, "Not my first encounter with a stallion, but he was such a baby about it. Hardly scientific at all. If he'd simply relaxed..." the Doctor tisked and shook his head. "Well, he's in quarantine now and much more satisfied with his nurses." I felt a shooty impulse... but it wasn't like the Doctor had planned it. He passed the beaker to Glory. "Now, what do you say?" He grinned once more.

She bristled a moment, then sighed. "I will keep a log of all my experiences, follow protocol, and keep consistent data points so that my work can be replicated later," she said in the slow drawl of a student repeating a rote.

The doctor began to lecture her on how the contents of that beaker were supposed to be topically applied, but I wasn't paying attention. A sample in the back had caught my attention. It was a strange golden tree, not very large at all. The leafless growth sat in the back corner, but I'd seen it before. "Where did you get this?" I

asked.

"I did not get it. It is a biomagical construct of some kind, retrieved from the surface. I haven't had much time to study it. The blue one is far more exciting!" I wasn't really listening though as I trotted out and retrieved the vial of flux. Walking to the tree, I saw that it was really a cutting; a broken-off limb planted in some dirt to help it grow. When I floated the vial over to the tree and let one drop of the rainbow substance fall on its bark, the entire limb quivered. The yellow bark took on a brighter glow, and the tree seemed to sprout new roots to dig into the soil. The doctor approached. "Fascinating," he breathed.

I pulled out my sword and pricked my shoulder. Then I flicked the drop of blood on to the bark, where it instantly was sucked inside. A few more drops of Flux, and I saw the telltale swell of a bulb at the end of one of the drooping limbs. The milky sack didn't get much larger than a hoof before it quivered and split open... dropping out something spherical and white. I caught it. An eye with a bright red iris looked back at me.

My eye.

"Extraordinary," the doctor breathed. He put his hooves around me and hugged me to him. "My dear, you may have opened up entire new fields of science! This is a breakthrough on par with the wing to thrust ratio!"

"Thank you," I replied evenly, then glanced at Glory, who was staring in awe. From the expression on her face, she was clearly torn by recent events. "Now, perhaps you could help me?"

"Anything!" he replied. "Those two were jabbering on about some political thing. I really wasn't paying too much attention. What was it you needed?" Both Glory and Moonshadow bristled at the infuriating stallion.

"I need to meet with Councilor Stargazer. Urgently. It's an emergency," I said in slow tones.

"Yes, yes, yes. Very well. I'll get to it. Eventually," he said as he looked at the limb of the Project Chimera replicating tree with longing.

I levitated him up and turned him to face me. "Now. Please," I added.

Who said I couldn't be diplomatic?

The doctor had put in the message and I hadn't let him go until he'd gotten a reply confirming she'd meet with me as soon as possible at Glory's. Only then did I let him go back to toying with things best left unpoked or prodded. Still, he had a point. Perhaps Killing Joke could be used for something good. Maybe the Blank tree would lead to new breakthroughs that would help ponies. It was nice to imagine science producing helpful things rather than monsters and weapons of war.

We returned to Glory's residence. The cloak might not have been working, but the simple cloth hid my augments well enough that I was just another unicorn in the middle of our group. The ponies of Thunderhead went on about their lives in blissful happiness. They talked and ate and played and enjoyed so many things that I was both in awe and saddened. I remembered the party we'd thrown for Scotch Tape when she'd gotten her cutie mark. Or the concert I'd played in with Priest, Medley, and Lacunae in Star House what felt like ages ago. Just a few miles down, life was so fleeting and precious that any joy was treasured. These ponies took it for granted.

And yet, why shouldn't they? They'd escaped the carnage of the last days. They had their plenty through their tower. Why shouldn't life be good for somepony in this world? They'd even, perhaps grudgingly, acknowledged that their plenty should be used to help others. They weren't bad ponies; I knew that Lighthooves had to be an exception rather than a rule. They were just privileged and sheltered.

Back at Glory's house, they ate a meal that was marginally better than the others; I had a cyberpony cake. Boomer, Scotch Tape, Lambent, and Lucent all played some kind of electronic game involving shooting ponies for fun. Scotch Tape just gave me an almost pitying look when I peeked in. P-21 and Twister talked in serious tones about what the Enclave would do when they arrived. Glory took a bubble bath in the name of science.

Me, I wasn't feeling like having fun. I found a window that faced out from the outer wall of the Thunderhead torus at the setting sun. The clouds were arranged in rings around the Tower, rising from that dark eye in the middle. If that was natural, I'd eat my horn. I could almost make out the flickering green glow, despite the brilliant red and gold painting the skies as the sun set. Boo curled up with me. She'd been quite happy when her horn'd been removed. On the way back, I'd gotten her some 'raspberries' by taking them off the dealer – who'd he report me to? – and her white muzzle was smeared with purple as she dozed on a cushion beside me.

One benefit of synthetic eyes was that I could stare out at the sun all I wanted. It moved around the planet without its Goddess. Maybe it always had. Maybe it

always would. It would be easy to simply dismiss the question and stop asking. Before leaving 99, I wouldn't have even thought of it. I would have simply accepted things and that I couldn't change them.

"Can I change this?" I asked nopony in particular.

"I think so," rasped a familiar voice. I turned to the side around and spotted the Dealer there, also staring at the sun. I supposed that being a mental-projected-soul-image-spell-thing gave similar sun-staring abilities. The Dealer seemed tired, but he smiled. "I missed that sight," he said as he looked at me. "Spending centuries in a computer as a spell makes you miss the little things."

"How are you doing?" I asked as I sat up a little bit.

His smile faded. "Just tired. Souls can get that way, I suppose." He closed his eyes. "So, are you doubting yourself again?"

"No," I said, then smiled a little. "Okay. A little bit. It's just... between Lighthooves and the Enclave... I don't know. It feels like just before the Celestia, you know? Trying to stop a war. Only this fight is so much bigger. The stakes are so much higher."

His grim lips curled slightly as he tugged down his hat. "So that's it. Folks are doomed. Game over. Might as well pack up."

"No," I said with a snort, and he lifted his head to meet my gaze with a smile. "Just because it's impossible doesn't mean that I can't do it. I just have to find a way."

"And you will. I believe in you, Blackjack. You're like your great great grandfather. Big Macintosh never let anything stop him if he thought it was the right thing to do," he said, but then his smile faded a touch.

"Even though it got him killed?" I asked, and he nodded. I sighed and looked at the red orb sliding slowly below the horizon. "I guess we'll see if we have that in common. I will stop Lighthooves. And I will save Thunderhead. Somehow."

He nodded, and we sat together, Boo snoozing on my thigh, watching as the golden light dwindled away.

"Honestly, Blackjack, you take forever," Boo said as she trotted beside me. I answered with assorted slobbering noises as I masticated a wad of assorted greenery I'd snatched out of the kitchen. "And you eat like a pig!" she added. Finishing chew-

ing, I replied in the most sublime way I could: swallowing and belching loudly. She flinched back and waved a hoof in front of her face. “Ewwww!”

“It’s a tough world out there, little sis,” I said with a grin. “Full of belches, farts, and other unspeakable things. Maybe some day, when you can handle it, I’ll tell you where little ponies come from.”

“I know that!” Boo said as her cheeks blushed furiously. “Not all of us slept through health class.”

“Oh. I know you know,” I said, my smile stretching even more. “But there’s health class, and then there’s what’s really involved.” I watched her go from pink to scarlet and gave her a hug, laughing. “Honestly, Boo, there’s worse ponies than me.”

“Death from above!” roared a mare, landing on my back and driving me into the ground. Rampage laughed, wrestling me into a hooflock. “A royal guard getting ambushed? Celestia would be very disappointed!”

“Uncle! Uncle!” I cried, slapping a hoof against the ground as the striped mare bent my body farther than it ever should go.

“I’m not yer uncle!” Rampage roared from atop my back.

“Hey, Coach,” Boo said with a smile.

“Hey Boo-ger,” Rampage replied as she sat on my back and twisted my hind leg between hers. “Is BJ here giving you trouble?”

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it! I swear!” I wailed.

“Well, she was,” Boo said with an arch smile. “But I think she’s learned her lesson.”

“See? And you said I’d never be a good teacher,” Rampage said as she released me. I wasn’t exactly certain being a coach was the same thing as being a teacher, but there was no doubt she loved working with little kids.

“Are you this rough with your students?” I asked with a huff, getting up and making sure she hadn’t broken anything.

“Well, that’s the thing, Blackjack,” she said as she put a hoof around my neck and pulled me close. “See, I’m exactly as rough with them as I need to be... and I know their weak spots.” Then, with no hesitation, she stuck her tongue in my ear.

“Gyaaaahhh!” I flailed back once more, felled by a lick. “Honestly, Rampage, that’s gross!”

“Do the words ‘Pot’ and ‘Kettle’ mean anything to you, Blackjack?” Boo said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. Together, we shared a good laugh.

A movement on the bed woke me. Not a Glory movement; she always slept like a rock. She’d given herself the bath treatment and had checked herself like clockwork for the change to end. Personally, I didn’t think that something called Killing Joke would be reversed by a bubble bath, but I’d been wrong before. The *Fleur* was silent, not even creaking tonight. I felt the movement on the bottom of the bed and saw Boo’s pale, almost luminous eyes looking back at me. Her ears folded back as she trembled.

Boo scared... I pulled Vigilance from its holster and my sword from its sheath, then reached over and shook Glory. “Hey. I think something’s wrong.”

She didn’t wake. I could see her breathing, but unless this was a side effect not mentioned in the book, this was bad. I rose to my feet and carefully walked to the next cabin. P-21 and Scotch Tape slept soundly. Too soundly. They didn’t wake when I knocked or when I shook them.

I went to the next room, “Rampage? Rampage!” The striped mare gave an extra loud snore, muttered, and then rolled over. I glanced at the scared Boo and carefully walked from the ship into the manor. The beautiful mosaics were cold and washed out, the colors seeming to bleed together in an incoherent mass. I knocked on Twister’s door, then Boomer’s. In a chair was one of the servants. All asleep.

A laugh, distant and haunting, sounded in my ears. I couldn’t tell the direction, though. I couldn’t see anything...

Then I smelled blood. After Roseluck farms, I’d never mistake that coppery reek.

I switched on my E.F.S. immediately and saw a single red bar. I didn’t have to go there to find the source of the sanguine scent, though. Lying in the foyer were two still bodies, one propping the door open. Outside were two more bodies, these decapitated. The blood was pooling around them, running down the fine marble steps. More blood smeared along the wall and floor, as if something had been dragged. I walked to the slain ponies. All well-dressed and armed. Only one had her beam pistol out of its holster, the weapon split in two. Their blood-soaked clothes looked professional and formerly clean. I searched them and found an I.D.

‘Frost Feather, Councilor Security.’

No. We weren't meeting with the Councilor till the morning. Why would she send ponies here in the middle of the night? I looked at the trail of blood leading further into the house, towards that red bar, and pressed my lips together. Step by step, I followed the gore. It lead straight to the library. How had I not heard these ponies being killed? Not a yell for help? A single scream?

I stopped at the door and glanced at Boo again. The silence all around me was deafening... no. Not silent. Not completely...

I could hear faint screams from within. A scream I hadn't heard in person since I'd come to the clouds. "Stay here, Boo," I said... or I meant to say. My lips moved, but not a sound emerged. I blinked and knocked my hoof into the wall. Silence.

The door to the library wasn't completely closed. Another security pony, quartered, kept it from closing. Carefully, I pushed the door open. Instantly, a pony sized mass came hurling straight at me. I raised the sword and my hooves to deflect it, but the throw did little but splatter me. Gross, but I'd had worse.

I raised my gaze up in the direction the heaved body had come from. There, on the desk, sitting oddly upright, was a pegasus washed in slaughter. The scream in my head matched the green glow coming from her eyes as she stared with a mad grin on her face. "Welcome to my house, Blackjack," Dawn said calmly, "Can I get you a drink?" Cradled in her lap was the severed head of the mare that I'd hoped against hope would be able to stop this train wreck. Blood-soaked but still recognizable as the mare Lacunae and I had seen in that meeting. Councilor Stargazer.

The Wasteland had come to Thunderhead.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Well, I'm glad I could get this out before heading down to Vegas for good. I really want to thank folks for their help right now. I was really stressing out with all the expenses of getting moved and set up. Akhmetov, Donovan, Janne, Stepan, Ryan, Chris, and Martin; thank you. Your help really got me out of a jam. I appreciate every last bit I get. Till I get a teaching job, I'm subbing. One missed day is bad.

Something that's been suggested to me is to write a story in serial similar to what I've been doing in Horizons. Apparently that's becoming more of a thing and I could publish it on Amazon. We'll see. I need to get Horizons finished. I hope that Thunderhead will post the link be finished in 1-2 chapters, the core in 2-3, and the story in 5. Then done... hard to imagine. But if I do get an original work going, I'll be sure to let folks know. It won't have ponies, but it will be all my IP.

Anyway, huge thanks to Hinds and Bro for helping me fix this up to make it decent to read. Trust

me. If it weren't for them... well... it'd be ugly. I hope next chapter will have Hidden too. Thanks to Kkat, as always, for creating FoE. I hope that she gets to read chapter 34 and 35 and get a laugh out of it. And last but certainly not least, thank you everyone for reading, giving me the feedback and encouragement to keep going, and the generous tips to deal with all the real life crap thrown at me recently.

Thanks.)

61. Action, Reaction

“You saved my reputation with Princess Celestia, and more importantly, you saved Ponyville! ...Or not.”

There have been times in which I’ve reacted with excessive violence. Moments where, due to fatigue or overskilled opponents, I engaged in no-holds-barred combat to destroy my enemies. I used to look back at those times with mixed feelings, tinges of shame. They were the times I let the Wasteland win, where the power of slaughter was used instead of harmony. I tried to find another way. A better way.

This time, I didn’t even blink. As the Councilor’s still-warm blood splashed across my head and face, I stared into Dawn’s luminous green eyes, opened a door in my head, and invited the Wasteland in for tea. And while it was here, would it mind helping me massacre Glory’s mother? Oh, why certainly, Blackjack. Anything for a friend.

I lapsed into S.A.T.S. as Dawn dove to the side, the magic only turning her streak into a slow creep instead of a freeze, a sign of just how fast she moved. I targeted her head and queued four magic bullets, lunging to the side as they fired to keep her in view around the cover she was trying to dive behind. The white bolts of energy streaked towards her, but the two that struck her gray, synthetic, hexagonal hide did little damage. When S.A.T.S. released me from its weird mathemagical grip, I opened fire with twelve-millimeter armor piercing rounds.

She didn’t make hitting her easy; she leapt onto the wall and started running along it as casually as a pegasus hopping on a cloud. Nevertheless, I wheeled and blasted round after round from Vigilance in the absolute, eerie quiet. I didn’t take time to mourn the venerable texts that exploded in puffs of tattered paper under my bullets. I had only one goal: to stop Dawn before she killed again. I kept trying to turn and stay facing her, but she was just so damned fast!

My ears crackled a moment, and then, in the midst of the silence, I heard her synthesized voice. “You’re hardly being a gracious guest, Blackjack.” Maybe it was because the words distracted me or maybe she’d found a way to magically accelerate herself, but I was nearly taken by surprise when she launched herself off the wall and at me. Her Core-green-glowing wings snapped together an inch from my head as I rolled to the side. I couldn’t stop rolling to fire, though, as she swept a wing back, ripping great cloudy crescents into the floor just behind me.

I came to a rest against the wall, fortunately on my hooves. I voicelessly swore at her, demanding answers for why she was here and how she'd done this. But Dawn just laughed, her voice accompanied by shrill feedback in my ears. "Oh, I'm sorry, Blackjack. Too bad you don't have a transmitter in your speech center like I do." She lunged again, punching both wings right at me. "No one will hear you when you die!"

Her wings exploded through the wall behind me as I jumped up, hooked the shelves with my forelegs, then smashed both rear hooves into her manic grin. She reeled back, and I reloaded Vigilance with explosive rounds while flinging a barrage of texts at her to keep her occupied. Each book was shredded by her magically sharp wings before it hit. "I bet I know what you're wondering. . . why am I here? It wasn't hard. My Goddess, a *true* Goddess, knows all. And when the Councilor learned that there was a Neighvarro intelligence cell here wishing to defect to her and her alone, why, the silly little dear came with only a dozen ponies for security!"

A sweep of her wings cleared her of the last of the swirling paper and put her right in my sights. The round exploded near her face, and she fell back, protecting her head with those green-lined wings. I didn't let up, though, dropping back to the floor and keeping every shot at her face. I'd need the starmetal sword to really finish her off, but I could slow her down. Out came the carbine and, with a gun on either side, I unloaded a stream of metal and explosive shells.

But I could see her grin. "But I know more of what you're thinking. Why won't your friends wake? How could I have drugged them all in their sleep?" I hated to admit, those were some very pressing, and distracting, questions. "Well, you see, Blackjack, I had help." Who? How? She rammed forward, her enmeshed wings smashing me to the bookcases. The razor-sharp pinions rammed into the wall inches from my shoulders as she pressed her face into mine. "One of your friends has betrayed you."

She was fucking with me. That was the only explanation. It had to be the only explanation. When. . . how. . . why would any of my friends work with this monster? I pressed Vigilance into her temple, but before I could fire she ducked her head and wrapped her wire tail around the barrel, yanking it away and tossing it behind her. Around came the sword in an awkward, desperate stroke. Her wing pulled back and blocked it with almost casual ease. Green sparks flashed where one impossibly sharp edge met another.

"My Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans you are unworthy of," Dawn said with utter conviction. "She will realize I am right, in time. Especially when you are torn to pieces! / will save the Wasteland! Me!" Dawn screamed in my ears, then

pulled out her other wing and started to ram it forward.

Fortunately, I was descended from Twilight Sparkle. My horn flashed as the wing ripped through where I'd just been, tearing a rent clear through the wall as I disappeared and reappeared behind her. The four feet still felt like I'd teleported four miles from the ache in my horn as I fetched Vigilance and the carbine, but the move let me get hold of something that would help even more than the guns: her tail. My teeth bit down hard on a mouthful of wire and strange synthetic-tasting hair. Still, if it would stop her, I'd eat her.

I found myself immediately reconsidering my tactic as she lifted both herself and me into the air and, with a flap of razor wings, barreled right into the nearest wall. Now, I had a vague notion that certain clouds of certain densities were used for different things. Light and fluffy clouds for clothing, heavy dense clouds for building. My notion was confirmed as she slammed through and dragged me along for the ride. The effect was rather akin to getting strung through concrete. I could have simply cancelled the cloudwalking spell, but, aside from the sphincter-loosening sensation that that entailed, I had no difficulty imagining me falling in a nice ballistic arc only to be cut in half by the cybernetically enhanced flyer.

Hadn't I gotten pounded like this already today?

I bit through the wires, prompting a cybernetic shriek from the mare and an almighty buck that sent me rolling like a wrecking ball across the foyer. The blood spread liberally all over the ground didn't help matters much. I rose to my hooves, locked eyes with the furious mare, smiled, chewed, and swallowed. Not too bad, really. She dove upon me, but I lifted my forehooves and let her collide with an impact that sent us both barreling across the floor. My ears made a pop, like a soap bubble, and I heard her gasping for breath. No fair! Why'd she get to emulate life better than me?

"WE ARE NOT IMPRESSED!" a voice thundered in my ears. For a horrifying instant, I was certain that the Goddess had somehow survived Maripony or crawled her way out of some abomination hell just to dick with me even more. But then I saw that the words had made Dawn flinch. "DOST THOU NOT WISH TO SPARE THE LIVES OF THY YOUNGEST OFFSPRING FROM THE HORRORS TO COME? DOST THOU NOT DESIRE TO SAVE ALL FROM ABJECT MISERY? THOU MUST TRY HARDER! OR PERHAPS WE SHOULD RECONSIDER OUR CHOICE OF CHAMPION?"

"No!" Dawn gasped. "I can beat her! I can! I am worthy!" Dawn pled, legs wide and

wings drooping as if she were being crushed by the weight of that voice.

“WE REMAIN UNCONVINCED, DAWN. THY CONVICTION IS MEANINGLESS IF THOU CANNOT ENACT OUR WILL, AND, IF THOU CANNOT, PERHAPS ANOTHER SHALL,” the voice thundered, but it had a familiar snide tone I knew boded ill for me.

I almost pitied her. If things had been a little different, perhaps I would be the mechanical monster in thrall to a higher power manipulating me and pulling my strings. In a way, I had been. We were so much alike. . .

Wait, we were alike, weren't we? What happened to me when I got upset? I got reckless. And while my head was one vulnerable point, my main power supply wasn't in my head but smack dab where my heart used to be. I could hit that a lot easier than what amounted to a small orb easily covered by wings.

I immediately adopted the most obnoxious smirk possible. “Don't worry, Dawn. Just kick back. Leave saving the Wasteland to the real heroes,” I said with the cockiest grin I could. The shocked and enraged look that got was more than worth the pounding I'd taken. “Guess that silence trick's not working anymore, but then, few of your tricks do.”

That got her to charge, forehooves outstretched as she flew at me like an airborne battleship, but this time I was ready. I deflected her upwards with a raised foreleg as I crouched and pressed Vigilance to her chest. For the first time in our fight, the mare let out a real scream as the round penetrated her armored hide and exploded inside her, the detonation turning a chunk of her chest inside out as hoses and wires dangled, dripped, and sparked. Smoke poured out of her nostrils and mouth as she tumbled over me across the floor, landing in a heap. Of course, I doubted that she was finished. I wouldn't have been.

Still, for all her rage and crazy, I still wanted to help her. No pony should have things like that voice thundering in their mind. If I hadn't had Lacunae. . . “I know you want to save your children, Dawn. I do, too. Work with me,” I said sincerely as I approached, Vigilance and sword ready. “We can save Thunderhead, together.” We can save you, I added silently, hoping she'd take it, knowing she wouldn't.

“No!” Dawn shouted as she charged, spitting blood, something that was decidedly not blood, and smoke as she swept her wings like dozens of starmetal knives at me. “They had their chance. They could have listened to Striker and me. They could have done better. Instead, they rejected me! Now they get to learn what the surface is really like!” Her wings swung in turns like a metronome, but I kept waiting and

backing up, getting her rhythm. Then, when she pivoted from swinging one wing to the other, I buried another explosive bullet into her chest. This time she screamed fire.

I admit, I balked a moment at the sight, and she sprung, sweeping her wing downward towards me. I crashed to the side and brought the sword down upon her neck; the blade bit through her synthetic hide easily enough but stopped well short of decapitation. Clearly, she had starmetal in more than just her wings. Unfortunately, with my sword jammed in the back of her neck, I didn't have it to parry her razor pinions. The other wing swept around to the side and I tried to slow the strike with the assault carbine. The weapon was torn into a half dozen chunks of metal, the magazine exploding between us as the bullets within were cleaved, but it did give me the precious second I needed to get my body clear of the attack.

I pulled the sword free, levitating it before me. "You don't have to obey Cognitum. Let me help you cut her strings," I pled, giving ground. One wing curled in front of her chest, protecting her as the other waited for the perfect moment to strike. She was learning, too.

"You haven't seen her glory! Her wisdom! Her majesty!" Dawn coughed as she swung her wing, my sword deflecting it with emerald sparks. "She may think you a fitting champion, but I know better. You're nothing more than a self-serving fool."

Okay, the craziness here was starting to approach surreal levels. "She thinks I'd help her? She's been trying to kill me!"

"Steel Rain's opinion. And mine," she added, sparks dancing as our edges met and ground against one another. "But she's been watching you for—"

"ENOUGH," that voice growled. "STILL THY TONGUE AND PROVE THYSELF IF THOU WISH PROTECTION FOR THY PROGENY." Dawn shuddered from head to hoof, almost in the grip of an epileptic attack, then slumped.

"Yes, my Goddess," Dawn whispered. I could have killed her then, but her wretchedness stayed my wrath.

The voice wasn't finished, though. "AND THOU, SECURITY," it thundered, cold and cruel. Apparently, it had worked out that I could hear it. "WE SHALL HAVE THY FLESH, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. THOU HAST PASSED OUR CHALLENGES AND THWARTED OUR MINIONS. THOU SHOULD BE HONORED."

"I've seen one 'Goddess' die this week. I know the basics of goddess-slaying," I retorted.

“HOW DROLL. THEN REALIZE THIS, SECURITY. WE HOLD THE LIVES OF THUNDERHEAD AND THY FRIENDS IN OUR HOOVES. SUBMIT, AND WE SHALL SPARE THEM FROM THE ENCLAVE’S WRATH. DEFY, AND THOU SHALT SEE THEM BURN,” Cognitum roared in my ears.

But I saw the strings clearly now. “For a Goddess, you’re not very creative. You threaten Dawn’s children unless she serves you. You threaten innocent ponies unless I do.” I wished I could spit in her face. “You offer slavery and call it salvation. I’ve already had one Goddess in my head, thanks. I’m not getting another installed.”

“THEN PERISH. MINION, RETRIEVE WHAT WE REQUIRE. THEN THY CHILDREN SHALL BE SAVED,” Cognium demanded.

“Yes, my Goddess,” Dawn said in quiet submission, her smoldering eyes lighting once more. Two craters in her chest let out reeking sulfuric green clouds that occasionally crackled with emerald lightning.

Oh crap.

In a flash of razor-sharp obsidian, she was on me. Only luck and an already upraised sword saved me from her initial attack. Then I gave ground with every step, parrying each slash and stab of her wings with the star sword as I blocked her furious kicks and stomps with my forehooves. I couldn’t even think of how to go on the offensive; it was all I could do just to stay alive! I needed something, though; the emerald blades were making nicks in my hide and steel, and eventually she’d get something important and slow me down. I needed more.

I needed my friends.

Had one of them really betrayed the rest of us? No matter how inappropriate the moment, I couldn’t drive the question from my thoughts. But where I was distracted, Dawn was perfectly focused. I felt my own blood start to flow as her wingtips sliced into my neck. The music I felt in my chest made my wounds tingle and burn. “What would your children think if they saw you now?” I asked at the top of my lungs.

It was a flinch, the smallest hesitation in her eyes and motion. Then my magic bullet struck her right between her luminous green eyes and she screamed, falling back and covering her face with hooves and wings. I didn’t let her recover; now it was *my* turn to give a beating. I might not be able to damage the starmetal parts of her, but I figured that, if I hit her hard enough, something important had to break. I did all I could to hammer her with my hooves, smacking her back with every blow. I didn’t give her any space to dash away. Just a few more blows. Just a few more...

Her wings spread wide, throwing me off. “Enough! You cost me my husband and Morning Glory. You will not cost me any more!” she proclaimed as a gust of wind sent me sliding along the hall. I came to rest before the great, dark, stained-glass window. The synthetic hide covering her face had peeled away, flapping in tatters around the edges and revealing a sickeningly familiar amalgam of metal, bone, and tissue.

“Don’t make me kill you in your own house!” I begged. “Think of your children!”

I’d hoped she could still be reached and reasoned with, but in one powerful lunge she roared, “I AM!” and put everything she had into a final attack. If I’d stood there, she might have cut me in half. Instead, I reared up, hooked my hooves on hers, and fell backwards. Dawn’s eyes widened in shock as I rolled and she rose above me. Vigilance fired a third time into her sternum, the blast peppering me with blood and shrapnel, and then, as the roll completed, I kicked out as hard as I could with all four legs. With a scream, Dawn crashed through the stained glass window and flailed as she fell from view.

I flipped back onto my hooves, crouched there for a moment, and then slowly rose. I’d lived through bad stuff, but I wasn’t sure just how much she could take. For almost a minute, I stared at the hole into the sky, but I readied myself to leap if she came through the floor, or the ceiling, or the wall. The cuts she’d made weren’t regenerating as fast as they should; I was making a bloody mess just standing there with my sword and gun out.

From the foyer came shouts and yells, and then purple-uniformed pegasi stormed in through the front door. Dozens of magical beam weapons hummed as they pointed at me, the ones with mouths free shouting at me to drop my weapons and surrender. I turned slowly and their shouts trailed away to stunned silence as I locked eyes with them. One shot by them, one sneeze by me, and the manor would get a whole lot bloodier. I could hear the blood dripping off my sword in soft pats.

“That’s enough,” a stallion said from the front door. Slowly, a dark gray stallion approached. Stratus, from the Rainbow Dash Skyport, stared at me with an inscrutable expression. He glanced towards the library and pressed his lips together in clear anger before glaring at me once more.

“I don’t suppose saying I didn’t do it would mean anything, would it?” I asked in careful, low tones.

A round, apple-like device rolled under me. I barely caught a glimpse of blue before there was a flash of crackling magic and everything went dark.

When consciousness returned, I found myself in a tiny room. Being a security pony, I recognized a jail cell when I saw one. The walls were a meshing of metal and the darkest cloud I'd ever seen, and the steel cot and hard 'cloudcrete' toilet were a dead giveaway. The energy field across the door dashed any plan of chewing through bars to make my escape. For several minutes, I just lay there and let my nerve endings inform me how much Dawn's wings sucked. The Enervation damage was healing, but it was taking its sweet time.

Still, I couldn't lie there and do nothing. I opened my PipBuck, but the device had been tampered with. The only thing that appeared was an Enclave symbol and the notice 'Electronic Interface Lockout 4227', and no amount of banging or button mashing would make it work. Apprehension began to rise in me. I tried to teleport through the field and spent the next ten minutes lying on my back, my body spasming from the magical feedback.

A tiny, singed purple mare in my mind flipped through her notes and observed that teleportation through magical energy fields was hazardous to my health. The diagram of me plus a purple flash equalling a skull and crossbones made it fairly clear. I was just going to lay here and do nothing for a little bit, till the twitching wore off.

"Good. You're awake." Stratus's voice came in through a speaker in the ceiling, and I looked around. There, in the corner, was a reinforced camera. The black lens peered at me as I glowered up at it. "I must admit, when I heard that the surface terrorists had been located, I must say I'm surprised. I hadn't anticipated such a weak performance. I suppose I should thank you for sparing me the tedium of an evening filling in work-related death forms."

"Moonshadow—" I began, trying to haul myself to my hooves before a spasm sent me flopping over onto my opposite side.

"Please, don't try shielding them," Stratus cut me off abruptly. "The young twins may escape exile if you cooperate. The earth pony filly might be granted clemency as well. Moonshadow and Dusk will be held for treason and conspiring with the surface. The adult earth ponies' fates are unimportant. I anticipate that they will be executed along with the traitors, or given flying lessons. That leaves you and the Rainbow Dash clone."

I stared up at the camera as he went on, feeling cold as a corpse. My aches and pains were shoved away by cold rage. "You are a terrorist wanted by the Neighvarro

for your presence at the Maripony attack. I anticipate a great deal of goodwill from Neighvarro for handing you to them, but not nearly as much as from handing over the Rainbow Dash clone.”

Enough lying down. Even if I was damaged, I rose to hooves with a rush of adrenaline. “Don’t you dare!” I shouted, slamming the wall with a bang much like the ringing of a bell. “She’s not Rainbow Dash! She’s Morning Glory!”

“Oh, my mistake. We’ll be sure to try her with her siblings, then give her to Neighvarro for sentencing,” Stratus chuckled.

I stared at the camera and scowled. Something was off about this. “Why are you telling me this?” But there was no answer. Something was *very* off. “Why gloat? Why not just let me find out in sentencing?”

“I just wanted to thank you for all that you’ve done for me,” Stratus said in clear amusement. “Now, behave yourself. When the Neighvarro fleet arrives, this will all be wrapped up quite nicely.” I sat down hard on the uncomfortable metal bunk, staring straight ahead. My friends were all going to die, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Storm Chaser had given me a window to work out a settlement between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Stratus had found himself a shortcut by handing us over on a silver platter. But I still didn’t understand why the Councilor had been there. Why come in the middle of the night? If she’d wanted to arrest me, she could have sent others to fetch me to her. If she’d wanted to talk, she could have simply waited for our meeting in the morning.

“Is that you, Babe?” a familiar voice asked, not through the speaker but from underneath me. I lay down and found, in the gap between the bunk and floor, an air vent. I peeked back up at the camera, but really, I couldn’t stop him from watching if he was. If he wanted to send in ponies to stop me, that was fine with me.

“Chicanery?” I asked back, keeping my voice low. The screws on the vent cover were loose; I magically twisted them and pulled it aside, along with a wad of dust that made me sneeze. Inside, I spotted something I never would have expected inside the duct: a tiny, weakly-glowing memory orb. I extracted the dusty globe and peered through the duct at the vent opposite mine.

“The one and only. Looks like my producing career might be clipped along with my wings. Intelligence goons came for me ten minutes after you and Legerdmain left. Threw around the word ‘terrorist’ with every other sentence.” He sighed. “And I

really was looking forward to the 'Wastelander' premiere."

"Are any of my friends with you?" I asked, hoping to hear Glory or P-21 reply. I needed smart-pony help.

"Just the white earth pony. Blue, I think you called her," he replied.

I relaxed a little. "That's Boo."

"That's it. She was put in here an hour or so ago," Chicanery replied. "Not a very talkative cellmate, but she's a demon at tic tac toe."

"Right." I considered my PipBuck a moment. "You wouldn't happen to know how to lift an electronic interface lockout, would you?"

"Oh, my favorite malware," he drawled sarcastically. "The Enclave's way to lock down anypony discussing ideas like clearing the cloud cover or clandestine trips to the surface. If I had a terminal and a couple of days, maybe. That's more Leger's field."

Too bad. But, speak of the devil. . . "What happened to Lighthooves after I . . . left?" I asked. Falling screaming through the floor counted!

"He dove out of there shortly after you did. Just took the Perceptitron and told me to get to the Tower right away. Said I'd be safer there than anywhere." He sighed. "Of course I hadn't even had a chance to pack anything before Stratus's ponies stormed in and arrested me."

Wait. Either Status's special talent was perfect timing, or the stink in Thunderhead wasn't just down to interloping Wastelanders. "You say that Stratus was there as soon as Lighthooves left?"

"Yeah. Pinched me good," Chicanery said with a rueful chuckle. "If they'd been a minute quicker, they would have gotten both of us. So, what are you in for, Babe? Aside from terrorism, 'cause that's a given. Capital Trespassing?"

"They're blaming me for the murder of the Councilor," I muttered sullenly.

"What? Gazer's been killed?" Chicanery gasped.

"By a surfacer I know named Dawn. Stratus showed up right after I threw her out a window," I said, frowning. Again, the timing was good. Too good. If one of his security ponies had seen me fighting Dawn, could he have locked me up and handed over Glory? "With the Councilor dead, who takes over?"

"Aw, Babe, you're forcing me to remember government class? I slept through half

of that,” Chicanery whined, then sighed. “Okay. Let me think. If the Councilor dies, the Lieutenant Councilor takes over, but he resigned last week. Sex scandal. Three wives and six kids. Even for Thunderhead, that’s too much. There was supposed to be a special election next month to replace him.”

“So who is running Thunderhead *right now*?” I asked tensely, fearing I already knew the answer. It was the same person who always ran things when official ponies in power died.

“Internal Security? Intelligence? The judiciary? I don’t know. One of those three,” Chicanery replied. What did I want to bet that Stratus was the head of one of those agencies?

“What do you know about Stratus? Is he head of Enclave Intelligence?” That would be the icing on the cake.

Chicanery chuckled. “No. He’s like... director of Thunderhead Security. He’s a midlevel bureaucrat connected to Enclave Intelligence, so he’s one with a lot of pull I suppose. No, I don’t know who the head of Enclave Intelligence is. No pony does, except maybe the GPE leadership in Neighvarro. Probably some general or something.”

I sighed, shaking my head as I lay there next the vent. “So, what’s your story?”

“Me?” He sounded surprised.

“Does this vent connect to some other pony?” I asked with a sardonic smile.

“No. I’m just used to telling other ponies’ stories. Not my own.” He was silent a moment. “My mom is a unicorn. We were born in the Tower and grew up there. We explored every inch of that place. There were labs for all kinds of experiments and storage during the war. Lots of Ministry of Awesome stuff that I don’t think anypony ever realized was going on.” He sighed again. “When Lighthooves was old enough, he sailed right through the tests and joined the Enclave. Then he made me promise I wouldn’t join him.”

“He did?” I asked in surprise. “Why not? I thought he was devoted to it.”

“Didn’t want me getting hurt. He’s devoted to Thunderhead. But I think he hates Neighvarro for two centuries of lies and excuses. He said stagnation was our greatest enemy. He once calculated that if we’d ended the isolation policy fifty years after the bombs fell, we would have prevented almost a million deaths and hundreds of millions of bits wasted in rationing. He always thought of Neighvarro as a threat, and he was always talking about going down there and finding something to help

Thunderhead get its independence once and for all. A balefire bomb. A megaspell. Something.” A plague, I thought silently to myself.

“Do you think he’ll use it? That bioweapon?” I asked.

Chicanery was quiet for a long time. “Yes, he will. *How* is another story. I want to say he’d never actually fire it. . . but, honestly, I’m sure he would. Then he’d do some rationalizing about him not having any choice. But he might have some other plan in mind.” Chicanery sighed. “I hope he does.”

I hoped I could figure it out, too. “And you?”

He chuckled. “I was the younger brother, Babe. All the freedom in the world. Since service was out, I got creative. Made the usual films glorifying the Enclave and soldiers. Usual propaganda droppings. But when I got the Perceptitron working. . . damn. That was the best.”

Glad lives of bloody misery are so inspiring, I thought sarcastically. “Did Lighthooves know you did?” I asked, wondering how long he’d been able to spy on me.

“No,” he said with a sigh. “Not till recently, when I came out with ‘Wastelander’. I think he thought I was tapping into little flying robots. Someone down there is apparently infamous for that. He didn’t know I could access *you* till today.” So his brother hadn’t been watching me every second. I wondered if he was watching me now, though. Chicanery fell silent as I thought, then asked, “You’ve got a plan out of this, right? You’ve always got a plan?”

“I’ll let you know soon as I do,” I replied, trying not to share the pit inside me. As far as I knew, I was screwed every way I looked. Couldn’t teleport out. Couldn’t chew through the bars because there weren’t any. Without Lacunae, I didn’t have anypony I could plan through. I didn’t even have my figurines. All I had was a movie producer. I glanced at the dusty little ball. It’d probably been stuck in that vent for decades or more. “What the heck. Maybe I’ll get lucky,” I muttered as I climbed onto my hard steel bunk and levitated the memory orb above me. “Tell me there’s a secret passage out of this cell or something.”

Then I touched my horn to it and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Now this was a familiar sensation. It was the second time in the last twenty-four hours that I was in Rainbow Dash. This version, however, was different from her in her prime. Her body, while strong and fit, had dozens of niggling little aches in the joints. Still, it certainly didn’t slow her down as she trotted down a hospital corridor.

Through the windows outside, I saw the skyline of Manehattan. The nurses and other patients all had instant reactions when their eyes met Rainbow Dash, some grinning in delight and others scowling sullenly. She simply wasn't a mare you could ignore.

She approached a door where a mare and stallion in pink MoM uniforms stood attentively. The tall, thin unicorn mare and wide, beefy brown pegasus stallion both brightened when Dash approached them. "Pumpkin. Pound. How are my favorite set of twins?" Rainbow Dash asked, greeting the pegasus with a hoof bump that made the stallion smile a little more, even though the question caused some clear distress.

"We're... we're okay, Rainbow," he said, but their eyes went to the closed door.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "And how's Pinkie doing?"

"The doctors say she's stable... medically," the mare said, her blue eyes full of worry. "They pumped her stomach and used magic to detoxify her, but it was a lot of PTMs." The unicorn glanced at the stallion and chewed her bottom lip.

"Where's the rest of the pony gang?" Dash asked, looking around.

"She didn't want us to contact them. Only you," Pound replied. "Since she woke up... it's been bad. She won't let the doctors see her. She won't come out. She's been working all night, sending out messages, but none of them are to anypony important. Why would she suggest that an old groundskeeper invite an astropony and her kid over?"

Pumpkin nodded. "And she's made special orders, but none of them make any sense either. Like sending Braeburn a box of bobby pins? He's a stallion!" Her eyes swept up and down the hall, and her voice dropped. "I don't know how long we can keep this from Princess Luna."

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Just say she's got a nasty case of the pony pox," Dash replied. "I'll talk to the doctors. Make sure they don't make any public statements." Then she glowered. "Or did Scarface take care of that?"

"Goldenblood spoke with the hospital administration, yes," the pegasus said in a low voice, averting his brown eyes.

"Was he involved in this?" Rainbow Dash asked, pointing at the door with a wing.

"I..." Pound looked at his twin; she gave a small nod, and he continued. "We're not sure. We don't think so. He's the one who called the paramedics, but some of the

things she's said since she woke up. . .”

Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth. “I’m going to kill him.”

The door to the room cracked open, and a wide eye with a tiny pupil and thin blue ring stared out the gap. “Don’t be silly, Dashie. Come in! Quickly!”

The eye disappeared, and Rainbow Dash nodded at the pair before pushing the door open and stepping into the dark hospital room. Only the few slits of light penetrating the blinds offered any illumination, and when Rainbow Dash hit the light button with her wing several times, nothing happened. “Oh, this is familiar,” Rainbow Dash muttered to herself as she stared at the room. The bed and most of the medical equipment had been shoved in a corner. At one small table, a game board rested, half covered with chess pieces and half covered with checkers. A bag of flour with a pipe shoved in the middle sat in one chair, opposite a bucket of turnips with a derby hat on top. A shadow whisked by the corner of her eye.

One wall was covered with scribbles, circles, and arrows pointing from one to the other. They fanned out like an enormous spider web that stretched from wall to wall and in some places crept out onto the floor and ceiling. In the middle of the web were the six cutie marks of the ministry mares, circled, surrounding a seventh circle with a huge question mark in the middle. Other predominant landmarks in the web of concepts were ‘four stars’, ‘Military Endgame’, ‘Enclave’, ‘Maripony’, ‘Goddess’, and ‘EoS’ in bold letters. I felt my insides lurch as I read, ‘Littlepip’, ‘Blackjack’, ‘Zebra(?) filly(?)’ in that nest of connections. ‘Hugs for Murky’? What’s a Murky? A large pile of rocks rested in a stack like a plinth, a monocle perched near the apex. Somepony in the room made a noise that was a mix of the worst parts of a laugh and sob.

“Pinkie?” Rainbow Dash asked warily as she looked around. In the corner of the room, before a large heap of lint wearing a fancy hunting cap, were pictures, photos, and other odd collections of objects. I recognized all the ministry mares, the Princesses, Goldenblood, and other ponies from the time before the war. Clippings from newspapers were interspersed with them, some going all the way back to Nightmare Moon’s return to Ponyville. I saw an old piece of paper upon which was an ominous black alicorn, rearing and kicking the air, silhouetted by a massive, sheer, flat-topped crag. A crescent moon banner fluttered above her.

Then hooves grabbed Dash’s shoulders, and Pinkie Pie hissed in her ear, “I am not crazy! Do you understand? I. Am. Not. Crazy!” Her voice trembled with desperation.

When Rainbow’s gaze turned to her, I disagreed with that. The mare I saw looked

positively deranged. She was thin, huge shadows surrounding her eyes, and her trademark poofy hair hung in pink and white streaks over her face. Tiny pupils stared from bloodshot eyes. “Sure, Pinkie. Why don’t we step outside so we can see the doctor and. . .” Rainbow Dash began in those tones reserved for crazy ponies. Then tears welled up in Pinkie’s eyes, and she began to sob, burying her face in Rainbow Dash’s chest as her friend held her.

“You have to believe me, Dashie. You have to. Please. Everything. . . everything. . . depends on you believing in me,” she said as she trembled. “None of the others will. Only you. Please.”

Dash held her friend and patted her back awkwardly. “Okay. I believe you. You’re not crazy. But you just had an overdose on those PTMs,” Dash said, then her voice hardened. “Did Goldenblood try to do something to you?” Pinkie Pie shook at his name, and Dash hissed, “I’ll kill him.”

“Yes, he did, and no, you won’t,” Pinkie Pie said with a sniff as she rubbed her swollen eyes and looked away. When Dash turned away for the door, Pinkie pulled her back. “You can’t.”

“The hell I can’t!” Rainbow Dash retorted. “I can think of half a dozen ways to take him out on my own. A dozen more with my ministry.”

“If you tried, you’d be thrown in jail, and even if you got him, it wouldn’t change anything. I know. I *know*,” Pinkie said with terrible urgency. “There’s bigger. . . worse. . . horrible things going to happen soon. Terrible bad things and there’s only a few ponies I can trust to stop it.”

Clearly, the haggard mare needed her friend to believe her. On the other hoof, a small vicious part of me wanted to cheer the blue pegasus on. Finally, Rainbow Dash sighed. “If we go to Luna and tell her how Goldenblood attacked you. . .”

Pinkie grabbed Dash’s shoulders and gave her a shake. “You don’t understand! Goldenblood is nothing! *Nothing*! I’m nothing. Fluttershy is nothing. Luna only needs Twilight and Rarity. Even you and Applejack are expendable.” She sniffed and released Dash. “Besides, Goldenblood is going to get his in a month or so. I need you to help me with something much more important.”

Rainbow Dash was silent for several seconds before answering. “Okay. What?” she asked with a small frown.

Pinkie Pie’s eyes moved left and right. “No, I can’t tell. . . achy hoof. . . flank flick. . . eye twitch. . .” Pinkie gave a sick smile that looked as if she might vomit. “I can’t. . .”

Again, she winced. She sat and hugged herself. “If I tell you. . . will you promise to hear me out and not think I’m crazy? Please?”

Rainbow Dash glanced to the door again, and Pinkie seemed on the verge of bawling. I felt Dash’s body start to shift, then stop. She shifted back. “I’ll try,” Rainbow said, her voice heavy with skepticism.

And now Pinkie was crying, punctuating it with occasional thank yous.

Pinkie trotted to the corner and retrieved a purple velvet box, then opened it up. Inside were six memory orbs, each one emblazoned with the cutie mark of a ministry mare. “I need you to collect a memory about each of our friends. She’ll need them.”

“Who?” Rainbow Dash asked as Pinkie Pie fished out the memory orb emblazoned with a thunderbolt.

Pinkie Pie didn’t answer for several seconds. I wondered what she was feeling as she twitched there. “LittlePip. She’s going to need these memories,” Pinkie Pie mumbled as she looked down at the lightning cloud orb. “They’re the only thing that matters now.”

“Who?” Rainbow Dash asked again in bafflement.

“She’s. . . don’t ask. Please. Please, trust me! The more you know about this, the less you’ll be able to do it,” Pinkie begged as she held out the memory orb. “In this, you need to put the memory of the Single Pegasus Project meeting you had with Applebloom and the Princess. Pumpkin Cake will help you. She knows the spells. But you have to get it from her. Say it’s for security or something.”

“Buh. . . the. . . how do you know about that?” Dash gaped, then frowned. “Have you been spying on me?”

“No! Well, yes, but no. This isn’t that. You have to do it. She has to know if she’s going to take over the Single Pegasus Project,” Pinkie said. “Please, don’t ask more Dashie.”

“This LittlePip is a pegasus in my ministry?” Rainbow Dash asked in a baffled tone.

“No, she’s a stable pony unicorn who in two hundred years will use the Single Pegasus Project to defeat the Enclave,” Pinkie Pie blurted, then covered her mouth in horror, like she’d said something dirty. The two stared at each other for a minute.

“Okay. . . are you sure you won’t see the doc—“ Rainbow Dash began, but then met Pinkie’s pleading gaze and deflated. “Fine. It wasn’t that critical a meeting anyway.

Just an overview.” Rainbow Dash sounded surprisingly bitter about just an overview. “Wait. . . two hundred years?”

Pinkie rapidly scooped up and pressed the diamond orb into Dash’s hooves. “Don’t worry about Rainbow Dash blinked, then looked down. “You need to get this one on Rarity. It’s the memory of her splitting her soul into those statuettes she gave us. Snips or Snails should give it.”

“She what?!” Rainbow Dash blurted, horrified. “You mean those little. . .”

“Yes. She did. They are. I know, I felt the same way too,” Pinkie Pie said as she hung her head. “Please don’t ask too many questions. She thought it’d bring us together, but it’s too late for that. Too late. . .” Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and sniffed, then scrubbed her eyes. She stared at the shafts of light coming through the window, “You should give your Rainbow Dash figurine to Scootaloo. I know she’d enjoy it.”

“Yeah. . . I. . . okay,” Rainbow Dash replied in a light, shocked tone. Then, when she was given the star orb, she asked, “What do I need from Twilight?”

“She’s going to do an interview with Trixie next week. You need that memory from Trixie. It’s what will trigger the Goddess to remember herself. Otherwise, LittlePip is doomed, and Blackjack with her.” Pinkie looked away. “You and Pumpkin could say it’s a background check or something.”

“LittlePip? Blackjack?” Rainbow frowned. “Which Goddess. Luna?”

“Don’t ask. Even I don’t fully get it. Well, Go Fish, but she changes her name,” Pinkie said, then waved her hoof. “Don’t get me started on her! LittlePip will be bad enough!”

“No surprise with a name like that,” Rainbow Dash asked, then frowned. “Wait. Will be? Going to do an interview? You mean this stuff hasn’t happened yet?”

Pinkie sighed. “I know. I know! It doesn’t make sense, but it will. It’s all one big ball of. . . of. . . wibbly-wobbly. . . timey wimey. . . stuff!” She slumped and spread her hooves wide. “Please. Trust me. Believe me.”

Another long moment. I wondered if my friends ever felt this way about my explanations for things. Dash rubbed her face with her wings. “Okay. What about the apple one?”

“This one is easy. There’s a security mare down in the ICU who’s in a coma. She’s going to die in a few hours, but Pumpkin Cake can get the memory of Applesnack killing Zecora last night,” Pinkie said as she bowed her head. “I almost asked her

myself, but she's going to have to get used to working with you."

"What? Zecora?! But how... why? Was it Goldenblood?" Rainbow Dash asked. "He was a Marauder! Maybe—"

Pinkie Pie grabbed Dash's face, silencing her and making her lips bulge. "Didn't you hear me? Forget about Goldenblood. This is bigger than him."

Rainbow pulled her face back and rubbed her cheeks. "Okay, okay. But we both know he's up to something. Somepony in the O.I.A. is sending secret ministry information to the enemy." I mentally growled in agreement.

"You have no idea," Pinkie groaned, and shook her head. "But no. It was a completely random chance. LittlePip just needs to know why he and Applejack broke up. Oh, but Blackjack needs to know that Zecora learned a pony was passing the Projects to a spy."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash said eagerly. "Who is it?"

"Oh, I can't tell her that. *When* is as important as *what*." Rainbow Dash's eyelid twitched. *What?* But I... she... buh... This was giving *me* a headache.

In a display of extreme patience, Dash took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, then looked at the balloon orb. "Can't you get this one yourself?"

"No. You need to get that from me next week, right before I raid Four Stars. Just tell me that I told you to tell me to give the memory of the mirror to you. I won't understand... because I'm going to have Pumpkin Cake erase what I know so that I can't mess things up. Which I have... so badly. But I'll give it to you." Pinkie Pie said softly. "You're my friend."

"But... why?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Pinkie stared at Rainbow with a piercing gaze. "I know what you did in Roam," she said, her voice low.

Rainbow looked away this time. "I had to," she said in a haunted voice. "He was a traitor."

"I know. But you did it. And I don't want to know. I don't want to think of my friend doing something like that, and that's one of a kajillion things I don't want to know."

Rainbow closed her eyes and nodded. "Timey wimey... stuff. Okay," Rainbow Dash groaned and slipped it into her saddlebags.

Pinkie Pie removed the last orb. "This one you'll have to get from Angel Bunny at

Zecora's hut. . . after the bombs fall. You'll. . . you'll have to get Pumpkin Cake to go with you after the bombs fall." Pinkie stared straight ahead with her pinprick eyes. Rainbow Dash's own pupils contracted as she stared in horror and Pinkie said in a hollow voice, "The memory will tell LittlePip how to get the Black Book..."

"Wait. What bombs? What are you saying?" Rainbow Dash asked as she rose her hooves. "Are you saying the zebras are going to do a first strike? My ministry doesn't have any info on that!" Rainbow Dash turned to the door. "I'm going to meet with Twilight and Luna and—"

But Pinkie Pie grabbed Rainbow Dash around the neck from behind and with surprising energy flung Dash against the wall and pushed her back against it. Pinkie hung her head, her mane falling in her face. "We can't stop it," she muttered.

Rainbow Dash stared at her. "Horseapples. If you know, we can stop it."

"No. We can't," Pinkie Pie whispered.

"The hell we can't! How can you say that?!" Rainbow Dash demanded.

"Because I've seen what happens if we try!" Pinkie Pie cried out in anguish. "We get arrested, and everything dies! Everything! Or we win, and everything dies! Or you try telling our friends, they don't believe us, and then everything dies. I've had combos so clear and so. . ." She sobbed and slumped against Rainbow Dash, who suddenly had to hold the pink mare up. "Don't you understand? The bombs falling are the *best* chance for us. In two hundred years, there will be another chance for other ponies to do better. To make this world right again! LittlePip will be the first. Then Blackjack. Then others! It's the slimmest of slim chances, but it's the only chance there is. But I can't do what needs to be done because I'll be dead in Manehattan!" And to my horror, she started laughing so broken heartedly that I wanted to hold her.

"Pinkie," Rainbow Dash said as both slowly sank to the floor.

Pinkie Pie trembled in Rainbow Dash's hooves. "I can't wait for Pumpkin to take all this from me. I don't want to know it. I don't! But I do. My pinkie sense. . . I know! We're going to die, or worse. And you know what? We deserve it! We do. The things we did for the stupid war. The ponies we've hurt. The zebras! Defeat would have been better! But it's too late now. Too late for us. Too late for them. It's going to take two centuries of death and misery as penance for what we've done. And for some of us, it's going to take so very much more." She sobbed and shook. "I wish it were a horrible joke. . . I want to say it's all a big prank. Just a great big prank. But I

can't do it alone. I can't! I need your help."

Rainbow Dash held her in her hooves and then closed her eyes. I wish I knew what she'd thought in that minute, before she opened them again. "Okay."

Pinkie Pie gave a little hiccup before looking at her. For the first time, the mare's eyes seemed to be returning to normal. "You'll do it?"

Rainbow Dash nodded, then said, "I'd *really* like to talk to Twilight about this. Or any of our friends. But you're right. Twilight probably wouldn't hear me out once I mentioned your name. Even the others might have trouble believing it." She rubbed the back of her head with a hoof, "I hate to admit, I have trouble wrapping my head around all this."

"But you believe me, right?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"I believe you, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash reassured her. "I may not understand you, but I believe you." Rainbow Dash smiled and nudged her shoulder with a hoof. "Though I am going to try to make you wrong. No offense. At the very least, I'll make sure the S.P.P. will be all set up and ready to go." The aging blue pegasus sighed. "Honestly, I'm still gonna pretend that this is one huge prank. I'll go cross-eyed otherwise."

"In a way, it is. When you get all six, you need to take them to your ministry's storage in Canterlot and make sure they're well protected. And in two hundred years, if everything goes perfect, we'll get a punchline that'll fix the world." Pinkie Pie said, smiling at her friend, and then she blinked. "Oh. And you're going to have to copy the memory of me telling you all this, too. Put it in the vent behind cell twenty-one in Thunderhead."

"Um... do I want to ask why?" Rainbow Dash said warily.

Pinkie Pie's candycane mane was curling a little before Dash's eyes as she smiled. "So I can tell Blackjack to remember what Lighthooves did to Glory." Then she blinked. "Oh. I guess I just did." She rubbed her eyes and looked away. "Dawn wasn't lying, but just because somepony does something bad doesn't mean they've stopped being your friend. And sometimes, if two babies are determined to fight, sometimes you have to take away what they're fighting over. Oh. And congratulations," she said, then shook her head. "I wish I could tell you about Horizons, Blackjack, but you're going to find out soon enough. . . and..." she paused, her smile twitching a little before she said in a cracking voice, "I know you'll pull through. I believe in you." She shook her head once more, looking utterly exhausted and drained, but happy. "That's enough. I need Pumpkin Cake."

“Pinkie, are you. . .” Rainbow started to ask as she held her up.

“No. I’m not. But neither are you. But I will be. And so will you. And Twilight. And everypony. After all,” she said as the world started to blur away, “You’re my true, true friend.”

oooOOOooo

When I came out of the memory, I felt like my *brain* had been tied into a timey wimey ball of wibbly wobbly stuff. Pinkie Pie had overdosed on PTMs and saw. . . me? LittlePip? Other heroes? How had she known those memories would help LittlePip? Why didn’t she tell me what Horizons was? Or which of my friends had betrayed me? Why hadn’t she marched up to Luna and told her what would happen in a month?

She’d believed the bombs were what they deserved, but everypony? Dash must have been a really good friend, because Pinkie sounded pretty crazy to me. I wondered just what she might have arranged before Rainbow Dash arrived. Memories sent out? Messages? All so that we could have a chance now to reverse the course set during that stupid war. I wondered if she might have made suggestions to Scootaloo for certain ponies to go to certain stables.

Checkers vs. chess. I was hopeless at the latter, but I knew that sometimes in checkers, sometimes, if you were lucky and could get everything lined up, you could jump from square to square and sweep the board. I wasn’t sure if I felt uneasy or reassured that Pinkie Pie, of all ponies, was helping LittlePip and me two centuries later. Finally, I settled on reassured. No matter how unstable she’d appeared, she’d wanted to help. So, I’d take it however I could. If she didn’t tell me, it was because I either didn’t need to know, or she knew I’d find out eventually.

Still, I really wish she’d mentioned what Goldenblood was up to.

The fact this orb was in the vent said that Rainbow Dash had done what she wanted. That was a leap of faith and friendship that staggered me. It would have been easy for Rainbow Dash to simply write off her friend as cracked. Heck, it would have been more rational than actually helping as she had. “Hey, Chicanery, guess what I just found out?” I said with a smile.

Silence. I frowned and rolled off the cot to peer through the vent. “Chicanery?” No response. “Oh, this can’t be good.” Then I looked over at the. . . powered-down energy field, and my eyes widened. A bloody heap lay in the doorway. “*Definitely* not good,” I said as I walked to the door and peeked out into the hallway. Down

at the end of the hallway was a stallion lying in a pool of blood. A trail of bloody hoofprints lead straight to my cell. I sighed, closed my eyes, and thumped my head against the wall. "I just got here. I wanted to catch a movie. Maybe listen to another concert. Why, for the love of Celestia, can't I just have a little less blood in my day?"

I stepped out into the hall and checked next door. "Boo?" I asked. She poked her head out from under the cot and rushed to me, hugging me fiercely. "It's okay. Where's Chicanery?" But she just cocked her head at me, and I sighed and looked around for myself. The other cell doors were off too, the rooms empty. Then I came to the last door. This one was metal, its surface bulged and buckled. 'High Security' was written across it, and I gave an experimental knock with my hoof.

With a metallic shriek, the door fell right out of its frame and landed atop me with a clang. Then a pony stomped on the other side. "Lock me up, you sons of mules? I'll kick all your asses! Your horses and camels too! Bring it on!" Rampage said from atop me, then continued in a slightly confused voice, "Hey. Where'd you go?"

"I'm down here, Rampage," I groaned from beneath the steel door.

She lifted it with one rear hoof. "Oh, hey, Blackjack. What are you doing?" A heavy metal collar and shackles dangled chains from her neck and limbs. "Where is everypony?"

"At this point, I have no idea," I groaned, answering both her questions. She flipped the door up with a kick of her hoof and then jammed it back into the frame. "Where are the others?" I asked, sitting up.

"Uh, no clue?" she asked with a little smirk. She trotted over to Boo and gave her a nudge. "Hey, Boo." The pale mare gave a nervous, hesitant smile. "When I woke up, I was locked up. I figured if I just beat on the door long enough, somepony would come, and I could beat them up for answers. Or just beat them up. Or pulverize them into a fine red paint. That'd be good too." She looked down the hall at the dead guard. "I see you had the same idea?"

"That wasn't me," I replied with a frown as I stood. "They must have the others somewhere else."

I walked slowly along the blood trail to where the guards lay in crushed heaps, something I would have done if my magic bullets didn't kill them outright. No alarms, which was even more ominous. The first guard was armed only with a baton; it brought back memories as I took it. I followed the bloody hoofprints to a door wedged open by two more security ponies' bodies. These were shot in the head by high-caliber

bullets.

On the far side, I saw why there weren't any alarms going off. A security post lay on the far side of the door. Somepony had smashed through the reinforced glass... or transparent cloud... smashed one pony's head into the console, and impaled the other's throat on the shattered glass partition. The trail led to an access hatch, just beyond the security station, that had been beaten in. Down two halls to the left and right, I could see more active cells. Elevators were against the back wall.

"So, you're *sure* you didn't do this?" Rampage asked as we walked by the security cell in the center, pointing with a hoof. It was reinforced plastic on three sides, with a locked door in the back. I guessed it controlled all these cells.

"I am..." I paused. Well, I couldn't say I was completely sure. I'd been taken over before, but I *really* hoped somepony else didn't have the keys to my body. "I'm mostly sure." She smirked and arched a skeptical brow. "Ninety percent." Eighty-five percent sure... sureness levels dropping...

"Right," Rampage replied. "Then you need to bust that ten percent out more often," she said as she shoved the body back into the security cell, hopped through the hole, and started to search it. I walked around to the door and twisted the deadbolt from the far side. Pegasus security really wasn't much for unicorn abilities. She opened up a case with some emergency bandages and peered at a bottle of tablets. "'Isosteroprophenhol'? 'Buck' is a lot easier to say. Ahhh!" She immediately beamed and extracted a second jar. "'Precognazine'! Come to me, my minty beauties," she said, shaking some into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she sighed, then looked at me as I examined the monitors for some sign of my friends. "Hey, Blackjack. Why haven't you killed me yet?"

The question was like a wrench thrown into my thought processes, and I froze in the act of pulling the smashed stallion off the controls. "You're asking this now?"

"There's a better time?" Rampage asked idly. She had a point, but I avoided looking at her as I tried to figure out how to work the controls. "You know I want to die. You could have killed me with that Folly thing, but you didn't."

"I don't generally kill my friends," I replied.

"Even when they want you to kill them?" she asked casually.

"Especially then," I answered.

"I don't ask for much, following you around. You saved me from a life of being a buffet. You've given me hope that maybe, somehow, things might be okay. But the

fact is that, even if it is, I'm going to live while all of you die."

"I'm a cyberpony, Rampage. I might live centuries," I said evenly.

"And this soul talisman might last millennia. Or longer," she replied. "And you might be killed in five minutes. You're tough, but I haven't seen you come back from being disintegrated. It's practically a joke for me. But if you die... that's it. I don't think I can make it. When Lacunae bought it... I envy her so much that it hurts." She turned away. "I don't want to bury everypony I know."

I stared at the screens but didn't really see them. "I thought that you were doing better with the recombinator and those memories I've found."

"Oh, it's interesting, I guess," she said with a roll of her eyes. "But they're still other ponies' memories. Other ponies' souls. I don't have a single memory of a childhood that's mine. I haven't seen anything that indicates I'm more than a thing."

I paused, then told her, "I can't kill you, Rampage."

"Horseapples. You kill better than I do, and I like it," Rampage said to me flatly. "So I want to know, if you find a way to end me, will you tell me? Some spell. Some device. Something." I looked over at her and saw in her eyes doubt and need. She needed something I couldn't give. Even now, I wondered if the star sword could do it. It cut through almost everything else. Maybe one slice and she could live a normal pony's life. Grow old. Die. Or it might kill her instantly.

I slumped and sighed. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. She didn't say a word as she turned away again. "I'll help you any way I can, but that. I'll help you find memories. I'll be here for you and I swear to you that for as long as I can, I won't leave you alone."

"Mhmmm," Rampage said indifferently as she trotted for the door. "Well, you were searching for the others, right? Better get to that," she said coolly. "Wouldn't want them to die or anything..."

I watched her step out, chains jingling. Then I laid one foreleg on the controls, buried my face in it, barely muffling my scream of frustration as I banged my hoof against the panels beside me. Why couldn't Pinkie have told me more? Some answer to make things go smoothly. Just for once, with the lives of thousands on the line, I wanted them to go smoothly! Boo patted my shoulder; she'd seen the gesture enough that I supposed I should be glad she knew it.

"Who's there?" P-21 said through a speaker. "What's that banging noise?"

I looked up at a screen that showed four cells, and in one of them were P-21 and

Scotch Tape. A red light next to the word 'Intercom' indicated that the cell's speaker was on. I brightened, rising up, and the red light winked off. "Hu... bu... wa?" I stared at the bloody, banged up control panel before me, trying to find the 'open' button. What button had I pushed? Where had my hooves been? I watched the pair talking silently. When in doubt, push buttons! "Come on. Which one is it?"

A green light appeared next to the word 'mic' on the screen, and I heard Scotch Tape say, "Don't change the subject, Daddy. You were having sex with Blackjack and Glory during the Gala, weren't you?"

I froze. Suddenly, the concerns of tens of thousands of ponies seemed much less pressing. P-21 crossed his forehooves and looked away. "I think that I'm starting to get why Glory gets a headache when 99 and sex come up together." Scotch Tape tapped her hoof impatiently, and he sighed. "I was drunk; first time ever. It was a one-time thing."

"You were drunk and *happy*, Daddy," Scotch Tape retorted.

P-21 sighed and smiled. "Yeah. I was. Happier than I've been in a long time." I felt strange fluttery feelings that had no place in a cybernetic body.

"Do you love Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked.

I leaned towards the screen a little, my eyes wide.

Then my hoof slipped and the green light winked out as his lips started to move. Something in me snapped as I shouted "Arrrgh! Stupid, frigging blood-covered buttons!" I mashed the control panel ruthlessly. I glanced up in time to see Scotch Tape cover her mouth in shock, and then I punched the control panel even harder. I needed to hear his answer. The control panel was nearly smashed to scrap as I snarled, "Turn on! Turn on! I need to hear what he says!"

"Detention Block AA-23? What's your status?" an angry, official-sounding pony asked tensely. "You're five minutes late for your check in."

Not the channel I'd hoped for. "I... uh..." I stared at the bodies. "There was a... a weapons malfunction! Yes, slight weapons malfunction. But, uh, everything is perfectly alright now. I'm fine. We're all fine here, thank you," I said, and then added lamely, "How are you?"

"We're sending a squad in," the pony said peremptorily.

Oh crap. What's something that'd keep me out in 99? "No no no, don't do that. We had a... reactor leak up here! Yeah! Radiation everywhere! Give us a few minutes

to lock it down. Large leak. Very dangerous,” I said desperately, willing them to believe it.

“Reactor? What are you talking about? Who is this? What’s your operating number?” the pony demanded.

I looked at the controls and finally just stomped them as hard as I could repeatedly, showering myself in sparks. Boo staggered back and hit a pair of large red buttons marked ‘fire’ and ‘emergency release’. “Boring conversation anyway.” I turned to the door. “Rampage! We’re going to have company!” An alarm began to sound and I saw the magical fields on the screen wink off one by one.

“Good,” Rampage said, then started taking tablets of Buck. “I’m in the perfect mood for company.” Okay, I’d better hurry and get her out of here before she painted the walls in pony.

A young stallion jumped out as I trotted to the left hallway. “Oh yeah! Riot! Ri—” and he froze at the sight of me. A few other criminals emerged too, only to balk at the bloody cyberpony before them. “Oh shit. . .”

“Yeah. It’s that kind of day,” I replied. “Back in your cells. There’s no fire.”

A few of them looked around. “Aw, come on, I was—” he started to say.

“Nope! Not hearing it! Back in your cells and behave.” He opened his mouth again, and I silenced him with a raised hoof. “Any other day, I’m sure your sob story would convince me to let you go, but right now I am just not in the mood. Besides, there’s a squad coming. I doubt you want to run into them.” Or Rampage. “So, in your cells. Now.”

Muttering, they returned. “Boo? Blackjack!” Scotch Tape squealed from behind me. The pair raced down from the other hall of cells, the filly almost tackling me. Then she realized what I was covered in. “Ew. . . Blackjack. . .”

“You’ve been busy,” P-21 said casually, looking over the mess.

“I didn’t—” I started to say, when there was a ping from the elevator. “Get out! Follow the blood,” I yelled as two elevators opened almost simultaneously. A pair of ponies in power armor stood in each, their beam weapons humming as they charged up. Their first mistake.

“On the floor! Now!” they bellowed. Their second mistake. Granted, I was already interposed between the elevators and P-21 and Scotch and Boo as they raced for the open access hatch.

Rampage stood before one elevator, completely unarmed save for her shackles. She tilted her head and gave an almost blissful smile, buck dust around her lips.. “You guys are exactly what I need right now,” the striped mare said with an almost seductive smile. The two armored ponies looked at each other. Their final mistake. The striped mare leapt the ten feet separating them, landing in the elevator. Beam blasts sizzled as the doors closed, but I could hear the smash of metal against metal and the screams of pain.

The other pair had a perfect view of the three of us dashing for the open door with no cover. I couldn’t think of anything to protect us except... my horn flashed, and a door and frame appeared in the air before them. Then it swung shut in their faces with a slam as we scrambled for the open portal. An instant later, gatling beams blasted the flimsy impediment into flaming shards of wood, but it had served its purpose. We got through the access door before their gatling beam guns turned us into four piles of glowing ash. I slammed my hooves against the door, shoving it closed.

“I hope Rampage will be okay,” Scotch Tape said. The access door led to a dimly-lit spiral staircase. The trail of blood led up. Down was a locked grate that I probably could have chewed through if we didn’t have power armor banging on the other side of the door. I smashed the keypad beside the door; hopefully that would slow them down.

“She’ll be fine. I’m more worried about Glory.” Actually, I was also worried for us. Whoever had left this trail of blood couldn’t have meant me any good. “Up, I guess,” I said, glancing at the others. My eyes met P-21’s, and I immediately flushed. “Oh... uh... I...” Huh. I could blurt out questions about bowel movements and make casual comments about sex that curled Glory’s feathers, but the simple question about how he’d answered Scotch Tape turned my tongue to clay. “Um... It’s good to see you, P-21.”

He blinked back. “Likewise?” The door beside us banged loudly. “Shouldn’t we get moving?”

I looked from him to the door to Scotch Tape to Boo and finally just gave up. “Today just keeps getting better...” I muttered, taking the lead up the stairs. The twisting ascent would be a bitch for them to navigate in power armor. And up. And up. And up.

Every twenty feet was another access door, each with the access panels smashed. “Odd,” P-21 observed.

“That describes my entire day,” I said, then went through and told them about Dawn,

Stratus, the Pinkie Pie orb, and how I'd 'escaped' from my cell. I was so occupied with telling them everything that had happened, minus the little scene I'd overheard, that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. We came around a corner just in time to run smack into a power-armored pegasus next to a cut-open door.

Her gatling beam guns opened up in a spray of magical fire that sizzled and sparked off the walls and ceiling. I couldn't even poke my head up long enough to try a magical bullet. "I've got them! They're pinned at access junction 12! Hur—" she started to shout.

I teleported directly above her, landing like a ton of cyberpony. Her armor still stood, but her shooting went wild. The stinger tail jabbed down at me, nearly ripping open my back as I slowed the tip with my telekinesis, then grabbed the end and hugged it tight. My hind legs pinned her wings to her side, but that didn't stop her from going into a bucking bronco of gunfire as her tail twisted like a snake. "Stop." I shouted, my horn sending a magic bullet into the back of her head. "Stop!" I shouted again, shooting her. Each blast widened a hole in her helmet as she screamed and struggled. "Damn it! Stop it!" Two more shots.

Suddenly her body spasmed and she collapsed beneath me. "No..." I pulled off her helmet, revealing a rose colored mare with blood coming out her ears. I concentrated, trying to heal her as Lacunae had healed me. I could do it! I'd done magic with minimal instruction. I was Twilight's descendant! I could do it! I strained and pushed and envisioned her without the blood or the hole I'd punched in her head.

"Blackjack, she's dead," P-21 said.

"No! I can... I have to... I..." I faltered, staring down at her. "I came here to save ponies, damn it! I wanted to save all of you!" I shouted at her corpse. I wanted to save Thunderhead from the Wasteland. Help it grow. Help civilization to spread. "Why won't you let me help you? Just stop fighting me!"

"Blackjack," P-21 said calmly. "We can't stay here."

I knew what he meant, but he was more right than he knew. "Come on," I said as I rose to my hooves, looking up the spiral stair. "Lets see where this trail of blood ends."

Five minutes later, we emerged in an office. The beige walls were a hint to its bureaucratic nature, and the body of a slain secretary outside the door was a con-

tinuation of the carnage. Her corpse was still warm; whoever had done this hadn't gotten far. I avoided looking at the smashed head; it was too similar to the body I'd left below. I stepped into the hall, but it was eerily silent. Unanswered phones rang, and an alarm sounded. Two more ponies lay in crumpled piles down the hall. Had the survivors been evacuated, or had whoever had done this slaughtered them all before they could flee?

I followed the bloody hoofprints, adding my own to them as we walked along towards a corner office. These were pretty fancy, important offices, and I began to get an inkling of my final destination. There were unarmored security ponies lying outside the door, bullet holes in their faces. I closed my eyes a moment, then read the blood-spattered nameplate.

'Security Director Stratus'.

"Oh, son of a mule," I hissed, then slowly pushed open the door to the large office. An impressive oak desk sat at one end, the kind of desk used by ponies who valued their position. Stratus's voice filled the air from a scratchy recording coming from a terminal. "...weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue, as she was tragically killed by the surfacer terrorist Blackjack. I'm securing the city. When you get here, there shouldn't be any excuse for securing the Tower. I look forward to your reply and hope you will keep my cooperation in mind when appointing the next Councilor to Thunderhead. I believe I've demonstrated my loyalty. End burst transmission. Send. Save."

Bent over the desk, his hooves splayed wide, was a dark stallion. His face had frozen in an expression of shock, as if he couldn't believe it had come to this. Buried in his back was a very familiar sword: mine. Duty and Sacrifice lay neatly on the table beside him. A shattered window lay behind him. I glanced over the scattered papers on his desk and spotted a picture next to his outstretched hoof. It was a grainy, slightly amberish-tinted image of four dark-colored pegasi: Sky Striker, Stratus, Stargazer, and the squinty-eyed Dawn.

Suddenly, that explained his perfect timing at Dawn's house.

"Begin Burst Transmission. Councilor Ironwing. I wish to offer my condolences for the death of High General Harbinger. I hope that the GPE selects a deserving and visionary pony such as yourself to lead us in these difficult times. I wish to report that Thunderhead is ripe for plucking. I've been able to arrange things, and your pretext is in position. The bio-weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue..." the terminal repeated as I slowly walked up and retrieved my guns.

Suddenly, his body jerked, and he drew a wet and rasping breath. His bulging eyes turned in his head to stare up at me. “You... it’s...”

“Don’t move!” I said as I looked at the sword and then at him. If I pulled the sword out... “Go find a medical kit or something,” I said to P-21 and Scotch. The two immediately rushed off to search as I lowered my face to his. “Where’s Glory?”

“The clone? I gave her to the Enclave military. They should have a press conference any second now. Should cause quite a stir...” He laughed weakly. “She was my golden ticket...”

I resisted the urge to hit the dying stallion. “Who did this to you? Was it Dawn?”

Stratus coughed, breathing heavily. “Dawn. I thought... she was so perfect... get that damned bleeding heart out of the way...” Blood bubbled out his mouth. “She... she wanted to help. Kill Stargazer. Take you. Hand over everypony to the Enclave and... and I’m the next Councilor. It was perfect,” he gurgled, then shuddered and coughed a fan of crimson.

“Who did this?” I asked again. “Lighthooves?”

I was losing him. His eyes were defocusing. “Lighthooves. So eager. So devoted. So stupid. He didn’t realize... nopony did...” He spasmed and lunged for me. “It... it should have been... me!” he gasped into my face before convulsing and falling over. He gurgled one last bloody breath and went still.

I levitated my sword out of his back. It still had a tiny identification tag tied to the hilt. I walked to the broken window and looked out at the bright lights of the city.

I’d been wrong.

We hadn’t left the Wasteland after all. The scheming, the manipulation, the avarice, and the ruthless ambition that plagued Hoofington below were up here as well. It might not have been ponies killing each other in the streets, but there was still the Hoofington madness above as there was below. Chicanery and Lighthooves. Doctor Morningstar. Stratus.

From down the hall came the stomping of many hooves. Scotch Tape let out a shriek a moment before P-21 yelled, “Blackja—” followed by a loud thump.

I stood there with sword and pistols as power-armored pegasi stormed into his office. More appeared outside the window. These were the old designs. Neighvarro forces. I closed my eyes and groaned.

“Well well well,” Captain Hoarfrost said from the door. “Isn’t this interesting?”

"You have got to be kidding me!" I shouted up at the ceiling. "Twice? Getting set up once by Stratus wasn't bad enough, I have to get set up twice?" I looked at the icy blue pegasus, who seemed a little baffled and unsure by my outburst. "Let me guess? I'm now the perfect patsy to pin all this on, right? Am I right?" Then I threw my weapons aside. "Congratulations. You win."

"I... what?" Hoarfrost said, the cool blue mare now definitely not sure what I was doing.

"You win! I surrender. I mean, Stratus sets me up. Then Lighthooves sets me up. Now you!" I said as I thrust my hooves into the air. "So you know what? I'm not going to fight it any more. Huzzah. Congratulations. Take me in. I want to talk to General Storm Chaser about this."

Hoarfrost scowled at me narrowly. "No, I don't think so. Kill her."

Okay. That wasn't quite what I'd expected.

Twenty power-armored soldiers all primed their weapons with the same ominous hum. Surrounded. Even if they hit each other, I'd be ash long before they were. And if I teleported away and left my friends in Hoarfrost's custody... would they be next? Probably.

Then one second passed. Then ten. Hoarfrost frowned. "What are you waiting for? Open fire!"

From inside the helmet of one suit of armor came a muffled, "I can't!"

"What do you mean you can't?" Hoarfrost asked coldly. "Fire. Last thing I want is General Chaser to waste more time with this terrorist."

"My suit's in repair and diagnostic mode!" wailed a stallion.

There were more muted shouts of dismay from the others.

I looked at Hoarfrost, and her eyes widened. She reached down to the beam pistol in her front holster with her mouth. I could have killed her four different ways. I could have levitated up the sword and sliced her head off. Duty and Sacrifice were nearby, too, though I wasn't sure if they were loaded. I could have managed at least one magic bullet to her face. Or simply smashed her with my hooves.

Instead, my horn glowed, and a door instantly poofed into existence right in front of her. Then it slammed shut in her face with a resounding bang. I opened it again, saw her swaying with a mildly concussed expression, her gun held limply in her mouth,

telekinetically pulled her head forward, and slammed the door closed a second time. Hoarfrost thumped to the ground behind it.

I was wrong. That *was* a useful spell of Twilight's.

Scotch Tape walked in, staring at the immobile ponies with clear wariness as the occupants within the motionless armor grunted. "Wow. How'd you do that, Blackjack?" Boo followed her in, walking among the black metal statues.

"I didn't," I replied. P-21 entered with Rampage following behind, the Reaper lacking the chains and wearing the top half of a power armor helmet like a hat. I didn't want to think about what happened to the head that had been in that helmet. "You're okay!" I said to her, giving her a hug. She didn't quite return it... P-21 was carrying all our stuff on his back. He started passing it back, telling Scotch something about finding the evidence locker just before the soldiers arrived. I admit, the return of those six figurines helped settle the imaginary ponies in my head. I could almost hear them sigh in relief.

"Yup. Still alive," she said coolly as she looked at the power-armor-clad ponies and then smacked her hooves together. "Shall I start smashing the ones on the left while you get the ones on the right?" she asked as she rubbed her hooves.

"What? No!" I retorted. "I'm trying to find a way to *stop* this mess, Rampage. Not add to it!"

"You need to think like a surfer here, Blackjack, not a stable pony or cloud dweller," Rampage replied. "You have side A and side B. You don't want them to fight each other and hurt the sane ponies that don't want to be involved, right? So kill a side. Hell, kill both sides! Then we can set you up as ruler of Thunderhead, Glory can be your lovely concubine, P-21 your master of intelligence, and me your brutal enforcer. It'll be a blast." She grinned as she spread her hooves wide.

"What would Boo and I do?" Scotch Tape asked curiously as I tried to pointedly ignore Rampage's advice.

"Boo can be public relations. Anypony we don't want to kill who has a problem can take it up with her. As for you..." Rampage paused and rubbed her chin. "You'll be the young lieutenant who devises all the war machines we'll need to maintain our empire."

"Cool! I'm in," Scotch Tape said with a grin.

"Please stop corrupting my daughter," P-21 interjected in mild annoyance.

"Awwww, but being in an evil empire sounds fun," Scotch Tape whined. "You'd look great in a black uniform, Daddy."

"Empress Blackjack is vetoing the Empire idea," I declared flatly. "It's all fun at first, but then some ragtag bunch of misfits rises up and overthrows you. I want to end this without any more ponies dying on either side."

"Oh. The *crazy* route," Rampage said with a snort and a wave of her hoof. "Go on, then. Give it your best shot. Worked well with the Reapers and Rangers, after all."

Oh boy, she was in a pissy mood. I ignored her as I levitated up my sword and sliced through the bolts holding a soldier's helmet in place. The terrified green mare within shouted, "Please don't kill me!"

Rather bold of her to beg that after she'd been about to kill me, but I didn't need her terrified. I needed her to listen. "I'm not going to. Is your radio up?"

"No! How did you do that? No pony is supposed to be able to do that!" the mare blurted.

"Trade secret," I replied. "Listen. I need you to listen." The mare's panicked green eyes dilated a little. "When your systems come back up or you reboot or whatever, I need to you tell General Chaser that I didn't do this. Understand? I know the blood leads right up to him, but it wasn't me. I'm still trying to stop Lighthooves. Understand?" I really needed her to believe me. I was in enough trouble with Thunderhead. If Neighvarro thought that I'd killed their pony too, I'd never get this stopped... which was probably the point.

"But... I..." She looked over at the body behind the desk.

"I don't want to kill anypony," I said flatly. "If I did, I'd kill you too. I don't. Okay? Please just tell General Chaser that."

"I'll... I'll pass it along," she replied. "Thank you for not killing me."

"I'm not an executioner," I replied, making Rampage groan. "You want to thank me, though? Don't kill. I know there're problems in the Enclave right now, but don't kill. These ponies didn't do anything to deserve that."

"I..." the mare began with a frown, but then took in my sword and her paralyzed companions and dropped her gaze. "Yes ma'am." I had no clue if she actually would. For all I knew, the second my back was turned, she could start slaughtering ponies. But I had to give her a chance to do better.

Otherwise, all I'd have left was a body count.

“Let’s go,” I said as we walked out into the hall. I needed to find Glory, and then I needed to get in contact with Storm Chaser. So long as Thunderhead didn’t actively start fighting the Neighvarro, I had a chance. Even if I hadn’t liked High General Harbinger or the Captains Icyhot, a Neighvarro victory was better than a bloodbath. If Thunderhead turned actively hostile against the Neighvarro forces here... well, I just had to head that off before things entered the zone of clusterfuckery.

Provided we weren’t there already.

“So, what are you going to do now?” P-21 asked. “What’s the plan?”

We entered an empty charnel field of a room, wide open and full of cloud cubicles; I looked around, levitated over a stack of papers from the nearest desk, and started slicing the sheets into little squares. “Well. I’m hopefully going to get some help.” Everypony stared at me in confusion. “You see, I didn’t override all that power armor. I’d love it if I did, but I didn’t. And I’m pretty sure that none of you did,” I said with a little smile. Not unless P-21 had gotten a broadcaster or special spark grenade and hadn’t told me about it. “So I’m betting that the pony who *did* do it...” And my horn flared as I flung the paper about in a literal blizzard of white squares. They covered everything, including a patch of shimmery air ten feet from us down the hall. I faced it and smiled, “...is still here.”

The air flashed, and the purple-caped Mare Do Well appeared. “That usually doesn’t happen,” the mare said in her synthesized voice.

“First rule when you think somepony invisible is around you: throw shit everywhere,” I replied.

“Wow. Blackjack really wasn’t crazy,” Rampage said in shock as she stared at the billowing cape and wide-brimmed purple hat.

“Told you,” P-21 replied smugly.

“Why were you staying invisible, though?” Scotch Tape asked with a frown.

“I wanted to see if she would kill them. If she was responsible for this,” Mare Do Well answered, gesturing at the slaughter. “So I shadowed the Neighvarro when they came up, and when they wanted to shoot, I used a little backdoor in the Mark II design’s repair talisman.”

“And if I’d started killing, you’d have deactivated it?” I asked archly.

“I thought you were supposed to be dumb,” Mare Do Well answered, oddly surprised.

“Even a not-too-bright pony learns things,” I countered. “So. Are you going to help

us? Because I'm guessing another squad is going to come up here, and they might not all be wearing power armor vulnerable to your trick."

Without another word, she turned and trotted away. I considered her not flashing away or disappearing a good enough answer for the moment, so we all followed.

I am really not one for stealth, but even I had to admire the purple-armored Mare Do Well's ability to evade the Thunderhead Security and Neighvarro pegasi. She didn't chat at all as we moved through the building, frequently stopping to let power armor pass, and she had to be connected to their communications because she seemed to know their precise movements. More than once she peered through the wall; I imagined her helmet had an enchantment on it similar to Penance's scope.

"That's quite some armor," I said as we waited in a janitor's closet for a squad of security ponies to stop chatting and head away so we could leave.

Mare Do Well glanced back at me, then at the wall. "Mark IV prototype for recon, infiltration, and sabotage. Twilight Sparkle herself oversaw some of the talismans that went into it. Been a nightmare keeping it up to spec. The stealth systems in particular are a headache to calibrate, but then, it's not a production model."

"That include the hat and cape?" Rampage asked.

"Yes, actually. Twilight's version of a joke, I suppose. Not all that funny to me, but then, she wasn't exactly consulting Pinkie Pie when she designed it," Mare Do Well replied tensely. "Now be quiet. I don't want to have to fight them if they hear us."

We waited till the five security ponies moved away, then dashed across the hall to a flat stretch of hall obscured by two large fake plants. Mare Do Well pressed some hidden latch or button, and a three by three foot square of wall swung in. We all filed through into a tunnel dominated by rainblastic pipes and conduits. Then she closed the door behind her.

"Who are you?" Scotch Tape asked as Mare Do Well took the lead.

"Just a pony trying to help ponies who need help. These days, that's a pretty long list," she said as she lead us along the low room. Thankfully, we were stable ponies, a Reaper, and Boo. The tight quarters didn't bother us a bit. "Finding other ponies who share that sentiment is... rather new."

"Nice secret passage," P-21 said, in complete honesty. "Must make getting around

easier.”

“Yes. They do,” the armored mare replied tersely.

“I need to find out what’s going on. I need to find Glory. And with Stargazer and Stratus dead, who’s in charge? The head of Enclave Intelligence?” I asked as we went down a stairway.

“No. What you need to do is go home,” Mare Do Well replied.

“Not with things about to explode,” I retorted. “And absolutely not without Glory.”

She sighed as she stopped and pushed her hoof against a wall of cloudcrete. “I was afraid you’d say that.” Then the wall swung open into a dim, cavernous space. “Welcome to the Mare Lair.”

The Lair was a hexagonal room dominated by a massive computer along one wall. Numerous screens showed images from all over Thunderhead, and smaller screens showed various parts of the Wasteland. I scowled at the sight of Enclave armor walking the halls of Tenpony Tower. A second wall was an armory with three separate suits of Enclave armor and one suit of Steel Ranger armor. There were weapons of all kinds in lockers along the base. The third wall had at least two dozen disguises, half for above the clouds and half below. A series of rubber masks in a variety of colors sat like a row of dismembered heads before the apparel. The fourth wall had two enormous maps, one of the Equestrian surface and another of the Enclave settlements. I recognized Neighvarro and Thunderhead, but the rest were a mystery to me. Hundreds of pins of different colors decorated both maps. The fifth wall was dominated by spartan living quarters. A large bed, a kitchenette, a medical cart, and gym equipment rested next to several pictures. The last wall had lab equipment, including a lot of electronics and explosives. In the middle was a mechanics bay, with several talismans lying on carts and tables around an empty stand.

Personally, I was disappointed by a substantial lack of mares.

A young unicorn mare beside the bay popped her head up. Her brown hide was smeared with oil and other mechanical fluids. A mechanic’s harness jangled with dozens of tools, and her black mane was messy and tied back with a bandana. “You’re back! Are you okay? Do you need any repairs? Did you find her? And... oh...” she immediately faltered at the sight of us. “I guess you did.”

“Blackjack, Monkeywrench,” Mare Do Well said as she trotted to the computer. “She takes care of the magical end of things here.” The unicorn balked a little, blushing

and looking down. "Get them something to eat, please," Mare Do Well said as she walked over to the computer.

"What about you?" Monkeywrench asked, ears folding down a little.

"I'm fine," she replied brusquely, then said to me, "I'll see if I can find your Glory and then get you out of here."

I looked from Mare Do Well to Monkeywrench. The unicorn was already trotting to the kitchenette. "Rude much?" Scotch Tape said before heading over after her. P-21 frowned but followed, along with Boo and Rampage. I hung back, watching the mare work as she skillfully typed on the computer.

"Are you her slave?" P-21 asked in a low voice. "If you are, we can take you with us."

"Oh, no no no! I'm not a prisoner," Monkeywrench replied. "She's one of the good ponies. One of the best ponies. And normally, if things weren't so bad and you weren't here, she's a lot friendlier. She normally never brings ponies here. I'm astonished she did." She took out some bottles. "Sparkle-Cola?"

"Oooh, is that Sparkle-Cola Rad?" Rampage said in delight.

"Yeah, but those are for... for Mare Do Well," Monkeywrench replied firmly. When Rampage reached for one, the brown mare almost closed the door on Rampage's face.

"Are you two together?" Scotch Tape asked.

"I... No. Not that... I mean... ah... no," Monkeywrench replied.

"Are you from the Tower?" P-21 asked.

"Actually, I'm from the surface. She... rescued me... from some bad ponies," she replied in those delicate tones that left little to imagine what she'd been rescued from. "I've been helping her out since I was your age," she told Scotch Tape.

Mare Do Well said from beside me, "Eavesdropping is a bad habit."

"Speaking from experience?" I asked.

Mare Do Well turned her head to look at me a moment. "Maybe."

Oh fine, be all mysterious. "So what's happening?" I asked in frustration as I looked at the terminal screens. "Where's Glory?"

She hit some buttons. A diagram of the Hoofington Valley appeared. Shadowbolt

Tower stood prominently in the middle, while Thunderhead was off to the east like an immense tire. Ten arrowheads were arranged along the west and southern sides of the valley in a semi circle. “The Raptors are hanging back. They sent in four formations through the cloud cover. Stratus probably gave them codes to bypass the lightning rods.”

“How many in a formation?”

“Twenty five. Five five-pony wings. Each Raptor carries four formations, or a flock,” Mare Do Well answered grimly.

“So a thousand ponies, give or take?” Oh yeah, this nightmare was getting worse by the second. “What does Enclave Intelligence have in the Tower?” She turned and stared at me silently, and I smirked, “What, you don’t know?”

“Five flocks, if they recalled all the reservists before this started,” she replied. “If Thunderhead Security joined them, that’s another five hundred, but they only have paramilitary training.”

“Small wonder Neighvarro wanted Stratus on their side,” I said with a frown. “Is there any way I can contact the head of Enclave Intelligence? Maybe they can help stop Lighthooves.”

“The official head of E.I. is a joke. Lightning Blaze is more interested in banging her way through the well-connected ponies in Neighvarro than doing her job,” Mare Do Well replied. “She doesn’t even stay in the Tower. I doubt she even knows that the attack is happening.”

I groaned and rubbed my face, and then I frowned. “Wait. Official head?”

“Neighvarro’s always appointed one of their little scions to Shadowbolt, and they’re almost always completely incompetent. The slightly less incompetent ones try for military command. And if somepony with half a brain shows up for the position, they usually don’t last too long,” Mare Do Well said grimly.

What I knew of Lighthooves and what I’d seen so far didn’t mesh with her description of incompetence. “So then who is the unofficial head of Enclave Intelligence? It’s Lighthooves, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied firmly. “This has to happen.”

“This... are you crazy?” I asked, gesturing to the screen. “Why does this have to happen?!”

“Because for two hundred years, the Enclave has been blind to the parasitic actions

of the military and so complacent that they can't even see how the quality of life up here has decayed!" She tapped a key, and the main screen brought up a picture of a pegasus city that seemed to be falling apart, the buildings stretched and distorted. Only a few dozen pegasi seemed to be living in what were virtual cloud ruins. She hit another button and showed another city, again vast and colossal and again all but abandoned. Another showed cloud fields barely filled by weedy crops. And another showed a settlement slightly more intact but with sparking and crackling talismans that were wired and re-wired. "Every settlement that is not vitally important to the war effort suffers. Sons and daughters are sent to Neighvarro to serve and send a pittance back to their families. Command is fat and corrupt. It's time that the pegasus people see this for what it is: an untenable situation that must be ended sooner rather than later."

"You knew this attack was coming," I said in shock.

"Of course. A civil war's been inevitable for the last thirty years," Mare Do Well replied.

"Then you know about Lighthooves's bioweapon," I countered. "His missiles."

"Oh, yes," she laughed and pointed a hoof at me. "But you see, you're doing the exact same thing that Neighvarro has. A report of a viral weapon. A report of missiles. This must be evidence of an attack! And so they send their ships to threaten and rattle their sabers. But when it's revealed that the bioweapon doesn't infect a pegasus's neuroglobin and that the missiles are in fact scrap metal, then Enclave aggression will be clear. The democracy will be revealed for the sham that it is, and we can finally make the changes to the Enclave that were needed two centuries ago!"

I stared at the masked mare, then said quietly, "He adapted it."

For a second, the Lair was utterly silent. Even Monkeywrench and my friends had stopped talked and were listening in. "What?"

"He adapted it to infect pegasi," I said evenly.

"You... he..." the masked mare stammered as she pointed a hoof at me. "You're..."

"On the surface, I came across two places where he adapted the virus to infect pegasi. And the 'scrap metal missiles'... They're intact. I think that, with a little bit of effort, they could be made to fly again."

"On the surface..." Mare Do Well breathed softly. "Son of a mule..."

She began to rapidly tap the keys, and an instant later there was a ring. Then Lighthooves's voice came over the connection, faintly buzzing and tinny. "Yes, Grandmother?"

I froze and panned from the blank terminal to Mare Do Well, feeling the shooty look establishing itself on my face. What... the... fuck?!

"Legerdemain. I want a status update on the virus," Mare Do Well said.

"All samples are accounted for and ready to go," Lighthooves replied a little too evenly.

"And there is no chance that it's infectious to pegasi?" Mare Do Well pressed.

"None whatsoever," Lighthooves replied evenly.

Mare Do Well glanced over at me. "This is very important, Grandson. Very important. It is impossible for this virus to infect pegasi?"

Lighthooves said, in a buzzing voice of annoyance, "Why so concerned, Grandmother? We've forced the Enclave's hoof. Either they attack and are destroyed, or they don't attack and Thunderhead achieves its independance. The infectiousness of the virus is moot."

"Because if it is a threat to pegasi, then our legitimacy is shot!" Mare Do well shouted. "The rest of the Enclave will never make the changes needed if they think we're a rogue state!"

"The rest of the Enclave can buck themselves," Lighthooves said in a low, ominous voice. Mare Do Well stared up at the screen, her helmet's glowing eyes somehow seeming to grow wide in shock. "They cower and crawl up to whatever pony has the power. They fear and cringe because of Raptors and Thunderheads. They deserve the military. And, when their talismans fail and they start starving to death, they'll come to us happily."

Mare Do Well sat back hard.

"I thought the last time you fought with Neighvarro, they almost destroyed you with four Raptors?" I shouted.

"Oh? Hello, Security. Thank you for your distraction. If you hadn't killed the Councilor and Stratus, then we never could have gotten our reserves back to the tower. A few more hours and everything will be ready."

"I didn't kill them. But I'm guessing you did," I growled. "And you didn't answer my

question: why are you so sure you can destroy the Enclave when they have more than double the forces they brought last time?”

“Grandmother hadn’t told you? It’s quite simple. You see, the Core is a fortress, designed to defend against air attacks from dragons and missiles. Yes, the tower itself has limited armament... but the tower is connected to the Core.”

I had an image of a green beam of energy punching straight through Hightower. “Holy shit...” I breathed. “You can access those?!”

“Oh yes. We didn’t use them last time; concerns about killing our own. This time, I’m afraid I simply don’t give a damn.” Lighthooves chuckled. “The Enclave has just lost its High General at Maripony. The rest of the leadership is in chaos. When a quarter of the fleet is blasted from the sky for threatening Thunderhead, it will never be able to endanger us again,” Lighthooves said with complete confidence. “A few judicious applications of the virus, and what remains of the military will be busy dealing with outbreaks. A few more missiles should take care of Red Eye and any other surfacer threats. Thunderhead will be secure to usher in a new era and save Equestria, just like you wanted, Grandmother.”

“Not like this, you fool. Not like this.” Mare Do Well groaned. “You’re making the same mistake she did.”

“With you on top?” I growled dangerously.

“Of course not. I will be publicly tried and executed for crimes against Equinity. I expect my monsterdom will last for centuries, but I also expect that Thunderhead will be there for those centuries,” Lighthooves answered.

“I’m going to stop you,” I swore. “You’re going to kill thousands.”

“Tens of thousands, actually. Necessary sacrifices,” he said dismissively. “I would have thought you’d be more interested in saving Morning Glory. You should probably tune in to the television.” He sighed. “Good bye, Grandmother. I’m sorry that I deceived you. Your plan was a good one, but you were trying to save an Enclave not worth saving.” Then the connection cut off.

“You fool. You damned fool.” Mare Do Well groaned. Monkeywrench came up behind her and put a hoof on her shoulder. “Saving lives doesn’t mean ending them. I thought I taught you better.”

I didn’t have time for this. “What did he mean about Glory?”

Mare Do Well pushed some buttons with her hoof, and the central screen lit up.

The screen was split between a cute mare and a live scene in Thunderhead. It showed the central ring park of the city, a stage, and a large statue of Rainbow Dash. Twenty-five power-armored ponies stood before an angry crowd of hundreds. Twenty-five more encircled a smaller group. There were all kinds of crazy tickers saying things like 'Neighvarro declares Martial Law in Thunderhead.', 'Accusations of bioterrorism from Neighvarro officials.', and 'Rumors of renewed Rainbow Dash sightings. Illegal cloning experiments in Thunderhead?'

"Yes. Yes. We are getting word that both Councilor Stargazer and the director of Security have been murdered by Thunderhead terrorists. Several have been apprehended, and we've been told that they're going to be transferred to Raptors for transport back to Neighvarro," the mare said as she touched an earbloom. The peach reporter standing in front of the stage went silent a moment, then nodded again. "Apparently they're going to make a formal announcement any minute. There's some reports that the surfer terrorists working with these ultranationalists are still at large."

She disappeared, replaced by a handsome, if vapid-looking, stallion. "Thank you, Sun Sprinkles. Keep us up to date." Then he turned to another camera, smiling banally. "Rumors of Thunderhead perfidy have existed since the establishment of the disarmament treaty a century ago, but never before have we received a clearer sign that our Enclave, our place of security, our sanctuary, is under attack. Whether it be from the surface or our own, it is clear that unity must be preserved at any cost. This is Neighvarro News Network, keeping you up to date with news, fair and balanced. We'll be right back."

I turned away as a commercial for feather shampoo began to air. "Where is that park?" She didn't respond. After finding out that her own plan had been given a deadly twist, I could imagine how she must feel. I reached over and shook her hard. "Hey! That section of the park! Where is it?"

She raised her head. "Hmm... that's the Rainbow Dash memorial park."

"You think they have Glory there?" P-21 asked.

"I think it's likely. Enclave hates traitors, right? What better place to turn over a whole bunch of them?"

"But what about Lighthooves?" Rampage asked. "I mean, I know you love Glory, but aren't the lives of thousands more important?" The question hit me like a ton of bricks. Lighthooves had said he needed just a few more hours, which meant to me that he was doing something important and final. Fueling the missiles, perhaps? If

I wasted time freeing Glory, his plans might come to fruition. But if didn't...

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll deal with my grandson myself," Mare Do Well said grimly. "I'll get you to the park and then go to the Tower."

"You can get in?" I asked in surprise.

She pulled off her hat, then reached under and unclipped something on her black and purple helmet. The eyes darkened, and then the armor hissed. An acrid stench escaped as the seal broke and the helmet detached. Beneath, I gaped at the mottled grayish-blue hide and the thinning polychromatic mane. Cloudy rose eyes met mine. The right side of her face was marred by three gouges running from her brow down past her eye and alongside her muzzle to her throat. "Duh," Rainbow Dash said. "It's my ministry, after all."

We all had a million questions and no time to ask them. I wanted to take her aside and talk all about the Pinkie Pie orb. Rampage just laughed in delight. P-21 was curious how she'd survived. Boo seemed to want to know where there was more Sparkle-Cola. Before any of that, though, Rainbow Dash busied herself picking up various supplies while Scotch Tape and Monkeywrench worked to quickly clear the Enclave block on my PipBuck; I was glad to have my EFS up again. Only after that, when we began making our way down one of Rainbow Dash's secret passages, did she explain what she could to our varied curiosity.

"Fact is, when I left the Enclave, they sent my childhood friend to bring me back, preferably not breathing. Hell of a fight. Best one I was ever in. Got me this," she said as her wing touched the scars running along her face. "And the fact was that I couldn't kill her in the end, not after all my other friends were dead. She didn't have the same problem, though. Ripped me to pieces, and I ended up crashing into a balefire crater. She left me for dead, which to be fair, I was. I just didn't stay that way."

"Why?" I asked. "Why go on? Why dress up as Mare Do Well?"

Rainbow Dash's cloudy eyes dropped. "Well, when you're a ghoul, you have to do something to keep your marbles together. The fact was that the Enclave thought I was dead. I didn't see any reason to correct them on that. I had access to the Tower and to Thunderhead, so I made this my base of operations and tried to make up for... for failing my friends."

“You mean when the bombs fell?” P-21 asked, and she nodded.

“Did you try and stop it after all?” I asked lightly.

She looked at me sharply, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, right. The orb in the cell. You actually got it... ugh... Pinkie...” She shook her head. “Yeah, I did. As much as I could. By then, though, the war had its own momentum. I asked questions. I even tried to get Twilight to speak to the Princess. But something that I didn’t know was what triggered the exchange. The zebras claimed that one of our megaspells went off in Roam. Then Cloudsdale went up. Then Maripony. Then everywhere else. The fact is, even though I knew the bombs were going to go off, I couldn’t just stand on the roof of the palace and shout that the world was going to end. I would have been locked up as a nutcase.”

“And Pinkie Pie erasing her memories couldn’t have made it easier,” I said.

“Sure. Even she didn’t believe me. Which I think was the point. Whatever her prank was, I couldn’t mess with it. She couldn’t mess with it. She put everything into motion and then left. All I could do was carry out her instructions, even after all my friends died.” She sighed and shook her head again. “I should have done more, earlier. Before Big Macintosh died. But I was too busy fighting for Equestria.”

“Personally?” Rampage asked, and the ghoul smirked.

“Hell yeah. I wasn’t going to be like Rarity and sit behind a desk or hold board meetings like Applejack. I got out there and did the work that needed to get done. We were operating behind the lines, gathering intelligence and sabotaging enemy action. It was glorious. And best of all, everypony thought I was just sitting in the Tower, twiddling my hooves and making photo ops. Ha!” She laughed. But her smile quickly faded. “Wasn’t worth it in the end, though. Not by half.”

“What wasn’t?” Scotch Tape asked.

“The Ministry of Awesome. The ministries in general. When Luna and Scarface suggested them, I thought they were crazy. But then Twilight started having ideas. Then Fluttershy. Then Pinkie. Ways that we could help make things better for other ponies. They got into it, and I came along for the ride. Because that’s what Loyalty does, right?” She shook her head. “Fact is, I should have spoken up. Luna wasn’t worth what we gave up.”

I felt a little shocked by that. “She was your Princess.”

Rainbow Dash stopped walking and faced me. “When I came up with the Single Pegasus Project, it was going to be a way to help all of Equestria. We’d get more

fighters to take the heat off the Earth Ponies, and we'd be able to help countless civilians. Do you know the first thing Princess Luna said when I proposed it to her?" I shook my head slowly and the ghouls grimaced. "She wanted to know how she could use the damned thing as a weapon! Throwing hurricanes and tornadoes at her enemies. She was glad for me to weaponize the frigging sky, and I had to grin and act like it was the awesomest thing since me." She bared her teeth, her filmy eyes glowing in agitation. "Fuck. Luna."

From the pain and rage in her eyes, this wasn't something I should argue. "So, since then you've been protecting the Wasteland?"

"Pretty much," Rainbow Dash replied as we resumed walking. "Trying to save who I could. I was a corpse already, so the radiation wasn't a problem. Lightning Dust had risen to the top of the martial government that would turn into the Grand Pegasus Enclave, so there was absolutely no way I could show my face there. There were a few ponies in the Tower who knew about me, though. We did what we could to nudge, cajole, blackmail, and otherwise convince the Enclave to pull their heads out from under their wings and do something. And I kept my eyes open for this 'LittlePip' who Pinkie said was going to fix everything."

"Did you ever tell... Spike?" I asked, and Rainbow Dash gave a lurch, pain crossing her face.

"No," she said, her voice rasping barely above a whisper. "I was too ashamed. He loved Twilight, and I let her die... or melt into that goop thing... never quite knew which it was. If I'd told him... maybe... maybe..." but she slumped and shook her head. "I don't know. I just wish things could have been different for him. For all of us." She straightened a little and went on, "He's known the myth of Mare Do Well, and I was fine with that."

"So you really do come out and save ponies?" Rampage asked.

"When I can. I perfected hit and run techniques. Sometimes one shot from a mysterious stranger is all a pony needs to survive," she said with a smile and shrug. "Otherwise, I was up here. It's a really big Wasteland, above and below."

"So... Lighthooves calling you 'Grandmother'... that's not literal, is it?" P-21 asked.

She laughed. "I was alone in my tower with a lot of sexy soldiers and plenty of tension to work out. And work it out I did." She sighed and closed her eyes. "But no, no time for foals. Fact is, I 'adopted' all of my best fliers. They became the children I never had myself." She shrugged. "Lighthooves and his brother were Fleetfoot's

daughter's daughter's etc.... so they're my 'grandchildren'. They grew up calling me 'grandma'. It was cute for a while. Now?" She sighed and shrugged again.

"You should get in touch with Spike again," I said. "He'd like to know that one of his friends is still around. And I think he'd be proud of what you've been doing."

"Maybe," Rainbow Dash said. Her tone told me that it wouldn't be anytime soon. "Maybe someday when I can think of it without feeling like I let all our friends die." I knew a little of what she was feeling. We reached another hidden door, and she pushed it open. The tunnel on the other side sloped sharply upward. "That should take you out into the park. Once you have Glory, you should leave. Let me clean up this mess; it's my responsibility."

"You know, I figured you'd have realized by now that I'm not going to walk away from this," I replied.

The ghoul smirked and pulled her helmet back on. "I got to ask: is LittlePip anything like you?"

"Um." I frowned. "She's a lot more sane. And cute."

"Pff. Sane's boring. Still, I look forward to meeting her sometime," Rainbow Dash said. "Try to stay out of trouble."

"Somehow, I don't think that Blackjack can," P-21 said.

Rainbow Dash started away, but Rampage rushed up to her. "Wait! Wait wait wait!" She moved in front of her and then grinned. "I gotta know... is that your natural mane color?" Rainbow stared at her with those impassive purple eyepieces, then stepped past her. "Oh, come on! That's a question for the ages!" Rampage called after her. "You know this is going to keep me up all night!" With a shimmer, Mare Do Well disappeared, and Rampage slumped. "Come on, I gotta know..."

"Some mysteries will forever remain such," P-21 said sagely, drawing a giggle from Scotch Tape.

"So what is the next step?" Rampage asked, then grinned. "Oooh! Oooh! Wait! Let me guess. It's *not* going up there and killing everypony!"

"Yup," I replied sardonically.

"So how are we going to get Glory back?" P-21 asked as he readied Persuasion, checking the sights and inspecting the barrel.

"We're going to go up there and beat the snot out of them short of killing them till we

get her back. Completely different plan,” I said defensively.

Rampage gaped at me. “Blackjack, killing is a *lot* easier, especially since it’s what they’d do to us! I mean, be reasonable! Slaughter is a perfectly sensible action at times.”

“Not when I need to beg General Chaser not to attack,” I answered.

P-21 frowned as he tugged his hat back. “There’s also something bugging me. Lighthooves wanted the Enclave to attack, right? No problem there. What I don’t understand is how he’s going to get Thunderhead to back him. I mean, he is a terrorist with a biological weapon at this point. Not exactly somepony the masses get behind.”

Pinkie had said to remember what he’d done to Glory. Betrayed? That was a given. Lied? Nothing new about that. There was something. Some trick he hadn’t pulled yet. He’d turned Neighvarro against Thunderhead. He needed some way to turn Thunderhead against Neighvarro.

But what? All he’d done to Glory was brand her and make her somepony for everypony to...

Oh, shit.

“We have to move. Now,” I said sharply. If I was right... things were about to get a whole lot uglier. I scrambled up the slope, my friends following behind me.

“Are we still going for your wussy ‘beat them up’ plan? Or have you come to your senses?” Rampage yelled after me.

“We’re going with the ‘Save Glory and then get the Neighvarro the hell out of here before they get killed and Storm Chaser comes in to save her soldiers’ plan!” I ended at a grate and kicked it open, emerging into a green park.

And it was filled with ponies. A thousand, maybe more. They were angry and scared, but they had the numbers. All they needed was a match, and Lighthooves was holding it.

At the stage further along the park, rainbow projectors had created an immense holographic image of Captain Afterburner as she gleefully informed the crowd of the terrorists found in the Sky Striker family. The clueless red mare seemed to be missing that calling a war hero a traitor and his children terrorists was definitely not winning hearts and minds. Fortunately, the sight of my friends and me was parting the crowd enough that we could make our way towards the stage. Dusk,

Moonshadow, and Glory were all wearing bright orange jumpsuits with hoods. It'd be impossible for them to run and hide in the crowd.

When Afterburner saw us, the red mare grinned broadly. "And here, just as I promised, are the final culprits! Security and her friends, surfacer savages who conspired with the Striker family to murder both the Councilor and the Director of Security, Stratus."

The crowd, however, was having a decidedly different reaction. Perhaps it was the advertisements. Perhaps it was the fact that we were approaching the stage rather than running. There were grins, whistles, and cheers. A small group of mares began to chant 'Twenty-One!' and others asked where LittlePip and Calamity were. Captain Afterburner's sneer faltered. "What is wrong with you people!? She's a murderer and a killer! Arrest her!"

"No!" came a shout from the stage as an armored pegasus launched into the air. He removed his helmet, and Boomer yelled out. "Don't believe her! Blackjack isn't a murderer. I don't know who killed the Councilor, but it wasn't her!"

"Arrest him! Gross insubordination!" Afterburner shrieked. Three pegasi launched themselves up to tackle him, but they failed to drag him to the stage.

I reached the steps of the stage and started ascending. Lighthooves had probably planned on me being here. Doubt. Confusion. It was feeding into the anger and fear. But I had to head this off. "I didn't kill Captain Hoarfrost or her formation, even when they were helpless in front of me. I am not your enemy!"

"Lies!" Afterburner screamed, then launched herself at me. Call me blasé, but she wasn't Dawn. She wasn't even wearing power armor. Some of the Enclave who were armored moved to grab me, but Rampage intercepted them.

"Bloodbath, Blackjack. Try it some time!" she grunted before heaving them off me. Two more dove at me along with Afterburner. That I was unarmed seemed to be keeping them from just spraying me and the crowd behind me, something that would have done Lighthooves's work for him. *Please, don't get any more stupid.*

I teleported away to where Afterburner had been standing, and immediately I was magically magnified in the air above me. "Everypony listen to me!" I yelled, and then...

Then...

They were. Thousands of eyes all on me, Thunderheader and Neighvarro alike. "I... I... this... we... ah..." Suddenly everything I needed to say was dribbling out of my

head. I couldn't even pay attention to the cards a little purple unicorn and little yellow pegasus were holding up in my head. I felt the silence growing tighter, tenser.

Then I saw a pony in the crowd. He wasn't really there. The pale stallion in the wide-brimmed hat in the front row just smiled at me, his watery pale eyes believing in me.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then...

"I know that you're all scared. I know that you're angry. You have good reasons to be, both Neighvarro and Thunderhead alike. But I want you to think back. Two hundred years ago, we were just as scared and angry as you are now. That led to a war that nearly destroyed everypony. It killed countless people, pony, zebra, griffin, and otherwise. Now, today, there are ponies who are using that same fear and anger to start bloodshed like the world hasn't seen in two centuries!

"I came from that world below. It's a terrible place. The life you have here in the sky is better than anything down below. But you cannot keep that life through fear, indifference, and hate. It's time to do better. It's time for calm and rationality to win the day for once, rather than hate and violence."

I pointed a hoof behind me. I had no idea if I was pointing in the right direction or not. "There's a pony in the tower over there that's a real threat, to both Neighvarro and Thunderhead. I know you have little love or reason to trust, but I am asking you... I am begging you... please don't let your home become the Wasteland."

Suddenly there was a loud squeal, and my image flickered. Then it coalesced into the white-armored image of Lighthooves. "Blackjack is correct. There is a pony who is a threat. A pony with a biological weapon capable of killing countless innocent ponies. But perhaps it should be known how this weapon came to be. A year ago, a virus was discovered on the surface... a terrible biological plague that, thankfully, miraculously, did not infect pegasi. This virus came to the attention of High General Harbinger, who ordered me to seek a method to convert it for use against our own people! A fitting weapon against ponies who seek independence, freedom, and security. Well, I did as he instructed under threat of death, but now that Harbinger's weapon is completed, I cannot give it up to him to be used against us."

The speakers drowned out all but his rising, dramatic voice. "The Neighvarro say Blackjack killed Councilor Stargazer, but I have sworn affidavits from Doctor Morningstar that a public meeting was scheduled today and was changed only when Director Stratus informed the Counselor that a midnight meeting was called for at the Striker residence. I have evidence taken from the Director's terminal of burst

transmissions to Neighvarro, confirming that their weapon was prepared and ready to be shipped over. And I have evidence that Captain Hoarfrost's own ponies slew Director Stratus in a bloody attempt to silence him and to bury this evidence."

Oh shit. What?

"There is a time that a pony can be silent no more! A time when a pony must take a stand against the unabashed evil that threatens their home. A time where the wrongness of others must be rejected and thrown out! That time is now! I say to you, Thunderhead, my home! Rise up and send these miserable dogs of war back to Neighvarro with their tail between their legs!"

For an instant, there was a horrible silence. It was like being on the Seahorse in the rapids, seconds before the boat made its terrible plunge. A rational pony would have heard that silence and perceived the threat in it. A wise pony would have left.

Afterburner was neither rational nor wise.

"Traitors!" she screamed as she drew her gun.

The crowd screamed back. It was a roar of a thousand voices, incomprehensible and mad. Somepony fired, maybe Afterburner or maybe somepony in the crowd, but there was a scream. It was the scream of the Wasteland, and it had come for us.

I'd failed. All I could do was get to Glory and her family as the pegasi of Thunderhead swarmed up in a great, vengeful cloud. One on one, they had no hope against the power armor, but these ponies were ten to one. Fifty to one. Unfortunately, I couldn't fly, and I was swept to the side. I heard one of my friends scream my name.

Afterburner, however, still had one last play to make. She swooped through the crowd, landed beside Glory, and seized her, pulling her into the projector's pickup area. "Get back! Get back! We have Rainbow Dash!" The sheer madness of the statement seemed to make the mob pause. "Get back, I say! I know you damned traitors love the rainbow-maned bitch! Get back, or I'll break her fucking neck. See?" And she bit the hood and yanked it off.

Purple mane cascaded out from beneath the orange hood. Immense lavender eyes opened and looked out at the crowd. A lovely face that I hadn't seen in so long bathed in the sunlight and brought a smile to my face, despite everything.

"Ahhh..." Afterburner gaped at the mare who obviously wasn't Rainbow Dash, and then she lunged forward and yanked the bag off of Moonshadow and then Dusk.

Looking over her shoulder at the crowd, she grinned desperately from ear to ear.
“Ah.... whoopsie?”

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: I'd like to thank Bro, Hinds, and Swicked for putting up with an absolutely grueling chapter. This one turned out more of a pain than I ever expected, and I am thankful for them taking the time to brush out several with Gdocs being a complete nightmare. It'll be nice to be finished, put everything on FimFic and be done. Couple more chapters to go.

In other news, I am still unemployed. The part of the federal government that does background checks is apparently 'non-essential' so until Washington pulls its head out of its ass, I am broke. Any help right now would be supremely appreciated. Tips are through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. If things don't straighten out soon... well, hopefully I can snag some seasonal work here in vegas. Otherwise I don't know what I'm going to do.

I'd like to thank everypony that has stayed with the story this long. It really means a lot to me that I've done something folks enjoy. Comments through Cloudsville are appreciated too. I want to get these last chapters done well. Hugs to Kkat for making FoE and hugs to everyone for reading along. Thank you.

62. Between the Wolf and the Lion

62.1 Part One

“I’ve learned that one of the joys of friendship is sharing your blessings, but when there’s not enough blessings to go around, having more than your friends can make you feel pretty awful. So, though I appreciate the invitation, I will be returning both tickets to The Grand Galloping Gala.”

Thunderhead rumbled; the entire city vibrated with the clamor of thousands of ponies roused by the timely interruption by Lighthooves. I wondered if he’d been wearing the Perceptitron, watching me give my speech for patience and tolerance before twisting it with his claims that Neighvarro had ordered him to adapt the plague. Worse, between the efforts of Dawn and himself, any pony in Thunderhead who could have put the brakes on this was dead. Now Thunderhead roared with anger and fear. I knew that most of the ponies here didn’t want a fight, but they were being dragged along by those who did.

Just like two centuries ago.

Glass smashed in the distance, and flocks of panicked ponies swirled like shattered rainbows to the safety of their homes. . . at least, I hoped their homes were safe. Smoke started to fill the air; I didn’t want to imagine what up here could burn. The acrid smell made me choke. All across the city, the flickering signs that had shown advertisements for casual enjoyments now showed static or giant red warnings to stay at home and ‘shelter in place’, whatever that meant. From the confused cries and stunned features of many on the street, I wasn’t the only one disoriented. Some oblivious ponies even seemed annoyed by this interruption to their daily routine.

We’d gotten out of the park easily enough; we weren’t all big black flying targets in Neighvarro armor, after all. Boomer was a bloody mess; his own fellows had been particularly rough on him before the fighting had even started. I suspected that he was now a de facto dashite. The crowd let us pass, and we made our way back towards the Striker estate. Afterburner, however, had managed to escape from the city by the hairs on her tail, darting over the park’s rim, through the ventral opening, and out of sight. Most of her soldiers, battered but otherwise intact, managed to withdraw before Intelligence ponies in their fancy new white power armor arrived. But they’d be back.

And there'd be hell to pay.

As we walked along the streets, violence was breaking out as gangs of ponies targeted anypony they could accuse of being 'loyalist'. The thin skin of civility had been scraped away from Thunderhead, and all the nasty acrimonious sentiments, grudges, and disdain that had lain beneath were manifesting in the mob. The leaders, whether they'd been selected ahead of time or were simply exploiting the opportunity, gave Lighthooves what he'd needed: chaos and cover. I'd thought he'd set himself up as a martyr to discredit Neighvarro; I hadn't anticipated he'd unleash a bloodbath first.

"Get off her! Now!" I snapped at a half dozen stallions and mares who'd dragged a wild-eyed pegasus from her shop. Somepony had started a fire inside. When my shouts didn't get their attention, I fired Vigilance. That worked. "Get your hooves off her!"

"She's a sympathizer!" growled a stallion, his coat perfectly matching the color of green foal poop.

"All... all I said was that we should calm down!" the yellow shop owner said as she tried to protect herself.

"Liar! You said we should let Neighvarro in to investigate! You know they'd just take over," the stallion spat at her. "You've always been soft on them. How much have they been paying you? You've been spying for them, haven't you?"

"No! I haven't! I haven't!" the mare screamed.

I would have liked to explain things. Tell them what was going on and try to come to some kind of understanding... but frankly, I didn't have the time or a clue where to start. "Rampage," I said sharply, and she blinked as she looked over at me. "Don't kill them. Just bruise them. A lot."

Rampage blinked at me, then narrowed her eyes at the half dozen. "Yeah. I can do bruising."

"What are you talking about? Stay back!" the poop-green stallion warned, suddenly aware that violence was about to be employed upon him. With a scream, Rampage charged, leaping horizontally like a red and white striped missile, then turning herself sideways midair to crash into the six and scatter them over the prone shopkeeper. The assaulted assaulters tried to fly away, but Rampage somehow entangled all of them, thumping, kicking, and biting whatever limbs she could, be they wing or hoof.

Glory rushed to the shopkeeper's side. She'd shed the bright orange jail clothing,

and I tried to avoid staring for too long at her beauty. If only all this havoc wasn't going on... The only thing that marred her delightful appearance was the gray stump of her absent wing. I wondered which she preferred now: her old body back, or being able to fly. "Stay still," she said as she examined the prone mare. She carefully checked her eyes. "Dilated and anisocoric. Blood from the ears. Can you tell me your name?"

"I just. . . I just wanted them to calm down. . ." she muttered in a daze before passing out.

"She needs medical attention. She might have a concussion," Glory said sharply. Once again, I wished I had healing spells in my bag of tricks. Her purple eyes turned towards Boomer. "You need to get to a hospital, too. If you don't have broken ribs, I'll eat my mane."

"I'm fine," Boomer muttered, but from his wheezing and the way he pressed his wings hard to his side, I could tell he wasn't.

Twister dropped from the skies, minus her power armor. "There you are. I was stuck on frigging crowd control at the upper aperture," she said sharply. "City's gone nuts. Storm Chaser's ordered a recall."

Storm Chaser? Wait! There was still a pony left who could possibly stop all this. "I need to talk to her."

Twister blinked at me. "Hoarfrost reported that you killed Stratus. She's not going to listen to a thing you have to say."

"I still have to try," I replied. "Face to face."

"What, is your broadcaster broken?" Rampage asked.

I shook my head. "The only way she might believe me is if I'm there in person," I said with a frown, and then I looked around at the city. "But. . . I don't know what to do about this."

If the Tower really could fire the Core's defensive weapons, it would be an absolute nightmare. There was one chance I could think of to stop it, but I had no clue if it would work or what the repercussions might be. If Chaser kept the Raptors away, we wouldn't have to find out.

"I think I do," Glory kept her eyes on the mare, then gave me a nervous glance. "We need to split up."

"After spending so much time together?" P-21 said with a small smile.

“Yes, but I think the only way we’ll get this done is if we separate,” Glory said as she gazed around at her home city falling apart.

Rampage poked her head up from the pile of groaning pegasi and spat out a bright wad of fecal-green hair. “Split up? You never split the party. What are you, crazy? When has that ever worked well for us?” She pointed at me with a hoof, “Do you remember what happened the last time we split the party? Smooze? Batpony shenanigans? Balefire bomb blows bits of Hightower across the landscape while flaming ghouls tried to kill us all?” Then she blinked and grinned. “Oh yeah. Never mind. Go on.”

But I regarded Glory and asked, “What’s the plan?” If she had an idea, it was better than me muddling through.

Glory glanced at me; her eyes played host to dancing doubt and uncertainty, but then they hardened. Being Rainbow Dash for a bit seemed to have done her some good. “I need to get them to a hospital. Then I need to talk to Doctor Morningstar. This plague is too great a threat to the skies and the surface. If we can make a cure, then Lighthooves’s bioweapon is useless.” She sighed. “If I only had a sample. Some contaminated food from Stable 99 would do, but that’s been flushed.”

I blinked. When you wander the wasteland, you tend to accumulate a lot of stuff in your saddlebags. I checked my inventory, sat down, and began to dig through my bags, tossing stuff on the street beside me. I stuck my head and hooves inside the enchanted bag and rifled around before I let out a whoop and levitated out a bowl of extremely stale and crumbled grass chips. The magic of my saddlebags had kept them intact despite everything I’d put them through.

“You’ve had those since 99?” Glory asked weakly.

“Yeah. I kinda forgot about them down in the bottom of my bags. Will these work?” I asked.

She threw her hooves around me. “If they were made from the contaminated recycler, I think so!” she said with a smile, then carefully tucked them under her wing.

Rampage left the heap of groaning ponies. “Wow, don’t you ever clean out your saddlebag?”

Scotch Tape stuck her head in and started to rifle around. “What else does she got in here?” But then P-21 bit her tail and dragged her away. “Hey!”

“If Blackjack has contaminated food in her bag, I don’t want to know what else is in there,” P-21 said firmly. I felt a little insulted; my bags weren’t any dirtier than my

room had been.

Sweeping them into her own saddlebags, Glory continued, "I'll get them to the doctor, and we'll see if we can get him working on a cure. Even if it takes weeks to develop, a start's better than having nothing at all." Then she looked at her siblings and addressed Moonshadow first, "You need to get home, find Lambent and Lucent, and get them to your astronomy lab. That's going to be more secure."

She turned to Dusk, but the mare raised a hoof. "Save it, little sis. I'm not going to any hospital."

"Yes, you are. Just not here and now," Glory retorted. Dusk appeared a little nonplussed, and her sibling went on, "I know you're not going to sit this out, so you feel up to a flight?"

"Long as it's not all the way out to Neighvarro. Why?" Dusk asked in confusion. Glory stepped closer to her, talking in low tones. Then Dusk blinked, smiled, and actually gave Glory a hug. "I'll be back soon." And with that, she flew off, a bit wobbly but still airborne.

Glory paused, chewing her lower lip as her eyes dropped in doubt. "Hey, don't stop now," I said with a grin. "You're on a roll. What's next?"

"Scotch Tape, P-21, and Boo come with me. You go with Rampage and Twister. She can commandeer a skywagon and get you to meet with General Chaser," Glory said, and the lavender pegasus nodded. Then Glory turned to P-21 and gave a smile. "Unless you'd rather go with Blackjack?"

P-21 glanced at me and then at his daughter, clearly torn between taking her somewhere safe and staying with me. "It's okay, go with her," I told him. P-21 nodded once but clearly wasn't happy with this separation. If only I knew what his answer had been.

"What? But I want to go with Blackjack!" Scotch Tape wailed.

"No," I said. "It's too dangerous. If Storm Chaser doesn't listen to me, then it's going to get ugly. Rampage can't die. You can," I told the filly firmly. She sulked at once; I could see she was upset, and I reached out and rubbed her mane. "Besides, somepony needs to take care of your dad." That mollified her just a little, but I could tell she still wanted to come with me. Then I glanced around, checking to see who was close. P-21 was watching the half dozen vigilantes as they limped away, and so I ducked my head to her and whispered, "Did he say yes?"

"Huh?" Scotch Tape asked in bafflement. P-21 glanced over, and a little immature

Blackjack stomped her hooves in a huff inside my head.

“Does he... I mean...”

“Blackjack?” Glory asked, with P-21 looking on at me from behind her.

Damnit. “Ugh... Nevermind...” I groaned as I rose and turned to Glory and moved away from really important questions to issues of survival and whatnot. “What if something goes wrong?”

She lifted her PipBuck. “You have my tag. I’ll have my radio on. If you need us to do something, just ask. We’ll meet back at Moonshadow’s lab if this works out. If not, back at Star House.” That was a chilling thought... that things might go so badly that... no. I wouldn’t think about it. Fortunately, I was good at *that*. I embraced and kissed her ardently, and she melted against me. Somehow, kissing her as Rainbow Dash just hadn’t felt as good.

Not at all like this.

“Take care of yourself. I finally got back my cute gray mare. I don’t want anything else to happen to her,” I murmured in her ear.

“Knowing my luck, the professor’s killing joke will get out and turn me into a stallion,” she muttered, then kissed my neck... then gave me a little bite.

“Hey. That’d clear up a whole lot of problems with you, me, and P-21,” I said softly, then watched her blush profusely. P-21 and Scotch didn’t seem all that amused by it, though.

“No thank you,” she said firmly. “I’ve had enough of being somepony else. I’d just rather be me,” she murmured in my ear. Now there was the beautiful mare I adored.

“Ahem...” Rampage said loudly. I glanced over at everypony staring at us. “If you two need a little time out, I’m sure we can get everyone to put this civil war on hold for fifteen minutes so you two can have a quickie.”

I rubbed my chin. “You really think so?” I stared speculatively at Glory, “I might be able to make it work with ten.” I saw the resigned smile on her face, looked over at P-21 shaking his head, and noticed Rampage’s nonplussed expression. “Oh. You were being sarcastic. Right. No quickie.” Damn it.

Rampage stared at me for a long moment, then smirked. “Well, it’s official! Normal Glory makes Blackjack dumber.”

We finally began to part ways when Boo suddenly darted for me. She slid on her

belly and grabbed my rear hoof in a bear hug. “Boo? No! Go with Glory. Glory, Boo!” She stared up at me with wide pale eyes, and I sighed, turned around, and ruffled her mane. “It’ll be dangerous.” Boo wrapped her legs around my neck and held me tight. I sighed.

“Oh, bring the good luck charm along. Maybe her freakish luck will get me killed,” Rampage said with a snort. I sighed, closing my eyes.

Then I smiled. “Okay. You’re with me, Boo.” The blank beamed and nuzzled my cheek.

As we turned away, Scotch Tape lunged. “Take me too!” she shouted, forehooves outstretched to hug my hind leg too, when suddenly she jerked to a halt and landed on her face. I raised my gaze to P-21 biting the filly’s tail.

“Come on,” he muttered around a mouthful of blue hair, and then met my eye. “Take care of yourself. See you soon.”

“Noooo! Don’t leave me with Glory! She’s booooooring now!” Scotch Tape cried out as she was dragged away, hooves scratching four lines in the floor. Glory and P-21 helped the concussed shopkeeper mare to her hooves and slipped her on Glory’s back. Glory sagged a little but then gave a little heave and carried her along. The filly gave a wail, “Blackjack!”

“Stay safe,” I said as they departed, then turned and made my own way.

“You know this is a bad idea,” Twister shouted over her shoulder as she bore me through the air to the west. It wasn’t fair that today was an absolutely beautiful day. The sky seemed exceptionally clear and the most perfect blue I could ever have imagined. If it wasn’t for the ominous Tower rising from the green eye, I would have loved to have spent an afternoon just dozing in the sun. Given that Lighthooves probably didn’t need me anymore, we gave the Tower and its defenses a wide berth.

“Blackjack *exce/s* at bad ideas. The only way this could get any better would be if we got her drunk,” Rampage replied as we flew towards the Raptors. The fleet was arranged in an arc around the perimeter of the valley, and unless I’d forgotten how to count, they’d picked up two more. “Then she’d probably commandeer one of those ships and crash it into the others by accident. While singing... and likely geld somepony for good measure, while she’s at it.”

“That only happened once. Or twice. Shoot, I can’t even remember anymore...

but that's beside the point!" I flushed and tried to refocus. "You told them we were coming, right?" I yelled to Twister, keeping my head down a little and not looking over the edge of the skywagon. Looking out was fine. Looking up... okay. For some reason the direction of down gave me a sensation like a hook pulling me towards a messy, smashy end.

"Twice. But we could be swarmed by a squad of power armor any second," she said, gazing out at the black specks that hovered in wedges around us.

"Relax. We're armed," Rampage said as she reached into a basket and pulled out a brownish-gray orb sprouting strange little tendrils with a stalk coming out of the top. According to Rampage, it tasted something like a turnip mixed with motor oil. I had to admit, it was tastier than most food in the sky. We hadn't had time to be picky with our source of transportation and had ended up grabbing the turnip wagon. "If one gets too close..." She grabbed a pair of stalks and started swinging them wildly around her body making strange zebraesque 'waaaah' noises.

Twister glanced back and, even though she wore her own power armor again, I could almost visualize her rolling her eyes. "They don't even need power armor. They could use a turret to blast us to pieces. Or vaporize us outright with a disintegration bolt. I'd rather not be green goop, if I can help it."

"Relax. General Chaser doesn't want a bloodbath. She'll talk to me." Of course, after the talk she might try to execute me, lock me up, or ignore me, but she'd listen first.

"General Chaser's not the only pony you need to worry about," Twister said, looking up at a Raptor, its black metal armor detailed with thin crimson lines along the edges. I could barely make out the name *Sirocco* on the side. "Captain Afterburner's right there, and she does *not* like you."

"She can get in line," I replied. There wasn't much that I could do about it now, anyway, as we approached the *Castellanus*. Somepony had to stop Lighthooves. If I could stall things for a day or two, long enough for Thunderhead to calm down and Rainbow Dash to get him out of the Tower, then we could negotiate a peaceful settlement. But Lighthooves was getting ready to do... something... and if he really could use the Core's defenses... well... I didn't want to see it.

I noticed Boo staring behind us. I glanced back towards the Tower, wondering if he was spying on me with the Perceptitron, and then saw it. A tiny flash of flame towards the top of the Tower. "What the..." I said, rising a little as a white thread snaked its way through the air directly towards the row of Raptors... and us...

almost straight at us! “Look out! Dive!” I shouted as I grabbed Rampage.

I don’t know if it was shot at us or if it was simply my rotten luck, but the missile streaked by almost faster than I could see. Almost as fast, the air filled with countless green bolts of energy as the Enclave tried to shoot it down. We were buried in turnips as Twister followed my advice far more literally than I liked and dove, getting clear of the field of fire. When she straightened out, I popped my head clear and spun my head around wildly. “Where’d it go? Did they get it?”

They had. A rain of smoke and luminescent green particles drifted towards the cloud layer. . . behind the raptors. One missile and it had very nearly gotten past them. “Wow. That was close,” Rampage said.

“Too close,” I said, shivering. “Was that directed at us?”

“Probably not,” Twisted replied. “Maybe a test fire. Glad they got it.”

I pressed my brow to the side of the cart. “Scary,” I muttered.

“Oh, please,” Rampage snorted, rolling her eyes. “If you want really scary, think of this: what if that thing wasn’t moving at top speed?”

“Thanks Rampage. Thanks a lot,” I muttered, not able to get the thought out of my head.

Our reception was waiting for us in the landing bay of the *Castellanus*. Two dozen power-armored pegasi were arranged in a semicircle around our wagon. This time, the general herself wore armor as well. It appeared to be a well-broken-in suit, the enamel scuffed in places from real use. The only ornamentation was a wing-flanked trio of small golden lightning bolts on her helmet, which was hung by her side. She didn’t step forward to greet me. “I must confess. I hadn’t expected see you again under these circumstances.”

I knew my response would be one of the most important I’d ever make. I took a deep breath and a step forward. Twenty beam weapons hummed in response, and I froze. “It’s a trap.”

“Mmmmm,” was all she said in reply, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Lighthooves has access to the Core’s weapon systems. I’ve seen them fire right through a reinforced building,” I said, panning my gaze from one to the next. “Look, I didn’t kill Councilor Stargazer or Director Stratus,” I began to hear a pleading note

in my voice that I didn't like. It was a tone that I usually only used right before I got in a lot of trouble.

"Of course," she answered, slow and evenly. "That is exactly what you would say if you were working with Lighthooves to secure Thunderhead independence."

Oh crap. "What?"

"It's the most logical conclusion," she answered in that most dreadful voice. "Councilor Stargazer was a spineless accommodationist. Director Stratus a loyalist. You, the most dangerous pony I've seen in decades, show up from the surface and kill them both. Rumors of a Rainbow Dash clone draws in a crowd, and then you make a wonderful and impassioned speech that is then brilliantly co-opted by Lighthooves at the perfect moment, turning the city against us. Now that we prepare to send in our wings to secure the city, you appear to warn us that our enemy has firepower capable of destroying us. We stay away, and Thunderhead prepares itself for civil war. Meanwhile, Lighthooves prepares missiles capable of striking at our homes with a horrifying contagion."

"Shit," Rampage said as she stared at me with awe. "That is slick, Blackjack. I mean, normally your M.O. is just to crash through things like a drunken brahmin, but this is some evil genius shit."

"I suspect it was Lighthooves that came up with the plan," General Storm Chaser said coolly. "I admit, I was fooled at first. All that talk of doing the right thing. Of saying you're not a soldier. Quite convincing. You're far more than just a pawn, Blackjack. You are a queen, and I would be a fool not to remove you from the board."

Why did everypony have to keep making chess references? I didn't even play the game! "Then why the hell did I come back here in person?" I retorted.

"Overconfidence?" Storm Chaser answered with a small frown. "Or perhaps you wanted a chance to eliminate me from the board. Just as you did Stargazer and Strat—"

I sat down, threw my head back, and screamed as loud as I possibly could. Into that scream, I put in weeks of frustration, annoyance, and sheer disgust with everything I had been trying to do. "I am trying to save your fucking life! And their lives! Everypony I can. It's the only thing that's kept me sane since I left my stable! And you know what? I'm starting to think Rampage was right!" The striped pony blinked in amazement as I began to pace ignoring the guns trained on me. "What the fuck

am I doing? You'd think that after a while I would have finally figured it out! I keep trying to save ponies, and fucking it up. My home! The Fluttershy Medical Center. Zebras. Chapel. Twice! I should do like Rampage says, try to kill everypony, and then end up saving everyone! My incompetence will save the Wasteland!" I pointed a hoof at the general. "All I want to do is save your lives, and save the lives of every pegasus caught in the crossfire! Got it? That's my motivation. You're accusing me of working with Lighthooves when the plague he's using infected my stable. I had to gas them! Everypony I knew! I don't want anypony, ever, to have to do that again! So put your damned suspicions away and work with me because otherwise I got nothing to fall back on but the Rampage plan and then we're all *fucked*!"

The general pursed her lips as she just stared at me for a very long and silent minute. Rampage waited like a steel trap ready to launch herself at everypony and let the mayhem begin. Finally, the general said in slow, even tones, "You are either the smoothest, most dangerous operative I have ever met or the unluckiest spawn of a mule in the history of Equestria. Or worse, you might be both." She fell silent again for another long pause. "The secretaries," she said slowly and evenly. "The secretaries were killed."

I blinked at this jump as the General turned away. "Killing the security ponies was one thing. That's understandable. Killing Stratus too, understandable. But why would you kill the secretaries in the office? That's something I couldn't understand. The surveillance and response network were both down. So why kill the secretaries if they couldn't sound an alarm? It'd take time, give Stratus a chance to get away or for help to arrive. But somepony did. They eliminated all the eyewitnesses to the murder."

"They didn't want anypony alive to say it wasn't me," I answered.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Damn, what Lighthooves could have been if he'd been loyal. . ."

"So you believe me?" I asked.

"No," she replied flatly. "But I suspect you slightly less than I did before. Slightly." She looked out the bay door at the nearest raptor. "Regardless of your warning, we're going to have to move the fleet in."

"I told yo—" I began, but she cut me off.

"Yes, and while I am skeptical, I haven't discounted your warning. However, we need to move closer if we want a chance of intercepting any missiles fired from the

Tower. There's a critical window of fifteen seconds where the missile is accelerating where we can shoot it down before it reaches top speed. Otherwise, our interception chance narrows dramatically. And we still need to get Thunderhead pacified. Neighvarro is bucking mad, and I've been exceptionally 'flexible' in interpreting their orders. One councilor is demanding we bombard Thunderhead till it surrenders. The bloody old fool completely ignored the true threat to himself."

I doubted Afterburner or Hoarfrost would have much problem with that. "I believe Lighthooves when he says he can access the Core's weapons. Somepony I know corroborated it."

"That warning alone could save many lives," she answered. "You and your friends, however, will be spending your time in the brig."

Rampage groaned. "Why does everypony keep trying to throw Blackjack in to jail? It never works!"

The General scowled at Rampage, "You are—"

"No. My turn. She got to rant. You got to monologue. My turn," she said as she jumped out of the cart. "The worst thing you can do right now is take Blackjack off the field. She wants to make sure all of you live. I don't know why... personally, I would have killed all of you just for fun. Seems like a thrilling challenge, and Big Daddy could never top me killing a Raptor with my bare hooves. But Blackjack wants you all to live. Lighthooves clearly wants *you* to kill *her*."

"Why would you say that?" the general asked with a scowl.

"Duh! Lighthooves didn't turn our little turnip wagon into a flaming cinder. You know he's watching Blackjack. If he killed her, then everypony who heard her little speech in the park will wonder what the fuck is up with him. But if she comes here trying to prevent the violence and you kill her, or lock her up so she dies when he blasts this raptor to dust, then you guys are the villains," she said with a flick of her barbed tail. "You don't want to trust her, fine. Send her on her way. I'm pretty sure she'll head straight to the Tower to take care of your little problem for you. But if you lock her up, all you're doing is tying up an asset that is opposed to Lighthooves."

The General sighed, "After some of the reports I'm getting from out west..." she began before glowering at me. "Very well. You and your friends can come with me. I don't want to set you loose just yet, but I won't remove you from play, either. Still, if you turn out to be an assassin, I should be cremated as the Enclave's greatest fool."

"Oh please," I said with a smile and a roll of my eyes. "If I were here to kill you

I would have teleported directed behind you and cut your head off or blasted four magic bullets down your throat. Heck, I could probably just jump and crush you under my hooves right now!" I chuckled, and Rampage guffawed. Then I became aware that we were the only two laughing and it tapered off to a slack grin. "Um. But, um. I'm not. . . So. Yeah. . ."

"This way," the general said as she turned and started into the Raptor, then stopped and glanced back at me with an uncertain frown at presenting her back before continuing into the ship. Some of the soldiers fell in behind her while others took positions around the launch bay.

Rampage snorted beside me. "You know what, Blackjack? I don't think it's just Glory. No pony up here has a decent sense of humor." She stalked along next to me. "I blame the altitude, personally."

"Not now," I admonished.

"See? It's even affecting you." Rampage grinned. I groaned, covering my face with a hoof. "You want me to get out of your mane, go over here, and kill some pony?" she asked, gesturing to the side and a pair of alarmed pegasus stallions. She glanced at them and grinned. "Oh stop. It'll be fun. Nothing like murder and mayhem to living things up."

"Dirt pony barbarian," one of the stallions muttered.

"Yup. And don't you forget it," Rampage replied. Then she reached over and, before he could dart away, grabbed him and kissed him hard. His eyes shot wide and his wings popped out to either side. "Want me to show you how we get down and dirty on the surface?"

The general wasn't stopping, and neither was I. "Don't, Rampage. No means no," I added as we headed up some stairs, leaving Rampage with the dozens of armored soldiers in the launch bay. "Feel free to shoot her in the head if she doesn't listen," I added to the soldiers. Then I glanced over at Boo who'd been walked along beside me, looking back at the squirming stallion. "Don't watch, Boo. She's a bad influence." The pale mare blinked cluelessly back. "That's why I like you, Boo," I said nudging her shoulder and getting a beaming smile in return.

I had to surrender my guns before we went onto the bridge proper. Fortunately, they were far more interested in my pistols and carbine than in my sword. I guess when you soared through the skies in war machines and power armor, you could get dismissive of an ornamental-looking, archaic weapon. Even the general surrendered

her weapons; one misfire or mistake and something vital could be damaged. With my ranged weapons in a locker, though, we were allowed into the section of the ship where they kept the brains of the machine.

On the bridge were a dozen unarmored pegasus mares in a semicircle who deftly worked glowing control panels made of rainbows and pressed keys with their pinions, the feather tips protected in purple plastic. They wore headgear with a clear band across their face, the surface flickering with images rather like a poor pony's EFS. There were no windows; instead, there were seven large screens showing an angled arc before the ship. Above us were three smaller monitors showing views out the rear of the ship.

Four armored stallions stood at attention in the rear of the room, each saluting with a wing as we entered. The big seat in the center of the semicircle of stations was occupied by a muscular, serious-looking stallion with a white mane and the most eye-bleedingly neon pink coat I'd ever seen. He rose to his hooves immediately. "General," he said with a crisp salute of his wing. I noticed that *he* got a gun.

"Situation, Captain Racewind?" the General asked as she studied the rainbow screens at the front of the room.

"Poor, General. We're deployed too far back for effective interception. Those missiles are damned fast, ma'am. Coms is... active," he said with a glower as he looked at a station. "Both across the fleet and with command. The GPE is screaming at us to move in. The formation is holding, mostly. The *Blizzard* and *Galeforce* are... 'drifting' closer to the Tower."

"Order the two raptors back into position and await further orders from Neighvarro. Have they appointed a replacement for Harbinger yet?" she asked, her body language noticeably tensing.

"No. It's currently contested between Ironfeather, who has seniority, and Starburst and her connections. There're a few retired generals making claims for the position, too. But they're almost unanimous in their orders for us to act immediately. Apparently, we're leadwings compared to Colonel Autumn Leaf and others out west," he said with a disapproving frown.

"Neither of those two are good news. Why is it all the good ponies are too decent for politics?" Storm Chaser asked rhetorically.

"You could try to throw your feathers in for High General," the Captain suggested.

"And when I left to play political games, they'd put Hoarfrost in charge here." The

general sighed, shaking her head, then snorted. "So long as they haven't confirmed a leader, this is my command. Fortunately, we're about to make our move."

A mare at her station began to work the controls. "Captain! I've got something strange. Two signals. One's a narrow band broadcast out of our ship, but it's not on any Enclave frequency we use. The other's an access signal from the Tower targeting our ship," one of the mares said. "It doesn't seem to be trying to access any of the ship systems, though."

"Sleeper device? Explosive?" the captain asked immediately.

"No sir. But it's on the bridge," the mare said. Why was my mane suddenly crawling?

"Can you block them?" I asked earnestly.

The orange mare looked at me with an expression of wondering who was this crazy pony asking her questions and glanced at the Captain, who nodded, but appeared no happier that the surfer was interfering. "Yes, ma'am. I can throw out enough ECM to scatter the signals."

"Do it. It's Lighthooves," I said to the General. "He has a spy device that lets him see what I'm doing." Everypony stared at me for a long moment, and I felt myself go red. "Look! I have a very busy life, and sometimes little things slip my attention! Sorry."

"That would have been good information to have disclosed earlier," Storm Chaser said lightly, then nodded to the technician. The mare's feathers nearly flew over the glowing control panel, and then my eyes turned fuzzy for a second before my sight returned.

"Both signals blocked," the mare said with a decisive nod.

General Chaser nodded and moved to the seat in the middle of the bridge. The captain vacated it immediately. "General has the conn," he said as he stood to her left. The air in the middle of the bridge flashed, and a holographic display appeared showing the twelve raptors, the Tower, and Thunderhead. It also had the dark circle of the Core beneath it.

"Now hear this. This is General Storm Chaser. We've waited. We've been patient. It is now time to act. We are going to close in, intercept any missiles, disable the Tower's launch capability, and restore order to the city of Thunderhead. Be aware that our enemy not only has the Tower's defenses but may also control the defenses of the city itself. *Sirocco, Blizzard, Galeforce*. Approach the Tower in staggered formation two two one J. Diverge at your discretion. Intercept any missiles fired and

destroy the launchers the moment they're exposed." Three dotted lines zig-zagged erratically towards the Tower.

"Finally!" Afterburner blurted impatiently over the radio.

"Understood. We shall execute all orders," Hoarfrost responded.

"*Azimuth, Helicity, Hurricane, Perihelion, Sleet, and Stratus Fractus* will approach and take positions at 22AJ, 24RS, 34PP, 56TS, 57FA, and 88RD respectively." Spheres popped into view in a roughly hexagonal arrangement, covering altitude as well as arc of flight. "Intercept anything that gets past the inner three and take it out. Your wings will be dispatched to Thunderhead to restore order. Restrain your fire. They're still Enclave citizens," the general said grimly. That prompted an outcry. "This is not a debate. Those are your orders. I don't care if they throw horseapples at you, you're in power armor. Separate, disperse, and keep your cool."

"General. High General Harbinger left standing orders that traitors to the Enclave were to be dealt with extreme prejudice," Hoarfrost said coolly.

"And then he went and got himself killed at Maripony," General Storm Chaser growled in reply. The outcry went silent. "I don't care what orders he might have left. I am not going to authorize the Enclave killing its own. When this situation is taken care of, the GPE can do what it wants. It'll be out of my feathers then, but I am telling you that right now you are to order fire restraint. Thunderhead is not the target. Is that clear?"

"Transparently," Hoarfrost said in a quiet voice that made me give the intercom speaker a shooty look.

"*Castellanus, Cyclone, and Lightning* will advance and target the Tower's anti-air defenses, breach the Tower at five thousand, four thousand, and three thousand feet, and secure the weapon. Remember, we want to take the Tower and its personnel *intact*. Exercise maximum fire restraint." Three dotted lines arched to touch the Tower towards the top. She looked at me, clearly questioning if I'd changed my mind about participating. I sighed and then gave a small nod. I might not be a soldier, but sometimes security had to get in there and shut problems down. "We'll have irregulars with us. White unicorn with black cybernetics, all-white earth pony, and a z- white earth pony with stripes. Red ones."

"Surfacer terrorists," somepony muttered just loud enough to be heard over the speaker. I saw the General grind her teeth but also caught the unsure glance at me. I had to admire her focus; she was dealing with a number of ponies that just

weren't on the same page as her.

"*Azimuth* and *Fractus* are our designated reserves if we have to fall back. *Helicity* and *Sleet* will move to cover them if they have to drop position. Does everyone understand?" the general asked. There were no replies. "Execute orders in sixty seconds. Mark."

The captain immediately snapped, "Turbines to full! Sound general quarters." An alarm rang out, and the lights immediately dropped to amber. "Secure all hatches. Prime turrets one through six." The mares typed commands into their controls and repeated the orders back as they were completed. I felt a purr run through the ship, and for the first time I felt more thrilled by a machine than I normally would have liked. Say what you wanted about the Enclaves's policies, they did have awesome toys!

"Now would be the time to remember anything else you might have overlooked, Blackjack," the general said above the pinging alarm.

"What? It looks like you got the perfect plan all squared away," I said as I pointed at the holographic display with a hoof.

"A plan is like a house of cards. It tends to scatter when the winds of war catch up with it," she replied, not taking her eyes off the icons. "What orders should I give? Will they be carried out fast enough? Can we react in time? Is Lighthooves's plan better than my own? I'd be a fool not to think of that." She sighed and leaned back in the chair. "War is never so neat and clean as in the movies. If you can think of anything at all, now is the time."

I took a moment to think as she gave orders for the ship to take its position and the vessel began to move. The lights changed from amber to red. There was one thing. "He said I gave him a weapon, but I can't think of what it might be. Maybe he got his hooves on Folly and a silver bullet? He could fuck up a Raptor with that, but you have twelve of them." There was something else, though. Dawn. Her arrival in Thunderhead was convenient. Too convenient. I didn't believe it was simple happenstance that she'd come for her youngest children. To save them. Save them from what? Save them from whatever she was planning. But what? What interest could Cognitum have in the skies?

"There's something else. There's a pony... a mare named Dawn. She's... Celestia, it's a twisted story. To sum it up, she's bad news. Completely crazy and a total zealot. She's involved... but I don't know how." I sighed and rubbed my mane. "She thinks she's going to save the Wasteland by getting everypony killed for her

‘goddess’.”

“Wait,” the general said, holding up one extended pinion, then smiled. “Did you hear it?”

I checked around the bridge, then frowned. “No. What?”

The general shook her head. “That was the sound of the cards starting to slip,” she replied. “We’ll have to see what others tumble down.”

The ship gave a sudden lurch, and I nearly fell over Boo. The pegasi simply leaned instinctively as the *Castellanus* rose at a sharp angle. I looked out the window at the sight of the black airships breaking from their neat line, propellers blurring above the machines as they rose, dropped, twisted, and banked in the air.

I barely paid it any attention, though. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that Dawn’s presence up here mattered. That meant that Cognitum thought this fight mattered. She’d killed Stargazer. . . the only pony with a chance of shutting things down early. But why would Cognitum care? The Core was unbreachable, even to the Enclave. I suppose if they got all their Thunderheads together, they could blast the buildings, but if Cognitum had even a minimum of power she could fight back and hide behind the Core’s shields. That had been the plan in the very beginning. If it hadn’t been for the spike in Enervation. . .

Wait. I felt a quiet horror steal over me as I slowly walked towards the display before the captain’s chair. Blue beams like lines of crackling lightning out to weld the heavens, not the Core’s weapons but not something I’d seen before either, were lancing out from the corners of the Tower near the crown and halfway down the side. One touched the *Castellanus*, making the ship quake under my hooves. The general was giving orders about alignment and readying fliers for boarding; I ignored her as I stared at the dark ring of the Core at the base of the display. “Cognitum doesn’t have access to all the Core’s systems. She has to fight for it. That’s why she needs EC-1101,” I muttered to myself, rubbing my forehooves together and scraping metal on metal. “But what if another pony already had partial access? Like Shadowbolt Tower being connected to the Core’s defenses.

“But if they turn on the Core’s defenses, it’s going to draw power, just like last time. If it does, all the enervation rings will energize. It’ll be Silverstar Sporting Goods all over again.” Who knew how far past the river it could spread? I hoped it was only my imagination hearing that faint scream in the back of my mind. “She came up here to get her children out because she *knew* this was going to be a slaughter!”

“What are you talking about, Blackjack?” General Chaser asked.

I sat down hard. “Why the hell can’t I get one atrocity at a time?” I asked nopony in particular. “Okay. . . There’s really no way I can explain all this neatly. There’s a life-killing radiation in the Hoof called Enervation. When they turn on the guns, it’ll draw power through the system, causing the Enervation to spike. Maybe the Tokomare will activate automatically; I bet it has some sort emergency override during an attack. Maybe Cognitum will do it herself. The Enervation field will kill everypony indiscriminately. It might even reach Thunderhead, if the city is close enough!”

“But why? What would be the purpose of mass slaughter like that?” Racewind said with a scowl.

“I don’t know yet, but what did you say about plans?” I asked the General archly, then looked at the display. “If the Enervation is strong enough, it’ll weaken you. If it’s stronger than that. . . It made the original inhabitants of the Core *melt*. If the draw is great enough, both sides might just drip away.” The Tower’s weapons were focusing on ships, scorching them where the blue-white beams touched. The cloud of power-armored ponies moved in arrowhead formations towards the Tower while a veritable swarm of defenders emerged from the building.

“What do you want me to do, Blackjack?” the General countered. “We’re committed. Once Lighthooves is dealt with and the Tower is under our control, we will be able to shut down their weapon systems.”

“We have power armor contact,” the Captain said as flickering red and blue beams began to spark back and forth between the power armored ponies. “They’re fast. . . I knew that their armor was good, but reaction times like that are phenomenal.” His eyes widened. “Several wings inbound. . . coming in rather disturbingly fast.”

“Yeah. Lighthooves all but tap danced on me. He beat me almost as good as Dawn had. . .” my voice trailed away. I’d fought Enclave armor before I was augmented and won. Power armor just wasn’t fast enough. It had inertia. That was the only saving grace of anypony fighting it. But Lighthooves had almost taken me apart in his brother’s office. “Oh you son of a mule! That’s what you were talking about.” I swore as I glared at the display. “That wasn’t power armor!”

“What are you talking about, Blackjack?” the General asked in tones suggesting she was tired of asking me that.

But I didn’t have time to explain as the Captain shouted, “Incoming fire and hostiles!” A blue beam shot out of the corner of the Tower and lingered on the *Castellanus*,

and the ship shrieked. Then a second beam swept in to meet the first. I was nearly thrown off my hooves as the air filled with the smell of burning metal. “Bank! Climb! Get that beam off us before it penetrates our armor!” the pink stallion bellowed at the mares. A third blue beam was coming up to meet the other pair.

“I can’t, sir! It’s going to br—” Then a sound unlike any I’d heard before pierced the ship. It was like the scream of metal of the factory abomination I’d faced in the tunnels, only this time it was as if I were inside the beast rather than before it. The entire ship reeled to the side, rolling as the bridge filled with nostril-searing smoke. The General pulled her helmet on, but everypony else tried to breathe and work the controls. Frigid wind howled and snapped through the raptor. I guessed the beam had penetrated right next to the bridge.

Red bars in my EFS. White-armored pegasi stormed into the bridge; the soldiers on guard sprang to action, but they were unarmed. Armed ponies were probably on their way, but by the time they got here, it’d be all over. Still, to the soldiers’ credit, they charged the boarders with fearless skill and determination. Their blows were to deflect weapons away from the crew and computers, even if it meant putting themselves at risk. I wondered if they were trying to disarm their attackers, but the invaders’ weapons were grafted to their sides beneath their wings. The soldiers’ scorpion tails stabbed and flashed, but their opponents had reinforced organs and internal healing talismans repairing their injuries. They were all going to get slaughtered...

Not if I could help it. I just really wished Rampage were here right now. This was the perfect situation for an immortal death dealer.

Two of the white armored invaders stormed into the bridge, their gatling beam guns starting to glow, when I threw myself at them with my hooves wide. One limb linked around each neck as I employed every ounce of my augmented bulk against them and twisted the guns up so they raked the air above the furiously working mares. Scorpion-tipped tails arched forward and stabbed at my chest, but even though I cried out in pain, I didn’t let go. I looked at the armor on my left and saw confirmation of my fears. Like Lighthooves at Chicanery’s studio, the mare wasn’t wearing a helmet... and her eyes glowed bright red just like mine.

At least, they did before I blasted her face with a quartet of magical bullets. The magical impacts ripped hide from the flesh beneath it, exposing gray synthetic materials bonded to bone and tissue. Her glassy orbs exploded in shards as my magic tore her face down to the metal and bone beneath it.

The mare screamed and flailed wildly as I let her go and turned my attention to the stallion on my right. He slammed his steel hooves into my chest as he struggled to knock me back. With the gouges in my chest his tail spike had inflicted, I couldn't hold on to him. He flipped in the air, pointing both guns at me. "Kill the bridge crew! Quickly!" he snapped.

Then he was slammed to the side by the worn gray armor of the General. He flipped through the air and smashed into the side of the bridge, shaking his head hard as Storm Chaser hovered in his previous position. "Captain, you have the conn."

"Yes ma'am! Get reinforcements and emergency response teams here now. Helm, climb one thousand feet and present our starboard side to the enemy while we get that hole dealt with," Racewind said coolly as he took the seat. The *Castellanus* continued to shake as alarms sounded. "Keep those beams off our engines or we're done!"

Two more invaders entered. The armored guards tried to move in to grapple and stab with their stinger tails, but it was as I feared. It was one thing to wear a shell that reinforced your body. It was another to be reinforced. And these ponies weren't just augmented like me; my augments were cobbled together from three different sources. Lighthooves must have taken Project Steelpony designs and fabricated fresh, brand-new parts. They twisted around, ignored stabbing tails, broke the wings of the stallions, and ripped out their ribcages and throats. One soldier managed to break the neck of a white cyberpony, but the others struggled just to survive.

"You're dead, old mare! We're the future of the Enclave!" the stallion roared as two more came in, bringing his guns to bear on her. Outside, in the hall, I could hear the electric crack of beam fire being exchanged.

Storm Chaser didn't reply or waste time with taunts. She swooped in high and dove at the stallion. At first, I thought she'd missed as she came in short, but her wings snapped and she performed a roll in mid air. The scorpion tail of her armor blurred as it swung around and the razor tip ripped a jagged line from leering mouth to chest. Blood and mechanical fluids spilled as gray synthetic underlays were exposed. He gurgled as he clamped his hooves to his throat. Big mistake. Storm Chaser continued the roll and brought both forehooves down atop his head with an impact that dented his skull. The transfer of momentum sent him flipping forward, and as he came around, Storm Chaser performed a backflip in midair. Rising tail spike met descending stallion face in a shower of sparks and blood.

"If you're the future, I'm not impressed," she said with superb disdain. The stallion's

reply was to gurgle and collapse in a heap, leaking blood and brains from the gash ripped through his head.

More white armored ponies stormed in through the smoking doorway. One balked as he got a close look at me. "Confirmed. Blackjack and the General together! What do we do?" he said as he pointed beam weapons built into his sides at me.

"If she's not dead or in the brig, kill her," the mare beside him yelled as she pointed her own integrated disintegration rifles at the general. "She's a liability now!"

"Over my dead body," I yelled and drew my sword, starting to teleport when the pony I'd blinded grabbed me from behind. Lacunae had once rattled off some rather fancy words about why it was difficult to teleport other ponies and yourself. Something about mass and distance and other things that made my eyes glaze over at the time when I had eyes that could glaze. When my teleportation spell went off, I had the sensation of trying to squeeze myself down a Blackjack-sized tube that was now half the size of Blackjack. The result was I slammed to the deck with every organic part of me feeling like it'd been beaten with a belt. "Math... hurts..." I groaned, trying to pull myself together as I watched helplessly.

One lunged at Boo, his white laminate cybernetic tail ending in a glowing green crackle of energy. The blank backed away, eyes wide and tail tucked as she swayed to the side and gave ground. "Filthy dirt pony," the pegasus snarled. "Stand still!" I could only stare in shock as the faster cyberpony soldier kept missing Boo by mere inches.

Probably only the fact that I wore an equally stunned pegasus atop me saved me from being disintegrated, incinerated, or both. The stallion closed the distance, his wings glittering with razor sharp edges as he approached. A little ungroaning part of my mind took some small measure of relief they didn't have that green glow to them too. The General was not so lucky, given that her armor didn't have any ranged weapons on it and I doubted that the cyberpony mare would allow her to close the distance. The General tried anyway, going into a dive straight at the armored mare. The cyberpony mare grinned as she opened up a stream of lethal energy bolts and beams. The Captain was drawing his disintegration pistol as some of the bridge crew started to move towards her...

But they were just flesh and blood ponies and would never reach the cyberpegasus in time. The mare moved with the swiftness and cold murderous action of the machine. With the precision of S.A.T.S., I watched the rapid fire barrage strike the General. For an instant it seemed as if she'd close the gap. For an instant, I felt like

I was the one stuck in S.A.T.S. Then the tips of her hooves glowed with the brilliance of a star. . .

Like a lightning bolt, the General struck the cybermare and crushed her between bulkhead and her metalshod hooves. That would have killed anypony without a generator for a heart. As it was, mechanical fluids and blood burst from the cybermare's throat as the sound of cracking ribs carried clear through the air. Still, her guns were wired into her brain, and one of them swiveled around and blasted wildly around her with more crimson beams. Clearly, the crippled mare wanted to take one of us with her.

Unfortunately, that was when one of the screens towards the front of the bridge exploded inwards behind General Storm Chaser. Chunks of metal and flew across the air; the mare sprawled atop me caught a piece of steel longer than my body and thick as my horn. It sliced almost completely through her and crushed me down even more. The bridge mares struggled to keep the ship under control even though more than half of them had been wounded by flying metal; Boo managed to avoid having her head taken off by a dinner plate sized chunk by inches.

More white-armored pegasi began to swarm the staggered general. Then a brilliant green bolt blasted into the lead cyberpony's head. I watched as Captain Racewind slowly advanced across the bridge. His uniform was slick with blood and one ear was gone as he walked slowly across the shaking deck. One of his targets collapsed in a shower of glowing green goop. Then a second. A third. He stood over the general before the breached wall. When his gun was dry, he flicked out the cartridge and slapped a fresh one in without removing it from his mouth.

The rest didn't enter shooting. Instead, they removed things from their armor, small metal apples with bright green bands around the middles. In unison, they pulled the pins of a around a dozen magic grenades and threw them through the breach. Even if I hadn't been halfway across the room with a dead mare on my back, I would have been hard pressed to catch and return so many at once. For a pony without magic, I didn't think it possible.

I guess it wasn't, because rather than try, he dashed right up to the breach in the wall and stood upright before it, spreading his wings wide to cover the portal and deflecting the magical grenades back into the room beyond. There were panicked shouts from our attackers as he looked back at the rest of the bridge.

I'll be damned if the stoic captain didn't smile a little.

Then there was a rapid fire series of brilliant green flashes and in an instant, he

was gone, reduced to a glowing green mist that settled on the deck. The General was closest to the blast, but the Captain's sacrifice had kept her out of range of the explosives. All it did was knock her back.

"Racewind. . ." the general murmured, only audible to my ears.

"One tyrant down," wheezed a gurgling voice as the cybermare Storm Chaser'd crippled proved not quite dead yet, and managed one last well-aimed volley that raked the General with brilliant red beams. "Die, you murdering whores!" she shouted, blood and black fluids spraying from her mouth. I'd forgotten how infuriatingly resilient cyberponies could be. The General took a step back, staggered, and finally collapsed as the beams raked her from behind.

No. I needed her. The Enclave needed her.

"Captain! General!" screamed half the mares as they rushed to the fallen General and swarmed over the cyberpony, their hooves twisting her integrated guns up towards the ceiling. The cybermare wheezed a horrible, gurgling laughter as she fired wildly. I watched my last, best hope to ending this lying in a smoking heap on the deck.

A cold and hateful part of my mind pushed simple weaknesses as pain aside and summoned up all my focus. Another of Twilight's spells, one that I'd thought exceptionally bizarre, came immediately to my mind as I imagined the cybermare with the biggest, bushiest beard and eyebrows I could. Her face disappeared into a yellow puff of dandelion-like hair. She staggered back as I shrugged the dead pegasus off me.

My magic seized the excess mane and I yanked his head toward me. My magic brought the sword up through his neck, slicing clean through it. Another pair of Lighthooves's cyberponies rushed me. "Get Blackjack!" one yelled. Instead, he should have been paying more attention, as my telekinesis threw the severed head into his face. He caught it, blinked down stupidly, and was rewarded with a sword swing that decapitated him just as neatly as the first. The third skidded short, deciding to shoot me rather than get in close. My hooves shoved the spurting stump of the second in his direction, and his S.A.T.S.-enhanced shooting was ruined by a blinding spray of blood and mechanical fluids. He'd need a few seconds to clear his eyes.

He didn't even get half a second before I plunged the sword through his hoof, his eye, skull, and brain. A twist and yank and he collapsed into a twisting, twitching heap. The sword came down in a finishing swipe and took his head as well. Even

healing talismans couldn't reverse decapitation. I took three steps towards where the crippled cybermare continued to fire wildly with her arcane energy weapons and sliced them off as well.

The stallion with the crackling tail stinger had finally backed Boo into a corner. "Now! Hold still and die!" he roared, plunging the weapon at the terrified mare. I just needed a few more seconds and I could help her. A few seconds. That's all I needed. Then I'd wake up and find out this was all a dream. A vision. A memory orb of a pony who'd seen too many good ponies die for stupid reasons. Boo ducked at the last second, curling up into a terrified ball as the stinger ripped through plastic and metal conduits above her.

One of which read 'Warning: high voltage.' As the tail ripped through, a noise like an enormous angry bee filled the bridge. The stallion went rigid as electricity played over his body for a second, then sparks shot from his blackening metal bits as his flesh began to char, then he exploded with a sickening pop.

"Hey! Blackjack!" Rampage called from the doorway. "Did you know that there's this great big hole in the side of the ship?" One of the cyberponies fighting the soldiers in the bridge whirled on her and started to open fire. With an annoyed look, she whirled as well, wrapped her barbed tail around the cyberbony's face, and, with a jerk of her haunches, pulled him down under her backside. She sat down hard on his shoulders. She paused, then shrugged. "Tempting, but bloody pleasure before squishy pleasure," she said, then raised both her forehooves and slammed them down on the cyberpony's skull like a jackhammer until his brains dribbled like bloody tar out his mouth and nose.

I rushed to the General and wished for the umpteenth time that I had some kind of healing spell. Her blue bar was still on my EFS. . . she was still alive, but any second I expected it to wink out. Her armor smoked from the beam blasts it'd absorbed. She wasn't moving. I didn't think she was breathing. Screw healing magic. At this point I'd be happy with something more substantial than first aid training I'd gotten years ago, and slept through, because any stable medical emergency would be handled by medics, not me.

Fucking idiot, Blackjack.

I felt the ship begin to list and groan with an alarming, substantial sound and turned briefly to the three mares around the General. "Keep us in the air, or we're all dead!" They nodded and rushed to their damaged stations. The most I could remember was 'ABC'. Her Airway was clear, and when I put my ear to her muzzle, my enhanced

hearing could pick up shallow Breaths... and I forgot what C meant. Contact medical? Control? Concede defeat?

Rising from the twitching body, Rampage pounced on another cyberpony, grabbed his head in a hooflock, twisted, and snapped his neck. That would have been sufficient for anypony besides Rampage. The mare kept pulling, the neck starting to pinch like taffy, till the head came off completely with a wet popping sound. Holding the decapitated head, trailing wires, she tossed it to one of the horrified *Castellanus* soldiers. She whistled at the smoking, crackling remains before Boo. "Nice job. Well done. I give it a nine out of ten. You want to make sure you can take a trophy from your kills, Boo. Or eat them. Or both." The shivering blank wasn't uncurling from her ball.

It was the wrong time for a quip. "Where have you been?" I asked darkly as I stared at the limp, prone form of the General. "Why weren't you here? What were you off doing, Rampage? Fucking? Fighting?"

"Uh, yeah. Well, the second one," Rampage said with a frown. "What's the problem?"

It wasn't right, or fair, but I stormed over to her and shoved her hard against the wall. "The problem?! The problem is if you had been here, the General wouldn't have been hurt! This isn't a fucking game anymore! Glory's family... Thunderhead... maybe even all the Wasteland... could be killed if we can't end this nightmare."

Then Rampage shoved back. I'd only been shoved once by Rampage, when we'd first met. Now, however, she set her back against the wall and kicked out with all four of her hooves. I found myself suddenly flying clear across the room, smashing into the opposite wall and landing in a heap. Rampage glared at me as she slowly advanced.

"I like you, Blackjack, but you're really starting to get on my nerves." Her voice low, and for an instant I realized that this was the Rampage everypony else knew. The Reaper. "You're the one who cares about Thunderhead, not me. You're the one who gives a shit if the Wasteland lives or dies. Not. Me. I only give a marginal shit about a half dozen ponies in this world. The rest can go fuck themselves. This is war. Ponies die. A lot. Good and bad, innocent and guilty. Do not ever talk to me like that and tell me what I should be doing. Ever."

I struggled to my hooves. "I thought you wanted to die," I spat, not able to bring myself to face her.

"And I do. You won't do that. So I do what I always do. Whatever else I want," she said, and I glanced at her and saw her looking at the glowing smear that had been the Captain.

Then the General's blue bar disappeared on my E.F.S. No. . . no! Damnit NO! The pinned cybermare took a deep, crackling breath and shouted "Confirmed! General is dead! Blackjack is alive! Report! Blackjack is—"

Rampage reared up, the bridge mares scrambling away. "Shut," she said with her hooves upraised. "Up!" she shouted as with one blow, she crushed the mare into a ball of bloody metal.

"Medics! Somepony get somepony! Please!" I begged. Rampage looked over as she wiped her bloody hoofclaws off on the slain mare. "Find a doctor!"

"Hush up. I'm not that kind of doctor," Rampage said, her voice becoming oddly calm and gruff, as she knelt beside the fallen general. Her hooves fiddled around her face a moment. "Mmm. Not good." She pointed a hoof at a bridge mare. "You. I need a medical kit. Bring it and see if it has a shot of adrenaline and some MoP electropads. Healing potion too would be nice. And I'd love a saki for when this is all over." She tugged off the bloody claws from her forehooves. "Hope this works."

She rolled the General on her back. "Press one nostril closed and blow in the other when I tell you to." And then, with surprising care, she began to compress the General's chest with short bursts. I was so worried that I didn't even gross out at the thought of putting my mouth there. "Breathe. Breathe." She intoned every ten compressions.

"Is she going to make it?" I asked between breaths.

"Probably not, but she definitely won't if we stop. Breathe." She said as she continued compressions. "I'm glad this body is so strong and this mare has a nice, flexible sternum. Breathe. Always distressing when you snap ribs. Breathe."

A mare rushed in with a plastic box. "Blackjack, after the breath after this one, cut open the chest of her armor with your sword. Breathe. Try not to cut her deeply, but be quick. She has enough problems. Breathe."

As soon as I finished blowing in her nose I levitated over my sword and sliced the armor between the plates as quickly and neatly as I could, tugging the rubbery underlayer away from her body as I sliced. To my shame, I did nick her a few times, but her armor was open. Rampage pulled the front of her armor wide and did another round of compressions. "Breathe, Blackjack. Can you find a vein, young

mare?" Rampage asked the bridge mare. When she shook her head, Rampage nodded downward. "Twenty compressions, then let Blackjack breathe. Breathe. Swap." And Rampage moved away so the beige bridge mare could take her place. "Just like that. Put your whole weight into it."

"Please save her. Please. We lost the Captain. We can't lose her too," she said, tears on her cheeks as she used her weight to press rapidly on the General's chest.

"I'm twenty five years out of residency, young mare, but I'm trying my best. We all are," Rampage said as she sorted through the hypodermic needles. "Why'd they have to go and relabel everything? This was complicated enough before the bombs fell." Then she picked up a bright yellow syringe. "Ah! Here we go." She bit down on the end, tugged off the cap, and said around the fat plastic cylinder, "Halt breaths." When I did, she turned the General's head and felt along her neck, pressed the needle in with care that would do a unicorn proud, and then her tongue pressed a little button. The syringe gave a hiss of compressed gas. "Hope that was her jugular. Otherwise she's going to have a doozy of a headache on top of being dead."

Suddenly the General gave a little gasp, her eyes wide as her body jerked and then went still again. Still, I saw her blue mark reappear on my EFS. "She's alive!"

"Stars and suns, it worked! Old Doc Hatchet would be amazed," Rampage blurted, pressed her hoof to the side of the General's throat beneath her jaw. She then grabbed a pair of thick yellow plastic blocks and cracked them neatly into two pads, revealing a clear goop on one face and pressed it to her side. Then she did the same with the other half on her other side. The backs of the pads was ripped open, and one had a bright yellow crystal. The other had a wire. She connected the pads with the wire then tapped the crystal, which started to growl like thunder. "Get back folks, especially you, Blackjack."

I did, and she tapped it a second time. The talisman flashed brightly, and there was a sound of lightning. The General jerked, coughed, and sucked in a breath of air, then promptly rolled over and puked. She spat, then immediately asked, "Racewind?" In her eyes was a mix of hope and fear I knew all too well.

"I'm sorry," was all I could think to say.

She closed her eyes, took a shallow breath as Rampage pushed the pad of her hoof to the General's throat. "Huh. You must take care of yourself, General. Weak but steady pulse. It normally takes two or three tries, if it works at all. Don't move, and we'll see if it sticks."

"Are we still under attack?" she asked.

"*Cyclone* and *Sleet* are shielding us. *Sirocco* and *Blizzard* didn't even try to intercept their flyers. They passed right on through," a bridgemare reported.

"I am going to personally pluck those two," the General muttered with a groan.

"You mean fuck? As in fuck over?" I asked, a little baffled.

"No. Pluck. It's a more serious condition when you throw them off your ship."

Ah. "Well, you could probably pull it off. That was some good fighting, especially against augmented ponies."

Then she groaned and muttered, "Ugh. . . fighting is for privates. Let me up."

"Stay down for three minutes. Make sure everything is stabilized," Rampage said. "Otherwise, I'll make them haul you to the medical bay and put Blackjack in charge."

I blinked. "No. No way. That's a bad idea. Of monumental proportions. I can't think of what to do with a ship besides 'shoot' and 'ramming speed'."

"Which is why the General is going to indulge me and rest a little bit before climbing back into the seat," Rampage replied, smiling down at the weakened but angry mare.

Storm Chaser clearly chafed but relented. "Since when are you a doctor? I thought you were some kind of Wasteland primitive."

"It's complicated. Even I don't understand it," she said, then regarded me. "So, Blackjack, how have you been doing with your self-destructive tendencies?"

This wasn't exactly the best time for a therapy session, but I guessed I couldn't pick and choose. "Well. . . I. . . better, I guess. I still seem to be the Wasteland's chew toy, but I don't think I'm. . ." then I blinked. "Wait. You're a lot more aware than the last time we met."

"Yes," the doctor said with a curious smile. "I too am wondering at it. Before, it was like being in another world with walls of dense smoke. Little by little, the smoke is clearing. Things are more lucid. For example, I know that I'm a soul in a talisman rather than a pony flying home to Manehattan after a conference. Quite astonishing really, even if I still expect to wake up and find myself crashing to the ground."

"Do the memories help?" I asked.

She nodded. "In a way. I'm also aware of others with me. . . some are aware of me while others aren't." Her smile faded as the Doctor said, "I've been trying to treat the

Angel. She's... a difficult patient. Still, it gives us something to do while I'm inside. Every time we experience another's memories it... connects us."

I swallowed, dreading this next question. "What about Rampage? Have you... do you... is she in there with you?"

She reached up to her brow to fiddle with glasses that weren't there. "I don't know. When I'm here, I'm not aware of things happening 'inside'. And when I'm not here, it's like peering through fog. I can't say for sure one way or the other. I'm sorry."

"I guess, 'I don't know' is better than 'No'." I sighed, "Well, I'm glad you're able to help others in there. Personally, I'm kicking myself over how badly I misjudged Lighthooves. I could have sworn he was going to surrender himself... but he seems like he's going all out."

Rampage's pink eyes softened, and she patted my back. "Don't be. From what I understand, and I may not understand it all, but I think that option was lost when Stargazer was killed. Lighthooves would never have turned himself over to Neighvarro. It wouldn't play in with this martyrdom idealization he has for himself."

"Huh?" I blinked.

Rampage gave a rueful chuckle. "He likely had quite the fantasy about how he'd surrender the weapons. Possible he had speeches written just for the event. But when Stargazer died, his perfect scenario fell apart. He seems to have a self-destructive streak as wide as yours. Perhaps wider. It's an immature response, to be sure."

"If he wanted to kill himself, there're easier ways to do it," I muttered. "I thought his big motivator was saving Thunderhead at all costs."

"I said self-destructive, not suicidal. Subtle but different. Saving Thunderhead is an expression of his psychology, not a driver. For instance, no rational person would utilize a biological weapon as a means of defense or liberation. In fact, had he wished for Thunderhead's security and safety, he would have aligned himself more with Stratus and Neighvarro."

"So what is his driver then?" I asked with a frown.

Rampage arched a brow as she smiled, "What was yours? When you were running around like a madmare? What's driven you to harm and undermine yourself?"

"I..." I opened and closed my mouth. I glanced at the General. "I... hate myself. The things I've done. That I've experienced. What I've become. Ways I've disap-

pointed Glory and failed my friends. Even before leaving 99. . . I mean, even if I only count P-21, I did unforgivable things to him and didn't even know I was doing it." My ears dropped. "I'm trying to do better and make up for it."

"I know." She patted me on the back. "And that's a healthier expression than embracing all the things you hate and becoming an utter monster. But, most importantly, you felt you deserved to suffer horribly for it. Suicide is easy, relatively speaking. A suicidal person wants pain and misery to stop. Self-destruction is complex. It reinforces denial. A suicidal person is the first to admit they're a mess. A self-destructive person will deny it to their grave, and possibly the graves of others."

"But why?" I asked, not just her but myself as well.

"Well, if you can convince him to surrender and schedule a few dozen therapy sessions, I'd be glad to find out. I'll even do it pro bono. Just have him make an appointment. But other than that, somepony is going to have to stop him, and it's going to be ugly. A self-destructive person doesn't just want to be stopped. They want to be destroyed, and they tend to cause a lot of collateral damage in the process. It's the ultimate expression of pettiness and ego, frequently painted over with a façade of selflessness or some higher—"

The General grunted, "Okay. That's enough psychobabble. I'm not dying in the next few minutes. Get me up. There's still fighting going on."

Rampage smiled at me, then reached down and helped nudge the General to her hooves. She shrugged out of the slit armor and pulled off the yellow boxes. As she staggered back towards the captain's seat, Rampage's eyes unfocused and she staggered, then looked around. "What happened? I... you..." she saw the General and blinked. "She's alive?"

"Alive enough to try and salvage this mess." Her stern professionalism returned. "Back to your stations," she said firmly. "I want the ship searched for any we might have missed. And get a clean-up crew in here, please." She took a seat and closed his eyes. "General has the conn. Status?"

It took a few moments for the mares to return to their stations. Most of them had some injury or another; ripped feathers, lacerations, contusions, but none of them left the bridge. "Damage to Starboard sections 2A and 4B and 6C. Breach at 5B and 11C. Engines operating at 78%. Primary systems are down, but we have backups operational and emergency response and fire crews are on," reported a red mare.

"Long range transmissions are down. We're bouncing comms through the *Cyclone*.

No further breach or boarding parties,” a russet mare sniffed as she glanced where Racewind had died. “Casualty list is being drafted.”

A seafoam green mare stared at her console, the metal twisted, the rainbow controls shattered, and little sparks of electricity snapping in the guts. “Uh... navigation is... um... well, we’re still in the air, ma’am.” The General just gave her a look and moved on to the next mare as the Nav mare moved to a smaller terminal in the back of the bridge and started working from there.

“*Blizzard*, *Galeforce*, and *Sirocco* are engaged with the Tower, focusing fire on the projectors. No ship losses reported, but all are being heavily engaged by Thunderhead fliers,” one ochre mare said in low tones as she too glanced at the green puddle on the floor. “*Cyclone* was boarded as well. Colonel Twilight Sonata’s been critically injured and they’re falling back. The *Lightning* is reporting a fire on board.”

I sat down, aching and tired. No. Not just tired. Drained. Botching a spell and getting thumped by a friend didn’t help. So much killing... All over a damned, stupid Tower, fear, and pride. It was the war two hundred years ago, only so much worse as now ponies were killing ponies. That’d ended with nearly everypony dying.

I stared up at the lights overhead. At the moment, I had a greater appreciation for what all the ministry mares had gone through. War had its own terrible momentum, and it seemed like it only ended when both sides annihilated each other. My eyes drifted over to Rampage helping Boo up. Was Rampage right? Should I just flip a bit, pick a side, and get to killing?

No. There had to be another way. Somehow.

The General scowled at the display. Green fire danced over the Tower, but apparently the general didn’t like what she saw. “What are Afterburner and Hoarfrost doing? They haven’t even scratched the launch tubes yet.”

I trotted up beside her. “I have a feeling that there’re going to be a lot of promotions and demotions by the time this is over,” I said, a weak attempt at humor.

“My faith in command has been sorely tested of late. Ever since we’ve come to this place...” she shook her head, then addressed the brown coms mare, “Can the *Lightning* and *Cyclone* still breach the Tower?”

“Captain Cirrus wants to hang back and soften their defenses more. Captain Barrel Roll is directing damage control teams. He asks for fifteen minutes,” the brown mare replied.

“He has five. We can’t be driven off. In the state the fleet would be in if it were routed,

the Enclave would be wide open.” She thumped the arm of the chair with her hoof. “Tell Cirrus to get in range and do all he can to slag those missile apertures, then get us doing the same. And make sure we have some guards posted at our breaches.” As they started to relay orders, she rubbed her eyes once more, and then they met mine. “What were those things, Blackjack? That wasn’t any armor I’ve ever seen before.”

“It’s not. They’re cyberponies made from a pre-war secret project called Steelpony. *That’s* what he meant about a gift from me. He must have gotten a copy of the designs,” I said as I slumped. “This is my fault.”

She snorted. “Unless you intentionally gave him the plans with the aim of getting ponies killed, it’s not. This Lighthooves is smart. If he’d been loyal, he might have become a prominent general himself,” Storm Chaser said evenly. “What are their capabilities?”

I thought a moment. “Similar to power armor but with none of the drawbacks. If they’re using the original design I was, then you’re talking tougher and lots faster. You wear your armor. A cyberpony *is* their armor. Internal regenerative and repair talismans to prevent rejection. Major damage like a lost limb will need to be replaced, but they won’t bleed out and die. They need some kind of power talisman in the chest, but that’s beyond what I know. If I had time, I’d contact Rover and. . .” Hmmm. . .

“Weaknesses?”

“Similar to power armor. Spark weapons work great. If we get knocked out, eventually our systems will self-reboot. No getting trapped in power armor. Ingest metal, food, and gems to maintain yourself. The real damage is long term psychological. You stop feeling like a pony. You can never take the augments out and just be yourself. Most of the cyberponies I’ve met are pretty unhappy characters. . . or crazy.”

“Most non-cyberponies are the same way in the Wasteland, Blackjack,” Rampage said with a smirk. “Especially around the Hoof.” I couldn’t argue with that. And yet, there was something that I couldn’t quite accept. Everypony still wanted to be happy. They hadn’t given up on that simple, little mote of hope. Not yet. If you didn’t want to be happy, you might find contentment, but it’d be the sort that the dead shared.

So I couldn’t give up either.

One of the mares said that the ship was aligned to target. “Open fire. Take some

heat off the *Lightning*,” Storm Chaser ordered. A second later, the entire deck twitched under my hooves as a ‘Thwoom’ rolled through the ship. I could almost see the wave as it ran along the bridge. Then another. Then another.

“Let’s see some results,” the General said as she regarded the front ‘window’. I could see blue beams flickering back and forth from the cornices of the Tower and at the base of those six heavy plates. I watched as a half dozen beams seemed to hone in on one Raptor like blazing claws of energy, but the ship suddenly climbed and only one blue beam flashed over the hull with a line of deep fire. Blasts from the Raptors flickered over the surface like boiling green balefire. Several of the green bolts met one of the blue beam protectors at once, and it exploded in a blinding flash. Gaps were starting to open in its armor as well.

“Jeeze, I thought these Raptor things were supposed to be powerful,” Rampage scoffed as I saw to the trembling Boo, stroking her mane to calm her. “What’s taking so long?”

“You’re not looking at some rickety Wasteland structure, or even an ordinary fortress from the war,” Storm Chaser replied, not taking her eyes off the screen. “Scootaloo saw to it that Stable-Tec built Shadowbolt Tower for Rainbow Dash. It had the most advanced structural and magical defenses of any building in Equestria. You could level Canterlot with a Thunderhead and some effort. It’s old. But nothing short of a direct hit by a balefire bomb could take out the Tower... and even that is a maybe, given that everything in this crosswind-damned valley was made to hold up to anything the enemy could throw at it.”

“You’re just not trying hard enough,” Rampage countered. “If I wanted to, I could take it out. It might take a couple centuries of kicking, but I could do it.”

“Not necessary,” Storm Chaser replied as another two projectors exploded. “Against a few ships, the Tower’s weapons are formidable, but we’re not allowing them to focus fire. A few more arclight projectors down and we should be able to focus fire on the launch bays directly. Lighthooves’s plague won’t be much use if he can’t deliver it.” For an instant, she smiled. “We’ll achieve victory yet.” Then Boo started looking around in alarm, followed by the bridge mares and guards, then Rampage. “Wait... what’s that noise?”

But I knew exactly what that screaming sound was.

The clouds beneath us began to glow with a horrible emerald hue, and the black cloud layer began to roil and boil as if it were a great luminescent sheet being torn and shaken by giant invisible hooves. Great twisting plumes blasted up, hundreds

of feet high as the cloud layer was ripped from below. The *Castellanus* lurched and turned so far that I grabbed Boo with my hooves and slid till I was standing on the wall, the metal around us groaning as the mares shouted warnings.

And then I saw the Core.

Stripped of its clouds, the damned city now seemed alight and inhabited by forsaken souls. Black monoliths stretched towards the sky, the glassy black surfaces lit by gleaming green lines far below, as though the streets were rivers of balefire. Some of the towers had broken and leaned at haphazard angles against each other. Others were connected and draped, as if by spider webs. This was not a pony city. It may have been built by ponies, may have been inhabited by them, but there was nothing of my kind in this place. It was a city inspired by hubris. In the very center, right at the base of Shadowbolt Tower, was a horrible emerald glow within the earth.

"First breeze, what is that?" Storm Chaser breathed.

The Core answered. An emerald beam from atop one of the intact geometric spires sent a line of crackling death into the skies. It caught a climbing Raptor on the stern and I watched as it ripped right through the length of the ship, fire erupting from every port and seam as the stormclouds boiled away, before the beam exploded from the prow of the ship and continued its ascent into the skies. What remained of the Raptor fell like a flaming metal pipe to the ground far below.

"The *Azimuth*," breathed one mare. "It's gone!"

"Incoming fire, General!" shouted another. "Multiple weapon signatures!"

"Evasive maneuvers!" ordered the General. There were no attempts to return fire now. Even a glancing blow from one of those weapons would be a death sentence.

The *Castellanus* began to move as I never imagined anything so big or massive could. Boo clung to me, I clung to a piece of conduit, and Rampage squealed in delight as she slid around like a pinball. I'd thought the force jerking me around would have flung the ship apart as it dove and banked around the slaying beams.

"Looks like their targeting talismans haven't been calibrated for two hundred years," the General hissed. I watched in horror as a beam punched right through the bottom of one Raptor, the green energy slicing right through as it progressed to the heavens. The shot had been off center, possibly the only reason the ship wasn't snapping in half. "They're off by a few degrees."

"Good news for us, then," I muttered weakly, staring at the flames spreading along the side of the warship on the screen.

"Until they compensate for the deviation. Hold on!" A forest of green beams flashed around us, and I discovered that a Raptor could do a barrel roll. I grabbed on to the arm of the captain's seat, the machine's engines howling as the shots from below flared to our left. "It seems Lighthooves wants us particularly badly," the General observed coolly as the *Castellanus*'s engines roared behind us.

"He must know I'm on this ship," I replied. But why? Why would he be after me? Granted, I had every interest in and capability for killing him if we met face to face, but why single me out over any other Raptor?

"General. I'm not feeling..." a mare said weakly from her seat. I saw blood dripping from her nose.

The purple mare in my head whipped out a chalkboard and began doing fancy things with numbers. The Core was teardrop shaped, and five miles across from east to west. The Tower was three miles high. We are all fighting within five miles of the center of the city, inside the strongest Enervation in the middle.

"Get away! Get some distance!" I yelled.

"I'm barely keeping ahead of the beams," the helmsmare shouted as she frantically hit the glowing controls with her pinions and forehooves and the *Castellanus* banked hard the other way. "If we run straight for ten seconds we'll be zeroed in."

Indeed, from the screen at the front of the ship, I could see other ships furiously maneuvering to avoid the beams. A beam sliced right through the front quarter of one Raptor as neatly as my starmetal sword through a neck. Another was on fire as it tried to limp away. The only safe zone was next to the Tower; but I knew that wouldn't be safe for long. He wasn't going to risk shooting his own nose off, but he could tear us apart piece by piece while the Raptors struggled to get clear or get in.

Lighthooves was using the Core's weapons to rip the fleet to pieces. Only the fact the Core's weapons were focused on the *Castellanus* allowed them to try and get any distance. But why? He must have thought the General would have killed me or locked me up. She'd been reported as dead. If he'd been spying right before the bridge mares cut off his signal, he knew I was free. The fleet was his big priority. So why me? Personal? Not his style. I had to have something... something... something that was a threat to him.

My eyes landed on my right forehoof and lingered there a moment. It wasn't possible... was it?

The *Castellanus* jerked hard, flinging both Boo and myself off the wall and across

the room to land on the ceiling, then the wall, floor, wall, ceiling, wall. . . and finally ended up on the floor as smoke poured into the bridge. “We’ve lost turrets two, four, and six, ma’am. Breach all along the C section, from sector 2 to 8.”

“They got us?” I asked, looking around.

“No,” the General replied grimly. “That was a near hit.”

“Hey, Blackjack. Remind you of Hightower?” Rampage yelled from the corner of the room. “We’re all fucked!”

Actually, it did, and that gave me an idea. Okay. At this point, there was nothing else to lose. As the decks started to list, I scrolled frantically through all my broadcast connections till I found it. ‘Hoofington’. I then opened as many channels at random I could, and hoped that she’d hear one of them. It was my only chance.

“Cognitum,” I said as clearly as I could over the clamor and banging and shouting and alarms, “This is Blackjack. I’m about to die again. EC-1101 is about to be destroyed if you don’t stop the weapons.” Nothing happened as a mare called out casualty reports. “If you can’t stop them, Goddess, then tell me how.”

For the longest time, nothing. I wondered if she even heard me. Then several lines of code began to fly across my vision. I caught a glimpse of a few words that stood out. ‘OIA backchannel’. ‘Random walk encryption active’. Then a series of instructions appeared.

>EC-1101 Priority Command

>Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.

> Heir Protocol Enable

> Ministry Mare descendant access.

> Hoofington power grid access.

> Luna and Celestia power generators at 97%. Authorization of Tokomare power generators pending EC-1101 access.

> Do you wish to activate Tokomare power systems?

>Y/N?

I froze. I’d forgotten that the Tokomare wasn’t the sole source of power in the Core. The two hydroelectric dams that flanked the Core must be running the weapons. Cognitum was trying to get *me* to turn on the Tokomare for her! “Forget it,” I countered, and hit no. The instructions repeated several times.

The *Castellanus* jerked as another beam nearly touched it. “We’re slowing down. I don’t know how much longer I can evade,” the helmsmare shouted.

“Abandon ship,” the General ordered, but the surviving bridgemares remained at their station. “That’s an order!”

“We’d be dead fifteen seconds after leaving our posts, ma’am. Just like the *Azimuth*,” a mare protested.

I hissed into my broadcaster, “You have ten seconds and then EC-1101 is dust. Horizons goes off. You lose!” Nothing. At this point I didn’t even know if we were still connected. Then, new instructions appeared in my vision.

>EC-1101 Priority Command

>Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.

>Heir Protocol Enable.

>Ministry Mare descendant access.

>Hoofington power grid access.

> Substation access

> Emergency shutdown SUB 8, SUB 10, SUB 12, SUB 13, SUB 19, SUB 20.

>Password: Thisisgonnahurt

>Confirm Emergency Shutdown Y/N? Emergency shutdown of power grid during power draw not recommended.

>Y

>Are you absolutely, positively sure?

>Y

> Execute: Y/N?

I closed my eyes, swallowed, and mentally hit Y.

My eyes swam with a solid block of rapidly scrolling code I couldn’t begin to understand. Then one of the bridge mares shouted, “General! Look!”

Parts of the Core started to go dark. The lights flickered as one by one they died. As the streets and towers dimmed, the beams atop the roofs also halted. Then, one of the sides of a tower swelled like a glowing blister, bursting in flame and molten metal as green sparks shot out, arching along those black spiderwebs. I saw the

base of one tower engulfed in flames that were crawling up the side of the building. Apparently, power substations didn't do so well when you pulled the plug on them while they were shooting energy weapons. The Enervation note receded and the cloud bank rolled in to obscure the Core once more. Still that sullen glow at the heart of the city remained like an ember.

"The attack's... stopped," one of the mares said in a daze.

"Damage control teams. I want a status update from all departments in two minutes," Storm Chaser said as she calmly wiped her brow. "What is the status of the Fleet?"

A minute later, a bridge mare reported, "Only the *Azimuth* was lost, ma'am. *Perihelion*, *Lightning*, and *Helicity* are all reporting severe damage and are falling back. Only the *Blizzard*, *Galeforce*, and *Sirocco* report no significant damage."

"Of course not. We couldn't be so lucky today," she said with a grimace. "Status of the Tower?"

"It's not firing," another mare said. "I think that whatever happened down in the Core might have knocked them out too."

"Now's our chance. Contact any ship besides those three to help. Get us into a position to board—" Storm Chaser began to say, but another mare looked up.

"Transmission from Neighvarro," a brown bridge mare said as she pressed a hoof over her ear while working her flickering controls. "I can't put it on speaker, ma'am. One second..." she worked furiously with her wing tips, then thumped the keys with her hooves.

"Nevermind the speakers. What's Neighvarro telling us?" she asked.

I watched the mare's eyes unfocus as she listened, then widen in shock. "No. I..." she shook her head and blurted. "General... You... I... they say you have been relieved of your command!" The words made the General slump as if she'd just been shot. She pulled off her helmet, her eyes wide and glassy as she peered at nothing. The bridgemare went on, "We're to..." she faltered. "Oh no..."

"What is it?" the General ordered.

"We're being ordered to shell Thunderhead until Lighthooves surrenders himself and his weapons," she said weakly.

"What! Confirm that last! Who is in command? Who gave that order?" Storm Chaser barked. "Don't those idiots realize that the Tower is exposed now?"

She spoke rapidly into the microphone of her headset, then slumped back in the seat. "I don't know, ma'am. Just that the order's been repeated." The brown pegasus mare stomped her controls with her hooves in frustration, "Wait. I think I got it. . . ." and then there was a crackle before the speakers came live.

A cold mare's voice came in over the speaker. "*Blizzard* to *Castellanus*. Storm Chaser, respond." The lack of rank was like a slap across her face. "Storm Chaser, please respond." The soft amusement in her voice trickled through the ship like cold poison.

"This is General Storm Chaser," she said grimly.

"Oh, I'd heard a report that you'd died. So glad you're still alive." Another soft laugh that precluded any letting her off easy the next time we met. "Storm Chaser, would you please acknowledge Neighvarro's last order, or do you need me to relay it to you?" Captain Hoarfrost asked in amused tones that really made me regret not slamming her head in the door till it cracked like an egg. . . but then I had no one to blame but myself for that one.

"I have received a transmission from Neighvarro but I question if they are acting with full knowledge of the facts here," she said with supreme self-control. "The Tower's defenses are down, Hoarfrost. We can simply fly in and stop him!" Storm Chaser said sternly.

"I'm aware of that. The *Sleet* and *Cyclone* will secure the Tower. However, Neighvarro's ordered us to shell Thunderhead. A chastisement that is long overdue, to be sure," Hoarfrost practically purred. "I'm sure somepony will tell the rest of the council. . . eventually."

The General stared at the communication mare so intensely I thought she'd ignite. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Our long range transmitter is out."

"That is a civilian target! Who gave the order? It can't be with the sanction of the GPE!" Storm Chaser countered through clenched teeth. "Put us through to Neighvarro."

"This came from Councilor Ironfeather's office, and given the incompetence of the commander in the field, you have no authority to countermand it. I have been given battlefield commission to Colonel and placed in command of this exercise," Hoarfrost's icy voice dripped menace. "You can't pick and choose your orders anymore, Storm Chaser. Do you acknowledge the order, or not?"

"*Galeforce*, *Blizzard*, and *Afterburner* have weapons aligned with us," a mare in-

toned, her voice numb.

“Do you acknowledge the order?” Hoarfrost asked coolly.

“This is outrageous. The Enclave cannot—”

The *Castellanus* lurched as the rear of the ship was hit with something that made the whole vessel groan ominously. They were firing on their own now? “Do you acknowledge the order?”

The General looked at the battle-wrecked bridge, the battered bridge crew, the bodies that hadn’t been cleared away, and the hole where the Captain had vanished. “We acknowledge the order,” Storm Chaser said quietly.

“General. . .” the helmsmare said, clearly as shocked as Storm Chaser had been moments ago.

“Do it properly, Storm Chaser. We’ll relay your broadcast to the rest of the fleet,” Hoarfrost replied.

The gray mare rose, her lips pressed together. There were tears on her cheeks, but her eyes were hard and furious. “This is General Storm Chaser. I acknowledge the order. I also wish to acknowledge to the fleet and the GPE that I am resigning in response to an order to kill our own. Never would I imagine that the Enclave that protected our kind for two centuries would stoop to wanton murder of Enclave citizens. It seems Rainbow Dash was right. ‘Pegasi first’ has become ‘Military first’.”

She turned to one of the bridge mares. “Please locate Lieutenant Flywheel. She needs to be briefed on the boarding operation—”

“*Sleet* and *Cyclone* will be sufficient to capture the Tower and its launch systems intact. The *Castellanus* will not be needed,” Hoarfrost said coolly. “Move in position to fire on Thunderhead.”

“Intact? I ordered the launch facilities destroyed!” Storm Chaser blurted.

Hoarfrost nearly purred. “What a waste that would be. Neighvarro recognizes that they have a biological weapon and a delivery system that will make the quarantine a reality. With a few dozen missiles, we will be able to pacify the surface indefinitely. Ironfeather was appalled that the General wanted to destroy such an opportunity.” Now I *really* regretted not killing her. “Do you acknowledge my orders?”

Storm Chaser slumped in the seat and bowed her head. “Our weapon systems have been damaged. We will have to fall back until we can make repairs. *Castellanus* acknowledges the Enclave’s orders.”

"Very well, coward. Please make sure that whatever commissioned officer assumes command of the *Castellanus* does so as well. Civilians do not have the authority to command Enclave ships, after all." Cold contempt came over the speakers. "Fall back to an intercept position. Storm Chaser, please confine yourself to quarters until this mess is resolved."

"Of course," Storm Chaser replied in a voice so hollow that it made me wonder if I'd done her wrong by saving her life.

It was too much for me. "I saved your life, Hoarfrost!" I snapped. "Don't kill innocent ponies in Thunderhead!"

There was a pause. "Ah. The terrorist. You're still alive." Storm Chaser groaned as Hoarfrost continued, "Yes, you did. Let me show you my gratitude by giving you the chance to surrender."

I glanced around the bridge. Maybe I could buy seconds. "Will you spare Thunderhead if I do?" I asked.

"Blackjack! No! That's stupid, even for you!" Rampage snapped.

"Of course. I'll dispatch some fliers to come pick you up. You have my word," Hoarfrost said in amusement. "Please hold them till we arrive. That is an order."

The former general sat back and said in a defeated voice. "Understood."

"Signal ended," the coms mare said. "Do you want me to try and get Neighvarro again? We might be able to get *Cyclone* to relay it?"

"No. It looks like they're determined to make an example of Thunderhead. And us," Storm Chaser said hollowly as she gazed at something a few thousand yards behind the screen displaying the Raptors. "Well, that explains why they left the missile system intact. They intended this all along." She sighed and closed her eyes. I couldn't imagine what she was feeling now, but she compartmentalized it and moved on to the next issue. "Blackjack, you can't be serious about surrendering to them," she said sharply as she frowned at me.

"No. But it might give Thunderhead a few minutes before they start firing," I said as I opened my broadcaster and selected Glory's Pipbuck. "This is Blackjack Radio. Things are bad. General is removed from command. Tower is disabled. Enclave wants the plague and they're going to shell Thunderhead. Give warning however you can. Love you. Promise I'll try and stay out of trouble till I see you again." I wished she had a broadcaster too so she could talk back. I really would like the advice of a smart pony.

"You can communicate with someone in Thunderhead?" Storm Chaser asked.

"Sure. My very special pony is there with a radio. She's the one who stopped her Rainbow Dash impression," I said.

"And you're doing so on non-Enclave channels." She sighed, "Blackjack, you really need to learn to convey pertinent information." She reached over and lifted my hoof. "Turn it on." And then, "This is Storm Chaser. You have about five minutes to get away from the equatorial regions. Take shelter in the internal support structures. If they inflict critical damage..." she paused and looked at me. "Where's a place down below that would be safe for them?"

"In the Wasteland?" I gaped a moment at that thought. 'Safe' and 'the Hoof' did not go well together. At all. Still, I could think of a few places they wouldn't be instantly killed. "The Rainbow Dash Skyport. The Volunteer Corps had some supplies there. The Society, I suppose. The Collegiate... er, Hoofington University. Megamart. Hoofington Memorial Hospital. Fluttershy Medical Center. Even the Hoofington Stadium," I said to the broadcaster.

Rampage guffawed. "Oh sure. Big Daddy will just love that!"

"But he won't kill them and turn them into coats on sight, will he?" I countered.

She rubbed her chin. "Eh... mmaaybe not," she conceded with a little nod. "He tends to prefer thrashing dumbasses. And I think he wants to make a balaklava next. Refugees are kinda under his weight class."

"Just make sure they mention Security. They should be okay for a few days." I blinked and realized that I seriously believed that. Somehow, in my meandering travels across the wasteland, I'd met horrible ponies that lived to kill and dominate, but I'd also met the good ones too. And that, hopefully, I'd done well enough that they would take them in for a while.

Past a while... well, we'd have to work something out. "Guess I better get out of here before they come and haul me off," I said as I cut off the connection.

"So you're not going to nobly trot to your death?" Rampage asked, and then relaxed as I shook my head, "I was worried for a second. You're occasionally really stupid about things like that."

"Thanks," I replied dryly. "If I thought I could trust her to keep her word, I might. I'm just not that optimistic anymore." I regarded Storm Chaser. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to make my escape now. What about you? What are you going to do, General?" I asked. The rank seemed to sicken her.

“What is there to do?” she said simply. “I have been relieved of command. I have resigned. I suppose I should begin to prepare a defense for my court martial.”

“You’re not going to try and help?”

She turned away. “There is little I can do at this point. One damaged Raptor cannot combat three or more, and trying would mean the loss of this crew.” I looked around at the bridge mares, but all were pretending not to hear as they kept their eyes averted from the disgraced general. “I would accompany you, but I’d be twice a fool. I’m a decade or more past the age where I could fly out, do something reckless, and pretend it was glorious.”

I felt a cold, mechanical stillness sweep through me. “What about Thunderhead?” I asked numbly. She didn’t answer. “What about my friends? What about all those ponies? You have to do something!”

“What?” she asked in return a mirthless smile on her face as her eyes distant and dead. “What do you expect me to do? We lost. They got the Tower.” As if to nail the point home, on the front screen was the smoking spire of Shadowbolt Tower. “They won.”

It was that word that set me off. “This is not a game! How can you just. . . give up?”

“Part of being an officer is accepting the reality that bad things happen and there is nothing you can do to change that.” Her eyes turned to the glowing mass that was the captain who saved all our lives, then surveyed all the injured and battered mares at their stations, then finally the battered stallions, living and dead, who had faced an augmented enemy and won. “I can’t risk more lives for a fool’s errand. The Enclave has removed me from command, and they’ll have their damned Tower.”

I stared at her, starting to understand exactly what she was feeling. She was on a mattress of her very own. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of what to say to snap her out of it. Rampage sighed and started towards the door. “Come on, Blackjack. She’s done.”

Storm Chaser glanced at her. “You have a better idea? Or you, Blackjack?”

“Ideas! That’s all it is with you ponies. It really isn’t just Glory!” Rampage said as she turned and sneered at Storm Chaser. “Sometimes you just have to fight! So you don’t know what exactly to do next? So what! Look at Blackjack! She makes everything up as she goes. Sure, it doesn’t always work out, but at least she’s doing something.”

“What do you expect to me to do?” Storm Chaser glowered at her. “I’ve been

stripped of command!”

“Have you been stripped of respect too?” Rampage scoffed. “I served under one of the finest officers in the Equestrian army. Colonel Cupcake. Pudgy little bastard couldn’t lick a zebra unless you dipped it in chocolate first, but we followed his orders into hell more than once. Not because Luna told us to, but because we knew he’d always do what was right. This fight isn’t over yet, and you know that plague is super bad news, so are you going to pony up and prove that you actually deserve that rank, or go sulk in your cabin and think about how absolutely and utterly you failed today?”

Twist then smiled at me through Rampage’s eyes. “I know Big Macintosh wouldn’t give up. Even if it killed him, he’d go down doing what’s right. It’s just the kind of pony he was.”

“I won’t risk the lives of this crew. . .” the General began.

“Permission to speak freely?” the brown Coms mare said as she rose to her hooves. The formal request made Storm Chaser sit up a little straighter in her seat and she nodded. “Every single pony on this ship, from the commanding officer down to the lowliest private, knows what’s at stake. We didn’t join the Enclave to stay safe, get connected with the powerful muckity mucks, and retire after twenty years. We serve because we believe that the Enclave does the right thing. If things really are so bad that some windbrained nag thinks shelling one of our own settlements is anything short of an atrocity, then we’re finished. We need ponies like you if the Enclave is ever going to have a chance.”

The surviving bridge mares began to stomp their hooves and cheer. Storm Chaser looked at the soldiers, but they too nodded, smiled, and even cheered as well. She seemed to be searching for somepony to disapprove, but Rampage nodded with her wide grin, and even Boo stomped her pale hooves... even if the blank didn’t seem to know what she was stomping for. I met Storm Chaser’s eyes, and the gray mare finally showed signs of life again.

Storm Chaser sighed. “I wonder if your LittlePip friend knew she was going to start a civil war with one balefire bomb,” she asked wryly.

I smiled and answered, “Probably not. It’s just funny how things end up that way.” Storm Chaser shook her head, and her expression turned more solemn.

She closed her eyes. “I did not want it to come to this. I would have given almost anything to keep us from killing our own. It goes against everything the pegasi are.

We're competitive, passionate, and driven, perhaps unreasonably so, but we never spilled the blood of our own. I'll have to take solace in the fact that Neighvarro ordered this, and that my surrender won't stop it. But I'm at a bit of a loss as to what I can do with only one damaged ship."

The brown coms mare smiled. "I'll patch a line in with the coms officers of the *Cyclone* and *Lightning*. They have to want to stop this."

The russet helmsmare nodded, "Colonel Sonata would have followed orders, but Captain Cirrus was a close friend of Captain Racewind. I know she'll help."

"Can you do it without Hoarfrost finding out?" Storm Chaser asked.

The coms mare grinned. "I will, ma'am. Even if I have to fly over a tin can tied to a string!"

"That still leaves me with the question of what I can do with a few damaged ships."

"You could ram them!" Rampage said with a grin. "Or abandon ship and let *me* ram them! Oh! Let me do it! Please? Pretty please with murder and mayhem on top." It seemed like Rampage was back to herself.

"That wouldn't address the Tower," Storm Chaser replied.

"So I'll ram the Tower."

"Which wouldn't stop Blizzard and the other Raptors," Storm Chaser answered smoothly.

"Okay, so I'll ram all the Raptors into the Tower!" She twitched a moment in silence. "Ugh. . . you're thinking too much again. Just let me do it! It'll be awesome!" She looked around hopefully, but saw nopony eager to entertain that idea. "Oh come on. It's not like we have another balefire bomb to blow them all up in one big boom!"

A sensation like lightning began at my tail and zinged right up to my scalp. I slowed, staring off into space. She couldn't. . . I didn't. . . I muttered quietly, "When they act like babies, you have to take it away. . ."

"What?" Storm Chaser asked. What indeed, but my mind was going a mile a minute down disturbingly familiar paths. It was impossible. No pony could do it. There was no way.

Unless. . .

Oh!

Oh shit.

"I think Rampage is right," I said absently. If I did this wrong a lot of ponies were going to die. But if I did it right. . . If I dared. . .

"Hot damn!" Rampage said as she rushed to helm, plucked the visor from the helmsmare's head, and popped it askew on her own. She shoved the russet mare aside and gleefully rubbed her hooves together over the controls. Then her rubbing slowed as she glared at all the buttons. "Um. . ." she tapped a few and nudged the panel. "What? Are you telling me that I got a dozen souls in me and none of them can fly this thing?!" She turned to the irate helmsmare. "Where's the manual? I need to learn how to crash this thing."

"Tell me you aren't seriously proposing this?" Storm Chaser said with a worried frown. "I'm not sure a raptor ramming the Tower would bring it down, even supposing Hoarfrost didn't shoot her down."

I opened my mouth, then stopped. "No. But. . . I do have something that might work. And since Lighthooves might be watching me. . ." I looked around and spotted a chunk of charred cyberpony. . . well, they had attacked us... I closed my eyes and began to write on the deck four words, fifteen letters. I fought hard to resist the urge to peek. "Don't say it!" I blurted, hoping that my lines were straight and not wandering all over the floor. The bridge suddenly grew very quiet.

Then Rampage broke it with a chuckle and a sincere, "Blackjack, I fucking love you."

"You're insane," Storm Chaser said as I trotted towards the slagged, ozone-reeking hole that the Tower's weapons had ripped through the armored hull. "Certifiably mad."

"I won't argue that at this moment, but it's the only way to neutralize both the Tower and the Raptors attacking Thunderhead, and I can't do it without your help." I stepped out and was immediately blasted by a gust of cold air. Outside was a narrow ledge that ran along the hull right next to the *Castellanus's* disintegration cannons. Rampage sulked a bit having been informed that she'd have to save her Raptor ramming trick for another day. Still, something to keep in mind.

Off in the distance I could see five Raptors close to the Tower. The rest were hanging back and silently watching. I hoped that Lighthooves couldn't seize his moment and fire a missile past them. Of the five lining up to fire on the settlement, four were on one side, pointing their cannons at the distant cloudy torus of Thunderhead, while one was on the other. Any second, she'd start firing. Soon as Hoarfrost heard I'd

‘escaped’, probably.

“Thank the skies the *Cyclone* has agreed to help. The *Lightning* may as well if they can get that fire under control. I don’t know about the *Sleet*. Captain Snowblind never lets anyone see what she’s planning,” Storm Chaser answered. “I can only hope one of the others comes to our side when they see that Hoarfrost is serious about shelling civilians.”

“We need another ship,” I said with a frown.

“Preferably one that isn’t struggling just to stay in the sky,” Storm Chaser agreed.

“Wait. Wait wait wait. Are you saying that we need to capture an enemy ship?” Rampage asked.

“Well, it would be nice,” I said, a little sarcastically.

The armored mare pointed towards the disintegration cannons at the front of the *Castellanus*. “What’s the range on those things?”

“Ten miles. . . why?” she asked, a little warily now.

“And if I get one of their Raptors, can I ram *that* ship into something?” Rampage asked.

Storm Chaser looked a little pained. “Raptors are just a touch precious and irreplaceable, Rampage.”

The striped mare snorted and rolled her eyes. “That’s what makes it awesome, duh.”

I glanced at the gray pegasus, and she just shrugged. “Okay, Rampage. If you capture an enemy ship, you can crash it.”

“Sweet!” She started to dance a little back and forth. “My own Raptor. This is gonna be so! Awesome!”

Storm Chaser sighed softly. “Irony. Even if he didn’t outright destroy the fleet, Lighthooves might very well achieve his goals. If operations in the north and west fail, there may not be much of an Enclave left. And with your plan. . .”

“Shh.” I tapped my head. “He might be listening.” I was going to smash that Perceptitron thing to bits if it meant a little less paranoia for me.

She sighed. “Well. The fact is that the Enclave’s power has been wearing thin for generations. I might not have agreed with Thunderhead’s pride and certainly not their methods, but I freely admit that they were correct about the slow degradation of our war machine.”

"Maybe that's a good thing. Balefire bombs, Raptors, Thunderheads. . . maybe the world will be a little better without them in it," I told her.

"And yet we're using tools like those to try and save lives too," she replied. "The fault lies not within our tools, but inside our hearts."

"Maybe," I said as I walked out on the edge. "So, Afterburner's ponies are in the landing bay looking for me. . . so all I have to do is. . . ah. . . oh. . ." Oh, that was a long way down. . .

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they don't 'relieve the General of her command'," Rampage promised. "And I'll keep Boo safe."

Now to make my escape. My brain locked up as I stared down and utterly refused to do what I needed it to do. "Um. . . Rampage?"

"Huh?" she blinked.

"A little help?" I asked in a tiny voice as I closed my eyes.

"Oh. Oh! Right." She moved behind me. "It must be my birthday."

"Any time now," I said, rapidly rethinking this. Maybe I could dig through the magic book for some other trick. . .

"One second, Blackjack. Let me savor the moment," Rampage said with a chuckle. "Pull!" And then two metal hooves clanged against my backside and launched me into the air. A second later I heard her shout, "Boo! No!"

And now I was falling. And while I understand that at times I am quite terrifying to certain ponies, I believe I set a new record for screaming like a little filly as I plunged through the air. This was the second time in two days. . . really, I had a feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with having my hooves off the ground. The wind roared in my ears as I dared to look down at the rapidly approaching cloud layer. Those were fluffy clouds. Soft, fluffy clouds. I'd hit them with a great big 'pwooff' and laugh about it later.

Unless, a purple pony in my head speculated, my armored body proved too dense and punched right through the clouds to land somewhere in the vicinity of Riverside, or the river. After all, the clouds were recently disturbed and might not support— I took that purple pony, mentally tied her up, gagged her, and threw her in a closet in my brain. Those were soft, fluffy clouds. Soft and. . . soft. . .

"Fluffy!" I screamed a second before I hit! For a terrifying second I kept falling, but then felt myself quickly slow. I came to a rest, my forelegs catching on the cloud

around me.

My rear hooves kicked open air.

“Okay. It worked! Nice and Fluffy clouds... nice... and...” I frowned as I felt my forehooves start to slip as I was tugged downward. “Fluffy... fluffy... come on!” I said as I swung my legs hoping to grab something a little more substantial and failed. My head popped free, and I suddenly had a view of the ground, and something in my brain broke as the clouds around my hooves began to pull away. My last thought was going to be that I could see my house from here.

Then I felt a pain in my scalp as my direction was reversed and I was hauled back up into the clouds. When I couldn’t see the thousands of feet of empty air below me, my brain kicked in and I looked up to see Boo biting my mane and struggling to haul me up. Fortunately, she provided just enough pull for me to quickly scramble up into the cloud. Together, we sat in the middle of a fog bank, the hole I’d punched in my descent rapidly filling up. “Okay. Boo. No more falling. How is that for a plan?” Boo just cocked her head and blinked at me. I reached out and ruffled her mane. “That’s what I thought. Glad we had this talk.”

Soon, there was one lone cloud scuddling its way over fields of rotten vegetation, propelled by my telekinesis. The Enervation had killed acres and acres of the floating crops, and they hung in the air, dangling limply, the bizarre plants dropping one by one through the clouds as their air sacs burst with flaccid hisses. Normally, that would have concerned me, but at the moment I could see green flashes along the curved wall of Thunderhead. The smooth torus now flickered and flashed, with tiny pockmarks appearing in the smooth side. Hoarfrost was taking her time. If she’d really wanted a body count, she would have taken a Raptor inside the city itself. It was my only hope, because somewhere in that cloud were three of my closest friends, one of whom had just gotten her snuggly body back!

Call me shallow, but in addition to saving tens of thousands of lives and preventing the spread of a cannibalistic plague across the world, I really really looked forward to renewing that snugglage. I wonder if that one spot behind her knee would still make her squeak...

It was times like this that I really wished that LittlePip were with me. With my cloud-walking spell and her telekinesis, we could have flown halfway to the moon with no trouble. As it was, I pattered along as fast as I could push myself and tried to ignore the fighting above.

Suddenly, the cloud layer fell away in a tattered edge, and I found myself in open

air on my little cloud. Beneath me stretched the Core in every direction, the green light suffusing its black canyons. I remembered folks saying that a balefire bomb had gone off in the city. I'd seen the kind of devastation one of those could do; I felt skeptical that something like that had gone off here. It was clear that *something* had happened, though. Few of the monolithic buildings rose vertically. They all seemed to be off by a few degrees. Some actually leaned far enough over to touch. The streets were filled with green light that seemed to come up from the ground, shining from deep below. Swirling black twisters crawled along the streets and buildings. Many of the towers were breached, and cables and wires were strewn from building to building like rotten entrails. Green lightning occasionally snapped from one building to the next.

How could Dawn think ponies could ever live in such a place? How did anypony ever think of building such a place?

So close, Enervation sounded less like a scream and more like... something else. It was almost a machine noise. A staticky note that plucked at my heart. I checked Boo, afraid she'd be coughing up blood, but the blank just blinked back at me, cocking her head in confusion. "Huh. Guess it's not just a cyberpony thing after all." Well, that was the second bit of good news I'd had today.

Storm Front had said there that were two ways in. One way at the top and one down at the cloud layer. First, I tried my own way in. I stuck the sword in the side of the Tower and sliced down, then around, and tried to tug open a hole. No chance. The wall was clearly thicker than my sword. So I scuttled my way around, looking up and down the massive structure for a way in. Up close, the Tower swelled to proportions that threw my sense of direction out of whack. I felt a touch of vertigo as up and down became confused with the horizontal. The hexagonal faces of the Tower were simply so large that a part of my brain wanted to walk on it.

From a distance, the Tower appeared a uniform black, but as I drew closer and closer, it appeared more of a midnight blue. The surface wasn't metal, as I'd supposed. It was the same glassy material as the rest of the Core. A layer of ceramic coating the steel underneath. In places, the layer had chipped away and created bleeding holes of oxidization that streaked the surface like bullet wounds. I puttered my little cloud along the face of the Tower, heading down and around as I searched for the entrance.

I could feel the Enervation tugging at me, countered by that strange tuneless song within. At this point, I'd given up guessing what could be causing it. Just one of many things to ask Professor Zodiac when next we met. I looked down into the very

center of the city, where six enormous towers rose from the foundations below. The ground in the midst of them had fallen away into a deep pit from which issued that soft, baleful green glow.

There! The door resembled little more than a round scar in the side of the colossal building, but when I got down to it, it was easily twice as large as myself. ‘Ministry of Awesome – No Trespassing’. Little chance of that here. I couldn’t see any latch or control, but I doubted that the hatch was as thick as the exterior wall. After all, it was supposed to be opened. Once more I sliced around the perimeter of the hatch, then cut an X through the middle. I gave them a kick, then another, and then the triangles of steel pulled free and tumbled into the Core below. I hopped into the gap and then paused, my eyes drawn down into that emerald pit.

She was down there... Cognitum, and possibly Dawn too. I could just go down there and end it. Get my answers, stop her, and wake from this bad dream I’d been living for two months. All it would take was for me to throw the lives of thousands into the wind. “You’re lucky I have bigger things to worry about,” I growled, pointing a hoof at the glowing pit below me. “But don’t get too comfortable. The second I’m done here, you’re next.” There was every possibility that this would get me killed, but, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel the slightest selfish hope that I’d die.

I looked into the dark interior of the Tower. “Time to double down,” I said, smiling as I imagined Lighthooves listening in and watching me check my ammo for Vigilance. Then, with that smile, I headed into the depths of Shadowbolt Tower.

END PART ONE

(Author’s notes: Sigh... I really wanted this chapter to be the finale of the Thunderhead Arc. I really did. But after edits... revisions... more revisions... re-revisions... it got to the point where if I wrote out the whole thing, it’d be 70 pages. Much as I love Kkat’s canterlot chapter, that’s a bit much for any one chapter to read through at once. So this chapter is coming in two parts. Part Two will be in a few more weeks.

As usual, I want to give thanks to Hinds, Bronode, Swicked, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune for helping me get this chapter out. We went through four versions, one with no pony dying, one with the general dying, one with the general and captain dying, and one with just the captain dying. I think this version is the best, though it will change the General’s arc. As always, thank you Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And I’d like to thank everyone who has continued reading this long and provide feedback wherever it gets posted.

Lastly, I’d like a special thank you to certain people who have helped me immensely this month. As some of you may know, the teaching job I moved here for fell through and the school decided not to

fill it. So I've been struggling to get into their sub teacher program, but it's been an arduous process. I'm still waiting for the background check to pass. I have a temp job, but it's only 16 hours a week and brings in less than 200 a week. I'm starting to work on an original manuscript for E-publication too; hopefully that will help me get ahead of my bills too. Still, if it weren't for these people's help, I probably wouldn't have made it.

So a very heartfelt thank you to Steven, Stepan, Donovan, Michael, Mel, Alexander, Nathan, Kenneth, Frank, Michael L., Keith, Lawrence, Alexander L., Tech, Martin, Nick, Swicked, Wes, Stuart, Cory, Jeremy, Brandon, Brian, Mac, Steven Z, Spencer, Christian, Ryan, Patrick, Erick, Jeffery and all the others who helped me out. When I started writing this, I never imagined the generosity and kindness of my readers. As much as the support and feedback keep the story going, these generous folk have helped to keep me going. If it weren't for them and others like them, I wouldn't have made it. So thank you and thank you to everyone who supports this story and its creator. Any additional help will be greatly appreciated till Clark County School District gets its head out of its butt and finishes processing my paperwork.

Again, thank you everyone.)

62.2 Part Two

Shadowbolt tower. Somewhere in here were Lighthooves, his biological weapons, and a couple dozen unicorns I had to get out of harm's way. First, though, I had to find some stairs or an elevator. The tower hummed softly around me as I moved further into the building, Boo following warily behind. I didn't know what defenses it might have inside, but I imagined that I was going to find out relatively quickly. I hurried down the hall I'd found behind the door; if this was going to work, then every second counted.

I reached another sealed door. Well, it'd worked for the last one... I cut a long slice, and a shrill scream split the air as wind blasted at me through the slit I'd carved. Boo covered her ears as I grimaced. Okay, this was unexpected! I made two more cuts, and the triangular slab of door blasted past me, bouncing off the floor as it flew back the way I'd come, spinning through the outer door and into open air. A gale blew through the hole it'd left, and even I had difficulty fighting the force of air. I moved in, braced myself against the hole, and extended a hoof to Boo. The pale mare took it and struggled to climb over me and into the large open space beyond.

I gave her one last push ahead and then pulled myself the rest of the way through. Boo worked her mouth, rubbing her ears, her mane and tail tangled about her head and haunches. We struggled farther away from the hole I'd sliced and the screaming air gusting out through it. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting that either," I said once we were

clear, glad synthetic ears could handle the shriek.

On the other side of the door was a catwalk; the interior of the tower was hollow, a massive empty shaft with the catwalk running around the outer wall. Conduits ran along the walls from the distant bottom to the top far above. Dim blue lights provided cold illumination throughout the shaft. A few terminals lay against the wall, but I didn't have time to try and hack my way through them. Made me wish that I'd brought P-21 along. I trotted to the edge of the catwalk and looked down. Below me I could see some kind of colossal weight suspended in the middle of the shaft. The weight blocked my view further down, but from the green glow, I could only imagine it was bad; the shaft must go all the way to the Core. Looking up, I saw more catwalks at regular intervals and another house-sized weight. Occasionally, crisscrossing bars reinforced the shaft.

Then I spotted, curled up against the wall by the terminals, three desiccated pegasus corpses. From their clothes, they appeared to have been civilians. I supposed that meant that nopony had come down this far in a very, very long time.

"So... stairs. Stairs. Where are the..." I glanced at Boo and saw her examining an odd platform against the wall with a set of up and down buttons beside it. "Or, we can take the elevator. That's good too." I trotted over to her and stepped on, kicking the up button with a rear hoof. The platform hissed, whirred, and began to climb. "Good. We'll get up there in no time. Easy peasy."

Wait, I didn't just say that, did I?

"Warning! Unauthorized pony detected. Warning! Unauthorized pony detected," an automated mare's voice called out as crimson lights set in the walls began to flash bright red. Red bars appeared in my vision, and I drew Duty and Sacrifice, glad that Lighthooves had left them with Stratus. Suddenly, a crackling blue beam lanced down from above, the energy burning a hole in my barding and hide and searing the metal reinforcements beneath that. I nearly rolled right off the elevator platform as I got out of the path of the energy and spotted the hemispherical beam turret on the underside of a catwalk. Slipping into S.A.T.S., I put four rounds into it before something within exploded with a cloud of crackling blue smoke.

One down, a whole lot more to go. The elevator was constantly carrying me closer to the targeting ranges of the turrets above, and I couldn't take my time to pick them off at my leisure. Blue beams burned hotter than red, that was for sure. My spine ached, the burn plucking pain with my every movement, but I couldn't stop. The elevator continued to rise, and on the bottom of every catwalk waited more beam

turrets. I moved around as best I could in the limited space, pulling Boo out of the sizzling paths of the beams while blasting turrets as soon as I was able. Far too soon, Duty and Sacrifice's hammers fell on spent casings, and my inventory said I was out of spare rounds. I switched to the assault carbine, but the lighter bullets weren't nearly as effective at chewing through the turrets' plating.

One magazine emptied, and I slapped another home without taking my eyes off those damned turrets. Every time we passed one catwalk, the ones above began to open fire on us. "It's times like this that I really wish you could use a gun, Boo!" The blank covered her face as she cowered at the edge of the platform.

Crack crack crack click click! went the carbine as I worked through my supply of 5.56mm ammunition. I could see the top of the shaft, but there were still a half dozen turrets between me and it. I drew Vigilance and braced myself. Vigilance was a fine weapon, but not at long range. I hissed as blue lines burned my body, trying to make each shot count before I got too close. One by one, the heavy rounds blew apart the blue beam turrets. Five. Four. Three. I became nervously aware that my supply of ammo was rapidly diminishing. I dropped into S.A.T.S. to pop the third turret. Two...

Boo cried out as one of the beams hit near her, the mere heat of its passage scoring her pale hide and peppering her with flecks of melted lift platform. I immediately blasted the turret. One, but Vigilance was dry now, too. As the last turret swung its searing beam towards us, I focused my will and fired magic bullets. It was a hundred feet away. Seventy-five. Fifty.

Finally, the blue hemisphere popped in a shower of sparks just as the elevator began to slow. I collapsed next to Boo. Psalm's operative barding had gotten a few new holes in it. I examined Boo, checking her burns. "I really need a healing spell," I muttered, digging through my inventory for some healing potions. The contents appeared more brown than purple, and I didn't know what they'd do to her. Frowning, I tossed them over the edge. "Hopefully we'll find something, okay Boo?"

She sniffed and wiped her teary eyes with a hoof. I sighed and looked around; we'd reached the top of the shaft, and there was a solid dome above us with a single flight of stairs leading up to it. I drew my sword and advanced up the dimly lit, curving steps. We came to another door and another two desiccated bodies lying at the base of it, their coats and feathers marred by hideous burns. The barding that remained suggested that they were surfacers. Celestia only knew where they'd come from or how they'd gotten this far only to die alone and in pain before a locked door with a terminal beside it. 'System Locked; Contact Sysadmin' glowed coldly

beside the portal.

Fortunately, I had a skeleton key. Cutting through the locks, I struggled to heave and shove against idle motors. They gave grudgingly but opened enough that Boo could squeeze through, followed by myself. Soon as I was through, the door, locks or no, slid closed once more. On the far side of the door was a hall filled with musty air and covered with a delicate layer of dust. I walked carefully along; there were no red bars on my E.F.S., but turrets didn't appear until they decided to start shooting.

Someday, I was going to have to find a PipBuck technician and sit on them till they explained slowly enough for me to understand how E.F.S. threat detection worked.

There were a few blue bars in sight, too, so I kept my clanking and clunking as silent as possible. My heavier hooves weren't exactly made for stealth. Next time I saw Rover, I needed to find a way to make my legs interchangeable. When I had stealth augments, I got into combat. When I had combat legs, I needed stealth. That, or he just needed to come up with strong, silent legs. *That* wasn't asking too much, was it? Okay, maybe a little...

I really could have used a map or an indication of where the next set of stairs was. These rooms seemed used mostly for storage and were linked with identical, criss-crossing hallways. Filing cabinets filled with old paperwork, shelves with arcane and forgotten equipment, chemistry sets coated in dust... I never really was much of a scavenger. P-21 could have swept through in no time and had everything of value without disturbing the dust. Glory might have been able to actually use those chemistry sets to whip up something for Boo's bad burns. Which Lacunae could have just healed. And Rampage wouldn't have been any help with the salvage or the burn, but she would have said something obnoxious and funny. I sighed and leaned over, nuzzling Boo's cheek. "I'm glad you're here. I really miss my friends. Rampage was right about splitting up. Nothing good comes from it."

Boo blinked, then gave a little baffled smile and nuzzled back. Then she sneezed. That simply stirred up more dust, causing more sneezes from both of us. Oh yeah, master of stealth, that was me.

When we stopped, I saw that the dust covering of some papers tacked to the wall had fallen away enough that I could read some of them. 'Support the Enclave. Support your own kind.' I magically brushed more of the dust off the poster, covering my muzzle with a hoof, and revealed a teal pegasus with blazing yellow mane and eyes. Her gaze and smile were the kind of hard smirk I'd come to loathe: arrogant, intolerant, and cruel. Beneath her was printed 'Support Lightning Dust for Councilor.'

There were other clippings beside it, and I exposed them one after the next. 'Rainbow Dash storms out of emergency meeting after failure to obtain aid for surface.' Another read 'Has Rainbow Dash spit her bit? Experts fear for former Ministry Mare's psychological health.' Another read 'Doctor Mephitis confirms surface unfit for pony survival, advocates quarantine of surface for pegasus health.' That name rang a bell. I brushed off more papers with my magic. 'Pound Cake named Councilor of Thunderhead. Promises to serve the pegasus people and lead proudly.' 'Princess Celestia sightings at SPP hub dismissed as hoax,' and 'Doctor Mephitis appointed director of Shadowbolt Tower, named Pony of the Year.'

That title came with the picture of a yellow pegasus stallion, smiling confidently as he eyed the camera in a decidedly smarmy manner. 'Smart, rich, and single: the most eligible bachelor in the skies.' and 'Doctor Mephitis: returning to the surface risks countless pegasus lives. Rainbow Dash's plans threaten to expose pegasus population to foreign diseases introduced by zebrakind.' Zebras. That was why the name was familiar.

"You mother fucker!" I shouted, rearing up and slamming the wall with my hooves, all thoughts of silence forgotten. "You got away with it! You actually fucking got away with it!" My kick had disturbed more dust and exposed other articles. Given my propensity to run into ponies who should have been dead two centuries ago, I *really* hoped I ran into an undead or robotic Mephitis. Anypony who left thousands of zebras to starve in their camps deserved what I'd do to them. I glanced at the rest of the headlines but didn't take the time to read them. Apparently, the doctor was named some kind of expert in diseases, claimed to be the Ministry of Peace's finest virologist, and backed up the Enclave's every word that the surface was rife with zebra and pony plagues. He'd been given awards. He'd been rich! One article named him one of the top five most pivotal figures of the Enclave's founding. He'd provided grotesque pictures of horrific zebra diseases for the public to ingest right as Rainbow Dash attempted to get the pegasi to clear the skies.

"You were nothing less than a two-bit murderer," I snarled at his image.

Boo whined and nudged my shoulder. I blinked at her and relaxed a little. "Right. Right. He's not worth the time, and I don't have any to waste." I forced myself into the hall again, looking left and right and wondering which way would take me up. Then I glanced at Boo. "Say, Boo, which way do you think we should go?"

She blinked at me, and I waited, then she blinked again, and still I waited. I smiled. She smiled. Then, for a moment, I was sure she was going to understand me and pick a direction... but she only gave another soft little sneeze. I deflated a little.

“Never mind, Boo. I guess we’ll go...” I trailed off as she started to sniff and then limped away. “That way.”

The stairs were located behind an old maneframe casing and a bookcase that’d fallen at an angle against it. Boo disappeared through the gap, and I frowned, carefully pushed the bookcase aside, and followed her up. This floor wasn’t quite as dusty as the one below, and the dim blue lights were a little brighter on this level. There was less garbage and more stuff. . . okay, the stuff was still garbage to *me*, but it was clearly important enough to *somepony* that they came down here to dust. There were mostly file cabinets and powered-down terminals. I found one sign that read ‘archives’ painted against the wall. Boo made a beeline down the hall and nuzzled at a door.

“Mmm... there has to be one of them somewhere around here,” I muttered, following more slowly and checking one crate after another for the last thing I needed for my plan. No luck...

I opened the door slowly to a room that showed signs of habitation. There was more clutter here, books lying around unshelved and papers arranged on tables. There were more pictures of the yellow ‘doctor’ on the walls, and better-preserved clippings of his life. I avoided reading them, as I was nauseated enough already. I *really* didn’t need to read his claims about surface parasite transmission, which apparently would contaminate the clouds. From my glances, he was wealthy, influential, and useful to an Enclave trying to find every excuse not to return to the surface... and I was getting really sick of constantly seeing him in front of me everywhere.

There were also Fancy Buck Cakes on the table, and a few empty wrappers along with some bottles of Sparkle-Cola. Boo, with all the swagger of a wasteland scavenger, whipped one of the cakes off the table with her tail, caught the package in her teeth, ripped it open with a swing of her head, and set the ovid snack cake flipping through the air. It fell into her open mouth, where it was masticated with pride. I myself had a bottle of Sparkle-Cola as I surveyed the rest of the room. Maybe it was the tent fort made out of a tarp in the corner, or the foalish drawings on the walls, but this struck me as a kid’s den. It’d happened all the time in 99; some fillies would take it upon themselves to claim some corner of the utility or storage level and make a name for themselves. In 99, we’d been the ‘Card Club’.

I was just about to head on when I heard a snore from the fort, and not the snore of a colt or filly, either. My magic nudged the flaps of the tarp aside, and I was instantly hit by an uncoltish reek of Wild Pegasus. I saw a pale rump bearing a cutie mark of a camera and attached to a stallion curled up with a bottle of whiskey. I tugged it

from his grasp. . . he could use it as a weapon, after all.

Okay. Maybe I took a long pull off it as well, to steady my nerves.

Unfortunately, my action had awoken the inebriate. He opened two bleary eyes, took one look at me, and shouted, "Don't kill me! I didn't know what the fuck he was going to do! Honest! Hail Neighvarro!" Then he focused somewhat, and I realized that I recognized his wrinkled, slept-in suit and his face, despite the stubble covering his chin. "Oh. . . hey, Babe."

I knelt before him. "Chicancery? What are you doing here?" His eyes suddenly bulged. "What is it?" I imagined murder implants going off inside him. . . maybe a bomb. Then he blew all right. He lurched forward and vomited down my front with impressive force.

Wasn't this such a lovely day?

"I think he's gone completely nuts," the pale pegasus said hollowly, no longer suave with his brown mane slicked back. He'd had a taste of the real Wasteland, and it wasn't fun anymore. "When he sprang me, he just butchered his way through everypony right up to Stratus. Said that Stratus robbed him of something that he deserved. Then he pinned him to his own desk like a butterfly. Said either Neighvarro would kill you or you'd get killed by Neighvarro. Either way, it worked for him."

"Did he mention Stargazer?" I asked, finishing cleaning off my barding with articles on the medical bastard.

Chicanery nodded, holding a bottle of Sparkle-Cola between his hooves. "After we got back here. Said he'd worked it all out, but with her dead it was ruined. But then he got even crazier. Not in the way I always thought, you know? I thought crazy was some villain going 'bwa ha ha' while blowing up the world. He said he wanted everypony to get exactly what they deserve. Then he kicked my ass out of... urp... out of Fabrication. That's where he was getting the missiles ready before the power links to the Core blew up." He gestured to the room. "End of the world stuff makes me nostalgic. Who knew?" he said mirthlessly.

I looked around the room. "Is this your base?" Maybe there was one of them around... nope...

That brought a sad smile to his face as he gazed around at the scattered paper. "Yeah. Back when we were colts. Us and a few unicorns our age formed the Butt

Brand Buckaneers, to help us find our... ah... well, that's what we called our cutie marks. Anyway, seemed as good a place as any to wait and see who kills off whom first."

I closed my eyes and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Do you have any of these lying around?" He narrowed his eyes, peered at it, and started to speak. "Don't say it!" I blurted, now baffling the white stallion. "Lighthooves might be listening with your perceptithingy."

Chicanery wore a skeptical expression, "That's either paranoid or genius. Either way, no, I don't have one. They'd keep something like that on the fabrication level." Figures. His eyes ran over my metal legs. "You don't have a jamming device in all that?"

I frowned. "My augmentations aren't exactly the same that Lighthooves is using. Mine are cobbled together with a repair talisman, two other sets of cyberpony parts, and a suit of power armor. His are... I don't know what. But they're a damned bit better than mine."

"Sounds like you need an upgrade," he joked. It'd been a joke. I should have taken it like a joke.

Instead, I turned and slammed him into the wall with enough force to wipe that smile off his face. A little harder... "Don't say that," I growled as I glared. "Don't even think it. I don't want an upgrade. If there was a way I could have less metal and more me, I'd take it in a heartbeat... if I had one."

He seemed to get my meaning, and I backed off a little. He rubbed his shoulder with a hoof. "Okay. Sorry. Really. I just... from the way Lighthooves made it sound, cyberponies are all 'more is better'. More strength, more speed, more armor, bigger weapons... isn't that the way of things?"

"It's different," I replied, shaking my head. "You can collect all the guns, armor, and stuff you want. At the end of the day, you can set them aside, if you're lucky enough to be able to relax. I don't ever get to stop being a cyberpony, though. You have no idea what it's like to walk all day and not have a sore hoof. I once ran fifteen miles, and I wasn't even winded. Awesome? Sure, it was in one respect. But I don't feel normal. I have trouble remembering what being tired feels like. What I have is an illusion of being a pony. Without that, I am so much less."

Chicanery stared at me with a new understanding. "The lies we tell ourselves to get through the day, I suppose." He gave a little half smile. "So no way you'd ever take

on more metal? Not even to be a big hero?"

I sighed, really wanting to lie. "Only if the lives of thousands hung in the balance. Even then, I'd want to find another way. Any other way," I said. I had to be honest; I'd take that next step. "I wonder if Lighthooves realizes how much he's given up, augmenting himself."

"Doubtful." He stood, swayed, and looked at the papers. "If he did, he'd rationalize it. He was always a little too smart for us. I wanted to see if I could get a 'farts lighting' butt brand. He did research papers on the heroes of the Enclave and how they got their cutie marks."

He gestured over to the table. "That's all research he did for a dissertation for his commission." My gaze was drawn to some of the neatly arranged articles and clippings and picked out some prominent names in the headlines and captions. Lightning Dust. Rainbow Dash. Soarin. Spitfire. Pound Cake. Borealis. Zephyr. Touchdown, Dumbell, and Hoops. Mephitis. The name stuck like a thorn and I levitated one page and scanned the biography. It touted his charitable work with zebra POWs due to his childhood growing up in zebra lands. Well, that explained the name, at least. From the article, he sounded like a saint warning the pegasi that due to radiation and disease, the surface would be uninhabitable for generations. But I knew what he'd done at Yellow River. This article made the camp sound like the Society's country club.

Well, no time to waste on ponies long dead. "Wow. Sounds like he and Glory would have gotten along great as kids," I said sarcastically. "Where is he setting up the missiles?" I guessed the answer was 'up there' and got that confirmed when he pointed up with a hoof.

"He converted the old Raptor arming and reloading facilities to launch them. It's up past the living quarters, the barracks, and fabrication," he said as he ran his hoof through his tangled mane. "I don't know how he convinced the others to follow him, but they're all cyborgs like you. The ponies in medical were taken up to the barracks to make the conversion, and they've been making them for the last twenty-four hours."

"Cyberponies might buy them some time, but not forever. Can he launch with the power from the Core cut off?" I asked, chewing my lip.

"No. The launchers he's made have too much draw for the tower's auxiliary power supplies," Chicanery replied, and I let out the breath in relief as he went on, "He could probably fire them one at a time, but to do that they'd have to do everything

manually; it'd take forever." Finally, some good news. Storm Chaser would be glad to hear that. "You see, he wants to fire them all at once," he rambled, and my good news feeling started going away. "That takes a lot of power to open all the doors and run the pumps and hydraulics and stuff..."

That other horseshoe dropping feeling was getting much too strong for me. "But without the power supply from the Core, there's no way he can launch them all like that, right? Right?" I demanded, grinning hard to try and force the universe to make it so though the power of desperate thinking.

"No no. No chance at all," he said and I relaxed. "That's why he's connecting them to the stable's reactor."

"Stable?" I blinked, felt my eye twitch and my mane crawl. "What stable?"

"Welcome to Stable 96," he said as he led me through the heavy, rolling door and into the clean, familiar, comfortably claustrophobic halls of a stable. "Current population two hundred and sixteen unicorns, ninty-two earth ponies, and sixty pegasi." All of the *living, still-there* stable dwellers wore achingly familiar stable barding, midnight blue PipBucks on their forehooves, and a glow of cleanliness. If I only had more time to talk and take in the stable. The occupants also seemed to completely ignore me save for curious glances when my attention was elsewhere.

I'd anticipated a few dozen unicorns, perhaps a hundred at the absolute most, living in slave-like conditions under pegasus overseers. I hadn't expected families, elderly, and young all going through their lives. Worse, this was a stable gone right. There were no males being kept as breeding equipment in the back rooms of Medical. No life support systems barely holding together. Posters hung stating, 'Respect diversity, genetic and personal.' and showing a unicorn with a glowing horn, a pegasus with wings outstretched, and an earth pony with a wrench: "We are strongest when we work together."

Sadly, it seemed as if the demands of the Enclave had encouraged unicorns over the other pony races, but everywhere I looked I saw signs that this stable had been devoted to unity rather than population control. Most ponies wore sober expressions, talking in worried tones, and everypony except the foals seemed to realize something was very amiss. "I imagine that the Enervation hit you bad," I said in low tones.

"Enerwut?" he asked blearily as he led me through the crowd, getting a few greeting

from ponies as he passed.

“The flesh-liquefying psychic scream that went off about half an hour ago?” I asked.

“Um, I was passed out,” he pointed out. “But I don’t see any liquefaction.”

“You’re right. . .” I muttered, frowning. From simple proximity, everypony in here must have heard the scream, and I heard a few talking about how they had been sickened by it... but this was the closest point to the Core without being *in* the Core; shaken nerves or no, none of them seemed dead.

Now was hardly the time, but I couldn’t help my interest. There were lots of places around the Core that weren’t affected by Enervation, even when they were right next door to it. I’d thought that it’d been due to the placement of the silver pest control rings, but it seemed to be more than that. All the places with vibrancy and life seemed resistant to the life-sapping energy, and they had more than just an absence of silver rings.

These ponies were working together, not just cohabitating a space. Every settlement that cooperated and didn’t exclude seemed far more resistant to the effects of Enervation than those focused merely on survival. The Reapers, with their bright field of grass, brought together gangs from all across the hoof to focus aggression and conflict into relatively harmless competition. The Collegiate worked together to protect and share knowledge. Even the Society had serfs and nobles working together; it wasn’t ideal, but it was better than out-and-out slavery. Megamart had the Finders working together in trade. Meatlocker’s ghouls banded together to maintain their sanity. Riverside, when I first saw it, had been a dying town, as had Rover’s people. Then, when they worked together, life had returned. It’d be easy to simply count that to economics, but it seemed like there was more to it. Even Chapel, which had nothing ‘special’ about it at all, kept the Enervation back with its inhabitants’ hope. The silver rings were a part of it, but it seemed like resistance to Enervation wasn’t simple cyberponification or a lucky lack of pest control talismans. It was something more. . . elusive. Something stronger. It was. . . It was. . .

It was something a smarter pony than me could have figured out.

I had a vague impression of a very disappointed little purple unicorn in my brain banging her head repeatedly against my skull, but I put it out of my mind as we moved to the social areas. The café off the arboretum could have been taken straight out of 99. I wondered if they had similar schools and activities. Did they have a food recycler, or were they dependent on food from outside the stable? How had they avoided the mistakes of 99? Did they follow the same three-shift protocol

for their security or go with a day and night two-shift structure or an even crazier four-shift system? Ugh, if only the lives of tens of thousands weren't on the line!

Boo shied away from the others at first, but as we crossed the arboretum, the blank's head snapped around to focus on a plate of freshly-made snack cakes. She trotted up to the table and extended her mouth towards one. The heavysset mare who'd sat down with the plate growled, "Hey you! Stay away from my cakes." Boo blinked, and her eyes widened as the mare began to chow down on the plateful and gradually ate more and more slowly. "Stop that, you freak," she grumbled. Boo didn't move an inch. She just stared, her eyes growing moist as her lip started to quiver. "Don't make me call the soldiers," she warned, then chanced a look around and saw half the room glaring at her. "Um... Please?"

A moment later, with a plate of snack cakes balanced on her rump and one in her mouth, Boo followed after us. She'd somehow been able to weaponize cute.

I walked through the unfamiliar stable, continually taken aback by the bright lights and clean air, till we came to a door that read 'Overpony'. Swallowing, I frowned, knowing that this wouldn't be pretty. In the Overmare's office, a half dozen ponies stood watching some monitors set in the wall. The things on the screens weren't good at all. I saw Thunderhead, the smooth torus now lumpy and distorted from the impacts of the disintegration cannons. Hoarfrost was keeping her ships close to the tower and using her long range guns. Good. So long as she kept doing that. . . On other screens were images of cyberponies fighting off three times their number of normal Enclave troopers in the halls of the Tower.

The six ponies turned and stared at me, most with bafflement and one with curious indifference, but from their expressions that I picked out the Overmare. Her features were less 'what the fuck' and more 'this isn't good'. I approached the tan unicorn mare with the short, no-nonsense brown mane. "Overmare?"

"Yes?" a distracted-looking unicorn mare said from the corner of the room.

"No, this is the Overmare, Blackjack. Overmare Farsight," Chicanery said as he trotted up to the pale butter-yellow unicorn mare with a dark brown mane spilling messily over her shoulders. She'd been the one with an indifferent expression, but, as I looked closer, I saw that her brown eyes were completely clouded over. "Mother, this is Blackjack. She's a cyberpony from the surface."

Her vapid expression turned more serious, adopting the troubled aspect I'd expected. "Ah. I see. She didn't sound familiar." She rose to her hooves, her PipBuck making little clicks as she walked around the gathered ponies and took her seat

behind the desk. “And I take it that this is something serious with regards to the goings on in Thunderhead and up above in the Tower?”

“Yes. And your son, Legerdemain,” I said with as much gravity as I could put in my voice. I sounded almost like Mom, actually.

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Please excuse us,” she said in quiet but firm tones. Without argument, the other ponies left. I felt myself straighten a bit, even if she couldn’t see me. When they’d left and the door had closed, she said, “So. Tell me. What do you have to do with my son and my stable?”

“Well, I’m out to stop Lighthooves. He’s developed a biological weapon and a delivery system that can disperse it all across Equestria. Now Neighvarro is here to take it from him. I’m here to destroy both the plague and the means to spread it,” I said grimly. “If he tries to stop me, or tries to launch the plague, then I’ll have to stop him, too.” Probably the fatal sort of stopping.

“Lighthooves?” the mare asked in confusion.

Chicanery spoke up. “She means Legerdemain, Mother. That’s his code name. He’s... she’s telling the truth. He’s made a real mess of things.”

Her face fell, but from the solemn resignation on it, I suspected that she knew something like this was coming. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she replied quietly. She took a moment to be a mom, then returned to being the Overmare as she asked, “And your plans for my stable?”

“I’m... not sure.” I sighed. “Honestly, I didn’t even know there was a stable here. I’d thought there’d be a few dozen unicorn workers here. Maybe even a hundred. I had no idea that there was *a stable*.” I looked at the screens. “I’d planned to evacuate all of you on a Raptor.” Now I could hear the cracks appearing in my own plan.

“I see. Well, Applebloom did what she did best: build a safe and secure living place for the residents of the tower,” the Overmare said evenly. “We are not, however, a *true* stable. A stable is meant to be an independent, self-sustaining. We lack that independence. We are beholden to the Enclave, no matter which settlement manages us or what shape our door is.”

“So you’re prisoners?” I asked with a frown.

“In a very pleasant prison, but a prison none the less,” she said with a nod. “We’ve never been allowed to train with weapons, only to repair them in the fabrication labs. Fighting is firmly forbidden.” Which meant that they’d be easy pickings out in the Wasteland. Maybe I could put them with the Society, but I was already putting

a burden on Grace with potential Thunderhead refugees. “The actual conditions under which we work vary from generation to generation. The current head of the tower lives in and works out of Neighvarro, so we’ve been fortunate to enjoy greater liberties than we’ve had in generations.”

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “Now I don’t know what to do.”

“Did you think that by taking us away, you’d remove something that Thunderhead and the rest of the Enclave fight over?” she asked.

“No. Actually, I had a different idea for that. A way to stop Lighthooves and save Thunderhead from the Enclave. But I need to get up to where he’s holding the missiles,” I said, trying not to give specifics as I fidgeted, glad she couldn’t see me.

She cocked her head, then smiled. “Oh. I see. Your plan involves doing something to the Tower itself. Something that might damage or even destroy our home.”

I took a deep breath and then sagged. “Something like that. Now. . . I’m not sure. I just didn’t expect there to be so many ponies here.”

“So now you have a hard choice: do you take the homes of hundreds of ponies to save the lives of thousands, even when we did not do anything to deserve our loss?” Farsight asked with a cock of her head and a sad smile. “I don’t envy you the weight of such a decision, Blackjack.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t have a second plan. Not one that would take care of the plague and those Raptors. “I’m sorry,” was all I could say.

“Mmmm,” she said, then ran her hooves along her desk and pulled open a drawer with her magic. “I was not born blind, you know. When I was young, I had some of the sharpest eyes in the tower, and I was always peeking in on the soldiers in the barracks. But some of them decided, perhaps as a lesson, that they would give me a flashbang grenade. I suppose they thought it would startle me, or that I would get in trouble. They didn’t understand that I had no idea what a grenade was or that, after the stem was pulled, you must throw it away. I never saw again after that. It was hard, losing my sight. Unfair. Wrong. Even when the pair were dishonorably discharged, it didn’t bring my eyes back.” She pressed her lips together a moment. “I could have given up or turned bitter. Instead, I learned to listen and to see things through the perceptions of others. I became so adept at it that I was made Overmare when the last retired.”

“I am so sorry,” was all I could say, feeling lame and wrong. “I wish there was another way, but I can’t think of one. I have to save as many as I possibly can.”

“That is some small comfort,” she replied grimly as she pressed her lips together, then shook her head. “I do not know where we can go. Thunderhead, I’m told, is under attack. We know nothing of the surface. I fear stable ponies won’t last long out in the wilderness. This stable is all we know.”

“Yeah. I didn’t last long when I’d stepped out of my sta...” I paused as a tiny purple mare pulled out a chalkboard, wrote 96 -> 99, and then smiled hopefully at me as she waved her hoof in vague encouragement. “I came from a stable whose population was... almost wiped out.” By me, I omitted. “There’s a hoofful of survivors left. It’s not nearly as nice as your stable is, but it is a standard Stable-Tec Stable. You’d have to share it with a group calling themselves the Steel Rangers, but I have a feeling that you two would have a lot of offer each other. They need ponies to run the stable and fix their weapons. You need a place to stay and ponies with experience fighting the Wasteland. The survivors there could show you all the ins and outs of the place, and you’d keep it alive.”

Her milky eyes widened in surprise, but then her face turned cautious. “And we would be free there? Not workers nor slaves?”

“You’d have to work that out with Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof and the survivors, but I know Stronghoof would want a fair deal,” I assured her. “He’s that kind of pony.”

“I see. It seems I have a choice. Do I trust you, hope that you are correct, and hope my people will be willing and able to evacuate quickly, or try and stop you, throw my lot in with whoever is the victor in the tower, and maintain the status quo, at best?” she said evenly. She closed her filmy eyes and was quiet a moment. I really did not want to kill another stable. I really, really didn’t want that. Finally, she said, “It is better to dare and die for something better than it is to live a life subscribed by another. I’ll need a few minutes to contact section heads. How much time do we have?”

“An hour. After that... I don’t know.” I couldn’t press the envelope past that. “You contact your heads. I need to check in and made some calls.”

She nodded and clicked her way to the door, talking in urgent and low tones. For a second, I worried she might be trying something, but my augmented hearing heard instructions being given for them to start preparing the population for evacuation.

First, via EC-1101 bouncing through the Enclave’s communication network like a pinball, I contacted Crumpets. Not that I doubted Paladin Stronghooves, but she seemed a little more grounded than the overenthusiastic stallion. It took me three

tries before I made the connection and informed her that she should expect a few hundred new residents for Stable 99. She expressed doubt a moment, saying that wastelanders didn't want to live and die in a metal hole in the ground under Steel Ranger supervision. When I filled her in on just who was moving in, she gave a soft 'oh' of surprise.

"I'll pass it along. Thanks, Blackjack. I was starting to doubt if we'd ever have the numbers to run this place properly," she answered before cutting the connection. Destination check. Now for transportation.

Storm Chaser answered immediately. "So, General, how many passengers can you carry on those Raptors of yours?" I asked.

"A hundred give or take. These are warships, not passenger cargo carriers," she said. "We might be able to go over that, but it would be hazardous."

"Right. Well, I have about four hundred ponies needing evacuation," I replied. "I have a spot on the surface we can take them where they'll be safe."

"Four hundred?" the general asked surprise. "I always thought it was a few dozen unicorns. The reports never said they were in the hundreds."

"There's a whole stable here. Can you get them clear in an hour?" I asked.

"Not with the original plan," she replied. "Taking the *Castellanus* down to one small door would be fine for a few dozen ponies. Trying to evacuate hundreds would take too long and be far too obvious. We're going to need another ship, and a landing on the fabrication level to get them all on all at once."

"Any others joined the cause?"

"The *Sleet* is with us, but most of her fliers are fighting to get to Lighthooves. They're bogged down. We're trained for exterior operations, not room-to-room combat. Lighthooves's cyberponies are pushing them back," she said grimly.

I closed my eyes and asked the question I dreaded. "What about Thunderhead?"

She hesitated several seconds. "It could be much worse. Hoarfrost is keeping close to the tower, so her precision is off, and she's cut power twenty five percent to keep her guns from overheating. Once the tower is secure, though, and she moves closer to the city, it's going to get ugly. She hasn't seemed to notice our movements, but that won't last."

"And her fliers?"

"Dispatched to the city. I have no idea how much resistance they're facing," she answered.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "Be ready to extract the tower ponies in an hour. I'll find some way to clear them for you." I was a little iffy on the how at the moment, admittedly, but I *would* figure something out.

"Acknowledged."

"Keep to the plan and try to figure some way to get another Raptor," I instructed her. With everything going on, I hoped there still was a plan to keep to. I knew what I had to do, but if I messed up or failed, a lot of ponies were going to die. I'd be the biggest mass murderer in two centuries.

"Hey!" came a distant shout over the speaker, and then Rampage blurted, "Did I hear right? You need another Raptor?"

"Get away from the microphone you maniacal—" Storm Chaser began.

"Hello? One should not interrupt maniacal monsters. It's rude," Rampage said indignantly. "You need a Raptor?"

"Yeah. One would be nice," I said warily. "For an evacuation."

"Can I crash it into something afterwards?"

"Blackjack," the general warned ominously.

"Sure. You get one, and it's all yours once this stable is evacuated," I replied. I swore I could hear Storm Chaser facehoof.

"Sweet! No problem. I'm on it," she said, squealing in delight.

"Blackjack, you heard me say that Raptors are rare, didn't you?" Storm Chaser sighed.

"She needs incentives in her life. Besides, I don't have a clue how she can actually get one, but if she can, then it's one less Raptor to shoot at the *Castellanus*, right?" I replied.

She stammered a moment. "I... but... you... you're insane. All of you surfacers are insane! Balefire bombs! Plagues! Madponies, the lot of you! You can't just... just... crash a Raptor because it's *cool*," she whined plaintively.

"I guarantee you that Rampage will accomplish two things: she will get her hooves on a Raptor, and she will crash it into something. My suggestion is point her at the *Blizzard* or *Sirocco* and watch the show. In fact, film it so that I can watch too."

Storm Chaser was silent for a second, then muttered, “‘Go to the surface,’ he said. ‘They’re savage primitives,’ he said. ‘What could they *possibly* throw at us?’ Harbinger, you idiot.” She growled scornfully, then said, “I’ll be ready in an hour. Storm Chaser out.” Then she cut the connection.

She was a good pony, but she needed to be a little more practical. The last thing I did was send a message to Glory. “In the Tower. Fireworks in an hour. Stay safe. Boo’s okay. Hugs for P-21 and Scotch Tape.” My voice cracked a moment. “Love you,” I said, then cut the connection. The knowledge that the bombardment wasn’t ‘as bad as it could be’ didn’t help in the slightest with the worry bubbling up inside me. We’d split up to keep each other safe, but safety proved the least sure thing of all right now.

Overmare Farsight was waiting for me to finish, so I cut the connection before I started blubbering, opened that dusty closet in the back of my mind, threw all my anxiety and worry inside, and applied the Stable 99 motto. Not thinking about it, I faced her. “Sorry about that.”

“You say that frequently. I’m not very sure it’s healthy,” she answered, making me flush. “I’ve contacted the department heads, and I’ll announce the evacuation soon as you leave. Ponies will be upset enough as is, and I don’t want there to be trouble between you and them. Is there anything else?” She asked it calmly but with that serious authority that reminded me that time was wasting.

I thought but only came up with three things. “Chicanery said that Lighthooves was using the stable’s reactor for power? Is there anyway to cut it off?”

She frowned. “The emergency reroute goes up the tower’s main conduit line. It would take hours to cut through the plating. We could just do an emergency shut-down of the reactor, but that would make meeting your evacuation deadline of an hour impossible and imperil the lives of the stable’s inhabitants. I don’t know if you noticed, but our tower lacks for windows.”

“I saw,” I admitted. My eyes switched over to Chicanery, then back to her. “You’re Lighthooves’s mother. Why do you think he’s doing this?”

The question made her slump. “I don’t know why you’re asking me this now of all times, but I also don’t know the answer. If you’d asked me a year ago, I would have told you he was a loyal and true member of the Enclave. That he wanted Thunderhead safe and independent but also recognized the need for Neighvarro. But over the last year, my son’s become... different. More driven. More intense and zealous for Thunderhead’s independence and what he called the ‘redemption’

of the Enclave.”

“It was after he went down to the surface for the first time.” Chicanery added. “When he came back, he had a look in his eyes. I thought it was just the harsh environment down there, but when we met after he returned, I didn’t recognize him. He looked hollow inside. Of course, then he smiled and made his normal smug comments, and I was sure I was mistaken. Now... He’s always been a bit off, but this is too much, even for him.”

“Whatever happened to my son down there changed him forever, but as to just what it was, you would have to ask him. I don’t know,” Farsight said solemnly.

It was something to think about. Like with Dawn, I felt there was a similarity between the two of us that I wasn’t quite comfortable with. He was every bit as driven as I was, in his own way, but where the heck was he driving this train wreck *to*? “Well, you have your people to get ready, and I need to clear a path between here and that landing dock.”

“You’ll have to go through the barracks,” she said solemnly. “And my son has quite a few followers holed up in there.”

Hmm. I drew Duty and Sacrifice. “I don’t suppose you have any bullets, do you?”

“Bullets?” she asked with a baffled look.

Too much to hope for. Well, I could always just hit them with my sword. A lot. “How about...” I started, but, really, if they weren’t allowed weapons, they probably wouldn’t have them either. They’d be above with the hardware. “I don’t suppose you have any spark grenades, then?” I asked with a lame smile.

The blind mare smiled.

“I’m telling you, those hornheads are doing something down there!” a green stallion with white cyberaugmentation muttered. “There’s some kind of activity going on, and we should go check it out.” Without their augments matching their hide and with no hint of a seam or impression that the armor could come off, the transition from one to the other was a bit disturbing. Three of them were clustered at a junction, giving watchful looks down the side halls.

“Orders are orders. Next time those Neighvarro jackasses try and move up, we hit them from below. When they come at us, Fabrication will hit them from above,”

a blue mare said sharply, then moved as if to touch an earbloom, but halted. She glanced over at a yellow stallion who pawed at his crotch. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm not sure if I still have a penis," he muttered.

"It's under the armor plates," she replied, rolling her eyes.

He poked down there some more. "I know that's what he said, but how do I know it's still there? I can't feel it. I can't feel anything!"

The mare balked a moment. "Just... focus on the job at hand. We've got to keep those Neighvarro busy till the weapon systems are back on line," she said in a huff.

"I'm telling you, it's too quiet back there! They're up to something!" the green stallion snapped. "It's too quiet! Everything's too quiet." Then he suddenly jumped. "Halt! Show yourself or I'll fucking dust you!" he screamed as he whirled and his integrated beam guns and started strafing wildly down the hall for several seconds. He halted firing, then snapped, "I told you to show yourself!"

A feather poked out into the hall, waving back and forth a second before Chicanery moved his pale head out. "Woah. Peace, Babe. I'm unarmed."

"I should dust you to be sure," the green stallion said, his eyelid twitching.

"I'm telling you, it's gone!" the yellow stallion wailed. "That box frigging gelded me!"

The mare snapped, "Will both of you shut up? You, stop looking for your balls and keep an eye for an enemy. And you, can't you see he's yellow on the E.F.S.? Go join Tempest." She waited till the two turned away, then waved Chicanery forward. "You. What do you want?"

"Fame and fortune, Babe," Chicanery replied as he trotted forward, wearing a ridiculous helmet with a camera in the middle and a microphone on a little wand jutting out to the side. "I'm a documentarian in Thunderhead. A bit of a film buff. I wondered if I could have a few words. Some embedded journalism, you might say."

"Now is a really bad time," she said as she glanced at the two stallions. "In case you missed it, we're under attack."

"Do you have your penis?" the yellow stallion asked the green one. "Are you *sure* you still have it?"

"And some of us aren't handling it all that well," she finished loudly. Chicanery walked closer, the embodiment of pony pleasantries.

"Yeah. I could tell. The last few ponies I've seen like you... well... I wanted to

find out what it's like from your point of view," he said as he trotted right up to her, all smiles and confidence.

"Me? I feel..." she blinked. "I shouldn't be talking about this. I should be focusing on the fighting. I..." she rubbed her face. "I think I made a big mistake. I think... I don't think I should have been made into this... this thing. I mean, I can smash power armor and kill with a thought... but I feel dead inside. It feels wrong."

"Yeah. I can kill you dead with a thought!" the belligerent stallion sneered. "I can kill all of you! Fuck you if you think I can't!"

That got a lot of flat looks before Chicanery said dryly, "Yeah. Sure you can. I noticed a lot of you have this little problem," he said, making all three frown as he nodded his head behind him. "I mean, all of you seem to be a lot more stressed than usual."

"Wait," the yellow stallion suddenly frowned at Chicanery. "How'd you get this far up? Somepony down below should have stopped you before you got here."

"That is very true. And they did," he said with a smile as he gave his tail a flick. Two bits of metal tied to the end glittered. Then the hallway filled with crackling energy that made Chicanery's mane stand on end as two blue spheres of electricity expanded around him. The three cyberponies spasmed, then collapsed in heaps as Chicanery looked down, spreading his wings and letting the expended spark grenades thunk to the deck. "And that's what happened to them."

"It's somewhat depressing that that's the tenth time that's worked," I said as I approached from down the hall where Boo and I'd been watching. "I never get this far without shooting somepony or somepony shooting me."

"I told you, Babe. I have no interest in harming them, these 'overcharged spark capacitors in apple grenade housings' aren't gonna harm em, and we're not gonna harm em now that they're out. Why should they see me as a threat?" I snorted, levitated out some more cable I'd collected from below, and trussed them up like all the others we'd encountered. Just like the last nine, these three didn't have a single weapon on them that didn't go 'zap zap'.

"Still, I would have expected one of them to be a little more difficult," I said with a scowl. "Getting past them just because you're a smooth talker seems like... cheating."

"You're just sore because the first time you tried to magic a grenade under them, they gusted it right back in your face," he replied with a smirk.

"Maybe," I admitted, stepping past them. Only a quick teleport spared me from being knocked out myself. The barracks looked like they were taken right out of Stable-Tec residential housing, only with a security checkpoint at both ends. Chicanery's grin and silver tongue had dispatched more cyberponies than a whole flight of power-armored pegasi. I glanced at the knocked-out yellow stallion. "I'm guessing Lighthooves didn't read them the fine print on becoming augmented."

"No. He just said it was a vital edge over Neighvarro," Chicanery responded, then gestured to the unconscious trio. "Is this a normal cyberpony thing? Not being knocked out. I mean... more than half the cyberponies we've come across have been a few clouds short of a rainstorm."

"I think it might be," I replied with a small frown. "I've only been like this for a month, but another one I knew, Deus, wasn't much better. Maybe it'd be different if it was just a hoof or even just a leg, but transforming a pony's whole body all at once into a cyberpony seems to have some nasty side effects." Like me trying to kill myself running all over the Hoof alone, or going into a balefire-burning prison. "Focus them on a fight and they can take it apart. Without that distraction..." Why did I get the feeling that, in a few weeks, Lighthooves's cyberponies were going to be a big problem?

Whatever would a problem-free life be like? Was there really a time when my biggest problems were being stuck on the C shift and not getting laid?

"You seem pretty well-adjusted," he commented.

"I'm a masochist, and I had help. A lot of it. From my friends, strangers, and a computer designed to help crazy ponies," I replied irritably, scanning for red bars; there were far too many for it to be of much help to me. "The raw physical power it gives me is great, and I'd be dead without it, but it's not life. I don't have a heartbeat, Chicanery. Sometimes, I imagine that this is what it feels like to be a ghoul. If I could have my old body back, I'd take it in an instant, no matter how much weaker it was."

"I wonder if..." he began, but then he trailed off. His eyes met mine and he averted his first.

"You wonder if your brother's cybernetics made him do this," I finished for him. He gave the smallest of nods, and I sighed. "It'd be a nice explanation, but he started this before I even left Stable 99. Something else prompted all this, and it doesn't smell like your garden variety of crazy." Understanding why wasn't nearly as important as stopping him, but understanding why was what made it matter. I blinked and lowered my voice. "More red bars."

“Showtime,” he said as he spread his wings wide, allowed me to tie two more grenade pins to the end of his tail, then hid the blue-banded grenades under his wings. “Make sure my hat is straight, Babe,” he purred with a grin, making me scowl as I gave it a little nudge.

“Stop that,” I replied sourly, which only made him smile even more.

“Stop what?” he replied with a naughty smirk I’d worn far too many times myself. “Am I making you nervous?”

“No, you’re making me horny, and I have a stable to evacuate, a city to save, a marefriend to reunite with, and your brother to stop before tens of thousands die. I do not have time for a quickie,” I said before pointing down the hall. “Now go do your thing, oh silver-tongued one.”

“Right. Right. That ‘real life’ thing,” he said with a sigh. “This is why I prefer pictures.” And he turned and started back down the hall while I waited with Boo.

“That stallion is either going to rut me or die trying,” I said, frowning and looking myself over. Something definitely felt off, but then, feeling off was normal for me right now. The blank tilted her head as I pursed my lips. “Do I smell funny to you, Boo?” I couldn’t really tell. My own sense of smell wasn’t exactly as sharp as it used to be. Boo blinked, then sneezed cutely, and I sighed and ruffled her mane. “That’s what I thought, Boo. That’s what I thought.”

A second later there came a crackle, and then silence, and then the air down the hall was filled with the zing of rapid-fire beams. I jumped to my hooves and started to peek around the corner when Chicanery raced past me. His tail smoked and his helmet blazed as he raced by, “Not chatty! Not chatty at all!” Boo, infinitely and sublimely practical, took off with him.

I peeked and spotted at least eight very pissed off cyberponies charging down the hall after him, and I reacted by following suit. Only, instead of simply fleeing, I levitated up the box of grenades, snagged two, and flicked off a half dozen stems all at once; then I raced after my friends. As the cyberponies came around the corner, some leaped, turned, and launched sideways off the wall after me; others stopped and poured on the beams and disintegration bolts. Only one of them happened to notice the little box I’d left behind.

Spark grenades were only supposed to be dangerous to cyborgs and robots, but a dozen of them going off at once sounded less like an electrical spark and more like lightning striking everywhere at once. My own eyes, ears, and legs failed, sending

me skidding across the floor, but I stayed conscious. While my systems rebooted, I felt somepony shaking me. "I'm fine. My systems crashed." At least, that's what I hoped I said. I could feel my mouth moving at least.

When things were back up and running, I looked back at the heap of twitching, groaning cyberponies. None of them were dead, but I had the feeling that all of them were regretting hooking computers to their brains. I stepped over the scorched forms, selected the closest room, and, without hesitation, levitated and bucked them one by one till the room was packed full. Once the doors closed, I Wonderglued the last two grenades to the floor and wired them to give the occupants an encore when they stepped out or if somepony stepped in to help.

Chicanery mourned his scorched camera hat for a moment before tossing it aside. "Well, so much for that. I guess I can pretend to be searching for the bathroom while you club them over the head or something."

Well, it was a plan. "What did you say to them?" I asked.

"I think I ran into where they were augmenting them," he replied, then trotted back down the hall. "This way!"

He led me to a much smaller cafeteria where six bemused unicorns stood around a machine that looked like Triage's medical booth on Buck, Rage, and maybe a little Hydra. The normally pony-sized casing appeared almost Princess Celestia-sized. A pair of large rings in the middle sprouted four articulated mechanical claws. Hanging from rails overhead was a panoply of spare cyberpony parts. Legs. Wings. Eyes. Hearts. Rolls of synthetic hide. *It's a damned assembly line*, I thought grimly.

Most disturbing of all were the bloody bins in the back corner. I didn't look closely, but the smell... the very idea... sickened me. Augmenting a crippled pony was one thing, but mutilating a perfectly healthy pony under the belief that 'stronger and faster' was 'better' disturbed and angered me on a fundamental level. There was doing better, trying harder, and not giving up, and then there was hacking off a perfectly good limb to make a pony a more efficient killing machine.

I picked through rows of talismans. Healing talismans. Levitation talismans. Beam talismans... ugh... where were the—

"What's going on out there?" one of the unicorns controlling the machine asked in a trembling voice. A pair of monitors glowed in the corner; one showed Thunderhead filled with swooping and shooting ponies, holes ripped in the wall of the city and smoke casting a haze. The other showed Raptors fighting with Raptors as pegasi

swirled and looped around the tower. I guessed that the augmented weren't the only ponies needing therapy after this. "We heard shooting and explosions and... who are you?"

"Security. We're getting ready to evacuate the stable. You're not safe here anymore," I said, and then I heard hoofsteps clomping behind me and turned; at the sight of three red-barred power-armored ponies, I raised my sword and prepared to teleport. "*Blizzard* or *Sleet*?" I shouted.

The power-armored ponies took one look at me, and the officer in front snapped immediately, "Power down your weapons! It's Blackjack! Power down! Now!" I relaxed as I saw bars turn blue. The officer reviewed her soldiers, then turned and faced me, pulling off her helmet. Twister's lavender features came into view, and she gave a crooked smile. "I'd wondered why their reinforcements suddenly dried up." Really, they needed name tags or something. It was just too hard to tell a pony by the end of their muzzle and the underside of their wings.

"Credit goes to Chicanery here and the stable's supply of spark grenades," I said with a wave of my hoof to the other stallion.

"Actually, they were 'overcharged spark capacitors' in conspicuously apple-shaped casings," Chicanery said with an easy smile.

"Is this area secure?" Twister asked.

"I might have missed a few, but every pegasus we neutralized should be tied up with cable behind us."

"Sweet. That'll make shooting them in the head easy," one of the pegasi laughed.

Before I could take his head off, Twister snapped, "Ground that talk, soldier. Just because Hoarfrost and Afterburner have lost their minds doesn't mean we stopped being ponies. Disarm and evacuate them as POWs. Understood, soldier?" Instantly, the ranks stiffened and saluted. "Good. Go round them up and get them to the loading dock in no more than groups of six. Last thing we want is a daring rescue."

Well, that was one way to keep me from thumping a pony. I warned them about the spark grenade traps we'd left behind, then told Twister, "Overmare Farsight is getting the stable ready for evacuation. Are the Raptors ready for extraction?"

Twister answered, "They can be here in five minutes, but the second we start to move, Hoarfrost is going to be all over us. Most of the fleet is either loyal or neutral. The former she's keeping close to the Tower. The latter is spread out to stop any more missiles being fired, but they're spread way too thinly. Lighthooves has at least

ten times more fighters between here and Fabrication than he kept in the barracks, and he's using them for something."

"He's using the stable's reactor to power the launchers," I said. "As soon as the stable is empty, we can shut it down. That'll put everything on emergency power. Problem is that I really don't think we have enough time. Lighthooves is desperate. If Neighvarro drags him down, he wants to go down bloody and to take as many of you as he can." I glanced at Chicanery as his gaze dropped.

"It'll take days to fight up the central shaft to the fabrication level," Twister replied, then looked at the machine. "Maybe if some of us hop in there. . ."

"No," I replied sharply. "You don't want to do that."

"If it'll even the odds. . ." Twister began.

I nearly jumped to my hooves. "Didn't you hear me? You don't want to become what that machine will make you! Sure, you'll be faster. Sure, you'll be tougher and stronger, too. You'll also be that much less a pony. Ponies aren't machines! You aren't. . . things! Things to be butchered and replaced with metal. That device will take your heart and put a pump in its place!" That wasn't adding the fact that this was something made by Lighthooves. Who knew what kinds of nasty things might be lurking in his designs?

"But the things they've let you do..." she said, as if amazed that I objected.

"You don't get it, Twister. I'm the freak. I'm the odd cyberpony out." I pointed to the side with a hoof. "Those ponies are the norm. I've met the original. Deus. He went through every moment of his life in agony and turned into a rapist just to feel normal. Another cyberpony is now a brain in a jar. A third is a pegasus who wants to kill everypony under the fucked-up premise of saving them. The fourth is a madpony with a biological weapon. The thing that let me do what I've done wasn't some talisman, hunk of metal, or armored legs. It was my friends and my refusal to quit, no matter what, that kept me going."

"Blackjack, maybe some of us are willing to pay that price. If it means saving my home, I'd happily give up half my body," Twister replied, her face sober and serious. "I'd give my whole body."

"I know you would, Twister." I put my hooves on her shoulders, looked her dead in the eyes, and said, with as much sincerity and emphasis as I could, "*I know*. And you might be able to at that. But what about afterwards? Is it worth your sanity? Would your loved ones really want you to become a half-mechanical monster just to

stop him?" I dropped my gaze first. "I know you want to do everything to save your home. There's nothing worse than seeing your home burn and being powerless to stop it. But this device was made during the war by ponies trying to do everything to save *their* home. In the end, they created monsters, and Equestria blew up anyway." I pulled away from her, not daring to look her in the eye again, knowing she'd see my guilt. "I can't make that call for you, though. All I ask is... if you do, please wait for me to leave the room."

Twister didn't reply for a second. Then she asked tersely, "Do you have an alternative?"

First things first. "Do you have one of these?" I asked, showing her the note and being careful not to see the words myself. When she opened her mouth to answer, I quickly interjected, "Don't say what it is. Just yes or no."

She balked a moment, looking at me oddly, then shook her head. "There's a half dozen of them on a Raptor, but I'm pretty sure they're all in use. Those are pretty rigidly controlled, and scarce to boot."

I deflated. "Yeah. Delicate, too. I smashed all the ones I might have salvaged below," I said with a sigh, putting the note away. No doubt Scotch Tape could have gotten one for me, even if she'd needed Glory's help. I thought a bit. Storm Front had said that there were two unofficial ways of getting in the tower. I'd used one... "Can you fly me up to the roof?"

She considered me for a long, sober minute. "Not in anything like a wagon, or carrying you. Lighthooves's fliers are all over. We can barely handle them in the open air with superior numbers, and it's dicey. We might be able to fight our way to the roof, but carrying the two of you would make us a huge fat target."

I hissed softly through my teeth. If only I could teleport more than a dozen feet! There had to be a way, though. I stepped away and let my eyes pass over the racks of synthetic eyeballs, legs, lungs, hearts, wings, beam guns, hide...

Wings. My eyes stared at the dozens of metal-feathered wings dangling from their rack, each with a red talisman in the center joint, and I felt my blood run cold.

No. I'd find another way. I wasn't about to lose my other half. "Let me get a better look at the shaft between here and fabrication. Maybe I can fight through," I said, trying to dredge up whatever optimism I had left. As we walked out, the pod's doors lay wide open as if patiently waiting.

The vertical shaft rose up a thousand feet above the top of the barracks, ringed every hundred by a catwalk bristling with not just turrets but also cyberpony defenders. The base of the shaft was a nightmare landscape of twisted metal, heaps of glowing dust, and piles of luminescent slime. The air was filled with so many bolts and beams that I'd have been blinded if I had normal eyes. Boo cringed back, hiding behind me as the air crackled and snapped. Plates of armor fallen from above or brought in from outside provided some cover, but this was a killing field nonetheless. Beam guns scorched the air, bolts fell in a rain of death, and one after the next, Enclave fell to their own.

As I stared at the chaos, I could see the major weakness in the attackers. This was a fight that called for Steel Ranger armor emplaced and dug in. A squad of missile launchers and grenade machine guns would have accomplished what a hundred magical-energy-weapon-armed ponies could not. Even Persuasion and a crate of grenades would be more useful. Instead, assaulting from below, all the attackers' advantages were against them. Flight was suicide. What few magic and spark grenades they wielded had to be thrown, exposing the attacker to deadly fire. If any cyberponies were wounded or damaged, they flew higher up till they regenerated.

Along one wall lay a conduit twice as large as my body and running straight up the tower. Its surface was scorched and blackened, but otherwise it was untouched. We didn't even have the firepower to cut the electricity to the upper tower. My sword could probably cut through the plating, but in my head danced images of me exploding like the Core's substations.

I watched in horror as ponies fell. Orders were shouted into the hurricane of chaos around us. Cries of pain and for help were lost on the winds of war. I stood there at a loss. In a battle of hundreds, what difference could one pony make?

Out of any lines of fire in the stairwell, I sank down to my haunches and covered my face in my hooves, listening to the screaming. Boo curled up tight against me, and I put a hoof around her shoulders simply for somepony to hold on to. Finally, unable to bear the screams in the shaft any longer, I ran away into S.A.T.S. and sat there.

"Not pretty, is it?" rasped a voice. In my vision, the Dealer appeared amid the frozen beams and bolts. He pushed back his battered cowpony hat and approached, walking through the glowing energy like a ghost. "My first fight, I was just like you are now. Just wanting to curl up and hide. Course, that doesn't help much, does it?"

Desperately hoping that the magic of my PipBuck would carry my thoughts to him in S.A.T.S., I thought the words, "I don't know what to do."

His tired eyes narrowed a bit. "Bullshit. You know exactly what you need to do. Precisely what you have to do." He raised his foreleg, two cards wedged between hoof and pad by the corner. "You have to make a choice."

"What are my choices?" I whispered mentally.

"Option one... you lose. You get the hell out of here. Get your friends, leave the skies, and let the bodies fall where they may. Rest. Heal. Focus on another day," he said before biting the card and turning it. I saw me, surrounded by the others, all holding on to each other as the skies burned above us and flaming pegasi tumbled down.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to hear option two, and he knew it. "Option two..." and all he did was turn the card. On the far side was exactly what I knew would be. I wanted to look away, but I was frozen, staring at the thing I was terrified of.

"I don't want to," I whispered, a foal's protest. His eyes narrowed scornfully.

"Pick, or let somepony else pick for you. Lighthooves, Hoarfrost, or Dawn, probably. Only I doubt you'll like their choice," he replied tossing the cards in my face. "Either way, stop sitting here whimpering. You don't have time to waste. Forty-five minutes, maybe less."

"I don't know if it will work. I don't even know if it's possible!" I protested, grasping at anything that'd make my choice easier.

"Steelpony is in your PipBuck, as am I. I can interface with it and help smooth things along," he replied quietly. "I've been there when you've been worked on in the past. I know which files to use."

I left S.A.T.S. and stared out into the hazy chamber. I'd already given a few pounds of flesh. What were a few pounds more?

Only all that I had left.

"Ante up," I whispered hollowly, not sure how many chips I had left to bet.

"Talk to me," I said tensely, eyes clenched shut as I stood trapped inside a humming, whirring nightmare. Apparently the machine wasn't used to having a cyberpony already inside, and the technicians were doing something to compensate. "That's your talent. Talk! Tell me something. Anything." The restraints around my neck, feet, torso, and tail didn't help matters.

They'd had to pick the original Project Steelpony from my PipBuck in order to access 'Shadowbolt Schematics'. The mechanical monster banged and buzzed for several minutes as it retooled itself for the changes. All I could hope was that the Dealer was able to guide the process so that I didn't end up some kind of double-augmented freak. Apparently, there was quite a bit more stuff in the original file than the mass-produced units, not to mention that I had parts in me that weren't in any file.

"Are you sure you don't want us to put you under?" the technicians asked for the third time. "The process is automated and only takes a few minutes, usually, but in your case it might be quite a bit longer. There's an anasthetical field on, but all the others were fully unconscious for this."

I *really* wanted it, or maybe a nice memory orb to hide in till it was all over. The problem was that I was on limited time, and I had to get going and soon as I was finished. "I'm fine. Just get it done." I took a deep breath. "Talk to me, Chicanery. Tell me something. Anything." I felt the vaguest tugging on my hide between my shoulders and clenched my eyes shut. "Tell me about the founding of the Enclave."

"Well, Babe, it's not a pretty story. Bombs fell, everypony died. Even Cloudsdale. Heck, Cloudsdale got hit *first*. Don't think that didn't hurt," he said grimly, then sighed. "Fact is, surface forces were annihilated, but since our cities are mobile, most escaped the initial carnage. We were still in big trouble, though, mostly due to a lack of food. There wasn't much in the way of aeroculture back then. Most of the food was emergency military rations while everypony waited for the other horseshoe to drop and finish us off. But it never came. In those years, we had Rainbow Dash constantly trying to get help down below. She and Scootaloo were the loudest voices for that. There were lots of others, though, who wanted to take care of our own first." He paused. "You okay?"

I could feel things dripping along my sides; it didn't hurt... but that didn't make it anywhere close to okay. "Don't ask that. Keep going! Why didn't folks listen to Rainbow Dash?" Only a few minutes. Only a few... I could handle a few minutes. I could. I could!

So why did it feel like I was nailed to a floor right now?

"Well, part of it was that she was a Ministry Mare, not a general. She was always seen as Princess Luna's mascot for the pegasi. Hell of a flyer and the only Ministry Mare with even a sliver of military background, but she wasn't a soldier in many pegasi's eyes. Just a gloryhound and a dirt-kisser. So when Cloudsdale was wiped out, the same thing happened that happened now when Maripony blew up.

Command structures were shattered. There was doubt and confusion. And along comes Rainbow Dash telling everypony we had to risk radiation and worse to help the surface. I think the military fliers resented it. They rallied together in opposition to her simply because she was a reminder of everything that had gone wrong—“ He stopped as my body let out a wet and meaty crunch.

“Keep talking!” I nearly screamed. If they put me out, then there was no telling if I’d wake before the evacuation took place. He didn’t, and I could feel things being done to my shoulders that felt as though pieces were being drilled in place. “Please!”

“Stress hormones are through the roof,” a technician said.

Chicanery’s voice cracked a moment as he went on. “The public was more on her side though, so the military ran nonstop propaganda to undermine her. They claimed that the surface was contaminated with diseases and radiation. Sent down probes to show mutated life and fields of dead bodies. Anything and everything they could to discredit her. Then the eclipse happened. Folks thought it was the end of the world. Sun and moon coming together like they were going to hit. Kinda quaint now,” he said mirthlessly as the machine hummed. “With the social disruption following that. . . well. . . Finally it came down to a vote of all the settlements whether to cut off the surface permanently or open the skies up and help the surface. All kinds of experts gave their testimony about pros and cons. . . mostly cons. Most damning was Doctor Mephitis. He showed footage of diseased zebras eating each other. Sickened the whole room. Rainbow Dash told them all to go buck themselves, though, and took off on her own. The Enclave got its start there, based on the military.”

At least it was working; listening to him was keeping my mind where it should be: not panicking. “Son of a mule,” I shouted. “Sick bastard probably accessed the cameras in his own prison camp!”

“Hey. That’s my ancestor you’re talking about there,” Chicanery said in mock seriousness, “And by all accounts, he was a pretty serious doctor. I don’t know what you mean by prison camp. Yellow River was a hospital.”

“Wait. He was your—” I started to say when I opened my eyes. . . oh, that was wrong. In front of me, I saw two bloody metal hands reaching for my face, the ends tipped in hooked blades, tiny pincers, and a panoply of needles. The restraints about my neck stopped me cold as I clenched my eyes shut and did all I could not to teleport away. I really did NOT want to leave this midway. But then I felt the tugging around my ears and cheeks, and it was all I could do to do nothing as I felt the rubbing that

made me want to itch and scream all at once. When those hands pulled, nothing could stop me from seeing the bloody hide dangling from the steel fingers, because my eyelids were attached to it.

“How is she still conscious? She should be having a heart attack right now,” I heard one technician say to another. I didn’t want to answer; I could feel my own blood dripping over my face. Then a clean hand returned with a plate of metal and pressed it to my face. “Alicorn modification. Seriously? Somepony decided to make augmentation designs for Celestia and Luna?”

Not them, but for whatever alicorns were created by Twilight’s potion, I suspected. After all, what was better than a flying magical pony but a flying magical bullet-proof pony with beam guns? Or who knew, maybe there was a plot for cyberpony princesses! At this point, I put nothing past Goldenblood. The metal plate was being fixed to my face, covering my muzzle and head before being screwed in place. I couldn’t blink. I had a disturbing sensation that I wouldn’t ever blink again. Waves of magic rolled over me as the machine whirled and banged, augmenting me for the last time. Any more, and I’d be Dawn.

“Woah! Foreign biological material detected!” one of the technicians shouted.

“Don’t worry. The pod will flush it,” replied the other.

“It’s in her uterus,” the first snapped. “Dear skies above, I think she’s pregnant!”

What? I ignored the cutting, the whirring, the dripping, and the part of my brain that imagined what I’d look like when this was over and focused on that word. Pregnant. “That’s impossible! I have a contraceptive implant!” I shouted.

“Check again!” a technician snapped.

“Not from what my systems are showing. Looks like it implanted in the uterine wall recently. Hormone levels confirm,” the mare technician said. “I might be able to override. Do you want to keep it?”

Oh Celestia, she was asking me this now? Now?! I had parts of my body being rearranged, a weapon to destroy, an enemy to stop, a city to save, and... and... crazy would be easier than reality! Did I want to keep it? Was she serious?

Did I? With everything going on, it really boiled down to a yes or no question. I had every reason to say no. Off the top of my head, I could think of six or seven good arguments as to why I shouldn’t have a foal, both now and ever. They were reasonable, smart reasons, but then, I never was a smart pony.

“Yes,” I muttered, then shouted, “Yes! Please, yes!”

“Attempting to override purge,” the mare said as I started to focus my magic to teleport out. It didn’t matter if I wasn’t completely put together. My priorities had been smashed in the knee with this new knowledge. If I had to, I’d tell Twister what to do, crawl to Thunderhead, and travel in any direction away from danger I could. Maybe see what LittlePip was up to. “There! It’s moving on to finishing up.”

“Thank you,” I said, wishing I could cry... but I didn’t have tears any more.

“What’s this? ‘Echo Cleanup Protocol’?” another technician asked as there was more hissing and whirring and doing something to my body. “Seriously? The parts are installed. What more is there to do?”

“Don’t ask me. It’d take me a year to get through all these designs and files. I think something in her PipBuck is guiding these, because I sure ain’t. Lighthooves used the pegasus production model. I have no clue what this ‘Eclipse’ model is supposed to be.” The pod around me whirled, then fell silent. A hiss of water blew over me, followed by a blast of warm air. Then the front of the pod opened with a hot, wet roll of steam, and I slowly stepped out.

The half dozen Enclave soldiers, unicorn technicians, Twister, Chicanery, and Boo all gaped at me as I walked forward. My E.F.S. was installing drivers in the periphery of my vision. The only parts of me that could feel open air were my mouth and under my tail. Every inch of me that remained was covered. I wanted to go to the technicians and find out for sure if they were certain I was pregnant, but I also needed to get to the roof, but I also... I also needed...

I felt everything slipping away from me. This was wrong. All wrong! I’d given up enough of myself, hadn’t I? Was there anything left of me? Anything at all? “Mirror...” I croaked. It was the least of the things I wanted, but the easiest to supply. Baby steps.

Chicanery, naturally, spoke first as he trotted over to a mirror set up against the wall. Somepony had cracked it, clearly not happy with the results. “Are you sure?” Chicanery asked as he stood in front of it. “Don’t you want to know more about the ba—”

“Just give me the fucking mirror!” I shouted, reaching out with a hoof and throwing him aside. Then I saw the reflection and froze.

The mare in the mirror wasn’t me. She was coated head to hoof in black armor. The only sign that a flesh and blood pony lay within was a small opening around her

mouth and two more for her red and black mane and tail. Angular red plates glowed softly where eyes should be. Black plates covered every other inch of her body, including her cutie mark. Even her horn had been plated in black steel. Between the plates, black cables ran like sinews under the plating. At her sides, a pair of black beam rifles pointed at her own reflection. Mentally, numbly, I toggled through the new commands on my EFS and selected flight.

Two wings, black as night itself and set with large red talismans in the middle of the wing joints, spread from her sides. The control planes resembled feathers, glimmering with tiny motes of red light along the metallic pinions. As the talismans powered up, I felt a sensation of levitation wash over me. I bowed my head, a dozen different reactions mixing and crashing through me. Slow laughter began to fill the room, low and tense and more than a little mad. Too late, I realized it was coming from me.

I screamed and whirled on the idling booth. I didn't know if they read my intent or if I mentally smashed buttons in my rage, but the beam guns on my side cracked again and again as they blasted the booth. My sword swung wildly in great arcs before me. Metal parted, hoses sprayed, wires sparked, and I laughed. I howled as I ripped the machine apart, and then, when there was nothing left of that horrid device to destroy, I sprayed and slashed and smashed my way through the rest of the room, pegasi and unicorns running for the exit or diving for cover.

I'd just keep shooting and slashing till there was nothing left. That seemed like the right thing to do. Yeah. And I whirled, ready to continue my rampage till something finished me off, when I came face to face with Boo. The terrified mare hadn't fled or jumped for cover. Her pale eyes were wide as she sat there, frozen before me. A part of me, the Reaper part of me, wanted to blast her to ash and cut down everypony else just because they were there. Boo should have been the first to run and hide. She deserved to die! They all did! / did!

Then the blank stretched out a hoof and touched the side of my mouth. My cheek and lips were all I had left that weren't covered in steel. I trembled, not sure what I'd do next, when she smiled, leaned in, and gave a little nuzzle. She tilted her head, scratched at ear with her hoof, and then looked to me with her bright ivory eyes. "B... Buh...Baaa..." She paused, and then, "Bwackjack!" she said, her voice light and bright and everything I needed right now.

I was Blackjack, and her reminding me of it was like cold Hoofington rain on my fury. I trembled as the rage that had given me power and action was robbed from me by simple kindness. That Boo had talked at all was a marvel that I'd ponder when the

most important half hour of my life was past. Chicanery, Twister, and the others rose from behind crates and doors. Thankfully, I hadn't killed anypony.

"Are you... okay?" Chicanery asked, in lieu of 'sane', 'safe', or their opposites.

I shook my head. "I look like a comic book villain. All I need are spikes," I muttered. Then I lifted my sword and brought it down where the beam guns met my body, cutting the weapons from me. Maybe it was stupid – after all, I was out of bullets – but I had to reclaim something of myself. Some small inch that wasn't a replacement or addition. I turned to the spooked mare technician. "You're sure I'm pregnant?" The mare gave a hesitant nod. "Is the baby okay?"

She gave a little half smile. "Right now it's a microscopic collection of cells implanted in your uterine wall. Hardly a foal." Her smile disappeared. "I have no idea if you'll be able to carry it to term, let alone give birth. You might be better off aborting it now. Odds of a miscarriage are high anyhow."

That would have been the safe, sane, and smart thing to do, certainly. It happened from time to time in 99. No pony would know if I did it... except for me.

I'd taken so much out of this world. What would it be like to bring something into it?

"If that happens, it happens," I muttered, not meeting anypony's eyes. Right now I felt so close to Twilight that it hurt. When the pressure was off, would I change my mind? I couldn't think straight about something so monumental. "How'd it happen? I thought I had a copper implant to prevent that."

"I can only guess that your healing and repair talisman treated it like any other bit of shrapnel or bullet and digested it," the mare answered, then sighed. "If we had the magic and a candidate, I'd suggest a surrogacy spell. You should be fine for a few months, but when the foal starts pressing against your reinforcements, it's going to get really uncomfortable for both of you."

I nodded. Something to keep in mind. I stood and tried to take a more objective assessment of myself, examining at my legs and peering back. Somepony had laser-etched my cutie mark on to my flanks. It brought the ghost of a smile to my lips. I had no idea if I still had my cutie mark under that metal, but I could pretend that I did. "I don't look like any cyberpony I've seen," I said.

"Talk to your PipBuck. It was running the show," the mare technician said, clearly disgruntled. "The pod only used our stuff for parts. I'm not even sure what those are," she said, pointing a wing at the glowing spots of energy on my wings. "Some sort of micro arcane energy repeaters or something. Levitation ruby talismans were

incorporated to get you off the ground. And then somepony laminated it all black to make it match your legs. And I have no clue where that came from,” she said as she gestured towards my back.

“What?” I asked as I stretched around to see, and failing miserably. “What is it?”

Twister gave a concerned smile. “It says ‘Security’ along your back. And there’s this little caped pony icon etched on your shoulder.”

“Really?” I wanted to blink in surprise. At least I could smile still. Now I just had to get the memories of being in the pod scourged from my memor—... nope. Better to digress and not think about it for now. I needed to get my head together, and something that the white stallion had said stuck with me. I pointed a hoof at Chicanery. “You said you’re related to that Doctor Mephitis guy?”

“Sure. He never married, but he had liaisons with some unicorns in the tower,” Chicanery answered, then rolled his eyes a little, “I mean, he was a great stallion. His biography is required reading for every schoolpony. But he did have a few little personal problems.”

Right. Like leaving thousands of zebras locked up with turrets keeping them penned up while they starved and cannibalized each other. “You should visit this little place called Yellow River down on the surface. Might make you appreciate your ancestor in a whole new... light...”

Oh shit. It couldn’t be that simple, could it?

Okay. Thoughts organized. It was now time for some movement. “I need to get up to the top of the tower,” I said in a rush. I glanced at my wings, but for now I’d rely on four-legged locomotion till I didn’t have ceilings to smash into. I pointed a hoof at Twister. “You get that stable evacuated.”

“On it,” Twister replied, then pressed the side of her head. “Blackjack is coming up. Big black-and-red cyberpony... alicorn... Look, you just can’t miss her. Don’t dust her.” Then she frowned at me and gestured behind her with a wing, “There’re stairs back that way. Pass the barricade and watch your head. They’ve got a lot more above us.” She paused, then turned to a soldier. “Flame Pinion? Could you escort her? Just in case? I really don’t want anypony shooting at her or her shooting at anypony she shouldn’t.”

“Great. A chaperone,” I said with a huff as I shook my head. Worst of all, it was probably a good idea. How depressing was that? “Let’s go.”

Every second that passed, I could feel things flying further and further apart. Re-

turning to the battle in the shaft, I looked around at the fighting and imagined the nightmare of trying to evacuate four hundred civilians through this battlefield.

“Can you do anything about this?” Pinion shouted as he joined the others in blasting away at the attackers above us. “You’re supposed to be some kind of cyber supermare!”

There had to be at least a hundred above me. Maybe more! It’d take far more time than I had to shoot my way through, provided I didn’t get dusted or gooped in the process. But a part of me wanted to help, badly. I pulled out my sword and levitated a half dozen plates of scrap metal. “Cover me and watch for falling catwalks.” Biting on the blade’s handle, I searched my E.F.S. for the new commands and toggled on flight. My wings hummed as the talismans charged up, and I felt as light as a weightless five-hundred-pound feather.

“All right, all of you,” I bellowed. “I’m Blackjack, and I’m giving you this one time to give up, get the hell out of here, and save me a lot of frigging annoyance! Don’t make me come up there! I mean it!” Then I raised the plates so the crimson beams and disintegration bolts sparked and splattered away above me.

Having a little experience as a cyberpony, I knew better than to try flapping my wings. My augmentations were smarter than I was and would handle the movement far more effectively than I could. Given just how much was whirring and working inside those two complex wing assemblies, I counted this as a blessing. I focused on a direction... up there... and a speed... fast.... and trusted my wings to get me there. What I didn’t know was just how fast ‘fast’ was.

This would have been a very good thing to know before I hurtled my way towards the underside of a catwalk. My plan had been to use the plates as shields and whatnot, but the fact was that I was moving much too fast for that. Faster... much faster than I’d anticipated... I found myself greeting the underside of the catwalk with my face, impacting with a resounding clang and a shower of sparks as I bounced and tumbled wildly, my ‘shield’ banging and flying every which way. I wasn’t exactly sure how many surfaces I bounced off... four, at least, one of whom was a very surprised cyberpony, before I cut out my wings and let gravity take me to land in a heap on the floor with a great cloud of dust billowing around me. Just when I’d thought I was done, my shields clanged off my body, with the last spinning slowly atop my steel-clad horn.

A tiny blue pegasus in my head bit her hoof to keep from laughing at me as the unicorn with the chalkboard was trying to figure out how the plates had landed on

me. At least the little pink pony gave me a 9. Flying was for pegasi. I saw at least a dozen ponies staring at me, and above me the defenders burst out laughing. “That’s Blackjack?! What a joke!” was bellowed.

“My baby brother can fly better than you!” called another.

“Hey Blackjack! When this is over, me and the boys can give you a real flying lesson!” howled a third.

That lasted for all of a second when the Neighvarro pegasi stormed the catwalks in a blaze of gunfire, catching the defenders off guard so they were forced to retreat to the next ring of metal. I watched with surreal amazement as the power-armored ponies stood upside down on the catwalks, using the floor as cover as they drove the defenders back. The defenders’ gunfire was now far less concentrated and deadly, and the attackers had solid metal floor between them and the cyberponies rather than plates of scrap armor.

“Brilliant! I never seen a distraction technique so well pulled off! I mean, you were spinning on all three axes at once. And the crying for your mommy? Wonderful,” Chicanery said as he trotted up with his camera helmet back on.

“Did you fix that?” I asked sourly as I rose to my hooves, one plate still perched on the end of my horn, rotating briskly.

“Oh yeah. No way I’m missing footage like this! I plan to live through this, and when I do—” there was a flash of silver, and I sheathed my sword before I turned and trotted for the exit. “Wait, what—” he began. Then the hat came apart and tumbled into his hooves. “My footage...” he whimpered. “Not cool.”

Outside, on the landing dock, the larger battle hit me like a storm. Raptors now maneuvered around the tower like great swooping birds of prey while wings of power armor battled teams of cyberponies swarming about the tower like angry bees and killer wasps. Only two Raptors fired at the city now, the rest busy battling Storm Chaser’s followers. As I stood there, the first wave of stable ponies began to rush out. Thankfully, property was light in stables, and most carried little more than a bundle of personal knickknacks. “This way into the Sleet! Hurry!” shouted a pegasus as he sought to direct the flow towards the landing hatch of the idling Raptor.

Above us extended the six large shield plates, and above that, where Raptors had once tied up for repairs, were service gantries and bays hanging like the branches of a dead tree. A ring of large, heavy doors ran about the tower by the branches, likely so that fabricated parts could be brought out to the ships. When the Enclave

tried to shell them, they fell shut with booms I could hear even from down here. As soon as the Enclave flew past, swarms of cyberponies would pop out and harass the soldiers from behind only to retreat when the greater numbers of soldiers rallied against them. If the doors were working, that was a bad sign. How long until the launchers were working again too?

“Would you look at that?” Chicanery said as he trotted out with his camera hat duct taped back together in a sticky gray cap. He caught me glaring at it and at once took it off and hugged it to his chest like he was protecting his foal. “No! I fixed it, Blackjack.”

“Tape my flight attempts, and I’ll *unfix* it,” I warned as I peered way up at the top of the tower. “That’s a long way up,” I muttered.

“Only three thousand feet,” he replied as he carefully put the hat on, smacked the wires with his wing, and then panned the battle. “Oh no...” he breathed.

I turned, saw which way he was looking, and then thought the exact same thing. Thunderhead rotated like an immense, ragged holey wheel of cheese that had been attacked by furious bloatsprites. The smooth, pristine torus was now mottled, twisted, and uneven. As I watched, a great swath of it began to sag. Like rainbow sherbet left out too long, it began to pull away from the rest of the city towards the cloud layer below. The metal supporting structure gave way with a shriek and plunged far below. I could now see into the smoke filled structure; see the buildings within grotesquely elongated, holed, or melted.

“I have to end this. Now. Help get that stable evacuated,” I said sharply as I stared up.

“Oh, come on! I know you’re badass, but how can you end this?” Chicanery asked incredulously.

I whirled on him, levitated out a piece of paper, and snapped it open in front of his face. On it were the fifteen letters in four words that I was keeping away from Lighthooves. If he knew, he’d never let me get off this deck. Chicanery’s eyes widened as he scanned them again and again. “Brown rain,” he muttered, eyelid twitching, then turned to the stable ponies and rushed to where an elderly stallion was taking his time. “Quickly, Grandpa! Quickly! Get on the nice Raptor.” He rushed over, scooped the old stallion on his back, and trotted to the Raptor. “Let’s go. Trot lively! In we go!”

I tucked the paper away. Amazing what those four words could do. I turned to Boo.

"You need to get on too, Boo. I don't think I can fly you safely up there. I'm not sure I can fly *me* safely up there."

The mare cocked her head with a listening look that gave me a moment of hope, then smiled. "Bwackjack?"

"Raptor. Go. Get in, Boo!" I pointed at the open door with a wing. "Please?"

She smiled and nuzzled my cheek again. "Bwackjack!"

"Yes! Blackjack! Blackjack wants Boo into the Raptor. Blackjack wants Boo safe! Please do what Blackjack asks, Boo," I tried plaintively.

"Bwackjack! Bwackjack! Bwackjack!" Boo began to sing as she skipped around me. What in Equestria had gotten into her? She was acting like... well... like I did when I was a little filly.

I blinked at her and slumped a little, then showed her the paper. "Look! See? Go in the Raptor, Boo!" Boo leaned in, tilted her head far to the right, narrowed her eyes and stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth. "They have snack cakes in there!" I lied desperately.

Her eyes widened in comprehension as she looked from the paper to me, back to the paper, back to me, then at the Raptor. Then she pointed her hoof at the paper and declared in glee, "Bwackjack!"

I slumped in defeat. "I'm not going to win this, am I?"

She grinned up at me and gave me a hug and a cheek nuzzle. "Bwaaackjack..." Nope. Defeated. And she hadn't even broken out the big eyes or pouty lip.

At the very least, though, I could protect her better. In a few minutes, I had my operative armor on her and repaired to cover her. The respirator hissed as she stared at me, and I imagined her baffled expression. "Don't look at me like that. If you're coming with me, I don't want you burned again. Burning bad. Owwie," I said, trying to give her a smile. The *Sleet* lifted off and moved away as another ship arrived. For a moment, I felt a thrill of panic as I saw it was the *Galeforce*.

Then the door opened up, and it became clear that somepony had made a mess of the crew. A terrified Captain Crosswinds came galloping out of the carnage. The green stallion, clearly battered and with one eye swelling shut, was being ridden by a striped, bloodied, and cackling filly I knew quite well. "Hiyas, Blackjack!" she said to Boo, and then looked at me. "Who's your badass friend?"

Great. Now my friends didn't even recognize me. "Hello, Rampage."

She blinked in shock, then burst into laughter atop the green stallion. “Blackjack? Is that... fuck me with a lollypop, it is you! What the fuck happened?”

“Upgrades,” I muttered. “I don’t wanna talk about it. Today sucks.”

“Damn. I think Big Daddy should give you leadership of the Reapers on looks alone,” she laughed, then regarded Boo. “And here we have Boojack,” Rampage said gaily. “Well, now my day is officially awesome.” She kept her hooves pressed firmly against the sides of the captain’s head as she stood on his back. “Do you like her?” she said, gesturing at the Raptor with her head. “I’m thinking of renaming her the *Rampage*, loading her up with beer and hookers, and becoming an earth pony sky pirate. Then, when I’ve had my fun, loading it up with all the explosives, balefire bombs, and magical waste I can and flying it right into this great big magic ball the Enclave say is unbreachable. What do you think?”

“Get these unicorns to Stable 99 and have fun,” I replied, relatively sure the mare would grow bored with that idea, eventually. “How’d you get on board the *Galeforce* in the first place?”

“Stormy loaded me up in their big cannon, and I got to play ‘Fun with Ballistics’. I owe their gunner some oral sex for making that shot. Once I was on board, I cut, stomped, and smashed my way to the captain here. I might not be able to fly a Raptor, but he can. Isn’t that right, Breakwind?” Rampage asked, squeezing her hooves. The battered green stallion cried out in pain.

“She can’t die! I disintegrated her myself, and she came back!” Crosswinds shouted wildly. “Twice!”

“Yeah yeah. Blackjack is supposed to be helping me with that, but she’s got that whole ‘life is good’ shit going on,” Rampage said with a disdainful roll of her eyes. “He’s tried to sell out just about everypony he can to get me off his back. Pansy...”

“Please. I’ll be a good captain. I’ll go on the straight and narrow. I’ll feed orphans and widows. I’ll stop cheating on my mare and my mistress and my girlfriend if you’ll please get her off my back!” he begged.

“Rampage,” I began.

She snapped immediately, “Oh, don’t you ‘Rampage’ me, Blackjack. This shit lies like I regenerate. Trust me. I gave him a chance to play along with the ‘good pony’ routine. Twice. I got disintegrated for it. Twice. It hurt.” She growled between her teeth. “And he warned Hoarfrost what you’re doing, so now there’s a whole lot more shooting going on.”

I frowned at the battered captain. "I'll pay my taxes!" he pleaded. "I'll resign my commission. I'll acknowledge all those bast...er... um... those 'potentially illegitimate offspring' I've sired! I'll fly to the surface and wash the hooves of poor wastelanders personally. Just please get her off me!"

"I might be able to do that," I began, levitating out a slip of paper, making his eyes widen in hope, "If you can get me one of these inside a minute."

"I... you... that..." he stammered. "I can get you one! Half an hour, tops. We'll yank em right out of the turrets. You can have all six. Just get her off me."

"Sorry. Not quick enough. Rampage, he's all yours," I said.

"Nooo!" he wailed.

"Oh, shut your mouth," Rampage said as her hooves gave another squeeze. Then she turned to me. "So, Blackjack. Are you really... I mean, you said you had one..."

"If I can get what I need to make it work, sure." I sighed, looking up. "At this rate, I might have to just cut one off a missile."

"Do you think that, if I'm fast, I could get back and be here for it?" she asked.

"Probably not. I'm using it just as soon as I find one," I replied with a smile. "You could come with me, but that'd require you to leave your ship in the hooves of somepony who probably doesn't care about becoming a sky pirate."

Rampage screwed up her face with indecision. "Ehhh.... decisions, decisions. Stay and do the right thing and become a sky pirate, or snap his neck and get what I want." She let out a huff. "Boo? What do you think?"

The blank pointed a hoof at me. "Bwackjack!"

"She can talk?" Rampage goggled. "Quick! Say 'booger!' 'Shit!' 'Harlot!' 'Batsuawa!' 'Trickle down economics!' 'Pink!'"

"Bwa?" Boo tilted her head.

"Rampage, we don't have time for this," I said flatly. "Are you coming or not?"

"But... but... I have a Raptor now! Sky pirates! But a good chance of me getting killed," she whined as she gestured from the ship to the top of the tower, clearly torn. Finally, she blurted, "That's not fair, Blackjack!"

Given everything that had happened to me, I couldn't help but laugh a little. "Today isn't a fair day for anypony, Rampage. See to your ship. Sky piracy sounds better than dying to me, any day," I said as I peered up again.

“That’s because dying for you is actually easy,” she sulked, but there was a hint of doubt in her voice as well. She kicked Crosswinds in the ribs with her hindhooves. “Yah mule. Back to my ship. We’ll need to paint it bright red to make it go faster. Give it some extra guns. And spikes. It definitely needs some more spikes.”

I shook my head and looked at Boo, hoping she’d follow. Boo, however, waited patiently at my side. Finally I sighed and scooped her onto my back, positioned her, and activated my wings. Thankfully she was no heavier than the rest of me. “Cover me,” I said to Flame Pinion before snapping my wings and taking flight.

I’d been mistaken on my speed in the tower. I was no faster than Morning Glory, and there were plenty of other pegasi wheeling and darting twice as fast as me. Maybe it was the fact that they were pegasi and I, even with my augmentations, was still a unicorn. The levitation field remained steady, but I watched as my power supply dropped slowly before my eyes.

In the air, the view of chaos was now complete. Raptor fought with Raptor as they moved in a deadly dance of maneuver and counter maneuver. I watched as the *Castellanus*, still trailing smoke from multiple holes in her plates, dove vertically towards the red-accented *Sirocco*. For a terrifying moment, I was certain that the *Castellanus* was in freefall as the ship blasted the spinning props atop the *Sirocco* with its front cannons. Then the *Castellanus* tumbled to the side, turned ninety degrees, and opened fire with its remaining ventral turrets, tearing great green gashes in the side of the *Sirocco*. As it plunged beneath its enemy, the *Castellanus*’s propellers blurred to life to slow its descent, its nose swinging up as it hovered in place and fired at the underside of its enemy. I had no idea how much damage it did, but, as I watched the *Castellanus* fall back into a horizontal position and pull away and the *Sirocco* return fire, I felt it was a little surreal to watch a giant war machine pirouetting so.

All around me, pegasi wheeled, clashed, and wheeled again. The more maneuverable cyberponies did all they could to attack their enemies from any direction but the front. The power armor, on the other hoof, would move in paired formations flying towards each other, each blasting any cyberpony harassing the other wing. Then the two wings would veer off seconds before collision. As soon as they pulled apart from each other, the cyberponies reengaged, harassing their backs and wings. I saw what Twister meant about an open-air advantage. Out here, the cyberponies really had to work to pick off an enemy before another formation pulled in and blasted them out of the sky.

Only now there were power-armored ponies fighting other power armor too. I had

no idea how they identified each other. E.F.S.? But in this case, they did all they could to fight two-on-one. One would engage the enemy and the second would fly up from behind and rip open their wings with those cruel scorpion tails. It was a daring display of teamwork; if one's partner fell too far away or behind, they were dead... or their partner was dead and they were next.

When we reached the branches with gantries and fabrication doors, one immediately lifted enough to expel a cloud of fliers at me, Boo, and the dozen or so power-armored fliers with us. "Hold on, Boo," I shouted as tried to go as fast up as I could. It would have been nice to know exactly how my flight worked. The levitation field was easy enough to understand. I'd seen robots with similar. But what was pushing me along? Did the wings have some sort of thrust talismans? Was it telekinesis? I had to flap my wings, so—

Two cyberponies darted up behind me like I'd observed before, only we weren't their usual cup of tea; they'd never before encountered another cyberpony with a hysterical pony flailing her rear hooves wildly and crushing the cyberpony's throat in terror, nor had they had to deal with a flying unicorn cyberpony with a glowing sword flashing around behind her. They actually paced me for a little while, staring in bafflement as if unsure if I was an actual threat or not. Three seconds later, with agility I could only dream of, they flipped in the air and pointed their very deadly weapons right at the pair of us. I knew exact—

Then four Enclave power armor streaked past horizontally while precisely planting crimson beams at the pair. A second later, they were past and I was left spinning around wildly in their wake. When I came to a stop, Boo clung to my back like she was Wonderglued, and I was left with hundreds of ponies zipping and blasting around me. "Slow down!" I shouted, waving my sword in their general direction while a tiny blue pegasus in my head laughed at me. Pegasi moved, thought, and in general *were* too damned fast for me. Pegasuses and their cheating wings.

Still, time to get while the getting was good. I continued to climb, leaving the fight far below me. This high, I discovered several things: the air was growing thin and increasingly cold and windy. Every second I flew, my power supply dropped down bit by bit. As badass as I might have appeared, these wings gobbled up juice like crazy. There wasn't an altimeter on my E.F.S., and I was so damn high that, as I looked about, I could see the horizon curving ever so slightly. The battle below became little flickering dots and larger flashing ovals. As I climbed, I watched the percentage of my power supply falling away: 50%. 40%. 30%... For once, I began to feel cold and struggled to breathe. Metal wasn't the most insulative material, and

I was covered in it. 20%. I could see the top of Shadowbolt tower. I just had to fly a little further. 10%... A hundred feet. Fifty.

3%... The talismans on the wings pushing me through the air began to flicker. "No..." I groaned as I felt gravity start to pull me back down. I needed a few more feet. Just a few.... it was so cold. So hard to focus. My metal limbs and wings flailed as the red light died.

The wings froze, and I began to fall.

Teleporting me was hard. Teleporting me with even more metal was challenging. Teleporting all that and Boo all at once was like trying to magically smooch both of us simultaneously through a hoof-wide pipe a dozen feet long. Only the knowledge I was about to fall *miles* to the earth below, and the primal and fundamental terror that accompanied that knowledge, allowed me to force a teleportation spell that got me to the top edge of the tower, and even then it was still so far that I was only able to hook my forehooves over the edge. My horn popped like a blown bulb, and I watched as my magic failed all at once. My sword, hovering beside me, tumbled away to the green Core far below. I saw it glitter for a moment in the sun, and then it was gone.

Boo scrambled off my back and onto the icy roof. The blank bit my mane and hauled me over the lip, and I felt a phenomenal appreciation for earth ponies. My power supply flickered at 1%, and then my vision went dark. The howling wind fell silent. All I could feel was cold wind and cold metal. "Boo. Gems, Boo," I rasped. "Gems. Please. I need power." I started to shiver in the cold air.

Something warm nudged my cheek, then draped itself over me. "I'm sorry, Boo," I muttered, gasping for breath. The air was so thin here that I wondered if I was just going to pass out. I wasn't even sure I had any gems left. Maybe way down in the bottom of my saddlebags, next to any other junk I happened to be carrying. My life support systems operated on a separate circuit, powered by my chest generator, but how long could I be up here before Boo or I perished?

I tried to move what muscle I had, but it was futile. I was more machine than meat now. I needed arcane energy to keep going. All I could do was lie here in the absolute silence. Well. At least I wasn't here alone. No matter how hard or fast I tried to breathe, I couldn't quite get enough air. I could only imagine what it was like for Boo. Even my sense of feeling began to fall away.

I could almost imagine I could hear singing.

I lay in a proper dungeon. Stone walls on all sides. Heavy barred gate blocking the exit. My body ached with cold and wet as I sniffed and shivered. The only thing to mar the effect was an arcane camera set in the upper corner of the cell and the light that'd been on since I'd arrived.

"Goldenblood is dead," a mare said, cold and hard and terrible. I shivered, turning to look up at the gate as a cold blue glow enveloped it and, after several clicks in the lock, opened it wide. There stood Princess Luna, though not the Princess I had seen before. This mare, older and harder and more imperious than that playful and kind mare, glared down at me with contempt. "Goldenblood is dead, but I suspect his conspiracies are not," she said in cold rage, eyes narrowed like blades.

"I don't know anything about Horizons," I whispered. "I told you and Pinkie. I don't..."

"I'm not just talking about Horizons. Everything he has done... everything he has touched... is suspect. Tainted. Poisoned. The secret projects. The liasons in the O.I.A. The government itself. Everything!" she said, her last word bellowing like thunder and knocking me to my face. As I lay there, grovelling on the cold hard stone floor, she continued, "I will not rest until everything he has ever done is laid open and bare. His association with the Ministry Mares. His work with the Ministry. His 'back channels' with the zebras. Nothing is certain anymore! Do you understand? Nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," I whispered.

"Sorry?" Luna said in contemptuous tones. "Do you understand what is happening as we speak? The zebras have made the preposterous claim that we detonated a megaspell in their capital. That we dispatched an agent to Roam and committed an atrocity on their soil. They have produced doctored film of ravaged cities, deftly edited to appear to be their capital, and are broadcasting them throughout their empire, but why? Why tell such a blatant lie, given that our military reports all our megaspells accounted for, primed, and ready to be cast?" Her furious eyes glared down at me as she continued, cold as the winter sky, "Whence sprang this deceit? Is it a plot of Goldenblood? A ploy of the Caesar? The lives of tens of millions of my subjects are at stake, and the one pony I trusted more than any other has betrayed me!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," I repeated, averting my eyes to the silver glittering on her hooves. "I would do anything to... to take it all back!"

“Anything?” she asked in a lovely, soft voice. Then, for a minute, she remained silent. When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. “Well, then. Do you wish a chance to redeem yourself?” she asked.

“Yes, my Princess. Anything.”

The white moon on her chest plate flashed, then detached and in a burst of light transformed into a geometric, glowing white crystal the size of a pony’s eye. “Do you know what this is?”

“That’s... that’s the EC-1101 megaspell matrix, your majesty.”

“A megaspell *you* worked on. A megaspell that *he* may have compromised,” she said as she contemplated it with disgust. “Goldenblood could have conspired with any one of the ponies it is intended for. Twilight. Fluttershy. That judge. Even my sister. He could have orchestrated a coup quite easily with this.” Her teeth bared in frustration. “I should have it destroyed, but what if *that* is his plan? I cannot know for certain.” Then she lowered her eyes to me. “Therefore, I think we shall try something less predictable.”

“What do you wish, my Princess?” I rasped weakly.

“We shall bond your mind and soul to this megaspell. Your body shall be taken away for safekeeping. If for some reason this spell should ever be released, it will search out its intended, but *you* shall ensure that it returns to *me*. If you do not, your mind and soul shall evaporate slowly and steadily till they are no more. But!” she said sharply, and then smiled. “But if you are loyal, if you are true, and it returns to me, then I shall reunite your body, mind, and soul. And if no plot emerges and EC-1101 remains safe, my land and my people secure, then... then you shall be pardoned.”

Slowly, I pulled myself to my aching hooves and bowed my head to the floor. “I accept, Your Majesty. I accept,” I said, utterly sincere.

Slowly, she backed away, and two stallions in dark purple robes entered, one short and stout, the other tall and thin. “Do it. I have to prepare for the Gala tonight. I’d cancel the damned thing, but it’s important to keep the pretense while we ferret out his conspirators. Once Pinkie is finished rounding up that Four Stars trash, she can scour the O.I.A. with my blessing.” Their hoods drew back as the unicorns, one blue and the other orange, stared at me with eyes full of stars. Then their horns flared and the world became white pain, and then nothing at all but white.

When thought returned, a few things had become apparent to me. One, I could breathe without feeling as if I were drowning. Two, I was being carried along by somepony. Three, I was doomed to constantly experience the memories and experiences of other ponies any time I closed my eyes. Really, why couldn't I have dreamed about a normal Equestrian life again?

Still, I didn't have time to waste. If anything, I might be too late. "Who's there? Who is it? Boo? Pinion? Twister? Glory? Dusk? Boomer? Rainbow?" I then frowned. "It's Lighthooves, isn't it? You were watching through the Perceptitron. You sick monster! I'll bite you to death!" I shouted, then snapped wildly against whoever carried me before they flung me off the top of the tower. I'd hit an artery! Maybe infection would finish him off!

A wing smacked me hard across the face. "Oh, you want to make this hard, do ya?" Wiggling as much as I could, I thumped my face against a metal flank. I thought I felt my steel-shod horn dig into something. "Take that! I'll stop you, you bastard!"

Then I was dumped to a floor and felt something spicy press against my mouth. I immediately closed my mouth around it, feeling it melt away and its magical goodness spreading throughout my body. My vision flickered, and my ears crackled as power returned and I blinked up at Mare Do Well. "Oh. It is you. Hi."

"I could say the same thing, Blackjack," she said in her low, synthetic voice. "You were right about Lighthooves spotting you on the Perceptitron, but he was going to leave you up here to freeze to death before finding out what's on that damned piece of paper you keep showing ponies." She frowned, withdrew another gemstone from a bag she had in wing, then shoved it in my mouth. "Bite me to death?" she asked wryly.

I masticated furiously, absorbing the energy before swallowing. "Don't laugh. I could probably do it," I said with a smile. She offered me the bag, but when I tried to levitate it, my horn told me to fuck off. It was taking a vacation after that last port. A very long vacation. And it'd left me with a throbbing headache. "What's going on? How long was I out?" Then, without further ado, I popped the bag over my mouth, hooked the drawstrings to my ears, and began to munch munch munch as I looked around.

We were in some kind of fancy office, but it had the impression of being used by a rather sloppy occupant. There were old posters of the Wonderbolts tacked to the wood paneling. A large map of Equestria and the Zebra lands was spread out on a large table. On a different wall were some sort of complicated schematics of a huge mechanical sphere and a mushroom-shaped building, and a mouthwritten

note ‘Don’t let Goldie lay one hoof on this project, Applebloom. I don’t care how much he claims he can help.’ A large list next to the desk read ‘Awesome Targets’ along with names and locations. Most of them sounded zebraish to me. Boo, with a tilt to her head, regarded several photographs of Ministry Mares arranged around the desk.

“You’ve only been unconscious a few minutes. Soon as you were sighted outside the tower, Lighthooves was talking about you, watching you on that Perceptitron. When he said you passed out up here, I nipped up the shaft and got you inside my office as fast as I could. Ascending several thousand feet in a few minutes is not a smart thing to do, Blackjack. The air pressure’s less than half what you’re used to.”

“I’m a super badass cyberpony, laid low by cold, air pressure, and dead batteries. There’s something reassuring about that,” I said around a mouthful of slobbery gemstones. “Lighthooves?”

“Planning to launch every single missile in one go,” Rainbow Dash said, then grinned. “But I have a plan. All the power is being drawn up through an emergency conduit. You take your magical super-sharp sword and, in two swipes, he won’t be able to open a single door. What do you think?”

I thought it still sounded like a quick route to electrocution. Odd; I normally wasn’t the cautious mare. Not that it mattered here. “Yeah. About my magical super-sharp sword...” I muttered, looking away. “I kind of dropped it.”

“You dropped it?” Rainbow Dash rasped. “You... dropped... it? How do you drop something like that?”

“Well, when I teleported, I burned out my horn. My sword was being held out in case some cyberpony nipped in at me or Boo, and when my power ran out... well... I dropped it!” I replied defensively. “Haven’t you ever just dropped something before?”

Rainbow sighed and shook her head. “That’s just sad,” she said as she lifted off and started to hover and pace in the air. “Okay. So we need a way to prevent forty missiles from launching. We could blow one up; that’d cause one heck of a mess, but there’s no guarantee that he couldn’t get the rest off. And he still has containers just full of his plague.” She tapped her chin. “Plus, we have to do something to help Thunderhead—”

“Actually, I have a plan to deal with all those, too,” I said around a mouthful of gems. Boo pulled out a rainbow-colored wig and, after chewing on it a little, popped it on her head. As I continued to gorge myself like a hungry baby dragon, I fumbled with

my bags and passed her the piece of paper. "Don't read it out loud. No clue who might be watching."

Rainbow Dash stared at it skeptically. "Blackjack, are you crazy? This is never going to work. Where the hell did you find one of these?"

"In my adventures around Hoofington," I said with a smile.

"But you can't just use one! You have to have the authority to—" I silenced her as I raised my forehoof, jerked it to flip open the housing, and showed her my PipBuck. EC-1101 glowed obligingly on the screen. She stared a moment. "Oh, horseapples... but... Blackjack, do you know what it actually *does*?"

"No idea," I admitted, putting the leg down. "I saw how a pony tried to get one to work, so I'll do what she did. But whatever it is, I doubt plagues or Raptors will be a problem afterwards, right?"

"Maybe..." Rainbow Dash shook her head a little. "You still don't have any way to target it."

"I'll need a talisman from one of his missiles, or maybe we can yank one from a turret," I replied, extending my tongue to lap up the gems in the very bottom of the bag. That whole bag only got me about half charged; I'd definitely have to avoid long periods of flight if I could help it. I became aware that Rainbow had stopped pacing. "What?"

"You're a scary pony, you know that?" Rainbow Dash said with a shake of her head.

I pulled the bag off my face, my mouth coated in a layer of glittery sweet gem dust. "Who? Me?" She sighed and shook her head as I licked the residue away, then I dropped my eyes. "Hope I'm not too scary. Honestly, look at me. What is Glory going to think?"

"Did you treat her differently when she resembled me?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You don't look like a bad villain from a B-rate film," I countered.

"True. But so long as your friends know you're still you, you should be fine," Rainbow Dash said.

"I just wish my friends were here," I muttered. "I know we had to split up, but..."

Rainbow Dash sighed and gazed at the pictures by the desk. "Welcome to the club. We have crumbled cookies and spilt milk." She shook her head hard. "Anyway. Time's wasting. What's the plan?"

"One second," I said, putting the bag in my saddlebags and trotting to the desk, finding a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, closing my eyes, I scribbled out the instructions. Lighthooves might think I was unconscious, but he also might be watching through my eyes right now. When I finished, I folded it over and returned to Dash. "Boo?"

The blank pulled her head out of a file cabinet with a snack cake in her mouth. In a trice, she ripped open the package, flipped it in the air, and caught the cake in her mouth. Chewing happily, she trotted to us as I passed the paper to the purple-armored mare.

Dash unfolded it with her wings, then stared. "Woah. Blackjack, you have terrible mouthwritting." She scanned the list, nodding. "Okay. I can do that. And that. Annnnd probably that. But will your friend here be able to do her part? She seems kinda..."

"She's fine," I said, turning to Boo, hoping I was right. "Boo. Listen to me. You have to stay close to Rainbow Dash. She's going to find something that's very important, and you need to get it to me. Okay, Boo? I'm counting on you." I stared into her eyes, trying to will her to understand me.

She tilted her head. "Bwackjack?" Then she nuzzled my cheek and pulled her head back with glittering sparkles on her nose.

I whirled to Rainbow Dash. "She's good. She's all over this!" I said with a grin. The most convincingest grin I ever grinned.

"Riiight," Rainbow said skeptically. "Well, let's get going. No time to waste before we do something completely stupid." She started towards the door, but I hesitated. There was a small room to the side of the office, almost an alcove, that was clearly a media center of some kind. Six monitors were dark, but the seventh had an O.I.A. symbol aglow. Slowly, I approached, the ring icon flickered and disappeared, and something new appeared on the screen.

>EC-1101 detected. Update routing data Y/N?

I stared at it as Rainbow Dash and Boo waited by the exit. "One second. I need to take care of something," I said, and tapped the "Y" key. Once again I was treated to a digital light show as the information was transferred to my PipBuck. When the transfer ended, I saw that a navigation tag had been updated... but no matter which direction I turned, I couldn't see where it was supposed to go. It said 'Robronco HQ', but... then I looked straight down and saw the little icon directly between my

hooves.

Oh. Well, I was certainly dressed for a trip to the Core.

“Hey, can you put me through to Glory?” I asked. “I want to see her again.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Rainbow Dash objected. “Any second he’ll have all those missiles loaded and be set to fire.”

“You know what I’m going to do. Don’t you think Thunderhead deserves a little warning?” I asked.

“And you can’t use your broadcaster because of the Perceptitron,” Rainbow grumbled as I tried to connect to Moonshadow’s lab. The screen flickered a few times, and then there was a ping and I saw the astronomy lab a wreck. Equipment lay scattered over the floor, and there was smoke in the room.

“Glory! Moonshadow! Is anypony there?!” I shouted, but nopony answered.

“It looks like the science ministry got hit,” Rainbow Dash said grimly.

I didn’t give up. “I know another pony who might answer.” I contacted Morningstar’s lab. I heard ponies talking in the background. “Hello! Is anypony there? Doctor Morningstar?” While the equipment had fallen over, at least there wasn’t as much smoke.

Then a drop-dead gorgeous mare stepped into view of the monitor, and I just stopped thinking for a moment as her long, luxurious mane swayed back and forth and gorgeous eyes blinked slowly and sensually. She asked in a voice that melted butter, “Yes? What do you want? We are trying to save valuable research here!”

“I... I...” Rainbow Dash thumped my rump with a clank and got my brain to engage, “I need to speak to Doctor Morningstar.”

“Yes. Yes. What do you want?” she said in the most beautiful irritation I’d ever seen, and then she looked to the side. “No, that sample first, then those! And don’t drop it again!”

“D... doctor!?” I stammered.

She let out a snort of disdain and severed the connection. I gave my head a hard shake. Apparently something had gotten loose. I reopened the connection, being rewarded with a posterior that nearly made me forget why I called again. “Doctor Morningstar. It’s me, Blackjack. Where is Glory?”

She turned, arching a brow, then smiled. “Ah yes. I am not the only one who’s

undergone some changes.” She put on the Doctor’s, her, thick glasses and the effect snapped me out of my lust daze. “Better? Good. My pupil is at the office of emergency management. Terminal address MN1-TNDR1-EM1- Terminal six or seven.”

Perfect. “Thank you, Doctor. Are you evacuating?”

“I won’t let my work be destroyed by military stupidity,” she declared with scorn that was gorgeous even with the glasses.

“Take it and as many researchers as you can to the Collegiate. Talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac. I’m sure they’ll welcome you and any research you have,” I said.

“Is that so? Well then... thank you,” she said with a little surprise. “I will find some way to pay you back.”

“No need. I owe you. Good luck. And leave the killing joke behind,” I suggested before cutting the terminal and entering in the address he’d given me.

The link opened, startling a pegasus stallion. “Who are you? Get off this connection!”

“My name is Blackjack!” I snapped. “Put Morning Glory on now!”

“Blackjack?” Glory said from off screen. Then the gray mare rushed into view, knocking the stallion right out of his seat. The end of her mane was singed, and there was a bandage around her head and soot on her nose, but she was ten times more stunning to me than Doctor Morningstar had been. I couldn’t talk for several seconds as she took in my appearance. Her gaze immediately softened. “Oh, Blackjack...”

“Yeah. I got upgraded.” And to avoid talking and thinking about it, I rushed, “How is Thunderhead?”

“Your warning saved more lives than I can count. There’ve been some casualties, but for the most part we’ve kept clear. The firing has slacked off a bit. Fortunately, we have somepony to manage this disaster.” And she moved back to let a mummy come before the terminal. Or at least, that’s what he looked like: a mummy in bloody bandages with two intense eyes.

“Sky Striker?” I gasped. “How did you heal your injuries?”

“I didn’t,” he rasped. “I’m slugging down a healing potion every ten minutes and trying not to move around much. What’s the situation?”

“The Tower is being evacuated, and you should be ready to do the same for Thun-

derhead. Now's the time, while the Enclave are fighting each other," I said. "The Enclave want the tower and the plague more than they want you."

Sky Striker frowned. "Why evacuate now? We're managing a decent resistance. I don't know where they learned it, but those two earth ponies are driving them crazy with their mines and bombs. I think the Enclave are scared to put a hoof on the ground without it blowing up under them."

In response, I showed the piece of paper. "Quiet. Don't say it. Lighthooves might be listening in. But yes, I do, and I'm using it." The shock was on everypony's face, and I couldn't meet Glory's eyes. "I'm sorry, Glory. I know I said we'd save it... but..." The shock and horror was clearly etched on her face.

"You tried your best, Blackjack," Sky Striker grumbled. "How much time do we have?"

"Long as it takes for me to get what I need. Fifteen minutes?" I said lamely.

"That's barely time to get under the cloud layer," he grumbled.

Rainbow Dash leaned in. "There may be another way. Get every pegasus you can and push Thunderhead away from the tower."

"Who—" Striker began.

"Time, remember?" I stressed.

"You have seventy or eighty thousand pegasi. Thunderhead is ten miles away already. If you all fly pushing in the same direction, you might get clear." She put a lot of emphasis on that 'might'. "Eight hundred wingpower can drain a reservoir. Eighty thousand can certainly move a city."

"Right. Right! We'll get on it. But again. The more time the better." Then he pulled away, starting to bark orders as new bloodstains spread under his bandages. Glory moved back to the screen, and I gritted my teeth.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, lowering my eyes. "I just wanted to save lives," I said lamely.

"Blackjack, you have! If you hadn't come up here... with Stargazer dead... it would have been a bloodbath. And ultimately, we still would have lost. The Enclave would just bring a Thunderhead next time. Wouldn't that be ironic?" she said with a smile full of tears. "Just do what you have to to bring this to an end. And Blackjack, I love you. No matter what you do or how you have to change, I love you. Just come back from this safely. Okay?"

"I'll try. I love you," I said, then cut the connections. I couldn't cry, but I wished I could. Just one more way I was less equine than before. Laughter, tears, hunger, lust, pain... good or bad, they were things that made a pony a pony.

And love. Love too.

The elevator ride down took far longer than I anticipated. I nearly bounced on my hooves with impatience. I wanted this done. "Rainbow Dash? Lighthooves... when did he come up with this idea for using a bioweapon to discredit the Enclave?"

"About a year ago. Why?" she asked.

"After he returned from his first mission to the surface?"

"His 'mission'? He was just a rookie. Claimed he got lost in a feral lightning storm and took shelter in a surface ruin." She shrugged. "It's happened for generations. Every now and then a pegasus will be so damned curious they'll nip down for a closer peek. Most are so horrified by what they see that they're gung-ho backing up the Enclave's isolation policy. A few stay down. That's why they don't give rookies power armor for their first few months. Why?" she repeated the question.

"Did you know he was related to Doctor Mephitis?" I asked.

"No. Does it matter?"

"It did to him," I said simply. Rainbow Dash just growled in annoyance. I'd been in the dark for months; she would get used to it.

As the elevator descended the shaft, the blue lights dimmed and flickered. "He's using the emergency generators, too," Rainbow Dash said. "I've been doing everything I could to slow him down."

"Time to stop him," I said, then smiled at her for reassurance. "Just keep to the plan. Get it and get it back to me." She nodded, and I closed... I really wished I could close my eyes! "Dealer? Are you there, Echo?"

"I'm here," he replied, his voice small and ghostly.

"You know what I need?" I asked.

"Are you sure about this? Do you have any idea how many ponies you might kill?" he whispered in my ear.

“Probably less than he will if all these missiles fly,” I countered. “Can you get it set up?”

“I can. Will you accept responsibility for those who die here?” he asked, his voice tense and on edge.

I sighed. Kill one to save two. Don’t kill one and let two die. Which was the moral answer? Was there one? “Yes. Add it to the bill.”

“I’ll have it ready,” he answered simply.

The lift reached its destination, and I stepped out first, walking across the floor of the central shaft to the stairs going down to the fabrication level. When I entered it, I saw a colossal chamber that I guessed was where those six large shields flared out. Below me was an entire self-contained factory. A smelter sat in one quarter, then large machines equipped with rollers and stampers and cutters. A machine shop in a second quarter had cyberponies welding and cutting. A third quarter was dominated by racks and racks of talismans and electrical equipment. The last section had a large transformer from which dozens of thick cables ran overhead to each door and launcher. The astringent whiff of ozone was in the air, and every now and then there was a loud snap and shower of sparks from the hanging lines.

Above these four quarters, around the perimeter of the factory floor on elevated frames, sat the missiles. Each one looked to be forty or so feet long and five or six feet around. A large round intake sat atop the fuselage, and a pair of five-foot-long wings swept back two thirds of the way from the pointed nose. A pair of smaller wings were near the front of the missile, and a vertical wing towards the back gave me the impression more of a big sleek paper airplane crossed with a dart than of a missile. I also wondered who in the zebra empire demanded all their equipment be striped. A little white pony in my head sniffed disdainfully.

Each missile sat in a launch cradle, a half-tube with a vertical plate on the back, before a large metal door; barrels and spare parts were strewn haphazardly across the floor around them. The very doors the cyberponies were using to harass the Enclave. As I watched, one of them rolled up in three seconds to admit a half dozen fliers and then closed just as quickly. Each launch cradle rested on hydraulic pistons that kept it in place. In the very center of the huge space, hanging from the ceiling, was a lit round room with windows on in every direction. A large crane on a rail looped around the room, and from it dangled huge plastic tanks attached to hoses that sloshed with bilious brownish contents, hoses that were being used to fill the warheads of the missiles.

I knew where I'd be if I were Lighthooves. I walked towards the center of that factory. As I passed, cyberponies halted their work and just stared. None of them took any shots, though. I didn't know if it was because they were intimidated, tired, or had been ordered not to. Many looked stressed to the point of breaking, with shaking hooves and haunted stares. Many didn't seem to have the full conversion others did, and I wondered if they'd been augmented against their will... thrown into the machine, cut to pieces, and made 'stronger'.

"It's her! We... we should... we should attack? Right?" a blue pegasus colt not much older than Scotch stammered as his eyes darted around the room.

"No. There's been enough attacking. It's time to talk," I replied.

"Talk?" a mare hissed. "What is there to talk about?"

"You're the enemy. All of you," muttered a stallion, but at this point he could have been addressing me or the entire room from the way his augmented eyes swept the crowd.

"The real reason Lighthooves made you into what you are," I said as I looked up at the control center. The pegasi began to murmur to each other, but they weren't taking their eyes off of me. "He's lied to you. This isn't about plagues or Thunderhead or Neighvarro. This is about him. It's always been about him." Maybe it was the resigned note in my voice, or that I was the pony in the room with the least flesh remaining. One by one, red bars winked to blue, and I continued past them.

A spotlight on the bottom of the control room suddenly painted me in its beam. "That's far enough, Blackjack," Lighthooves said over a loudspeaker. "I suppose this is the point of our climactic battle? Good versus evil? Light versus darkness? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid that I'm pressed for time. The Enclave has attacked a helpless civilian target, and they shall pay dearly for it."

I could almost read it like a script. "I went to Yellow River," I called out to him. "But then, you wanted me to."

The light snapped off, and the door to the control room opened. Lighthooves emerged onto a landing. He still looked more flesh and blood than I, but, then again, the measure of a pony wasn't in flesh and blood. "Yes, I know. I saw what you did. Your demonstration of physical prowess was most inspiring."

"I never really knew why you pointed me to it. That note you left wasn't just for me, though. It was for anypony who came after you. You wanted somepony to see the camp and know what Mephitis did." I activated my wings and kicked off the floor,

levitating up toward him and setting off a murmur among the watching cyberponies. “But that wasn’t enough, was it? You knew that, even if Dusk or I went to Yellow River, the truth wouldn’t get out. They’d ignore it. Or bury it. Or bury you.”

“History has ever been the servant of tyrants,” Lighthooves replied. “What hope has the truth against such odds?” His grandiose speech matched up with what Doctor Octopus had said. Melodramatic. Immature. I could stall him. Time was my greatest asset at this point. He gestured with his head at the control room and stepped in, with me following. While his back was to me, I flipped open my PipBuck and pushed a button. If he spotted my movement, he didn’t say anything. “So, did you put it all together?”

Standing this close, he was a wreck. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. “You tell me,” I replied. “You found out that you were descended from one of the Enclave’s heroes. The genius doctor who prevented the Enclave from making a terrible mistake and returning to the surface. And you took pride in that lineage. And somewhere in researching your ancestry, you found out about Yellow River. So at the first opportunity, you went down looking for it. To stand in the place where your ancestor stood.”

“As a descendant of Twilight Sparkle, I’m sure you can relate,” he replied, then smiled smugly. “Oh yes, I’ve done my own checks on you since we parted ways.” His eyes were calm, almost serene. Around the room, papers were thrown all over the floor. Tapes and memory orbs were cast across the controls like garbage.

“I can,” I said. “More than you know. I know that Twilight did some messed-up things, too. Ignored people she shouldn’t have. Hurt people she shouldn’t have.” I narrowed my eyes. “Though I have to give Mephitis credit. He committed atrocity on a whole other scale.”

The calm broke, and Lighthooves hissed at me, spittle spraying. “He left them! He took his ill-gotten gains and left them! Left them to starve! I saw the security footage the automated turrets left behind! Some of them lasted for months! Months!” he hissed at me, outrage etched in his face as his spittle speckled my visor.

I continued, calm and cool. “But he was a doctor. A virologist. And, most importantly, a pony the Enclave could use.” I watched the serenity settle over his face once more. “It’s one thing to argue about whether you should or shouldn’t return to the surface if it’s easy to do so. It’s another thing entirely if the surface is too deadly to risk,” I said, and we slowly started to circle around the edge of the control room.

“The Enclave has milked that propaganda for two hundred years. Two hundred,”

Lighthooves said with a smile. “The wealth and fame they poured on him has been paid back ten thousand fold.”

“Chicanery told me that you worked out how many lives might have been spared if we’d gone back. Still, what could you do?” I continued. “Who could you tell? It wasn’t enough that you knew. You couldn’t just take that knowledge and be a better pony. Not you. No. You had to act,” I said as we walked. “You needed something they couldn’t ignore. Something nopony could ignore. You needed something so monstrously huge that it couldn’t be covered up. So you approached Rainbow Dash with a plan.”

“She’s always been looking for a way to bring down Neighvarro. It wasn’t hard to convince her,” he replied with a tired, almost rueful smile.

“And for a time, you gathered the pieces. The plague. The delivery system. The targeting talismans. Everything you needed. But something changed. Something that meant the scandal wasn’t enough. What was it?” I asked.

He laughed quietly a moment. “I told you, Blackjack. I told everypony.” His wings reached down into the rumpled mat of documentation at our feet and swept up a few pages that he shook at me. “The Enclave found out what we were doing, and *praised* us.” Disgust dripped from every syllable. “They wanted to accelerate the plan. They wanted to distribute the virus to every corner of the surface, wipe out all hostile life, and, oh, *then* return!” He threw the pages in my face, and they swirled about us wildly.

“So a scandal wasn’t enough. Defaming Mephitis wasn’t enough. You needed more. You wanted to bring down the Enclave,” I said as the papers fell around me.

“Don’t tell me they don’t deserve it!” he hissed, marching over and smacking a control. One of the monitors lit up, showing a scavenger city being blasted by magical energy weapons. I watched a foal get disintegrated right before my eyes. To my shock, I saw LittlePip, tears streaking her face, trying to collect the dust. “I got that from a contact yesterday. They targeted children, Blackjack!”

I tore my eyes from the screen and returned my attention to Lighthooves. “You had it all set up. You weren’t going to create a scandal. You were going to create a *crisis*. After Maripony, things were unstable. There was fear and doubt. You were going to hand over all the evidence with every camera rolling, give yourself over to a huge trial, make Thunderhead the hero that saved the Enclave from Neighvarro’s mad agent.” I paused, we both stopped, and a vein began to tick in Lighthooves’s temple. “Only—”

“Only you murdered the fucking councilor!” he roared at me, eyes wide. “Did she come to arrest you, only for you to slaughter her, or was her death planned in advance as a way to spite me? She might not have been a good politician, but she was a caring pony and a friend!”

“It wasn’t me who killed her, Lighthooves,” I said, knowing he wouldn’t believe me and not really caring anymore about whether he did. “But her death did fuck your plan, didn’t it? Stratus wouldn’t have investigated like the councilor would. He would have covered everything up. The last thing you wanted. So you fell to plan B: lure in the Enclave fleet and blow it to pieces. That would be a disaster far worse for them, and you could follow up with the plague at your leisure.”

“Yes,” he said, seemingly once more calm. “But the power draw was too much. It destroyed the substation power grid.”

“No. I destroyed the power grid,” I replied, my eyes locked with his. His were, at least, still flesh and blood. Still windows to a soul in torment. We both stopped our circling.

“You... how?!” he spluttered.

I smiled grimly. “You don’t know the whole story, Lighthooves. You don’t know about Dawn, Cognitum, or the Tokomare. You’re not the Princess... piece... thing on the board, you’re just a prawn too. Or are those horsies? Or maybe one of the castle thingies.” Okay, I really needed to learn the game if I was going to keep up with the chess analogies. “Point is that there is way more going on than just you and your personal issues!”

“I see. I must admit, I am boggled as to why you would side with Neighvarro—” he began.

“I’m not siding with them!” I snapped, cutting him short. “You self-obsessed little colt; did it ever occur to you that there’s more sides to this than just you and your petty, bloody ego trip?” I asked, my words seeming to stun him more than mere blows. “You can make all the little speeches you want. I’m going to destroy this plague, those Raptors, and you. Possibly a great deal more, but definitely the first three,” I finished quietly.

For a second, there was doubt; for a second, I hoped sanity would prevail in the end. Then his features turned hard and skeptical. “Oh, are you? You seem so very certain you can. Well, I’m going to have to disappoint you. Those missiles are going to fly as far as they possibly can. I’m even sending a few to the zebras, just

so they can enjoy the fun,” he said with a laugh that just made me feel fatigued. “With Project Steelpony, our own people will be safe, augmented and immune to the plague. Everypony will know the truth. All the lies will be swept away, and finally... it will be over.”

“Why?” I asked tiredly, knowing the answer but hoping that somehow, some way, I was wrong. In my E.F.S., I saw two blue bars moving about; hopefully one was Boo. I put my forehooves on a chair in front of one of the terminals.

“I told you! For truth! For their crimes!” he cried back at me.

“Don’t give me that brahmin shit!” I snapped back. “Look at me! Look at what I’ve done to myself to stop you! No more lies! Tell me the truth!” Do it, I mentally screamed at him. He wanted to. “You owe me that much.”

“Because I hate everything!” he snapped at me. “I hate the Enclave for its hypocrisy and lies. I hate Thunderhead for its mewling complacency. I hate the surface for its savagery and weakness. I hate the past for all that it’s done to us and I hate the future for all that it’s denied us. I hate every drop of blood in my being. But most of all, Blackjack, I HATE—”

And that was the point in which I threw the chair with all my strength right into his face. He flew clear across the room and smashed into the window hard enough to almost drive him through it. “You were going to say ‘you’, right?” I asked, and then I galloped straight at him, slightly enlarged steel-clad horn aimed right at his chest. He brought up all four hooves and caught my skull, deflecting me to the side. I smashed my shoulder into his chest, and together we went flying through the window. We tumbled in the air over the factory floor, and at least a hundred cyberponies stared up at us.

“Doc Oc was right,” I said as I hovered... well, bobbed. “Immature and self-destructive as fuck.”

Lighthooves swept his hoof at me. “Shoot her!” They all continued to stare up at him. “Kill her! A few more minutes and it will be done. Everything will be done!” Still not a one of them moved, and I smiled at him. “What... what are you doing?” he asked in bafflement.

“Mewling complacency?” a mare asked in an angry, low voice.

“You set all this up?” a stallion growled as he pointed his guns at Lighthooves. “You said this was for Thunderhead’s freedom!”

He slowly looked around. “How... you don’t understand. It had to be done!”

"You told me it was for my children," another mare shouted. "Why?"

He stared at a sea of very angry cyberponies, then gaped at me. I flipped open the panel of my foreleg and showed him my broadcaster. "You wanted to confess your sins to the world? Well, now you have." I'd forego burning off his cutie mark and branding him a Dashite. He didn't deserve it. The cyberponies were falling apart. Without the lie of the nobility and necessity of this, the reality of what they'd sacrificed for him was coming home. I heard some ponies screaming in shock. Others wept, and some just sat there in stunned disbelief.

I looked at him and saw a pony who'd lost everything. Everything. Such a waste. I turned to them. "You need to get out of here. Fly to the surface. Get to the Collegiate. Maybe... maybe somepony there can help you. But you can't stay here."

"We can still kill him!" one yelled.

Another roared, "Let's rip off the meat he's got left!"

Lighthooves glared at me with utter hatred. "You did this. You all deserve this. Command: snapped strings."

Suddenly, every cyberpony around me began to spasm and fall over. Some managed to cry out as they collapsed, gripping their chests with expressions of agony. I thought back to the scavenger in Tenpony. Blood spurted from their mouth as they jerked and shuddered. A few fired weapons as they expired, but in a matter of seconds, it was all over. With three words, he'd killed hundreds of ponies. Mothers, fathers, siblings... all dead.

A purple streak dashed through the air and slammed into Lighthooves, knocking him from the air and across the factory floor into heaps of stacked metal bars. "You monster! You murderer! I trusted you!" shouted Rainbow Dash as her hoof blows rained down. "You betrayed us all!"

"Betrayal is a matter of perspective," Lighthooves spat back. "If I must finish this myself, so be it!" His wings snapped, and he pressed his attack, the two blurring through the air above the factory floor locked in dazzlingly swift aerial combat.

"Boo!" I shouted as I rose to my hooves. If all the cyberponies were dead, then that meant that Hoarfrost's ponies would be here in minutes. From the darkness, Boo trotted out. "Did she find one, Boo? Did she? Did she?" I asked with a desperate smile.

She beamed a smile, reached into her saddlebag, and pulled out a Fancy Buck Snack Cake. "Bwackjack!" she said cheerfully as she presented it to me. I slumped,

really not having the time to search for one myself. I panned my eyes over to the racks of talismans, but there were dozens of different kinds, perhaps hundreds.

“That’s okay, Boo. That’s okay.” I rose, hoping I’d get lucky as Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves battled through the air. Lighthooves may have been augmented, but Rainbow Dash was the best flier in history as far as I knew. Maybe I’d find one in... then I saw Boo cupping something in her other hoof. It was a talisman about the size of a hoofball, white, and with a boresight on the front of it. I leaned in, grabbed her shoulders, kissed her hard, and then grabbed it with my mouth; I had to be careful not to bite down too hard, or it’d be lunch.

“Bwa...” Boo said with a very baffled look on her face, then unwrapped the cake, popped it in her mouth, and ran after me.

The pegasi moved almost too fast to follow. Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves streaked in purple and white lines around crackling power cables as each moved to strike the other with as much force as they could. Lighthooves had all the cyberpony control, strength, and resilience I did, but Rainbow Dash’s special armor more than once disappeared just before he struck only to blast him from literally out of nowhere. His lightning-fast counterattacks hammered the purple-laminated steel in a shower of sparks.

I flew back up to the control room and found a terminal. I’d only seen this once, but I closed my eyes a moment, trying to remember everything she’d done. “Dealer, time to make this happen,” I said as I scrolled through the commands as best as I could remember them. Outside, Lighthooves and Rainbow Dash were just blurs of color. The talisman flashed red three times, then turned completely red as it was armed.

Time’s up.

Suddenly, Lighthooves came flying through the window and slammed into me, and we bounced across the control room floor together. He flipped up while I rolled under the factory control terminals. The bright red talisman went bouncing out the control room door and into the factory.

“Boo! Get it!” I shouted as pulled myself to my hooves. If it broke on the way down... well... I’d just have to worry about that then.

“Enough!” Lighthooves cried, his flesh bloody and his armor plates dented, and then he rose to his hooves and began slapping buttons as quickly as he could. “I’m ending this now!”

“Automated launch sequence activated,” said a cool recorded voice. With a whirl,

the doors began to rise one after another. "Fire one." A launch cradle rose up at a steep angle as the end of the missile began to whirl. Then the missile slid down the cradle, out the door, and into open air. A second later the end of it erupted in flame, and it whooshed out into the sky. "Fire two," the speaker said calmly, the launcher already rising up.

"Stop them," was all I could say to Rainbow Dash. With all the fighting going on outside, there was no way the Raptors would be able to intercept all of them in time. As the second missile slid down its cradle and the third one started to rise, she launched herself towards the open door. I flapped like an iron albatross towards the fourth.

Lighthooves rammed into me, and together we crashed into the fourth launcher. The impact from our bodies made the launch platform shriek and shift as it rose above us. The supports snapped off and the entire sling swung to the side. The missile began to slide down... and then I heard a crunch as the engine began to rev up. Together, we looked at the end of the launcher and saw that the nose of the missile had caught on the base of the door. "Launch error. Launch error," the voice said calmly.

Far off to the west, I saw a brilliant explosion. If Rainbow Dash could get one missile, I had to trust that she could get two more.

Lighthooves rose, hatred etched deep in his features as he glared at me. All around us, sparks rained down as the missile in the cradle above started to smoke. "You don't have to do this, Legerdemain," I said as I stared into his stark features.

"I have lied. I have killed. I have betrayed," he said simply. "I'll fire off the rest of the missiles manually if I must, but I will see this ended."

He turned and darted towards the fifth launcher. My horn wasn't working at the moment, still very upset with me after my last teleportation attempt. Still, I had wings now. Jumping over bodies, I activated the levitation talisman enough to get me airborne, snapped my wings, and launched myself with forehooves outstretched at his back. He glanced over his shoulder at me and flattened to the ground so that I sailed straight over him, crashed into the floor, and bounced up into the missile cradle. My wings and hooves ripped into the delicate fuselage, soaking me in something smelling strongly of flamer fuel.

"This can't end well," I muttered.

Then the cradle suddenly tilted, and the missile began to slide down towards the

edge. Trailing rainbow-tinted fluids, I ripped free and threw myself over the far side of the launcher just as Lighthooves made for launcher six. The ruined missile tumbled out into open air and, seconds later, I heard a resounding explosion. Plunging after Lighthooves, I dove once more as his hooves began working the launch controls. He paused only long enough to deliver a double-hooved applebuck to my face, sending me flying back into the spent launcher behind me.

As the cradle started to lift, I kicked off with my hooves and snapped my wings once more. Crossing my forehooves in front of my face, I barreled right into the hydraulic lifts of launcher six and sheared them from the deck entirely. Hooves scraping, I scrambled out from beneath the launcher as it fell over, barely escaping being splattered. The wings and engine of the missile snapped off as it rolled from the cradle and across the floor towards the seventh launcher. Barrels marked 'lubricant' and 'hydraulic fluid' scattered before me, and Lighthooves looked up in time to see me charging at him. He darted into the air, over number seven and moving on to eight. The rolling missile slammed launcher seven and split, spewing more fuel across the launchers, the floor, and me.

Did I mention that the power cables snaking overhead sparked?

With a fluid hissing noise, a sheet of blue and orange flame spread across the factory floor. I launched myself into the air as the fire expanded towards me. Come on Boo, find that talisman. Come on Rainbow Dash, finish those missiles and get back to me.

I flapped over seven and spotted him working on eight's launch mechanism. Cancelling my levitation, I fell like a ton of cyberpony. His wings cracked like a pile of twigs as I crashed down on him and rolled off, getting quickly to my hooves. Even though his wings now resembled crumpled paper, he didn't slow in the slightest as he leapt into the air and brought all four metal hooves down on my head. My skull rang like a bell as it hit the floor, and for a second I was sure that I'd black out. But I couldn't black out. I had an enemy to defeat and a nightmare to stop. As I shook it off, he once again beat on me with his lightning kicks and blows... but this time I was much more armored.

I heaved myself to my hooves once more, reared up, lowered my head, and drove my armored horn straight at his chest. He reared up and brought his forehooves to my face... and then the ends of his hooves opened like flowers, three fingers and a thumb springing from each. He grabbed my face, latching down on my horn and jaw, and with a great heave used my own momentum to throw me over him and slam my back through a barrel of fuel that burst like a milk carton and with a resounding

clang into the metal floor beneath. Bracing his hindlegs against my body, he started twisting my head far further than it was intended to turn.

"I have to admit, thumbs are useful," he said as sparks of pain broke through my usual numbness. Not a good sign.

Wait. Did he put a design for thumbs in that damned conversion machine?

Only one way to find out. I did something I hadn't done in more than a week and tried to pop my fingers out. With a hiss, the casing around the ends of my fore-hooves peeled back, and two black hands emerged. Each grabbed his hindknees and pressed with all the torque they could muster. His legs gave way, and, robbed of his leverage, he stopped twisting my head off.

I fought my way to my hooves, and he kicked out of my grip with a powerful backflip, landing several feet away. "So what's the plan? We keep fighting till Rainbow Dash arrives or the Enclave crash the party?" I asked.

"Actually, I'm betting that all those augments draw a lot more power than mine. In fact, I'm pretty sure you've burned through a lot of your reserves. Am I right?" he asked with a smirk.

Oh crap; he was right. I was down to a third again already! So I charged in, trying for a blow to his head to take him out in one hit... but one thing that hadn't changed was his damnable agility. He deflected, he dodged, he did everything he could to keep me flailing wildly with my hooves while he calmly avoided me over and over again. This relatively low exertion wasn't going to eat up my power, though. He was running out of time; any second, somepony else was going to join the party, and it wasn't going to be anypony on his side. So why wasn't he running to the next—

A pink pony in my head then pointed behind me with a worried expression. I chanced a glance and saw the spreading flames snaking closer and closer as pool after trail after splash of rocket fuel ignited. Then I met his eyes and saw his lips spread mockingly. "Or we can find out how fireproof you are, Blackjack."

That was why! And I'd have to move away from the launcher to get away from the flames. He might get a little toasty, but he wouldn't go up like a candle; he'd certainly still be able to launch this missile. But I couldn't hit him, either, and in a few seconds it would be academic... and my self-extinguishing skills would be tested. Finally, in both desperation and frustration, I reared back to strike; he just smirked smugly, ready to dodge once again.

My hooves fell on one of the barrels of lubricant, the cylinder rupturing and spraying

us both with slippery black oil. “How fireproof are *you*?” I countered, grinning at him.

He gaped at me, then flapped, slipped, and slid over to the wall next to the door and a large blue talisman mounted on it, me flapping, slipping, and sliding after him. He rammed his hooves against the talisman, and it immediately flashed to life. “Fire prevention measures, activated,” the mechanical voice said, and instantly white blobs fell all over the factory with heavy ‘flumps’. One landed right on top of the pair of us, chilling me instantly. I poked my head out of the snowdrift and looked at him as the pristine white quickly stained black around the both of us. He panted, staring back at me, just as filthy and exhausted. The fire was out, the snow steaming from where it’d extinguished the blaze.

Having a few cubic yards of snow dumped on my head really helped cool my anger, too. “I’d really appreciate it,” I said as I tried to wiggle out of the snowdrift and just sank up to my chest, “if you just gave up now. Before this gets any more... ridiculous.”

“I didn’t do all of this just to give up. Not for you. Not for anypony,” he muttered as he pulled himself free.

“Come on,” I whined, still fighting to get myself up. “Let me do what I have to do. No more plague. No more missiles. And I might save Thunderhead, too.” I stared at him, begging him to accept.

“Would you, after all you’ve done, after all you’ve been through, give up simply because your enemy asked you nicely?” he asked archly as he stood easily on the drift.

He had me there. “No,” I admitted. “Probably not.” Then I scooped up a load of snow between my hooves and packed it into a ball. “But if the battle for the future of the Enclave and the Wasteland comes down to a snowball fight, nopony is going to believe it.” Well, my friends might, but they were used to my... solutions.

He stared at the ball as I drew my hoof back ‘threateningly’, then let out a snort. Then I started to laugh as well. Somehow, I doubted that the history textbooks were interested in moments such as this. “I don’t believe you,” he said after the laughter ended. “I kill hundreds... maybe thousands... and you... Blackjack. Why are you doing this? Don’t you care?”

“Of course I care! I know you’ve done wrong. So have I. Things that I deserve to be killed for. But since then, I’ve taken every chance I’ve gotten to do better and improve the world. So I can’t just be an executioner,” I answered. “I think you should

pay for what you've done... but there's so much good you could still do. Killing you's a waste. It's not punishment. It's what you want." That made his smile slide away.

"You are a very strange mare," he replied. "I think I would have been better off getting to know you instead of thinking of how best to use you." He stood up and started towards the launcher again. "But sometimes, there is no second chance. Sometimes, execution is the best option. For everypony."

"Lighthooves..." I warned, then activated my flight and resumed kicking and clawing my way out of the snowdrift, my wings flinging little bits of slush everywhere. Damn it, why did pegasi get to walk on drifts like they were clouds?

"No, Blackjack. I've come too far and done too much to betray it all now," he said as he started tapping the controls.

Then the engine of missile four, jammed against the door and its launcher, activated and filled the factory with its incandescent thrust, and I didn't hear anything but the roar of combustion. A sheet of fire washed over the ceiling, cable insulation igniting and flames spreading in a glowing fan. An immense cloud of steam formed instantly as the snow all but flashed away from the blast of flame overhead. Thick plumes of smoke obscured anything that wasn't ablaze, and the heat was so intense that pieces of the metal roof began to melt. Cyberpony or not, I'd melt too. I screamed for Boo but had no idea if she heard me over the furious roar of the engine.

Then the missile crushed itself like a tin can, ripped like foil, and exploded in a ball of fire that washed through the factory in a wave. All I could do was curl up in a ball, cover my mouth, and endure. An elegant white unicorn in my mind told me to hang in there. When the fireball passed, I slowly uncurled, tasting the chemicals in the air. A half dozen other missiles were on fire now, tangled and twisted in their launch cradles. I slowly rose to my feet. "Lunch Errrr. Lunch Errrr," the voice slurred.

"Boo?" I croaked out. "Boo!" I turned around, half terrified I wouldn't see her and half terrified I would. I spotted the red bar first. Lighthooves was at the base of launcher seventeen, struggling with the hydraulic jack that would let the missile slide free. Slowly, I approached. He wasn't handsome anymore. His white exterior was charred as black as mine. A dark hole in his chest still oozed blood. His mane was no more than reeking stubble, and the metal of his augments was warped. He attempted with his scorched fingers to connect wires from his chest to the motor. He slowly turned. One eye was cooked like an egg in his skull, and the other was an angry pit of rage.

"It's over," I said simply.

"No. They... they have to suffer... they have to pay... I have to make them pay!" he rasped as his hands fumbled; he wasn't used to using them like I was. I could hear the shouts of the Enclave approaching, orders for them to seize everything.

"You don't have the right," I said solemnly.

"And you do?" he gasped as he lay there.

"No. Nobody does."

He connected the wires to the motor, and slowly the cradle began to rise. "One more. I just need one," he said as he smiled at me. "Unless you kill me."

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered, but this time, the words didn't feel noble. They sounded cowardly and hollow. He was helpless, crippled, and probably mortally wounded.

"There's a first time for everything," he said as the cradle tilted further and further. A few more feet and more death would fly. Killing one helpless, crippled enemy to save thousands. It shouldn't be this hard...

The sound of metal piercing metal filled the air once more.

Slowly, I pulled my horn out of the machine that sat where his heart once lay, blood and cyberpony fluid washing down my face. The lift slowed, then halted. He smiled, his skin cracking and sending blood dripping down the sides of his face. "What was on the piece of paper?" he whispered. "The one you kept showing everypony?"

I fished it out and showed it to him. His remaining eye widened as it passed over the fifteen letters that spelled out those four little words, and then he smiled in honest happiness. "It's over..." he breathed. Then the red bar winked out. Boo appeared, the Perceptitron perched on her head and the red-glowing talisman in her mouth. Without a word, I moved the former into my saddlebags and took the latter. I tapped the talisman, and it began to blink. I then set it in his hooves.

I walked to one of the open doors, and then Neighvarro Enclave stormed into the tower from all other sides. "Save the missiles," somepony ordered. Then they spotted me and Boo standing beside the door. "You! Blackjack! You and your... robot are under arrest! Surrender!" they bellowed at Boo, who cringed back, and me. Our utter lack of armament was likely the only reason we weren't dusted then and there by fifty armored ponies.

"Surrender. You are weaponless, outnumbered, and injured," an officer barked.

From somewhere outside I could hear the whir of a Raptor that was far too close. “You don’t have a chance,” he sneered.

“I don’t need a chance,” I replied, showing him the paper. “I have a megaspell.”

The red talisman let out a beep and suddenly everything in the room jerked sideways towards the talisman as a purple aura surrounded the orb. The moment was all I needed to grab Boo and jump out of a perfectly good tower. Far below the city, I imagined a troupe of skeletal magical phantasms around a diamond saturated with arcane power for two hundred years. A glance at my PipBuck as we fell told it all.

>Hoofington Megaspell Complex

>Access Megaspell Chamber #8.

>Lock target: Target Talisman 12964-239-428J.

>Target Locked

> Cast Megaspell Y/N?

> Y Authorization EC-1101.

> Warning, Megaspell #8 at 125% arcane saturation. Do you wish to proceed Y/N?

> Y

> Casting Megaspell: Implosion

An orb of purple light flashed out from the middle of the tower, passing through everything as it expanded further and further. I had no idea how far it would go; I might have just killed the Hoof and all my friends in it. A flock of Enclave poured in on me as I spread my wings and tried to get away... and then I felt a jerk that stopped me in midair. For a moment, I wondered if I’d been speared by a power armor tail, but a glance back saw them hanging in midair as well, seemingly just as baffled as I was. Then a soft rushing noise filled the air... and it reminded me of the sound of the air blasting out of the tower. But this wasn’t blowing out. It was sucking in.

With every bit of energy in my body, I tasked myself with flying away.

Still, I couldn’t help but look.

A hazy purple field of energy permeating the air seemed to be drawing everything into it. The branches with their gantries and equipment shook wildly, and the whole tower began to sway. The noise and motion filled the air with a bassy groan I was sure would carry for miles. Vortices twisted into the open bay doors like hungry

mouths, and I watched as the Neighvarro fliers closest to the Tower were sucked in. The Raptors struggled like the *Seahorse* caught in rapids.

With Boo clinging to my back, I only had thoughts of getting away. Below me, the cloud layer boiled and tore like moldy fabric, thick black clouds studded with rotting vegetable matter streaking up towards the Tower in foul gray chunks. I barely got my face covered in time before getting hit with a spray of noxious lumps of mushy plants and wet cloud. A few of the greasy, tumbling balls flashed to dust in front of me, struck by stray beams from the power-armored ponies on my tail. There was a megaspell going off, and they were still trying to kill me; I couldn't decide if that was dedication or insanity. Maybe both.

Then another purple shell of magic radiated out from the tower, and when it hit me, suddenly it felt like the world had turned on its side. I flapped my wings, trying to propel myself in the direction of 'away', and it felt as if I were once more trying to fly straight up. Then a deep gonging noise reverberated through the air, so massive-sounding that both I and my zealous pursuers chanced another glance back.

The ring of doors and missiles was gone. So were the walls between the doors. Instead, a rumpled seam looped around the Tower where the fabrication level had been, with no gap between the parts of the Tower above and below. The world was still sideways, but the roaring wind cut off entirely; for a moment, silence prevailed. The Raptors seemed frozen in their positions, and silent clumps of cloud and fetid matter 'fell' past me with barely a whisper. I could see the Tower and the other spires of the Core exposed completely beneath me; not even the slightest whiff of vapor obscured the luminous boulevards below. Despite the broken buildings and sickly green glow, in an almost obscene way, it seemed... inviting. As I stared, everything seemed to hold its breath, even the city.

Then a groan, pained, tortured, and so low that it was more felt than heard, echoed across the valley. I watched the crease where the fabrication layer had been deepen and stared as it crept up and down the side of the tower. The groan grew into a wail as the building began to twist and warp before my eyes like a melting candle. The top drooped like a wilting flower for a few moments before the metal finally failed, and then all at once it was snapping and springing apart as the building disintegrated. A plate from the massive armored head reached out like an immense steel paw and caught one of the Raptors; in an instant, the warship shattered, the pieces joining the falling colossus. I only hoped it was the *Blizzard* and not the *Castellanus*.

Something was wrong, though: the tower wasn't falling down, it was falling *in*. The pieces wrapped around the middle where the fabrication level had been, and

the sounds of tortured metal grew to a higher and higher scream as the pieces were compressed under the force of the magic... and then another pulse of purple emanated from the shell. As it passed through me, hooks of magic dug into every particle of my being... and we all started moving towards the center of the spell. "Oh no. No no no!" I shouted as I tried my best to flap away, 'up' when I seemed so much heavier to the new 'down'.

I could now hear a tremendous rushing sound. Not of wind, precisely. Not the high-pitched throaty scream of the vortexes I'd heard earlier. This noise was deeper, wetter, more like a current of water than air. As I struggled to move away and failed, I saw that all of us, fliers, Raptors, clouds, and even Thunderhead itself, had begun to orbit the crumpling sphere atop the Tower. The pull ripped away the clouds from more and more of Hoofington, pulling them towards the center of the valley in a great upward spiral, all to be compressed down around the sphere. "This is bad. This is very bad!"

Another chorus of ripping metal filled the air, and I glanced back to see that the immense, collapsing sphere of metal rotated as well, and that as it moved it was slowly stretching and twisting the Tower below it. With a resounding crunch, the foundation gave way completely, and I watched in stunned amazement as the dangling length of the M.A.W. hub flew through the air, a massive length of steel looking like so much string. Another Raptor, straining to get away, was clipped by the end as it passed. The ship snapped in half, and immediately its debris was pulled inward as well. As I watched, the closer the pieces got to the sphere, the smaller they became, as if massive hooves squeezed them to fractions of their former size. In a few more seconds, both they and the dangling tower were gone, wrapped into the orb.

Now it wasn't just rotten plants and clouds striking me. A storm of garbage and debris from the *surface* began to batter us as we struggled against the mighty pull. The weight of the debris and the force of its flight increased by the second. First papers, then tin cans and dead branches, then limbs of trees... I rotated to the side so that the heavier stuff smashed into me rather than Boo. Another chance glance behind me and... no...

Where the top of Shadowbolt Tower had been was a spinning sphere of purple magic pulling in air and debris from all across the Hoof. Now there were rusty wagons in the debris, parts of houses. I barely heard the screams of the fliers as their lighter frames were buffeted by the shrieking winds. I didn't look for them; I didn't want to see them meet the same fate as that Raptor. And damaged pieces of Thunderhead were being plucked off and pulled into the vortex...

Maybe this wasn't a such a good idea...

A little purple unicorn pointed out that the best direction right now wasn't away, it was towards the surface. Her orange friend told me to keep flapping, and a white unicorn told me not to give up and push harder. A pink pony pointed out chunks of metal wagons and hunks of buildings heading for me, and a blue pegasus cheered me on as I looped and dodged the debris as best as I was able. The yellow pegasus just covered her face with a terrified squeak... and... and... for some reason I imagined someone was eating popcorn as they watched things unfold!

If this continued, I might have taken care of Cognitum entirely by accident. I couldn't worry about that at the moment, though; I was flying downward as quickly as I possibly could. That it was towards the Core didn't matter; I was resistant to Enervation, and it hadn't seemed to affect Boo when it spiked the first time. And neither of us was immune to whirling vortices of death! With painful slowness, I pulled us down to the rooftops of the highest of the black skyscrapers... but, given how pieces of them were now flying up towards that maelstrom above, I didn't stop there. I started moving down between two of the obsidian-sided buildings—

And then *another* wave of purple magic swept out, and my direction reversed. No amount of flapping increased our distance from that sphere, and gravity seemed entirely impotent. I once again passed a standing skyscraper's roof, though, and reached out with a hoof, popped out my fingers, and grabbed the metal rail that ran around the edge of the building. Boo began to slide off me with a scream, and I reached out with my other hand to grab her forehoof.

If I'd been only half metal, I think I might have been torn in two. Now I was worried about Boo as she swung above me like a kite in a hurricane. I watched in stunned surrealism as small chunks of skyscrapers began to be pulled up towards that disk. The sturdy railing I was clasping for dear life started to bend...

And then another purple wave swept through me, but this one was heading in, collapsing around the sphere. As it passed through us, I felt one last mighty yank, and then Boo and I slammed into the roof of the building. We lay in a heap, Boo shaking in pain and me holding her as I stared up at the mess above us. In seconds, the sphere collapsed around where the megaspell had activated, then revealed a shimmery, dark orb only a dozen feet across. The disk of debris twisting around it slowed, and the orb let out a thunderous crack. A solid white sphere of cloud and pouring rain expanded, spreading like an umbrella above me

Then the orb, which I guessed was Shadowbolt Tower and everything else that'd

been pulled in, fell to the earth trailing a great plume of hissing cloud and steam behind it. The sphere shot past us into the middle of the Core, and suddenly the skyscraper we clung to leapt beneath us as the entire Core rumbled. The black towers swayed, some smashing into each other as the falling sphere impacted somewhere far below. Flame and dust fountained up from thousands of nooks and crevices, blasting up into the air in dirty gray jets that covered everything in a choking layer of particulates. The rooftop we were on gave way once, and again, and again as floor after floor pancaked beneath us. The walls of the skyscraper peeled away, sending Boo and me tumbling towards the streets below.

I struggled for enough power to fly. To levitate. To do anything to prevent a bloody smack against the broken road below us. I clutched Boo close as my back slammed into strings of cables running from one building to the next, snapping them in my passing. Then again. Then again. Finally, Boo and I landed with a crash atop the rest of the rubble. Then, as if adding insult to injury, we were drenched in a cold, torrential rain. I stared, through the downpour, up the narrow canyon at the slit of now distant sky. The tiny black motes in it turned into pieces of buildings, chunks of wagons, and a barrage of all kinds of other debris falling down upon the Hoof. The shaking earth stilled for a moment, and then a deep, reverberating groan filled the city, a moan of something far below accompanied by a second, slighter tremble of the ground. Then it was gone, and the city filled with just the patter of falling debris and the hiss of rain.

“In retrospect,” I said as I lay there atop a pile of rubble in the middle of the deadliest ruin in all the Wasteland, “maybe that wasn’t the very best idea I’ve ever had.”

Then Boo straightened, her ears twitching as the clouds of dust swirled around us. “What?” I panted, but then I heard it too. A whining of engines fighting a losing battle against gravity. I stared up as the rolling gas cloud parted to reveal the bow and plasma cannons of a Raptor plunging at us, *straight* at us down into the gap between the buildings, its shattered dorsal propellers sheared away and its supporting stormclouds nothing but tatters. Its edges ripped and tore at the sides of the skyscrapers in a scream of metal as it descended. I made out the name, *Hurricane*, across its bow. As I lay there, only one thought passed through my mind before the ship struck.

Does that count as a boat?

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Whew. You have no idea how hard it was to get this chapter done and out. Holidays, finals, and other drama constantly pushed it back and pushed it back. But this is the end of the Homecoming Arc. Now there's just the finale. I'd like to thank Hinds, Bro, and Swicked for helping me get this done without killing each other, or me, or me killing them... really, a lack of killing all around is good. I'm thankful for folks who took a peek ahead of time. I hope that it's a good read.

Edit: also, I know some folks may think Blackjack's upgrades are a bit... much. Please bear with me three more chapters. I know what I'm doing... I hope.

In other news, we will be going back sometime relatively soon and tightening up Mare Do Well in the second half and make a few other little tweaks to this arc before coming on to the finale. I also want to tell folks I finally got some what steady employment starting in January. Now it's just a matter of hanging on till then. I'd like to thank everyone who sent me tips this month. They're basically the only thing keeping my bills paid at this point. The temp work is... sigh... temp work. Anyway, thank you so very much, everyone who contributed. Some folks were uncomfortable when I named names, so just know I thank and appreciate you so much. If it wasn't for you, I'm not sure I could have made it.

I also found out that Kkat read Horizons up to chapter sixteen and said it was okay... wildly off canon from what she planned... but good. So that's good too. I will always be grateful for her for creating FoE and letting all of us play in her sandbox. I hope the Finale will meet with everyone's enjoyment. Take care and I hope everyone will enjoy the last arc: Horizons.)